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Version: Accepted Version

Article:
Sanz Vergel, A. and Nielsen, K. (2023) Virtual issue: Psychological interventions in the field of work and organizational psychology. Applied Psychology, 72 (4). pp. 1735-1740. ISSN: 0269-994X

https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12361

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: Sanz-Vergel, A.I. and Nielsen, K. (2021), Virtual issue: Psychological interventions in the field of work and organizational psychology. Applied Psychology, which has been published in final form at https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12361. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Use of Self-Archived Versions. This article may not be enhanced, enriched or otherwise transformed into a derivative work, without express permission from Wiley or by statutory rights under applicable legislation. Copyright notices must not be removed, obscured or modified. The article must be linked to Wiley's version of record on Wiley Online Library and any embedding, framing or otherwise making available the article or pages thereof by third parties from platforms, services and websites other than Wiley Online Library must be prohibited.

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Virtual issue: Psychological interventions in the field of work and organizational psychology.

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Accepted: Applied Psychology: An International Review

18th November 2021

Interventions in the field of work and organizational psychology are "planned, behavioural, theory-based actions that aim to improve employees' health and well-being by changing the way work is designed, organised, and managed" (Nielsen, 2013, p.1030). Although over the last 10 years we have seen an increase in the number of intervention studies, these type of studies are still scarce in comparison to other research designs. The main reasons for this imbalance are the difficulty to design and implement interventions, as well as the lack of clear methodology and theory behind them. Scholars in the field are making huge efforts to overcome these difficulties, and there are currently more guidelines both at the theoretical and methodological levels to help researchers implement decent interventions. There is still much to do in this field and with this virtual issue, we hope to stimulate reflection and encourage colleagues to conduct and refine their interventions and the theory behind them.

To gain an overview of the development in interventions in work and organizational psychology, we conducted a search in APIR over the last 20 years and have selected six papers published in APIR in this period. Throughout this editorial, we refer to these studies to highlight lessons learnt so far and to discuss how future research could build on existing research to further help us understand how to design, implement and evaluate interventions in our field. We hope that through this discussion, we can provide some hints to answer the following questions:

a) How can we better evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions?
b) What are the boundary conditions and explanatory processes that influence the effectiveness of an intervention?
c) How can we know whether interventions are sustainable?
d) Do people transfer what they have learnt into their daily work?
e) Should we prioritise individual or organizational interventions?

a) How can we better evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions?

One of the greatest challenges of designing an intervention is how to ensure that we appropriately evaluate its effects, that is, whether the intervention has actually worked.

Traditionally, the "gold standard" has been the use of Randomised Control Trial (RCT), which allows us to compare an intervention group with a control group. However, the use of RCTs may not always be desirable or feasible. The article by O´Shea, O'Connell, and Gallagher (2016) provides an excellent overview on the debate on RCTs. The authors encourage greater use of RCTs in the field and adapt a RCT checklist for use in work and organizational psychology settings, which allows for more direct comparison across interventions. They also provide creative and useful options to overcome the challenges associated to this type of design (e.g., active control groups, clustered design). An important take-home message from this article is that although RCTs do not guarantee a successful or meaningful outcome (Nielsen, Fredslund, Christensen, & Albertsen, 2016), they can provide insights into how the intervention compares to care as usual, i.e., the use control groups helps us understand what would have happened if an intervention had not been implemented.

The challenge of the RCT on its own it that it only answers the question of whether something happened or not compared to a control group, it fails to answer the questions of what can explain the change and in which circumstances change may happen (Nielsen & Miraglia, 2017).

As interventions happen in diverse settings, there is a lack of consistency in the evidence of organisational interventions. In other words, it is difficult to conclude which interventions are effective because of the heterogeneity in the methodology, the implementation, the context of the intervention, and the measured outcomes. Roodbari, Axtell, Nielsen, and Sorensen (2021) delve into these aspects and help us understand 'what works for whom in which circumstances'. Through a realist synthesis analysis, the authors develop programme theories that explain how different mechanisms and contextual factors may lead to different outcomes. This may enhance our understanding of what type of interventions are effective for which group of employees, why, how, and under which circumstances. In APIR, we have also published empirical papers trying to answer these questions. In particular, we selected two studies for the next section – the first deals with boundary conditions affecting the effectiveness of an intervention, while the second one tests an explanatory mechanism in the context of a coaching intervention.

b) What are the boundary conditions and explanatory processes that influence the effectiveness of an intervention?

To understand whether and why an intervention has been effective, scholars have to consider the broader context in which the intervention takes place. If a specific intervention is particularly effective under specific conditions, the interventionists must either make sure these conditions are in place or be prepared that their intervention may be less effective. The study by Molina and O'Shea (2019) illustrates the importance of contextual factors. They examined the effectiveness of a mindful emotion regulation (MER) intervention versus a "control" savouring nature (SN) intervention and focused on the moderating role of supervisory justice in the relationship between type of intervention and proactive behavior. Interestingly, the SN intervention only brought about intended outcomes when supervisory justice was high. When levels were low, a

more complete and complex intervention (MER) was required in order to prompt proactive behaviors.

Contextual and temporal boundaries change over time, with organizations and societies facing new challenges every day. The last global challenge has been the Covid-19 pandemic. This means not all existing interventions will necessarily work under the current circumstances – however, looking back at other interventions implemented under extraordinary/difficult circumstances may guide the design of future interventions. We encourage scholars to implement interventions in the current COVID-19 pandemic work context to shed light on which boundary conditions may make them work best.

Beyond contextual factors, it is important to disentangle the underlying psychological mechanisms through which interventions work. Based on goal setting theory, Fontes and Dello Russo (2020) explore the mediating mechanism explaining the effectiveness of a coaching intervention. They found that the reason why this intervention translated into better job attitudes was an increase in Psychological Capital. This study highlights the importance of rooting the intervention in theory and exploring mediating mechanisms – these are important suggestions that we would like to emphasize in this virtual issue too. The authors also mention sustainability as a core aspect of their intervention: The change in positive psychological resources was maintained over time. This leads us to our next question: Do we know whether interventions are sustainable?

c) How can we know whether interventions are sustainable?

A common limitation of most interventions is the extent to which their effects are sustainable over time. If the follow-up takes place only a few weeks after the programme has been implemented, the conclusions have to be contextualized in terms of short-term effects. To illustrate this section, we selected a paper by Schaer, Bodenmann, and Klink (2008) in which the authors proved the mid-term sustainability of a couple-oriented intervention aimed at providing couples with strategies to cope *together* with stress. They found that after 5 months, participants in the couple-oriented intervention still reported a greater increase in life satisfaction and well-being than most other participants. These authors emphasize in their limitations section that future studies should include a longer follow-up to find out whether the same intervention would still work after 1 or 2 years. They could not explore this possibility because of practical issues (i.e., the company expected major changes) – but we agree with them that when/if possible, scholars should aim at this longer follow-up periods. A second highlight of this study is the particular sample they worked with (couples). While this is quite unusual in the field of work and organizational interventions, it should not be the case, because we know that work experiences impact behaviors, thoughts and feelings in the home domain (spillover), which in turn may affect significant others (crossover) (Bakker & Demerouti, 2013). As noticed by Schaer et al., companies should consider these two processes, and from this virtual issue, we encourage scholars to implement couple-oriented interventions in the workplace.

d) Do people transfer what they have learnt into their daily work?

A related issue to the sustainability of interventions is what happens once workers return after training or what happens once action plans have been developed. Is learning and action plans translated into changes in emotions, cognitions and behaviours and maintained over time? (Baldwin & Ford, 1988). Understanding what happens in the workplace is crucial to internal validity – how can we make sure that any changes are due to our intervention? Interestingly, only one study in APIR has explored training transfer in the past 20 years. Morin and Latham (2000) provide an excellent example that without supervisors applying their trained mental practice skills in the workplace, no changes could be observed in self-efficacy. They also found that individual characteristics, (i.e., supervisors' imagery skills) influenced their ability to apply learned skills. We welcome research on training transfer, that is, whether skills and knowledge acquired during training translate into changes in the workplace and are maintained over time. Training transfer is important to understand why we can observe any changes and understanding the contextual factors, both in the individual but also in the context, e.g., supervisor and peer support for training has important implications for how we can optimize our training development to ensure training has sustainable effects. To gain such understanding we must not only implement longer follow-ups times as mentioned above but we must also collect ongoing process data to track what happens when workers return and attempt to transfer training (Blume, Ford, Surface, & Olenick 2019). If they are faced with resistance and lack of opportunities to apply learned skills and knowledge, they are less likely to persist in applying these.

e) Should we prioritise individual or organizational interventions?

A common debate in the field of work and organizational psychology is the debate as to whether organizational or individual level interventions are more effective. Organizational interventions are generally recommended at they address the causes of poor health and well-being (Nielsen Randall, Holten, & Rial González, 2010), however, as Montano, Hoven and Siegrist (2014) point out, scientific evidence from intervention studies does not fully support the superior effectiveness of organizational interventions. It has been argued that such comparisons are like comparing apples and oranges as the premises of these types of interventions are fundamentally different (Nielsen & Miraglia, 2017). Scholars have argued for a change of focus on multi-level interventions (LaMontange et al., 2014) and it has been suggested that interventions should aim to minimise demands and develop resources at the individual, group, leader and organizational levels (Nielsen & Christensen, 2021).

Multi-level interventions operate at multiple levels and are therefore likely to create synergistic effects, enhancing the effects on employee health and well-being (LaMontagne et al. 2014). For example, when implementing teamwork, leaders could be trained in how to implement and manage teams and employees could be trained in complex decision making and collaborative work practices (Nielsen, Randall, & Christensen 2017). Interventions at all levels may be helpful to create a healthy working environment (Day & Nielsen, 2017).

Conclusion

Intervention studies in the field of work and organizational psychology are aimed at increasing employees' health and well-being. To make the most of these interventions, scholars need to find effective ways of designing, implementing and evaluating them. Past and recent research published in APIR may guide and inspire future researchers in the field, and hopefully with this virtual issue we have encouraged colleagues to reflect on some of the current challenges and how these can be addressed.

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