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

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

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 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’.1 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).

This workshop, part of the 70th anniversary celebrations of Human Relations and the Tavistock Institute, 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.tavinstitute.org.

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

Contributions around other aspects of the social relations of work are also encouraged.

1 A review of the impact cases submitted to the Business and Management Sub-Panel reveals a substantial number on topics relevant to the journal, such as public policy on employment and the practices of key actors such as trade unions. A smaller number looked directly at topics such as employee commitment and engagement within organizations and the role of research in promoting them; at least 12 very specific case studies of this kind can be identified.
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?

Format

There will four short (15 minute) presentations by experts in the field, taking specific examples to address some of the above questions. There will be six short presentations from other participants on different aspects of work. There will be space for questions and discussion, leading up to a concluding round table of experts.

10.00–12.30: Presentations from 4 invited experts [15 minutes + 15 minutes of questions each]:

**Tuomo Alasoini (Chief Adviser, TEKES, Finland)** on Nordic models of workplace change and the workforce development programmes.

**Prof. Anne-marie Greene (De Montfort University)** on the impact of feminism on working life.

**Prof. David Guest (King’s College, London)** on the Quality of Work Life movement.

**Prof. Ewart Keep (Oxford University)** on skills and understanding of the demand for and utilization of skills.

Wider reflections and implications [30 minutes].

13.15–15.15: Six short presentations from participants on different aspects of work [10 mins + 10 mins questions each].

15.45–16.15: **Prof. William Brown (University of Cambridge)** commentary on overall themes.

16.15–17.00: Roundtable discussion and conclusions.

Who should attend?

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.

To book your place, please contact the journal’s Managing Editor, Claire Castle, at c.castle@tavinstute.org, no later than 5 September.

Outputs

The purpose is to generate a state-of-the art assessment of the difficult issue of linking research to practice. The aim is mainly to discuss from an academic point of view the challenges and possibilities of ‘making a difference’. It is not to provide a set of recipes for ‘how to do it’, though it may act to clear some ground around this issue and to ask a better class of questions about it.

Written presentations, revised as appropriate in light of the discussion, will be posted on our web site together with a summary of the round table discussion. Our Social Media editor will use appropriate channels to develop a conversation about the workshop, ahead of it, during it, and after it.

Depending on the depth and weight of the presentations, it may be feasible to produce a short edited collection of essays.