Reframing employability: Exploring career-related values in psychology undergraduates

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Abstract
Despite the current economic climate, improving the first graduate destination of students is a key strategic priority for UK Higher Education institutions. Supporting students in the development of their transferable skills has become the mainstay of employability initiatives. In this empirical study, the skills approach was broadened to critically analyse students’ work-related values. Seventy-one psychology students (60 female, 11 male; modal age 20 years) selected their personal values from a large array, based on the learning resources provided by Lantz (2011). They also provided a brief written narrative explaining what each of their endorsed values meant to them. The qualitative analysis revealed a strongly other-orientated focus, with ‘helping others’ as the dominant value for this sample. Although UK universities are judged on the type of work and starting salaries of their new graduates, these students were not seeking prestige or financial gain in their prospective careers. The results are discussed in terms of how these other-orientated values might be processed alongside the typically scientific and individualistic skills developed during undergraduate study in Psychology and the potential impact this may have on the student experience. The paper concludes by advocating an existential model of employability and provides examples of how this can be achieved.

Keywords
Employability, psychology, transferable skills, work-related values
Introduction
Psychology is one of the most popular undergraduate programmes both in the UK (Quality Assurance Agency, 2010) and internationally (Goedeke & Gibson, 2011). Although it represents the most common approved route into professional psychology, the vast majority of psychology graduates will not directly use the subject-specific knowledge from their degree programme after graduation (Lantz, 2011). As such, the discipline has long prided itself on the quantity, quality and variety of generic transferable skills that psychology graduates possess (Hayes, 1996). Nonetheless, analysis of the first graduate destination of psychology students reveals relatively low levels of graduate employment and starting salary (HESA, 2012), although many may take low paid, non-graduate positions to acquire the experience needed for further professional training.

With roots tracing back to The Dearing Report (1997), providing opportunities for skills enhancement remains the dominant approach to supporting these students into the world of work. For example, the importance of, and mechanisms for, embedding employability skills within the psychology curriculum was emphasised by Robertson, McMurray and Roberts (2012), who highlighted nine key skills and outlined where they are most likely to be experienced and practised, signposting examples for student readers of their article.

The construct of employability has now become virtually synonymous with skills enhancement, as evidenced within the submission guidelines for this Higher Education Academy conference. Papers are encouraged whose employability objective involves “improving the employability skills of STEM graduates”: a rather narrow definition, which potentially excludes other creative, research-led ways of understanding and supporting students in their career development.

A complementary approach to the skills enhancement agenda is provided by Lantz (2011), who emphasised the career-related values of psychology students. This approach adopted Super’s (1990) self-concept theory of career development, in which a life stage developmental framework sees 15- to 24-year-olds engaged in synthesising their interests, values and skills into an understanding that will inform their active pursuit of career goals. Lantz (2011) draws on this body of work to create a values assessment exercise for psychology students. Although the social-cognitive career development literature is well developed in the USA (e.g. Brown, 2002) there is little published contemporary research into British psychology students’ values and how these link to their employability skills. It is this gap that the current research aims to fill.

Method
Participants
Seventy-five second year psychology undergraduate students formed the initial sample for this study. This comprised of sixty-three female and twelve male students with a modal age of 20 years. This ratio of females to males is only marginally above the 80% estimate from the QAA (2007).

Materials
Following piloting, the list of thirty-seven work-related values provided by Lantz (2011) was modified for use in this study. The final list comprised of forty-four work-related values.

Data Collection
As part of a broader set of optional, extra-curricular career development learning activities, participants were invited to complete a task independently and in their own time. They were presented with a random array of the forty-four values and asked to select the 8-10 values that meant the most to them. For each selected value, they were asked to provide a brief written reflection on what it meant for them. They were reassured that everybody was
different and that there were no wrong or right answers.

**Ethical considerations**
The students had the option of submitting their responses for formative feedback. At that time they were asked to provide written consent for their work to be used in anonymised form for research (or marketing) purposes. This supplied the final sample of 71 participants (60 females and 11 males) for the study.

**Results and discussion**
The values selected by the students were tallied and ranked. For the purposes of this paper, the reflective comments from the students will be used illustratively.

The most highly endorsed work-related value was Helping others, with 66.19\% of the sample selecting this value. Some responses were expressed in general terms, for example “listening and making sure people are accommodated so that there their needs are met” (female, P19), whilst others mapped this value directly onto specific career aspirations, for example “I aim in the future to help children with conduct disorders” (female, P8). The tendency for this value to be long-standing and deeply rooted was highly evident, as one young woman explains: helping others is “really important to me and motivates me in a job and makes me feel happier, always wanted a career in which I can help people” (female, P50). Responses articulating a specifically professional-level of “helping” were very rare. The following was a notable exception: “helping one or more people to achieve a goal. These people could be colleagues (e.g. helping to achieve a business target) or clients (e.g. helping to improve their lives by offering a service)” (female, P43). “Working with others (39.43\%) and Opportunities for further study (30.98\%) were also important to this sample.

Financial Gain, (<15\%), typically tied it to basic needs, comfort and security, rather than more materialistic values, for example: “financial gains are important as I would not like to constantly worry that I can’t afford the basics and my aim is to be able to live comfortably” (female, P58). Meanwhile, Prestige was not endorsed at all.

**Concluding comments and implications**
This abridged paper has provided a brief overview of a very rich and varied data set, with potential for many different academic points of reference. For example, data emerged that can be related to the study of positive psychology (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2007) and identity theory (Eccles, 2009). The focus here is on key topical issues in Higher Education.

At first glance, the dominant values selected by these students might suggest a worrying mismatch with the highly individualistic, scientific subject-specific and generic skills identified by our profession. Psychology skills are owned by the teaching staff and shared and developed with the students. In contrast, values are owned by the students and may have been set in place long before they arrive at University. However, we would argue that such skills and values are far from inevitably antithetical: the current findings strongly suggest that students require facilitation and guidance in order to recognise how their new skills (e.g. report writing, data analysis) can be used in ways to help others in collaborative, socially relevant, professional work – and how to self-promote for recruitment into such careers.

Other research has shown that work-related values are linked to job satisfaction (Hofmans, De Gieter & Pepermans, 2012). Therefore, further research is recommended to assess how an apparent mismatch between scientific skills and socially-orientated values impacts on psychology students’ HE experience and their National Student Survey (NSS) responses. Such research might also investigate why these students do not choose direct routes into caring professions at undergraduate level. It could also be considered as to whether the core Psychology curricula and related skills should be broadened to include more
opportunities for the development of ‘soft skills’. Hulme, Taylor, Davies & Banister (2012) view Psychology as a STEM+ subject, with one of the ‘value added’ components being communication. This is included as one of the QAA (2007) generic skills for psychology graduates and is defined as “developing a cogent argument supported by relevant evidence...” (p. 7). Following the analysis of this data, it is suggested that psychology students may enjoy and appreciate the facilitation of interpersonal communication skills, including listening skills, counselling skills and persuasion/negotiation skills.

The image of psychology students in this data differs markedly from what is represented in the destination statistics and initial salaries section of the new Key Information Sets (KIS). The students here were ambitious for their own continuing professional development, but they were not motivated by financial gain. Should these findings be replicated with other samples, departments of Psychology are advised to make their students’ values public: for use, in combination with the KIS and other government initiatives, by prospective students in determining subject of study and institution. In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that the current skills focus of undergraduate employability strategies should be extended so as to embrace a more existential model, where consideration is given not just to what graduates can do but also to how they want to be. The oral presentation of this paper will culminate with examples of classroom based activities to demonstrate how this may be achieved, as well as an illustration of how these findings have been used to inform our own institution’s strategic plan.

References
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