This is a repository copy of *The limitations of the theory and practice of mobilization in trade union organizing*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/129555/

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

The limitations of the theory and practice of mobilizati7on in trade union organizing

Jane Holgate

University of Leeds

Abstract

Since the publication of *Rethinking Industrial Relations* in 1998, John Kelly's mobilization theory has been used by many scholars attempting to understand union organizing—often using specific campaigns to unpack and analyse various elements of the theory that help to explain the success or failure of collective mobilization. We review this literature and highlight the major areas of interest from the book—injustice, framing, and leadership— and the contribution to industrial relations research. We find that the terms mobilizing and organizing are used interchangeably, which, we argue, is problematic and has led to confusion about what is actually happening in unions. Unpacking the difference between the two terms can help to explain limitations in the way mobilization theory has been used by scholars, and, at the same time, deepen our understanding of why unions have not been particularly successful in reversing their decline despite the 'turn to organizing' over the last few decades.

Key words

Framing, injustice, leadership, mobilizing theory, deep organizing, trade unions

Introduction

That Kelly's 1998 book *Rethinking Industrial Relations* has been well-read is without doubt— it has been cited over 1,400 times in scholarly writings[1] since its publication. Kelly's mobilization theory identifies under which conditions 'individuals are transformed into collective actors willing and able to create and sustain collective organization and engage in collective action against their employer' (1998: 38). The book then outlines a theory of how that collective organization and action takes place, and the opportunities and constraints presented by the wider context. Given the

---

[1] Google Scholar shows 1433 citations on 22 March 2018.

political landscape at the time of Kelly's writing, it was an important moment in industrial relations scholarship and in an in-depth review shortly after its publication, Martin (1999: 1208) argued that Kelly's mobilization theory offered great strength to understanding collective action:

> *First, it generates researchable propositions about the structural conditions under which collective organizations might be expected to develop, while at the same time recognising the central importance of agency. Second, it focuses upon power, and responses to the differential distribution of power, as the central dynamic of industrial relations. Third, it recognises the importance of political, social, and economic factors in the development of collective action, relating them to each other in a systematic manner. Forth, it provides an open-ended approach to the future of trade unionism.*

Many of these issues have been picked up in the academic industrial relations literature using mobilization theory, although some to a greater degree than others: power, for example, and the importance of political, social, and economic factors in the development of collective action, have not received the same attention as structural conditions or agency. Martin (1999) made an important observation soon after Kelly's book was published, that mobilization theory could provide a useful analytical approach to understanding renewal and the future of trade unionism. We agree that it still can, but it would be a much more useful systematic tool if there were a clearer conceptual understanding of what academics and practitioners meant by the term mobilization.

Our central argument here is that both in the original text, and in many subsequent applications of Kelly's mobilization theory, there is a tendency to conflate two related, but distinct, concepts: mobilizing and organizing, and also that time and experience suggests that new definitions are now necessary. One distinction we make is that the starting point for mobilizing is the utilization of power resources *already available*, whereas organizing begins by asking where the power is that is *needed* to effect change and then works backwards to figure out a systematic strategy to develop those resources needed to win. Put another way, mobilizing is most often limited to activating an existing base of support (usually union members in the case of industrial relations), whereas *deep* organizing involves engaging and activating people who may not initially agree but who, through a process of collective organizing and the development of grassroots leaders, begin to self-identify as part of a community with a shared objective in seeking to challenge injustice. The distinction also extends to a difference in the use and understanding of power: while it is possible to win concessions by mobilizing a minority, a union's power is much more clearly demonstrated when a large ('super') majority of workers is organized, actively showing support

for the cause. The latter is achieved by a systematic power analysis of allies and enemies to understand how to build support and create leverage to weaken the opponent.

Han (2014) defines the difference between mobilizing and organizing in a more concise way by referring to the former as 'transactional activism' and the latter as 'transformational activism'. In a mobilizing approach 'participation is conceptualized as a transactional exchange between an activist and the association [union]' where tasks requested are 'strictly limited in their time commitment and require minimal effort on the part of the activist' (95). In comparison, in an organizing approach 'the goal is not only to get work out of the activist in the short-term but also to invest in developing the activist's capacity to act' (96) in the long-term and this is done through on-going leadership identification and the teaching of power by working collectively with others in the union and beyond.

In making our argument, we are not criticising the central pillar of mobilization theory and its contribution. Rather, we are urging industrial relations scholars to think more systematically about the distinction between 'deep' organizing and 'shallow' mobilizing, or Han's (2014) 'transactional activism' and 'transformative activism', and how it affects the analyses undertaken, the conclusions reached, and the implications for practitioners. To do this, we reviewed 52 published research articles that apply Kelly's mobilization theory in the context of trade union organizing activity. Our findings suggest that future scholarly analysis would benefit from a clearer distinction between these two terms, and thus we adopt an approach that sets mobilizing and organizing as two different and distinct activities within unions and other social movements (McAlevey, 2016).

Kelly's Mobilization Theory in its Historical Context

In explaining why there has been a lack of consistent clarity between the two concepts of organizing and mobilization, it is important to note the publication date of *Rethinking Industrial Relations*. The book was published in year one of the first Labour government after 18 years of Conservative Party dominance of UK politics. Those 18 years had seen sweeping industrial relations reform, large-scale strike action in industries such as coal mining and printing, violent confrontations between the State and unions, resulting in a political, economic and social context that was deeply hostile to trade unions and collective action. The election of a Labour government in 1997 brought an almost immediate shift in the approach of the State to regulating industrial relations. Of most significance to the ideas presented in *Rethinking Industrial Relations*

was legislation introducing statutory processes allowing trade unions recognition for collective bargaining, and, at that time, that legislation was already being discussed, and the trade union movement was preparing for it. Those preparations included establishing training programmes for union staff at national level (see Heery, et al., 2000 for a discussion of the establishing of the TUC's Organising Academy) and developing campaigns at a local level (Heery, et al., 2003, Gall, 2005, Holgate and Simms, 2008).

In this context, attention of both practitioners and academics was focused towards developing campaigns that attracted members and demonstrated union effectiveness in the workplace and beyond. Most of these were referred to as 'organizing campaigns', and indeed some unions did organize, but many were mobilizations of workers who were already union members in order to (re)gain union recognition rights for collective bargaining. Even though the legislation stated that only a simple majority of workers (51%) was needed to vote in favour of recognition, these simple majorities, however, leave a large part of the workplace unorganised.

Importantly, *Rethinking Industrial Relations* offered a 'go to' theoretical framework within which to analyse these developments. The empirical studies that followed the publication of the book have added important detail to our understanding of the micro-processes of union activities, and some have linked these to wider macro-developments, but without distinguishing, however, between the evolving conceptual differences of deep organizing and shallow mobilizing as set out by McAlevey in her book 'No Shortcuts' (2016), and expanded upon in the section below.

Mobilization and organizing in perspective

Effective power, as McAlevey argues, is evidenced by US unions being able to demonstrate 'super majorities' of *workers* supporting action, not simply mobilising the already supportive union *members*, who might indeed be a minority of the workforce (as in the UK in relation to strike ballots). 'Mobilizing'—or 'moving workers into activity' – is a necessary step in the process of organizing, but not all organizing work seeks to create a mass mobilization. While 'mobilizing' is an important tool and activity *within* organizing, it is not, on its own, organizing.[2] To be more precise, a focus on just mobilization risks creating a movement that has little sustainability. At its

---

[2]   To clarify and restate - here we refer to mobilizing (i.e., moving workers into activity) as a tactic that can be part of a deeper organizing approach rather than mobilizing as a strategic approach in itself, which is clearly distinct from deep organizing.

most problematic, mobilization can create an illusion of strength (when activists are able to temporarily compensate for the inactivity of members or the wider workforce), but is unable to be sustained because of a lack of *power* that comes with mass supportive activity. Indeed, we argue that it is conceptually useful to understand deep organizing as a specific strategy to build power to win worker demands, often through strike action.

This is not to deny the important potential—and sometimes reality —of some collective mobilizations. Visible mobilizations are capable of creating a context that shifts the public discussion and can sometimes be enough to create wins. The Occupy movement and the more recent Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the U.S. are examples of how protest can highlight inequality and discrimination. Strikes and union recognition mobilizations are examples in the arena of industrial relations. Kelly's particular application of mobilization theory to industrial relations helpfully refocused attention on these visible worker actions, but focused only relatively briefly on the organizing activities that underpin decisions to act or that make mobilization possible.

In this article, deep organizing is a theory about how to win majority strikes, and is taken to refer to the long-term day-to-day grassroots activities, often undertaken by trade unions, but sometimes by other community groups, to effect change. Organizing draws on the concepts of collective interests (in the context here, mainly of labour and capital) and the agency of key actors (workers, unions) to challenge capital that are central to mobilization theory, but it is a much wider range of activity than end stage mobilization. Crucial in a deep organizing approach is the need to have a theory of change (strategy) about how workers might confront and rebalance the power of capital. Early on, this requires a power analysis of the strengths and weakness of both workers and the forces reigned against them. A decisive factor in deep organizing is the extent to which it is possible to broaden the base of activity (by increasing members or activists) and identifying new leaders and their capacity to act to increase the power resources of workers. It is about organic leaders who are trusted and respected by their co-workers converting opponents or non-members into active supporters of the cause. This is something missing in mobilization which tends to rely on already-members or 'the usual suspects' to just turn up to protests or a one-off activity, but this, on its own, may not build the relationships that are necessary for developing capacity, power and grass-roots leadership that is sustainable in the long-term. In mobilizing, action by members is often directed by staff and the measure of success is the numbers taking action, whereas in deep organising support is provided

by staff who train, coach and mentor, workplace leaders who can engage their fellow workers in activity, thus building a greater depth of support for the union. As a quick fix, mobilizing can be successful, but it is seldom, on its own, *transformative* or effective in changing the balance of power in the workplace.

Kelly's use of mobilization and organizing in *Rethinking Industrial Relations*

Drawing on the work of social movement theorists such as Tilly (1978), McAdam (1988), Klandermans (1988), and Gamson (1992), Kelly puts mobilization at the heart of his theoretical proposals. In applying these theories to industrial relations and trade unionism he argues that in order for workers to define their interests as a collective, there needs to be a sense of dissatisfaction about breached values and norms. In the process of moving towards the development and articulation of collective interests, those dissatisfactions must be framed as illegitimate and attributed to an agentic other party—usually, in industrial relations, management—and then put forward as a set of demands. Leaders are essential in that process, although Kelly gives little detail about who he understands leaders to be. Mobilization can only then occur when a collective group (say, workers) perceive an injustice which is framed as such and attributed to another group, say managers. Whether or not mobilization occurs depends on the opportunity and judged effectiveness of acting. This cost-benefit analysis can be affected by many factors including the perceived likely risks, for example danger of counter-mobilization, and possible financial and personal costs—including a calculation of whether action will make the workplace a more or less attractive place to work.

Kelly (1998: 37-8) presents the forms of collective action that are the focus of his discussion and theorisation: strikes, overtime bans, go-slows, works-to-rule, petitions, lobbies, collective appeals, and 'the many other forms of non-cooperation and threats to employer legitimacy…' There is a centrally important point here; they are, in the main, mobilizations. They are all *moments of action* in the day-to day grind of industrial relations and trade union representation. Kelly does not claim that mobilization theories should, or even could, explain the broader and long-term challenge of recruiting and organizing workers into unions. His focus is on worker collectivism, and specifically collective mobilization, as a mechanism for union members to use their collective power to pursue their interests and challenge injustice. The focus on mobilization was explicitly intended to move debate away from the descriptive and institutional focus of industrial relations into a realm that gave greater conceptual and theoretical clarity to agency (1998: 15). In doing so, Kelly had an explicit agenda to put power dynamics at the heart of his theorisation, but this is something that

has still not received much analysis in the industrial relations literature we reviewed, and specifically the literature on union organizing/renewal (1998: 9).

That said, broader issues of union organizing are not absent from *Rethinking Industrial Relations*. Within Kelly's analysis the levels of membership and density of union representation are important factors for workers in judging the likely costs and benefits of mobilization. Drawing on Tilly (1978), Kelly argues that these are important variables in helping understand collective organization and action, but that 'we need to look more deeply and try to gauge the extent to which members identify with the organization and the degree of interaction, or density of social networks, amongst members' (Kelly 1998: 37). In other words, he refers not just to structural aspects such as of union density, but to more qualitative aspects of union organization. Importantly, however, he pays little attention to *how* unions can achieve this. Rather it is taken to be one of the contextual factors that is required *before* workers engage in effective collective mobilization.

In sum, *Rethinking Industrial Relations* is mainly focused on understanding the dynamics of collective action, in particular on *mobilizing* people who are, in the main, already trade union members. In taking this approach, the broader context of union organizing is taken to be a contextual factor that contributes to judgments about the likely effectiveness (or not) of collective action.

McAlevey's use of mobilizing and organizing

While McAlevey does not specifically address Kelly's mobilization theory, she sets out why a distinction between the two concepts of mobilizing and organizing is important in understanding the way that workers develop their capacity to challenge injustice and win concessions. Her thesis is that each approach has a set of common traits that sets them clearly apart; they are not opposites, just very different methods of organizing workers. She begins, as others have done before (Simms and Holgate, 2010) , by posing the important questions of 'what are unions organizing for?' and 'what is the purpose of the union?'. This, and two other important factors— the way that power analysis defines the direction of the action, and the way the union is led and governed—distinguishes the two approaches.

McAlevey argues that mobilizing approaches risk having low day-to-day participation of members, with the exception of one-off mobilizations such as marches, strikes or rallies. Even when these activities *do* occur they tend not to have majority participation of the workforce. The focus of these mobilizations is usually to improve material conditions—such as winning wage growth—rather

than broader reasons, such as to improve job quality or professional standards. Although the form of this approach to collective trade union representation varies in particular national and sectoral contexts, it is familiar. By focusing on occasional moments of collective member protest (mobilizations) and allowing professional union staff to undertake most of the on-going day-to-day work of the union, the union asks relatively little from its members. Although a lot of effort is put into engaging members towards the occasional mobilizations, the main focus of activity is led by union staff and lawyers who direct and inform the workers. Workers themselves play a secondary role, if any, and this is particularly the case in terms of strategy. While union staff are able to mobilize members, most often these are the already committed 'dedicated activists who show up over and over at every meeting and rally for all good causes, but without the full mass of their co-workers or community behind them' (McAlevey, 2016: 10).

McAlevey contrasts this with a 'deep organizing' approach which is characterised by high levels of participation by union members who decide for themselves the issues around which they will organize: 'organizing places the agency for success with a continually expanding base of ordinary people, a mass of people never previously involved' (p.10). While material concerns such as pay are often the key issue for workers, the labour process, or quality of service, or care, is also of considerable importance to workers who just want to be proud of their work and do their job well. The purpose of the union is therefore to reflect these concerns, which may relate to the workplace and beyond, with an understanding that union power needs to be utilised to increase both workplace and non-workplace standards. McAlevey describes this as 'whole-worker organizing' where workers, rather than staff, are the primary actors in an organizing union and are networked and embedded in their own communities from where they can draw further support and increase their power resources. As a result, they develop greater relationships of trust within the workforce. These 'organic worker leaders' are developed to be key organizers for the union and have a strong following at work and perhaps in their communities as well. Broad shop-floor issues are taken into open collective bargaining sessions run by workers themselves, who are able to work out what is needed to force managers to agree to their demands. In this approach, workers figure out through a comprehensive power analysis that super majority strikes can be an effective tactic in affecting change. No public action is taken until the union can demonstrate at least 65 per cent support and the intention is to work towards increasing that figure to as close to 90 per cent as possible. All this requires systematic, deep organizing workplace-by-workplace to ensure there is mass participation by members—only this way can a union be sure the issues have the full support of members who are prepared to commit to each other that they will act to achieve their goals.

In a practical example of the differences between the two approaches, McAlevey (2016: 58-59) cites the 1930s Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO) unions as those that understood deep organizing as distinct from mobilizing:

> *The CIO organizing methods incorporated an appreciation of power inside and outside the workplace. They used a systematic approach to recruiting support not only from the shop floor but also from the broader community in which the workers lived. Yet today, most good unions that organize inside the shop mobilize outside it: deep inside, shallow outside. It's as if they can't see the full extent of the battlefield or the vastness of their army…To restore worker power to 1930s levels requires an organizing model inside and outside the shop, based on CIO practice in the 1930s and 1940s but adapted to today's conditions.*

In short, McAlevey's contribution draws attention to the risks of focusing only on mobilization and therefore gives a framework through which to evaluate literature that has used Kelly's mobilization theory. There are, undoubtedly, problematic aspects to the 'vision' of deep organizing developed by McAlevey. Most obviously, shop-by-shop organizing is not always a feasible strategy, particularly in very small workplaces, or in parts of the 'gig' economy. Similarly, mobilizations may be able to give wider meaning and solidarity to the struggles inside individual workplaces. An example here would be the Fight for $15 campaign in the USA, which has been successful in raising the pay of millions of low-wage workers through advocacy and protest, but on its own has done little to build the power of workers themselves to challenge corporations. Clearly any action to increase workers' pay is to be applauded and this was a hugely successful large-scale mobilization, but it is a very different approach from deep workplace organizing and mass recruitment of union members as advocated by McAlevey.

What is important here is that McAlevey's critique of mobilization, and clear articulation of an alternative that she labels deep organizing, provides a helpful framework through which to explore how these concepts have been deployed in empirical research to date. By systematically reviewing published empirical studies, we identify three areas that are central to both Kelly's concept of mobilization and McAlevey's concept of deep organizing: injustice, framing, and leadership. By evaluating studies through the lens of contrast between organizing and mobilizing, this article extends existing analyses of union-building activities in two important ways. First, we make the case that researchers and practitioners need to be far more systematic in their thinking about the distinction between organizing and mobilization. Second, we argue that this lack of

clarity helps explain why the resources and attention given to union renewal activity in recent decades (see, for example Simms, et al., 2013) has perhaps had such limited effect.

Methods

As researchers and writers in the area of union and community organizing we adopted a reflexive methodological approach in this paper. We began with a systematic literature review. Using keyword searches of major academic databases, we identified four academic journals that have published the largest quantity of work in this area: *Work, Employment and Society*, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, the *Industrial Relations Journal*, and the journal of *Economic and Industrial Democracy*. For each, we searched using the terms 'mobilization theory trade union', 'organizing trade union', and 'Kelly mobilization union'. Taking the publication date of 1998 as the cut-off point, and using abstracts and keywords, we identified the 20 most relevant articles from each journal. In practice, not all the journals had 20 relevant articles using mobilization theory. For example, the journal of *Economic and Industrial Democracy* generated 27 results in total but of those only 9 were considered pertinent to our paper (e.g., some of the articles were about partnership and not union organizing and thus were not reviewed in-depth). The relevant articles were reviewed by one of the article authors and summarised using the following headings: 1) abstract, 2) summary purpose of article, 3) contribution to mobilization theory and 4) further comments. In total, 42 articles were reviewed in this way. This was then supplemented by a further search of academic databases using the search terms above. This yielded a further 10 relevant articles in other journals[3]. They were reviewed in the same way.

Reading through this vast literature, we categorized the articles by the main concepts of mobilization theory they drew upon. As a result, we focused on the three key areas of interest authors tend to use from Kelly's theory when discussing union organizing campaigns: injustice, framing, and leadership. In addition, we highlighted how many of these studies conflated 'organizing' and 'mobilization' as concepts using the distinction we make above. By addressing these themes, and by offering more conceptual clarity our aim is to show what a more nuanced approach to using mobilization theory might provide for theoretical and practical understandings of trade union organizing. Clearly, in an article of this length, it is not possible to review each of the 52 articles in any detail, therefore we have chosen to use examples from a selection of the papers to

---

3   These included: Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations, Journal of Industrial Relations, Capital and Class, Employee Relations, Historical Materialism, New Technology, Work and Employment, Journal of Occupational Psychology, Human Resource Management Journal and Irish Journal of Management.

illustrate the ways that we think mobilizing and organizing have been conflated and where it would have been helpful to be more precise in describing the agency in the empirical examples outlined in the case studies.

How have these concepts been operationalized in studies of union organizing?

In our extensive review of the literature using Kelly's 1998 work three areas demand attention as they highlight some of the problematic ways in which organizing and mobilizing have been conflated and the consequences of this conflation for our broader understanding of union activity. We focus on sense of injustice, framing, and leadership, as these are the three areas that emerge most often in published empirical studies using Kelly's book. That is not to say that we dismiss historical context and ideology as important factors when assessing the empirical examples (e.g., Healy and Kirton 2013). Rather, we focus here on these three areas because they offer the richest material to evaluate.

Sense of injustice

The first important element in Kelly's mobilization theory is 'interests'. More specifically, Kelly refers here to the processes of how individuals acquire a sense of injustice ('the conviction that an event, action or situation is "wrong" or "illegitimate"') and how this grievance becomes collectivized. This process of interest collectivization involves attribution (e.g., the employee is able to blame the employer) and social identification (e.g., the employee feels part of a distinct group in opposition to an outgroup), and according to Kelly (1998), leaders are critical in framing the injustices in a way that the employees are able to attribute this to a specific actor and feel part of a group.

As might be expected, injustice was central to many of the studies using mobilization theory to understand union activity (see for example: Healy and Kirton, 2013, Pearson, et al., 2010, Edwards, 2009, Buttigieg, et al., 2008, Gahan and Pekarek, 2013), but this was also where there was critique from authors who argue the notion of injustice needs to be better conceptualised. Healy and Kirton (2013) draw upon Kelly's work to understand the early mobilizing influences on women trade union leaders in the UK and USA. In their research, they found that participation in unions is often based upon social identification with fellow workers, more so than with workplace injustice alone, and this arose from the ideological influences of feminism and political activism of their interviewees. The critique from these authors is that there is a danger of treating injustice—a trigger for mobilization—as a universal (class-based) concept without consideration of race,

gender, disability, sexuality, etc. and the impact this has on feelings of injustice and the propensity to act. Healy and Kirton argue there is an 'underplaying of ideology by foregrounding of injustice' whereby 'gendered and racialized injustices act as causal mechanisms leading to mobilization, but that these are not fully recognised by mobilization theorists' (2013: 727). The collective social identification of the women in this study arose from experiences of racism and sexism—not just workplace grievances—issues not well considered in much of the research on worker activism or union organizing—or indeed mobilization. The authors use the stages of Kelly's mobilization theory to assess the ideological reasons for joining unions, and appear to use the term mobilization to mean joining or 'moving into activity'. At one point, they do make a distinction when they say, 'organisation is an essential component of mobilization' (p.723). However, taking our conceptualisation of the terms as outlined above, we might flip this round to say that mobilization is often the outcome of organising—although in this particular study mobilization of these women workers did not appear to arise from an organizing campaign and was largely individual choice rather than collective decision. What this study perhaps shows is the difference between a deep, whole-worker organizing model and mobilization—even though the authors do not use this terminology. The former approach builds from the bottom-up allowing consideration of the gendered forms of injustices that female workers face, whereas a mobilizing approach in which the injustices are framed by the mostly (white, male) leaders is likely to not recognize the different forms of discrimination many workers face, or they are considered individual injustices that perhaps help to mobilize workers into joining a union.

Similarly, this theme was taken up by Cox et al. (2007) where they applied mobilization theory to explain gendered collective grievances, and explored how it is also a useful theory for considering the absence of collectivism. In the case studies, the authors found that changes to pay and working time as a result of organizational change were identified as grievances, but that these were considered *individual* grievances, and workers did not attribute these to management or the company. This stemmed from a lack of understanding of employment rights (parental leave, the right to time off for domestic emergencies, requests for flexible working), and the consideration of work-life (im)balance as being a personal time-management issue rather than a gendered injustice or union issue—meaning that workers did not look for a collective response to resolve their issues. This was not helped by the fact that the union was weak and treated all complaints as individual rather than collective grievances. Although the main complaints from workers fell generally under the heading of 'family-friendly problems', these were never articulated as such by the union or as shared interests that could be acted upon collectively to formulate demands. The authors conclude

that, 'to advance future understanding of gendered mobilization processes, it may be necessary to extend the boundaries of analysis beyond the workplace, since factors such as union structures, national contexts and legislation governing workplace representation may be more or less conducive to mobilization theory' (p735-736). Importantly, in this case, the lack of deep whole-worker organizing (e.g., making sure women's priorities are voiced) partially led to failed mobilizing efforts.

The articles highlighted from the review of literature show that there is important clarification that can be brought to the empirical material by systematically differentiating between deep organizing and mobilizing as related, but separate, concepts. Making this differentiation highlights that the broader concept of deep organizing (as defined above) is helpful in the practices of union renewal activity because it allows workers to develop broad bases for the injustices they experience. The wider notion of deep organizing encourages union activists and staff to see the 'whole worker' with their complex, overlapping and sometimes contradictory interests, concerns and identities. Mobilizing, by contrast, can trap union activists and staff into asking the question about whether such interests are likely to form the basis of a broad-based mobilization. If the response is negative then those issues are unlikely to be prioritised as a basis for mobilization because they are unlikely to appeal to a wider group. However, McAlevey argues it is necessary to move beyond mobilization theory's narrow articulation of injustice arising from grievances, and instead to focus on 'raising expectations' of workers and creating a sense of hope that they can change the environment in which they work, thus broadening out their demands. In attempting to raise expectations, deep organizing is more likely to ask workers 'which key things would you like to change about your work', rather than to ask, 'do you think you should have a pay rise'?

Framing

While a number of the papers reviewed accepted Kelly's view that the framing of grievances (i.e. how issues are articulated) is an important element of mobilization theory (Wood, 2015, Johnson and Jarley, 2004, Hodder, et al., 2016, Gajewska and Niesto, 2009, Murphy and Turner, 2014), there were a few where this issue was central (Badigannavar and Kelly, 2005, Lévesque and Murray, 2013, Moore and Read, 2006, Heery and Conley, 2006, Gahan and Pekarek, 2013). For example, in Badigannavar and Kelly's research on why one union higher education branch was more successful in mobilizing its members than another, the authors found that in the first branch, they broadened the collective action frame to attract support from outside and took a strong adversarial approach to dealing with management. Looking at the campaign, it was clear that this branch took an

organizing approach by building union density by focusing on non-members, increasing reps, involving people in the organizing committee, etc. As such, this was far more successful than in the second branch, which was less outward looking and where there was no coalition-building and a narrow framing of the issues just around a small section of the branch. In the second branch the campaign was framed around the issues of contract workers and it was not integrated into a campaign encompassing the main union branch thus leaving these workers weak and isolated. Therefore, this example suggests that thinking through an effective way of framing grievances by widening the scope of supporters and ensuring there is a clear understanding of 'who is to blame' makes a significant difference to mobilizing versus organizing workers into action.

Widening the frame of injustice to assist the collectivisation of workers is also considered by Blyton and Jenkins (2013) where they specifically use the analytical framework of mobilization theory to compare different levels of activism in two similar garment factories. These authors found that the way injustice (in this case factory closure) was framed made a significant difference to the extent and level of mobilization for industrial action. In one of the factories the union extended its collective action frame by appealing to the wider community for support. As the dominant employer in the area this factory was of importance for the local economy. Mobilization (and organizing) in this case was much easier than in the other factory as a result, and thus the authors suggest that:

> *…no matter how strong organization may be at the workplace level, for mobilization to be sustained and effective, it must have access to external support; isolation of the aggrieved population undermines both the likelihood and efficacy of organized collective action. Thus, we argue that it is in the detailed examination of the interaction between the micro and macro levels of mobilization that we begin to understand why one workforce mobilizes and another does not.* (Blyton and Jenkins, 2013: 735)

According to the authors, there is a tendency for mobilization theory to be considered as a single process, whereas it would benefit from greater weight being applied to the impact of interaction between the workers and the workplace, and wider social structures in which these operate (i.e. the social, economic and political environment). Reframing worker injustice as a community issue, as was the case here, could, the authors argue, provide the opportunity for workers operating from a position of weakness to increase bargaining leverage and power by organizing with others outside of the workplace.

Our findings from reading this paper is that the authors tend to use the terms organizing and mobilizing interchangeably when instead the terms could be more accurately applied to the different forms of activity taking place in their two case studies. It is possible to distinguish between the micro and macro levels of *organizing* in one campaign (Burberry) and the micro-*mobilization* of protest in the other campaign (Dewhirst). Workers at Burberry had a tight-knit social structure inside the factory and were, through innovative leadership and organization at the micro and macro levels, able to organize external solidarity through effective framing of their issues. The same process at Dewhirst, however, did not happen because, despite the anger from the workers, they had little external support from the wider community and 'there was no-one with the resources necessary to help frame and organize mobilisation outside the plant' (p748) – instead they responded with micro-levels of mobilization via worker protests and individual sabotage of factory equipment, similar to what Taylor and Bain (2003) have called 'directionless subversion'.

In another study, Gahan and Pekarek (2013) focus on the weakness within industrial relations research that has tended to assume that injustice at work serves as *the* central principle for mobilizing workers. However, these authors argue that other social movements have used alternative master frames to injustice to link together people with common interests[4]. Seeking to extend Kelly's theory they use a 'frame alignment' process to demonstrate what unions need to do to effectively mobilize their members. Starting with frame bridging, this builds and connects individuals and organizations, then frame amplification and extension, which clarifies the collective values of the group and draws in new participants, before frame transformation, which shows how, instead of relying on traditional repertoires of industrial action, new approaches (for example, civil disobedience) can be deployed to a greater effect. In working through these processes, leaders, members, and supporters may argue and dispute which collective action frame is the most compelling, but in doing so may end up with a stronger and more effective frame resonance that binds people together in a much stronger campaign than when groups are acting alone. In other words, by taking on a more inclusive, participatory grassroots approach unions are likely to engage in deeper organizing strategies rather than more limited mobilizing tactics. We argue that Gahan and Pakarek's work also offers opportunities to understand the framing process as an opportunity to move towards deep organizing which allows union renewal far beyond moments of mobilization.

---

[4] The example used by the authors is that of 'labour movement 'greenbackism' [which] portrayed workers and employers as producers with common interests, and pitted these against non-producers such as banks' (726).

In summary, then, empirical evidence relating to the framing of injustices highlights a potential risk in conflating organizing and mobilization. This goes beyond semantics. By conflating the two, practitioners risk missing opportunities to broaden and deepen the basis of their union renewal activity and, as a consequence, focus on challenging power only at a short moment in time (the mobilization) rather than as an on-going project of radical power disruption (and perhaps redistribution). For academics, the risk is that mobilization (the moment of action) is fetishized above other forms of activity and the long slog of deep organizing is under-examined and under-theorized.

Leadership

In line with Kelly's theory, a number of the papers reviewed considered the necessity of someone to blame, i.e. attribution, and the role of leadership, as a prerequisite for workers taking action (Buttigieg, Deery and Iverson, 2008, Badigannavar and Kelly, 2005, Cunningham, 2008, Lopes and Hall, 2014, Simms and Dean, 2015). Atzeni (2009), for example, argues that Kelly's mobilization theory is not actually a theory, but rather a framework designed to think through and discuss the stages of union mobilizing, and is therefore less useful as a general theory of collective action. Taking spontaneous and 'unorganized mobilizations' in Argentina as his empirical lens, Atzeni shows that the emergence of leaders (and feelings of injustice) can be a *product* of mobilization rather than a pre-requisite. As such, if leaders emerge *from* mobilization, rather than are a necessary pre-condition *of* mobilization, then he posits that the way leadership is conceptualised in Kelly's theory is problematic. According to Atzeni (2009), Kelly doesn't account for the 'spontaneous mobilizations' he encountered in his own research as these did not follow the linear 'injustice-leadership-action' process outlined in mobilization theory.

This matters, because in mobilization theory (Kelly 1998, 34-36) leaders are argued to be central in the decisions of workers about whether or not to act during the mobilization process. Leaders frame and attribute broad injustices as being the result of actions of a responsible party (often management). Although Kelly does not explicitly states who leaders are or could be—which leaves open the possibility of leaders being both union staff and also workers—there is a clear assumption that they have some kind of specialist knowledge and/or political education. Atzeni's argument is that there are empirical circumstances in which rank and file militants (or organic leaders who have the trust and respect of their colleagues) emerge from mobilization, which is far closer to the ideas of 'whole worker organizing' discussed by McAlevey.

In a more positive take on the role of leadership in mobilization theory, Darlington (2009, 2001) draws upon his studies of left-wing leadership in the UK rail union the RMT to argue that while the political nature of leadership is not well-covered in Kelly's work, the theory is however useful in explaining how left-leaning leaders are a 'contributory catalyst' in framing disputes from social, political and economic perspectives around which workers can mobilize. This aspect is important, as is the role of education and training, in order to develop effective leaders who are able to clearly communicate vision, grievances, and attribution that lead to mobilization or deeper union organizing (Burchielli, et al., 2008). This was further articulated by Cregan et al. (2009) who make a distinction between transactional leaders, defined here as servants of the bureaucracy who service the membership and can mobilize workers for protests, and transformational leaders who have strong respect and trust from their peers, and are thus able to help build and develop social identification among the collective group leading to greater levels of organizing among workers. In this case, grass roots or organic leaders who are deep organizing are able to turn out super majorities for strike action rather than simple majorities that leave a great deal of the workforce passive or hostile. In looking more closely at Darlington's studies of the RMT it is evident that he often uses the term mobilizing when the activity he is describing is actually organizing. For example, the author states that the RMT adopted 'a highly democratic/participatory form of structure and organisation', a 'high degree of devolved activist engagement', high levels of participation by the membership, and a 'reinvigoration of union organisation' (2009: 19-20)—all elements of deep organising. The adoption of this organising strategy has shown that when the RMT membership needs to be *mobilized* into action in relation to strikes, they have been *organized* to respond accordingly. At one point, Darlington (2009: 21) articulates this distinction clearly when he says: 'Such a strike mobilization strategy has been accompanied by the RMT's comprehensive application of a distinct version of the "union organising" model. As we noted earlier, mobilizing is an important activity within organizing, and can often be seen as the visible or public manifestation of organizing, particularly as seen here in relation to strikes. Further, there is often a virtuous circle when organizing leads to successful mobilizing which then adds strength and depth to organizing. Importantly, this demonstrates there is a dynamic relationship between the two forms of activity.

In summary, then, although Kelly makes a distinction between different forms of leadership (e.g. transactional and transformational leaders), this is seldom picked up in subsequent literature on leaders in union campaigns, or in organizing campaigns in practice. Yet, McAlevey argues that this distinction matters as it can highlight one of the key differences between mobilizing and deep organizing. Transactional leaders mobilize in a reactive way, they encourage union members to

pursue objectives via reward, and appeal to short-term self-interest. In comparison, transformational leadership aims to change union culture by being proactive and asking members for ideas. Transformative leaders motivate and empower by appealing to higher ideas, and moral values, asking members to move beyond self-interest and to consider wider group interests as well.

Discussion and conclusion

Rethinking Industrial Relations was written at a time of heightened political pressure on trade unions and the system of industrial relations more broadly. Kelly's mobilization theory specifically analyses the conditions under which workers are likely to act as a collective against an employer-generated injustice. Importantly, however, the likelihood and success of the mobilization relies implicitly on the qualitative strength of the union organization. In other words, to a certain extent, for collective action to take place, there is an assumption that a qualitatively strong organization is already present. In many cases, however, this is not the case and the mobilization efforts may suffer as a result.

We therefore agree with scholars such as de Turberville (de Turberville, 2004, 2007, Carter, 2006) who argue that there is a risk of reading Kelly's mobilization theory as being a largely 'top-down' theoretical framework. Although de Turberville uses mobilizing and organizing interchangeably he makes important points about the three areas of injustice, leadership and framing. Specifically, he draws upon data on employees' sense of injustice and shows that, 'those who attribute injustices to management has fallen from around 23 per cent in 1995 to around 15 per cent in 2002, while only 17 per cent of non-union employees thought that unionism is a solution to such injustices' (de Turberville, 2007 :574). de Turberville's argument is that while workers may feel aggrieved, they do not necessarily know who to blame. He uses the term mobilizing (as well as organizing) to critically refer to a top-down model of trade unionism. Putting aside the language used for a moment, we agree that mobilizing tends, in the case of trade unions, to be top-down and led by union staff. Further, if there is no qualitatively strong union present, the mobilization efforts will likely not be sustainable in the long-term. However, if the union engages in deep, whole-worker organizing, it requires a bottom-up process with members and often new members taking on active leadership roles and deciding the best strategic approach that meets their objectives. It also has the potential to increase the power base available to workers.

The review of empirical studies has illustrated that authors have a tendency to conflate the terms organizing and mobilization. This matters more than simply as a semantic discussion. It matters because a focus on mobilization risks taking a view of union renewal activity that is narrowly focused on the decision of a worker to take part in some kind of collective action. While that is undoubtedly an important part of union activity, it is—we argue—insufficient to create a wider context within which to challenge the power and interests of capital in a sustainable manner—in effect, to use Marx's phrase, to transform workers into a 'class for itself'. It is not the argument here that worker mobilization is unimportant. Indeed, there are many examples where collective actions and mobilizations have pressured employers and governments to shift position on important issues. What is argued here is that the wider context of union organizing—leading to membership growth and renewal—needs to be examined as often and as theoretically rigorously as mobilizations. McAlevey (2016) offers a useful way to differentiate between organizing and mobilization, and also a conceptual framework through which to understand those wider processes of deep organizing— of which mobilizing workers into collective action is a part. Kelly (1998) and McAlevey (2016) share many concepts: the importance of identifying injustices, issues and interests, framing those as collective interests and identifying leaders all feature strongly in both contributions. They also share a focus on the possibility of unions to disrupt power relations in the workplace and beyond. Where they differ is McAlevey's focus on strengthening the wider power base of unions and on growth and sustainability and the power to turn out super majority strikes when necessary. Kelly's focus, by contrast, is on moments of mobilization which can, of course, be extended in time but are nonetheless moments. It is clear that there is evidence of both forms of union activity in the empirical literature surveyed for this article. But by conflating the two, the evidence around what 'works' and what does not is less clear than it might be.

Again, this matters because unions have invested a great deal of time, energy and resources into renewal activity in recent decades and the results have been patchy at best. To develop sustained and sustainable approaches that facilitate long-term renewal, it is clear that focusing on moments of mobilization is not sufficient. Rather, unions need to engage in deeper organizing strategies to become a sustainable counterforce and realize that mobilization is often not enough to challenge the power structures reigned against workers. The 'danger' for unions in taking mobilization theory as a blueprint of how to develop a stronger union is that they risk focusing only on part of the challenge that they face.

Finally, it is important to note that this article should not be read as a rejection of mobilization theory. It was a hugely significant contribution to industrial relations literature at an important moment in time. It focused the attention of both scholars and practitioners on the opportunities for union renewal and offered a theoretically sound and structured way to think about the processes involved. It has proved remarkably resilient because it has found considerable empirical support. By offering this conceptual distinction between organizing and mobilization, we hope to extend the relevance of Kelly's important contribution in ways that are useful to both academics and practitioners in the future.

Bibliography

Atzeni M (2009) Searching for injustice and finding solidarity? A contribution to the mobilisation theory debate. *Industrial Relations Journal* 40, 5-16.

Badigannavar V and Kelly J (2005) Why Are Some Union Organizing Campaigns More Successful Than Others? *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 43, 515-535.

Blyton P and Jenkins J (2013) Mobilizing Protest: Insights from Two Factory Closures. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 51, 733-753.

Burchielli R, Buttigieg DM, and Delaney A (2008) Organizing homeworkers: the use of mapping as an organizational tool. *Work, Employment & Society* 22, 167-180.

Buttigieg DM, Deery SJ, and Iverson RD (2008) Union mobilization: a consideration of the factors Aaffecting the willingness of union members to take industrial action. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 46, 248-267.

Carter B (2006) Trade union organizing and renewal: a response to de Turbeville. *Work, Employment and Society* 20, 415-426.

Cox A, Sung S, Hebson G, and Oliver G (2007) Applying Union Mobilization Theory to Explain Gendered Collective Grievances: Two UK Case Studies. *Journal of Industrial Relations* 49, 717-739.

Cregan C, Bartram T, and Stanton P (2009) Union organizing as a mobilizing strategy: The impact of social identity and transformational leadership on the collectivism of union membership. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 47, 701–722.

Cunningham I (2008) Mobilising workers within inter-organisational relationships in the UK voluntary sector. *Industrial Relations Journal* 39, 191-211.

Darlington R (2001) Union militancy and left-wing leadership on London Underground. *Industrial Relations Journal* 32, 2-21.

Darlington R (2009) Leadership and union militancy: the case of the RMT. *Capital & Class* 33, 3-32.

de Turberville S (2004) Does the 'organizing model' represent a credible union renewal strategy? *Work, Employment and Society* 18, 775-794.

de Turberville S (2007) Union organizing: a response to Carter. *Work, Employment & Society* 21, 565-576.

Edwards G (2009) Public sector trade unionism in the UK: strategic challenges in the face of colonization. *Work, Employment & Society* 23, 442-459s.

Gahan P and Pekarek A (2013) Social Movement Theory, Collective Action Frames and Union Theory: A Critique and Extension. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 51, 754-776.

Gajewska K and Niesto J (2009) Organising campaigns as 'revitaliser' for trade unions? The example of the Lidl campaign. *Industrial Relations Journal* 40, 156-171.

Gall G (2005) *Union Recognition: Organising and Bargaining Outcomes*. London: Routledge.

Gamson WA (1992) *Talking Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Han H (2014) *How Organisations Develop Activists. Civic associations and leadership in the 21st century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Healy G and Kirton G (2013) The early mobilization of women union leaders — a comparative [erspective. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 51, 709-732.

Heery E and Conley H (2006) Frame extension in a mature social movement: British trade unions and part-time work 1967-2002. *Journal of Industrial Relations* 49, 5-2.

Heery E, Delbridge R, Simms M, Salmon J, and Simpson D (2003) Organising for renewal: a case study of the U.K.'s organising academy. *Research in the sociology of work* Vol.11, 79-110.

Heery E, Simms M, Delbridge R, Salmon J, and Simpson D (2000) The TUCs Organising Academy: An assessment. *Industrial Relations Journal* 31, 400-415.

Hodder A, Williams M, Kelly J, and McCarthy N (2016) Does Strike Action Stimulate Trade Union Membership Growth? *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, n/a-n/a.

Holgate J and Simms M (2008) *Ten years on: the impact of the Organising Academy on the UK union movement*. London: Trade Union Congress.

Johnson NB and Jarley P (2004) Justice and union participation: an extension and test of mobilization theory. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 42, 543-562.

Kelly J (1998) *Rethinking Industrial Relations. Mobilization, Collectivism and Long Waves*. London: Routledge.

Lévesque C and Murray G (2013) Renewing Union Narrative Resources: How Union Capabilities Make a Difference. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 51, 777-796.

Lopes A and Hall T (2014) Organising migrant workers: the living wage campaign at the University of East London.

Martin R (1999) Mobilization Theory: A New Paradigm for Industrial Relations? *Human Relations* 52, 1205-1216.

McAdam D (1988) Micro-mobilization contexts and recruitment to activism. *International Social Movement Research* 1, 125-154.

McAlevey J (2016) *No Shortcuts organising for power in the new Guilded Age*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Moore S and Read I (2006) Collective organisation in small- and medium-sized enterprises – an application of mobilisation theory. *Human Resource Management Journal* 16, 357-375.

Murphy C and Turner T (2014) Organising non-standard workers: union recruitment in the Irish care sector. *Industrial Relations Journal* 45, 373-388.

Pearson R, Anitha S, and McDowell L (2010) Striking issues: from labour process to industrial dispute at Grunwick and Gate Gourmet. *Industrial Relations Journal* 41, 408-428.

Simms M and Dean D (2015) Mobilising contingent workers: An analysis of two successful cases. *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 36, 173-190.

Simms M and Holgate J (2010) Organising for what? Where is the debate on the politics of organising? *Work, Employment and Society* 24, 157-168.

Simms M, Holgate J, and Heery E (2013) *Union Voices. Tactics and Tensions in UK Organizing*. Ithaca: New York: Cornell University Press.

Taylor P and Bain P (2003) 'Subterranean Worksick Blues': Humour as Subversion in Two Call Centres. *Organization Studies* 24, 1487-1509.

Tilly C (1978) *From Mobilization to Revolution*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Wood AJ (2015) Networks of injustice and worker mobilisation at Walmart. *Industrial Relations Journal* 46, 259-274.