

Interview with Dr Narelle Hess

Conducted by Milena Shvedova

Dr Narelle Hess is currently a guest lecturer in PSYU3338 here at MQU. She convenes PSYO8915 and PSYP8904, and teaches on PSYO8914 and PSYO8921 in the Master of Organisational Psychology and Master of Professional Psychology. So you may recognise her if you've been through any of these units!

Her key areas of expertise are Career Development, Athlete Career Transitions, and Organisational Career Management.

In her spare time, she enjoys reading (novels), attending live events (sporting and arts) and hanging out with family and friends.

The following interview with Dr Hess is full of valuable insights and advice from her journey in organisational psychology.

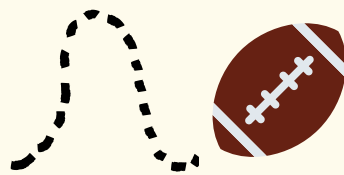


Milena: Would you be able to tell me a bit about your journey into organisational psychology?



Dr Hess: I, like yourself, and a lot of the other students that will be reading, completed a bachelor's degree majoring in psychology. In my undergraduate studies, I was finding I didn't have as much flexibility in my degree as I would've liked. So, I moved out of the Bachelor of Psychology and into a Bachelor of Science degree. This allowed me to major in sports psychology in my undergraduate studies. Then I was accepted into honours through my grades, so I completed my fourth year.

After my four-year degree, I wasn't yet one hundred percent sure what I wanted to do psychology-wise, so I decided to start work! I applied for graduate roles that wanted a psychology background, and I ended up working in my first role as a recruitment consultant, which was super lucky because I was able to have exposure to different people working across different job roles and organisations.



After a year of working full-time, I decided to continue my psychology studies. I spoke to my honours supervisor, who was a sports psychologist. I was tossing up between doing further studies in Sport Psychology or Organisational Psychology, and she suggested I look at organisational psychology, because a lot of the theories and ideas that you use in sports psychology, you use in organisational psychology as well. So I did, I applied and I was accepted. I completed the Master of Organisational Psychology part-time whilst I was working full-time.

Looking back on my journey to commence the Master of Organisational Psychology, it was about exploring my interests and considering what areas of psychology were of most interest to me. I was really interested in how individuals navigate their lives, but also, from my work as a recruiter, I was really interested in the world of work and how organisations and employers have an impact on individual wellbeing. I wanted to develop a better understanding of the impact of the organisational system on an individual. I also wanted to learn how to motivate teams and individuals, which was aligned to some of the units I completed in my undergraduate studies in sports psychology.



Milena: Oh wow! So you've been on quite the journey with all of your studies. Sounds like you definitely put the hard yards into what you were doing.

Dr Hess: Yeah! So then, after I completed my masters I worked in organisational psychology consulting, consulting to organisations around the employee life cycle, including selection and assessment, training and development, managing organisational change projects, and supporting individuals navigating career transitions.

After seven years working in consulting, I decided it was time to complete further study. I commenced a PhD and at the same time, I jumped into working in sport. I worked at the Sydney Roosters Football Club supporting athletes in early preparation for their post-sporting life.

So my specialty that I started to navigate towards whilst I was studying my masters but also while I was working in consulting was a keen interest in how people make career choices and how people are supported or not supported in their career development. I think my specialty within organisational psychology navigated towards that area and I used that specialty knowledge and applied it with athletes. Then I studied and researched this area in my PhD.

So in summary, that's been my psychology journey from undergraduate studies to present day.



Milena: That sounds like quite the journey, and I do think that a lot of students will find it encouraging to hear that you might not have necessarily known exactly what kind of psychology you wanted to study, even up until your masters decision. It's wonderful to hear from someone who made that decision based on their interests and ended up developing a fruitful career out of it. That is so encouraging to hear!

Dr Hess: Good! For me what was helpful was having that chance to explore different career areas. I knew that I wanted to work as a psychologist in some capacity, I just wasn't sure, and I guess I wasn't immediately committed to an additional two years of full-time study after my honour's year. So, taking that year out to develop a better understanding about myself but also about different areas of psychology was really helpful for me to help make an informed decision on my masters studies.

Milena: It sounds like it definitely gave you the space to make an informed decision. On that note, for people who haven't explored the avenue before, what is organisational psychology?

Dr Hess: That's an excellent question!

If you are interested, I would definitely recommend completing the organisational psych unit (PSYU3338). In this unit, you explore the key organisational concepts and how they relate to the role of the psychologist. I came into the psychology degree with a very narrow understanding of what psychologists were and what they did at work. It was in my undergraduate studies where I started broadening my understanding of what the psychologist's role is and can be.

Organisational psychology is a very broad area as well. Like I said, my specialty ended up being related to career development. But I also worked in selection, I worked in development, I supported organisations navigating organisational change. We also see organisational psychologists work in other areas in terms of mental health and employee wellbeing, as well designing systems and improving processes and user experience.



So, it can be a whole range different avenues you can navigate with a Master of Organisational Psychology. And similar to how I found my niche, you can find your niche whilst you study your masters. During your coursework you will have exposure to a number of different areas of organisational psychology, and then you complete different placements and you have the opportunity to see where your skills and interests best fit. You might consider: Am I somebody who wants to have more engagement one-on-one with people, or would I rather work with teams? Would I rather work with the whole organisational system or just parts of the system? So organisational psychology can have a specialist focus or it can have quite a broad focus. We work in a whole range of different areas to support employees, leaders, and organisations depending on where our focus is.



Milena: I think that it's almost more helpful to hear just how broad the realm can be, and how you can afford to find your niche within that wide spectrum of ways that you can employ your organisational psychology research and knowledge. It's encouraging to hear that there are many different ways that you can employ these interests and get excited over niche ideas and areas, so thank you for that!

Dr Hess: Absolutely, and I shouldn't forget that a lot of the work psychologists do within organisations is about supporting employee wellbeing and supporting employees in creating systems to improve mental health. I think one of the students I was talking to in an orgpsych class was saying that's what motivates them. So there are certainly avenues within organisational psychology which are in relation to mental health and supporting employee wellbeing as well.

Milena: On the topic of finding your niche, are there any areas of research that you're currently involved in that you can tell me more about?

Dr Hess: Sure! My PhD research looked at how employees are supported within organisations with their career development.

What I identified from the work in consulting was there were a lot of organisations focusing on career management and talent management of their employees. Yet, what I was seeing in the academic literature was a shift away from organisational career support and more towards individuals navigating their own careers. So, I was intrigued by what I perceived as a paradox or disconnect between individuals managing their careers and organisations supporting that individual with their career development to support and retain them in their organisation.

So I looked at it in a couple of different ways. Firstly, I wanted to see if how organisations support career development has changed over time. I looked at some data that had already been collected through a human resources survey called Cranet. They surveyed HR managers across the world. I was looking in particular at the Australian data. I wanted to see if organisations were offering less or more career management practices now than in early 1990s. Not so surprisingly, what I did find was that more organisations are offering organisational career management practices now than what they were in the early 1990s.

What was really interesting was that the practices that appeared to be the most popular were those that were more complex. So things like supporting employees in engaging in networking, supporting employees with career consultations; things that required what I would perceive as this dual engagement both from the perspective of the organisation and from the employee.

Next, I wanted to see, what do the employees, HR managers and line managers think supports engagement in these practices? I completed just over fifty interviews across different organisations. What I found was that it wasn't as simple as organisations just offering these practices and employees just buying into them. It really depended on the individual employee, but what really was important was the line manager. How well did the line manager communicate what was available to employees, how well did the line manager build trust in that employee, so that the employee would feel supported to have these sorts of career conversations. The manager had a really important role, but that wasn't enough. The employee needed to be engaged, HR needed to be engaged, senior managers also needed to lead the strategy. I later did some follow up studies to tease out some of those ideas from those two earlier studies. But that is my PhD research in a nutshell.



As I mentioned I've been working in sport for the last seven years, so I'm also interested to see how athletes are supported in their career development or what engages athletes to consider how they can prepare for their post sporting life now. So, the area of research that I support with the honours students links to some of those ideas; organisational career management, athlete career management, and how athletes are best supported in their career development.



Dr Hess: Selfishly I think all my research is interesting and relevant, but I think particularly looking at all the career areas that we see in the world of work as impacted by changes. Whether it's looking at professions or occupational groups and seeing how individuals in these career areas can best navigate career change and transitions, forced or unforced, will be an ongoing, continually important area of work.

Athletes and supporting athlete career development I believe will continue to be important. A specific focus in the next few years may be considering the demands for female athletes. We're going through a period where female athletes are still semi-professional, but they have more demands on their time, which is quite impactful. So, future research is needed to understand how to best support female athletes to ensure both their well-being and mental health are supported. Sport might also be quite topical in Australia because Brisbane is hosting the Olympic Games in ten years. The Olympic Games is always an event that elite athletes focus their careers on, but how can we best support those athletes following that big sporting event?

So those are some research areas I think will be interesting to further unpack in the next decade.

Milena: It's such an intriguing topic because it's something that we encounter in workplaces every single day. Are there any prospective research ideas that you have in that realm that you would really like to see realised?



Milena: Well, any prospective honours students reading this, consider looking into those things! Thank you for sharing them! On the note of prospective students, do you have any advice for those who are hoping to continue into the field of organisational psychology? Whether that be study advice or what kind of jobs or volunteering roles they should be seeking out?

Dr Hess: That's a really excellent question. Firstly, complete the PSYU3888 undergraduate unit if you're interested in orgpsych. You'll receive a broad exposure to the different theories that underpin organisational psychology. That would be my first and most important piece of advice.

In the APS there is also a college of organisational psychology, and they often have different networking type events that you can attend. They also run a conference every couple of years. This year it's in Gold Coast, so why wouldn't you want to spend time in July in the Gold Coast learning about Orgpsych?



I know you [students] have a lot of demands on your time in terms of work and study, but a lot of you would also already be working in a range of different job roles, or perhaps your family members are. So, it might also be useful to consider: How are they selecting people? How are they developing their people? How are they managing people? Just start to contemplate, what are the things they do well, what are the things they could be doing better?

You can also start to consider entry-level type roles in organisational psychology. These entry-level roles can include recruitment, market research, or consulting. Several consulting firms recruit psychology undergraduates for summer or winter internships, perhaps if you are reading this in your third year, consider completing a winter or summer internship in a consulting company to learn more about that type of work. This will help you to see what those different organisations do, and how you might be able to apply your psychological knowledge in different ways.

In terms of study skills, everybody is individual. I think one of the biggest things that I always tell students though, is take a pen and paper to your lectures and write in your lectures. I think it's a really good way to consider the information that's being presented. I do see students now with the electronic pads doing the electronic thing, so perhaps I should be encouraging that as well. I definitely pay attention more so when I don't have email and things like that to distract me, for sure.



Milena: Thank you so much for sharing those valuable ways that we can be getting ourselves involved in the industry. I know personally towards the beginning of my degree, I found it incredibly difficult to seek out roles that were relevant and find organisations that were willing to take psychology students under their wing and give us some field experience. A lot of the things you listed I hadn't heard of before; it would definitely be awesome to consider them.

Now potentially the least related question, if you weren't an organisational psychologist, are there any other things that you would have considered doing?

Dr Hess: I don't know... but, this is an ironic story perhaps. When I was in primary school, I don't know if any other students had to do this, but I had a dress-up career day where I dressed up as the career that I wanted to be when I grew up. The role that I dressed up as was a check out person at a supermarket. I think that was my dream career when I was six or seven, and I don't actually know why it was. Maybe it was the aspect of customer service, counting, researching, I'm not sure. But now I get to realise that dream career every time I go shopping and I do the self-serve and I can believe I am that person again! I've made my dream career!

I honestly think that I am living my dream career... I've worked in consulting, I've worked in sport, I now combine that experience in work as a university lecturer.

"My biggest bit of advice would be, to be okay to explore, to learn from all the different classes you have, take the chance to learn about the different areas of work, and I have no doubt that wherever you take your career, your psychology degree will serve you well".

OrgPsych Toolkit!

Master of Organisational Psychology at MQU:

<https://mq.edu.au/study/find-a-course/courses/master-of-organisational-psychology>

APS College of Orgpsych:

<https://groups.psychology.org.au/cop/>