

Workers' direct participation at the workplace and job quality in Europe

Maria C Gonzalez*

Department of Sociology, University of Oviedo, Oviedo, Spain

Abstract In this paper we focus on workplace practices aimed at increasing workers' direct voice, and their connection to job quality. After contextualizing historically the various reasons for increasing different types of workers' participation and exploring the muddled role of direct participation in European policy, it reflects on possible indicators for workplace worker involvement (direct and through representatives) and offers a brief review regarding research on the impact of workers' direct participation on job quality in Europe, identifying essentially positive but also some negative outcomes. The interaction of the workers' direct voice with representative participation at the workplace in terms of substitution or complementarity and the mediating role of productive and industrial relations contexts are also reflected upon.

Keywords employee involvement, workers' participation, job quality, indicators, European policy

Introduction

Workers' involvement or participation in decision-making in the workplace has been defended from three main angles (Strauss, 1998): (i) *democratic* arguments as to power sharing and the protection of workers' economic interests; (ii) *humanistic* arguments referring to workers' increased expectations as to the nature of work itself in terms of autonomy and self-realization; and (iii) *economic* arguments, mostly in terms of the potential to increase the efficiency of organizations. In the latter, participation is considered a productive factor in itself (Gold, 2005); for instance, performance may be enhanced by improving workers' and unions' understanding of, and commitment to, the business.

The first type of angle has a redistributive focus, and it is traditionally the most favoured by trade unions; the other two perspectives have an integrationist focus,

on workers themselves in the case of humanistic arguments, and on both unions and workers in the case of economic arguments (Gold, 2005). The first two types were by far the most prevalent arguments in social, political and academic debates in Europe during the 1960s and 1970s, with the aim of increasing workers' control over their work and employment. Yet since the late 1980s, analysing the business case for extending workers' participation has been the main focus among scholars, employers' representatives, governments and even some unions (such as the British Trade Union Congress' (TUC) *Partners for Progress* strategy, adopted in the second half of the 1990s). This can be seen as part of the general trend of change of orientation of the debate on labour and labour markets from 'how to make the economy adjust to a steady expansion of social rights' to 'how to adapt working conditions and workers to the evolving needs of capitalist enterprise' (Streeck,

*Author to whom correspondence should be sent: Maria C Gonzalez, Department of Sociology, University of Oviedo, Campus del Cristo, s/n, 33006 Oviedo, Spain. [email: m.gonzalez@uniovi.es]

2008: 11) in a context of industrial restructuring, economic liberalization and increased market competition. Workers and their representatives had to help in managing adjustments in staff levels and work organization to 'master the challenges of post-Fordism' (Streeck, 1995: 678).

Thus research has increasingly focused on quantifying the economic impact of indirect or representative participation on firms or the economy, i.e. of works councils, collective bargaining, or trade unions (e.g. Addison et al., 2004; Bryson, 2004; Hübler and Jirjahn, 2003; Plasman et al., 2007). However, more characteristic of the last two decades is the substantial growth of interest in the impact of *direct* worker participation on firms' performance, mostly with regard to labour productivity (e.g. Addison and Belfield, 2001; Bayo-Moriones et al., 2003; EPOC, 1997; Eriksson, 2003; Forde et al., 2006; Peccei et al., 2005; Ramsay et al., 2000), complemented by a renewed interest in analysing the workers' case for participation in terms of its impact on job quality (e.g. Bauer, 2004; Gallie, 2007a; Green, 2006).

Direct participation is generally voluntary, the result of management initiative and considered a weak form of participation (Gold, 2005). It concerns face-to-face or written communications between managers and subordinates in the form of information (e.g. briefing groups) and consultation (e.g. workers' surveys, suggestion schemes), and also schemes that give workers some decision-making capacity on a given set of issues such as semi-autonomous or autonomous teamwork and problem-solving groups. Much like the concept of 'flexicurity' (Viebrock and Clasen, 2009), direct participation is supposed to benefit both employers and workers and to support a high-skill/high-wage adaptable economy. For the business, direct participation elicits workers' tacit knowledge and improves communications while raising workers' awareness of the business situation and improving labour productivity and flexibility. For the workers, direct participation may increase their discretion and influence, skills, job stability and wage. Both workers and the business may also benefit from improved work relations and job satisfaction as a result of direct participation (Gonzalez, 2009).

Direct participation is at the heart of human resource management (HRM) practices oriented towards increasing the performance of workers by increasing their commitment to the business (Appelbaum et al.,

2000). Instead of a performance management tool, it can also be simply used with a motivational aim to attract and retain employees in periods of low unemployment (Brown et al., 2008). Finally, it can be tightly connected to work organization (Gonzalez, 2008). Although formal mechanisms of direct participation can be useful within a Taylorist work organization as a motivation-oriented integrationist tool, they are not in-built in the productive process and can only be an HRM add-on. Rather, direct participation is associated in Europe with newer forms of work organization: the presence of some forms of direct participation is in-built in lean production because of its emphasis on teamwork and quality control, and direct participation can be said to be the essence of discretionary-learning forms of work organization, characterized by high levels of autonomy at work, learning and problem-solving, task complexity, self-assessment and teamwork (Valeyre et al., 2009).

Discretionary-learning forms of work organization with high levels of direct participation are in fact dominant in the two countries considered as exemplary in terms of flexicurity – Denmark and the Netherlands – and in Sweden. Yet, the extension of the high-trust discretionary-learning type of work organization is well below the EU27 average in countries such as Greece, Spain, Portugal, Bulgaria, Lithuania and Romania (Valeyre et al., 2009). Viebrock and Clasen (2009) have reflected recently on the limits placed by low social trust to the transferability of flexicurity policies. Similarly, work organization should perhaps be taken into perspective when assessing the possibilities of the flexicurity paradigm to deliver a high-skill/high-wage economy where low-trust productive contexts are dominant.

This article focuses on exploring our knowledge as to the connection between direct participation and job quality. Its deliberate position as a 'grey area' in EU policy will be explored first, offering some ideas for indicators of workplace participation the European Employment Strategy (EES) currently lacks. This is followed by an overview of research into the impact on job quality of direct participation, and a reflection on the possible relationships between direct and representative participation; in relation to both, the institutional and workplace contingencies that may intervene will be briefly explored. It concludes by summing up the most relevant issues for future research in the present policy context.

European policy on workplace workers' involvement

Much like the general debate, the European Commission's interest in employee participation has changed from a focus on extending workers' rights as such by 1970 (first draft of the European company statute) to increasingly being underpinned, from the late 1980s, by the consideration of participation as a productive factor that may secure co-operation at the workplace, facilitate restructuring and promote companies' interests (Gold, 2005: 5). Political factors (mostly trade union pressures for workers' rights in exchange for trade liberalization), prevention of social dumping and company law harmonization have been the other relevant rationales for the Commission in 'the most controversial' area regulated by the social and employment policy of the EU (Gold, 2005: 1). The controversy surrounding workers' participation is partly compounded by the institutional diversity across Europe (Carley and Hall, 2008), and partly by the differing social actors' views. Regarding the latter, attempts at extending workers' rights in the area of information and consultation have traditionally been accused by employers of undermining managerial authority (thus the failed Fifth and 'Vredeling' directives), while employers' interest in direct participation has often been perceived as a threat to unions' authority (Carley and Hall, 2008; Regalia, 1996).

Finally, in March 2002 the European Directive on Informing and Consulting Employees (Directive 2002/14/EC) was passed, by which undertakings with at least 50 employees or establishments with at least 20 employees must inform employees about their economic situation, and inform and consult them on issues concerned with employment and work organization. This Directive was to complement at the national level the legal framework on workers' participation that had been created for companies present in several EU countries (Directive 1994/45/EC on European Works Councils and Directives 2001/86/EC and 2003/72/EC). Innovatively, the Directive allows for direct participation to be the method used to inform and consult employees 'as long as they are always free to exercise the right to be informed and consulted through their representatives' (Art. 16). This addition to the traditional EU representative-focused approach towards participation was most clearly picked up in the UK and

Ireland when transposing the directive to national legislation. Both countries have admitted specifically direct participation as an alternative to representative channels (Carley and Hall, 2008).

By the time the directive was adopted in 2002, direct participation had been on the EU agenda for some time. Direct participation's possible role in modernizing work organization (i.e. as a productive factor) had come to the fore of European policy to improve workers' motivation and adaptability in the late 1990s (European Commission, 1997, 1998). Yet, a few years later, the emphasis shifted to its potential for improving the quality of jobs. *Social dialogue and worker involvement* are explicitly mentioned as a dimension of quality in work in the 2001 European Commission framework for investing in quality (European Commission, 2001: 8) and in the 2003–2005 Employment Guidelines for the European Employment Strategy (Council of the European Union, 2003: 17). Increasing workers' influence was the argument used to justify their consideration as one of the dimensions of quality of work in the EES, thus establishing a connection between democratic and humanistic arguments for participation through job quality.

However, and despite the recommendation of the Employment Committee that the possibilities of measuring employee representation and involvement should be examined urgently (Employment Committee, 2001: 3), this dimension is not addressed in the list of possible indicators (European Commission, 2001: 13). Then in 2007, the European Council included workers' participation as one of the principles of 'good work' (European Council, 2007: 7), demonstrating that it remained a well-established dimension of job quality in Europe. Still, no key indicators were ever identified for this sensitive dimension of quality in the EES 'characterised by strong divergences between Member States and also weak and polemical indicators' (Peña-Casas, 2009: 65).

Worker involvement: not defined, not measured

Part of the problem may be that worker involvement is an equivocal term that has been most often used by the Commission as an alternative to workers' representative participation (e.g. Group of Experts, 1997) but that, when placed side by side with social dialogue,

may be understood to include direct participation. The explicit reference to direct participation in the European Directive on Informing and Consulting Employees supports such a view. The possibility of competition between channels for direct and representative workers' voice can then be reasonably thought to be the key reason for a lack of agreement between European social actors on how to measure this dimension of job quality. Furthermore, the *Employment in Europe Report 2008* (European Commission, 2008: 154) lists 'worker consultation, participation in decision-making and good social relationships at work' as linked to this dimension, widening the concept beyond direct and indirect participation to include work climate.

Although *involvement* is a concept that, similarly to *participation*, can encompass social dialogue, in the industrial relations and HRM literatures it is more closely linked to direct workers' participation than to that through representatives (Wood and Wall, 2007). Yet, worker involvement also goes beyond specific forms of participation connected to workers' voice, and may include aspects like a supportive management style, job enrichment and profit-sharing or, as picked up by the European Commission (2008), work relations. Separating all these aspects clearly and deciding what is meant by involvement is necessary in order to build reliable indicators.

The lack of indicators has created a strange situation in which the EU cannot monitor to what extent a goal of the EES is being achieved. The European Trade Union Institute has taken the initiative in filling this gap by developing an index for measuring job quality in Europe that includes a sub-index for 'collective interest representation and voice' (Leschke et al., 2008: 12). This is a composite of the proportion of workers covered by collective bargaining, trade union membership rates and the proportion of workers that reported being consulted about changes in work organization in the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) 2005. Such an indicator has important limitations in measuring both representative (Leschke and Watt, 2008; Leschke et al., 2008) and direct participation, and more information on direct participation could be derived from the EWCS and other sources, yet the available information in European datasets is limited (cf. Gonzalez, 2009).

Were workplace participation-specific surveys to be developed, there are several variables that would be of

interest in order to build an indicator focusing only on participation – widely defined as formalized procedures to grant workers' voice in decision-making at the organization – rather than on the more elusive concept of involvement. As a minimum, an indicator considering the presence or not of participation and, where present, the proportion of workers covered, and its breadth (matters covered) weighted by depth (information, consultation, decision-making) seems necessary to reflect employee influence in workplace decisions as intended by the EES – setting aside social dialogue at levels above the firm and its coverage.

Regarding representative participation at the workplace to assess workers' collective voice, it would be of interest to consider, as well as presence or absence of workers' representatives and the proportion of workers covered, the number of subject matters open to representative participation and the types of exchange over each (information, consultation or negotiation) (cf. Addison et al., 2004; Bryson, 2004). It seems reasonable to think that workers without workplace collective bargaining (i.e. decision-making) but offering at least information on one issue to workers' representatives have more collective voice than those at a workplace where there are no representatives; equally we may reason that where workers' representatives bargain over five matters, workers have more collective voice than where they are consulted on five. The representatives' entitlements according to the law can be considered as a reference where existing; in other institutional settings, the reference to use could be a pre-defined list on the basis of custom and practice (Gonzalez, 2008). Similarly, regarding direct participation, besides considering the proportion of workers that participate, its breadth could be assessed by the number of different schemes of participation available (Addison and Belfield, 2001; Cox et al., 2006; Gonzalez, 2008), or by the type and number of matters covered (Gill and Krieger, 2000; Peccei et al., 2005; Ramsay et al., 2000). Its depth can be measured by weighing the type of communication involved, i.e. whether it is informative, consultative or decision-making (Tüselmann et al., 2003).

The effectiveness of the voice mechanisms could be further evaluated by the frequency (Gill and Krieger, 2000) and permanency of exchange (Cox et al., 2006), or by its perceived influence on workplace decision-making (Gallie et al., 1998), although these may be more equivocal indicators.

The impact of direct participation on job quality in Europe

Participation should improve the quality of work life by its impact on actual job characteristics. Given its productivity enhancement effects (Gonzalez, 2009), it should also lead to higher pay and job security. An assessment of the impact of direct participation on job quality can thus be done, distinguishing between its effect on intrinsic and extrinsic facets of a job. In general, both research and theory on the impact of workers' direct participation on job quality offer a mix of positive and negative outcomes that are not mutually exclusive. In other words, participation can contribute to a simultaneous improvement and deterioration of job quality in different aspects of work (Bacon and Blyton, 2003). Yet, research results are overall mostly positive.

Impact on intrinsic aspects of work

An increase in direct participation may affect intrinsic aspects of work such as work relations (since it can alter communications in content, direction, interlocutors and intensity), the actual work (task content, variety and attached responsibility), and the degree of influence (degree of initiative and autonomy). Influence is itself associated with trust (Green and Tsitsianis, 2005) which, along with the intrinsic aspects of the job, may affect organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Ramsay et al., 2000).

Thus, on the positive side, direct participation has been found to improve perception of influence (Bacon and Blyton, 2003; Delbridge and Whitfield, 2001; Gallie et al., 1998), collective relations and work climate (Addison and Belfield, 2001); by increasing workers' discretion it can lead to more meaningful work, improving the sense of achievement (Edwards et al., 1998; Green and Tsitsianis, 2005; Ramsay et al., 2000); it can induce a cultural change towards improved trust and loyalty (Gallie et al., 2001); it can improve workers' skills, since workers are more likely to receive more training (Bacon and Blyton, 2003; Gallie et al., 1998; Whitfield, 2000); and it has been found to close skill gaps between part-timers and full-timers and between temporary and permanent workers (Felstead and Gallie, 2004). Studying the 2000 European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS),

Bauer (2004) found that increased autonomy, influence and communications resulted in increased job satisfaction. Llorente and Macías (2005) found a positive association between job satisfaction and autonomous teamwork in Spain.

On the negative side, by increasing responsibility direct participation can lead to work intensification, greater time pressures and stress (Green, 2004; Ramsay et al., 2000). Finally, in some studies it has been found to have little impact on job quality in terms of workers' influence (Dundon et al., 2001), work experience (Harley, 2001), workplace culture (D'Art and Turner, 2006) or safety/stress working conditions (Antonioli et al., 2009).

Impact on extrinsic aspects of work

Direct participation can also have an indirect impact on extrinsic facets of work that in turn affect job satisfaction and thus job quality. Mainly, it can affect job security, pay and promotion prospects. On the positive side, direct participation as part of the high-performance paradigm is supposed to contribute to delivering an organization of work that relies on the higher productivity of skilled jobs and motivated and committed workers. Forth and Millward (2004) found that in the UK, high-involvement practices had an 8% wage premium compared with traditional management, and that job security was a necessary condition for that wage premium. Also, Fernie and Metcalf (1995) found that efforts on the part of firms to boost employee involvement had resulted in a positive impact on employment growth in the UK between 1984 and 1990.

On the negative side, some research indicates that the increased productivity may be absorbed by the firm and not transferred to workers, resulting instead in lay-offs. In the EPOC study (1997) Germany and Spain were the least successful in absorbing the reductions in employment due to direct participation, the Netherlands and Denmark being the most successful.

Finally, by improving the skills and training of the workers and their opportunities to shine, participation should enhance both the employability, stability in employment and the promotion prospects of workers. There has been little research into this aspect of direct participation's impact.

Contingent factors mediating participation's impact on job quality

There is some evidence that the company context (technology, labour intensity, financial situation, market strategy) may affect the type of impact direct participation has on job quality because it affects managerial use of direct participation (Greenwood and Randle, 2007). For instance, negative effects on intrinsic aspects of jobs tend to appear when direct participation is part of a firm's survival strategy, or is introduced in the presence of high unemployment (Forde et al., 2006), while positive effects are more likely with low unemployment (Brown et al., 2008). As pointed out in the introduction, work organization is clearly another relevant factor: a high degree of workers' control over pace and work organization may be necessary for direct participation to have a significant impact on job satisfaction (Brown et al., 2008).

Also managers' actions may pull in opposite directions, for instance increasing information and consultation and the sense of influence while increasing control and decreasing task discretion (Gallie et al., 2001). This type of strategy, where employee involvement acts as a cushion for the negative effects of an increased rationalization of work, mitigates downward pressures on job satisfaction (Green and Tsitsianis, 2005). Direct participation is being used in these contexts mostly as a motivational valve (Gonzalez, 2008).

Another relevant contextual variable is union presence, since there is some evidence that it makes direct participation's positive effects on pay and job security more likely than negative effects (for the UK, see Forth and Millward, 2004). Finally, the wider institutional context is a further variable mediating participation's impact on job quality. Gallie (2007b: 100) points in particular to the capacity of governments and organized labour 'to constrain the actions of employers in the interest of improving the quality of work life of employees'.

Increasing workers' voice: direct and indirect participation connected

The Industrial Democracy in Europe project (IDE, 1981) highlighted a complementary relationship between direct and indirect participation in finding a workers' preference for personal involvement in

short-term decisions and for representative involvement in long-term decisions. Several years later, a study of workers' participation at British multinationals confirmed a significant specialization of different participatory channels by depth: direct participation was used mainly for information sharing, representative committees were used mostly for consultation, and the trade union channel was mostly used for negotiation (Wood and Fenton-O'Creevy, 2005). The study also found that employee voice was weaker where only direct participation channels were in place, and concluded that to extend employee voice through direct participation, representative participation should be fostered.

These studies are addressing a traditional debate on direct participation: the possibility of a weakening of workers' representatives as a result of the introduction of direct participation, resulting in overall lower levels of workers' voice. The institutional and workplace contingencies that make a substitution or a complementary effect more or less likely are still to be defined in a generalizable manner. Regarding the workplace level, for instance, Helfen and Schuessler (2009) have found positive managerial attitudes towards direct participation to be detrimental to the establishment of works councils in German small firms. Yet, at the institutional level, Godard (2004: 369) has argued that co-ordinated market economies that provide strong rights of representation at the workplace and strong protection against lay-offs are more likely to foster managerial interest in teamwork than are liberal market economies. At the same time, he argues, the strong rights of representation make many information- and consultation-based direct participation practices redundant (Godard, 2004: 370). Empirically, however, all types of direct participation appear as generally low in Germany (Gallie, 2007b), and some studies have found evidence supporting a view that German works councils may block the extension of teamwork (cf Gallie, 2007b).

In contrast to the varied evidence for substitution in Germany, for liberal economies such as Ireland and the UK the relationship between indirect and direct participation increasingly appears to be one of complementarity (Dundon et al., 2006; Gallie et al., 1998), perhaps as a result of the social partnership approach adopted by trade unions in these countries since the late 1990s. In these studies

employers have been found to exhibit behaviours described as low-road and high-road approaches to participation, by which employers tend to have either low levels of participation – direct and indirect – or high levels of both (Dundon et al., 2006; Gallie et al., 1998).

After analysing the differences between Germany, the UK and some Nordic countries on task discretion, teamwork and workers' influence over work organization, Gallie (2007b) has argued that it is workers' power in terms of trade union membership – rather than works councils or employment protection rights – that favours new forms of work organization with greater levels of direct voice and a greater concern for the quality of working life. Taking into account that Poutsma et al. (2003) found that workplace unionization levels had no significant impact on the level of direct participation in European workplaces, it may be that unionization is a better predictor of the extension of direct participation at the country level than at the workplace level. Alternatively, the relative importance attached by the unions to issues of work organization and the goal of improving the quality of working life in different countries – also highlighted by Gallie (2007b) – may be a better predictor.

Conclusion: issues for further research and policy implications

Although direct participation has the potential to improve job quality, very little is known about either the determinants of its adoption in European workplaces, or the most likely contexts in which it may contribute to increase the quality of jobs. The presence, influence and interests of workers' representatives (Gallie, 2007b) and the country institutional context may be two important determinants that call for more in-depth national studies. Also, the importance given in the EES to increasing overall workers' influence as a dimension of job quality makes further investigation of the link between direct and representative participation at the workplace level particularly relevant, given that the channels may be complementary or substitutes. Considering both types of participation as linked may help to establish more clearly the effect of workers' voice levels on job quality. To that end, the problem of a lack of proxy indicators for workplace worker involvement in European policy should be addressed, and some

ideas have been offered regarding indicators for the workplace level. The need for a better survey instrument for cross-country analysis of workplace direct and representative participation in terms of breadth and depth is also patent.

The impact of direct participation on hierarchical and peer relations is under-researched, although existing evidence is mostly positive. Though theoretically it should lead to more equal relationships under a more participative style of management of the labour relationship, there is no evidence sustaining a significant transformation of culture at European organizations, other than towards increasing workers' awareness of the need of carrying out changes. As for quality of working life, some evidence suggests that direct participation may lead to both increased stress and increased job satisfaction (Ramsay et al., 2000).

There is particularly little research on the effects of direct participation on career progression, wages and employment tenure. Direct participation is often positively associated with greater training provisions and increased skills, which may increase workers' employability and job security; however, it can also be used just as a motivational valve without developmental aims. With the extraordinary level of emphasis currently being placed on fostering flexicurity activation policies, perhaps more attention should be given to aspects pertaining to the internal labour management in firms. Work organization involving high levels of direct participation may be at the heart of some successful stories of flexi-secure labour markets with high-skilled quality jobs. Countries with authoritarian relationships in the workplace, greater reliance on low-skilled work organization, relying heavily on insecure forms of work and with weak unions may not be ready to deliver jobs of quality through flexicurity.

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