

## **PhD Studentships 2024/25**

### **Centre name: Centre for Organisations and Society**

The Centre takes a critical approach to studying organisational and societal challenges, engaging in collaborative and interdisciplinary work. Our research expertise and interests include organisational ethics; international HRM; employment relations; critical management studies; equality, diversity and inclusion in the workplace; precarious work and its future; platform/gig work and its impact; interactive service work (emotional and aesthetic labour); post-pandemic forms of working; and discursive approaches to understanding work.

Please get in touch with the potential supervisors named below before submitting your application.

### **Proposed research topic 1**

Title of proposed research topic:

Potential supervisors:

[Professor Peter Hamilton](#)

[Professor Onno Bouwmeester](#)

### **Developing a Rhetorical Account of Moral Disengagement.**

There are numerous global challenges that are addressed in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's). Reaching these goals will potentially affect business models that were successful in the past, but which may not be considered sustainable for the future. Industries affected include the fossil fuel industry, Agri business, the food process industry, the tobacco industry, the tourism industry and many more. Prior behaviours and actions will need to be changed to contribute to SDG goals. These industries are however powerful lobbyists that seek to maintain the status quo or to moderate change in ways that ensure their business models stay profitable. The debates centre around long term versus short term benefits, or inclusion of narrow versus broad stakeholder groups, and societal effects that are minimized or maximized. One approach through which we can examine businesses response to SDG is through the concept of moral disengagement (Eriksson & Svensson, 2016). Concerned with how people transgress and absolve themselves of immoral conduct, as initially developed by Bandura (1990) we can extend the notion that ethical standards can be obviated from the individual level to the organisational level (Newman et al., 2020; White et al., 2009).

While Bandura (2018) has written on the 'rhetoric and reality' of moral disengagement, and although the development of the concept has been labelled as linguistic devices (Schaefer and Bouwmeester 2021) there is a paucity of studies that have examined moral disengagement through the prism of rhetoric. This is surprising since a rhetorical lens on moral disengagement tactics fits with arguments to minimize consequences or moral justification arguments that could reframe unsustainable business behaviour as still being necessary to keep the economic system running (Perelman 2020). Exceptions include rhetorical studies that have identified various moral disengagement strategies and mechanisms in Presidential speeches (Cartledge et al., 2015) and

online racist acts (Faulkner and Bliuc, 2016). In organisation studies the rhetoric of moral disengagement is largely unexamined though urged implicitly by Schaefer and Bouwmeester (2021).

The proposed research here aims to study the moral engagement rhetoric of environmental organizations that challenge firms to make their business models more sustainable, and the moral disengagement rhetoric in the responses as to why this is not necessary. While moral disengagement needs to be studied at the organizational and social level, there is a paucity of moral engagement studies, whereas many environmental organizations are quite successful at countering moral disengagement tactics. We want to find out how they do this through competing rhetorical forms.

The study will focus on a selection of public debates in which environmental organisations have been successful in getting leading multinationals to become more sustainable over time, less involved in moral disengagement, and more eager to show their moral engagement beyond greenwashing. Analysis of public discourse will be accompanied by interviews and document analysis of selected cases, with a focus on the best and worst in class multinationals within selected industries.

The research project will aim to establish:

- How environmental organizations have practiced a moral engagement rhetoric and what responses and actions they have triggered from most/least sustainable multinationals.
- Whether and how the more sustainable multinationals have changed their moral disengagement rhetoric into moral engagement rhetoric and action since the SDG's adoption in 2015.

The research is relevant for further developing moral disengagement theory at the organizational level, and for its focus on the counter rhetoric of moral engagement. The study can help environmental organizations to strengthen their rhetoric and presence in public debate. The found strategies may also apply to other organisations that aim to challenge forms of moral disengagement. For the study of rhetoric, it is a new field of application, and a way to become more relevant as a method in the social sciences. We welcome applicants excited to work on a topic of global significance through the prism of rhetoric and discourse to help further our understanding of a key public policy issue.

## References

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- Eriksson, D., & Svensson, G. (2016). The process of responsibility, decoupling point, and disengagement of moral and social responsibility in supply chains: Empirical findings and prescriptive thoughts. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 134: 281-298.

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## **Proposed research topic 2**

**Title of proposed research topic: Gendering hospitality work through engaged and engaging research**

Potential supervisors:

[Owain Smolović Jones](#)

Owain's research focuses on leadership to enhance equality, diversity and inclusion. He draws on theory from critical geography, feminism and political theory to adopt a critical approach that draws out the rich power-resistance dynamics of organisations.

[Cat Spellman](#)

Cat's research interests include topics around the experience of work, particularly low-wage and precarious work, and gendered experiences of work. Cat's methodological expertise is in qualitative research, for example ethnography and participatory research.

The hospitality industry is the UK's third largest employer and one of the fastest growing job markets (UK Hospitality, 2024). Hospitality can constitute the very identity of a place, with some towns and areas of cities becoming synonymous with a type of hospitality - e.g. theatre districts like London's West End, fine dining hubs like Padstow in Cornwall, specialist food neighbourhoods like Chinatown in Newcastle or the 'Curry Mile' in Manchester, etc. Whilst the UK Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy recognises the importance of the sector not just for the economy but also for its social value, the pandemic triggered a number of challenges in terms of business contingency and resilience (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2023). A contradiction is evident in the fact that hospitality - despite adding so much value socially and economically - is also systematically under-valued. It offers low pay, with a Resolution Foundation report (2020) finding that it offered the lowest hourly median pay in the UK. Furthermore, a report showed that during and post-pandemic hospitality workers found themselves increasingly subjected to unfair working conditions such as abuse from both customers and managers, whilst feeling unable to report abuse or challenging behaviours and environments due to the cultural conditions of the sector (Hadjisolomou et al. 2022).

Although women represent the majority of the hospitality industry, studies show that their experience continues to be characterised by male dominated values and norms (Dashper, 2020; Silva & Couto, 2023). Women working in hospitality face ongoing challenges such as a persisting gender pay gap (PWC, 2019) and occupational segregation in which women are often assigned to service and more domestically oriented tasks (Silva & Couto, 2023). Whilst gendered perspectives on hospitality work are emergent, the literature is scarce on the gendered lived experience of workers: for example, on assault and harassment in the workplace (Morgan & Pritchard, 2019) and the role of gendered stereotypes in women's experiences in hospitality settings (Mooney, 2020). For example, Pills et al. (2021) highlight the significance of experiential factors of inviting, care, and comfort in

shaping experiences in service-oriented environments such as theatres, which are undeniably interlinked with service oriented tasks commonly associated with female workers. Insight into the embodied experiences of women workers in these settings, particularly considering the complex challenges faced by the sector, is however lacking. In short, more studies that engage with the lived experiences of hospitality workers from a gendered perspective are sorely needed. Furthermore, study in this area has the potential to be engaging for policy and practice - informing UK hospitality working practices, helping to develop an agenda for greater gender equality and more inclusive workplaces in one of the UK's most valuable and meaningful industries.

We welcome applications from prospective students who can enliven knowledge of the gendered nature of hospitality work, through engaged and engaging research. Proposals could include - but are not restricted to one or more of the following:

- Ethnographic explorations of occupations that are under-researched, offering insight from sustained and embedded engagement in a workplace.
- Proposals that foreground embodied, lived experience, drawing in theory and empirical analysis to help us understand how bodies are disciplined, but also asserted and made to matter.
- Perspectives that apply theory from critical geography to meaningfully engage with gendered hospitality work. Such proposals could offer relational views of space (Massey, 2005), exploring how gendered norms are enforced through the spaces of work, but also how workers re-craft space in ways that enhance dignity, solidarity and liberation (Smolovic Jones et al, 2022). Proposals in this area could also draw in perspectives from economic geography, providing rich analyses of the spatial networks that maintain and challenge the gendered economic inequalities inherent in hospitality (Johns et al, 2024).
- Proposals drawing on queer theory could illuminate the experiences of LGBTQ+ people, or people who defy heteronormativity within hospitality work (Rumens et al, 2019). Such studies could engage with the emotions of hospitality work, exploring how norms of happiness/unhappiness, or other forms of feeling offer a queering of gendered norms (Ahmed, 2010 and 2014).
- Accounts of hospitality work where class is prominent, such as workplaces where low-paid and precarious women workers serve prosperous customers.
- Intersectional approaches that explore and challenge normative constructions of hospitality workers along vectors of disability, race, age, class and sexuality.
- First-hand accounts of attempts to unionise and/or lead hospitality workers to resist from a gendered perspective.

## References

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### **Proposed research topic 3**

#### **Leadership to (re)build within and after armed conflict**

Supervisors:

[Professor Owain Smolović Jones](#)

Owain's research focuses on leadership to enhance equality, diversity and inclusion. He draws on theory from critical geography, feminism and political studies to adopt a critical approach that draws out the rich power-resistance dynamics of organisations.

[Professor Jamie Callahan](#)

Jamie's research explores issues of power and privilege in relation to marginalised groups' experiences of leadership, emotion management, and organisational contexts, with an interest in how forms of activism can deconstruct traditional power structures. She grounds her work in critical pedagogy, critical management, and feminist studies.

The number of deaths caused by armed conflicts reached the highest level for 30 years by the end of 2023 (Ahmed, 2024). Images of suffering we had hoped were consigned to history are now ubiquitous. Alongside climate change, it is leadership to bring peace that should preoccupy our thinking more than any other focus.

Some guidance may be at hand in the nascent body of work exploring leadership for peacebuilding (Khalil and Hartley, 2022). However, the sheer scale of destruction wrought in recent years may require radical and existential epistemologies that diverge from established theorising, to include

offering alternatives to traditional conceptions of leadership, such as the leaderlessness of social movements (Keshtiban, Callahan and Harris, 2023). Writing in relation to the prospect of catastrophic and irreversible climate disaster, but relevant to considerations of lasting peace, leadership scholar Jonathan Gosling (2016) asks how one might lead in ‘situations that are radically discontinuous’, where ‘everything by which value was assessed [is] thrown into doubt, facts known with absolute certainty revealed as illusory almost from one moment to the next’ (p.36). Any form of leadership that seeks peace in such a context may need to not only deal with generations of trauma and violence but an international order of human rights that seems to be in tatters.

Certainly this is a time that demands leadership informed by an ethics of care (Tomkins, 2020), one capable of reviving democratic accountability and voice (Care Collective, 2020; Gilligan, 2023; Segal, 2023; Tronto, 2013), recognising all humans as interdependent. Indeed, the trauma of our time raises the possibility that radical leadership may be most effective through subtle forms of activism (The Kintsugi Collective, 2021, 2023). Any research in this area will need to reckon with the materiality of conflict – upon the body (Ford et al, 2017), its injuries but also its potentials for connection and compassion (Ahmed, 2006; Pullen and Vachhani, 2021), sensitive to the particularities of gendered and racialised experience; in devastated geographies but also governmental and corporate spaces of international political and economic power (Smolović Jones, 2022; Smolović Jones et al, 2024); and of course in the economic circuits that fuel, but may be redirected to heal, conflict.

Such leadership will need to operate at multiple scales, all of which are valid foci for research – the micro, community level of local neighbourhoods through to the macro of the geopolitical order. Proposals at any scale will be considered. We particularly invite qualitative proposals that seek to enrich knowledge of the lived experiences of a leadership to rebuild.

We therefore invite applications that address in one way or another, the pressing question: How can leadership (re)build a shattered world?

## References

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Potential Supervisor: [Professor Stefanie Reissner](#)

Current interests include:

- Flexible / hybrid / remote working and how this affects people’s working practices, wellbeing and identities.

Potential Supervisor: [Professor Jo McBride](#)

Current interests include:

- Precarious working and work life balance
- Universal credit changes and their impact on those in insecure work