

# Revisiting impact in the context of workplace research: a review and possible directions

Revisiting  
impact in  
workplace  
research

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to revisit the scholarly impact agenda in the context of work-based and workplace research, and to propose new directions for research and practice.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper combines a contemporary literature review with case vignettes and reflections from practice to develop more nuanced understandings, and highlights future directions for making sense of impact in the context of work-based learning research approaches.

**Findings** – This paper argues that three dimensions to making sense of impact need to be more nuanced in relation to workplace research: interactional elements of workplace research processes have the potential for discursive pathways to impact, presence (and perhaps non-action) can act as a pathway to impact, and the narrative nature of time means that there is instability in making sense of impact over time.

**Research limitations/implications** – The paper proposes a number of implications for practitioner-researchers, universities/research organisations, and focusses on three key areas: the amplification of research ethics in workplace research, the need for axiological shifts towards sustainability and the need to explicate axiological orientation in research.

**Originality/value** – This paper offers a contemporary review of the international impact debate in the specific context of work-based and workplace research approaches.

**Keywords** Impact, Research method, Dialogic impact, Reflexive impact, Temporal impact, Workplace research

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

What impact is, how to measure it, and how it shapes the work of the higher education sector remain highly problematic despite decades of discussion (Banks *et al.*, 2016). The move towards the measurement of research impact globally has created ongoing tensions, for example, in relation to the UK's research measurement exercise. Here, impact “remains a major challenge despite the massive investment in research [...] and [...] often remain[s] problematic as a result of inadequate interpretations produced by mere numbers based on citation counts” (Chowdhury *et al.*, 2016, p. 1). As such, the higher education research sector has largely accepted publication and citation data as a central proxy for impact, and in turn, such a proxy shapes research focus and careers, and insidiously suppresses inter-disciplinary and creative forms of research (Rafols *et al.*, 2012; Martin, 2016).

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Indeed, evidence suggests that publication fits particular orthodoxies which do not challenge established methods or theories (Wilkins and Huisman, 2015; Siler and Strang, 2017), and evidence from the broad field of medicine suggests that impact is “severely underestimated” in “applied” fields which may not be cited but which directly shape practice (van Eck *et al.*, 2013). There have even been claims that the use of citations and journal rankings to direct research practice is “bad scientific practice” and that journals should be abandoned altogether (Brembs *et al.*, 2013). These concerns are important in the context of work-applied research approaches, given their applied, localised, and inter-disciplinary/trans-disciplinary nature (Costley *et al.*, 2010).

These problems are echoed within the disciplines constituting business, management and organisation studies (Siedlok and Hibbert, 2014). In particular, Aguinis *et al.* (2014) provided a particularly scathing critique that impact is conceptualised “almost exclusively on a single stakeholder (i.e. other academics)” (p. 623). Rather, they call for impact to be conceptualised as a pluralistic concept, that is, impact can mean different things to different stakeholders. This, it seems, may be a way for what Alvesson and Sandberg (2014, p. 967) have described as moving from a “boxed-in” way of thinking about impact, towards “box changing, box jumping and, more ambitiously, box transcendence” to indicate more imaginative and influential research results.

Entangled with the “relevance gap” debate (Pettigrew and Starkey, 2016), more recent discussions of impact in the broad sphere of business, management and organisation studies highlight the role of dialogue, reflexivity and temporality in describing and explaining pathways to impact between universities and their stakeholders (MacIntosh *et al.*, 2017). Here, the insight and practical recommendations link to co-design and collaborative forms of research and inquiry over longer periods of time (Birkinshaw *et al.*, 2016).

These insights and strategies are positioned as useful in relation to the broad and diverse communities which constitute business, management and organisation studies, but not necessarily so for those who are more familiar with the action-oriented and work-based research methodologies (or families of methodologies) which are more directly and explicitly focussed on workplace change as a desired process and or/outcome (Wall, 2015). These include, as examples, forms of work-based learning, inquiry and research (Wall, 2010, 2013), reflective and critically reflective practices (Helyer, 2015), action research (Gearty *et al.*, 2015), action learning (Trehan and Rigg, 2015), action inquiry (Torbert, 2004), synergic inquiry (Tang and Joiner, 2006), and work-applied learning (Abraham, 2012).

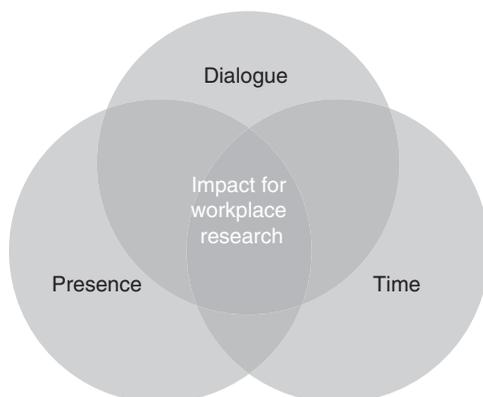
Although dialogue, reflexivity and temporality are relevant to these sorts of research practices, there are particular issues which are missed in the literature and which need clarification in relation to work-based learning and change methodologies. The contribution of this paper is therefore to outline new insights into how impact is conceptualised in the context of workplace research. The three dimensions that constitute the focus of this paper are summarised in Figure 1.

The structure of this paper is as follows. This section has provided an overview of the paper and has outlined its contribution, that is, to provide and inculcate a more targeted discussion of impact within the context of workplace learning research methodologies. The next three sections then highlight and offer a more nuanced discussion in relation to three contemporary dimensions relevant to impact. These dimensions are: the discursive elements of research as pathways to impact, the role of presence and non-action as pathways to impact, and the role of time in making sense of impact. The final two sections then summarise and discuss the key insights, and identify a number of implications in relation to understanding impact in the context of work-based learning research methodologies.

### **Contemporary debates about impact**

#### *Discursive dimensions of research as pathways to impact*

Recent evidence points to the role of the discursive and dialogic nature of interactions to highlight pathways to changes in ideas, practices and self-awareness (MacIntosh *et al.*, 2017).



**Figure 1.**  
Summary of  
development areas

For example, Cunliffe and Scaratti (2017) propose “a form of engaged research that draws upon situated knowledge and encompasses dialogical sensemaking as a way of making experience sensible in collaborative researcher-practitioner conversations” (p. 29). This sort of relational engagement, which co-develops, has been recognised for some time in cooperative and participatory forms of research (Heron, 1996). To highlight this potential, Cunliffe and Scaratti (2017) identify “conversational resources” as discursive or dialogic routes to impact:

[...] being attuned to relationally responsive dialogue [...] engaging in shared reflexivity within conversations to recognize and interrogate opacity and avoid overcommitment [...] recognizing and building on arresting moments in which we are struck, oriented or moved to respond to each other or our surroundings in different ways [...] surfacing the play of tensions, contradictions, binaries and boundaries within dialogue [...] creating action guiding anticipatory understandings (p. 35).

However, such pathways to impact are not solely present in the “engaged” forms of research that Cunliffe and Scaratti (2017) refer to, and indeed, the same relational co-influence is increasingly emerging within education debates (Anderson *et al.*, 2017; Wall and Tran, 2015, 2016). Such a relationship is partly why there can be potential ethical issues when managers become insider researchers and or leading change efforts in organisations and using these for research purposes (Stokes and Wall, 2014).

The discursive and dialogic influence is therefore beyond forms of “engaged research” which have an explicit axiological commitment to shift ideas, practice and awareness, and can apply to other forms of workplace research without this commitment, for example, interviews. Indeed, it could be argued that qualitative research, involving some form of interaction more generally, invariably impacts upon the thoughts and potential subsequent actions of the respondent through a discursive process, because of the inextricable link between the researcher and participant (Eden and Huxham, 1996).

For example, a longitudinal study by one of the authors (Bellamy) investigated the strategy formation process of nine small firm owner-managers over two years. The underpinning theory collectively considered strategy as a process of learning which informed decision making and incremental development (Crossan *et al.*, 1999). Here, the owner-managers were interviewed up to four times over the two-year period, focussing on the performance of the company, future plans and the rationale for their decisions. The design of the interviews and the nature of the topic required the researcher to explore the respondents’ thoughts behind a number of possible options and to look back at their rationalisation of previous choices made.

Here, the researcher found that an open but gently challenging form of questioning over the two-year period took a form similar to a mentoring process, noticeably influencing the very phenomenon under investigation. This process necessitated the respondent to reflect and not simply report, with the researcher becoming a facilitator for this action, accumulating insight with each interaction. The cumulative impact of interactions appeared to increase trust and mutual understanding, and facilitated an open exchange between the respondent and researcher with a very strong rapport being established (Stokes and Wall, 2014).

Impacts were most tangibly noted around the specific area of the external environment and direction of the organisation. Exploratory areas around their awareness of macro-environmental impacts (e.g. political, economic, social and technological) brought about a recognition of a lack of environmental scanning for some respondents and the need to look outside of the organisation for potential impact factors. Examples of new respondent awareness and sensemaking are provided in Table I.

The researcher also found that with increasing contact, increasing familiarity, and increasing rapport between the researcher-respondent, it appeared that the ability of the researcher to influence the thoughts and therefore actions of the respondent might increase. Even subtle feedback, active listening and the gentlest indications of empathy towards the respondent appeared to shape influence. Other factors, which appeared to influence the pathways to impact, included the perceived status or expertise of the researcher, increasing the weighting and legitimacy of the comments. These reflections seem to reposition the researcher as an insider, an extension of the context and co-producer of thought. Working with respondents to unveil their thoughts can trigger a deeper recognition of self and relationships to their environment, helping to determine future outcomes. Their role can shape behaviour with discussion extending to nuance mentoring and coaching-like interactions occurring within the research process. The mirror of respondent reflection is facilitated by the research, even when the intention is not to influence in such ways.

*The role of presence as a pathway to impact*

Notions of impact, and research impact more specifically, can imply that the research or researchers have a generative role in learning and change in sites outside of academe.

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Owner-  
manager

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- A Here, A was referring to insights about their agency and anxiety:  
[...] and you know if managers are standing on a rock just watching the sea go out half a mile just leaving bare rocks, wrecks and everything else [...] you know that something terrible is coming
  - B Here, B was referring to insights about their role, ability and commitment in longer range planning  
It's a lot; it's a lot for me to carry both emotionally, personally and every other way. Particularly if you're also doing the admin [...] lot of it's hearts and minds but the mind part of it also requires thinking [...] you're the rock and the hard place. I think the difficulty is [...] quite personal [...] the lack of other people willing to take the issue by the horns and run with it [...] it's like looking after your kids all the time, I don't need to go on doing it. I personally don't, don't intend to go on doing beyond April next year
  - C Here, C was referring to insights about diversification and congruence with the core offering:  
[...] you know I, I completely agree with you that I didn't think that the cosmetic things, the thing we should be spending a lot of money on, we should be spending money on other parts of the eyes and not about the plastic surgery
  - D Here, D was referring to insights about perceived limitations of personal and management capacity:  
I have learnt that, trying to do what I do and not delegate can have a catastrophic effect on your business
- 

**Table I.**  
Example of owner-  
manager insights  
through interviews

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This is particularly true when impact is conceptualised as a transfer of some sort, for example, research impacts the ideas, practices and awareness in practice (MacIntosh *et al.*, 2017). In contrast, more contemporary notions of impact indicate the generative role of dialogue and reflexivity in co-developing shifts in the research process and outcomes (Anderson *et al.*, 2017), and point towards recognising the co-evolutionary role of ideas, practices and awareness in collaborative settings (Cunliffe and Scaratti, 2017). Such processes are familiar in the context of methodologies for work-based learning and change (Wall, 2013).

However, long standing evidence from the Hawthorne studies (Mayo, 1933) is a constant reminder that the changes we make to workplaces may not be attributable to the causes the researchers believe, or want to believe, but might rather indicate the positive benefits of special treatment or positive attention generated during that process (Hansson and Wigblad, 2006). Similarly, developments in how the micro-dynamics of agency are conceptualised in business, management and organisation studies have developed in ways that indicate how influence can be generated through the material effects of presence which may in part involve “non-action” of those influencing (Fairhurst and Cooren, 2009; Wall, 2016c).

One form of this presence can be exemplified in relation to the micro-dynamics of coaching interactions, which function and are oriented towards facilitating development and change in practice settings (Wall, 2016a). In the following vignette, one of the authors reflects on a coaching session which she expected to focus on tackling a business development issue, but which turned into something else:

She [the coaching client] revealed that she had been the first to discover the aftermath of a murder. Suddenly and unexpectedly, our coaching session was about a situation which was so difficult and traumatic that it was too big to avoid and change the subject. I realised that all I could do was be there, with no expectation of being able to have any impact on the situation. I said very little and let her talk.

After perhaps half an hour, I noticed a change in her face – a brightening – as though darkness was lifting, a storm was passing. I commented on her strengths and the values I had noticed as she was speaking. She smiled and thanked me, saying the session had been “a gift”.

This vignette indicates how presence can emerge as a space that enables someone to deal with processing that needs to be done, perhaps with minimal intervention from another party, other than co-occupying the space and being attentive to a need, echoing the Hawthorne studies mentioned above. Evidence indicates that this sensation can be described as being “emotionally held by an encouraging presence” (Levine, 2010, p. 5) or “an unconditional positive regard” (Rogers, 1957).

In the field of business, management and organisation studies, this, and other forms of presence can be conceptualised as a form of power and influence over/in situations which are mobilised in and through collectives rather than individual agents (Raelin, 2016), or as when an individual “ventriloquises other entities” (Clifton, 2017, p. 301). This presence, it is argued, “is not necessarily a purely human physical presence, but can also be a hybrid presence of human and nonhuman actants, which are dislocated across time and space” (Clifton, 2017, p. 301). This is echoed in evidence about how influence can be imparted through physical appearance, and even more controversially, through “sentient and non-sentient actors [...] [which] enact and circulate [...] norms” (Ford *et al.*, 2017, p. 1).

For example, in relation to collaborative research into facilitating cultural change, Wall (2016b) found that although his reflective interest and focus was centred on what it could mean to “act collectively” in an individualistic work culture, he found that others had reported that his presence within a research group seemed to initiate and sustain a stream of conversations, thoughts, and activity which led to additional projects, publications and social activity outside of the group. This was unexpected, unintended, and he was uncomfortable about becoming aware of such impacts through presence.

These insights mean that within workplace contexts, it is possible to exert influence through presence without an utterance (which is arguably an action in itself). Indeed, Panteli (2016) found that influence can be exerted through various styles of interaction, one of which was silence, as demonstrated in the coaching vignette above. The role of silence in generating pathways to impact are nascent within the context of business, management and organisation studies, but silence has been evidenced to support sensemaking, learning and personal transformation, support self-understanding, reflective learning, therapeutic outcomes, and even a state or way of being (Ronningstam, 2006; Zimmermann and Morgan, 2016). In this way, silence is still imbued by presence (Wall, 2016a), and can provide the kind of psychological safety that is often discussed as being necessary in collaborative research spaces (Sealy *et al.*, 2017).

### *Time and making sense of impact*

Time and temporality are emerging as a recognised but still under-explored aspect important to conceptualising and realising impact (Bartunek and Woodman, 2015). Impact has been linked to longitudinal immersion within particular contexts of practice, and the proposal is that “future opportunities for engagement and impact may be captured by a longer-term, value-driven and less episodic approach to the entire research process” (Wells and Nieuwenhuis, 2017, p. 45). Yet within the context of insider and other workplace learning and change methodologies, this prolonged or immersive feature is common, and indeed, the intimate contextual and historical knowledge of insider researchers can be a key reason that “access” is granted (Stokes and Wall, 2014).

However, recent evidence into assessing the impact of complex organisational interventions provides a more nuanced view of judging impact in organisations (Wall *et al.*, 2016). Wall, Tran and Soejatminah (2017), Wall, Jamieson, Csigás and Kiss (2017), and Wall, Hindley, Hunt, Peach, Preston, Hartley and Fairbank (2017) undertook a study across ten countries of practitioners involved in organisational learning, development and change work, and found time was a central aspect of making sense of impact, in two main areas: time and linearity.

In terms of time, Wall, Tran and Soejatminah (2017), Wall, Jamieson, Csigás and Kiss (2017), and Wall, Hindley, Hunt, Peach, Preston, Hartley and Fairbank (2017) highlighted how narratives about the nature, extent and causality of impact can dramatically change in time, and give the example of impact evaluations made at two different points in time:  $t_1$  was an impact evaluation at end of an intervention, and  $t_2$  was an impact evaluation made six months after  $t_1$ . They found that although at  $t_1$ , the impact was rated as very limited and as not meeting the expectations of the individual or organisation, by  $t_2$ , there was radically different sense-making apparent, and involved reportedly dramatic organisational and even life changing impacts. In other words, there was a slippery relationship between impacts at the two points in time.

In addition, however, such accounts were also problematized in relation to notions of linearity, or more specifically, accounts of cause and effect in relation to what appeared to “cause” those impacts (A led to B). Wall, Tran and Soejatminah’s (2017), Wall, Jamieson, Csigás and Kiss’s (2017), and Wall, Hindley, Hunt, Peach, Preston, Hartley and Fairbank’s (2017) studies, for example, questioned whether the intervention (A) had generated the sorts of impacts in the narratives (B), or whether other factors (C, D, E, etc.) had been more influential in creating those impacts (B). For example, in terms of the dramatic changes in performance and culture (B), was it the organisational development coaching (A) that had been deployed, was it a change in management team which had enabled a change in culture (C), a mix of these (B, C), or none of these (E, etc.).

Such discussions about the slippery nature of impact accounts are important in the context of work-applied and change contexts, as organisations may need or want to demonstrate return on investments (Wall, Tran and Soejatminah, 2017; Wall, Jamieson, Csigás and Kiss, 2017; Wall, Hindley, Hunt, Peach, Preston, Hartley and Fairbank, 2017), and/or evidence of a demonstrable account of impact may be needed as part of a work or practice-based academic

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award or project (Costley *et al.*, 2010). Yet these more nuanced and complex accounts of impact highlight how time can shape how we make sense of impact, and indeed, reflect the idea that time is produced through the narratives people tell rather than being a material reality as such (Wall and Perrin, 2015). Here, the idea is that as we participate in narrative, we are constructing how we see ourselves and the world around us, but are also slightly changing our narrative to fit the circumstances in which we see ourselves in (Ricoeur, 1984). Brown (2008, p. 405) explains how and why narrative changes over time:

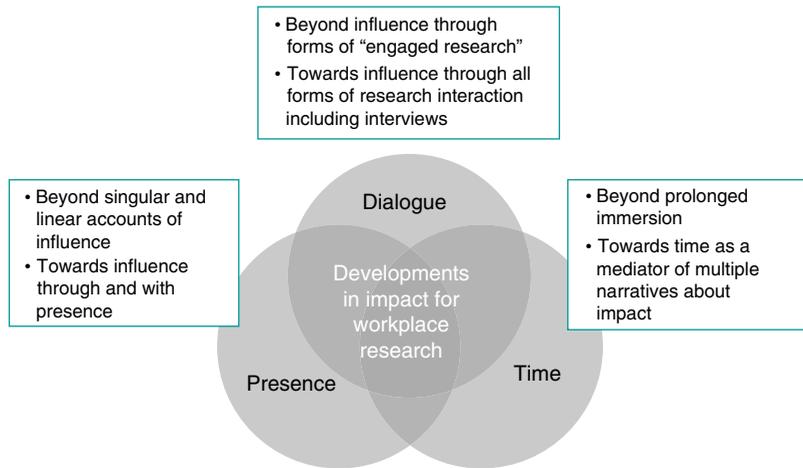
I may wish to share my thoughts spoken or written. But as I say something, I may be more or less disappointed with how my thoughts sounds once converted into words. And through my attempts to reconcile what I thought with what I said, my understanding of the world might then be modified. So when I feel ready to speak again, there may be some shift in the way in which I express myself, as, in a sense, a different person is speaking. And so on [...] where understandings and explanations continue to disturb each other perhaps for as long as I live.

The implication of this discussion is that it returns us to Aguinis *et al.*'s (2014) notion that impact is a pluralistic construct, where there are multiple accounts of impacts, but that, in addition, these accounts may change over different periods of time. This is particularly pertinent to work-applied settings, as it suggests that longitudinal immersion, alone, may not be enough to “capture” impact as such, and that there are other dimensions to consider when engaging in workplace research and development. Importantly, the idea that time is produced by narrative, thereby creating different and instable accounts of impact, challenges the assumption that there is a singular and static account of what impacts have been made. Time is active in mediating the narratives of impact over time, which is important if we are need to utilise the accounts of impact to inform new action (Wall and Rossetti, 2013).

### Discussion and future directions

Recently, research in the field of business, management and organisation studies has been criticised for promoting “novelty rather than truth, and impact rather than coherence” (Davis, 2015, p. 179) and for “becom[ing] enamored by shiny objects and interesting puzzles” (Mathieu, 2016, p. 1132). Weick (2016, p. 333), in contrast, interprets this perspective as “ill-served”, because “constraints of comprehension may give the illusion that organizational research represents *settled science*” (emphasis added). This paper highlights that our understandings of impact in the context of work-based or work-applied research contexts are by no means “settled”, and the aim of the paper has been to offer nuanced perspectives about the pathways to impact in the context of methodologies for workplace research. Figure 2 summarises the analytical points raised in the previous section, each of which indicates the more nuanced issues pertaining to workplace research.

When taken together, the three additional dimensions emphasise the complex, unstable and problematic nature of the micro-dynamics or micro-foundations (Miron-Spektor *et al.*, 2017) of impact. As such, there are a number of implications that give insights into future directions for methodological design, practitioner-researchers, practitioner-research training, and universities/research organisations (Wall, 2014). In a broad sense, a central theme of the analysis is that influence can work through all forms of research interactions and non-physical presence, and that accounts of impact can change over narrative and time. This means that there is a need to conceptualise and amplify the omnipresent aspects of research influence and therefore ethics in workplace research; that to deal with this omnipresent nature of ethics at a practical level, workplace researchers therefore need to understand their omnipresent responsibilities to their different stakeholders, over time, and across different communities; and that as such, this introduces sustainability into workplace research practice – a dimension largely silent in the context of workplace research impact – which requires axiological explication in order to navigate complex and contradictory agendas. Each of these implications is now discussed in more detail.



**Figure 2.**  
Summary of future  
directions

*Amplification of research ethics in omnipresent influence*

The preceding discussion outlined how researchers or those who identify as practitioner-researchers can influence not only through conversations or by asking probing questions, but also through presence. This presence, echoing the lessons and insights from the Hawthorne studies, amplifies the collective sensitivities to the micro-dynamics of workplace research, and the potential for unexpected risks or harm and possibilities for positive impacts (Stokes and Wall, 2014). Reconceptualising impact from a contained or limited interaction (e.g. an interview) to a more omnipresent state, where influence can ripple through conversations without the need for co-physical location, implicates the analysis of ethical considerations. This is particularly relevant in the context of work-based learning and change research approaches where the insider-researcher can be entangled in a network of relations beyond the research project. Therefore, there is the potential for multiple ripple effects in work areas as well as those participants in the research (who are themselves entangled in the same network), for example, an uncomfortable interaction with the researcher in one part of an organisation might lead to employment disputes in another part.

The shift in ethical research practice here might mean a shift towards researchers becoming beacons of ethical practice through the micro-moments of practice (Stokes and Harris, 2012). This is especially compelling given a call for more work to be done in relation to workplace ethics in the context of work-based and workplace learning methodologies (Wall, 2017b; Wall, Tran and Soejatminah, 2017; Wall, Jamieson, Csigás and Kiss, 2017; Wall, Hindley, Hunt, Peach, Preston, Hartley and Fairbank, 2017). Future research and development work into impact might explore the micro-dynamics of ethics in more detail as “engaged” forms of research develop. Cunliffe and Scaratti’s (2017) conversational resources for impact (see earlier) provide one framework for doing this, especially in relation to “recognizing and building on *arresting moments* in which we are struck, oriented or moved to respond to each other or our surroundings in different ways” (p. 35, emphasis added). For example, this might include a key question: in what ways might conversations and presence play out in practice to generate other systemic ripples or risks, and how might this be narrated differently over time? This ethical dimension also prompts the review of ethical content and action in broader questions of responsibility within the context of workplace research. This is the next point for consideration.

*Axiological shifts towards sustainability*

The impact debate has largely focussed on the problems of the current system in prioritising publications and citations over other narratives of impact, and the preceding discussion has highlighted more nuanced understandings of impact in relation to methodologies for workplace research and change. However, this debate also seems to be dislocated from broader discussions of responsibility in a context where there are serious and strong calls for more to be done with respect to sustainability in organisations, higher education, and in the context of work-based and workplace learning methodologies (Wall, Tran and Soejatminah, 2017; Wall, Jamieson, Csigás and Kiss, 2017; Wall, Hindley, Hunt, Peach, Preston, Hartley and Fairbank, 2017). This is especially pertinent in the workplace context given the complex and varied agendas of current and future stakeholders, including employees, customers, intermediaries, governmental and legislators and collaborators.

Such an omission from the current impact debate reflects the frustrations of families of action-oriented methodological approaches which explicitly embed such axiological commitments (Reason, 2007; Gearty *et al.*, 2015). As Reason (1993) explained over two decades ago:

I believe that the process of democratic participative inquiry-inquiring together may be the primary gift that our Western culture has to offer to the wider processes of cultural and planetary development. We need to learn how to take the value and spirit of inquiry into economic, political, personal, and spiritual life as a counterweight to narrow-mindedness, authoritarianism, and chauvinism. We need participative action research as one way to re-invent our society and democracy in the face of political, economic, and maybe most importantly environmental crises (p. 1253).

Although research has begun to consider and question the economic costs of doing research (Buswell *et al.*, 2017), a more contemporary and practical heuristic and framework which can aid practitioner-researchers and universities to prompt thinking, reflection and decision making in relation to responsibility is the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. Such a framework can be used to facilitate discussions, choices and action amongst practitioners, practitioner-researchers, and their communities, and participatory settings. The goals include commitments to (Wall, 2018, p. 4):

- (1) end poverty in all its forms, everywhere;
- (2) end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition;
- (3) ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all, at all ages;
- (4) ensure equitable education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all;
- (5) achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls;
- (6) ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all;
- (7) ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all;
- (8) promote sustained and inclusive employment, and decent work for all;
- (9) build resilient infrastructure and foster innovation;
- (10) reduce inequality within and among countries;
- (11) make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable;
- (12) ensure responsible and sustainable production and consumption;
- (13) take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts;
- (14) conserve the oceans, seas and marine resources;
- (15) protect and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems (including biodiversity);

- (16) promote peaceful and inclusive societies and accountable institutions; and
- (17) strengthen the means of implementation through global partnerships.

For practitioner-researchers to simultaneously consider all or even some of these goals may require an axiological, or value-based, shift in what is considered to be legitimate for them to attend to (especially if they are conducting research in or with a profit making organisation) (Rowe *et al.*, 2016). For example, if a practitioner researcher investigating the operational efficiency of an online banking platform becomes aware of the detrimental effects of the platform on “decent work” (goal 8), it may be very difficult (if not culturally inappropriate) to challenge the fundamental pay structures or process design of the platform. Future research and development work might consider the extent to which these commitments should feature in the work of practitioner-researchers, and how the tensions and contradictions amongst the commitments play out in practice. Importantly, evidence indicates that the way in which practitioner-researchers are trained and developed, and the pedagogical environments in which this development occurs are important to developing the sensitivities and complexities required to deal with these issues (Wall and Jarvis, 2015; Wall, 2017a).

#### *Explicating axiological orientation in research*

Amplifying the omnipresent nature of discursive and dialogic forms of impact alongside axiological shifts towards sustainability, creates a hyper-complex practice environment for researchers and those identifying as practitioner-researchers. Some forms of workplace inquiry may be sufficiently developed to generate impacts amidst the complexities of working to multiple agendas and polyphonic voices in practice (Reason, 1988). However, an alternative perspective is that explicit choices are made with regards to the type and form of impacts a practitioner researcher and university/research organisation aspire to make. This reflects Aguinis *et al.*'s (2014) position, whereby organisations supporting research into business, management and organisation studies make strategic decisions about the nature of impact they want to aspire to create in the world.

In the context of the discussion so far in this paper, for example, a university might decide to focus on tackling workplace inequalities in global workplaces, or finding ways of organising to tackle global poverty. Such strategic re-orientation seems like a bold move to help generate cohesion and direction amongst research teams and in the research training environments (Akrivou and Bradbury-Huang, 2015). However, there are strong social, political, governmental and economic structures which keep publication and citations firmly in place as the “gold standard” of measuring impact. Indeed, as Wilkins and Huisman (2015, p. 1) recently found, there seems to be:

[...] wide acceptance of the use of journal rankings, despite the downsides and problematic nature of these rankings being clearly recognised. It raises the question why the very diverse field of higher education does not show more resistance against the rather homogenising instrument of journal rankings.

Therefore, further research and development work might usefully be undertaken to disrupt the governance of research and research assessment at country level. Yet given the globally competitive market dynamics for research and its link to economic policy for higher education, this may be a problematic focus point. That said, possibilities for collective action to create new ways of conceptualising research impact are emerging which amplify both individual and collective agency – such as pledges and boycotts (Byington and Felps, 2017). Further research and development in this area would be not only be unashamedly “novel” (Davis, 2015) and solving an “interesting puzzle” (Mathieu, 2016) but would also be worthwhile in terms of “re-invent[ing] our society and democracy in the face of political, economic, and maybe most importantly environmental crises” (Reason, 1993, p. 1253).

## Conclusion and implications

This paper extends the debate about impact by placing it within the context of work-based and work-applied research methodologies, and highlights the need to amplify the conceptualisation of research ethics in the context of omnipresent influence, deepen awareness of sustainability in the context of workplace research, and explicate axiological position in order to guide workplace practice and research and navigate complex and contradictory perspectives. Examples of specific implications for practitioner-researchers, universities/research organisations, and governments/governing bodies are outlined in Table II. This, however, is only a starting point and platform for further research and development, with an ambition to further broaden and build the impact of workplace research in practice.

	Amplify omnipresent influence	Towards sustainability	Axiological explication
Practitioner-researchers	<p>Reflect on the ways in which own workplace practice is influenced, and specifically – what or who is present right now? What or who is influencing right now, but not present? How might these change under alternative future scenarios?</p> <p>During workplace research, periodically reflect on the ways in which own presence is influencing others right now, and the ways in which own presence might be influencing without being physically present. How might these reflections change under alternative future scenarios?</p> <p>During all stages of the workplace research project, notice the “arresting moments” and explore the variety of influences at play – use this information to help guide action in relation to the other two columns</p>	<p>Reflect on the UN’s SDGs framework to highlight which goals are the most relevant to self and own workplace research – this can inform research focus and methodological perspective</p> <p>At the workplace research implementation stage, explore the conflicts, contradictions, and tensions in own research practice – notice which SDGs are evoked and how they relate/repel</p> <p>Discuss the tensions generated in own workplace research practice with supervisors and other trusted advisors to aid sensemaking and find practical action steps</p>	<p>Reflect on the type and forms of impact (including from the middle column) that are relevant to self, organisation, and any other networks that are personally relevant</p> <p>Explore resonance and repellents between own stakeholder groups (as outlined above) and agree priority as well as complementary and supplementary areas</p> <p>Ensure the desired impacts are supported by own methodological choices and own research programme – discuss with supervisors to ensure resonance</p>
Universities/research organisations	<p>Ensure ethics training in workplace research programmes highlight and demonstrate the subtleties and nuances of influence and the potential rewards and risks within such conceptualisations</p> <p>Provide “update training” to workplace research supervisors/facilitators to increase awareness of the subtleties and nuances of influence in workplaces</p> <p>Ensure infrastructures and supervisory teams encourage the noticing of the subtleties and nuances of influence in workplaces, e.g. integrating into existing reflective log, action learning set, or other reflexive techniques</p>	<p>Utilise the UN’s SDGs framework to explore the dimensions of workplace researcher responsibility in research training</p> <p>In addition to organisational agendas, frame workplace research projects in relation to the UN’s SDGs framework</p> <p>Model practical ways to navigate and deal with the complexities of becoming aware of tensions and contradictions, such as tools for overcoming dilemmas and double bind problem situations</p>	<p>Discuss and agree the type and form of impacts, and where possible, do so at a variety of levels, for example, institutional, faculty, programme, programme team, research-supervisor</p> <p>Once specific types and forms of impact have been clarified, review infrastructures to enable the realisation of the desired impacts</p> <p>Mirror impact intentions in the design of workplace research programmes and associated training</p>
Government/governing bodies	<p>Re-orient conceptualisations of research impact to include forms of workplace research, which may be inter-disciplinary/transdisciplinary</p> <p>Re-orient proxy to include a greater weighting of narratives which have been validated by multiple stakeholder groups</p>	<p>Re-orient funding frameworks and mechanisms to prioritise the different dimensions of sustainability identified in the UN’s SDGs – in terms of topic areas, but also in terms of the the resources required to undertake the project and the plans in place to support responsible research practices</p>	<p>Re-orient funding frameworks and mechanisms to support the variety of different axiological positions that are explicated by different universities, whilst at the same time, explicating the body’s own stance for sustainability and impact</p>

**Table II.**  
Example implications  
for practitioner-  
researchers,  
universities, and  
governments

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