The case for reinvigorating quality of working life research

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Abstract
The quality of working life became an important topic in the 1960s and 1970s, helping to stimulate an early approach to evidence-based policy advocacy drawing on interdisciplinary research by social scientists. Over the years it fell out of the limelight but much relevant, albeit fragmented, research has continued. We present a case for rekindling an integrated and normative approach to quality of working life research as one means of promoting workers' well-being and emancipation. We outline an updated classification of the characteristics of quality of working life and a related analytic framework. We illustrate how research and practice will benefit from following this renewed quality of working life framework, using work design as an example. Concluding, we aim to stimulate debate on the necessity and benefits of rebuilding a quality of working life agenda for marrying academic rigour and practical relevance in order to support interventions aimed at fostering worker emancipation and well-being.

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Introduction

Promoting the quality of working life (QWL) is a social and political cause that has sprung from the development of democratic societies and establishment of basic human rights. The realization of this cause has had a varied history tightly linked to changes in the global economic, political and societal landscapes. In western industrialized countries some headway was made in the mid-20th century with legislation on health and safety at work, restrictions of working hours, and rest periods and holidays. In the 1960s and 1970s, QWL initiatives were extended to include greater self-determination of workers, provision of more meaningful work and equal opportunities at work, reflecting an economic and political climate that encouraged such initiatives to be taken up in what has been called the QWL movement. Major programmes on industrial democracy, especially in the Scandinavian countries, attracted much attention from social scientists, industrial leaders and politicians alike (Davis and Cherns, 1975).

Since the 1980s, research into practices related to QWL has continued, however without the binding force of the earlier QWL movement. Our core argument in this article is that it is time, once again, to focus research around an integrative approach to QWL, which we define as a coherent set of research-informed policies and practices that aim to enhance workers' emancipation and well-being. There are several reasons for this. First, we share the widespread concerns about the challenges to workers' well-being presented by contemporary developments in work and in society more broadly and argue that an integrated approach to QWL can help to address these concerns. Allied to this, we support calls to promote workers' emancipation and believe that these calls can gain force by focusing action around improvements in QWL. Second, QWL is a concept that has positive connotations that can win endorsement from major stakeholders, as has the likely outcome of enhanced worker well-being. Third, QWL has the potential to integrate a variety of bodies of contemporary research and related policy that have implications for workers' well-being. Brewer (2013) outlines the case for a 'new public social science', suggesting that its ethical commitments make it 'normative and partisan' (Brewer, 2013: 201), and we believe that this perspective should pervade research on QWL.

We will make and substantiate five claims in this essay: (1) the initial QWL movement of the 1960 and 1970s offers an early model for evidence-based policy-making and managerial practice resulting from interdisciplinary social science research that provides useful lessons for contemporary practice; (2) contemporary developments in work and in society more broadly justify a renewed focus on QWL; (3) recent research relevant to QWL has been conducted with increasingly narrow disciplinary foci and overly optimistic assumptions regarding the compatibility of individual and organizational interests, which has limited its policy impact. Researchers need to address the challenge of competing perspectives in this regard; (4) a revised list of QWL criteria and an associated analytic framework, that take into consideration both relevant developments in society and advances in research can serve as a basis for a renewed QWL research agenda; (5) QWL researchers need to (re)learn how to create policy impact by working to an interdisciplinary, stakeholder-focused and intervention-oriented research agenda. This kind of QWL research agenda should benefit evidence-based policy-making and interventions in organizations, but also academic research itself by rebalancing its rigour and relevance. We will

conclude with some remarks on where we hope a discussion provoked by this essay might lead us as a scientific community concerned with improving QWL.

The original quality of working life movement as a model for evidence-based policy-making and managerial practice

Studs Terkel (1974), an acute observer of working life, described work in the mid-20th century as often nasty and brutish. But as he and many others had argued, it did not have to be this way. In a context where the rhetoric of radical Marxist and post Marxist-inspired critiques often dominated, one of the more effective approaches to workplace change in the second half of the 20th century was the 'quality of working life movement'. It emerged initially in the late 1960s, capturing the optimistic spirit of the times. We use the term 'movement' because it brought together a number of research streams and socio-political perspectives within a general normative focus on ways of improving working lives. It had some success in influencing policy at the national and international levels as well as managerial practice in organizations, mainly in Europe and North America. The QWL movement had two distinctive features. First, it gave primacy to improving the well-being of workers rather than enhancing organizational performance, thereby making a strong normative claim about QWL as a legitimate goal in its own right. Second, it was firmly based in interdisciplinary research undertaken by social scientists to support evidence-based policy and managerial practice (Pawson, 2006; Rousseau, 2012).

Walton, a leading academic in the field, identified eight 'conceptual categories' describing the core characteristics of QWL. These were: adequate and fair compensation; a safe and healthy working environment; development of human capacities; growth and security; social integration; constitutionalism; consideration of the total life space; and social relevance (Walton, 1973, 1974). Social science research was conducted to support national and organization-level interventions in these areas (see Davis and Cherns, 1975; O'Toole, 1973; O'Toole and Lawler, 2006). In the wake of this research, new legislation was introduced in a number of countries, foremost to promote health and safety at work and equal opportunities for all workers. Furthermore, several countries in Europe as well as the USA and Canada set up organizations such as the Ontario Quality of Working Life Centre in Canada, the Agence Nationale pour l'Amelioration des Conditions de Travail in France and the Work Research Unit in the UK to develop and improve QWL through changing managerial practice, building on the early Scandinavian examples such as the Norwegian Work Research Institute.

In Table 1, some characteristics of the original QWL research are summarized. This research was built on a clear normative orientation with priority given to relevance over rigour and an interdisciplinary approach to studying and changing work organization at meso and macro-levels of analysis. The overall social impetus was to foster collective emancipation with a corresponding emphasis on collective agreements as a means for improving working conditions. QWL research and policy initially prospered within a generally favourable economic and political environment. As economic circumstances changed in the 1980s, interest in QWL as a coherent approach to improvements at work waned. Our core argument is that it is time to renew interest in such an approach.

Table 1. Changing frames for quality of working life (QWL) research.

	Original QWL movement	QWL research from the 90s to today	Proposed future QWL research
Orientation towards practice	Normative; evidence-based intervention	Creating an evidence base for practice	Normative; creating an evidence base for practice and evidence-based interventions
Research focus	Relevance	Rigour	Relevance and rigour
Scientific approach	Interdisciplinary	Disciplinary	Interdisciplinary
Level of analysis	Meso to macro	Micro to meso	Multi-level
Promoted employment relations	Collective agreements	Individual agreements	Combining collective and individual focus
Political and economic environment	Favourable towards QWL	Unfavourable towards QWL	Unfavourable towards QWL
Social impetus	Emphasis on collective emancipation as a route to societal prosperity	Individual proactivity for personal emancipation	Emphasis on individual and collective paths to emancipation

Reasons for a renewed focus on integrative and intervention-oriented quality of working life research

First and foremost, while at least in developed countries the QWL overall has improved over the last 50 years, several of Walton's criteria remain unfulfilled for large swathes of the workforce. This is evidenced in the marginalization of growing numbers of workers through unemployment or precarious employment and increasing evidence of stress-related mental health problems that employment insecurity causes (De Witte et al., 2016). There is a strong need to remedy the neglect of workers' interests brought about by the changing economic and geo-political context that has led governments to focus on economic priorities at the expense of worker well-being (Thornley et al., 2010) or to chip away at workers' rights and representation (Currie and Teague, 2016). Even in the Scandinavian countries political interest in QWL-related initiatives is waning (Abrahamsson and Johansson, 2013; Hakanta, 2014). Revitalizing QWL concerns has also become more urgent but also challenging owing to the growing power of international corporations and the declining capacity of national governments and organized labour to control the movement of capital and jobs across countries. The changing balance of power between capital and labour has weakened social partnership as a significant source of pressure (Thompson, 2013) and helped to enhance inequality (Felstead et al., 2015; Picketty, 2014).

Alongside the declining union influence there is an increasing emphasis on personal agency in political as well as research agendas. A case in point are the idiosyncratic deals or 'i-deals' (Rousseau, 2005), which entail bargaining between individual workers and their employer for special employment conditions usually bypassing any need for union involvement. With the decline of trade unions and other forms of collective organization, QWL research has an important role to play in devising new ways for effectively representing and pursuing workers' interests in the future. Placing all the responsibility on the individual workers themselves by proclaiming that emancipation is a matter of self-direction and proactivity is not the answer (Parker, 2014).

A second reason to promote a new QWL research agenda is concern about the changing nature of work and debates about the quality of jobs (Findlay et al., 2013). In advanced industrial countries, blue-collar factory work has largely been replaced by white collar service, administrative, technical and knowledge work, without necessarily resulting in higher quality jobs (for data on the USA and the UK see Okay-Somerville and Scholarios, 2013; Vidal, 2013). Furthermore, low quality jobs are more likely to be associated with precarious forms of employment (Inanc, 2015). Accompanying this, technology has facilitated an intensification of work. Indeed, UK evidence reveals that in recent years, across the working population as a whole, demands at work have increased while individual control has declined (Felstead et al., 2015), an established recipe for reduced physical and psychological well-being (Karasek, 1979). Over the years, stress and other 'invisible' illnesses have become the major cause of absence from work. All social partners have become concerned about the costs of this to individuals, to organizations and to society, with Europe-wide research evidence pointing to a clear association between work-related stress and coronary heart disease (Kivimaki et al., 2012). Another feature of contemporary work, particularly as service work becomes ever more dominant is that it requires flexible arrangements to cover 24/7 availability of services, resulting in risks of exploitation, of constantly fluctuating work patterns and of a threat to work–life balance (see e.g. Sonnentag and Binnewies, 2013). This is judged to be a particular risk to workers on temporary or other forms of flexible contracts (Wilkin, 2013). At the same time there is a growing belief that – at least in the more advanced economies – generational changes in workers' attitudes and values mean workers are becoming less tolerant of low quality working environments (Twenge et al., 2010). Work values and priorities are also likely to be influenced by improving education levels resulting in higher expectations about working life.

A third argument in favour of revitalizing QWL research is the growing evidence that mutual benefits to both organizations and their employees can be achieved without compromising the normative impetus of the original QWL movement. Large corporations are increasingly keen to brand themselves as good employers (Edwards, 2010). This is reflected in the willingness to engage in activities such as 'the 100 best companies to work for' (Dineen and Allen, 2016; Fulmer et al., 2003), which take into account a range of criteria that address QWL. At the same time initiatives concerning corporate social responsibility (CSR) have gained in importance. While much of the research has focused on the effects of CSR on firm performance (Hillman and Keim, 2001), there is also some evidence regarding positive effects on employees' work-related perceptions (Valentine and Fleischman, 2008). Additionally, the resource-based view of the firm that argues that employees provide the main source of competitive advantage (Wright et al., 2001) has increased the general interest in human capital by making a case at organizational and national levels for addressing ways of enhancing workers' experience of work – QWL – as a means for improving their contribution to the organization. These developments that speak to employers' vested interest in QWL connect to the long-standing debate on what Staw (1986) once termed 'the pursuit of the happy/productive worker' concerning the question of whether gains in QWL can sit alongside gains in organizational outcomes or at least require no added costs. One may argue that a clear normative stance – a hallmark of the early QWL movement – helps in setting a political agenda

aimed at supporting human values beyond their economic relevance. However, high-lighting economic advantages pragmatically reflects the realities of contemporary industrial life.

A final argument for reinvigorating QWL research rests on the changes in academic research. Academic life has shifted over the last 50 years to give greater prominence to publications in top-level journals that place a premium on high quality disciplinary the-ory and research, emphasizing academic rigour over policy relevance. Furthermore, many top journals emphasize quantitative research and are reluctant to publish research on policy evaluation or evaluation of change programmes. At the same time, the volume of research has grown dramatically and areas of specialism have tended to become ever narrower, with calls for integrative multi-level research (e.g. Mathieu and Chen, 2011; Rousseau, 2011) mostly unheeded. This is reflected in what has happened to research on QWL. Large amounts of research have continued to be published but much of this research has been more narrowly focused (see Table 1), in terms of topics and levels of analysis addressed, with less cross-disciplinary collaboration, and an emphasis on aca-demic rigour at the expense of policy relevance and direct intervention (see e.g. Ackers, 2006). Moreover, as a result of the changing research landscapes, reflected for example in the growth of Business Schools, many academics turned their attention away from researching normatively anchored and employee-centred emancipatory issues. Instead, they began to focus on building evidence for management practices aimed at job and organizational performance and related employee behaviour and attitudes, such as organ-izational citizenship behaviour (Organ, 1988) and organizational commitment (Mowday et al., 1982). Overall, while the normative and intervention-oriented impetus and the integrative force of the original QWL movement have diminished, research on topics related to QWL has grown considerably. But research specialization has also increased, rendering integration of what has become a vast body of research into a coherent frame-work much more difficult.

Alongside these concerns, there is an increasing awareness of the widening gap between academia and practice that these changes have effected, evidenced by debates in major management journals (e.g. Fincham and Clark, 2009; Hodgkinson, 2001; Rynes et al., 2001; Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006). Counter measures have been devised, for instance, by promoting evidence-based policy and practice (Pawson, 2006; Rousseau, 2012), although this is not without its critics (Morrell and Learmonth, 2015), or by argu-ing that critical realism can help to bridge the research/relevance gap (Hodgkinson and Starkey, 2011). A rather draconian approach to the promotion of policy relevance of academic research has been adopted in the UK where 20% of the evaluation of univer-sity research excellence, which provides an important basis for research funding and status in universities, is currently devoted to 'impact', generally interpreted to mean policy impact at organizational or national level. We argue that a renewed QWL research agenda can create the normative and integrative force that is needed to marry relevance and rigour, building on the substantial theoretical and methodological advances since the early QWL studies. Our proposed new QWL research agenda helps to highlight the potential for mutual gains whereby successful promotion of QWL can also lead to improvements in organizational performance (Tsui et al., 1997) while at the same time acknowledging debates within the broader social sciences, where issues of power and

workers' emancipation, and the institutions that shape these, continue to be major topics (Delbridge, 2014; Edwards, 2015a).

In making this claim for QWL, we are conscious that those viewing QWL from within labour process theory (Braverman, 1974) would argue that practical QWL initiatives are likely to be working more to a managerial agenda aimed at performance improvement and employee incorporation. It is important to be aware of this risk and we outline processes to guard against it. At the same time, the arguments we have outlined support our advocacy of a renewed focus on QWL with its centering around action with respect to research, policy and practice.

To summarize, we suggest that promotion of QWL needs to remain a high priority of social science research based on a framework that combines the best features of the original QWL movement and of contemporary research (see Table 1). Thus, it needs to again combine a normative policy and intervention orientation with an evidence-based empirical focus; it needs to combine relevance with rigour; and it needs to adopt an interdisciplinary approach and embrace multi-level perspectives. Finally, it needs to combine the initial QWL focus on collective emancipation as a route to societal improvements with the more recent focus on individual proactivity for individual emancipation, thereby fostering the development of new means of shaping employment relations in a global political and economic environment that remains generally unfavourable towards QWL.

A renewed quality of working life framework

We have argued that the core objectives behind the original QWL movement are still valid today. As a consequence, we believe that Walton's original list of criteria from the 1970s, remains relevant. However, a number of important changes have occurred since the original list was developed. At that time, the prevailing focus was on the manufacturing sector. By 2016 it is the service sector that dominates employment in all advanced industrial countries and many service jobs provide greater autonomy and scope for individual initiative as well as opportunities for various forms of flexible working enabled by information and communication technologies. As workplaces have become more dispersed, collective organization has become more difficult and individuals are increasingly required to take decisions on their own. To reflect these changes, we propose to extend the original classification of dimensions of QWL by adding two further criteria. We label these criteria *Individual proactivity* and *Flexible working*. *Individual proactivity* highlights the desire for and benefits of the exercise of personal initiative (Parker et al., 2010), implying the requirement for organizations to provide employees with a sufficient degree of control over activities that are central to their well-being, without transferring all responsibility for their situation at work to them. *Flexible working* covers arrangements that allow scope for some choice over when and where to work. While the primary focus of these and other criteria within our QWL framework is on workers' well-being, from a practice perspective it is desirable to consider the interests of both individual and organization to maximize mutual benefits. The extended classification of criteria to guide QWL activities is listed in Table 2.

A potential problem with this classification, and one reflected in the development of related academic research, is that it easily lends itself to a fragmented perspective by

Table 2. A revised list of quality of working life criteria (adapted from Walton, 1973, 1974).

Criterion	Description
Adequate and fair compensation	Pay meeting socially determined minimum and fair standards; equal pay for equivalent work
Safe and healthy environment	Promotion of healthy work and work environment
Development of human capacities	Jobs that promote skill development, decision-latitude and task identity
Growth and security	Jobs that promote employability and opportunities for personal development
Social integration	Positive organizational climate and psychological safety; accommodating diversity
Constitutionalism	Respect for and protection of employees' rights and mechanisms for employee representation
Consideration of the total life space	Adequate concern for balancing demands from different life domains
Social relevance	Adherence to socially responsible practices in the organization
Individual proactivity*	Support for personal initiative without undue transfer of employment risks to the employee
Flexible working*	Flexible working schemes to bridge organizational and employee interests

Note: *indicates new criteria not included in Walton's original list.

focusing on individual criteria. Yet a coherent approach to QWL requires integration both across criteria and across levels of analysis. In Figure 1, we outline an integrative framework that incorporates all criteria in the classification. At its heart (level 1) is the individual worker and their job, reflected in *Individual proactivity* and the *Development of human capacities*, implying a focus on job content, decision-latitude and employee development. In the first band around this core (level 2), reflecting the organizational context of work, we locate organizational HRM policy-related criteria including *Adequate and fair compensation*, *Safe and healthy working environment*, and *Social integration.* The outer band (level 3) covers issues related to the world outside work including *Consideration of the total life space*, *Social relevance* and *Flexible working*, although the latter potentially cuts across all three levels. The boundaries between the different levels of analysis are likely to vary in strength and there is inevitably some overlap. Specifically, *Growth and security* is placed at the boundary of level 1 and 2 and *Constitutionalism*, that is the protection and promotion of employees' rights and mechanisms for representation, sits between levels 2 and 3. Outside the sphere of QWL we locate national and international institutional and legislative arrangements and the wider economic and financial systems that facilitate, prescribe and also inhibit QWL activities.

   The updated and reconfigured approach to QWL we propose is clearly not the only possible framework to promote QWL. We look forward to ensuing discussion that will challenge our claim that the suggested conceptualization of QWL is a suitable framework to promote normatively anchored, rigorous and relevant research that takes on the
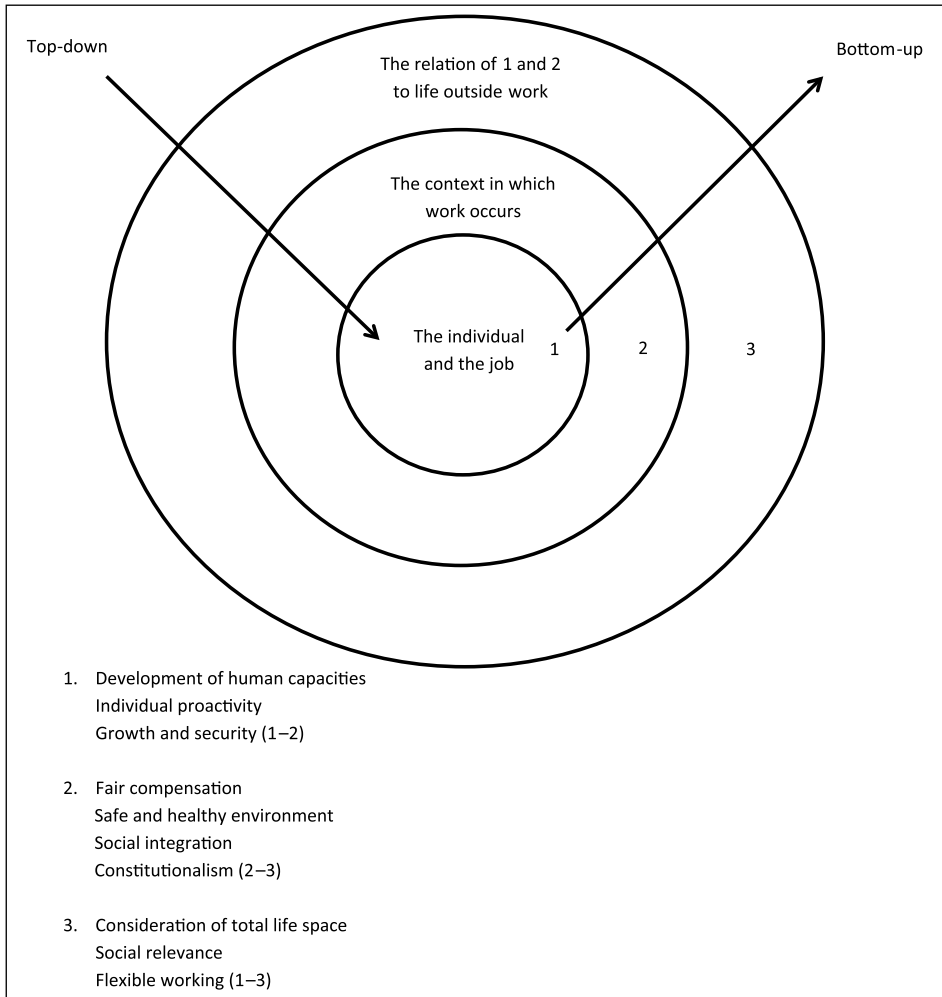
Figure 1. An integrated framework for future quality of working life research.

integral and multi-level perspective required to answer crucial questions concerning the balance between well-being and organizational outcomes, individual and collective action, and top-down and bottom-up QWL initiatives (see Table 1). Moreover, while we would argue that the QWL dimensions we have outlined have a universal character, QWL is also a subjective concept relating to contextualized expectations and experiences. We recognize that it will be a major challenge to develop international comparative measures of job quality (Findlay et al., 2013) and of QWL more broadly, which take into consideration needs and interests stemming from living in different social, political and economic contexts (Erez, 2010) and from fundamental differences in the meaning of work itself (Rosso et al., 2010). Finally, the vital question remains whether high QWL is

inherently restricted to certain contexts and occupations. We see much scope for improvements in a wide range of settings and jobs, which we will expand upon in the following section, using work design as an example.

Applying the updated quality of working life framework: The example of work design

To substantiate our final claim that rigour and relevance of QWL-related research and its impact on policy and practice can be improved by utilizing our proposed analytic framework, we first discuss different perspectives on work design research and policy. Work design, which is centrally concerned with levels of autonomy and control within organizations, has always been at the heart of debates on QWL. It has been a focus of research and writing from a variety of perspectives that need to be taken into account in considering future QWL research and as such it has also provided a major long-term focus of competing academic discourses. For example, a critical management perspective views work design as largely determined top down by management and sees Taylorism and its variants as a classic representation of this (Braverman, 1974). Alternative approaches, including the human relations movement and the early QWL movement, are characterized as variations on systems of management control. For example, a standard critique of QWL and associated HRM approaches to work design is that management utilizes it as a means of enhancing efficiency by moving from external management control to internally driven 'responsible autonomy' allied to human resource policies and practices designed to enhance competence, motivation and commitment (Legge, 2005). This indicates the need to take fully into account management motives in any action to promote QWL through work redesign.

Management control of work design has been viewed from a somewhat different perspective by industrial relations specialists who have focused on conflict over control of work and rewards reflected in concern about the 'frontier of control' (Batstone, 1988; Goodrich, 1920) or 'contested terrain' (Edwards, 1980). A core assumption is that workers value control over their work, an assumption that is reflected in debates about participation and more specifically, the distinction between representative and direct participation, where the latter focuses on work design to permit worker or team control over decision-making (Heller et al., 1998). The work of industrial sociologists is closely associated with this perspective and over the years they have reported an impressive body of work on changes in job content based on both detailed case studies and larger surveys. For example, research reported by Gallie (2013) using the Skills and Employment Survey reveals that direct participation has a clear positive association with higher job quality, skill use, job satisfaction and psychological well-being. Furthermore, it is not associated with any diminution in the trade union presence in a workplace. The most recent of the regular UK Workplace Employment Relations Surveys reveals a clear association between subjective worker experience of autonomy and standard indicators of worker well-being (Van Wanrooy et al., 2013). Survey findings such as these offer one kind of potential counter to the critical management stance. The industrial relations perspective highlights the importance of considering all parties involved in any initiatives to redesign work.

The desire for autonomy and the benefits of work designed to provide autonomy are also central to a third perspective that is dominated by specialists in organizational behaviour who also give prominence to worker well-being as an important outcome (Parker, 2014). Within this perspective, there are a variety of research streams that offer scope to advance the role of work design as a central integrative feature of QWL research. For example, Clegg and Spencer (2007) have argued for a more dynamic approach to work design by complementing expert-led job design with explicitly encouraging job crafting by the job-holders themselves (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001) and by conceptualizing work design as an on-going process tied to career development. Furthermore, the scope of work has been enlarged by studying the interaction between paid and unpaid work in research on volunteering (Rodell et al., 2016), showing, for instance, that work design criteria are also relevant for the design of volunteering activities (Pajo and Lee, 2011) and that there may be compensatory effects between paid and unpaid work (Rodell, 2013).

What writing and research within these perspectives illustrates is that the scope of work design is potentially extensive and is best considered at a variety of levels. At the organizational level, there may be a more or less explicit policy or even philosophy (Hill, 1971) concerning work design, the role of relevant stakeholders and who takes decisions about work design. Indeed, there is a potential research agenda concerning who actually determines the design of jobs. Research at the team level on semi-autonomous work groups highlights the scope for decisions about allocation of roles within teams while it is the individual level that has been addressed in much of the more recent research on novel approaches to work design (see e.g. Grant et al., 2010).

A focus on QWL, with its emphasis on a role for stakeholders, can help to address the concern that organizations have become increasingly interested in HR practices designed to enhance performance while neglecting employee well-being (Beer et al., 2015). The claim about such practices is that they enhance human capital, employee motivation and opportunity to contribute (Jiang et al., 2012). But in doing so, they treat workers as means to an end and neglect many of the HR practices more likely to enhance employee well-being and promote QWL (Clinton and Van Veldhoven, 2013).

Advocacy of work design as a central focus of a reinvigorated QWL programme of research will therefore need to carefully consider the wider context, often emphasized by those adopting a political economy perspective (see e.g. Godard, 2004) that reflects the changing pressures on both management and employees. This should include, for example, consideration of competitive pressures in increasingly international markets, pressures to enhance productivity and trends towards financialization of the economy (Thompson, 2013). The challenge for a reinvigorated QWL research approach to work design is to adopt a framework that takes explicit account of the broader context that is shaping organizational life, recognizes the various ways in which management exercises control or permits employee autonomy and understands their motives for doing so, ensures employee representation in the work design process in ways that support personal agency without passing all responsibility to the employees themselves, and recognizes the potential benefits of autonomy at work in promoting employee well-being.

We recognize that this is a highly ambitious aim, particularly in the face of competing pressures represented, for instance, by financialization on the one hand and millennials

in the workforce with their concern about the environment and desire for autonomy on the other. It is possible to conceive of ideal settings where work design is aligned with many of the QWL criteria. The work of professionals comes to mind first, such as technical specialists or medical doctors, where much scope for individual proactivity and personal growth and development is provided and a keen sense of calling and social relevance is prevalent. However, there is another side to this picture also with, for instance, hospital doctors being under considerable pressure in challenging working conditions, carrying excessive workloads and long hours that contribute to a poor work-life balance.

By contrast, high QWL is imaginable in many less skilled jobs as well. In UK national surveys of job satisfaction, hairdressers have appeared among the most satisfied. This reflects the content of the work, including its high level of social interaction and continuing relationships with customers as well as the scope for creativity and immediate feedback. In fact, right from the early days of the QWL movement in Scandinavia, less skilled work was the focus of work design improvements, as in the auto industry by introducing semi-autonomous work groups. Call centres are usually viewed as today's service sector equivalent of traditional Taylorism, yet Batt (2002) has shown how there is considerable choice over their organization and that by providing employees with elements of QWL including greater autonomy, there can be benefits for both employees and employers. Call centre work has also been found to be amenable to job crafting and proactive behaviour, where it is the employees who actively enrich their work (McClelland et al., 2014). Job crafting can also extend to blue-collar work as Tims et al. (2013) have demonstrated in their longitudinal study of job crafting and its link to employee well-being in a chemical plant. Harley et al. (2007), in their sample of both high and low skill health care and personal care workers, illustrate yet again that good QWL is not limited to highly educated workers and also provide an example of the importance of concurrently considering QWL criteria at the different levels of our framework. They contrast their findings with those of Berg and Frost (2005) with a somewhat similar US sample but much poorer QWL and cite the high level of collective union representation – what we have defined as the criterion of constitutionalism – in their Australian sample as a key differentiating factor.

In short, a high QWL can potentially be found in a wide variety of settings, the key being the design of the job and the work environment. There is invariably scope for choice about these matters. Our concern is that the range of environments and influences in which QWL is promoted or submerged need to be better understood and more extensively researched. The framework we have presented offers an analytic context in which to do this.

Researching quality of working life in the contemporary context

We acknowledge that in the current university research climate, improving the quality of research on QWL presents a significant challenge. At the same time, we believe the case for reinvigorating QWL research is a strong one. In what follows, we outline four approaches that we believe, in combination, have the potential to produce useful outcomes.

The first approach involves the collection of large-scale information about the state of QWL within the working population. Surveys conducted at national and international level, particularly if they are regularly repeated, provide valuable information about trends in each of the core areas of QWL. Some such surveys already exist (see e.g. Green et al., 2013; Holman, 2013). We return again to the UK Skills and Employment Survey as a useful example. It collects information from a large sample of workers on several features of QWL and does so on repeated occasions. It reveals that while there is evidence of improvements on some dimensions of QWL such as working conditions and skill levels, there has been a decline in job autonomy alongside rising work intensity (Felstead et al., 2015). This type of analysis emphasizes the importance of adopting an integrated analytic framework to explore QWL developments. A second advantage illustrated by the same survey is the possibility of conducting finely grained analyses of specific features of QWL. For example, analysis of employment flexibility reveals that temporary work can usefully be disaggregated since those on fixed-term contracts, often quite long-term, generally report a high QWL, while those in agency and other types of temporary work, usually of a short-term nature, report much poorer objective QWL conditions (Inanc, 2015). Such surveys therefore provide a valuable backdrop to national and organizational policy on QWL and provide a context for more local studies.

A second feature of research to improve QWL concerns the use of, or monitoring of interventions. We believe academic researchers need to shift their focus from observation, measurement and evaluation to more active interventions to promote QWL. Rigorous and ecologically valid research on QWL should entail what Walton (2014) has described as 'wise interventions', that is, interventions that address well-understood specific psychological processes and while often being brief themselves, help 'to improve people's outcomes in diverse circumstances and long into the future' (Walton, 2014: 74). The fact that QWL has not been addressed much in recent campaigns fuelled by 'behavioral insights' (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008) makes promotion of powerful QWL interventions an even more important endeavour, but only if their likely effects at the individual and collective level are carefully considered and well understood. Also, we need to recognize that in the work context it is rare to find ethically acceptable opportunities for experimentation. Grasping those opportunities is an important skill, exemplified for instance in some of the high quality research on job design (see e.g. Wall et al., 1986) and research on changes in work-life balance (see e.g. Kossek, 2016).

The third factor to consider in developing research on QWL is the need to give careful consideration to who are the clients of research (Edwards, 2015b) and the importance of maintaining a concern for emancipation and social partnership. In this context, emancipation means, inter alia, involving workers in changes likely to affect them and raising their awareness of the implications of the changes. This brings up challenging questions about the role of researchers as change agents and the types of data that can be collected in action research (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003). Special skills are required for negotiating the conditions for intervention and research and there has to be a willingness to withdraw if the necessary ethically sound conditions are not met.

The final feature required for contemporary research on QWL is an improvement in our capacity to work in interdisciplinary teams to undertake action research. This includes consideration of the kind of analytic frameworks initially adopted by socio-technical

systems researchers at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (Trist and Bamforth, 1951) that provided the platform for some of the early QWL interventions reported, for example, by Emery and Thorsrud (1976). Too little current university-based research incorporates carefully developed and evaluated change of QWL within an interdisciplinary approach. There is scope to learn from interventions in other disciplines such as healthcare and education where such research is more common. One example of cross-disciplinary learning and cooperation is ReflecT, a Dutch university-based organization that focuses on research and practice concerning flexicurity, employability and social cohesion (ReflecT, 2011).

An important factor in the success of any micro-level workplace intervention will be the need to bear in mind the range of dimensions that comprise QWL, to recognize their interdependences and to ensure that action on one or more dimensions of QWL does not compromise others. This also highlights the necessity to operate at the different levels of analysis implied in the analytic framework that we have outlined in this article. As a consequence, there is also likely to be scope for organization-level interventions, possibly through shifting the focus on human resource policy and practice to give greater primacy to practices likely to promote QWL. Doing so opens up the possibility of significant mutual gains.

Conclusion

The objective of this article has been to stimulate debate on the need for and the nature of a renewed agenda for QWL research. Our central argument has been two-fold: first, given the range of challenges to workers' well-being, an integrated approach to research and policy on QWL that can help to enhance well-being is needed; second, much relevant research evidence has been produced whose policy impact could be amplified through integration within an overarching QWL agenda. More specifically, we have argued that social scientists need to collaborate in interdisciplinary and multi-level research that seeks emancipation of workers and improves our knowledge of those contexts, policies and practices that enhance workers' well-being. Too much recent research has focused on managerial interests or adopted a micro-individual approach that fails to consider wider interests and contextual influences.

We have also argued that a QWL agenda – while providing an integrated policy focus that gives primacy to the promotion of workers' emancipation and well-being – should pragmatically accept the need to pursue mutual benefits for workers and management. Those adopting a critical management perspective might contend that hopes for improved QWL are naïve unless QWL initiatives predominantly serve the interests of management by promising a competitive advantage for the organization or are enforced by legislation. Even if there is an element of truth in this perspective, it is a recipe for inaction. Delbridge (2014), as a counter to traditional critical management studies, has asserted that social science needs to claim influence on policy and can do so by adopting a clear ethical and emancipatory stance. We follow his argument in our advocacy of research and practice around QWL. QWL is compatible with an explicitly pluralist perspective and, despite its prime focus on employee emancipation and well-being, should not shy away from pursuing mutual benefits for employees and employers where these can be identified. Edwards

(2015b) has posited that justification for interventions needs to take account of different interests. Sharing this view, we have argued that QWL interventions, at any level, are justified where it can be demonstrated that they are likely to be in workers' interests.

More broadly, Suddaby (2014) has postulated that normative theory and analysis has an important role to play in stimulating research and provoking debate. It is within this context that we present the case for reinvigorating QWL research as a means of promoting what Sen (2000) and Delbridge (2014) describe as the role of the social sciences in enhancing workers' emancipation. In recent years, many authors have lamented the lack of influence of research on organizational and institutional policy-making, accompanied by calls, for instance, to promote evidence-based management (Rousseau, 2012), to bridge the rigour-relevance gap (Hodgkinson and Rousseau, 2009), and to build relationships across the academic–practitioner divide (Bartunek, 2007). We suggest that a revived and updated focus on QWL could propel these efforts by aligning and advancing the vast body of extant research and by accentuating its policy relevance. More generally, we are encouraging researchers to adopt a more reflexive stance that incorporates explicit consideration of QWL and workers' interests in their research. This means stepping outside the narrow closed-system bounds of research on topics such as reward systems, flexible work arrangements or work redesign to consider wider contextual and open systems implications including distribution of power and institutional arrangements.

Effective promotion of QWL presents distinctive challenges stemming from the changing nature of academic research and the changes in the wider economic and political context in which QWL issues need to be addressed. We believe that these challenges can be met within the proposed approach. It is crucial, though, to keep in mind the fundamental question of how much QWL is and should be a matter of evidence or of ethics. The answer we as social scientists give to ourselves, to the practitioners we work with and to the wider society will shape the research emphasis on particular antecedents, processes, and outcomes of people's work.

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