

**SPECIAL ISSUE**

## Ethics of Psychological Assessment in Organizations



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# Special Issue on Ethics of Psychological Assessment in Organizations

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# Special Issue on Ethics of Psychological Assessment in Organizations

## Editorial

Diana Rus & Roman Soucek

Dilemmas surrounding ethics in Work and Organizational Psychology (WOP) research and practice are quite common. Indeed, ample research has been published on the topic and ethical codes of conduct for WOP have been developed at regional and national levels. In this Special Issue, we are delighted to feature a collection of articles centred around the ethics of psychological assessment in organizations that have sprung forth from an EAWOP Small Group Meeting (SGM) held in Warsaw, Poland, September 11–13, 2019.

The SGM was organised by a group of Polish researchers and practitioners, namely, Joanna Czarnota-Bojarska (Faculty of Psychology, University of Warsaw), Urszula Brzezińska (Psychological Test Laboratory of Polish Psychological Association) and Grzegorz Rajca (Polish Psychological Association). The aim of the meeting was to discuss various ethical issues pertaining to the research and practice of psychological assessment in organizations, and fifteen practitioners and researchers spent two fruitful days sharing their insights. Four main ethical challenges related to psychological assessments in organizations emerged during the meeting which are also reflected in the articles published in this Special Issue. These four challenges focus on: a) an apparent goal misalignment between business and science; b) difficulties surrounding the practical application of research findings in specific contexts; c) the employment of research methods that require significant effort from participants; and d) WOP compliance with legal requirements and ethical standards.

We open by presenting an interview that the first author held with one of the organisers of the SGM, [Urszula Brzezińska](#), an experienced WOP researcher and practitioner in the field of psychological assessment. Urszula outlines the psychological assessment landscape in Poland and offers the readers some interesting insights on the ethical challenges faced by WOP practitioners resulting from the changes in the workplace due to COVID-19.

Next, we continue with a fascinating essay by [Grzegorz Rajca](#), a seasoned WOP practitioner working as a consultant. Grzegorz tries to understand why certain

psychological assessment tools that lack any solid evidence-base are prevalent and popular in organizations, whereas evidence-based tools lag behind in popularity and use. He highlights several reasons for why these tools may be dominating the assessment market and provides a number of possible solutions to the problem.

Following, we have an interesting case study from Poland depicting the ethical challenge of hidden employee appraisal during competence training. The authors, [Sylwiusz Retowski and Magdalena Trzepiota](#), vividly describe a case from their practice highlighting the ethical standards that could have been infringed upon and present the courses of action they took to handle the situation. This case is a good example of ethical challenges that WOP practitioners might be faced with and highlights the need to raise awareness among WOP practitioners and Human Resources (HR) professionals of professional ethical standards.

We continue with an analysis by [Katarzyna Durniat](#) of the theoretical, methodological, legal, and ethical issues related to diagnosing and counteracting workplace mobbing. Katarzyna highlights the state of the art in mobbing research and engages in a discussion of the strengths and limitations of prevalent research methods in the field. She also elaborately points to the legal, ethical, and practical issues encountered in preventing and counteracting workplace mobbing in the Polish context.

Our next article, authored by [Joanna Czarnota-Bojarska](#), focuses on some of the major ethical and methodological dilemmas faced by researchers conducting organizational research. Joanna focuses specifically on issues related to ensuring respondents' anonymity and the confidentiality of their data. Based on two specific examples of organizational research, she highlights problems that might arise when respondents feel that the anonymity and confidentiality of their data is threatened. She concludes by proposing specific actions that organizational researchers can take to counteract these issues.

Last but not least, [Katarzyna Wojtowska and Joanna Czarnota-Bojarska](#), discuss the ethical dilemmas faced by organizational researchers employing the experience sampling method in diary studies. They present the results of a workshop conducted among researchers participating in the EAWOP SGM held in Warsaw, Poland, September 11–13, 2019. Workshop participants who engaged in creating a new tool for diary research identified several ethical issues and jointly developed some preliminary solutions for addressing these issues.

We hope you will enjoy this Special Issue that highlights so many salient points about our work. For the rest of the year, we have further papers in preparation, including a fascinating case study on family businesses. We also hope to bring you a Special Edition of papers on “*Young people and careers*” from a SGM held in Glasgow in June 2020.

We would also like to announce some exciting news and developments. First, we are happy to announce that we have been growing and are now regularly publishing more than one issue per year. We would like to take this opportunity to thank all of our authors, the editorial team and our production designer who have made this possible! Therefore, we will change our issue-based system of publication to an annual volume based system. In other words, the journal will publish annual volumes that may contain several issues. You can find more information about this change [here](#) as well as on the [journal homepage](#).

Second, we are looking forward to your contributions and are planning to introduce a new paper format designed to further our current understanding of the application of WOP. In this respect, we will especially welcome contributions that present practice-oriented tools used in WOP. These could include the presentation of new tools used in WOP practice as well as material that shows how certain tools have been used in WOP interventions. Please contact us ([InPractice@eawop.org](mailto:InPractice@eawop.org)) with your ideas and a short plan of the paper and we will be delighted to work with you to bring this material into publication.

Best wishes for 2021!



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# The practice of psychological assessments in Poland

Interview with Urszula Brzezińska, Warsaw, Poland

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## About the interviewee

**Urszula Brzezińska** is a senior test specialist in the Research & Development department of the Psychological Test Laboratory of the Polish Psychological Association (i.e., Pracownia Testów Psychologicznych Polskiego Towarzystwa Psychologicznego – PTP PTP). She is also a delegate to the European Federation of Psychologists' Associations on behalf of the Polish Psychological Association (PPA) where she serves as a member on the Board of Assessment. Her professional interests centre around the implementation of psychological assessment standards in work settings, data integration procedures in psychological assessments and the measurement of leadership and entrepreneurial competences. She is especially passionate about helping organizations work with diagnostic models that are evidence-based and compliant with professional ethical standards.

Urszula works on creating and validating Polish versions of new psychological assessments and she is responsible for shaping the PTP PTP's policies surrounding the accreditation of assessment competencies among professionals without a psychological degree. As a certified trainer of the POA she often supports work and organizational psychologists' (WOP) advanced professional development in assessment procedures. In addition, she plays an advisory role for public and private sector organizations interested in improving their employee assessment policies.

*Keywords:* Work and Organizational Psychology, assessment, ethical challenges

## Introduction

In September 2020 Diana had the pleasure of interviewing Urszula, a highly experienced WOP researcher and practitioner, living and working in Warsaw, Poland. Urszula was one of the organisers of the EAWOP Small Group Meeting (SGM) held in Warsaw, Poland, September 11–13, 2019 aimed at exploring ethical issues surrounding psychological assessment. We took the opportunity to ask Urszula about the psychological assessment landscape in Poland and the ethical challenges faced by WOP practitioners resulting from the changes in the workplace due to COVID–19. We agreed on a series of questions prior to the phone interview that lasted for around 60 minutes. This article is a summary of our conversation.

## Interview summary

**Diana:** *Can you describe the practice of psychological assessments in Polish organizations at the moment?*

**Urszula:** It might help your readers to understand the Polish psychological assessment culture if I first briefly describe the history of the PTP PTP. The PTP PTP was established in the 1970s (in those days it operated under the name of the Psychological Test Laboratory) due to the efforts of researchers from the Psychology Department at the University of Warsaw and the PPA. Its aim was to collect psychological assessment methods from around the world and to make them available to university students and practitioners. At that time, there were no commercial entities that offered psychological assessments for sale; therefore, it was important to create and maintain a comprehensive database of psychological assessments that practitioners could access. The PTP PTP quickly became the heart of Polish psychological assessment practice and it has maintained this position to this day. Of course, the PTP PTP has changed over the years, and currently, it focuses not only on disseminating psychological assessment methods that were imported but also on developing original methods that are uniquely suited to the Polish context. In addition, it has taken on the role of educating WOP practitioners as well as Human Resources (HR) professionals in the proper usage of psychological assessment methods and in advising organizations on how to develop diagnostic models that are evidence-based and in line with ethical standards. I would say that most Polish WOP practitioners would agree that the PTP PTP has a reputation for a scientific evidence-based approach and is seen as setting the standards for the practice of psychological assessments in Poland.

One also needs to understand the broader historical context of psychological assessment in Poland. Given the scarcity of validated tools up until twenty-thirty years ago, most practitioners have tended to focus on gaining access to diagnostic tools (any diagnostic tools) that they could implement. This has also meant that *the validity or the evidence-base of these tools* did not always get questioned. In addition, as a WOP practitioner you don't need to undergo a formal certification process to be allowed to use diagnostic tools in Poland. As a result, some questionable diagnostic tools such as the Rorschach Inkblot Test or the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) have gained popularity in recruitment or selection and have been widely implemented in organizations ([see also the article by Grzegorz Rajca](#)).

This issue of determining the evidence–base of a tool has become even more important these days. First, the number of commercial providers who offer psychological assessment tools (which vary in terms of validity and scientific backing) for sale in Poland has proliferated. Second, providers of digital diagnostics with automatically generated reports have mushroomed. Whereas these tools are generally user–friendly and appealing, more often than not, their underlying assumptions and methodology are obscured and hidden in a ‘black box’. Therefore, I deem two things to be important for the future.

First, *WOP practitioners need to become better educated in asking critical questions about the evidence–base of diagnostic tools presented to them*. In this respect, the PTP PTP has been active in advising organizations and providing workshops and trainings for WOP practitioners and HR professionals. Second, *the psychological assessment market in Poland needs to become more transparent*. For instance, about a decade ago, we tried to introduce the psychological testing standards proposed by the European Federation of Psychological Associations (EFPA) into the Polish market. We initially set off by organising a conference to discuss the issue with relevant stakeholders from different organizations such as HR professionals, WOP practitioners, managers, and WOP researchers. Next, a group of experts was tasked with creating a set of Polish psychological testing standards by adapting the EFPA psychological standards to our local context. This initiative was partially successful in that some organizations have readily adopted and implemented these standards, whereas others have not managed to make them their own and incorporate them into their organizational cultures. We also collaboratively developed a variety of high–quality training materials for assessment practitioners, which provided a good platform for dialogue and has led to some positive developments. For instance, a recent survey we conducted among Polish organizations seems to indicate that things are slowly but surely changing a little bit. We see that diagnostic tools that are fun but not validated, such as colour personality tests, are still popular, but validated diagnostics such as the Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO PI–R) are also gaining in popularity. So, there is some hope after all.

**Diana:** *What are some of the most prevalent ethical challenges you’d say that WOP practitioners working with psychological assessments face?*

**Urszula:** I think one of the big challenges that WOP practitioners face is to learn how to *position themselves as assessment experts within their organizations* and promote professional ethical standards. Sadly, too many WOP practitioners do not understand that they need

to actively show their added value to other stakeholders in the organization. They need to market themselves as experts in psychological assessments, promote evidence-based assessments and be able to demonstrate to other stakeholders that an integrated assessment strategy delivers return on investment. For instance, psychological tests are sometimes treated as individual products that are bought and implemented, independent of already existing diagnostic models and/or organizational policies. As a WOP practitioner it is important to consider these diagnostic tools from a broader perspective and ask questions such as: “How does this tool fit with our already existing diagnostic models?”; “How can I ensure that participants receive adequate feedback?”; “Is this the best available tool to determine a person’s fit with the organization or the position?” Once these questions have been answered, practitioners need to build a business case for the deployment of these assessment tools.

Another related issue is that WOP practitioners *need to stand their ground and educate the rest of the organization when being asked to engage in activities that might violate ethical standards*. For instance, managers might want to employ assessment results obtained for developmental purposes in order to make promotion decisions. This is unethical and a WOP practitioner should be willing and able to dissuade them from doing so. I think that this issue of educating others (e.g., managers, HR professionals) in the organization about ethical standards to be upheld when using diagnostic tools is a really important one and it might not be unique to the Polish context. One thing worth considering is to create interdisciplinary teams that are in charge of psychological testing. What I mean by this is the following: most organizations have a small number of WOP working for them, whereas they tend to have much larger HR departments. Oftentimes, diagnostic tools are implemented by HR professionals who have been certified in using that specific tool. Yet overall, they are not as experienced and have not developed the level of diagnostic competence of a trained assessment psychologist. Therefore, to facilitate knowledge transfer and competence building, it could be fruitful to have HR professionals work together with psychologists in interdisciplinary teams.

**Diana:** *Did the current shift to a lot more work being done digitally impact the work of psychological assessment practitioners in Poland, and if so, how?*

**Urszula:** The massive shift to working online has definitely impacted how we work and has brought some unique challenges with it. The first challenge we encountered in the spring of 2020, when the shift to remote online work started, was that *WOP practitioners had lost the possibility to access some of the psychological assessment tools*. Bear in mind

that most of these tools were paper-based and usually accompanied by voluminous test manuals. Clearly, this impacted their ability to continue their work. Meanwhile, a number of these tools have been digitised and practitioners have switched to largely working online. I think that these developments have likely shifted the longer-term landscape of conducting psychological assessments: from being done primarily in-person to being done online.

The second challenge was related to *procedural and ethical issues* surrounding remote online assessments. This not only required developing new processes but also acquiring new skills. For instance, practitioners had to think about creating instructions and guidelines for remote testing as well as grapple with potential data protection issues. Given the proliferation of different online applications, WOP practitioners had to determine which ones were, for example, trustworthy, which ones would protect participant privacy and store the data securely. This has led to lively dialogue in our community and we can see that new procedures and standards are emerging for conducting psychological assessments remotely. Moreover, the advent of the digital era, that has been accelerated by the pandemic, has a tremendous impact on the skills required for online psychological assessments. On the one hand, practitioners need to embrace an attitude of life-long learning and develop a variety of technical skills. On the other hand, the need for developing critical thinking skills has increased. For instance, one issue that can occur with online testing is that it becomes depersonalised. In this respect, *WOP practitioners need to think of ways in which they can still add a 'human face and touch' to this process* and treat participants with dignity and respect. Relying on technology alone to assess and provide participants with automatic feedback robs them of this basic dignity and is also unethical from a professional perspective. Therefore, I think that, as a community of practice, we need to address these questions and develop new professional standards for online assessments that safeguard participants' rights and well-being.

**Diana:** *What advice would you give to young WOPs entering the field?*

**Urszula:** Be prepared to keep learning and to *continuously update your skillset*. It is important to stay abreast of changes in the field and the world and to find ways to not only reactively adapt to them but to proactively develop skills needed in the future. Also, as a young WOP, you may not realise yet that you are part of a larger community of practitioners and that most learning happens by working with others. Collaborate with people, find a mentor, engage in dialogue with colleagues and work with others that have different backgrounds than you. Ask for constant feedback and be prepared to challenge

your assumptions. Finally, learn the language of your stakeholders in organizations (e.g., employees, managers, HR) and be able to communicate effectively with people at different organizational levels. It is not enough to be an expert in your field. Rather, you need to be able to translate your expertise into the language of business and demonstrate the value added of your expertise.

Another point I cannot stress is enough is that you need to learn to think critically and be able to integrate and synthesise data from different sources and disciplines. You need to develop the ability to determine the evidence-base of data presented to you and do so across various disciplines. It is no longer enough to be only a specialist in a specific area. Rather, you need to be an expert in your area, while also understanding enough about related areas.

In sum, be prepared to learn and update your skillset, collaborate with others, engage in teamwork, and stand your ground when it comes to your own professional standards and values.

**Diana:** *Thank you so much Urszula for taking the time to talk to the readers of InPractice and share your insights.*

**Urszula:** It has been my pleasure.

# Battle report from a corporate psychologist: Why inaccurate methods are easier to sell and what we can do about it

Grzegorz Rajca



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## About the author

**Grzegorz Rajca** is a psychologist (MA) with over 10 years of experience in business consulting. He has conducted consulting projects in the area of Human Resources (HR), workplace strategy and change management. He takes an evidence-based approach in his work, and specialises in translating complex business problems into research questions. Grzegorz is a member of the Polish National Awarding Committee, established by the Polish Psychological Association to implement standards for using psychological tests in the business context, developed by the European Federation of Psychologists' Associations (EFPA). He is also an author and co-author of many publications promoting the evidence-based approach among business practitioners.

## Abstract

As a psychologist working in consulting, dealing with various types of organizational research is my daily bread. The amount of low-quality methods and tools lacking adequate validation that I encounter in the business world is staggering. Even more worrying is their popularity in business and their resistance to being replaced by validated methods, even if they are available. For some reason business seems to prefer using questionable tools. This paper explores why such tools dominate the market. Several reasons are discussed for why these methods may have an advantage over those designed and validated by academia. Possible solutions to overcome this problem are also discussed.

*Keywords:* psychological testing, assessment, reliability, validity, business, evidence-based

## Introduction

It was 2011. I was still a psychology student and had just started my new job in an HR consulting company. One day my manager told me that there was an HR conference in two weeks, and that it might be a good idea for me to go there and look around. The conference seemed like a good opportunity to explore various assessment tools and meet like-minded professionals, whose fascination with factor analysis and validity metrics equalled mine.

When I arrived at the conference, I was really excited. The room was filled to the brim with exhibitors presenting their solutions. The tools were beautiful. Automated reporting, exports, recommendations, algorithms that calculated job fit in a matter of seconds. Still in awe, I asked one of the exhibitors, *"What is the theory behind this assessment?"*. The exhibitor looked at me and said: *"Huh?"*

As I quickly learned, there was no theory behind the assessment. It was just a collection of questions, mixed into a questionnaire based on basic common sense. I was shocked. They had just sat down one day and wrote a list of questions that seemed like good questions to ask in an assessment!

Still in disbelief, I asked, *"What methods did you use to validate this tool?"*. The exhibitor had an equally surprising answer to my second question. He said, *"We've already sold hundreds of licences for this assessment, our clients love it, so we know it works!"* I spent the next couple of hours talking to all the exhibitors who promoted assessments of any kind. Out of maybe ten different companies that advertised their tools that day, only one had any data on reliability and validity (and we seemed equally happy to find each other). Here's the key issue: it's not even the fact that those other companies didn't have the data on validity or any theory that would support their tools. It's that they didn't understand my questions.

## Background

The title of this paper is *"Battle report from a corporate psychologist"*, as I really do believe that in the field of organizational psychology and business assessment there is a battle going on. The key challenge that psychologists face in this battle is that low-quality methods seem to sell, while high-quality methods don't.

One might think that not being able to sell high-quality methods is a problem that should be dealt with by sales representatives and marketing departments. I firmly believe that this is not only a business problem, but also an ethical one for psychologists. What's the point of constantly improving empirically tested, valid tools? Nobody buys them and they are already much better than what's popular on the market. Should we be more active in trying to push low-quality tools out of the market? Should we change the way we design our tools to make them easier to sell? I think that there are many ethical questions to ask here. We should definitely try to understand why evidence-based tools seem to be so difficult to sell.

In this paper, I will focus solely on tests. By tests I mean paper and pencil or computer-based assessment tools, used to measure constructs like personality or aptitude, most often used in employee selection, development or career counselling. The problem described above is relevant to other assessment methods as well. However, tests are well defined tools and as such much easier to compare. Therefore, I will use them as an example to illustrate my point.

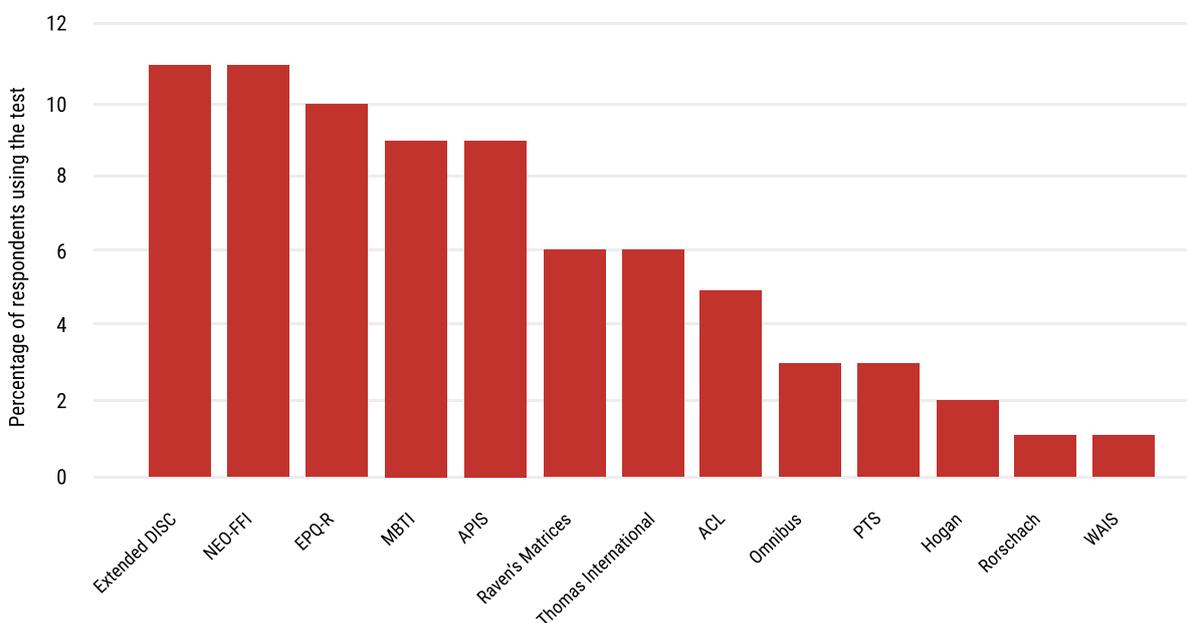
First of all, let's analyse whether there really is a problem. While preparing for my 2019 EAWOP Small Group Meeting presentation in Warsaw, I googled the phrase "most popular assessment tools". The top search result was a list of ten personality tests of which the first two were the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and the Extended DISC Assessment. The validity of both of these methods either hasn't been confirmed or has been questioned for years both in scientific studies and in the business literature. For instance, see Burnett (2013), Eveleth (2013), Grant (2013), and Stein and Swan (2019), for criticisms of the MBTI. As for the Extended DISC Assessment, it's virtually impossible to find any independent, peer-reviewed research on its validity.

One could of course make a point that googling a phrase is not the best method of searching for valid assessment tools. While this is true, it also seems to be the simplest and most commonly used method in business. It would be really difficult to find a business executive who searches for an answer by performing a systematic literature review.

Fortunately, we don't have to rely solely on web search results. In 2009, a Polish consulting company conducted a survey focused on understanding the practice of selection testing in Poland (Wekselberg, 2011). The survey was completed by 84 participants representing 84 different companies. Some of the tools identified as most commonly used by Polish HR departments were the same ones that came up in my web search results (Figure 1). A fraction of participants even stated that they used the Rorschach inkblot test for selecting managers.

Figure 1

Frequency of using psychological tests in managerial selection in Poland (2009, N=84)



Note: Adapted from Wekselberg (2011), with publisher permission. Full names of tests: NEO-FFI (NEO Five-Factor Inventory); EPQ-R (Eysenck Personality Questionnaire-Revised); MBTI (The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator); APIS (Bateria Testów APIS-Z; eng. APIS-Z Test Battery); Raven's Matrices (Raven's Standard Progressive Matrices); Thomas International (Tests by Thomas International, including Thomas PPA: Personal Profile Analysis and Thomas TST: Tests for Selection and Training); ACL (The Adjective Check List); Omnibus (Test Inteligencji OMNIBUS; eng. OMNIBUS Intelligence Test); PTS (Kwestionariusz Temperamentu PTS; eng. Temperament Questionnaire PTS); Hogan (Tools by Hogan Assessment Systems, including HPI: Hogan Personality Inventory, HDS: Hogan Development Survey and the MVPI: Motives, Values, Preferences Inventory); Rorschach (The Rorschach Inkblot Test); WAIS (Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale).

Some time ago I participated in a workshop designed around one of these popular, colourful business assessments. The goal of the workshop was to show that people have different psychological profiles and that communicating effectively must take these differences into account. One week before the workshop all participants had to fill out an assessment, so that profiles could be prepared in advance.

During the workshop, I raised questions concerning the validity of the assessment. The trainer – although a psychologist – was not able to provide any information on psychometric properties. She promised, however, to forward my concerns to the test publisher. As agreed, right after the workshop I sent her an email asking for information on the validity of the assessment. I also mentioned that I was interested mainly in criterion or predictive validity. I received a response from the test publisher the next day. The publisher replied that this was a business tool, not a psychological

one, and as such it has not been tested for criterion or predictive validity. The only "validation" method used was calculating the Cronbach's alpha. This approach is really worrying. Apparently, at least some publishers believe that measuring validity is optional in business assessments and that we don't need test results to be related to the real world in any way.

The market is filled with low-quality tests: never-validated and based on outdated research. In fact, such tools seem to be doing very well. What makes them so successful? Perhaps it's their low cost? As it turns out, this is not the case. In Poland, many of the validated tests cost a fraction of what you would have to pay for using a popular business assessment.

If neither quality nor price seems to be the main factor – what is? We have tools that work, have been validated and are often cheaper than business assessments. Why isn't the market dominated by such tools? I believe the problem includes other variables. In one of his lectures Jordan Peterson (2017) suggested that you could make a case that the probability of a company using a test that predicts performance is inversely related to the accuracy of the test, and also – that less accurate tests are easier to sell. He gave two reasons for why this is the case.

Firstly, according to Peterson (2017), such pseudo-tests don't hurt anybody's feelings. One might think that hurting somebody's feelings shouldn't be the main focus of an assessment. However, in today's business reality, recruitment (being able to find and attract candidates) seems to be more important than selection (choosing the right candidate from a pool of applicants). This is due to an increasingly competitive landscape for recruiting and retaining talented employees. As a result, choosing a less accurate tool, based on which everybody is a winner, seems to be a better strategy than using validated assessments and risking a Public relations (PR) crisis, caused by an offended candidate. Secondly, Peterson (2017) claims that most people don't do very well in real, validated assessments, or rather – don't think they do well. The main reason is lack of statistical knowledge and confusing percentages with percentiles. Consequently, being in the 60th percentile is often interpreted as barely passing the test, when in fact it means that you scored better than 60% of the population.

I believe both of these observations to be accurate. However, I also think there are more reasons that help explain why accurate tests are difficult to sell. In this paper, I will describe four such reasons I managed to identify so far in my practice.

### **Reason 1: “PLEASANT = TRUE”**

In HR one of the most prevalent questions, which gets asked after training, workshops, coaching sessions, and even company parties, is a version of “*How did you like it?*” Measuring the quality of an intervention solely by asking participants to rate their overall experience and satisfaction with it is the simplest, most popular way of evaluation. In some cases, assessment tools can also be evaluated in this way, if they’re a part of a workshop or a selection process. As a result, highly rated tools are usually the ones which are fun, short, and give an overall impression that complex phenomena like human behaviour can be explained by splitting people into several distinct and well-defined categories. If measuring overall satisfaction is the only way of evaluating an assessment (and it usually is), then the tools perceived by both HR and employees as the best ones, are those that provide the best overall experience.

Another issue which stems from the simplicity of such assessments is that their interpretations are memorable. The aforementioned workshop provided me with one more interesting insight. After its conclusion, I talked to three colleagues who – prior to completing the assessment for the workshop – had undergone an assessment conducted with a validated psychometric tool. Only one of them told me that this most recent test seemed more like an advanced version of a horoscope than a real assessment. The remaining two didn’t really notice any major differences between the two methodologies. They claimed that both tools gave them a fairly accurate picture of themselves. However, what later caught my attention is the fact that a few months after both assessments, none of the participants could recall any of the results of the evidence-based test. On the other hand, everyone remembered their “dominant personality colour” provided by the business assessment. Some participants also remembered their team members’ colours, and sometimes referenced them in their work. As much as I dislike inaccurate, oversimplified tests, I have to admit that this is something they are doing well. Their results are very memorable and seem to influence participants’ perceptions months, or even years later.

### **Reason 2: “OLD = WRONG”**

If you mention any kind of research to an executive, one of the first questions you will get is probably, “*How old is this research?*”. If it is more than ten years old, there is a fair chance that he or she will immediately lose interest in the findings.

The perceived “expiry date” of research is much shorter in business than in academia. To understand why this is the case, we must first understand how business reports work. In the business world, research reports are published once every quarter, sometimes once a year. The business landscape is very dynamic and provides enough change to fill a report. Therefore, from the business perspective, basing your decisions on last year’s report is a recipe for failure. In a fast-paced, constantly changing world, the key issue is to get relevant information quickly and act on it immediately. In such circumstances, a research paper from 1970 seems prehistoric and completely irrelevant.

In academia, the perception of this topic is very different. Although new findings are interesting, theories that have been developed years ago and replicated multiple times in various contexts are extremely valuable. It is a domain where the value of many concepts and research findings grows with age. In business, the opposite seems to be the norm.

One might wonder why we can’t just provide executives with new, relevant research. At first glance, this seems like a reasonable expectation. Businesses however usually have a very specific problem to solve. It’s not always possible to find relevant, high-quality research, which is also relatively new. The key to effectively use scientific findings in business seems to be rooted in the ability to understand the researched phenomena and apply this understanding to a specific context. For this purpose, insights from research published a year ago can be equally helpful as those from research that is fifty years old.

### **Reason 3: “NEW (BUT NOT TOO NEW)”**

A situation I’ve experienced with one of my clients, with whom I had the opportunity to work as a consultant, may serve as a particularly apt illustration of the “NEW (BUT NOT TOO NEW)” problem. The company hired us to provide recommendations on a particular business problem. One of the priorities and key requirements of the project was that the proposed solution should be innovative. Our team conducted extensive research within the company and suggested a course of action that we believed would help the client achieve their goal.

The solution was a novelty in the Polish market, but already tried and tested in countries like The Netherlands, Australia, Germany or the UK. The management board listened carefully to our presentation. Afterwards, the CEO expressed his interest in trying out the solution. There was only one condition that had to be met before

they decided to proceed with implementation. They wanted us to provide examples of companies that successfully adopted the proposed method. Said companies were expected to be of similar size (more than 1,000 employees), operating in Poland, in the same industry. Only after reviewing these examples the management board would feel confident enough to undertake the project. In the case of this client, innovation meant choosing a safe, well-trodden path.

A common stereotype is that in business you want to be first. In my opinion, this is not exactly true. You don't want to be first, you want to be second. You don't want to be the one experiencing all of the unforeseen difficulties and problems of a novel solution, which is often the fate of pioneers in any field. You want a solution innovative enough that it gives you a competitive advantage, but at the same time established enough to not pose significant and unpredictable threats to your business.

This problem forms a particularly dangerous synergy with the previously described "OLD = WRONG" problem. Why should a business trust a methodology that was developed in academia sixty years ago, has been refined ever since, and still hasn't managed to dominate the market? Why aren't any of our competitors using this idea? Are we really the first company in six decades to think this old concept makes sense? Surely there must be something wrong with it; something that all of our predecessors must have realised, but we are currently unable to see. This combination of distrust towards old concepts and a tendency to use what's already popular on the market is a major obstacle in convincing businesses to use established, validated tools.

#### **Reason 4: "NO THEORY, NO PROBLEM"**

A couple of months before I began writing this paper, I had received an email from an HR consulting company. Its aim was to sell me a new test that had recently appeared in the Polish market. The email stated that a large number of commonly used personality assessments are based on social sciences, which rely on observations of human behaviour and ignore chemical reactions of the brain. This claim was followed up with a statement that, according to the latest research, a large part of our behaviour is written into our DNA. Therefore, effective diagnosis should be based on both the observations of behaviour and the measuring of chemical reactions in the brain. In the next paragraph the author of the email claimed that knowledge gained with the use of their tool can help boost performance of teams and entire organizations, prevent conflicts, increase effectiveness of team management and communication, as well as

develop self-awareness, including – among other things – the understanding of one’s own motivators and stressors.

The major obstacle in competing with such tools is that if a test provider doesn’t feel obliged to be true to any theory or research, they can promise whatever they like. Going against such promises with a well-designed, validated test is very difficult. Unless the client is familiar with basic psychometric concepts, they’re unable to compare the quality of various tools and verify unrealistic promises. Therefore a validated test with a clear purpose and a fairly narrow but well-defined range of uses will be perceived as poorly designed, having limited applicability and relying on outdated research. Especially when compared to a tool based on “recent revolutionary research” which – according to the marketing brochure – can diagnose everything from motivation and stressors to chemical reactions in your brain.

## Possible solutions

What I suggested above are some of the reasons why evidence-based tests are difficult to sell. The problems I described reflect cultural incompatibilities, rather than differing goals. The key thing to understand: it’s not that companies don’t want accurate tools, it’s that they use a different set of criteria to make decisions. And the important question is, what we can do to increase the use of high-quality methods in business. There are a couple of ways in which we can approach this problem.

In my opinion, the first thing worth considering is the overall assessment experience. Some researchers recommend including participants’ perceptions of the assessment as one of the variables in validity measurements. Moyle and Hackston (2018) suggest we should start measuring something they call *experiential validity* of tools. According to their definition, experiential validity tells us whether the person completing an assessment experienced the assessment process (including feedback) as personally valuable. Additional components of experiential validity include finding out whether the intended development outcomes were achieved, whether key learnings (in the development context) can be recalled months or years later and whether the assessment has an ongoing impact at work. Moyle and Hackston (2018) suggest that the fact that people remember the results, trust them, and are motivated to engage in development activities based on these results should be taken into account when considering the validity of a tool, especially in the development context. I think that experiential validity is important not only in employee development, but also in employee selection.

We could redefine it as “*whether the candidate experienced the assessment process (including feedback) as fair and relevant to the selection goal*”. Paying attention to experiential validity would make tests look more relevant and more believable, which would be helpful in convincing businesses to use these tools.

The other thing worth considering is *simplicity*. Of course, there are some tools and methods that require extensive training and understanding of complex theoretical concepts. However, maybe it’s a good idea to design more basic tools for business purposes. Tools that could be used by an HR professional without psychological background, who has only read the manual. Tools that incorporate all of the positive aspects of popular business assessments, such as the possibility to conduct testing online and automating everything that can be automated without compromising the accuracy of the assessment. The idea behind this is rooted in behavioural economics, which suggests that we should make the right choice an easy choice and the wrong choice a difficult one (Rozin et al., 2011). We can’t make it more difficult to use low-quality methods. We can, however, make it easier to use high-quality ones.

The third thing that, in my opinion, is worth paying more attention to is the *social proof*. The term, coined by Robert Cialdini (2001), states that one of the means people use to determine what is right is to find out what other people think is correct. In my consulting practice, I experienced many situations in which social proof turned out to be critical in making decisions. For instance, clients rarely ask about the methodology behind a tool. If they do, I usually reply that I can go into detail and explain the methodology, if they wish for me to do that. That willingness is usually all that it takes to convince clients that the methodology is in place, and I almost never get asked to explain it. On the other hand, talking about examples of similar projects usually takes a large portion of a business meeting. Clients usually ask many questions about other comparable organizations that we worked with or similar business problems that we solved. Also, social proof seems to explain why some concepts, although old, do very well in business. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is an example of such a concept, which although a few decades old and questioned by researchers (e.g., Tay & Diener, 2011), is very popular in business and can still be found in brochures and presentations on motivation and well-being. This popularity works like a self-propelling mechanism. After all, this concept has been present in the business world for decades and is still being used by many organizations. Surely it must provide valuable insights. Being aware of this tendency may turn out to be very helpful when planning your conversation with a business executive.

## Conclusions

In this paper, I described a problem of business using questionable tests and methods that have not adequately been validated. This problem exists even though, in the case of tests, high-quality methods are usually available and in many cases cheaper than their more popular counterparts. Therefore, the source of this problem seems to lie not in the quality-price ratio, but in differences in communication and in the use of different criteria in decision-making in academia and business. I believe, however, that this problem can be solved or at least mitigated. Some ways to do it include improving experiential validity of assessments, simplifying tools, if possible, and paying more attention to the social proof when communicating with business. The battle is not yet lost. However, perhaps instead of fighting, all we have to do is learn from these popular methods and incorporate what they're currently doing well into our own practice and tools.

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# What's going on? Implicit appraisal of employees

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## Abstract

In this article, we will present one case study from Eastern Europe illustrating the ethical problem of hidden employee appraisal during competence training. Ethics breaches during employee assessment are extreme examples of psychological contract breach between an organization and its employees. In the discussed case, upon having realised the potential ethical problem, we persuaded the client to modify the training project agenda and objectives. In our discussion of the case, we highlight those Polish Psychological Association Ethics Code standards (PTP, 2019) that, in our opinion, could have been seriously infringed upon. The presented case seems to be a good example of ethical challenges faced by work and organizational psychologists. In our opinion, it is essential to raise awareness among managers and Human Resource (HR) partners that employees should be informed when they are being appraised.

*Keywords:* training, appraisal, ethics code, competences

## Introduction

Organizational psychologists working as consultants are often faced with situations where the officially stated purpose of a training has little to do with the aims pursued by the client organization/HR department. We will present one case study from Poland illustrating the ethical problem of hidden appraisal during employee competence training. This kind of training is a commonly used tool for improving organizational performance (King, King & Rothwell, 2000). Usually the training process is connected with giving feedback. Adequate feedback is a powerful and effective way to affect the motivations and achievements of employees, as well as school and university students (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Unfortunately, some organizations try to use the process of employee training to pursue hidden agendas, such as implicit appraisal of employees or an implicit selection process. In effect, some organizations act or encourage professionals working with them to act unethically.

We base our discussion of the case below on one of the central tenets of the Polish Psychological Association Ethics Code (PTP, 2019), namely that:

*“Psychologists feel obliged to care mainly for the welfare of those who are direct receivers of their professional activities. This obligation applies also when psychological services are commissioned by another person or an institution” (PTP, 2019, p. 2); and “Psychologists do not undertake activities causing the risk of exposing receivers to any injury, including the risk of psychological or physical overload” (PTP, 2019, p. 2).*

The situation happened in a Polish organization; however, we have no doubts that similar problems may occur in other organizations that do not pay sufficient attention to ethical procedures performed by internal or external psychologists. In describing the case below, we used the structure adopted in the literature on ethical problems in organizational psychology (Lowman, 2006).

## The case

### Client organization and stated goals of the training project

Several years ago a HR business partner in a big business consulting organization contacted the second author (i.e., a consulting psychologist at NAVIGO Group). The organization was looking for an adequate consulting company to perform a soft competence training project for a team of analysts and their manager. During the first

meeting, the HR business partner communicated some basic information about the organization and the needs of the team and their manager.

The consultant learnt that the client organization had already implemented a number of HR activities, such as periodic (once a year) employee competence appraisals. The results of these appraisals were being used by the HR department and managers to plan employee and team development activities. For instance, based on the appraisal results, employees should take part in training courses. Overall, the main responsibility for supporting employee development was in the hands of managers – they could decide on how their team was going to be developed based on the training budget allocated to them. Leaders could also independently select external development services suppliers (e.g., trainers, coaches, mentors) they wanted to cooperate with. Of course, HR business partners assigned to individual teams could support them in these activities.

In this case, the HR business partner and the team manager had performed an analysis of the yearly team appraisal results. Overall, the team showed slightly lower results in the areas of social and organizational competences required from analysts employed by the organization. The organization defined social competences as communicativeness (an ability to communicate one's thoughts clearly and precisely, to listen actively, and to adjust the communication style to addressees) and cooperation (establishing and maintaining relations based on respect and trust, caring for positive relations within a team, pursuing common aims). Organizational competences, on the other hand, were understood as the ability to organize one's own work, and thus were related to defining priorities, meeting deadlines, and using resources effectively. After careful consideration, the HR business partner and the team manager reached the conclusion that the team manager would need help in supporting the development of the team. They agreed that a series of workshops could be a good starting point for strengthening the social and organizational competences within the team. Moreover, the additional aim of the training was to enable participants to get to know each other better.

During our initial meeting to discuss the scope of the potential project, the HR business partner stated that all sixteen team members would participate in the training. The team consisted of analysts whose daily work entailed using advanced technologies to investigate data provided by clients and develop solutions to business problems related to financial risks and rates of return. According to the HR business partner, the team showed deficiencies in the areas of social and organizational competences due to the nature of their work, which does not facilitate the development of these competences.

## Ethical challenges during contracting and redefinition of project objectives

Based on the agreed consultancy programme and the HR business partner's recommendations, the team manager decided to start cooperation with the consulting company where the second author (from here one referred to as "the external consultant") worked. A meeting was arranged during which the parties were to clarify project objectives and range, as well as steps to undertake. Not only the manager and the external consultant, but also the HR business partner took part in the meeting.

During the meeting it was confirmed that the project's long-term objective was to improve team members' social and organizational competences. Specific aspects of these competences that were to be developed under the project were identified. Taking into account the relatively low level of employee skills in these areas disclosed during the yearly appraisal, it was decided that development activities would mainly include training workshops. Four one-day sessions were planned for the team at approximately one-month intervals. Between training sessions participants would perform various development tasks agreed on with the trainers that would enable them to practice the acquired competences. At this stage of the discussion, the project scope, objectives and schedule seemed to be clear to the external consultant.

Next we started to discuss procedural matters. In the process of discussing who would be participating in the sessions, the team manager expressed his intention to also attend some of them. As the external consultant did not know his motivations, she asked him why he wanted to be present. He explained that he wanted to broaden his knowledge about the subject matter of the training course – although he himself had no identified deficits in these areas. Moreover, the team manager wanted to analyse the team and assess individual employees. He explained that he did not have many opportunities to watch his team members perform their daily tasks. Moreover, he argued that many people had only recently started to work for the team and he still did not have an informed opinion about them. By observing them during the workshop, he hoped he could gather information that he could use in deciding about promotions or dismissals within his team.

The external consultant was surprised to hear that the HR business partner shared the team manager's expectations – she suggested that the consulting team should prepare a "team competences map" based on the training outcomes. This map was meant to

include evaluations of all participants and identify the employees with the highest and the lowest levels of competences. The HR business partner and the team manager, expected that the consulting team would hide from participants the fact that they were going to make observations and formulate appraisals. The idea was that, in this way, participants' behaviours were going to be free from self-presentation – they would show the actual level of their competences. In other words, if they did not know about the appraisal, they would behave naturally.

The external consultant repeated the project objectives defined by the client representatives. She pointed out that the organization wanted to satisfy two expectations with the use of a single method (training); developing and assessing the employees at the same time. Moreover, the fact that employees were being assessed was to be hidden from them. From the external consultant's perspective, however, the combination of such objectives and the fact of hiding the appraisal from training participants caused ethical and methodological dilemmas. She emphasised that according to the standards of the company she represents:

- Project participants should not be assessed and developed at the same time with the use of a single method;
- If a project includes employee assessment, they should be informed about the appraisal date and criteria.

The sources of the above-mentioned standards can be found in commonly accepted goals of individual tools and HR methods, experiences of the external consultant's company and the Polish Psychological Association Ethics Code (PTP, 2019). In further discussion, the external consultant stated that the general aim of a training is to develop participants' competences. Assessments could be made with the help of other methods, for example competence tests, sample task performance or periodic appraisals. Training participants are encouraged to discuss their problems openly and try new skills; as it is assumed that this is the time they can make mistakes (mistakes are even desired, as participants can learn how to correct them).

Presumably, when informed that their competences are going to be assessed during the training course, employees would start using self-presentation techniques to show themselves at their best instead of trying to learn as much as possible. From the development aims perspective, excessive self-presentations by training participants are undesired, as they can restrict their willingness to disclose their competence deficits.

Therefore, a method combining both assessment and developmental objectives would very likely negatively affect the latter.

Client representatives listened to the external consultant's arguments and then asked whether, in a scenario where both assessment and developmental objectives were pursued simultaneously, the assessment objective could also be negatively affected. The external consultant informed the HR business partner and the team manager that it was not possible to adequately conduct a workshop and simultaneously make reliable observations and assessments of participants (that satisfy methodological requirements). Therefore, it could be expected that the assessment aim would not be achieved either. Client representatives also asked why it was unethical to hide the fact of performing an appraisal from employees. The external consultant replied that according to ethical standards used by psychologists such solutions are inadvisable (PTP, 2019).

The arguments of the external consultant convinced client representatives. We agreed that trainers (i.e., the psychologists that would conduct the development programme) would not assess individual employees (neither secretly, nor openly). After conducting all the workshops they would suggest development activities for the whole group in order to maintain the training effects. The team manager was to take part in workshops according to the same rules as his team members (he was supposed to be a workshop participant and to take part in all activities offered by trainers). We also agreed that he would refrain from assessing his subordinates during the training course.

### **Workshop challenges and positive project completion**

Workshops were organised for the company as planned during the meeting. The team manager took part in them. At the very beginning, trainers established with participants a psychological contract that included rules of group work during sessions (e.g., addressing others with respect, communicating one's opinions openly and constructively, all participants taking an active part in sessions, and that the rules are the same for all participants). Despite this fact, initially, team members were reluctant to openly engage during the workshops. Upon being gently confronted about this by the trainers, they admitted that they were afraid that they would be assessed by their manager. However, thanks to open discussions about participants' needs and expectations (including those of the team manager), the trainers managed to "overcome" these fears. During the course of the programme, some difficult situations related to the team manager's behaviours also occurred; for example, several times he formulated non-constructive critical

opinions about the way some participants performed their tasks. Nevertheless, thanks to the mutual understanding achieved and the rules (i.e., the contract) adopted at the beginning, the group managed to handle these situations in a constructive and open way.

At the end of the training project, the external consultant held a meeting with the HR business partner and the team manager to evaluate the project outcomes. Client representatives had positive opinions about the project performance. The participants also had positive impressions of the project – in evaluation questionnaires they gave very good ratings to both training sessions and the effects they brought. As such, questionnaires mainly reflect the opinions and feelings of those who fill them in rather than actual results; therefore, the external consultant, the HR business partner and the team manager agreed that the next evaluation of effects would be done during the next yearly competence appraisal. During the meeting, they discussed the steps the team manager could take to support their team in implementing the skills acquired during the training workshops.

## Case interpretations and implications

It is an ethical responsibility of an employer to inform employees about any planned assessment. Legal requirements, however, are not so self-evident. For example, the Polish Labour Code (KP) mentions employee evaluation only once. It says that: “An employer shall in particular apply objective and fair criteria for the evaluation of employees and their performance” (KP, 2020, p. 51). It does not specify, however, what is permitted or not. Furthermore, adopted legal solutions may vary across the world. In the discussed case, the client organization’s manager and the HR business partner initially intended to conduct employee assessments as part of the competence development programme without informing the employees about them. Fortunately, the external project managers’ intervention and frank, open communication with client representatives resulted in the correction of these hidden objectives and the training workshops were carried out in accordance with ethical rules. An in-depth analysis of the case shows that the following paragraph from the Polish Psychological Association Ethics Code (PTP, 2019) is relevant to the ethical problem described in the case.

*“Service receivers have the right to obtain information about planned activities, in particular about the activities’ aims, planned formats and methods, duration time, the most probable consequences, and possible alternatives” (PTP, 2019, p. 4).*

According to the PTP, every employee should be informed about the appraisal date, its criteria and possible consequences. Unfortunately, during initial conversations the manager and the HR business partner did not see an ethical problem in combining training with hidden appraisal. Moreover, they did not see potential negative consequences of such steps for the team and the organization. Probably the managerial staff are less sensitive to unethical situations due to their strong motivation for success in their profession. Researchers show that a similar mechanism is observed with regard to the acts of corruption in organizations (Rabl, 2008). Moreover, in the discussed case, the psychologists acting as external consultants were almost persuaded to perform the assessment process without informing employees about it, yet they chose to act in accordance with the code of practice of their profession. However, one can easily see how external consultants could get intimidated by the client for fear of losing a lucrative contract and engage in unethical procedures.

In the discussed case, another important ethical rule defined in the Ethics Code (PTP, 2019) could also have been infringed without the external consultant's intervention:

*"Psychologists have an obligation to protect information obtained during professional activities, including information about those with whom they work and about other people, as well as information about test products and results, raw results in particular. Data obtained by psychologists upon performing their professional activities are treated as sensitive" (PTP, 2019, p. 4).*

If an appraisal is hidden during training, there is a risk that employees will find out about it anyway. Moreover, there is a high risk that the assessments performed during workshops will be unreliable. If the external consultants had agreed to prepare a "team competences map" based on the assessments gained from trainings, they would also have (implicitly) agreed that the information collected for each individual employee would be used in an unethical way. The manager's request to observe the team during the workshops without being an active participant himself was also unethical. Moreover, it could have resulted in employees avoiding other workshops and losing trust in their manager and the organization. In contrast, the situation where a manager participates in a workshop together with the team, whereas not comfortable for the subordinates, offers at least an elementary level of safety. Also, given that all participants, including the manager, are encouraged to be honest, it might help create better mutual understanding.

It is worth noting that the described ethical problems encountered by external consulting psychologists can also present larger-scale challenges for the organizations in which

these situations occur. Ethics breaches during employee assessment are extreme examples of psychological contract breach between an organization and its employees. Research results on the consequences of psychological contract breaches are quite clear (e.g., Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski & Bravo, 2007). Psychological contract breaches have been shown to lead to negative emotions in employees and a loss of trust. This, in turn, may negatively affect organizational attitudes (e.g., may decrease job satisfaction and commitment to an organization, increase turnover intentions) and, eventually, lead to decreases in job performance (Zhao et al., 2007). Unresolved ethical problems within an organization may lead to serious economic troubles. Therefore, it is recommended to undertake preventive measures, such as conducting training courses on how to act ethically, to ward off such problems (Chudzicka-Czupala, 2013).

## Project takeaways

The use of training processes to perform hidden employee appraisals presents consulting psychologists with a dilemma: should they follow professional ethics guidelines at the risk of alienating the client and losing a lucrative contract or should they 'give in' to the client's wishes at the risk of damaging their professional reputation? In the discussed case, the external consultant decided to act in accordance with professional ethics standards and persuaded the client to modify the training project agenda and objectives. However, this is not necessarily always easy. In addition, as we mentioned above, failing to treat employees ethically and breaching the psychological contract between an organization and its employees, could have negative downstream consequences for the organization at large. In this respect, the presented case seems to be a good example of challenges faced by work and organizational psychologists (WOP) conducting consulting work. Although our case took place in an organization from Eastern Europe, it very well supplements psychologists' experiences with ethical problems already described in the literature (Lowman, 2006). It clearly shows that, in the face of real ethical dilemmas, consultants may – thanks to frank and open communication with an organization (a client) – modify these project aspects that, in the long run, are neither beneficial to employees nor the organization itself.

We can recommend several good practices that may prove helpful when dealing with ethical dilemmas and may protect organizations and psychologists that cooperate with them. In our opinion, WOP consultants should:

- Be familiar with an ethical code binding psychologists in a given country – in particular, its provisions and recommendations concerning the work of organizational and managerial psychologists;
- Be familiar with the labour code provisions in a given country that refer to employee assessment and development;
- Translate the key concepts included in these documents into internal standards of consulting/training companies;
- Inform one's clients about ethical standards essential for project objectives;
- Devote a sufficient amount of time to diagnose project objectives and possible ethical risks.

Organizations should:

- Ensure that they have their own ethical standards of employee assessment and development (that are in line with legal regulations, an ethical code, and existing relevant codes of practice);
- Appoint within the organization a person responsible for the implementation and observation of internal standards of employee assessment and development;
- Educate managers and HR employees about the aims of and the ways of using individual methods and tools of employee assessment and development.

## Conclusions

It seems necessary to raise awareness among HR professionals and managers that activities aimed at assessing and developing employees should be conducted separately from each other. It is also essential to raise awareness of professional ethical rules and guidelines among managers and HR business partners, such as, for instance, the need to inform employees of any appraisals they might be subjected to.

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# Methodological, ethical and legal problems of measuring and counteracting workplace mobbing

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**Katarzyna Durniat**, Ph.D, is a psychologist and a doctor of humanities specialised in the field of Work and Organizational Psychology. She holds the position of an Associate Professor at the Institute of Psychology, University of Wrocław, Poland. As an academic and a consultant, she mostly focuses on organizational behaviours (from ethical to counterproductive behaviours), organizational climate, employees' competences and their assessment, job selection and recruitment procedures. She is an expert in the field of workplace mobbing/bullying having studied mobbing in Poland and abroad for almost two decades. Her expertise grew out from clinical experience and practice, while she was working with and supporting the victims of mobbing in Poland, acting as a member of a National Anti-Mobbing Association (2004–2006). She also consults, diagnoses and prepares expert opinions on mobbing in organizations. Since 2006 she has been working on the methodology and testing her own method (called SDM Questionnaire) for diagnosing mobbing. Katarzyna Durniat is the author of over 40 scientific publications (in Polish and English) and dozens of academic speeches and presentations, most of them focusing on a variety of aspects (i.e., specificity, dynamics, cultural biases, perception, antecedents and consequences, methods and methodology) of workplace mobbing. She is also an active member of the Polish Association of Organizational Psychology (PSPO) and the European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology (EAWOP).

## Abstract

The paper looks at theoretical and methodological problems, as well as legal and ethical issues, connected with diagnosing and counteracting workplace mobbing. Firstly, the author briefly presents the mobbing research tradition and points to current international approaches to and methods of measuring mobbing in the workplace. The author comments on the possibilities and limitations of the implementation of some methods, which are commonly employed in mobbing research and shares some doubts about the universality and international usage of the “mobbing/bullying tools”, which were developed under specific socio-organizational circumstances. Then, the paper discusses the legalities and practicalities of preventing and fighting mobbing in the context of Polish and European legislation. The author points to a wide spectrum of ethical and legal aspects of counteracting and dealing with mobbing. In conclusion, the author recommends that corporations and businesses should take

all possible preventive steps to minimise the risk of mobbing, given that, apart from adversely affecting employees' health, career, work engagement and job satisfaction, it substantially damages their reputation.

*Keywords:* mobbing/bullying, measurement, anti-mobbing law, prevention

## Introduction

The issue of mobbing, in some countries called workplace bullying, does not have a long social or scientific tradition, although it has probably been present in social interactions and organizations since their beginning. The word “mobbing” derives from the Latin *mobile vulgus* meaning an “unsteady, threatening crowd” and was used for the first time by the ethologist Konrad Lorenz in relation to the aggressive behaviour of wild animals vying to stave off an intruder (Lorenz, 1963). The Swedish doctor Peter-Paul Heinemann (1972) used this term for the first time in the context of human aggressive behaviour. A couple of years later, a Swedish psychologist Heinz Leymann (1986) endowed the term with a new meaning (now widely accepted and recognizable in most European countries), using it in reference to a specific form of aggressive behaviour and unethical communication in the workplace (cf., Leymann, 1990b, 1996). Actually, the interest of scholars in the mobbing phenomenon was initiated and developed mostly in Scandinavian countries (e.g., Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Leymann 1986, 1990b, 1996; Vartia, 1996, 2001). Nevertheless, by now the issue of mobbing has been intensively researched all over the world (e.g., Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003, 2011; Keashly & Jagatic, 2011; Power et al., 2013; Salin et al., 2019).

Moreover, in recent years mobbing has become one of the focal points of social, ethical and legal concern. On 20 September 2001, the European Parliament passed a resolution on harassment at the workplace (European Parliament, 2001) calling on the EU Member States to counteract workplace mobbing and sexual harassment, and thus reflecting the implementation of the provisions of the Lisbon Strategy for growth and jobs. Poland, after Sweden, France and Belgium, was the fourth country in Europe to pass a legal anti-mobbing act, which was introduced into the Polish Labour Code in May 2004 (Polish Labour Code art. 94<sup>3</sup>, § 2), together with Poland's accession to the EU. Since that time the issue of workplace harassment and mobbing has gained added importance, which substantially increased public awareness of mobbing as well as practitioners' attention and scientists' interest. Scientific studies (Nielsen, Notelaers, & Einarsen, 2011; Zapf, Escartin, Einarsen, Hoel, & Vartia, 2011) suggest that approximately 10% - 17%

of employees experience workplace mobbing, though (depending on the measurement instruments and methodology applied in particular studies) the prevalence rates cited by different sources vary widely (Nielsen et al., 2009; Nielsen, Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010).

The results of numerous studies indicate that mobbing leads to a range of negative consequences, both on the individual (Høgh, Mikkelsen, & Hansen, 2011; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012) as well as organizational and societal level (Hoel, Sheehan, Cooper, & Einarsen, 2011). The findings of a number of independently conducted studies confirmed that experiencing mobbing evokes a number of negative psychosomatic and physiological symptoms, such as headaches, backaches, sleep disorders, problems with concentration, etc. (Hansen et al., 2006; Høgh, Mikkelsen, & Hansen, 2012). The research shows that mobbing induces very strong psychological stress (Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2002; Marchand, Demers, & Durand, 2005) which can even evolve into the development of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2004; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002; Tehrani, 2012). Moreover, experiencing mobbing causes frustration, may lead to aggression, anxiety or chronic fatigue (Harvey & Keashly, 2003; Ireland & Archer, 2002). Furthermore, it negatively influences victims' self-esteem, lowers work engagement and work satisfaction and reduces employees' effectiveness (Durniat, 2011; Parzefall & Salin, 2010). Thus, it presents a threat not only to the individual concerned but also to the whole organization, its productivity and organizational image (Durniat, 2017; Hoel et al., 2011).

Despite the apparent social awareness of the gravity of mobbing and extensive research into it, it seems that both scientists and practitioners still have a lot to do in the field of the development of mobbing measurement tools and diagnosis (cf., Durniat, 2020; Nielsen et al., 2011; Notelaers & Einarsen, 2013) as well as of mobbing protection and intervention mechanisms (cf., Durniat, 2019; Durniat, Działa, & Krupa, 2016; Salin et al., 2020). In this article, the author will discuss some of the methodological, ethical and legal problems connected with diagnosing and counteracting workplace mobbing. All these issues or perspectives are intertwined and related to each other. The article relies on a combination of international mobbing research, Polish research, as well as organizational and legal circumstances and practices. The scientific issues will be presented in view of the current Polish anti-mobbing laws and regulations as well as organizational practices.

## Terminology, definitions and specificity of mobbing

One of the most often cited and internationally recognized scientific definitions of mobbing was paved by Leymann (1996) who stated:

*“Psychological terror or mobbing in working life involves hostile and unethical communication, which is directed in a systematic way by one or a few individuals mainly towards one individual who, due to mobbing, is pushed into a helpless and defenceless position, being held there by means of continuing mobbing activities. These actions occur on a very frequent basis (statistical definition: at least once a week) and over a long period of time (statistical definition: at least six months of duration). Because of the high frequency and long duration of hostile behaviour, this maltreatment results in considerable psychological, psychosomatic, and social misery.”* (p. 168)

Actually, this mobbing definition set a benchmark for most mobbing scientists and practitioners all over the world, despite the fact that a lot of them ignored Leymann’s call for distinguishing mobbing from bullying (Leymann, 1996), whereby bullying involves physical aggression and threat. In fact, bullying at school is strongly characterised by such physically aggressive acts. In contrast, physical violence is very seldomly found in mobbing behaviours at work. Rather, mobbing is characterised by much more sophisticated behaviours such as, for example, socially isolating the victim. I suggest keeping the word “bullying” for activities between children and teenagers at school and reserving the word “mobbing” for adult behaviour.

Unfortunately, nowadays these two terms are used interchangeably, despite their different scientific roots, traditions and the crucial difference in the kind of violence pointed out by Leymann (1996). In Poland (like in some other countries of Central and Western Europe), the Nordic term “mobbing” is used instead of the British “bullying” to describe the prolonged exposure of an employee to numerous unwanted and harmful behaviours which may appear in the workplace. Nevertheless, ironically, the Nordic researchers themselves are nowadays more prone to use the term “workplace bullying” (in contrast to “school bullying”) in reference to the phenomenon which they originally called “mobbing” (cf., Einarsen et al., 2011). This terminological inconsistency causes some misunderstandings about the actual meaning of both terms. For example, some scientists claim that mobbing (unlike bullying) should be associated with group (not individual) violence. Nonetheless, despite the fact that this understanding of the word “mobbing” is embedded in its etymology, it is not what Leymann (1986, 1990b, 1996) had in mind while introducing the term into the psychological literature and contrasting it with “bullying”.

Accepting the existing terminological incongruences and referring to the most recognizable scientific mobbing (or bullying) definitions and research (cf., Einarsen et al., 2003, 2011; Leymann, 1990b, 1996; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2004), one can distinguish some universal, mobbing defining criteria. At the top of them are: the frequency (repeatability and regularity) of the target's exposure to a variety of unwanted behaviours, the intentionality of these acts, the length of persecution, the imbalance of power between a mobbing target and a perpetrator, the inability of victims to defend themselves, and the appearance of negative and harmful mobbing effects. It is worth noting that a Polish psychological mobbing definition proposed by Durniat and Kulczycka (2006) contains most of the criteria, which appear in international scientific definitions. In particular, Durniat and Kulczycka (2006) stated that:

*"Mobbing is psychological abuse taking place between at least two partners of social interaction, systematically and intentionally applied by an oppressor (less often oppressors) against a victim (less often victims) in repetitive verbal and behavioural attacks. Mobbing has a mainly subjective character, but its effects are manifested by mental destabilisation of the victim, by a sense of injustice and bewilderment as well as by experiencing strong psychological stress."* (p. 463)

This definition is in agreement with the Polish legal definition (cf., Polish Labour Code art. 94<sup>3</sup>, § 2). However, the basic definitional mobbing criteria should be discussed first to address some of the issues, which appear in scientific discourse. To begin with, it must be highlighted that aggressive behaviours which sometimes appear in the workplace can be called mobbing only if they are persistent, reoccurring and long-lasting. It means that a singular or isolated incident of negative social interaction cannot qualify as mobbing. Leymann (1996) arbitrarily set very strict mobbing frequency and duration criteria, stating that at least one negative behaviour must appear for no less than once a week for at least half a year. The statistical approach of measuring and diagnosing mobbing with the use of Leymann's "operational criterion", despite its vast popularity and numerous applications (e.g., Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Einarsen et al., 2003; Vartia, 1996), has been criticized by some researchers (cf., Durniat, 2020; Durniat & Kulczycka, 2006; Hirigoyen, 2001; Kulczycka & Durniat, 2004; Nielsen et al., 2011) for being poorly related with the empirical mobbing evidence and not reflecting mobbing dynamics and complexity. Next, it should be explained that the criterion of the imbalance of power between the main actors of mobbing does not have to reflect the formal power structure. However, research proved (Björkqvist, Österman, & Hjelt-Bäck, 1994; Durniat, 2010, 2015a; Zapf et al., 2011) that in most cases employees are mobbed by those who are higher in the organizational structure. Nevertheless, mobbing may be executed by any

employee: a superior, a colleague or even an inferior. The perpetrator's source of power may be informal, for example based on knowledge, experience, seniority, social support, connections, etc. or strictly psychological (cf., Durniat, 2015a, 2015b; Einarsen et al., 2011; Nield, 1996).

Mobbers show incredible skills in hitting targets' soft spots. One of the characteristic features of mobbers' attacks is directing them at victims' weaknesses or imperfections, so that the targets very quickly lose faith in themselves. Moreover, the aggressors frequently use false accusations and manipulation; their attacks are global, aimed at diminishing the persons' general worth. Moreover, the oppressor likes to use isolation, which proves to be one of the most successful strategies of weakening targets' social and psychological position. At the same time, mobbers strengthen their own social position by building a coalition, seducing others and setting the most submissive group members against the target. All these mechanisms strengthen the imbalance of power between mobbers and their targets and are pushing mobbing victims into defenceless positions (cf., Durniat, 2015b; Hirigoyen, 2001). In addition to that, the behaviours that constitute mobbing are very often covered, vague, indirect or highly contextual, making the whole process extremely difficult to be observed externally via objective assessment (Durniat, 2012, 2015b; Durniat & Kulczycka, 2006). Hirigoyen (1998) stated that "Clinical research is hampered by the fact that every word, intonation or allusion are of paramount importance. All these details seem meaningless when recorded separately, but accumulated and combined they result in a destructive process" (p. 14, own translation).

Furthermore, numerous psychological (cognitive and emotional) as well as social group mechanisms are induced in the process of mobbing (cf., Durniat, 2014a) and they make the mobbing witnesses very reluctant to interfere and support their colleagues who become mobbing targets. Though partially explainable by the power of cognitive and social mechanisms, this kind of co-worker attitudes and conduct should be assessed as cowardly, unethical and lacking in solidarity. Moreover, research findings indicate (Durniat, 2010, 2014a) that mobbing is often directed towards employees who do not know, support or follow shared organizational goals and practices. Thus, mobbing may be perceived as a form of social exclusion, which is a very powerful group mechanism and leads to a painful social sanction reserved for those who refuse to be aligned and become the outcasts (Durniat, 2014a).

## Mobbing measurement methods

The implementation of proper methodology and validated psychometric tools is crucial for both academics and practitioners. Sound methodology is the basis of reliable research results and accurate mobbing diagnosis. An overview of the existing mobbing measurement methods (Nielsen et al., 2011) reveals that, so far, the phenomenon has been measured in three possible ways: (a) with the use of so called self-labelling methods (b) through the implementation of behavioural experience methods, and (c) combining the above mentioned two methods in one study.

The self-labelling methods are the most subjective and methodologically weak, as they just measure the respondent's overall feeling of experiencing victimization via workplace mobbing (with or without providing the respondents with the given mobbing definition). The behavioural experience methods, like the most recognizable Leymann Inventory of Psychological Terror (LIPT) (Leymann, 1990a, 1990b) or Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ) and its revised version (NAQ-R), developed by Einarsen and colleagues (Einarsen, Hoel, & Notelaers, 2009; Einarsen & Raknes, 1997) measure the respondents' perceptions of being exposed to a range of mobbing behaviours. However, in Poland, there exists a psychometric tool called SDM Questionnaire (cf., Durniat, 2020) which goes beyond self-labelling methods and behavioural mobbing indicators (cf., Durniat, 2014b). This tool can be classified as an interactional method. It offers a new approach to measuring mobbing, as it consists of both behavioural as well as cognitive and emotional indicators (Durniat, 2014a, 2020). The interactional method developed in Poland measures not only the respondents' perceptions of exposure to typical mobbing behaviours but it also measures targets' typical cognitive interpretations and emotional reactions, which are the symptoms of anxiety and depression. Actually, in a recently released methodological paper on assessing mobbing (Notelaers & Einarsen, 2013) it is recommended that mobbing should be measured and diagnosed not only on the basis of behavioural scales (like NAQ-R), but through combining the results of these type of scales with the results of other (external) scales measuring anxiety and depression symptoms. Interestingly, these two types of scales constitute the SDM Questionnaire, which was developed in Poland as early as 2006 (cf., Durniat, 2020).

Some researchers claim (Keashly & Harvey, 2005) that the methodological issues connected with the mobbing assessment instruments and methods, despite being crucial, have not been treated attentively and rigorously enough. Unfortunately, until now we do not have a good choice of validated and reliable instruments for diagnosing mobbing in

the workplace. Thus, researchers, practitioners and organizations should be very cautious what kind of methods are implemented in the studies, as it has a huge impact on the obtained results and their credibility. A meta-analysis of the impact of methodological moderators on the mobbing prevalence rates (Nielsen et al., 2010) indicates that the results obtained by different researchers vary a lot, depending on their methodological approach and the instruments used. Generally, self-labelling methods combined with a mobbing definition provided to participants resulted in the lowest mobbing rates; higher mobbing rates were found when the behavioural experience scales were used, and the highest mobbing rates were reported when self-labelling estimates without definitions were used. Nielsen et al. (2011) emphasized that the knowledge of the differences of the various measurement methods and their impact on the mobbing prevalence rates indicates a danger of possible abuse and manipulation.

It should be added that even the most recognizable behavioural methods (like LIPT or NAQ/NAQ-R) implement an arbitrary set of operational criteria to distinguish mobbing targets from non-targets. In most of the international mobbing studies (e.g., Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Einarsen et al., 2003; Vartia, 1996) Leymann's operational criteria (which were explained earlier in the paper) were implemented. Moreover, some researchers employed different versions of these criteria, for example, stating that the person must experience at least two negative acts per week for a period of six months (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001) to be called a mobbing victim, or even that three or four acts per week must occur (Agervold, 2007) to qualify that experience as mobbing. Unfortunately, the implementation of arbitrary criteria leads to dubious decisions and diagnosis, which are not much rooted in empirical data and do not reflect the complexity of the mobbing phenomenon (Nielsen et al., 2011). For this reason, the measuring devices should follow a comprehensive and uniform set of criteria in order to obtain comparable results.

Mobbing has some cultural bias (Durniat, 2012; Durniat & Kulczycka, 2006; Durniat & Mañas, 2017) which seems to be underestimated and ignored by most of the researchers. Most of them treat mobbing as a universal phenomenon, which can be cross-culturally researched by implementing the same, universal mobbing tools. Nevertheless, the comparison of mobbing study results, for instance, obtained by Leymann (1996) in Sweden with the results of the Polish pioneering mobbing study by Delikowska (2003), both using the same methodology, indicates the existence of huge differences between mobbing prevalence rates (3.5% for the Swedish sample and 76.6% for the Polish sample). Undoubtedly, such pronounced result discrepancies should draw researchers'

attention and encourage more in-depth studies and critical analysis (cf., Durniat & Kulczycka, 2006). It is noteworthy that in the example quoted above the original LIPT questionnaire, which was used in both studies, was simply translated into Polish and implemented by the researcher, without prior cultural adaptation. Unfortunately, the direct transfer of a method rooted in one culture to another has limitations. For instance, some findings show (Durniat & Mañas, 2017) that behaviour which is perceived as neutral and acceptable in one country, or organization, may be perceived as threatening and unacceptable in another country or organization. Thus, mobbing research should always be conducted with the awareness of the national and organizational cultural context, as the understanding and perception of the phenomena is strongly related to and shaped by cultural norms and patterns of behaviour (Durniat, 2012, 2014a; Durniat & Mañas, 2017). Thus, scholars should not only be very cautious while implementing mobbing tools rooted in one country in another but they should also be vigilant while diagnosing mobbing within the same country, but in a specific organizational setting. It is recommended (Durniat, 2012, 2020; Durniat & Mañas, 2017) that mobbing studies conducted in a specific organizational setting should be preceded by a thorough study of its organizational culture, to be able to understand the meaning of particular patterns of behaviour.

Furthermore, practitioners should be aware that it is hardly possible to diagnose such a complicated phenomenon as mobbing with the implementation of just one method, such as a self-reporting questionnaire. Thus, mobbing studies conducted with the use of self-reporting methods should be supported by accounts from the perspective of mobbing witnesses, managers, HR specialists, as well as the alleged mobber. Each reported mobbing case should be treated seriously, examined immediately and thoroughly, as both the underestimation of the problem as well as false accusations and misdiagnosis can lead to damaged health, tarnished reputations and ruined careers. Moreover, every unresolved case of mobbing casts a shadow over the organizational image.

## **Workplace mobbing from a legal perspective in Poland**

Before 2004 the victims of mobbing in Poland could assert their rights only by referring to the civil code (which does not refer directly to mobbing) and by seeking support from trade unions, the Polish Labour Inspectorate or national anti-mobbing associations. Undoubtedly, the introduction of anti-mobbing law into the Polish Labour Code in 2004 made employers and business circles start to appreciate the topicality of the issue.

According to the Polish Labour Code (Polish Labour Code art. 94<sup>3</sup>, § 1), the employer is obliged to counteract mobbing. The anti-mobbing act and its regulations were a milestone in the social awareness campaign and struggle against mobbing in Poland. In 2008, 22 cases were ruled positively, out of 691 lawsuits filed on the grounds of mobbing in Poland (Rakowska-Boroń, 2009). These numbers as well as statistics from the following years indicate that Polish anti-mobbing regulations are hindered by numerous limitations, leaving Polish employees not very well protected against workplace mobbing (cf., Durniat, 2011, 2012, 2019).

First of all, under Polish law, anti-mobbing legislation covers only parties which have signed a contract of employment. Other parties are not covered by Labour Law and can file claims only in civil courts, which do not investigate mobbing cases. According to the Polish anti-mobbing law, an employee who has suffered health problems as a result of mobbing (which must be well documented and proven) is eligible to seek financial compensation. However, the biggest challenge that mobbing victims are facing while seeking justice and claiming damages under the anti-mobbing law is to prove the case in court. According to the provisions of the Polish Labour Code, the alleged victims of mobbing are required to collect evidence of the prolonged mobbing experience, which is extraordinarily difficult and should be done on the advice of a lawyer or counsellor from an anti-mobbing association. However, these professionals are usually contacted by the victims when the harassment is already at an advanced rather than at an initial stage. Another difficulty in preparing evidence is to call witnesses. Unfortunately, in many cases, mobbing is underestimated (especially at the beginning of the process) or tacitly accepted within an organization. Moreover, the employees tend to perceive the act of testimony to support the victims of mobbing as disloyalty to the employer. This is because, formally, the case is always against an employer, no matter who the mobber was.

Another problem is connected with the fact that mobbing is sometimes mistaken for discrimination, which may, but need not necessarily, co-occur. Real life and legal practice show that the borderline between the two is fuzzy. Nevertheless, employees may happen to purposefully sue the employer for discrimination rather than mobbing, just because it is easier to sue, prove and win such a case. According to the ruling of Polish labour law, certain features of molesting (which is one of the types of discrimination) and mobbing are alike (Polish Labour Code art. 18<sup>3a</sup>, § 5). However, in discrimination charges it is the defendant (employer) not the plaintiff (employee) who is required to produce evidence. Moreover, if the employer has violated the discrimination law, the employee has a right to hand in their notice on the grounds of gross negligence. No wonder, some

of the mobbing victims choose to sue the employer for discrimination rather than for mobbing. Unfortunately, the confusion caused by mixing these two distinctive workplace pathologies, unduly hinders the judges' work and obscures court proceedings. This is an undesirable effect, especially in the light of the fact that the judges seem to not fully comprehend the complex character of mobbing and, erring on side of caution, too often rule in favour of the employer or behave in such a way that the plaintiff (victim) feels re-victimised during the hearing. It seems that often the judges are neither able to grasp the vicious nature of mobbing, nor the amount of suffering and mental destabilization experienced by mobbing victims. Sometimes the judges seem to believe too easily that the plaintiff files a claim to take revenge on the superior or the employer. This motive is, in fact, very rare, although also possible and it needs to be examined thoroughly.

Nevertheless, later on, an employer can file a lawsuit against the mobber, provided that the organization was equipped with anti-mobbing codes, organizational laws and procedures which aim to protect the employees against mobbing (cf., Durniat, 2019). Although Polish employers have not received standardized guidelines regarding how to counteract mobbing in the workplace, according to the interpretation of Polish law (Kucharska, 2012): "Undertaking activities aimed at preventing mobbing in the company limits the employer's liability in the event of mobbing" (p. 21). Organizational life and practice indicates (Durniat, 2017, 2019) that the burden of responsibility for protecting employees against workplace mobbing and dealing with this problem is assigned to HR specialists. However, this important role of HR specialists and their perspective on the mobbing issue has rarely been researched (cf., Fox & Cowan, 2015; Hodgins, MacCurtain, & Mannix-McNamara, 2014; Salin et al., 2020). Polish findings indicate (Durniat, 2017; Durniat et al., 2016) that the level of organizational awareness of the mobbing issue and its gravity is quite high, although the picture of organizational anti-mobbing mechanisms and their implementation is diverse. Nevertheless, employers and managers should realize that mobbing not only ruins targets' health and lives but it also lowers employees' job commitment, engagement and trust, spoils group cooperation and organizational climate, as well as severely damages the reputation of an organization, which is very difficult to rebuild.

## Summary

Mobbing is a very complex and insidious (initially subtle, hidden and underappreciated, but imperceptibly evolving, building up strength and distractive power) social phenomenon, which is unwanted and harmful, though significantly prevalent in different

workplaces all over the world. Mobbing proves to be one of the most severe psycho-social stressors; mobbing targets experience a variety of negative psycho-somatic symptoms and psychiatric disorders, which adversely affects their well-being and functioning in the professional and private spheres. Moreover, mobbing negatively influences other employees and whole organizations; it lowers organizational commitment and productivity, as well as badly affects organizational image and reputation.

Unfortunately, the occurrence of mobbing, its escalation and endurance in workplaces is sustained by a number of psycho-social mechanisms. Thus, it is hardly possible for mobbing targets to cope with this pathology individually, while not being supported by the organization and professionals such as lawyers or counsellors from anti-mobbing associations. Consequently, socially responsible organizations and states should build and execute anti-mobbing laws and procedures that aim at protecting employees against mobbing in the workplace. Practice proves that fighting mobbing on the national level, i.e., mobbing lawsuits and cases in courts of law, is usually very hard, ineffective or even unsatisfactory. Actually, it is the organizational level on which anti-mobbing laws and mechanisms should be built and implemented.

Research shows that early and systematic mobbing prevention based on building awareness of the phenomenon combined with strong and visible anti-mobbing policy proves to be the most effective and least expensive way of avoiding that unwanted workplace pathology. Research demonstrates that mobbing can be successfully deterred by organizational standards, proper conduct, efficient communication and adherence to accepted moral norms, principles and code of practice. Undoubtedly, it is incomparably easier to develop proper policies and prevent mobbing in the workplace than to deal with complicated mobbing cases, which require professional and very careful interventions combined with complex, multi-stage mobbing diagnosis. Needless to say, all these activities engage a great deal of organizational resources and pose threats to organizational image and reputation.

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# The ethics of organizational research: Methodological considerations for ensuring respondents' anonymity and confidentiality

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## Abstract

When planning any research in an organization, it is necessary to decide upon the types of personal data to be collected. Ethical research principles suggest that researchers need to ensure participants' anonymity and confidential treatment of their data. However, researchers tend to collect various types of demographic information which might lead participants to believe that their anonymity could be compromised. This article highlights some methodological considerations aimed at ensuring respondents' anonymity and confidential treatment of their data. It also presents two examples which highlight some potential problems that might arise when respondents feel that the anonymity and confidentiality of their data are threatened. Finally, the article proposes specific actions researchers can take to increase participants' trust in them and the employed research designs.

*Keywords:* organizational research, anonymity, confidentiality

## Introduction

When conducting psychological research in organizational settings, we often need to collect demographic information about our participants, such as age, gender, or organizational tenure, in order to be able to test our hypotheses. However, we sometimes collect demographic information even without a specific interest or need. As researchers, we should be aware that our participants might be concerned about the anonymity and confidentiality of their data and that their responses might be influenced by the extent to which they feel anonymity and confidentiality concerns are addressed. In this article, I will first highlight the ethical research principles we should follow in protecting

participant anonymity and confidentiality and I will discuss some methodological considerations aimed at ensuring respondents' anonymity and confidential treatment of their data. Next, I will use two examples to discuss how participant concerns about confidentiality might affect research results. Finally, I will propose some specific actions researchers can take to increase participants' trust in them and the employed research designs.

## Ethical aspects of anonymity and confidentiality

In 2005, the European Federation of Psychological Associations (EFPA) proposed a Meta-Code of Ethics which serves as a roadmap for the ethics codes of national psychological associations. One of the four basic ethical principles highlighted in the code centres around “*Respect for Person's Rights and Dignity*”, which, implies respecting individuals' “rights to privacy, confidentiality, self-determination and autonomy” (EFPA, 2005, p. 1). Psychologists are therefore expected to act in accordance with the following rules:

- *“Restriction of seeking and giving out information to only that required for the professional purpose.*
- *Adequate storage and handling of information and records, in any form, to ensure confidentiality, including taking reasonable safeguards to make data anonymous when appropriate, and restricting access to reports and records to those who have a legitimate need to know.*
- *Recognition of the tension that can arise between confidentiality and the protection of a client or other significant third parties” (EFPA, 2005, p.3).*

An overly simplistic conclusion that could be drawn from these rules, is that research in organizations should be completely anonymous, since that would eliminate any possibility of (inadvertently) violating participants' confidentiality. Yet, sometimes, researchers have hypotheses that are specifically related to demographic variables such as, for instance, age, gender, organizational tenure or education. Hence, the following question arises: how can researchers reassure participants that the confidentiality of their data is safeguarded and that their anonymity is protected? One obvious solution is to not record any personal data that is unnecessary for research purposes such as participants' names, addresses and employers. However, this still doesn't address respondents' potential concerns about the anonymity of their responses when it comes to providing information that might be needed for research purposes such as

their age, gender, position, education or tenure, which, in combination, might render them identifiable. In the following sections of this article, I will discuss some possible solutions to ensuring respondents' anonymity while collecting potentially confidential demographic data.

### **Collection of confidential demographic data while ensuring respondents' anonymity**

The most popular solution to collecting demographic data that ensures respondents' anonymity is not to ask about specific values, but rather about ranges of values (Salant & Dillman, 1994). For example, instead of asking "How old are you?" we could ask "Select the age group you belong to" and propose response ranges (e.g., 21-25, 26-30, 31-35 etc.). The same principle could apply to questions pertaining to tenure, organizational position or educational level. Unfortunately, when the research sample is small, this solution is not necessarily ideal. When dealing with a small research sample, it is worth considering the characteristics of the group as a whole and decide whether specific demographic variables would inadvertently render some respondents identifiable. In addition, it is also worth thinking about whether these variables are indeed informative for research purposes. For instance, if the sample one is studying is relatively homogenous such as a group of nurses which consists of mainly females, asking about participants' gender could render the few male nurses more easily identifiable. In this case, given the gender homogeneity of the sample, collecting data about respondents' gender would also not be informative for research purposes. Given the potential threat to participants' anonymity and the lack of added value for research purposes, researchers might be better served dropping questions related to gender.

Another important factor, that can facilitate the collection of demographic data is the respondents' trust in the researcher and the research procedure. Organizational researchers often believe that it is enough to inform respondents that the collected data will be analysed "as a whole" to reduce concerns about anonymity. However, it is not that simple. The respondents may not trust the researcher or even understand what this "collective data analysis" means. In addition, they might not believe that superiors or colleagues will not have insight into individual responses. This is especially likely if there are low levels of trust in the organization, employees are aware of various pressures from their superiors and are afraid that the researcher may also succumb to them (Tyler & Degoey, 1996). With this in mind, it is important to try to gain participants' trust and to assure them that their data will be treated confidentially.

In this respect, researchers could benefit from spending some thought on how they design the informed consent form presented to respondents. The informed consent form should use clear, lay language, accurately describe the procedure for collecting and analysing data, clearly specify who has access to the collected data and explain how respondents' data will be treated confidentially to maintain their anonymity. It is also necessary to provide respondents with the opportunity to refuse participation and withdraw from the study at any time, and to provide them with the opportunity to ask questions before consenting to participate (see EFPA Standards for Psychological Assessment, 2013).

## **How concerns about confidentiality can affect research results**

Respondents' lack of trust in the confidentiality of their answers could have varied effects. For instance, they might simply refuse to participate in the study. Or, they may not answer some of the questions, especially those related to demographics. The latter solution is especially probable when respondents fear that refusal to participate in the study might have negative repercussions at work and, therefore, try to protect their anonymity by withholding responses to demographic questions. Alternatively, respondents might answer some of the questions dishonestly, in order to present themselves in a better light. It is worth noting that social desirability biases might lead to positive self-representations, even if respondents feel that the research guarantees the anonymity and confidentiality of their answers.

Below, I will present two examples from actual research illustrating the two potential effects of respondents' lack of trust in the confidentiality of their answers mentioned above: a) respondents refusing to answer demographic questions; and b) respondents answering some of the questions dishonestly.

### **Example 1: Refusal to answer demographic questions**

I will present part of a research study that I carried out in an organization in the healthcare sector in Poland. The study aimed to measure various employee attitudes and behaviours. Management was concerned that employee morale was low and planned to implement activities aimed at increasing employee morale. The effect I will describe below was not expected, but it suggests that the quality of relationships between employees and management might need improvement.

In the study, 92 respondents were asked (among others) to self-categorize into one of three professional groups: medical staff (e.g., doctors, nurses), administrative staff (e.g., secretaries, accountants) and service staff (e.g., cooks, cleaners). They were also asked to provide their age, gender and tenure in the organization. The variables under study were work satisfaction, organizational commitment, work engagement and counterproductive work behaviour (CWB). I measured work satisfaction and CWB with scales used in previous research (see Czarnota-Bojarska, 2015). Organizational commitment was measured with Bańka, Bazińska, and Wolowska's (2002) Polish adaptation of Meyer and Allen's (1991) affective commitment subscale of the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire. Finally, work engagement was measured via the vigour subscale of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

Out of the 92 respondents, 19 people did not provide any information regarding their professional group. Out of the remaining respondents, 28 identified themselves as belonging to the medical group, 20 as belonging to the administrative group and 25 as belonging to the service group. Given that such a large percentage of respondents refused to self-categorize into a professional group, I included them as a separate category into the analyses.

The results (see Table 1) suggest that the group of people who did not want to indicate their professional affiliation had the lowest levels of satisfaction, commitment, and engagement. I conducted a series of one-way ANOVAs on levels of satisfaction  $F(1,3) = 4.04, p = .01$ , commitment  $F(1,3) = 1.42, p = .24$ , engagement  $F(1,3) = 2.33, p = .08$  and CWB  $F(1,3) = 2.46, p = .07$ . Subsequently, I performed Fisher's least significance difference tests to check for intergroup differences. The tests revealed that the group of people who did not want to indicate their professional affiliation showed significantly lower levels of satisfaction and engagement than all the other groups. In addition, the analyses suggested that this group's level of commitment was significantly lower than that of the medical and service groups and that their level of CWB was significantly higher than that of the medical and administrative groups.

Table 1

Means of satisfaction, affective commitment, work engagement and counterproductive work behaviour per professional category

Professional group		Satisfaction	Affective commitment	Work engagement	Counterproductive work behavior
Medical	Mean	4.81	3.13	3.93	1.49
	SD	1.11	0.74	1.22	0.38
	N	28	28	28	28
Administrative	Mean	4.58	2.99	4.26	1.53
	SD	0.79	0.86	0.69	0.53
	N	20	20	20	20
Service	Mean	4.22	3.13	4.08	2.10
	SD	0.78	0.81	0.83	0.51
	N	25	25	25	25
No answer	Mean	3.60	2.62	3.31	1.90
	SD	1.18	0.48	1.15	0.80
	N	19	19	19	19
Total	Mean	4.35	2.99	3.92	1.75
	SD	1.06	0.76	1.05	0.60
	N	92	92	92	92

Of course, the question arises as to why this group of people who chose not to reveal their professional affiliation might differ from the others on a range of variables such as satisfaction, commitment, engagement and CWB. One possible answer might be that these people who are less engaged and satisfied with their work might also not trust the confidentiality of their data. Therefore, they might have chosen not to answer questions that could potentially identify them, as this could entail negative consequences for them in the workplace. In other words, it is possible that this group of people agreed to participate in the study and took the opportunity to honestly convey their attitudes towards their work and their organization, yet, they feared for their anonymity and chose to ignore answering some questions that might identify them.

When considering those that chose to disclose their professional affiliations, one could think of two possible scenarios to explain their answering patterns. One could assume that they did not have concerns about anonymity and answered the questions pertaining to the variables of interest honestly. Or one could assume that they were concerned about their anonymity and chose to answer the questions dishonestly by providing socially desirable answers. Clearly, it is impossible to determine based on this

dataset which interpretation is correct. Nevertheless, it is important for researchers to be mindful about potential reasons that respondents might have for not answering demographic questions.

## **Example 2: Dishonestly answering some questions**

Research that investigates employee behaviours that are beneficial (e.g., organizational citizenship behaviours) or harmful (e.g., counterproductive work behaviours) to the organization can face a number of challenges. For instance, employees might fear disclosing that they engage in behaviours that are harmful to the organization. In addition, social desirability concerns might lead respondents to overclaim engaging in beneficial behaviours and underreport engaging in harmful behaviours.

CWBs are undesirable acts that hinder work, bring measurable social damage, worsen employee relationships, decrease well-being and negatively affect the effectiveness of the organization (e.g., Fox & Spector, 2005). Examples of CWBs are wasting time, gossiping, theft, bending or not following the rules, fraud, and bribery.

Organizational citizenship behaviours (OCBs) are voluntary acts beneficial to the organization and colleagues which are not included in the formal remuneration system (e.g., Organ, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006). Examples of OCBs are voluntarily helping others with problems at work, encouraging achievement, preventing and resolving conflicts, actively participating in events and changes, being loyal to the organization, and complying with rules.

The question is whether or not self-reports of the types of behaviours described above would systematically affect participants' response patterns. There are at least two possible reasons for this. First, admitting to either beneficial or harmful behaviours can be influenced by social desirability concerns. Generally speaking, people feel more comfortable admitting that they engage in "good" behaviour (see Schlenker, 1980). It can therefore be expected, that people will overreport engaging in OCBs and underreport engaging in CWBs. This problem, however, affects any self-report measures of desirable versus undesirable behaviours. Second, respondents who might be concerned about the confidentiality of their data, might be even more likely to overreport engaging in OCBs and underreport engaging in CWBs, given that they might be afraid of potential negative repercussions at work. One way, one could verify this latter assumption is by comparing response patterns obtained in

research contexts which inherently vary in the degree of respondent anonymity such as research performed within a specific organization versus cross-organizational research performed via an online platform. For instance, if confidentiality concerns play a role, one would expect that employees participating in research within their own organizational context, would overreport OCBs and underreport CWBs when compared to employees answering the same types of questions on an online platform.

To test this assumption, I pooled data on OCBs and CWBs from various studies that I had conducted in these two types of settings: within specific organizations and in cross-organizational settings via online platforms. The group of studies described as “in organizations” consists of data obtained via surveys in various organizations, but always as part of larger research programmes that were officially approved by management. The data were collected by ensuring participants of their anonymity and confidentiality, but the surveys always included questions related to demographic variables such as gender, age, position etc. The data of the second group – “online platform” – come from a study that relied on a nationwide representative sample of Polish employees and was collected via an online platform. The respondents worked for a number of different employers, but information on the name of the employer was not collected. The data were collected by ensuring participants of their anonymity and confidentiality, and respondents provided information regarding demographic variables such as gender, age, position etc. Descriptive statistics for OCBs and CWBs in the two settings can be found in Table 2.

Table 2  
Means of organizational citizenship behaviour and counterproductive work behaviour

Type of survey		OCB	CWB
In organization	Mean	4.48	1.62
	SD	0.59	0.46
	N	787	787
Online platform	Mean	4.13	1.70
	SD	0.66	0.73
	N	635	635

The pattern of results (see Table 2) suggests that, as expected, respondents are slightly more likely to report engaging in OCBs when participating in a study embedded in their own organizations than when participating in a cross-organizational online study,  $t(1420) = 10.29, p < .001$ . Similarly, they are slightly less likely to report engaging in CWBs,  $t(1420) = 2.37, p < .05$ . In sum, it appears that employees participating in research within their own organizational context, slightly overreport OCBs and underreport CWBs when compared to employees answering the same types of questions on an online platform. Yet, these differences are small and I would like to point out that these results should be interpreted with caution given the high degrees of freedom and the pooled nature of the samples. In addition, it should also be noted that the research performed in the organizational settings adhered to strict protocols to safeguard respondents' anonymity: only basic demographic data were collected, respondents filled in the surveys in their own time on paper and dropped their responses in a sealed envelope in a large box on site. Therefore, it is possible that, relatively honest answers can be expected from respondents in organizational settings, if strict protocols to safeguard their anonymity are put in place.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be noted that safeguarding the anonymity of respondents is important for ethical reasons but also presents researchers with a methodological challenge. From an ethical perspective, care for respondents' privacy is an expression of respect for them and their personal dignity. From a methodological perspective, ensuring the confidentiality of personal data is necessary to obtain honest responses to research questions. The examples described above show that respondents' concerns about anonymity and confidential treatment of their data, might influence their response patterns to a certain extent. Importantly, trust in the researcher and the procedure are crucial for ensuring participants' sense of anonymity even when being asked to disclose some personal data.

Based on ethical principles for research (EFPA, 2005), research methodology considerations and my own experience, I would like to recommend several good practices for ensuring respondents' anonymity and confidential treatment of their data in organizational research:

- Researchers should be independent from the management of the organization (e.g., the study should be conducted by individuals independent of the organization, not by direct managers);
- Survey data should be collected anonymously (e.g., paper and pencil surveys dropped in a sealed envelope in a closed box, online surveys that do not collect IP data or e-mail addresses);
- Only demographic data necessary for hypothesis testing should be collected and care should be taken that the collected data does not allow for the identification of specific people (e.g., avoiding to simultaneously ask about the name of the team and the individual's position, as this would allow for individuals to be identified);
- Data storage should ensure respondent confidentiality, preferably outside the organization under study (e.g., in the researcher's office or on a server managed by the researcher);
- Respondents should be presented with full information on the methods employed to protect and process their data and they should have the possibility to contact the researchers to answer any questions;
- Respondents should be able to actively provide or withhold their consent for participation in the study and they should be able to withdraw their participation at any time.

To conclude, research that ensures respondent anonymity and the confidential treatment of their data, not only demonstrates respect for them and their personal dignity, but also contributes to higher quality research.

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# Ethical aspects of conducting diary research at work

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## Abstract

Due to the growing popularity of using experience sampling methods (i.e., diary studies) in organizational research, it is worth considering the ethical dilemmas faced by researchers employing this method. In this article, we highlight some of these ethical dilemmas and present the results of a workshop conducted among researchers participating in the EAWOP Small Group Meeting (SGM) on "*Ethical issues in psychological assessment in the organizational context*" held at the University of Warsaw, 11-13 September, 2019. Workshop participants tasked with creating their own tools for diary research, identified the following ethical issues: a) copyright of tools; b) the newly developed tools' psychometric values; c) the expediency of using the diary study methodology for a variety of research questions; d) employees' well-being; e) rewarding employees for the effort required by the methodology; f) employees' dignity; and g) employees' time away from work. Workshop participants developed some preliminary solutions for addressing these issues: a) using diary studies as a supplementary method to questionnaire research; and b) participants' sacrifice of personal psychological resources should be adequately appreciated.

**Keywords:** diary study, ethical aspects of applied research, workshop, EAWOP Small Group Meeting

## Introduction

This article discusses a method of data collection called the experience sampling method or diary study method (Larson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1983), which has been gaining popularity in the context of applied organizational psychology research (for example Dalal, Lam, Weiss, Welch & Hulin, 2009). Conducting research during working hours places demands on the employees as it constitutes an interruption of their daily work. Thus, employees must choose whether to continue their work or whether to complete a survey that has been sanctioned by their employer. Measurement during working hours also raises ethical dilemmas on the part of the researchers who, on the one hand must take into account the employees' well-being, and on the other hand, are responsible for safeguarding the integrity of the employed methodology. As the method has become increasingly popular, it is worth considering these ethical dilemmas, especially given that organizational psychologists operate in a profession that has the trust of the public.

The rest of the article has been structured as follows: in the theoretical section, we first describe the experience sampling method and highlight the benefits and ethical challenges it poses to researchers. In the second part of the article, we describe a workshop that was part of the EAWOP SGM on “*Ethical issues in psychological assessment in the organizational context*” held at the University of Warsaw, September 11–13, 2019. This workshop was aimed at developing solutions to ethical dilemmas arising during diary research conducted in the workplace. We end our article with some suggestions for researchers employing the diary study method.

## Theoretical framework

### What is the experience sampling method?

The experience sampling method (ESM, Larson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1983), also called diary method, is a strategy for gathering information from individuals about their experience of daily life as it occurs. The method can be used to collect both qualitative and quantitative data and the questions are tailored to the purpose of the research. The individual's own thoughts, perceptions of events, and allocation of attention are the primary objects of study, grounding this method in the phenomenological approach. An example of using this method, would be asking participants questions four times a day for two weeks. Measurements can be done via a web application, by sending emails with

links to questions or by using handheld devices which display reminders to complete the survey. The method is not new (Flügel, 1925), but new technology has facilitated this type of research (Dalal et al., 2009).

## What are the benefits of ESM?

The experience sampling method has a number of benefits, some of which, we will highlight below:

- Measurement occurs in natural conditions – fluctuation in episodic states can explain the antecedents and outcomes of these states; the more the study captures the daily lives of its participants, the more reliable it is (Wheeler & Reis, 1991);
- Minimising the effects of participants' unreliable memory – by asking questions that pertain to the current point in time it eliminates errors in participants' answers due to gaps in memory; this is especially the case in studies targeting feelings and behaviours in response to a specific situation, given that emotional states and behaviour are highly variable and occur situationally (Beal, Weiss, Barros & MacDermid, 2005);
- Providing the possibility to capture the dynamics of behaviour, emotions or perceptions – only a within person approach can adequately address these dynamics and therefore this method complements the between-person approach (Alliger & Williams, 1993).

Partially, due to these benefits, the method has steadily been growing in popularity. There are currently 45,900 records about ESM in Google Scholar (search term “diary study”, search performed on 28.07.2020). With the method's ever increasing use, it is worth taking a closer look at the ethical aspects of using it in psychological research.

## What are potential ethical challenges posed by ESM?

The very method of diary research poses challenges for scientists. Especially in the context of conducting the research in the workplace during working hours, the researcher faces ethical challenges in relation to employees and employers. Therefore, considering its growing popularity, the method could also benefit from being scrutinised from an ethical perspective. Ethical dilemmas that a researcher could face are:

- Care for the employees' well-being (dignity, autonomy, dedication to work)

versus interruption of work duties. One solution balancing these two concerns could be using the shortest possible measurement with a user-friendly interface. However, short measurement raises another potential ethical challenge highlighted below;

- Responsibility for user-friendliness (short multiple measurements) versus quality of the obtained result (offering only a minor contribution to the knowledge in the research area). One solution could be to adjust tools properly and limit the variables / hypotheses under study. However, reducing the number of items or hypotheses may lead to only minor contributions to the knowledge in the research area.

Based on the methodological assumptions (short and multiple measurements, several times a day for several days in natural conditions) of ESM, some ethical problems associated with conducting research in the workplace and during work hours are presented below.

### **Care for the employees' well-being versus interruption of work duties**

One of the ethical dilemmas researchers face when using ESM concerns care for the employees' well-being (e.g., autonomy, dedication to work, fatigue during the survey) versus interrupting their work duties. This dilemma springs from the methodological assumptions of ESM (i.e., short and multiple measurements, several times a day for several days in natural conditions).

Given that ESM requires several measurements during a working day for multiple days, it tends to interrupt employees' daily work routine. In other words, this method of study interferes with the fulfilment of employees' work duties. It might also affect their well-being negatively by raising internal conflicts between a felt responsibility to fulfil their work duties versus completing the survey conscientiously every single time. Since the organization sanctioned employees' participation in the study, employees might be confronted with simultaneously fulfilling their responsibility of completing work tasks as well as an additional task – completing the survey during the working day.

In addition, the ESM requires the use of the same questions for each measurement, and due to the fact that it is a multiple measurement, it could lead to respondent fatigue. Fatigue with questions may be an important issue prompting participants to withdraw from the study or it might undermine the quality of their answers. Participants tired of questions might answer them automatically in order to just get to the end of the study.

They might not understand why they have to answer the same questions repeatedly and, in the end, both the researcher and the study may lose credibility in their eyes. This might pose a threat to the credibility of future psychological research among the general public, which is important given that our profession requires public trust if we are to serve society and improve general well-being.

In sum, the multiple measurements required by the ESM during the working day, could lead to employee productivity losses, internal conflicts between sets of competing duties and fatigue with questions. This, in turn, might affect employees' well-being as well as the quality of the research. One solution could be to use the shortest possible measurement with a user-friendly interface (Dalal et al., 2009).

### **Responsibility for user-friendliness versus quality of the obtained result**

Another ethical dilemma researchers face when using ESM concerns responsibility for user-friendliness (short multiple measurements) versus quality of the obtained result (minor contribution to the knowledge in the research area).

Conducting short measurements inevitably puts limitations on the number of variables and questions that can be fitted into a single measurement. Since, most of the time, it is not possible to test the entire research model in one study, one possible solution could be to design several studies to test parts of the model. This implies reducing the number of variables and hypotheses per study. Even if the research methodology is modified accordingly, the question of a relatively minor contribution to the knowledge in the research area still remains (Wojtkowska, 2021). Limiting the variables and simplifying the research model may not lead to new conclusions, the mechanisms of psychological processes are complex and the basic questions already have answers.

Another possible solution to ensuring short multiple measurements, besides limiting variables and hypotheses under study, would be to limit the number of items per variable in a single measurement. In this scenario, the researcher reduces an existing research tool by choosing those items they think will effectively measure the construct. This raises potential issues regarding the reliability of the shorter version of the employed research tool.

Multiple short measurements involve a great deal of effort and commitment from both the researcher and the participants. So, the question of return on investment (ROI) arises. The researcher shortens the scales, simplifies models and hypotheses, and the employee participates repeatedly in the measurement. Does this effort pay off? It is important

that psychologists consider the possible gains and losses that may result from their methodological choices.

All ethical dilemmas discussed above are related to methodological dilemmas, hence the two issues are inseparable and influence one another. In the next section, we will discuss a workshop aimed at revealing these types of ethical dilemmas when employing ESM and possible ways of dealing them.

## **Workshop: Joint reflections on the ESM**

The EAWOP SGM "*Ethical issues in psychological assessment in the organizational context*" was held at the University of Warsaw, Poland on 11–13 September, 2019. The meeting was aimed at WOP researchers and practitioners; and focused on discussing the ethical problems they encounter in their activities. As part of this meeting we conducted a workshop, which will be described below. The goal of the workshop was to prompt participants to consider ethical challenges associated with the use of ESM in the workplace, which, so far have tended to be ignored in the literature. The participants had to create a tool (based on an existing one) that could be used in a diary study, discuss the difficulties encountered, reflect on the ethical problems of using the ESM in organizational research and collectively brainstorm about possible solutions.

### **Introduction to the workshop: An ESM example from the literature**

As part of the workshop introduction, the trainer introduced 10 participants to a research study conducted by Dalal et al. (2009), which both exemplifies the use of ESM and provides solutions for some of the ethical dilemmas we have described in the article so far. Importantly, participants were provided with Dalal and colleagues' (2009) reasoning underlying the process of designing the final version of the research tool and study procedure. The presented material from study 1 of Dalal et al. (2009) allowed the workshop participants to better understand and empathise with the role of a researcher using ESM step-by-step.

First, they were informed about the authors' *choice of organization* (an e-business software company) which was dictated by the participants' knowledge of new technology. Participation in the study using a handheld computer was a task that was familiar to them and did not require much additional cognitive involvement. The choice was dictated by the authors' care for the participants and the study itself.

Second, they were informed about the authors' considerations regarding *voluntary participation* in the study. They highlighted that voluntary participation guarantees compliance with ethical principles, but the researcher must always take into account the possibility of participant withdrawal. In the case of an engaging research method and multiple measurements, there is an increased probability of higher drop-out. Indeed, in the cited study, 48 out of 420 employees volunteered to participate. Therefore, the larger the company involved in the study, the more likely the researcher is to collect sufficient data to draw conclusive results. Thoughtful recruitment protects the researcher, but also the employees, from a sense of wasted time and effort.

Third, the workshop participants received information about the authors' procedural considerations. *The procedure* was created for short and repeated measurements during a normal working day. Participants used handheld computers to complete four short surveys each working day for three working weeks (i.e., a total of 15 working days). In a single measurement, participants answered questions about: a) currently felt emotions (four items); the reduced measurement was based on the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988); and b) behaviour since the last measurement (12 behaviours); the reduced measurement was based on the organizational citizenship behaviour typology (OCB) created by Sackett and DeVore (2001) and the counterproductive work behaviour (CWB) typology created by Bennett and Robinson (2000).

The authors described the selection of items in detail. Therefore, we presented our workshop participants with the researchers' reasoning underlying their choice of behavioural items tapping into OCB and CWB. They argued that the measurement must be short (taking only two to three minutes), therefore the researcher should carefully choose the quantity and type of items from the existing tools used in the questionnaire method. In other words, researchers would need to essentially create a new tool in ESM that should retain the psychometric properties of the original tool.

Due to *the short measurement format intended not to interfere with the employees' duties*, the authors had to decide which emotions and behaviours from the full set of questionnaire tools to include in the diary study. For them, the greatest challenge was to create a limited measurement of behaviour. They highlighted that existing scales for both types of behaviour were originally designed to measure differences between persons rather than within-person variability in behaviour and for a one-off measurement. This has led to a number of issues in selecting items for diary research.

First, it turned out that the content of a large number of the 44 CWB items (Spector et al., 2006) did not render them suitable to multiple short measurements. Second, they reasoned that selected items should tap into behaviours more likely to be demonstrated during the study period of two to three weeks (e.g., “Took money from your employer without permission”; Spector et al., 2006). Third, they argued that the response scale used cannot refer to the frequency of involvement in a behaviour if the measurement takes place every two to three hours (e.g., it cannot consist of five-point scales ranging from 1 – never to 5 – every day). They argued that, in this case, a dichotomous scale might be more suitable: the employee either does or does not demonstrate a given behaviour. Finally, they argued that the selection of items should be dictated by the frequency of occurrence of a behaviour in everyday life. For example, this is consistent with using the experience sampling method in stress studies: asking about daily hassles rather than critical life events (Wheeler & Reis, 1991).

The authors also took into account the fact that short scales with repeated measurements can cause fatigue in participants, and therefore, designed a study with item rotation on a given scale: a) for emotions, four items were alternatively selected out of an eight item-pool per measurement; b) for behaviour, 12 items were alternatively selected out of a 16 item-pool per measurement. Table 1 shows the design of the ESM used in study 1 of Dalal et al. (2009).

Table 1  
Description of the experience sampling method used in study 1 (based on Dalal et al., 2009)

AFFECT				EXTRA-ROLE BEHAVIOUR	
<i>How do you feel? Example: PLEASED</i>				<i>Since the last beep, I was respectful of other people's needs?</i>	
1	2	3	4	Yes	No
not at all	slightly	moderately	very		
<b>Measurement:</b> 2 items of 4-item scale for positive affect 2 items of 4-item scale for negative affect				<b>Measurement:</b> 6 items of 8-item scale for OCB 6 items of 8-item scale for CWB	
<b>Rotation of the items:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ 4 out of 8 items were alternated</li> <li>■ two surveys per workday contained one set of 4 items and the other two surveys contained another set of 4 items</li> </ul>				<b>Rotation of the items:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ half of the items from the set were used only once per day</li> </ul>	

## Workshop task 1 - Creating your own tools for ESM research

After the introduction, participants were divided into two groups and asked to assume the role of researchers and create an ESM tool that could be used in organizational

research to measure perceived organizational support. They were presented with a measure of perceived organizational support consisting of 36 items (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison & Sowa, 1986). Participants followed the guidelines for designing ESM research (Dalal et al., 2009):

- Measurement length and quality of measurement (time requirements per measurement, number of measurements per day, total duration of the study);
- Limited scale and selection of items (possible event frequency, variety, choice of rotation or lack thereof);
- Balance between length and quality of the measurement.

During the exercise, participants were asked to also write down their questions and difficulties in creating the tool.

### **Workshop task 1: Conclusions**

The task of creating a tool based on an existing one was met with great resistance, which prompted discussions about the first ethical problem: *copyright of tools*. Participants concluded that any researcher who wishes to adapt existing tools for use via a different research method is required to obtain the original author's consent for the modifications and use of the modified tool in a given study.

In addition, participants had doubts as to whether the new tool met required *psychometric properties*. They concluded that, researchers selecting a small number of items for measurement in a diary study should use the most frequently selected items by participants in previous questionnaire studies; increasing the probability that these items will be meaningful in a diary study. Also it was important that the selected items took into account the factor loadings of specific items, that is, to select those items that load the highest on a given factor.

The final ethical issue that came up during the discussion was related to the *possibility and expediency* of using the popular ESM for any type of research question. Part of the group thought that it made no sense to use ESM when measuring employee attitudes, for instance, because these are stable over time. They argued that the method itself is demanding, therefore, its popularity alone does not mean that it lends itself to answering a variety of types of research questions. Another part of the group was of the opinion that it might be an empirical question to determine whether the method lends itself to a variety of types of research questions. One participant offered an example of researchers

being able to change participants' attitudes in an experiment via manipulating independent variables. The example supported the conclusion that researchers might need to empirically test the assumption that ESM might not lend itself to certain types of research questions. Finally, related to the expediency of using ESM, a closer examination of the issue of using highly engaging research methods, especially in the workplace, points to the potential costs associated with the method, namely the required efforts on the part of respondents.

## **Workshop task 2 – Discussion about ESM researchers' ethical dilemmas**

Remaining in the same groups, participants reflected on those ethical issues that have usually not been considered in the literature on ESM. A lecturer experienced in conducting diary studies also took part in the discussion with the participants. During a session for brainstorming solutions, the lecturer shared their own conclusions with the group.

### **Workshop task 2: Conclusions**

One of the issues that was raised in the group discussion, was related to the *frequent measurement of emotions* in the study that served as input for the first part of the workshop (Dalal et al., 2009). Some participants argued that asking respondents about emotions can build an attitude of openness during the study. However, others argued that sudden and frequent questions during the day about emotions may direct an employee's thoughts away from work tasks and towards internal processes. Questions about feelings can also affect the well-being of the employee. Measurement of emotions can indeed deflect individuals from their baseline, however, research has shown that they return to this baseline (Bowling, Beehr, Wagner & Libkuman, 2005). Moreover, Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall, and Zhang (2007) have proposed that individuals can use past affective experience to anticipate how they would like to feel and then choose behaviors that they believe will attain the feelings they desire. Therefore, repeated measurement studies can help to more consciously influence these affective states.

However, it is important that the researcher informs potential participants upfront about the purpose and procedure of the study, so that they can make an *informed decision* about their participation. One way to help potential respondents make an informed decision about participating in a diary study would be to conduct a pilot study. For instance, in the research of the first author (Wojtkowska, 2021), a questionnaire survey was conducted as

a pilot prior to the diary study, which might have made it easier for employees to decide to participate in or refrain from participating in the study using ESM. There are several advantages of this type of research procedure: a) direct contact with the researcher allows for the possibility of responding to respondents' doubts and questions; and b) being exposed to the survey, on which the diary study is subsequently based, allows the respondents to get to know the content of the second survey method (ESM) better. These examples can improve engagement or reassure a person in their opt-out decision. Workshop participants argued that presenting a sample measurement to potential respondents, during the informed consent, should be mandatory, because during the diary study the employee may not have the psychological space to consider how they feel about answering certain types of questions while performing work-related duties.

When answering questions about emotions in a diary study, the employee bears additional psychological costs associated with an intimate topic. The workshop participants, felt that the sacrifice of personal psychological resources should be *rewarded*. They argued that, ultimately, participants involved in engaging research should be rewarded for two reasons: a) keeping their commitment and mitigating the drop-out rate; and b) showing the researcher's appreciation of the participants' effort. In the research under discussion (Wojtkowska, 2021), at the end of the diary study, employees received individual feedback that was generated anonymously. Yet, this solution raises ethical issues related to respecting *participants' dignity*. Receiving feedback should be voluntary and the feedback should be clear, allowing respondents to request further clarification. Automated remote feedback provides the option of refusing the feedback by selecting the option not to receive it or simply by closing the window with the information without reading it. In the discussed research (Wojtkowska, 2021), the participants could refuse to accept feedback, but they could not ask additional questions about it. For this reason, feedback was written using very colloquial language, leaving open the possibility of interpreting the information to a certain extent. There was an additional reward in this study; participants were offered a three-day soft skills training in emotion management. During the training, participants could also ask for feedback. Participation in an unpaid diary study and training *takes employees' time away from work*. Even free training or research can be perceived by some organization as a cost, but if the organization and its employees benefit by raising competence, then this investment may pay off in the future. Financially, the time taken to complete the survey is cheaper than having to fund a three-day training programme led by a consulting company.

## Outcomes of the workshop

During the workshop, the participants quickly adapted to taking the role of an ESM researcher conducting organizational research. Their challenge was to create a tool to be used in a diary study based on a long questionnaire (36 items). During the workshop, they identified the following ethical challenges: a) copyright of tools; b) the newly developed tools' psychometric values; c) the expediency of using the diary study methodology for a variety of research questions; d) potential impact on employees' well-being; e) rewarding employees for the effort required by the methodology; f) employees' dignity; and g) employees' time away from work.

Participants developed some preliminary solutions for researchers conducting diary studies in organizations. First, they argued that diary studies should be used as a supplementary method to questionnaire research. Due to the time-consuming nature of the method for participants, researchers should consider which variables might better be served being measured by the survey method and which variables would benefit from being studied via ESM. Second, they argued that employees' sacrifice of personal psychological resources should be adequately appreciated. In this respect, it is worth paying attention to the fact that the reward itself does not take time, is adequate to the content of the research and proportionate to the effort made by the employee.

## Overall conclusions

Despite the fact that the diary method is gaining popularity in the context of extra-role behaviour research, current studies do not appear to deliver ground-breaking insights (Wojtkowska, 2021). Therefore, is it worth investing the time of the organization, employees and the researchers themselves?

Conducting research in the workplace using engaging research methods places additional demands on employees and also presents them with a dilemma of how to reconcile their work duties with their participation in the research. One could argue that, since the employer has agreed to the employees' participation in the study, they have implicitly consented to their interrupting regular work duties to participate in the study. Therefore, employees should not feel that there is a dilemma to be reconciled.

Yet, is that truly so? Priorities may shift, employers may not have realized how much time it takes for employees to participate in the study, and employees may feel that they have to reconcile work duties with study participation. Therefore, it is the responsibility

of researchers to ensure that the study interferes as little as possible with normal workflow, respecting employees' well-being and their effort involved in completing the study.

The workshop held at the SGM focused on two main ethical dilemmas:

- Care for the employees' well-being versus interruption of work duties;
- Responsibility for user-friendliness versus quality of the obtained result.

The main conclusion from the theoretical considerations and the workshop was that diary research in the workplace should be carefully planned and serve as a supplement to questionnaire research. On the other hand, the questionnaire method is not able to answer research questions about cause-effect relationships, whereas ESM can. Therefore, it is important to remember that the decision to use ESM in organizational research should be made based on the type of research question one tries to answer and should involve a restrictive selection of variables on the basis of previous questionnaire studies.

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# InPractice is changing to volume-relative numbering

The EAWOP Practitioners E-Journal, *EWOP in Practice. European Work and Organizational Psychology in Practice* (ISSN 1736-6399), more commonly known as “InPractice”, is growing and we are now publishing more than one issue per year. Therefore, we intend to change the numbering of issues from absolute numbers based on issues to volume-relative numbers. As a result, the journal will publish annual volumes that may contain several issues. The number of the volume increases every year, while the numbering of issues restarts with every new volume.

## Page numbers

The issues of a volume will be paginated continuously, that is, the first issue of a volume starts with page number 1 and pagination will continue throughout in the next issues of a volume.

## Previous issues become volumes

To ensure consistency in the numbering and pagination of existing issues, all previous issues represent one volume consisting of one issue each. For example, issue 12 becomes volume 12, issue 1. The change to volume-relative numbering starts in 2021 with volume 15, issue 1.

### Changes in numbering of InPractice

Year	Absolute numbers based on issues (old)	Volume-relative numbering (new)	
	Issue	Volume	Issue
2006	0	0	1
2007	1	1	1
2008	2	2	1
2009	3	3	1
2011	4	4	1
2013	5	5	1
2014	6	6	1
2015	7	7	1
2016	8	8	1
2017	9	9	1
2018	10	10	1
2019	11	11	1
2020	12	12	1
2020	13	13	1
2020	14	14	1
2021		15	1

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