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

Programme

Overview

This workshop, part of the 70th anniversary celebrations of Human Relations and the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, addressed the contribution of research to practice. It was designed to be an engaged conversation among experts—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 was 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 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. An 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).

Written presentations, revised as appropriate in light of the discussion, are below.
The Quality of Working Life movement
An extended summary of a presentation to the *Human Relations* 70th anniversary workshop held on Tuesday 10 October 2017 at the British Academy, London

David E Guest, Professor of Organizational Psychology and Human Resource Management, King’s Business School, King’s College, London

The origins of the quality of working life (QWL) movement are usually traced to the early work at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations. The seminal study by Trist and Bamforth (1951) presenting a socio-technical analysis of coal mining was published in fourth issue of *Human Relations*. The fuller outline of the socio-technical systems approach was subsequently set out by Trist et al (1963) in a Tavistock Publications book, *Organizational Choice* by which time the general principles concerning work redesign had begun to attract a wider audience.

One of the most notable early applications occurred in Norway where Fred Emery from the Tavistock Institute teamed up with Einar Thorsrud to explore the scope to improve industrial democracy through a participative approach to work redesign (Emery and Thorsrud (1969; 1976). They set out a series of principles underpinning their work in Norway that went well beyond job redesign to include concerns for learning, decision-making autonomy, support and recognition, a link between work and wider social life and work that led to an attractive future.

By the late 1960s interest in QWL, reflecting this broader perspective, had greatly increased, reflecting some of the concerns in major economies at that time. These included the need to address rising expectations resulting in part from better education; worry about poor industrial relations and low worker motivation; the impact of new technology and increased bureaucratisation, growing demands for emancipation and industrial democracy and, more particularly in the USA, concern about alienation (Blauner, 1964). One consequence of these concerns was the setting up of a government initiated enquiry in the USA which confirmed the seriousness of the problem and recommended improvements in QWL (O’Toole, 1973). Recognising some of these challenges, a number of companies in various countries had initiated action to improve QWL and some governments set up applied units and research centres to encourage QWL innovations.

In the early 1970s, a major conference was held to review the progress of what had by then become an international QWL movement (Davis and Cherns, 1975). As well as the presentation of numerous case studies and reviews of activities, one feature of the meeting was an attempt to define the territory of QWL with Walton (1975) setting out eight characteristic features of QWL. These were adequate and fair compensation; safe and healthy working conditions; opportunities to use and develop human capacities; opportunities for continued growth and security; social integration in the work organization; constitutionalism in work organization; work arranged in relation to total life space; and the social relevance of work. This list is worth presenting because it indicates how far beyond job design the QWL movement had gone in seeking to address the broader societal problems linked to changes that had been occurring in the workplace (for a fuller account, see Guest, 2018 in press).

The 1972 conference and the publication of *Work in America* (O’Toole, 1973) reflected the high point of the QWL movement. External events led governments and industry to shift their priorities. Specifically, following the Yom Kippur war in 1973 the oil crisis caused a major recession, shifting the focus to traditional economic concerns and reducing the pressure to improve QWL. At the same time, evidence was beginning to build that it was proving difficult to implement QWL. Developments in the UK can serve as an illustration of these problems.

The UK government had been slow take any initiatives on QWL. But prompted by NATO, which had taken an interest in promoting QWL, a working party was set up which recommended a ‘cell’ within a government department that would work with industry and academics to undertake and evaluate QWL initiatives (Wilson, 1973). This led to the setting up of the Work Research Unit within the Department of Employment. In 1979, NATO sponsored a further conference to evaluate progress in improving QWL. UK researchers at that conference described a number of problems that had arisen in seeking to implement QWL initiatives. These included a lack of senior management buy in to the underpinning philosophy, opposition from line management and unions and weak strategies of change (Guest, Williams and Dewe, 1980; Lupton and Tanner, 1980; Wallis and Cope, 1980). A leading member of the Work Research Unit, reflecting on the strategy of change concluded “Wilson’s hope of seeing well-defined results from
A few leading UK companies took initiatives to promote QWL. Hill (1971) presented ‘Towards a New Philosophy of Management’ outlining how Trist had helped to develop and begin to implement elements of QWL and socio-technical thinking in Shell. However, Blackler and Brown (1980) subsequently challenge the success of this initiative. Once the Tavistock Institute involvement had ceased there was insufficient impetus and with the lack of line management support and union opposition, few initiatives were implemented. At ICI, where Herzberg had been invited to explore scope for job redesign, initial evidence of success (Paul, Robertson and Herzberg, 1969) was constrained by union opposition and further progress was viewed as only feasible in the context of a productivity deal with workers paid to accept some job redesign, a process that became badly bogged down in job evaluation (Roeber, 1975).

So where does this leave QWL? First, it should be noted that not all initiatives ended in failure. Although the Norwegian studies failed to diffuse in Norway (Bolweg, 1976), they helped to stimulate a considerable number of successful initiatives in Sweden. More importantly, QWL issues had a positive influence on the social partners in Europe where a series of legislative activities mandated various features of QWL in member countries. These addressed a range of factors including health and safety, equal opportunities, consultation and communication and working hours. Grote and Guest (2017) noted that although research under the banner of QWL had diminished, research on QWL topics, including job redesign, had continued and developed. They argued that this fragmentation of research had limited the ability to develop a coherent strategy of change to improve QWL. They also argued that in the light of contemporary developments, Walton’s list of QWL dimensions needed to be extended to include scope for flexible working and individual proactivity.

The case by Grote and Guest for a revival of the QWL movement and for a more integrated approach to QWL reflects a view that the contemporary contextual issues are at least as pressing as those that gave rise to the original QWL movement. The challenges of alienation remain, not least in the USA. Several countries, and notably the UK, face major problems of low productivity increases. Inequality is a growing problem. Advances in technology have already had a damaging impact on the quality of work life of those in the gig economy and the anticipated advances in artificial intelligence threaten a wide range of jobs. Global competition alongside other trends have increased employment insecurity and there has been a growth in mental health problems, often traced to experiences linked to work. All this is reflected in a growing concern for well-being at work.

O’Toole and Lawler (2006), updating the Work in America report, describe the benefits of a ‘high involvement’ approach to management in organizations, which can include QWL features, for both well-being and performance while noting that those adopting this approach are in a minority. Guest (2017) has outlined an integrated approach to human resource management that prioritises QWL practices that promote well-being as a route to high performance. Reflecting the complexities of the issues, Grote and Guest call for an approach to QWL research and action that adopts a pluralist, multi-stakeholder, multi-level and multi-disciplinary framework. While this may work as a means of integrating the research and analysis, what is additionally needed is improvement in the strategies of change and a rekindling of the enthusiasm for evidence, advocacy, action and impact so evident in the seminal work undertaken by staff at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations.

References


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

Many authors speak of a particular ‘Nordic Working Life Model’. The use of such a concept has been justified by three interrelated arguments. First, from the quality of working life (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. Third, this distinctive quality – sometimes called as the ‘Nordic effect’ – manifests itself as high QWL in the Nordic countries, a fact that can be verified through various working conditions surveys.

Different authors have given different explanations for the ‘Nordic effect’. According to institutional theories, the Nordic countries can be regarded as examples of ‘coordinated market economies’ (production regime theory) or ‘inclusive employment regimes’ (employment regime theory), both creating favourable conditions for a high QWL (Gallie, 2007). In more ‘agentic’ models of explanation, the main attention is paid to particular forms of bi- and trilateral interaction and communication between organized labour, employers and governmental institutions in those countries (Gustavsen, 2011; Kettunen, 2012; Kristensen, 2011).

According to a standard view of the Fordist compromise, labour unions trade a high degree of management control over work organization for greater levels of pay and security. Such a compromise leads to Taylorist jobs that do not leave much space for discretion or autonomy at work for most employees. However, in the Nordic countries, characterized by powerful labour unions and a relatively high level of trust between organized labour and employers since World War II, a different kind of compromise between the parties took shape. In the Nordic version of the Fordist compromise, labour unions traded their demands for higher levels of task discretion and autonomy for a high degree of task and working time flexibility, leading to ‘saturated jobs’ with high work intensity (Boxall and Winterton, 2015).

Numerous projects, programmes and campaigns to reform working life are one form of manifestation of close interaction and communication between the parties in the Nordic countries. Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark
have a long history of such efforts at the national, regional and industry level, based on cooperation between policymakers, unions, employers, workplaces, action researchers and consultants. Despite a great amount of literature, questions concerning the potential of such programmes to act as agents of change and the possibility of working life change through such programmes in general have remained the subject of scant academic research and policy discussion thus far.

Finland and Norway can be considered the two Nordic countries with the most ambitious programmes in this area during the past 20 years (Alasoini et al., 2017). Here, I take the ‘helicopter perspective’ for the long-term development of working life development programmes in both countries and examine three questions: How far the programmes reflect social science thinking? What are the main successes, limitations and problems of the programmes? How could these limitations and problems be met?

Norway is the pioneer in Europe; its history of experiments in job redesign and workplace democracy dates back to the early 1960s. A close relationship between the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations and the Work Research Institute (WRI) and, further, between the WRI and labour market organizations contributed to the fact that working life development activities in Norway became heavily influenced by action research and socio-technical work design from the very beginning. Action researchers acted as an important source of influence for programmes and renewals in working life through labour market organizations and government. However, problems emerged when the focus of programmes moved away from the industrial relations framework and into innovation, industrial and regional policy arenas in which labour market organizations were not dominant actors and in which action researchers were not used to act.

Finland is a latecomer in programme-based development of working life compared with Norway. The first programmes in Finland emerged only in the 1990s in the aftermath of a deep economic recession. Here, the influence of social science thinking has been more indirect. The programme rationale in the 1990s originated from the idea of a system deficiency seen through the ‘systems of innovation’ framework. Workplace innovation was considered as a neglected area and governmental intervention was considered as a legitimate approach to meet this deficiency. At workplace level, social science thinking and action research (together with participatory consultancy) acted as the means of realizing this strategy. In Norway, social science thinking played a considerable role also at the strategic level in the programmes, whereas in Finland this role was important only at the operational level.

The main successes of the programmes in both countries are similar and can be summarized into four main points:
- Productivity improvements and better QWL in participating workplaces through adoption of new management, organizational and other work-related practices (local workplace innovations).
- Creation of collaborative relationships between workplaces and academic researchers.
- Creation of platforms for bold experimentation within workplaces and between workplaces and workplaces and researchers as broader development coalitions, learning networks, etc.
- Promotion of democratic discourse in workplaces and society.

The main limitations and problems of the programmes seem also quite similar in both countries:
- The problem of diffusion of workplace innovations or other ‘good practices’.
- Lack of substantial breakthrough innovations that would have undermined dominant logics in working life (the programmes have been more successful in speeding up already ongoing trends).
- No plausible theory of transformative change steering the implementation of programmes has emerged from their experiences.
- Difficulty in gaining policy legitimacy outside of the sphere of the industrial relations system.

As stated above, despite the great number of programmes of different kinds, discussion of how to ‘fix’ the problem of ‘limited impact’ has been scarce. According to Gustavsen (2017) – one of the few authors who has seriously tried to deal with this issue – two kinds of challenges can be distinguished. The first concerns research policy authorities: how to expand programme budgets, how to increase the timeframe of programmes and how to better link workplace development programmes to other initiatives such as technology programmes. The other challenge concerns research itself: how to better link the several, local and parallel processes of workplace change together to bring about something like a social movement through comparing local experiences and learning from them.

I find Gustavsen’s considerations relevant, but still partly inadequate. For the future, programmes would also need a more explicit theory of transformative change, which would be able to give better answers to such questions as how
to not only broaden but also to up-scale innovations, how to challenge dominant logics in working life and what kind of policy mixes are needed for up-scaling. I would suggest that, here, sociological theorizing based on transition management literature (e.g. Grin et al., 2011) – widely utilized in innovation studies but still almost unknown in working life studies – could make a contribution. As a derivative of the need for a better conceptualization of how transformative change in working life is possible, more explicit programme theories for the realization of such a reform are also needed.

References

The impact of ‘feminism’ on working life
Anne-marie Greene, University of Leicester School of Business

My starting point is to look at two influential workplace studies, Anna Pollert’s *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives* published in 1981 and Cynthia Cockburn’s *Brothers: Male Dominance and Technological Change* published in 1983. I do this in order to condense my ideas around the contribution of the key traditions, methods and findings of feminist work on contemporary working life today.

Feminist standpoint theory is arguably one of the most controversial theories to have been proposed and debated in the history of second wave feminism over the last 30–40 years (Hekman, 1997). While feminism is necessarily political, at the same time it is centrally concerned with method, truth and epistemology (Hartsock, 1975). At the time of its emergence, standpoint theory represented a major challenge to traditional epistemological positions, in which objectivity is best ensured through disinterested, value free, point of viewless, enquiry procedures (Harding, 1990). Within feminist standpoint, some actors are viewed as being better placed or become a more revelatory source because of their marginalised position: the articulation of the stories and experiences of the marginalised is the way that understandings of the dominant patriarchal system can be challenged.

Without talking to the authors themselves, I cannot determine the extent to which Pollert and Cockburn were directly influenced by developments in thinking, and the writings that marked the emergence of feminist standpoint theory in the late 70s/early 80s. From an outsider’s point of view however, I feel that standpoint is heavily implicated in both Pollert’s and Cockburn’s studies. They both have a central focus on gender relations; on action and political engagement; and emphasise the importance of standpoint, both of the research subject and of themselves as researchers.

Both studies utilised methods within ‘a broad ethnographic paradigm’, mixing interviews with observational comment, and analysis of company and union documents, reports and media representations. The political activism of the researchers is writ large throughout the descriptions of the way they carried out their research and the subsequent analysis. Pollert states a clear feminist position wanting to show how the ‘roots of women’s oppression
lie in their segregation and isolation as mothers outside the social relations of production’ (Pollert, 1981:3). She wanted to ‘expose the ‘hidden clamour, tensions and conflicts behind the oft-quoted ‘silent majority’, and give a voice to the ‘hard to reach’ (Pollert, 2012: 174). Cockburn also strongly identifies as a feminist researcher and the feminist project is central to her research work. Both authors are refreshing open and reflexive about the effects of their own identity characteristics on the research. As Cockburn (1983: 13) expresses:

‘It is easier to be tolerant of the contradictions expressed by others when you are aware of those in your own life: I write from the point of view of a woman, a socialist, a feminist, a worker, a mother, a trade unionist. Not all of these categories sit easily with each other’.

So, what did these studies find? I would argue that they found things that inspired and led to development on from, a number of key issues which are still highly relevant today. What was/is distinctive about being a woman/and or a man worker? Their empirical evidence showed us a rather different story of the experience of factory life than had been seen before- they challenged the separation of public economic and private familial spheres as influences on working life and demonstrated the embedded nature of gendered power relations at work, whether this be with fellow workers, supervisors, managers, husbands or other family members.

Their analysis shows us the ‘unstable and labile nature of consciousness’, as Pollert found, ‘the constant tussle between consent with and rejection of accepted norms and perceptions’ (Pollert, 2012: 176). Cockburn started her analysis with understanding contradictions as a primary goal (Cockburn, 1983: 13) – as she says, bucking the convention within social sciences in which we are usually encouraged to:

‘speak to code and tabulate responses... trying to emerge brandishing a handful of yesses, a bunch of noes and a few doubtfuls all adding up to a hundred percent... [but this] leads to asking the wrong questions, hearing the wrong replies and seriously underestimating the intelligence of the informants.’ (Cockburn, 1983: 12)

Adequate and appropriate methods of research and analysis have to be able to capture and make sense of massive contradictions: women can feel oppressed and also not see themselves as feminist. The emancipation of women from their expected roles perhaps through technological change, does not necessarily lead to commensurate benefit for them. Silence about poor treatment might say more about opportunities for voice, or permission to speak rather than consent or satisfaction. Men are torn between the demands of their working-class identity and a masculine one. The individual choices made in the face of these contradictions determine the level of social change that can be enacted (Cockburn, 1983: 213). I argue that we can see an inheritance line from Pollert and Cockburn to a wide range of developments in day to day experiences of work. Feminist approaches influenced thinking, method and practice more widely, moving beyond the experience of women to encapsulate more complex social stratifications across race, class, ethnicity, sexuality and so on, dealing with the fragmented and contradictory nature of human subjectivity.

I also want to comment on a couple of other aspects of the two studies: style and recommendations. A striking feature of both books, is how easy they are to read. I would argue both authors successfully achieve the aim of accessibility whilst not losing any of the theoretically-driven sophistication of analysis. These two studies are very good exemplars for those interested in empirical, policy driven, politically engaged research. Apart from the occasional opportunity afforded with doctoral study, it is or has been relatively difficult to gain funding or more importantly the time required to carry out ethnographically informed research and analysis, particularly as funding and journal publication contexts have become harsher. Reflecting on her study 30 years on, Anna Pollert comments on the ‘privilege of shop floor immersion’ she was afforded back then, compared to the limited fieldwork possible for most researchers today (Pollert, 2012: 175).

However, it maybe that we are actually offered some new opportunities with the research impact agenda which is now such an important part of the criteria by which funding bids are judged by Research Councils and within the Research Excellence Framework exercise. Within the new metrics, around thirty percent of the REF assessment will look at impact. There is a huge pressure for universities to show how they are engaging with non-academic stakeholders and ‘making a demonstrable contribution’. Look at the current popularity of co-production as evidenced by the recent ESRC funded multi-million-pound research study on Knowledge That Matters: Realising the Potential of Co-production. Reading the final report on this which includes all kinds of recommendations for universities and researchers, while they are not named as such, the underpinning philosophy and methods described look very much like feminist approaches. There are also explicit concerns for political activism and change.
In 2012, Pollert stated that ‘imagination and commitment can continue research traditions learned in the 1970s about the world of work’ (Pollert, 2012: 177). I would echo this call, and also for the will, funds and resources from our employers, funders and publishers to engage with research designs.

References

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

The PowerPoint presentation and the original abstract indicate the main lines of argument. In essence, although policy makers in England find it exceedingly hard to recognise, accept or admit this, supply-led skills policies have largely run out of road. To some extent this is because the public money needed to further substantially expand the supply of education and training (E&T) is no longer there, and recent initiatives (such as those announced in the Budget) represent relatively marginal tinkering rather than major new schemes. However, at a deeper level, there are now the faint glimmerings of a realisation in sections of the English policy community that there are major deficiencies in the shape and level of demand for skill across parts of the UK economy; that we have too many bad, low paid jobs; and that the usage of skill in many workplaces is ineffective – hence in part our productivity woes (Keep, Mayhew and Payne, 2006). Perhaps the major catalyst for this paradigm shift in perception has been the longitudinal education outcomes (LEO) data on graduate earnings (25 per cent of graduates not earning more than £20,000 per annum a decade after graduating). These issues, however, remain utterly undiscussable within English public policy debate and it is doubtful if ministers have been confronted with the uncomfortable truths that flow from current data.

One of the issues raised at the workshop was the issue of social class, not least in terms of E&T’s role in distributing opportunities to access the finite supply of better quality job openings. This is plainly a major challenge, although one that the presentation was unable to cover due to lack of time. In essence, we have a situation of polarising and saturated labour markets, where the proportion of ‘bad’ jobs is static or growing, and where the proportion of good jobs is static or falling, meeting a still rising tide of more highly qualified entrants to labour market. The results are over-qualification, and ‘bumping down’ or cascading down in the labour market as more qualified entrants displace more lowly qualified workers even in very routine work, as well as a massive under-utilisation of skills (Keep, 2016).

As Brown, Lauder and Ashton (2011) discuss, across the UK and other developed nations, the outcome is lower wage returns to education, a massive zero sum game of positional competition for access to the finite supply of good jobs, reduced levels of inter-generational social mobility, and disappointment with the ‘broken promise’ of educational achievement leading to better personal outcomes.

Easy solutions and happy endings look to be in short supply. English skills policy is fundamentally bankrupt, but finding a new direction is going to prove exceedingly hard, not least because traditional and well-understood supply side policy moves or remedies are played out; interventions within the employment relationship or the workplace are still off-limits (see the very sluggish and minimalistic response to the fairly anodyne recommendations in the Taylor Report as an example); and we lack the kind of joined up economic development, business support, business improvement and workplace innovation ‘offer’ and infrastructure to help firms to change (Keep and Mayhew 2010 and 2014; Keep, 2015). Scotland is heading down a different road. The Fair Work Convention, the Scottish government’s Labour Market Strategy, and emerging elements of a business support offer linked to a focus on
productivity gains and enhanced demand for and usage of skills via better job quality, are starting to sketch in a different way to both frame and tackle the skills problem. In England, another half-hearted spin of the supply-side wheel seems the most likely development, at least in the short term.

Looking further ahead, the economic shock liable to be administered by Brexit (in whatever form this becomes manifest); the problem of insecure, casualised and exploitative work; the ongoing productivity crisis and the resultant stagnation of real wages are all liable to create pressure for new forms of economic interventions and to push policy makers towards re-focusing attention onto the workplace and what goes on within it. In the long run, some realisation that there are links between job quality (broadly defined), demand for a more highly qualified workforce, good skill creation, and enhanced skill usage seems has to be one of the desired goals of both research and policy formation.

For further details of the work of the Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance see: http://www.skope.ox.ac.uk

References

Presenters

Improving job quality as vehicle for integrating the social sciences
Kevin Daniels, Work, Learning and Wellbeing Programme,1 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 organizations. Evidence also suggests that national and institutional factors as well as organizational, 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 organizations 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.2

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). There are two main criticisms of much research on job quality that we believe hinders the practical application of social science research on job quality and well-being (and performance). Addressing these criticisms may lead to better knowledge of how to introduce large-scale improvements in work.
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. There is consistent evidence from multiple and large-scale longitudinal studies that the features of high quality work are associated with subsequent levels of a broad range of indicators of health and well-being. However, a recent systematic review of job quality and well-being shows that although deliberate attempts to improve job quality may not necessarily translate into better jobs or well-being, there is more consistent evidence that improving job quality improves well-being when other employment practices are changed. In part, this may reflect that the features of high quality jobs often co-occur with other employment practices (e.g., training and development), and therefore research that relies on observing the features of high quality work may suffer from omitted variables bias and would lead researchers to believe improving some aspect of job design (for example, job autonomy) would lead to an improvement in well-being without necessarily having to alter other aspects of employment. The intended benefits of the intervention alongside management of the change process might also determine the outcome of interventions too. We therefore 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 organizations. 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 organizations 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 scaleable 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. See https://whatworkswellbeing.org/.
5 Although this would also run counter to socio-technical systems principles, see e.g., Clegg CW (2000) Sociotechnical principles for system design. Applied Ergonomics 31: 463–477.
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, organizations 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 focussed 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 (Findlay, Lindsay, Mcquarrie, Pascoe-Deslauriers, Findlay and Smart, 2016a). The research objective focusses 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 (Findlay, Lindsay, Mcquarrie, Pascoe-Deslauriers, Findlay and Smart, 2016b).

Our FITwork project draws on the concept of workplace innovation to address the barriers/opportunities that exist in addressing job quality. The FITwork 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 small and medium-sized enterprises (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 FITwork tool has been deployed across managers and employees in over 50 organizations, 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 organizations, evaluate the relationships between job quality, fair work and workplace innovation and – where requested – support interventions aimed at new ways of working.

This presentation gave a brief outline of the process and substance of the FITwork project. On the former, it considered the building of a network; multi-partner investment; the development of collaborative working; and developing complementary public supports. On the latter, it outlined our direct engagement with employers and employees, the emerging research data and other outcomes at workplace level. It addressed 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 The Innovating Works/FITwork research team is: Patricia Findlay, Colin Lindsay, Jo McQuarrie, Rachelle Pascoe-Deslauriers, Jeanette Findlay and Alison Smart (Universities of Strathclyde and Glasgow).
Being there (or not): Early Tavistock research on work accidents in understanding the importance of job quality

Nick Turner, University of Calgary

I examined 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 and Trist, 1953, 1955) and other places years later (e.g., Trist et al., 1963; Goodman and Garber, 1988). I described 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

We discussed three challenges of creating and demonstrating impact while conducting research in organizations, using our programme of study on purposeful leadership to illustrate our points. We identified timing, research focus, and our role as academics versus consultants as tensions that we acknowledge and balance to meet the needs of funding bodies, organizations, fellow academics, and ourselves. Upon consideration of the discussion that ensued after our presentation, we reflected more on our role in the impact process as researchers – are we consultants, academics, or is it possible to be both? How should we deal with challenges that arise from findings that are unwanted by organizations (i.e. finding that leadership is uninspiring), or that might compromise some individuals (i.e. finding that a particular service is failing)? There are clearly no right or wrong answers to the ethical dilemmas that arise in working with organizations and funding bodies on research. Yet conversations that illuminate these dilemmas encourage a more thoughtful management of them.

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Amanda Shantz https://www.tcd.ie/business/people/shantza/

“Impact” seems to be the new buzzword for management and organizational 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 organizations. Pressure to generate impact also arises from the organizations 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 organizational 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 organizations 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 organizations who hold the assumption that ‘what is good for the organization 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 organizations, 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 organizational 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 organizations 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 organizations 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 organizations, 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
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The Centre for Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship (CREME): A vehicle for engaged scholarship
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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. 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 offered 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 (Ram et al., 2007).

First, 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., 2004). 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).

Second, 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
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.

Reflections following the presentation and discussion

As we progressed through the event and into this final presentation in the sequence, much of the discussion moved on from the can and should questions in the programme title to consider how social scientists might apply their...
insights to make a difference and promote meaningful change through engaged scholarship. The practical challenges associated with filling out the detail of applied work attracted significant attention, with calls for greater clarity about the nature of safe and valued contributions and the difficulties of developing collective capacities in this area. The final presentation concentrated on issues around the rebalancing of scholarship, recognising obstacles and constraints yet claiming space for a more engaged humanizing activism. While the difficulties posed by unreflectively aligning with managers and workers was acknowledged (considering the impact of insular, sectional and divisive behaviour, for example), attention focused on the limiting effects of managerialism on academic work and the importance of securing quality improvements here as elsewhere. As other contributors also recognized, the performance preoccupations and anxieties of academic managers have had a narrowing effect on scholarship. The views of relevance and impact that find favour with university managers are not exactly conducive to a humanising applied research agenda, prioritising rapid publication in dominant yet conservative journals, for instance, and denying time for practitioner contact that aims to challenge conventional understandings and ingrained forms of debilitating or oppressive work organization. Recalling earlier influential arguments from Tom Burns and John Eldridge on how value positions enliven scholarship, the presentation and subsequent discussion considered possible means of counteracting the effects of academic managerialism and creating protected spaces to advance an alternative humanizing academic practice.

Drawing on John Kelly’s mobilization theory, and relating this to insights from Nordic experience, feminist research and supportive networks in earlier presentations, options for mutual learning, mentoring and capacity building were discussed. By this stage, participants were looking inwards to academic work processes and capabilities as well as outwards to practitioner initiatives and patterns of engagement. The importance of strengthening academic alliances for advocacy, lobbying and mutual support was stressed, along with the need to illuminate choices and identify collaborative opportunities that might help like-minded colleagues to feel comfortable advancing this agenda. There were calls for further contact and additional networking to share insights and experience on how to sustain and defend this sort of approach, and to report it for advantage through the managerialist appraisal and reporting processes by which academics are evaluated as well.

Some concerns were expressed about the workload pressures that might follow from all of this. Coping with another level of principled work certainly presents potential problems in terms of reasonable workload, and possibly also health and wellbeing, especially when coupled with the ongoing effects of academic labour intensification. This underlined the importance of connecting academic work and management to the wider debates on quality jobs and transformative interventions. The unpalatable pressures on researchers and restrictions now placed on the terms and conditions of younger lecturers merit attention, and indeed inclusion, in our collective work improvement projects. Resilience and sustainability become key themes for applied projects and the humanizing work of academic communities. It would be naïve to debate possibilities without grounding these in a realistic appreciation of the conditions for activism among academics themselves, although collective developments and supportive networking signal at least some potential to share the load and lift the spirits. There are also rich traditions of applied scholarship on the self-empowering and self-transforming activism of hard-pressed work and professional groups to draw upon, including the early Human Relations contributions of Trist and Bamforth and research on ‘natural work groups’.

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