

Skills, Job Control and the Quality of Work: The Evidence from Britain Geary Lecture 2012

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I INTRODUCTION

In the last decade and a half there has been a marked increase in the interest of European policymakers in the quality of work. In part this reflects the concern to give greater content to the notion of a social Europe, and in part it stems from a growing awareness that the cherished employment objectives of the European Union (in particular with respect to women and older workers) will be difficult to achieve unless jobs offer a degree of intrinsic interest and levels of work pressure that are compatible with psychological health. However, it is notable how little policy discussion draws on the growing evidence from empirical research. This paper aims to trace some of the principal developments in the research agenda and in substantive knowledge, drawing on a major programme of British empirical research over the last two decades. It focuses on two core aspects of work quality – skill on the one hand and job control on the other. These have been central to the debate about job quality since its earliest days. The next section outlines the evolving debate among researchers about underlying trends in the skill and control and the following section examines the emerging picture from the empirical evidence.

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II SKILL AND CONTROL: CONTRASTING VISIONS

Sociological research into the quality of work was dominated until the 1990s by two broad perspectives – one that emphasised the destructive force of modern capitalism and its tendency to undermine skills and the quality of work and the other that advocated a scenario of long-term skill upgrading and improvement in work conditions.

The birth of a serious pessimistic research tradition on work quality can be traced to France and in particular to the pioneering work of the great French sociologist Georges Friedmann, the founder of the discipline of “sociologie du travail” which for many decades was the dominant subdiscipline within French sociology as a whole. Friedmann was deeply influenced by the legacy of Marxian thinking about the evolution of work and he centered the problematic of the quality of work on the issues of skill and the capacity of employees to control decision making at work (Friedmann, 1946; Gremion and Piotet, 2004). His point of departure was that work is the major source of self-realisation and that if workers were deprived of the capacity for self-development through work they would be subject to objective alienation. He had trained as a machine tool apprentice in the early 1930s, and his image of good quality work was rooted in the traditional conception of the craftsman – where the job combined both the conception and execution of the work task. His overall conception of the dynamics of work quality was set out magisterially in his book *Problèmes humains du machinisme industriel*. The initial manuscript was destroyed by a mysterious fire in his Paris flat in 1942 and it was not until 1947 that it was rewritten and published in French, with an English translation emerging only in 1955 as *Industrial Society: The Emergence of the Human Problems of Automation*.

Friedmann shared the deeply pessimistic Marxian view of the long-term evolution of work processes in modern capitalism, which he saw as embodied in the managerial precepts of Frederick Winslow Taylor’s Scientific Management. The long-term trend, he argued, was for technology to simplify work tasks and eliminate the opportunities for workers to exercise creativity and initiative in their jobs. He launched his students on a major programme of ethnographic studies of the nature of work tasks in manufacturing – providing a detailed picture of the mind-numbing repetitiveness of work in the giant mass production factories that were then expanding across France (see Gremion and Piotet, 2004; Rose, 1987). The picture that emerged from this collective evidence was indeed one of the deskilling of manual work, the increased fragmentation of work tasks, the intensification of work through detailed timing of task activities and closer supervisory control of work performance.

This approach to the analysis of work quality reached Britain only some two decades later in 1974 with the publication of Harry Braverman's *Labour and Monopoly Capital* (Braverman, 1974). Much of Braverman's argument bears a strong resemblance to Friedmann's, although stripped of some of Friedmann's qualifications about potential mediators of the effects of the capitalist division of labour on employee's experiences of work. Friedmann, sadly, gets very few references in Braverman's four hundred page volume and even these are mostly confined to the footnotes. But there were also important ways in which Braverman extended the argument. In the two decades between the publication of their respective books, the long-term trends of change in the sectoral and occupational structure of the economy were already becoming apparent. The service sector had significantly expanded and the relative importance of the non-manual workforce had increased. It was at least plausible to argue that Friedmann's argument was applicable only to an ever diminishing sector of the workforce. Braverman countered this by arguing, with the support of exemplar evidence, that the underlying strategies of deskilling and reduction of employees' control were being progressively extended across all sectors of the workforce – manual and non-manual, manufacturing and services. Hence they could be conceived of as "... the general law of the capitalist division of labour" (p. 83). In its Bravermanesque version, "labour process theory" came to have a major influence over research in Britain (Crompton and Jones, 1984; Smith, 1987; Smith, 1994).

The major theoretical challenge to this general line of argument came from the group of researchers gathered around Clark Kerr (President of the University of California) in his vast post-war comparative research programme – the "Inter-University Study of Labour Problems in Economic Development". The programme brought together, over the period 1954 to 1961, a hundred researchers from 10 countries. The detailed finding reported in 29 books (including many of the great classics of the literature) and dozens of articles were brought together in a grand synthesis in the volume *Industrialism and Industrial Man* co-authored by Clark Kerr, John T. Dunlop, Frederick Harbison and C.A. Myers in 1960, which had no less an objective than refuting the Marxian theory of the capitalist development of work (Kerr *et al.*, 1960). The future of work in advanced industrial society it was argued was not towards increased degradation but towards the growth of higher and more specialised skills; it was not towards increased managerial control of the work process, but towards a greater say for employees both over their immediate jobs and in workplace decisions; it was not towards ever greater conflicts of interest between employers and employees, but towards the institutionalisation and joint regulation of industrial relations and greater consensus.

In broad terms Kerr and his colleagues attributed the shift to rising skills to the increasing sophistication of technology. Their optimistic vision of the future of work was to be reinforced by a number of more specialised studies focusing on the nature of technological change and its implications for work organisation. In the US Robert Blauner drew a bold picture of the evolution of technologies from the types of craft production so dear to the heart of Friedmann to the large mass production industries that culminated in assembly line production where work was subject to Taylorist and Fordist principles (Blauner, 1964). Up to this point the schema is very close to that of the neo-Marxists. The difference is that Blauner then argues that a new technological era was now dawning as a result of the rapid spread of automation. This reversed the trend towards an ever more detailed division of labour, increasing the skills and decision-making autonomy of employees. A rather similar literature emerged in Britain in the series of studies conducted by Joan Woodward and her colleagues (Woodward, 1958; Woodward, 1965; Woodward, 1970). With the increasing integration of task activities into the technology itself, they argued, there is greater freedom to design work organisation in a way that meets the needs of employees. Most crucially, the integration of the control system into the impersonal technical process removes the need for the type of tight supervision of employees' work that characterised mass production industry.

During the 1970s and 1980s the research scene remained fundamentally polarised between these two sharply contrasting visions of the evolution of work. Indeed, they continued to overshadow much of the debate in the 1990s and early 2000s, although under somewhat different labels. The neo-Marxian concern for the degradation of work became transformed into "flexibility theory" with its emphasis upon the growing polarisation between a core and a peripheral workforce (Atkinson, 1984; Atkinson, 1986; Hakim, 1987). Rather than positing a universal process of deskilling and declining job control, it was suggested that there were diverging trends in which a privileged "core" of employees benefited from mutually reinforcing advantages in terms of their employment conditions, while other employees were confined to a "periphery" where they experienced multiple disadvantage. Indeed, from the 1990s, this view of developments in the structure of employment was reinforced by arguments by some labour economists (Autor *et al.*, 2003; Goos and Manning, 2007). Rather than the picture of a general trend to higher skilled work implied by the argument of skill-biased technical change, they suggested that the growing prevalence of computer-based technologies led to a hollowing out of the middle of the employment structure and an expansion both of those in highly skilled and in non-skilled work.

The liberal theory of industrialism, with its emphasis on skill upgrading and greater employee influence, was also integrated into a number of successor theories. A significant change was in the conceptualisation of the primary motor of employment development. The initial emphasis on “industrial technology” turned into an emphasis on “theoretical knowledge” in theories of post-industrialism and on “information and communication technologies” in theories of the “information society” (Aoyama and Castells, 2002; Bell, 1974; Castells and Aoyama, 1994; Rodrigues, 2002). Another shift compared to the earlier liberal theories was a greater emphasis on the importance of quality in output (whether of products or services) in an increasingly competitive globalised economy and of high employee motivation as an essential condition of achieving such quality (Walton, 1985a; Walton, 1985b).

But, despite these modifications to the arguments, the broad divide in perspectives remained every bit as great and there were few suggestions as to how they might be bridged. There was, however, a slow but important shift in the availability of rigorous evidence that was to begin to clarify aspects of the debate. Throughout the period there was a growing accumulation of conflicting evidence from diverse case studies that appeared to offer some support for both perspectives. But the selective nature of the choice of “exemplar” cases and the rather loosely controlled nature of what then passed for qualitative research made it very difficult to assess whether investigators were doing more than cherry picking evidence that suited their prior convictions. There was also the evident problem that the isolated case study was a poor basis for making statements about trends. The general strategy adopted was to focus upon cases that were seen as representing in some way the future of where technological development was going. But in practice this proved rather difficult to predict. The heavy emphasis on the large scale assembly line production systems of the car factories was soon to feel curiously dated. It was increasingly evident that any progress in addressing these debates required good representative evidence over time.

Curiously, the initial lead in this direction had been taken in the USA where in the 1970s a series of quality of work life surveys had been launched (Quinn and Staines, 1979). But, despite the demonstrated richness of the analysis that these made possible, US quality of work surveys died a strange death in the Reagan years. In contrast, from the late 1970s there was an increased development of large-scale surveys in European countries that provided representative evidence of patterns and trends across the workforce as a whole. The Swedish Surveys on Living Conditions provided a range of important indicators from 1976; in Germany the Surveys on Educational Attainment and Careers (BIBB/IAB) were established from 1979; the French “Enquêtes Conditions de Travail” was launched in 1984; and the British Social

Change and Economic Life Initiative Surveys in 1985 created the basis for an over-time Skills Survey series. The first truly national survey, providing a representative picture of the British workforce was carried out in 1992 and followed by surveys in 1997, 2001, 2006 and 2012 (Felstead *et al.*, 2007; Gallie *et al.*, 1998).¹ The emergence of these new, much more powerful, representative national studies, that made it possible to study change over time, was to provide a rather clear resolution of some of the most contentious issues, but it was also to create interesting new research puzzles.

III JOB CONTROL AND SKILLS: THE EVIDENCE OF THE BRITISH SURVEYS

What light did such studies in Britain cast on the key issues that had dominated theoretical debate in the previous decades? The discussion here will be restricted to three major contributions with respect first to the subjective importance for employees of the scope for initiative in work, second to the consequences of job control for motivation and well-being and third to the major trends over time with respect to job control and how these are related to trends in skills.

3.1 *The Subjective Importance of the Scope for Initiative in Work*

One of the initial contributions of this new source of data was to confirm the importance that employees attached to the ability to exercise initiative in their jobs. This was not to be taken for granted since there had been a significant literature arguing that employees were becoming increasingly instrumental in their attitudes to work, giving priority not to its intrinsic quality but to the financial rewards it provided for meeting their central life goals outside of work (Goldthorpe *et al.*, 1968). With the decline of local community solidarities, a greater availability of consumer goods and a shorter working week, it was predicted that family and leisure would become increasingly central to people's value systems, generating a dynamic for an ever greater instrumentalism towards work.

However, comparison of the pattern between 1992 and 2006 suggested that the importance of the intrinsic aspects of work, including initiative, had increased rather than decreased. The importance attached to pay had also increased, but the period had seen not a shift from intrinsic to extrinsic preferences about work but increased aspiration with respect to both. One of

¹ The 2012 data were still being collected at the time of writing. The 1992 survey was conducted by Duncan Gallie and Michael White, the 1997 survey by Alan Felstead and Francis Green and the subsequent surveys by Alan Felstead, Duncan Gallie and Francis Green.

the factors that turned out to be very important in accounting for this was education (Gallie *et al.* 2012). There is a strong link between educational level and the importance attached to the intrinsic quality of work and there had been a marked rise in levels of education in the workforce over the period.

Table 1: *Most Important Aspects of a Job 1992 and 2006*

| | 1992 | | | 2006 | | |
|-----------------------------|------------------|-------------|--------------|------------------|-------------|--------------|
| | <i>Essential</i> | <i>E+VI</i> | <i>Score</i> | <i>Essential</i> | <i>E+VI</i> | <i>Score</i> |
| <i>Intrinsic</i> | | | | | | |
| Use of Abilities | 27.4 | 78.5 | 3.03 | 34.3 | 84.6 | 3.17 |
| Can Use Initiative | 23.7 | 74.9 | 2.96 | 30.7 | 82.7 | 3.11 |
| Variety | 16.6 | 60.2 | 2.69 | 21.3 | 68.5 | 2.84 |
| Work You Like Doing | 33.9 | 83.9 | 3.16 | 48.4 | 91.0 | 3.39 |
| <i>Extrinsic</i> | | | | | | |
| Good Pay | 25.7 | 71.6 | 2.94 | 34.7 | 75.7 | 3.08 |
| Promotion Prospects | 10.7 | 42.1 | 2.29 | 15.2 | 50.1 | 2.45 |
| A Secure Job | 37.3 | 83.3 | 3.17 | 37.8 | 83.1 | 3.18 |
| Good Fringe Benefits | 6.8 | 30.0 | 2.07 | 10.2 | 40.9 | 2.31 |
| Training Provision | 27.4 | 72.0 | 2.91 | 22.7 | 65.2 | 2.79 |
| Physical Working Conditions | 23.1 | 69.4 | 2.86 | 23.2 | 73.8 | 2.93 |

Source: (Gallie *et al.*, 2012). E+VI = Essential+Very Important.

Certainly, in 2006, after a period of relatively sustained economic growth that should, according to the tenets of the theory, have been highly favourable to the spread of instrumental values, it is clear that intrinsic aspects of work remained of fundamental importance. When asked what they considered important about a job: 83 per cent of employees considered it either “essential” or “very important” that it should be one in which “you can use your initiative”. It was the fifth most important aspect of work out of fifteen listed dimensions of a job, very close in importance to “the opportunity to use your abilities” (85 per cent), “friendly people to work with” (85 per cent), and “good relations with your supervisor” (84 per cent). It had a similar level of importance to job security (83 per cent) and came considerably higher than pay (76 per cent).

3.2 *The Implications of Job Control for Motivation and Psychological Well-Being*

Second, the Skills Surveys were able to cast light on the significance of employees’ control over their work for their motivation on the one hand and their psychological well-being on the other. It was the motivational issue that

had been most central to the argument of the liberal theorists who had predicted increasing involvement of employees in decision making. There are three relevant indicators. The first is a question of whether the person puts in effort over and above what is strictly required. The second is a six-item measure of organisational commitment, while the third is a measure of overall job satisfaction. Both organisational commitment and job satisfaction have been shown to be strongly linked to sickness absence and turnover (Meyer and Allen, 1997; Warr, 1991).

Task discretion was measured through four items about the amount of influence the person has over their job with respect to work effort, deciding what tasks are to be done, how to do the task and the quality standards of the work. It is notable that for all three of the motivational measures there was a strong relationship with task discretion and this was robust when controls were added for sex, age and class (Table 2). Indeed, in a detailed analysis of the factors that contributed to the decline in organisational commitment between 1992 and 2001, it was found that this could be entirely accounted for by the decline in task discretion over the same period (Gallie *et al.*, 2001). Similarly, there had been a marked and highly significant decline in job satisfaction between 1992 and 2006, but approximately half of this was directly attributable to the decline in task discretion (Green, 2006).

Table 2: *Task Discretion and Employee Motivation*

| | <i>No Controls</i> | | <i>With Controls</i> | | <i>Survey Years</i> | <i>N (with Controls)</i> |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------|-----|--------------------------|-----|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| Uses Discretionary Effort on the Job | .27 | *** | .24 | *** | All | 12,802 |
| Organisational Commitment | .23 | *** | .21 | *** | All | 11,067 |
| Overall Job Satisfaction | .36 | *** | .38 | *** | 1992+ 2006 | 6,400 |

Source: Author's analyses 2006 Skills Survey. OLS regressions. ***=Significant at 0.001 level. Controls: age, class, industry, temporary work, part-time work.

Turning next to the implications of job control for psychological well-being, there could be contrasting expectations. A greater sense of participation could enhance people's well-being by providing a stronger sense of recognition or reducing insecurities. But, arguably, it could also have deleterious effects by increasing the demands experienced at work. A greater sense of responsibility for the way work is carried out also could constitute a source of additional work pressure.

The measures of work-related psychological well-being used in these studies were strongly influenced by Warr's (1990) argument that it is

important to distinguish two axes of psychological well-being – “contentment-anxiety” on the one hand and “enthusiasm-depression” on the other. To capture this, respondents were asked a range of questions about their emotional responses to the job.² For each axis, a scale was constructed by averaging responses to the items.

There is a very strong positive association between task discretion and all three of the psychological well-being measures (Table 3). This was the case for both men and women – indeed the coefficients for the sexes are remarkably similar, despite arguments that work may have less centrality for women’s lives. Such cross-sectional data is not causal. But it is possible to look at the impact of past change in the control that people exercised over their work. The survey has a retrospective question on whether or not people’s discretion over their jobs has changed in recent years. It asks “compared to your job five years ago, has the amount of choice you have in the way you do your job increased, decreased or stayed about the same?”. It is notable that past change in task discretion had as strong effects on each of the measures of psychological well-being as the current level of task discretion.

Table 3: *Task Discretion, Change in Choice over Job, and Psychological Well-Being*

| | <i>Overall Psychological Well-Being</i> | <i>Contentment-Anxiety</i> | <i>Enthusiasm-Depression</i> |
|----------------------|---|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Task Discretion | | | |
| All Employees | .40*** | .16*** | .25*** |
| Male Employees | .42*** | .17*** | .25*** |
| Female Employees | .40*** | .15*** | .25*** |
| Change in job choice | | | |
| All Employees | .42*** | .14*** | .28*** |

Note: Author’s analyses 2006 Skills Survey OLS regressions, weighted. Controls: age, class, industry, temporary work, part-time work. ***=Significant at 0.001 level.

3.3 *Trends in Job Control and Skills*

There can be little doubt then that job control was regarded as important by employees and was associated with both higher motivation and higher psychological well-being. This confirmed the assumptions underlying both the more optimistic and more pessimistic visions of change about its centrality for the quality of work. But what had been the trend of change over time: had job

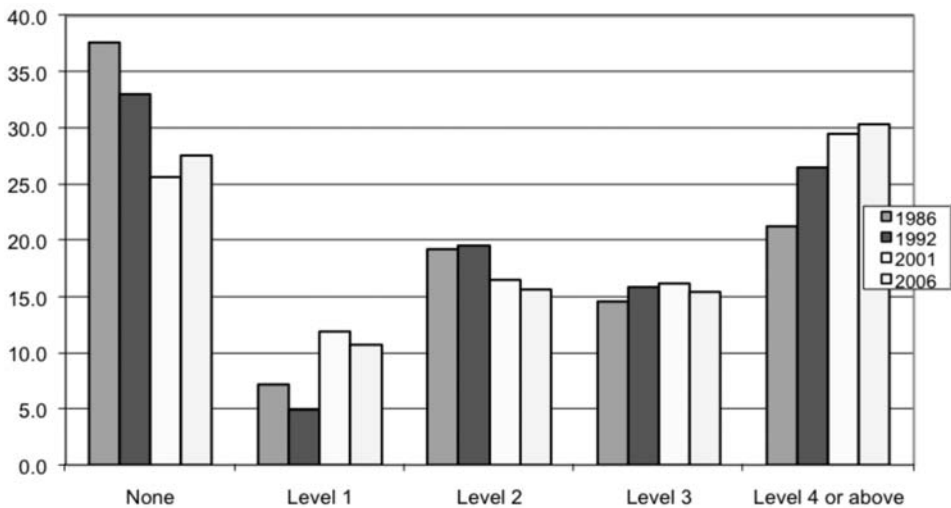
² To tap enthusiasm-depression, the adjectives were “depressed”, “gloomy”, “miserable”, “cheerful”, “enthusiastic” and “optimistic”. To tap contentment-anxiety they were “tense”, “uneasy”, “worried”, “calm”, “contented” and “relaxed”.

control increased or decreased? And how was it related to the pattern of change in skills?

It has been seen that a common feature of the contrasting theoretical approaches to skill and job control is the assumption that the main driver of work quality is skill level. In the case of neo-Marxian theory, it was the undercutting of skills that entailed closer supervisory control; whereas in liberal theories it was skill upgrading that created strong incentives for employers to give employees a greater say over their work tasks so that they could draw on their knowledge and discretionary effort. However, one of the most striking features that emerged from the British surveys on skills and the quality of work was that these trends did not necessarily work together.

Taking first the trends in skills, it should be noted that the measures of skill deployed in the surveys are focused on the skills required by the job rather than the individual's personal skills. They were based on Spenner's definition of skill as the "... substantive complexity" of job tasks – in terms of the level, scope and integration of mental, manipulative and interpersonal tasks (Spenner, 1979; Spenner, 1990). Much like the Swedish surveys, they are based on the premise that the idea of relative skill level or task complexity is best proxied by the learning requirements necessary to develop the knowledge to do the job. A principal measure is a question asking people: "If you were applying today, what qualifications, if any, would someone need to get the type of job you have now?"³

Figure 1: *Qualifications Required and Useful for the Job*



³ Other indicators tapping vocational training required and initial on-the-job learning were also used and pointed to the same broad conclusions about the process of skill upgrading.

It can be seen from Figure 1 that the overall trend between the mid-1980s and the mid-2000s was quite clearly for a rise in skill requirements. There was a marked decline in the proportion of employees reporting that they needed no qualifications, although there was some evidence that the proportion of employees in non-skilled jobs began to increase again in the early 2000s. At the other end of scale there was a linear rise in the proportion of employees in jobs requiring degree level qualifications or higher. Overall, the evidence is primarily consistent with the view that the trend has been for skills to be upgraded than with a deskilling thesis (for a fuller discussion, see Felstead *et al.*, 2007).

But turning to task discretion the picture is very different. In contrast to the expectation that a trend to rising skills would be accompanied by a trend to rising task discretion, the evidence showed a marked decline in task discretion from the early 1990s to the early 2000s, after which it levelled off. Both the average absolute levels and the decline were almost identical for men and women. However there was a difference in the timing of change between the public and the private sector (Gallie *et al.*, 2004). The main period of decline in the private sector was between 1992 and 1997, in the immediate aftermath of the sharp recession of the early 1990s. In contrast, the decline in the public sector was most marked in the period 1997 to 2001, coinciding with the introduction of new Labour's "reforms" of public management involving the setting and monitoring of more detailed performance targets.

Table 4: *Trends in Task Discretion Items 1992-2006*

| <i>Percentage With a Great Deal of Influence:</i> | <i>1992</i> | <i>1997</i> | <i>2001</i> | <i>2006</i> |
|---|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| How Hard Works | 70.7 | 64.4 | 50.6 | 52.5 |
| What Tasks | 42.4 | 33.1 | 30.5 | 28.7 |
| How to do Tasks | 56.9 | 49.7 | 42.8 | 42.7 |
| Quality Standards | 69.6 | 51.1 | 51.7 | 51.1 |
| Overall Index | | | | |
| All | 2.43 | 2.25 | 2.18 | 2.18 |
| Men | 2.43 | 2.26 | 2.19 | 2.18 |
| Women | 2.44 | 2.24 | 2.17 | 2.18 |

Source: Author's analyses EIB; Skills Surveys.

It is of course possible that such patterns have been significantly affected by the economic crisis. Some indication of possible developments can be gleaned from the European Social Survey. This has two measures of control over the immediate job task – asking people how much management at their work allows them to (1) decide how your daily work is organised and (2) choose

or change your pace of work. These again show no evidence of an overall rise in job control – rather both measures show a further decrease in task discretion over the more recent period.

Table 5: *Change in Task Discretion 2004-2010*

| <i>Allowed by Management to:</i> | <i>2004</i> | <i>2010</i> |
|--|-------------|-------------|
| Decide how own daily work is organised | 6.91 | 6.82 |
| To choose or change your pace of work | 5.51 | 5.42 |

Source: European Social Survey 2004 and 2010. Author's analyses.

3.4 *Convergence or Polarisation in Job Control?*

The versions of the degradation of work thesis that emerged in the 1990s placed the emphasis on increased polarisation between core and peripheral categories of employee rather than on the general trend. In particular, they emphasised the very different employment experiences between lower and higher skilled workers and between employees with different contractual statuses – full-time as contrasted with part-time workers on the one hand, and permanent contrasted with temporary workers on the other. Did the general trends in task discretion conceal markedly different patterns between different types of employees?

A notable feature of the decline of task discretion among British employees was that it was evident across all occupational classes (Gallie *et al.*, 2004). But at the same time, as can be seen in Table 6, it was the case that the “discretion gap” between managers and professionals on the one hand and semi and unskilled workers grew greater from the beginning of the 1990s to the mid-2000s. This could not be attributed purely to changes in the sex, age or industry composition of these categories, as it remained significant in regression analyses that controlled for these factors. With respect to contract status, there is no evidence of an increasing gap between part-timers and full-timers, but there was evidence of polarisation between those on temporary contracts and those with permanent positions.

In short, rising skill levels were not accompanied by a trend to greater decision making scope for employees in their jobs, but rather by an overall decline in task discretion, accompanied by a significant increase in polarisation between classes and between permanent and temporary employees. This provides comfort for neither of the main theories of the changing nature of work – the rise of skill levels contradicts the neo-Marxian scenario, while the decline in task discretion contradicts the assumptions of the liberal thesis of the upgrading of work quality.

Table 6: *Ratios for Task Discretion Scores by Class, Working Hour Status and Permanent/Temporary Status*

| | <i>Ratios</i> | | | | <i>Significance of Change</i> | |
|--|---------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| | <i>1992</i> | <i>1997</i> | <i>2001</i> | <i>2006</i> | <i>Gross Change 1992-2006</i> | <i>Net Change 1992-2006</i> |
| <i>Class</i> | | | | | | |
| Professional-Managers vs Semi/Unskilled | 1.19 | 1.29 | 1.27 | 1.31 | ++ | + |
| <i>Contract Status</i> | | | | | | |
| Full-time/Part-time | 1.04 | 1.09 | 1.07 | 1.06 | n.s. | n.s. |
| Permanent/Temporary | 1.03 | 1.04 | 1.12 | 1.14 | ++ | + |

Note: Author's analyses EIB and Skills Surveys. Significance of change between 1992 and 2006 is estimated through a regression analysis with year interaction terms: ++=greater polarisation significant at 0.01 level, + at 0.05 level. Gross change analysis controls for other employee statuses. Net change analysis controls for other employee statuses, sex, age and industry.

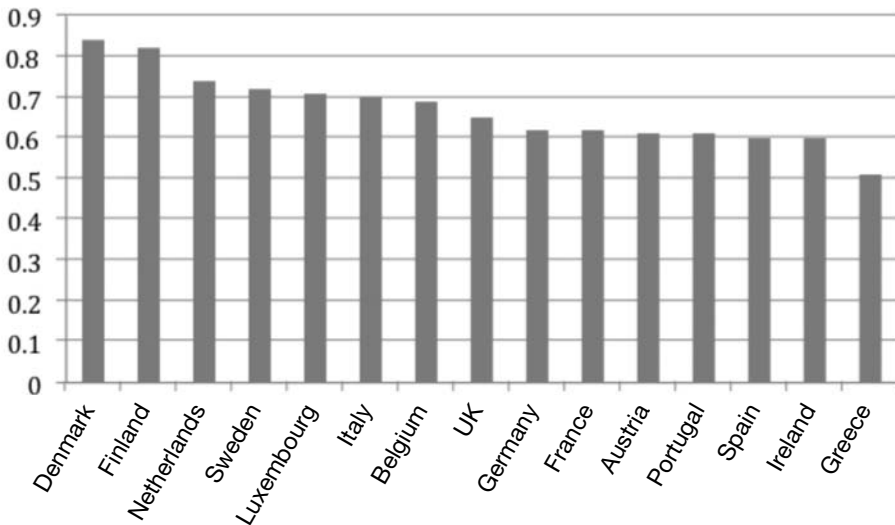
3.5 *Britain in European Perspective*

How distinctive was the British pattern? A first point to note is that European research confirms the picture of rising skill levels across quite diverse countries (Oesch and Rodriguez Menes, 2011; Tahlin, 2007). This is the case both for men and for women. We have rather less good evidence with respect to control at work. There is some evidence from national work surveys for France, Germany and Sweden for the period between the 1970s and late 1990s (Gallie *et al.*, 1998). In France, between 1984 and 1998, there was a clear rise in employees' discretion over work methods, but some decline of control over work pace. In Germany, a rather general indicator on the extent to which "work performance is highly regulated" shows relatively little change over the period 1979 to 1998. A particularly striking case, however, is Sweden where there was a consistent rise in employees influence over their jobs from the mid-1970s to the beginning of the 2000s.

For differences in the relative levels of task discretion in the more recent period, a comparative picture of job control in countries of the E15 is provided by the European Working Conditions Survey. This has three relevant indicators. People were asked whether they were able to choose or change: their order of tasks, their methods of work and their speed or rate of work. Figure 2 shows the country scores for 2010 using a summary indicator of the three items. It is clear that Britain emerges in the middle of the spectrum. It is considerably higher than most of the Mediterranean countries and Ireland and indeed somewhat higher than countries such as Germany and Austria. But it is also notably below the Nordic countries and the Netherlands.

More detailed analysis has shown that the difference between the Nordic countries and all others, including the UK, is at a high level of statistical significance. Moreover, it is clear that this does not simply reflect differences in industrial structure or differences in workforce demography. The distinctiveness of the Nordic countries in employee job control still stands out clearly when variations between countries in terms of the sex and composition of the workforce, occupational and industry structure and the size of workplaces are taken into account (Gallie, 2009).

Figure 2: *Task Discretion in the EU-15 2010*



Source: Author's analysis, European Working Conditions Survey, 2010.

IV CONCLUSION

Research has made considerable progress in several respects in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the major scenarios of the evolution of work that have dominated debate over several decades. To begin with it has firmly established the centrality of job control both in terms of employees' own subjective priorities and in terms of its association with higher levels of motivation and psychological well-being. There can be little doubt that job control is a vital component of the quality of work.

At the same time, the accumulating evidence has shown that earlier theories provide inadequate explanations of the factors that determine job

control. It was generally assumed that the key driver was change in skills. Those who were pessimistic about trends in job control attributed this to a long-term trend in advanced capitalist societies for skills to be undercut. Those who argued that employees' control over their jobs would increase believed that this was a necessary outcome of skill upgrading, driven by new and more complex technologies. Research has largely confirmed the view that the general tendency is towards the upskilling of the workforce. But it has shown that the assumption that rising skills would necessarily lead to greater employee influence at work is incorrect.

Moreover, the increased availability of comparative data has cast doubt on the plausibility of such arguments rooted in common characteristics of the development of capitalist societies. The notable feature is the marked variation between advanced capitalist societies both in the level of control they give their employees and in the direction of change. The example of the Nordic countries and of the Netherlands is particularly interesting because it demonstrates that it is possible for countries to introduce patterns of work organisation that provide employees with greater involvement in decision making without incurring major disadvantages in terms of economic performance. These countries appear to have achieved the virtuous circle between high productivity and employee welfare that underlay the optimistic scenario of the quality of work.

This points to an explanation of variations in levels of job control primarily in terms of the policies pursued by governments, employers and unions in the different countries. While Britain has never had an explicit, well-resourced, policy programme aimed at improving the quality of work organisation and employee involvement, these countries have had policies that have actively pursued such objectives. In Sweden, particularly from the 1970s, a series of legal changes and well-funded initiatives were undertaken by government culminating in a vast programme for working life reform in the 1990s – the Working Life Fund (AFL) – which is estimated to have affected approximately half of all employees across the range of industrial sectors. In Denmark and the Netherlands, improvements in work quality were driven primarily through reforms in health and safety measures. These countries appear to have developed a distinctive “employment regime” that emphasised inclusiveness both at work and in the labour market.

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