**Behavioural Ambidexterity: Effects on Individual Well-being and High Performance Work in Academia**

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**Abstract**

Academic work demands behavioural ambidexterity: the ability to simultaneously demonstrate exploration (creativity in research and/or in innovative teaching and learning practice) and exploitation (compliance with quality assurance). However, little is known about the effects of behavioural ambidexterity on the well-being of individual employees. We explore the experiences of men working in academic roles at Universities in Sweden and the UK. More specifically, we examine the relations between behavioural ambidexterity and perceptions of well-being using an interpretative approach based on narrative analysis. Despite societal differences between Sweden and the UK, academics in both countries felt ill-equipped to fulfil the demands for ambidexterity. This resulted in mixed performance outcomes with serious implications for well-being. We identify and discuss the influence of personal circumstances and the role of agency in work design as two key antecedents of positive well-being outcomes.


**Keywords:** behavioural ambidexterity, performance, well-being, agency

**Introduction**

Trade-offs are an integral feature of organisational life and individuals' experiences of work. Knowledge-based professional work is particularly demanding, given varied job tasks, fuzzy boundaries and high autonomy, but it is also rewarding and self-fulfilling. Academia is one sector in which intrinsic motivation to 'do well' typically underpins commitment to work, where job involvement is high and where self-management of 'protean careers' and academic freedom contribute to a profound interest in and attention to work (Enders and Kaulisch, 2006; Kinman and Jones, 2008a). Conversely, as academic institutions adopt new transparency measures and quality-assurance (QA) schemes, the work of academics has become subject to growing scrutiny, and is increasingly constrained by bureaucratic processes (Yli-Joki, 2013; Kinman and Wray, 2014).

A conflict between ensuing compliance and inspiring creativity, then, arises when organisations seek to adopt behavioural ambidexterity, i.e the ability to simultaneously demonstrate exploitation (compliance) and exploration (creativity) across a business unit (Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004: 209). Interest in the performance outcomes of behavioural ambidexterity is growing (see Patel et al., 2013; Ahammad et al., 2015), but little is known about its effects on individual well-being. We explore the experiences of 14 men working in academic roles at Universities in Sweden and the UK, focussing on:

1. How they experience their work,

2. How they perceive their well-being,

3. How behavioural ambidexterity helps and/or hinders the relationship between work design and well-being,

The influence of personal circumstances and the role of agency in work design are key antecedents for positive well-being. Our contribution adds in-depth qualitative insights to complement largely quantitative evidence that has been previously generated (see Wood et al., 2012). Focusing on men means that we are able to expand knowledge in a space that has not been extensively studied: a considerable body of research has documented women's (especially mothers) struggles to navigate the demands of the contemporary workplace (Chang et al, 2014; Kinman, 2016). Research on men and fathers is only emerging (see for example McDonald and Jeanes, 2012; Gatrell et al., 2015). This imbalance drove our sampling strategy: we specifically wanted to speak with respondents who self-identified as "new men" (Hearn, 1999) or "working fathers" (Ranson, 2012), concepts that refer to men who value personal well-being, and seek work-life balance.

It is generally understood that gender equality is further advanced in Sweden concerning women's workplace participation and men's involvement with family. Culturally, Swedish society values quality of life whereas in the UK, a more traditional gender roles and a long-hours work culture seem to prevail (van der Lippe et al., 2006: 307; Gregory and Milner, 2011) within an individualist and masculine value system (Taras et al., 2011: 191).[i] Moreover, 'new public management' has changed the landscape of academia in both countries (Barry et al., 2006; Lorenz, 2012), transforming work practices in higher education and giving rise to conflicting demands and pressures (Menzies and Newson, 2008; Ambos et al., 2008). This seems to be taking its toll on its workers as their well-being has diminished over time (Kinman and Wray, 2014). For men who wish to work flexibly, particularly for the purposes of child-care, there is the added pressure of being viewed negatively by colleagues and managers (women as well as men) and being deemed less motivated and less deserving of promotion and salary increases (Kelliher and Anderson, 2008; Rudman and Mescher,

2013). Nonetheless, how men cope with work, family and life situations remains an under-researched area.

**Conceptual Framework: Behavioural Ambidexterity–Performance–Well-being**

Our conceptual framework draws together behavioural ambidexterity, performance, and well-being as shown in Figure 1.

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*Figure 1: Conceptual framework*

In organisational research, ambidexterity refers to an organisation's ability and desire to simultaneously pursue two different, often conflicting, aims: exploration and exploitation (see Simsek, 2009; Birkinshaw and Gupta, 2013). There are three forms of ambidexterity in organisations: temporal, structural and behavioural (Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004). In temporal ambidexterity, exploitation and exploration are sequential depending on organisational and environmental requirements (Swart et al., 2016). Structural ambidexterity utilises 'dual structures', where certain business units concentrate on exploitation while others focus on exploration (Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004). Behavioural ambidexterity is the capacity to simultaneously demonstrate exploitation and exploration across a business unit. It encompasses manifold ways in which organisations manage the tensions inherent in doing two different things at the same time (Birkinshaw and Gupta, 2013). Within academia, behavioural ambidexterity is predicated on its strong generative interrelationship between research, teaching, and administration; these imbricated strains are dependent on an effective balance of compliance and creativity.

Behavioural ambidexterity has become a popular concept not only because it is versatile, but also because it is closely associated with notions of employee engagement and high-performance work systems (Patel et al., 2013). Research tends to favour the performative potential. Although employee well-being is an important concern for contemporary management practice, as yet, it has not been investigated within an ambidexterity framework. We query the relations between behavioural ambidexterity and performance *and* well-being in academia since jobs that combine variety with autonomy and flexibility tend to produce positive performance outcomes, but varied well-being outcomes (Humphrey et al., 2007; Oldham and Hackman, 2010).

The anticipated performance outcomes include research income, high quality publications, real world impact, innovative teaching and learning, student support, as well as timely and accurate administration of procedures, the aggregation of which ensures the career progression of individual employees. Achievement of such performance outcomes collectively leads to organisational competitive advantage (league table performance, Research Excellence Framework (REF)[ii] status, student intake, research grant income, etc.) and QA status.

The well-being outcomes in the framework derive from a holistic definition based on healthcare, philosophy, psychology and sociology literatures, which encompass three core dimensions of well-being: psychological (happiness), physical (health) and social (relationships) (Grant et al., 2007: 52). Happiness refers to the psychological well-being of employees; key issues are satisfaction with work and life in general, with focus being placed on subjective experiences and functioning at work (ibid), and commitment to the organisation (van de Voorde et al., 2012). Health refers to the physical and psychological well-being of

employees in terms of experiences of strain or work-related stress and outcomes such as cardiovascular disease, hypertension, sleeping problems, mental health issues and workplace accidents (Grant et al., 2007; van de Voorde et al., 2012). Relationships are a recent addition to considerations of employee well-being (ibid), encompassing the interactions and quality of relationships between people, both within the workplace and in their personal life.

Extant literature suggests that academics enjoy high job satisfaction (happiness) but suffer from stress (poor health) and experience work-life balance challenges (poor relationships) (Bentley et al. 2013; Kinman and Wray, 2014). The high autonomy that many academics experience may also enable intensification whereby increased flexibility can further threaten work-life balance and recovery processes rather than facilitate them (Kinman and Jones, 2008b).

A strong connection between performance and well-being has been established (see for example Edgar et al., 2015). This supports the view that a 'mutual gains' perspective facilitates the achievement of positive organisational (performance) and individual (well-being) outcomes (van De Voorde et al., 2012). Here the links between management practice and happiness, health and relationships are generally assumed to be positive in that managers focus on building a two-way exchange between organisational support and employee trust and commitment. Alternatively, the 'conflicting outcomes' perspective posits that managerial practices have either no, or a negative effect on well-being (ibid: 392-93; Grant et al., 2007). This acknowledges that the type of management practices that produce high performance (organisational focus) are probably different to those that enhance employee well-being (employee focus).
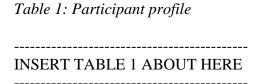
**Research Approach**

Research on ambidexterity has mainly taken the organisation as the unit of analysis (Birkinshaw and Gupta, 2013: 291; Swart et al., 2016); our contribution is at the level of the individual. As we wished to gain in-depth insights into how academic men perceived and reasoned around their work and its associations with performance and wellbeing, a qualitative research approach was appropriate. A comparative study was designed, based on life-story interviews and narrative analysis. Research ethics approval was granted by Nottingham Trent University, UK.

Interviews were conducted with 14 men (seven each from Sweden and  the UK) from construction-related departments at universities in the two countries. Assistant Professors (1), Lecturers (4), Senior Lecturers (4) and Professors (5), aged from mid 30s to early 60s, were represented (Table 1). Most respondents had full-time posts; four worked part-time in academia). All respondents were married or in a long-term relationship, and all but one had children between 18-months to 32-years. The interviews, lasting around one hour, were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

We employed a purposive informant-sampling strategy, and tried to match categories and ages of respondents in the two countries. It was important to access views from 'new men' employed at different hierarchical levels in academia. The lived experience of each interviewee was considered a situated, specific life-story. We wished to capture individual contextual circumstances, past and present and how individuals coped with them, both practically and affectively. Capturing their affective attitudes relating to happiness, health and relationships was especially important in providing insight into their well-being.

We make use of characterizations (Barry et al., 2006) in contextualising our discussion, and draw on the characteristics of the interviewees to describe their experiences of ambidexterity and related performance and well-being outcomes. However, we avoided mentioning analytical terminology, such as 'ambidexterity' or 'happiness' in our prompts. Narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995) was applied on the data to identify and sort the plots and themes in the life-stories. Both separate and collaborative reflexive close-readings of the transcripts strengthened our interpretations[iii].

Philosophically, phenomenology underpins our research. We used descriptive analysis of the experiences and perceptions expressed by the participants in relation to behavioural ambidexterity and well-being. We queried the intentionality of their life-stories and encouraged them to reflect upon their awareness of self and other persons relevant to their experiences. Exploring the conditions of possibility, contexts both within and outside work, was of particular interest and helped us develop insights into the multiple and parallel constraints and allowances the respondents highlighted.

*Table 1: Participant profile*

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**Research Findings**

 In the following sections, we initially consider behavioural ambidexterity and subsequently discuss the well-being implications, and present three characterisations that emerged to showcase the ways in which respondents experienced ambidexterity and well-being. Finally, we develop the comparative analysis (Sweden-UK), and consider whether the mutual-gains

perspective or the conflicting outcomes perspective more closely aligns with the respondents' experiences.

*Behavioural ambidexterity*

A central theme in the respondents' accounts was 'multiple roles inherent in academic work' with many referring to *'the usual mix of teaching, admin and research' (Senior Lecturer 1, UK).* However, the relative importance of these elements varied considerably between people and institutions, and depended on their career stage. Those lower in the organisational hierarchy indicated a predominance of teaching and administrative work whereas professorial work mainly focused on research publications and grant income.

Our respondents at all levels and in both countries alluded to challenges in career progression. Advancement depends on demonstrating competence in each role (teaching, administration and research) although workloads were not evenly distributed between different levels of the hierarchy. Managing performance standards and quality control was wrought with tensions. On the one hand, we evidenced a strong intrinsic motivation to do well and deliver the best work they could, for example employing innovative, practical learning activities. On the other hand, respondents in the UK especially reported that centralised timetabling eroded flexibility in managing contact hours, and student feedback initiatives could police the quality of the feedback. Organisational discourse was increasingly concerned with QA, but our respondents perceived a gradual weakening of academic quality in spite of the increased monitoring. Lecturers felt they were deliverers of a standardised product rather than providers and generators of knowledge. Well-being concerns and a sense of de-professionalisation were also evident.

Flexibility was the benefit that was most appreciated by all respondents. It offered opportunities to make important life choices and balance competing demands: for example, to spend time with family during office hours and work in the evenings. While all respondents appreciated the flexible scheduling of academic work, only two discussed it in wholly positive terms. Four respondents from each country said they work long hours. Professor 2 and Senior Lecturer 2 from the UK estimated that they worked 65-70 hour in an average week, and 12-hour working days were not uncommon. In Sweden, respondents reported working an average of 55 hours. Rather than being an organisational support-mechanism, working-time flexibility tended to tighten the bind between the academics and their work. One respondent each from Sweden and the UK also reported feeling unable to engage with the formal care resources provided by their employer (such as counselling during stressful times) because of the stigma associated with the uptake of such initiatives, especially for men (Cech and Blair-Loy, 2014; Kinman and MacDowall, 2016).

Despite the challenges of occupying 'multiple roles' and ensuring career advancement, many respondents working full-time spoke positively about the possibilities offered to pursue their academic ambitions, for example research goals and teaching aspirations. According to UK Professor 2, academia is the only workplace today where "one can become whatever one wants to be". One Swedish respondent considered his work to be a hobby as well as a job. Reflecting the findings of previous studies in academia (Kinman and Jones, 2008a), these respondents' social identities were closely tied to their work.

Erosion of agency in work design emerged as an important theme. Work demands and the nature of work were seen to evolve according to external and internal pressures, and the balance kept shifting between autonomy and freedom, and management control and

structures designed to ensure accountability. Exploration was central to the respondents' accounts of work: the creative *elements* that make academic work 'professional and knowledge-based'. However, this was not always available to those at the lower levels, in line with Swart et al. (2016: 13) who associated the level of seniority with ambidexterity in Professional Service. In academia, research work was deemed the most desirable and strived for element of the job, which many struggled to accommodate into their schedules (see also Barry et al., 2006). Thus, they had to resort to the compliance mode (exploitation), which then filled most of their role. This is especially true for Lecturers and Associate Professors.

Careful time management and prioritisation of tasks and activities emerged as successful strategies for balancing different demands. UK Professor 2 discussed prioritising commitments and involvement, and delegating certain work tasks to junior colleagues. The rationale here was that these tasks served as useful staff-development activities, offering opportunities to participate in, for example, committee work (exploitation), while the more senior colleague frees up time for strategic exploration. Planning work ahead of time was considered essential for a mix of exploration and exploitation, akin to Litrico and Lee's (2008) orchestrated cooperation.

Another successful strategy was structural, based on the rolling appointment of senior leaders for a fixed period. Professor 2 from the UK reflected on how his appointment to a demanding position for three years was manageable because time-bound. He focused his efforts on the university's strategic priorities (exploration at the organisational level) at a temporary cost to his personal development (exploration at the person/role level). This illuminates the possibilities for academics to demonstrate exploration along temporal lines as well as behavioural ambidexterity.

*Well-being*

One of our respondents talked about his work in academia in very positive terms:

> *I feel, in my job, very privileged. I consider that to be a very satisfying part of my life… I enjoy sitting on University committees, and it's nice that the Vice Chancellor knows who I am… [but] had I not done that and just carried on being a mainstream academic, I think I would have been just as satisfied as I am now. No other job I'd rather do than the job I do, and it's nice to be able to say that. (Professor 2, UK)*

This Professor has developed a successful career in academia, through hard work and long hours. Although we probed about his life beyond work, he invariably returned to his work circumstances. He may well represent the 'ideal' worker who is committed to what he does, and from whom an organisation can only ever expect to gain positive outcomes. The relationship between Professor 2 in the UK and his employer is mutually beneficial as the synergy in academic entrepreneurship at the level of the organisation and the individual results in job satisfaction (a measure of happiness) (Grimaldi et al., 2011: 1050).

One of our Swedish respondents also talked about his work situation in such positive terms:

> *'The academic world is a great place for self-development, developing knowledge, and with many intelligent and nice people to interact with, both colleagues and students, so I enjoy the environment.' (Associate Professor 1, Sweden)*

Notably these two academics align themselves with the general nature of the work and the environment within which it is done. Others highlighted particular aspects of their work as particularly satisfying; for example, travel and the opportunity to mix with academic, industry

and political decision-makers. Academics in managerial roles, in both countries, particularly enjoyed the opportunities to wield influence at a strategic and political level and grow their research profiles by strengthening their niches through international collaboration and networking. These respondents felt empowered by the increased scope for entrepreneurial activity within their role. One school of thought argues that universities should proactively develop academic entrepreneurship and provide incentives for their personnel to devote time and energy on such activities (Grimaldi et al., 2011). UK Professor 1 noted a markedly achievement-oriented take on job satisfaction:

> *'Making sure I achieve is important… I like to achieve personally… There's always a need to push things forward and to try and make things that little bit more comfortable, otherwise you'd lose your drive.' (Professor 1, UK)*

Other respondents were more critical of their work circumstances, and it was difficult to extract anything but a lukewarm, neutral or in some instances an overtly negative response. Their job satisfaction was reduced by feelings of under-achieving and an inability to do a good job in any sphere, which in turn eroded their self-confidence.

As a result, some worrying symptoms of ill-health thought to be related to the job were evident: psoriasis, stress, heart problems, and 'nervousness'. These complaints were articulated by four out of the 14 respondents, two each from Sweden and the UK. Additionally, Professor 3, Sweden, mentioned that '*his physical health was good – his mental health was bad*'. He expressed frustration, verbally and through body language, toward the university and his manager. Given the small sample size, five is a disproportionately high number of respondents to report severe health concerns. As half of the respondents (three Swedish and five British men) disclosed a desire to increase their involvement in sports activities, it was not only their current health that was of concern, but also possible problems

due to reduced physical activity. These eight respondents had been active sportsmen in younger years, and expressed nostalgia for a part of their lives that they have had to abandon due to lack of time. Two respondents, however, used sports as a de-stressor: cycling to and from work provided a liminal space and time for thinking, or not thinking.

Managing relationships-related well-being outcomes seemed mixed. All the men mentioned how their careers had been, and often still were, enabled by understanding partners or wives. In all narratives, the wife/partner was depicted as the one who 'reshuffled', 'reduced' or 'gave up' job arrangements and plans for the men's career and/or needs of children. Interestingly, most respondents noted that these accommodations were jointly negotiated by both partners. Only Associate Professor 1 from Sweden likened his relationship with his partner to a patient-nurse relationship, and Senior Lecturer 2 from the UK admitted that his wife felt undervalued because he always put work first.

Regarding involvement with family in general, the men's accounts dealt with activities such as the school run, bath time, sports and holidays. One UK-based respondent noted how family commitments served as a way of mitigating overwork:

> *Those things that you have to do are often an excuse to say, "I'm stopping work now, because I've got to pick up the kids from school"[…] So, actually, contact with the family puts a limit on the "creep". (Lecturer 1, UK)*

Only one respondent (Associate Prof 2, Sweden) had a family storyline of shared caring and decision-making in the family unit. This indicates that for this small sample of academics, work takes up most of their time and concern.

In line with Litrico and Lee's (2008) research, we found that behavioural ambidexterity was a requirement both within work and out of work activities. However, there was an imbalance of exploration and exploitation outside the work context. While some exploration (flexibility) on the part of academics supported family responsibilities, family/spouses predominantly demonstrated exploration in seeking to accommodate the needs of their academic partner. Thus, the men in our sample align with the 'Solo Performance' or 'Organic Fluid Adjustment' patterns that Litrico and Lee (2008: 1009) presented. These patterns suffer from lack of boundaries and segmentation of different contexts (e.g. work and life), and individuals often feel a strong need to continually adapt with a high degree of exploration.

'Orchestrated cooperation' (ibid: 1011) offers a better balance of exploration and exploitation, where flexibility is recognised as a necessity, but managed with careful planning and structure in order to gain benefit from exploitation (e.g. routines and time tracking). Indeed, two of our respondents (UK Senior Lecturer 1 and Professor 2) referred to setting boundaries and establishing routines that helped balance work commitments and time with family. Friday night was designated 'e-mail free', and holidays were 'sacred' time away from work.

Concerning relationships with friends, the respondents expressed a lack of social contact in terms of temporal distance (not spending time together) and relational distance (lack of intensity in interaction). Many acknowledged the negative implications that striving to manage relationships and achieve work-life balance had on their job satisfaction.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

*Characterizations*

We discerned three identity-clusters that shaped the characterizations emerging from our analysis: high performers, core workers and the disgruntled.

The first cluster, *high performers*, comprises high achievers who had mixed well-being outcomes. For example, Professors 1 and 2 in the UK engaged in more exploration at work and benefited from exploitation at home; consequently, their work performance and job satisfaction were high. They reported no specific health concerns, but suffered from poor relationships at home. Professor 2 and the Lecturer, Sweden, also exhibited characteristics relevant to this cluster. Professor 2 engaged in more exploration at work, but presented a balance between exploration and exploitation at home.  His work performance and job satisfaction were high, but he had suffered poor health in the form of burnout.  He described his relationships as satisfactory. While the Lecturer also engaged in more exploration at work and presented a balance of exploration and exploitation at home with high performance and job satisfaction, his health and relationships were both poor.  However, in spite of their overall job satisfaction, academics in this cluster acknowledged the negative implications for well-being, with their health *and* relationships most likely to suffer. High performers benefitted from exploration at work and the flexibility offered them by supportive spouses at home, or from alternating the support when the need arises.

Focus on work and achievement orientation point to gendered identify work that serves a dual purpose: on the one hand, in male dominated occupations (such as construction) and work-

life boundary-spanning academic work many networking opportunities necessary for securing good job prospects and career advancement reinforce the traditional male role model – that of a breadwinner – and thus tightly binds the academics with their work. On the other hand, "male bonding" and "brotherly competition" (after Vehviläinen et al, 2010) amongst the networks produce feelings of belonging and sense of achievement, which shape job satisfaction.

The second cluster, *core workers,* comprises academics that tended to use exploitation combined with good performance and well-being outcomes. The most positive experience within this cluster was evidenced by UK Senior Lecturer 1. He achieved some balance between exploration and exploitation at work and at home, but we noted that he sometimes used more exploitation in the context of work. He performs well at work and reported good well-being outcomes. Associate Professor 1 in Sweden and Lecturer 3 in the UK reported using exploitation at work and at home. Their performance at work was good, and their well-being outcomes were mixed: poor job satisfaction, minor health concerns, and satisfactory relationships. UK Lecturers 1 and 2 used exploitation at work and engaged in exploration at home. These part-time lecturers were employed in teaching-only roles, and may have felt their contribution was limited compared with their full-time colleagues given the prestige of the organisational narrative on research related work. Thus, their performance at work tended to be average and they experienced poor job satisfaction with the academic part of their work, but reported good health and relationships. Associate Professor 2, Sweden, juggled work and relationships, both of which could be improved, but he expressed no overt ill-health problems and strategically used exploitation to achieve his aims.

While the high performers used exploration, core workers used exploitation. Interestingly, they exhibited the most beneficial well-being outcomes in terms of health and relationships, but this tended to be at the expense of meaningful and fulfilling work engagement. A relationship between exploration and job satisfaction on the one hand, and exploitation and good health and relationships on the other is emerging.

The third cluster comprises the *disgruntled*: those that reported poor well-being outcomes, regardless of whether they used exploration or exploitation. Professors 1 and 3, Sweden, used more exploration at work, and mostly exploitation with some exploration at home. Their performance at work did not meet their ambitions or their aims, their job satisfaction and health were poor, but they had good relationships outcomes. UK Senior Lecturer 2 and the Assistant Professor in Sweden tended to use exploitation at work. The Assistant Professor was struggling to fulfil all his teaching and supervision tasks according to the high ambitions he had set, but felt he was failing. He also reported poor well-being outcomes. The academics in this cluster had no job satisfaction, suffered from poor work-related health, and experienced poor relationships. This cluster suggests that the relationship between exploitation and good health and relationships does not hold.

*Comparison: Sweden–UK*

Subtle differences emerged in the accounts of respondents from Sweden and the UK. The respondents talked about their experiences of managing relationships in gendered terms: many UK men had stay-at-home partners, which they tended to rationalise as financially beneficial and advantageous for the children. There is little evidence of reflection about what this situation meant for their partner. The Swedish academics depicted a similar division of labour, but with an interesting difference in discourse and affect. Typically, they were more

inclusive and empathetic to their partners' perspectives. Many Swedish men mentioned 'feeling guilty' about the sacrifices their partners had make to enable their success. Moreover, Swedish respondents were candid about the negative effects of work intensification on their health and well-being, commenting on their inability to adequately fulfil the many demands of their job roles. British respondents tended to attribute their challenges to management systems and pressures, and expressed frustration and anger towards 'the top', thereby externalising their problems. They had to be prompted to speak of family and work-life balance. These differences may be explained by the feminine national culture associated with Sweden, where *'emotional gender roles overlap: both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life'* (Hofstede et al., 2010: 140-144). Overt achievement orientation is more pronounced in the UK, and men appear reluctant to show vulnerability by disclosing possible weaknesses. It is important for future research to gain deeper understanding of how 'new' men, who are situated in different national and organisational cultures, respond to the weakness stigma and the effects on their well-being, job performance and advancement as well as their satisfaction with personal relationships.

### *Theoretical Implications*

Our study responds to recent calls for research into ambidexterity at the level of the individual and extends existing knowledge on behavioural ambidexterity by revealing patterns and connections regarding academic work and well-being outcomes. The high performing academics used exploration at work, underpinned by a strong drive and work orientation, and benefitted from supportive arrangements at home. This combination was critical to their success. All the other academics felt ill-equipped to fulfil the demands for ambidexterity imposed on them, which threatened their central academic contributions: creativity and intellectual input. They often used exploitation at work, especially in their

teaching activities. This compromised their ability to deliver high-performance outcomes due to a devaluing of such activities compared with research-related pursuits. Neither their employers nor the respondents appeared to personally benefit from the focus on exploitation. The mixed well-being outcomes found are cause for concern and attention.

We deepen the understanding of behavioural ambidexterity by linking individual circumstances and work context as key antecedents for behavioural ambidexterity, highlighting the interrelatedness of performance and well-being outcomes. We built on Litrico and Lee's (2008) work on balancing exploration and exploitation in alternative work arrangements, suggesting there are patterns that allow exploration and exploitation to mix or become counterbalanced; they need not always compete (p. 1016). Since this balance is a fragile equilibrium and stressful to manage (ibid), we argue that behavioural ambidexterity cannot be considered solely in the organisational context (and in relation-performance outcomes). We therefore added 'personal circumstances' to our conceptual framework. A more inclusive and balanced framework thus emerges; one that acknowledges the centrality of the employee in achieving behavioural ambidexterity.

Engaging in ambidexterity varied according to the respondents' positions within academia. We observed a continuous pull and push within each individual between personal desires, institutional demands and family domains; daily tensions arise that crave mental and physical energy and effort to resolve. The more senior and entrepreneurial the respondents, the more they tended to use exploration. This is not surprising; however, what prior research has not identified is that exploration builds on judgement and experience as well as resources and support.  Academics at lower levels of the hierarchy typically used exploitative behaviours; partly because these were safer and enabled them to learn 'the ropes', and partly because of the way their work was allocated. These patterns concur with research findings on

professional service firms (see Swart et al. 2016). What complicates matters for academics is that recruitment and selection panels demand evidence of excellence across the domains of research, teaching, entrepreneurship, and administration.

In line with Clarke et al. (2012), we also found that academics tended to comply with the demands made upon them, but their love for the work is being eroded by instrumental and administrative pressure. Thus, it is the conflicting outcomes perspective that more closely aligns with our respondents' experiences of behavioural ambidexterity and well-being. While it is clear that ambidexterity is inherent in the way work is organised in academia – and in theory it offers a variety of tasks ensuring good performance outcomes – the well-being implications seem largely negative. Creativity and intellectual contribution, central to success for both individual and organisational, suffer. This is of concern as intrinsic job satisfaction has traditionally counterbalanced the high effort required of academics and dissatisfaction with the more extrinsic aspects such as terms and conditions of employment and pay (Kinman, 2016).

At the same time, behavioural ambidexterity feeds 'greedy jobs' and demands more time and resources away from the home. If men cannot access organisational support and/ or take advantage of flexibility at work in a way that helps work-life balance, rather than enables work intensification, then their ability to contribute to relationships and family is limited. This in turn reproduces women's position within the family as the primary caregiver and recasts 'new men' as breadwinners.

*Implications for Management Practice*

We conclude that happiness tended to be an outcome of the respondents' accounts about success at work. They had made considerable sacrifices in prioritising work over recreational activities which, in combination with adverse effects of pressure at work, could have serious negative consequences for their well-being in all three domains: happiness, health and relationships. Family relationships mostly operated on a one-way support basis despite respondents having identified as 'new men'; partner/wife (and children) enabled the men to develop and maintain successful careers – often at the expense of family well-being.

These findings implicate management practice in two ways: firstly, academia has very effectively tapped into the workers' affective commitment, and these have a strong intrinsic desire to do well, which in turn reflects positively on their well-being. Yet, tensions were evident in their accounts of work, well-being and the relationship between the two. As Ashcraft and Trethewey (2004) among others maintain, tensions are a regular feature of organisations, and academia is no exception. A prominent tension arises between the respondents' ability to design their work, i.e. their autonomy, versus the high managerial control they perceive. This tension, labelled the autonomy paradox, is common to knowledge workers: the more freedom employees have to design their work, the more they work, whereas the more constrained and controlled they feel by the organisation, the less effectively are they able to work (Michel, 2011). This also reflects enabled intensification whereas flexibility combined with high work demands and high job involvement typically results in more rather than less effort. In relation to ambidexterity, this effect manifests itself in individuals' perceived inability to focus on exploration and increasingly rely in exploitation. The more they use exploitative behaviour, the less autonomous they feel and the less inspiring becomes their work. This downward spiral can be debilitating for both the

individual and the organisation, and is likely to lead to impaired performance and withdrawal behaviours.

In order to encourage commitment and intrinsic motivation, management practice should aim to enhance the creative aspects of ambidextrous work design, which would increase workers' feeling of empowerment. As Patel et al. (2013), drawing on Gibson and Birkinshaw (2004), warn: behavioural ambidexterity is not created through organisational practices no matter how well-intentioned, but rather *'through the flexibility of allocating the time and attention of human resources toward exploration and exploitation'*. To be effective, behavioural ambidexterity should function on two levels: the organisation and the individual. What our data show is that academics perceive strong restrictions on their flexibility and have increasingly less time to fulfil their wide-ranging tasks, which limit the attention they are able to give to each task. The implications are that *they* then feel exploited, and their attention is therefore directed toward exploiting (making the best of the situation by doing what they must), rather than exploring to find new and better solutions. Professors, who have more control over their work design, may choose only to do tasks *they* consider to be legitimate, i.e. those tasks they consider align with their academic role and identity (Semmer et al., 2007).

At the core of the problem is loss of agency; lack of employee voice and autonomy. When an individual has a sense of control and influence in relation to their work –agency– their well-being tends to be more positive. Thus, a way of ensuring more positive well-being outcomes whilst benefiting from ambidexterity would involve managers and academics taking more active roles in work design and affect how work in academia should be accomplished. Higher level changes in the legislative and normative environments are clearly fostering role identity modifications of university workers (Grimaldi et al., 2011), and these should be addressed

collaboratively by academics and their managers. Jain et al. (2009) argue that establishing the micro foundations of academic entrepreneurship, for example, requires closer scrutiny of the university worker as a key contributor to this phenomenon. The importance of agency in health specific well-being outcomes has long been recognised and is underpinned by recent longitudinal research which argues that job demands will be negatively related to mortality under conditions of high control (Gonzalez-Mulé and Cockburn, 2016).

Finally, the relationships-related well-being outcomes reveal gendered implications of behavioural ambidexterity at work and home. We find that exploration beyond work is most commonly used by the female partners of the male academics in our study. This enables the men to focus on work and feeds their greedy jobs while making them physically and/or emotionally unavailable to fulfil roles in their personal life. It also maintains and reproduces traditional gender roles. Given the differences in societal values in Sweden and the UK, it is surprising to find such small differences in the sample. Universities and their HR professionals and line managers play critical roles in promoting socially sustainable work design and thus contributing to achievement of gender equality over the long-term.

***Limitations and Future Research Directions***

Our intention has been to conduct an exploratory, in-depth study of the lived experiences of academic workers. However, we acknowledge that the sample size is limited and gender specific. We sought detailed answers to 'why' questions in an attempt to understand both causes and effects of individual perceptions of work and well-being. Further comparative studies, including countries in both eastern and western Europe as well as in other continents,

would provide interesting data. Moreover, studying larger samples, and including both male and female professionals as well as their partners, may reveal interesting insights and generate comparative data to allow researchers to either confirm that our findings are gender neutral (thus highlighting the organisational and structural issues) or confirm that men struggle to balance work and life/relationship commitments in specific ways. Studying larger samples would also allow the mapping of further categories in relation to 'personal circumstances' – our respondents highlighted partner and family, social networks interests and hobbies, and personal development as the domains that were important to them. Different occupational groups may reveal different priorities. Moreover, it would be useful to investigate to what extent high performers have benefitted from training and development, allowing them to take advantage of the entrepreneurial opportunities open to them and/or to what extent it is the mind-set inherent in person's value system and personality that influences their perception, performance and well-being. Finally, our focus in this study has been on the individual level. Researching managers' and HR professionals' perceptions of behavioural ambidexterity, work performance and well-being outcomes would provide a more holistic picture and lead to deeper understanding of the complexities involved in balancing exploitation and exploration. It is important to focus some attention on considering whether behavioural ambidexterity is predominately an organisational issue or an individual behavioural issue given that the extant literature sends mixed messages.

**Declaration of interest**

In accordance with Taylor & Francis policy and our ethical obligations as researchers, we report that there are no conflicts of interest with any of the Universities or individual research participants relevant to this research reported in this paper.

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## NOTES

[i] For the purpose of this paper this general description suffices. We acknowledge that there is a lot more to be said about the political climate in both countries, but such a discussion is outside the scope of this paper.

[ii] The REF is the system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions. For detailed information please see: https://www.ref.ac.uk/

[iii] For an in-depth discussion about the research methodology, methods, and processes please see (Authors) *Combining gendered strategies, a narrative approach and coaching to examine the effect of behavioural ambidexterity on individual well-being and high performance work, In Wheatley, D. Handbook of Research Methods on the Quality of Working Lives, Edgar Elgar.*