Human Relations 70th Anniversary Workshop

Can, and should, social science contribute to better quality jobs? A 70-year retrospect and prospect

Tuesday 10 Oct 2017, 10.00–17.00, British Academy, 10–11 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AH

This workshop will interest scholars of work and employment, policy makers in employers’ organizations and trade unions, public officials, and researchers in research institutes with an interest in work and the labour market. It is intended to be an engaged conversation among experts. Numbers will be restricted.

Programme

09:30–09:50 Registration, tea and coffee
10.00 Prof. Paul Edwards (University of Birmingham): Introduction to the aims of the day.

Presentations from four invited experts (15 minutes + 15 minutes of questions each):

10.15–10.45 Prof. David Guest (King’s College, London): The Quality of Working Life movement.
10.45–11.15 Prof. Tuomo Alasoini (Chief Adviser, TEKES, Finland): Nordic models of workplace change and workplace development, with special focus on Finnish and Norwegian examples.
11.15–11.45 Prof. Anne-marie Greene (University of Leicester): The impact of feminism on working life.
11.45–12.15 Prof. Ewart Keep (Oxford University): Skills Policy – an obsession with supply, and a lack of engagement with underlying demand and utilisation.
12.15–12.30 Summary reflections and points to capture.
12.30–13.15 Lunch, tea and coffee

Six short presentations from participants on different aspects of work (10 minutes + 10 minutes of questions each):

13.15–13.35 Prof. Kevin Daniels (University of East Anglia): Improving job quality as vehicle for integrating the social sciences.
13.35–13.55 Prof. Patricia Findlay (University of Strathclyde): Harnessing knowledge, research and networks to drive Fair, Innovative and Transformative work (FITwork) (or ... the challenges of putting our research engagement where our academic mouths are ...).
13.55–14.15 Prof. Nick Turner (University of Calgary): Being there (or not): Early Tavistock research on work accidents in understanding the importance of job quality.
14.15–14.30 Break
14.30–14.50 Prof. Katie Bailey (University of Sussex) and Dr Amanda Shantz (Trinity College Dublin): Discussing the challenges of impact: Insights from a study on purposeful leadership.
15.10–15.30 Prof. Martin Beirne (University of Glasgow): Dilemmas in practically engaged scholarship: Too much of a risk or a matter of safeguards?
15.30–16.00 Break - tea and coffee

Discussion and conclusions:
16.00–16.30 Prof. William A Brown (University of Cambridge) – commentary on overall themes.
Overview

This workshop, part of the 70th anniversary celebrations of Human Relations and the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, will address the contribution of research to practice. It is intended as an active conversation with some short invited presentations, together with the opportunity for other participants to offer specific reflections from their own experience.

The anniversary celebrations will culminate in a festival taking place 17–20 October, 2017. You can find the full programme on the festival website at festival.tavistute.org.

The founders of Human Relations defined a goal of the journal as being to ‘relate social theory to social practice’. The goal underlines the work of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, much of it published in the journal. A celebrated example is the ‘socio-technical school’, which sought the ‘joint optimization’ of the social and technical aspects of work and which engaged in numerous action research projects, in the UK, India and Scandinavia, aiming to apply the lessons. A reflection on this wealth of experience after 70 years is timely.

Two other aspects of the context heighten the relevance of this issue. The first is the importance of the impact of research outside academia, as signalled in the UK by the requirement of the Economic and Social Research Council that research proposals address ‘pathways to impact’ and by the inclusion in the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF) of impact as one dimension of the assessment of the quality of research. Impact was defined broadly to include ‘changes and benefits to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life’. Secondly, there has been growing academic interest in the ‘relevance’ side of the celebrated rigour–relevance pairing, as in several contributions identifying ‘emancipation’ as a goal and in related debates about the ‘performativity’ of research (as in a themed issue of the journal in February 2016).

Focus

The focus is broader than that of ‘impact’. Impact for the REF meant tracing a path from a very specific piece of research to some particular change of policy or practice. We are interested here in overall traditions of research, rather than individual pieces of work, and effects that can include changes in how an issue is defined or understood, rather than a concrete shift in practice.

The interest is in social science research that aims directly to change practice in relation to the management and organization of work. The specific focus is the concrete experience of work so that we are not concerned with public policy or the strategies of employers or trade unions as such, though these themes may be relevant to a particular story. The question is not ‘can social science explain situations where the quality of work has improved?’ but ‘what examples are there of high quality social science that has directly or indirectly improved the quality and experience of work?’

Specific topics directly related to the journal include:
- the socio-technical school
- quality of work life
- employee participation and involvement
- health and well-being interventions

Illustrative questions:
- What have been the major impediments to contributions to practice?
- What examples can be given of successful engaged research? What conditions are needed for them to work? Do they have unintended consequences such as possible negative effects for some groups?
- What are the prospects for future engagement with practice?
- Should the goals of engagement be emancipation or something more modest?
- Is it possible to engage in a disinterested manner, or is a commitment to a particular set of stakeholders inevitable?
- Should engagement be limited to education and critical dialogue, as opposed to concrete interventions in practice?
The quality of working life (QWL) ‘movement’ had its heyday in the optimistic era of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It serves as an example of an international attempt by social scientists to bring about improvements at local, national and international level in the quality of work. It was therefore a major attempt at emancipation of workers and an example of evidence-based social science. Despite early optimism, it largely failed to have a sustained impact and offers some salutary lessons about the challenges of using the social sciences to bring about improvements at work (Guest, in press).

The origins of the QWL movement are usually traced to the early work of the Tavistock Institute including the development of ideas about socio-technical systems. Three important features were the focus on the content of jobs, the analysis of job content within a wider technological, social and economic context and a concern for action, encapsulated in the concept of action research. These ideas were applied, initially in Norway by Emery and Thorsrud and colleagues and in organizations such as Shell and Philips. Although proclaimed by social scientists as successes, all faced major challenges of sustainability.

To meet this challenge there were three important developments. Firstly, there was a concern to embed QWL at an institutional level, reflected in the setting up of national bodies to promote QWL in most advanced economies, secondly the concept of QWL was broadened beyond the focus on jobs – something started by Emery and Thorsrud with their “general psychological requirements” for good work - and third, there was pressure for legislation which came to fruition, for example, with support from the social partners in European legislation.

However after the mid 1970s, pressure to improve QWL dissipated. In a recent analysis, Grote and Guest offer three main reasons for this. First, QWL had risen on the spirit of the times and with pressure from trade unions and within society more widely for greater emancipation; but by 1973, the first major oil crisis has turned attention to what industry and governments viewed as more pressing issues. Secondly, the difficulties of action research to improve work organization, often in the face of opposition from supervisors and line managers, had sapped progress. Thirdly, management pressures to promote QWL as a means to address concerns about rising employee expectations associated with improved education, the resulting demands for greater autonomy on the shop floor, concern about motivation, productivity, poor industrial relations and alienation, were directed elsewhere. Now their attention was...
diverted by other ideas such as Japanese management, lean management, quality management, the search for excellence and the focus on leadership which offered more viable or at least more attractive ‘solutions’. And social scientists, increasingly located in business schools, also turned their attention to other issues.

Grote and Guest (2017) have argued that it is timely to reinvigorate research on and application of steps to improve QWL, with work design as a central issue, on the grounds that there is now a much greater body of knowledge to provide a strong evidence-base for action that could result in mutual benefits. Secondly because action on job design can usefully be viewed within the wider context of a distinctive human resource strategy that incorporates QWL issues (Guest, 2017). Thirdly, because there is evidence that in the context of the changing nature of work, pressing for greater emancipation through improving QWL has become more urgent, justifying both promotion of and engagement in action by social scientists to improve QWL. Social scientists therefore should contribute to this endeavour. Whether they can is more of a moot point; there are lessons from the history of the QWL movement to suggest that without strong and sustained support from the key stakeholders, it is unrealistic to expect much progress.

References

Nordic models of workplace change and workplace development with special focus on Finnish and Norwegian examples
Prof. Tuomo Alasoini, Chief Adviser, Tekes – the Finnish Funding Agency for Innovation; Adjunct Professor, University of Helsinki. Contact: tuomo.alasoini(at)tekes.fi

Many authors speak of a distinct “Nordic Working Life Model”. The three basic premises underlying the use of this concept are that, first, from the QWL point of view, the Nordic countries can be seen as a whole; second, working life in the Nordic countries has some sort of distinctiveness compared with working life in other European countries; and third, this distinctive quality manifests itself as high QWL. The high QWL of the Nordic countries that can be verified by many working conditions surveys has been explained through institutional theories or by referring to distinctiveness of the history of the Nordic countries concerning power relations or the concept of social citizenship.

The Nordic countries have often been considered also showcases of cooperative development of working life between employers and employees. However, significant differences exist between institutional arrangements of the Nordic countries in this regard. This paper focuses on efforts to develop working life in Finland and Norway where development have in recent years taken place through different joint programmes between the social partners, the government and action-oriented researchers.

The historical development of programmes to develop working life are quite different in Finland and Norway in many respects. However, a common feature for the two countries is that, originally, the programmes were launched on the initiative of actors of the industrial relations field, but, over the years, the programmes have tried to be more responsive also to issues rising from problem settings of industrial policy, innovation policy or regional policy. This paper examines the success of Finnish and Norwegian programmes in this respect and the implication of this policy turn for the achievement of the more traditional industrial relations-based objectives of the programmes such as improved QWL, broadened employee participation and democratization of the working life.
The impact of feminism on working life
Anne-marie Greene, University of Leicester School of Business

This presentation takes two classic feminist workplace studies as its starting point of analysis: Anna Pollert’s (1981) *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives* and Cynthia Cockburn’s (1983) *Brothers: Male Dominance and Technological Change*, each of these standing chronologically near the centre of the span of time being celebrated by *Human Relations*. I use these studies as exemplars in order to illustrate the contribution of feminism, or more particularly feminist research in the field, tracing a line from their key philosophical underpinnings, objectives, methods, and findings, to ‘real-life’ impact on working life.

Both studies encapsulate key characteristics of feminist research: a focus on gender relations; an action focus/political engagement; and the importance of standpoint. In looking specifically at women workers, the aim was to disrupt conventional notions of the universal (male) worker, adding the power relations of selling labour into an analysis of women’s oppression in wider society. These studies highlighted what was distinctive about being a woman worker; challenged the separation of public economic and private familial spheres as influences on working life; demonstrated the embedded nature of gendered power relations at work; and revealed the importance of research methodologies which facilitate the capturing of the informal and those who often remain unheard or unseen.

I argue that we can see the inheritance line from this research to a wide range of developments in the day to day experiences of work such as: legislative rights and changes (for example equal value, maternity and paternity leave, parental leave, flexible working, different definitions of discrimination); practice within organisations (for example self-organised groups and women-only spaces, positive action initiatives, recognition of institutional discrimination); and specific contribution of feminist thought and activism to broadening the working lives of men (for example workers as parents and carers, challenges to traditional notions of masculinity, consideration of intersectionality, understanding of choice).

Feminist research also has a lot to teach us methodologically and I argue that impactful research has to take on board by necessity, some of the methods commonly used by feminist researchers. There has been some lamentation in the field about the lack of space for more immersive methods, particularly as funding and journal publication contexts become harsher. However, it maybe that the research impact agenda actually offers some opportunities, providing renewed space to continue older research traditions.

Skills Policy – an obsession with supply, and a lack of engagement with underlying demand and utilisation
Ewart Keep, Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance, Department of Education, Oxford University

This presentation explores the way in which English policy making and the more general policy discourse around skills, including contributions from employers and their representatives, has tended to focus on the supply of skills to the exclusion of other crucial considerations. In particular, those relating to weak underlying demand for skills within some parts of the economy and labour market, and the at-best partial usage of skills in many workplaces. These problems reflect massive issues with job quality, task discretion, career progression, weak notions of occupation, and Taylorised or impoverished models of work organisation and job design.

Policy from the early 1980s onwards assumed that occupational change, driven by technology (the ‘weightless economy’) and globalisation would mean a sharp decline in low paid, low skilled work, and the rise of a new breed of knowledge worker employer in a knowledge driven economy. The sole policy challenge was to surf this tide of change by increasing participation and achievement within all forms of education, particularly those related to work and employment. A corollary of these beliefs was a strong expectation on the part of policy makers and gurus that the model of soft or sophisticated HRM would be adopted by the majority of organisations and that this would ensure that workers would be empowered to be creative, to exercise discretion and to be developed to maximise their potential contribution to organisational performance and success. These assumptions have largely proved to be mistaken and have therefore ensured that policy has failed to generate the intended results.
The presentation briefly reviews the evidence on various dimensions of demand for skills and skill utilisation in the workplace. It then explores why it has proved so hard to refocus policy away from a simple obsession with skills supply, and why a broader approach to skills, job quality, employment relations, workplace innovation and productivity has not emerged. Factors such as policies built almost exclusively on human capital theory, a policy model that has chosen to treat the firm and workplace as a ‘black box’, the weakness of the people management function within firms, and the political capital already sunk into supply-led approaches are noted.

The presentation concludes with some thoughts on policy developments outside England, and also on the barriers that reduce both the volume and impact of research on demand for skills, and also skills utilisation.

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**Presenters**

**Improving job quality as vehicle for integrating the social sciences**

Kevin Daniels, Work, Learning and Wellbeing Programme, What Works for Wellbeing Centre Universities of East Anglia, Essex, Reading and Sheffield

In national and international policy, the international trades union movement and amongst academics, improving job quality is held as the pre-eminent or one of the pre-eminent means of improving well-being in the working age population. There is widespread evidence that the features of high quality work are linked to subsequent improvements in a variety of indicators of psychological well-being, mental health and physical health. There is also evidence that high quality work is linked to better performance in organisations. Evidence also suggests that national and institutional factors as well as organisational, team and individual factors influence the development of high quality jobs.

Given the evidence available and from the viewpoint of enlightened self-interest, it would be expected that organisations would seek and, through consultancies and management education, be able to access information on how to improve the quality of jobs. However, the incidence of low quality jobs in developed economies indicates that substantial numbers of workers are likely to be in low quality jobs.

In this presentation, we take the position that even jobs traditionally conceived of as low quality jobs can have the features of high quality work (e.g., security, variety in skills used, some task autonomy). We introduce two main criticisms of much research on job quality that hinders the practical application of social science research on job quality and well-being (and performance).

First, we contend that the dominance of research on the features of high quality jobs has misdirected researchers and policy makers away from other employment practices (e.g., training, development reviews) that support high quality work. Drawing on a recent systematic review of job quality and well-being, we show that although deliberate attempts to improve job quality may not necessarily translate into better jobs or wellbeing, there is more consistent evidence that improving job quality improves well-being when other employment practices are changed. The intended benefits of the intervention alongside management of the change process might also determine the outcome of interventions too. We contend that research on job quality is likely to make more rapid progress if the focus is on deliberate attempts to improve jobs rather than through passive assessments of jobs that lack a critical appraisal of how the jobs came to be like that in the first place.

Second, we argue that the focus of much job redesign research is misdirected at policy levers or at the actions of individual organisations. Our argument is that the evidence base lacks, but could be developed, to include a more integrated approach across the range of levels from individual to supra-national. Such an approach could include more emphasis on regional and sectoral factors that encompass more localised explanations of why and how particular organisations do, or do not attempt to improve the job quality, flows of knowledge between key stakeholders, key stakeholder preferences and motivations amongst other things. In theoretical terms, this would mean integrating knowledge on job quality from traditional medical, psychological, sociological, industrial relations and labour market economics based approaches with frameworks from, for example, politics and geography. This
would necessarily entail integrating knowledge from across social science disciplines. In practical terms, it would entail better knowledge of how to achieve scale-able improvements in the quality of jobs.

Notes
1 Sara Connolly, Kevin Daniels, Cigdem Gedikli, Jessica Knights, Rachel Nayani, Chidiebere Ogbonnaya, John Street, Olga Tregaskis, David Watson, all University of East Anglia, UK; Mark Bryan, University of Sheffield, UK; Simonetta Longhi, University of Reading, UK; Alita Nandi, University of Essex, UK. Contact: kevin.daniels@uea.ac.uk

Harnessing knowledge, research and networks to drive Fair, Innovative and Transformative work (FITwork)¹ (or … the challenges of putting our research engagement where our academic mouths are …)
Patricia Findlay, Scottish Centre for Employment Research, University of Strathclyde

The study of job quality, well-rehearsed on the pages of Human Relations, has illuminated the complex and multidimensional nature of the concept. While any quest for a single definition does (and probably should) continue to elude us, analyses of the definitions, dimensions and measures of job quality within and across firms, industries and countries and for particular demographic groups have significantly enriched our understanding of the world of work. It is also increasingly recognised in academic and policy circles that good job quality benefits individuals, organisations and societies (Findlay, Kalleberg and Warhurst, 2013). Better understanding of – and ability to measure - what constitutes a good job has also stimulated discussions of what interventions (and by whom) might enhance job quality (Findlay, Warhurst, Keep and Lloyd, 2017). Yet poor job quality persists and we have recently witnessed the emergence of business models heavily predicated on ‘bad jobs’. In this context, what is the scope for academic research to influence those key stakeholders with a direct role in shaping job quality?

This presentation will focus on a research and knowledge engagement programme specifically designed to use social science knowledge to enhance job quality. The core starting point of the project – defining what we know - is existing academic expertise on job quality, workplace governance, innovation and change alongside the knowledge of other workplace stakeholders on the challenges of enhancing job quality on the ground. The research objective focuses on what more we need to know, and how to generate meaningful impact from this knowledge. The core facilitating process has involved establishing a network of researchers, policymakers, public agencies, employers, trade unions and others around the central idea that job quality and fair work matter and how workplace innovation can enhance both, and that closer collaboration can improve information sharing, support the generation of better evidence and improve the likelihood of developing supportive policy and intervention.

Our Fitzwork project draws on the concept of workplace innovation to address the barriers/opportunities that exist in addressing job quality. The Fitzwork approach develops a distinctive approach of mutual gains-based workplace innovation, developing on and embedding synergies between high quality jobs, fair work and innovative workplace practice. Moreover, the project proceeds from an holistic, multi-stakeholder perspective in which the objective of aligning job quality, fair work and workplace innovation is to deliver fairness for employees, innovative practice for employers and transformative outcomes for society in addressing poverty, inequalities in opportunity, income and health and deliver sustainable and inclusive growth.

From a pilot study of SMEs beginning in 2014, this programme of work has developed an extensive secondary evidence review and a bespoke research instrument (in the form of an online survey tool). The latter assesses key dimensions of job quality and fair work, measures known drivers of workplace innovation and relates these to a range of HR and business outcomes. The Fitzwork tool has been deployed across managers and employees in over 50 organisations, complemented by in-depth qualitative research interviews and occasionally focus groups with key stakeholders, in order to map workplace practices, analyse differences across demographic groups, teams/workgroups, locations and organisations, evaluate the relationships between job quality, fair work and workplace innovation and – where requested - support interventions aimed at new ways of working.
This presentation will give a brief outline of the process and substance of the FITwork project. On the former, it will consider the building of a network; multi-partner investment; the development of collaborative working; and developing complementary public supports. On the latter, it will outline our direct engagement with employers and employees, the emerging research data and other outcomes at workplace level. It will address the opportunities and challenges of action oriented research and of collaborative working across researchers, policy makers and practitioners, as well as considering the implications of the process for academic research and researchers.

Notes

1 Findlay, P., Lindsay, C, McQuarrie, J. (University of Strathclyde); Pascoe-Deslauriers, R. (Mount Alison University); Findlay, J. and Smart, A. (University of Glasgow).

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**Being there (or not): Early Tavistock research on work accidents in understanding the importance of job quality**

Prof. Nick Turner, University of Calgary

I examine the impact of the early Tavistock research program into the relationship between workplace accidents and absence, which was reported in *Human Relations* (e.g., Hill & Trist, 1953, 1955) and other places years later (e.g., Trist et al., 1963; Goodman & Garber, 1988). I describe four ways in which this research program implicates job quality in promoting workplace safety: two ways by ‘being there’ and two ways by ‘not being there’.

First, in terms of ‘being there’, although the Hill and Trist (1953, 1955) studies reinforce an individual difference perspective on accident causation (accident proneness through a psychoanalytic lens), they nevertheless implicate the connection between employees and their organization and the consequences of the misfit between the two, pre-empting what would become organizational commitment and person-organization fit ahead of their recognized empirical times. Second, with their psychological perspective, Hill and Trist confounded individual differences and perceived cultural explanations for workplace accidents, which may come as a surprise to those who acknowledge safety climate’s ostensive origin (Zohar, 1980) as occurring almost thirty years later. Third, in terms of ‘not being there’, despite setting out and being cited as some of the first examples of the sociotechnical approach, these two studies paid surprisingly little attention to the technical side of accident causation while studying employees facing potential for considerable physical danger in steel works. Fourth, the research discounted injury severity in its theories for uniting work accidents and absence.

Subsequent research that grew from Hill and Trist’s (1953, 1955) studies involved some of the same Tavistock researchers (e.g., Eric Trist) and collaborators (e.g., Paul Goodman), and with richer understandings of study contexts and more rigorous research designs, they extended research on work accidents and absence by connecting the importance of ‘being there’ with the ‘not being there’. Two examples of these connections include work organization (autonomous work groups) and job knowledge (familiarity). Decades later, meta-analytic research on work accident prediction squarely combines the social and technical features of work and illustrates the important role of interpersonal interactions (e.g., leader-member exchange, co-worker relations) as a mechanism linking situational characteristics (e.g., leadership styles, work characteristics), safety climate, and accident occurrence.

**References**


Discussing the challenges of impact: Insights from a study on purposeful leadership
Katie Bailey¹ and Amanda Shantz²

“Impact” seems to be the new buzzword for management and organisational scholars today. This is particularly the case in the UK where the importance of demonstrating impact has risen to 25%, according to the latest REF published guidance. One consequence is that scholars are increasingly publishing in bridging journals, such as Harvard Business Review, or online forums, such as LSE’s Impact Blog. This may constitute a new pathway to impact, and in doing so, reach out to consumers of current or future research, including prospective students and organisations. Pressure to generate impact also arises from the organisations in which we conduct research; they need to generate return-on-investment, and researchers are therefore asked how their research will, or does impact business practice. Pressure to create impact also resides with researchers themselves, as some argue that the current research agenda lacks relevance to the ‘real world.’

Although generating impact services several positive outcomes, there are challenges that arise in managing the aims of multiple parties. In this presentation, we will discuss some of the challenges that we encountered in a CIPD funded research project on ‘purposeful leadership.’ The project commenced in late 2015, and by June 2017, we collected data from five organizations (1557 survey responses, 46 interviews, 16 focus groups, 4 individual workshops, one final workshop; output included: 5 organisational reports, several vodcasts, 1 overarching technical and 1 practitioner report published by the CIPD).

One challenge we faced was timing. With the next REF at our heels, we have juggled working on research outputs aimed at peer-reviewed academic journals; with shorter-term ‘impact’ papers, such as the one we published in The Conversation; with liaising with our study organisations to determine impact in their practice. Although the impact of a research project can be seen in advance of academic publications, the focus on generating immediate impact distracts our attention from generating new theoretical insights that rarely come with such haste. Moreover, the REF requires that impact is traced to specific academic outputs, which ignores the reality that many research projects generate impact in the shorter term.

The second challenge is one of research focus. The topic of our research – purposeful leadership – is unitarist and newsworthy. Since the CIPD’s stakeholders are organisations who hold the assumption that “what is good for the organisation is good for the employee”, the research questions we addressed focused on positive outcomes, and we asked fewer inductive or critical questions than we would have liked. To show that our research has impact in organisations, we are therefore limited in the framing of our research to consider topics of interest to them and/or funding bodies, calling into question how we might reconcile a more critical agenda from a research perspective.

A third challenge refers to our role. Since the REF rewards projects that produce change in organisational policies, then scholars have a vested interest in seeing their work put to practice. Although it might be tempting to some, our role is not one of consultants, which is not easily digestible to many organisations who want clear guidance based on the research. Moreover, findings from academic research can be fuzzy, and contradictory at times, which practitioners often find confusing. In this project, we found that some organisations find it challenging to connect the research findings to their practice.

Despite these challenges, we believe that our project will have impact in the participating organisations, the wider public, and, the academic literature through a careful balancing act among these various tensions. We pre-empted these challenges by being open with all stakeholders and have worked diligently with them to interpret the research findings to guide them in bringing about change. By bringing to light the positive effects of purposeful leadership, we hope to contribute to a positive agenda of change in policy and practice.

Notes
¹ Professor in Management, University of Sussex
² Associate Professor of Human Resources, Trinity College Dublin
The Centre for Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship (CREME): A vehicle for engaged scholarship
Monder Ram, University of Birmingham

Self-employment often provides ethnic minority communities with a job, a mechanism for survival in a context of racial inequality, and for some, a path to social mobility. ‘Mainstream’ social scientists have rarely ventured into this academic field, leaving the space to be filled mainly by ‘ethnic relations’ scholars reflecting on the cultural distinctiveness of such enterprises; or entrepreneurship specialists keen to enumerate and make comparisons with ‘white’-owned businesses. Policy-makers and practitioners involved in ‘business support’ – and innocent of the relevant research - have frequently lauded such businesses as a response to acute inequalities in the labour market, or to celebrate the supposed innate entrepreneurial drive of some ethnic groups. 1 Rarely have scholars and practitioners in this field intermingled in a sustained way. CREME was established in 2004 as a joint venture between a Regional Development Agency with an interest in promoting enterprise amongst all communities, and a group of researchers with a history of engagement with non-academic stakeholders. My presentation offers a reflection on the dynamics of running CREME, a centre that aims to meld social science with the practical concerns of diverse non-academic stakeholders (ranging from major Banks to migrant groups). I reflect on three kinds of impact, which though indirect and not centrally concerned with job quality, do nonetheless influencing thinking and practice on key element of the labour market: migrant self-employment.

The first impact relates to promoting awareness of ethnic minority firms – particularly in relation to employment issues - by sustained study and engagement with non-academic stakeholders. Crucially, this knowledge has often been shared directly with state agencies and altered their organisational practice (see Beckinsale and Ram, 2006; Ram et al 2015). More commonly, CREME’s influence has been more indirect; our work small firm non-compliance has, for example, formed part of the evidence base for the Low Pay Commission (Ram et al., 2007).

Second, CREME’s activism with practitioners has resulted in the creation of number of social science inspired ventures since its inception. It established ‘Supplier Development East Midlands’ in 2004: a novel initiative that brought together 20 leading corporations with minority businesses in order to promote supply chain relationships (Ram et al., 2007). It was successfully ‘spun-out’ in 2006 and operates to this day as Minority Supplier Development UK (MSDUK). At around the same time, CREME established the 12/8 group, a forum of African-Caribbean business owners who provide peer-support (Ram and Trehan, 2010). These initiatives have resulted in business contracts for small firms (MSDUK) and the establishment of forum for exchange of mutually-beneficial business support that has been in existence for 15 years (12/8 group).

Finally, CREME’s longevity means that it acts as focal point for policy-makers and practitioners with an interest in minority entrepreneurship. Who actually ‘owns’ the policy challenge of promoting migrant entrepreneurship is difficult to establish with any precision. This applies with particular force to austerity-blighted Britain, a country which – prior to the dismantling of public sector business support in 2010 - had a tradition interesting policy experiments to encourage ethnic minority enterprise.

Notes

References
Dilemmas in practically engaged scholarship: Too much of a risk or a matter of safeguards?
Martin Beirne, University of Glasgow

Arguments for an applied academic activism on work are capturing serious attention. After a period of evident neglect across the academy, social scientists are rediscovering principled traditions of scholarship that connect research with practical efforts to anticipate and promote genuinely enriching and empowering ways of managing and organizing work.

There is undoubtedly demand for a critical-practical approach to academic work in this area, certainly among graduates who are familiar with published arguments and evidence, who object to the dominance of crude and cruel managerialism and look for more telling and potent knowledge to inform their own everyday management activities. With a more explicit applied agenda, critical scholars would be better placed to support principled practitioners and help to sustain their progressive inclinations.

Struggling to make a difference

Rebalancing scholarship along these lines will be less than straightforward, however. Personal and professional dilemmas are attached to practical projects, and these range beyond the issues and concerns that exercised academics in the past.

Anxieties previously centred on academic freedom and independence from commercial pressures. There were fears about managerializing debates and the misappropriation of critical knowledge by enthusiasts for authoritarianism and tight labour control. Generations of researchers issued warnings about the perils of dealing with practitioners who expect contributions to be congenial and useful on their terms, raising the spectre of conservatism that has long haunted the human relations tradition. The problems are now also closer to home, however. Academics are more likely to confront conservatism and challenges to value-driven scholarship within their own employing organizations.

The managed academic

Academic work has itself been affected by rationalistic impulses and far-reaching managerialism. These have restricted the space for alternative ideas about applied knowledge and practical impact, discouraging younger researchers in particular from looking beyond approved or detached positions to grapple with practical matters of challenging managerialism and changing work arrangements, within or beyond the academy. The corollary is that many academics are passionately frustrated rather than assuredly transformative in their outlook and practice. Establishing a safe environment for emancipatory work therefore involves more than negotiating access agreements that maintain integrity. It means claiming and defending space for academic activism in appraisal processes, building collective support and resilience arrangements, and devising effective ways of increasing the congruence between expressed values and applied scholarship under difficult local conditions. So how is this to be achieved? This presentation will consider restrictions and possibilities to stimulate discussion.