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Old frames and new lenses: Frames of Reference revisited

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Abstract

The 'frames of reference' concept has been a significant and enduring feature of industrial/employment relations since being developed by Alan Fox; and yet there has been only limited scholarly research seeking to develop the frames. We introduce this special issue by reviewing the extant literature on frames which provides a backdrop to the five article contributions that explore the frames in both new and historical light. The special issues asks the following questions: do the traditional frames continue to provide insights into the perceptions and behaviour of employers and employees? and if not; how might existing frames be broadened by new (or indeed historical) developments and insights? A re-examination of frames of reference is both important and timely given the many changes currently impacting work and employment. Our hope is that by reflecting on and celebrating the influence of Alan Fox on our thinking we can also chart a forward-looking research agenda which continues to use his insights and apply them to the field as well as developing and continuing to engage with them.

Keywords: Frames of reference, unitarism, pluralism, radical pluralism, marxism

Biographical notes

Michael Barry is Professor of Employment Relations at Griffith University. Michael's main research interests are in the formation, behaviour and current activities of employer associations; and in integrating conceptualisations of employee voice across industrial relations and management disciplines. He is currently involved in research examining the mechanisms of employee voice in health care and how this relates to both employee and patient care outcomes.

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The ‘frames of reference’ concept has been a guiding and enduring one since the celebrated work of Alan Fox (1966) (see Heery 2016). Countless courses that introduce students to industrial/employment relations (I/ER) feature a discussion of the distinctions between the traditional unitarist and pluralist frames as outlined by Fox in his early work, and the more radical perspective he later developed (Fox 1974; see also Cradden 2011:5). Typically featured in these discussions is the view that the pluralist frame offers a balance between the unitarist view that both parties in the employment relationship have common interests, and that of the radical/Marxist view that divergent class interests produce unresolvable conflict (eg Hyman 1975). The Pluralist frame sees a shared interest in the employer’s ability to profitably provide long term employment, and that this is the basis to bring parties together to negotiate inevitable conflicts that arise from fundamentally differing interests. In such a light, as Budd et al (2004) note, pluralism views the employment relationship principally as a ‘bargaining problem’, and that resolution is possible with appropriate mechanisms and institutional supports, such as worker representation and statutory regulation. In connection to this, ‘[t]he pluralist ethos is typically embedded in a social democratic conception of capitalism’ (Cullinane, 2016, p.336).

Given the enduring influence of the frames of reference, it is surprising that there has been only limited scholarly research within I/ER seeking to develop the frames. Some explicit attempts have been made to do so such as Cradden (2011) who argued for as many as nine frames. Godard (2000) argued for five frames, dividing both the unitarist and pluralist frames in two, being respectively, neo-classical and managerialist and orthodox pluralist and liberal reformist. More recently and influentially, Budd and Bhave (2008) extended the traditional frames by adding a fourth (the Egoist frame) to account for the trend toward marketized, neo-liberal regulation of employment. The egoist perspective shares with unitarism an assumed employer-employee interest alignment, but it is distinct from unitarism because under egoism, or as some prefer individualism (Kaufman 2015), utility is maximized for both parties through the benefits of market competition and free trade. According to the egoist perspective, turnover is seen as costless, and unhappy employees can vote with their feet, whereas under unitarism interest alignment comes through opportunities for employee fulfillment at work which themselves contribute to productivity and underpin the conditions for harmonious collaboration.

Yet, while the tension at the heart of the frames - between the degree that interest alignment produces either cooperation or conflict - remains central to I/ER, few attempts (such as Kaufman and Gall 2015; and Bray, Budd and Macneil 2019) have been made to explicitly integrate or extend the different frames of reference into a model to theorise this tension. In developing a model to explain cooperation Bray, Budd and Macneil (2020) argued that both pluralism and unitarism needed to be extended to account for, respectively, collaborative vs. adversarial pluralism and consultative vs. autocratic unitarism. While efforts to integrate and extend the frames are important, much of the debate about frames occurs only within individual frames. While making this point, Heery (2016:257) also suggests that while there are some modest signs of integration between the different perspectives, that the unitarist frame in particular seems impervious to ‘realignment’ and continues to ‘accord with the dominance of employers in the labour market’ and show few signs of ‘reach[ing] an accommodation with competing perspectives.’

Beyond I/ER, inter-organisational trust researchers have also argued that Fox's frames are highly applicable in analysing trust relations, and yet, here, Fox has been virtually neglected. In their systematic review of trust literature Siebert et al (2015) argue that this literature suffers from a preponderance of unitary analysis, which is conditioned by a failure of most researchers to look 'beyond the factory gate', and in so doing this literature fails to take account, as Fox did, of broader structural and societal influences that condition the nature of employment relationships and hence trust within organisations. As such, Siebert et al (2015:1051) 'argue that more pluralist approaches to trust research are needed to better reflect the nature of modern work relations. Thus, Fox's early advocacy of this pluralist perspective may enrich intra-organizational trust research'.

Ramsay (1975) first attempted to apply Fox's frames for I/ER when he looked at the notion of firms as football teams. This research sought to determine whether the idea of workers and management perceiving they are both on the same team reflected the reality of workers' experiences in the workplace. Contrary to this position, Ramsay (1975:399) found that 'the 'unitary' view of the firm has far fewer adherents [among workers] than suggested by the usual interpretation of the football team question.'

As with the football team analogy, IR academics have also been prone to assert that managers' views of the employment relationship are guided by the unitarist frame, but it is not entirely clear what this means (Cullinane and Dundon, 2014). As Fox (1966) noted, unitarism can vary from a soft form of paternalism at one end to an absolute assertion of a right to unilaterally manage the employment relationship at the other end. Unitarism in its soft form may be manifest through welfare provisions, such as high pay and fringe benefits, or though human resource management policies that provide satisfying work and career development (Purcell and Ahlstrand 1994; Provis 1996). The soft variant of unitarism simply asserts that conflict can be avoided and that where effective HR policies and procedures apply, unions have no role to play. In this sense employee representation is not so much excluded as it is rendered unnecessary. What is critical here is the role of management in avoiding the conditions that would give rise to conflict, such as by providing clear and effective communication to workers.

Cullinane and Dundon (2014) identified a key limitation in the academic analysis of the unitarist frame. They argued that while unitarism has been often cited as the guiding ideology of management (and that they themselves have been guilty of such generalisation (Dundon and Gollan 2007), there is little evidence on which to base this assertion. Cullinane and Dundon (2014:2574) note that 'Few studies have had empirical access to union-resistant employers, with analysis of unitarism, as a consequence, based on conjecture and inference of a presumed intent.' Therefore, IR has suffered from an 'excess of deduction' and a 'paucity' of investigation into the actual views and intentions of management. These authors sampled Irish firms that had or were currently opposing requests for trade union recognition. They sought to classify employer reactions along a spectrum of unitary styles. Their main finding was that employer preference reflected a 'traditional unitarism' that sought to retain workplace control and remain as much as possible regulation and union free. Moreover, that there was not a greater degree of sophisticated, soft HRM, was unsurprising given the predominantly small-firm sample of firms which lacked in house HR specialisation, however equally they were surprised by a lack of 'familial' paternalism given this same sample. Though

Cullinane and Dundon only examined unitary intentions of only one ER dimension (union recognition), in only one setting, their study nevertheless valuably sought to actually test the views of the parties rather than to proceed on the basis of taken-for-granted assumptions of employee and employer intentions.

As might be expected, there has been more research into the pluralist frame of reference given its long standing, mainstream position within I/ER. Contemporary research on the pluralist frame has focused principally on examining how it has adapted (or indeed failed to do so) to the significant changes affecting work; namely the breakdown of the traditional breadwinner model of male, full time employment occurring in large manufacturing workplaces governed as they were by a prevailing structure of unionised collective bargaining. Ackers (2002) argues that pluralism has failed to move beyond its core assumption of the primacy of unions and collective bargaining that reflected the system of the 1970s much more than contemporary employment relations, whereas, at least through the efforts of authors such as Kelly (1988), Marxist analysis has engaged in some critical self-reflection and revision to reflect modern workplace realities.

Ackers' (2002) critique of pluralism centres on how it has failed to account for relations that occur outside the auspices of unionised collective bargaining. He argues for a new (neo) pluralism that captures the important interactions between work, family and community which have produced a growing disparity in opportunity and outcome. Ackers' call is for pluralism to re-find its moral and ethical compass, which for him became lost in the preoccupation with rule-making processes and outcomes. Thus, in IR, Ackers (2002:4) finds 'an over-specialised academic sub-discipline committed to a myopic research agenda, which finds less and less resonance in the wider debates about the future of our society.'

Heery (2002; 2016:243) has also examined how those in the pluralist academic tradition – what he calls the 'increasingly beleaguered heartland of IR' - have responded to changes that cut deep into pluralisms' core assumptions. Unlike Ackers, Heery's (2016) overall focus remains more squarely on evolving market and workplace relations, and how pluralism has come under attack from an ascendant unitarism and neo-liberalism. More specifically, Heery (2002), and Kaufman (2018), examine the frames of reference through academic research on worker participation and employee voice. Heery notes that worker participation is a heavily contested area of academic analysis, and that the frames of reference offers a way to understand the divergent scholarly views, which offer both analysis and prescription of different forms of participation. In HRM and organisational behaviour (OB) research there is a strong unitarist prescription for direct participation, with employee participation seen as a means to assist business performance. Other writers have noted this trend as well, with Godard (2014) arguing that this research agenda reflects the influence of psychology on current employment relations scholarship. Similarly, Kaufman (2014) and Barry and Wilkinson (2016) offer critiques of the HR/OB research on voice which they argue promotes a narrow conception of this phenomena based on individual, 'pro-social' behaviour. For these authors, pro-social equates to pro-management, with participation and voice seen to benefit the firm rather than advance the interests of employees. Evident in OB research is the exclusion of voice which is offered as complaint or dissent (eg Morrison 2011), or as an expression of employee self-determination (see also Budd, 2004). In other words, the mainstream management research on

employee voice and participation is dominated by a unitarist view of employee intention and behaviour that sees it as being aligned with the interests of the firm (Wilkinson et al 2020).

In response to this research trajectory, Heery (2016) asserts that many scholars in the traditional pluralist camp have developed a more critical edge to their writing. Traditional pluralists see employer-sponsored participation schemes as insufficient to enable genuine worker involvement, and this has pushed the pluralist agenda somewhat closer to the critical wing of IR which is deeply suspicious of formal schemes of participation. However, a distinction between the pluralist and more critical/radical scholarship remains that the latter has retained its focus on forms of employee resistance, whereas pluralist scholars continue to see participation as properly occurring through traditional as well as newly emerging structures and institutions, including unions and non-union employee representation.

Kaufman's (2014) analysis of employee voice in the US utilises the frames of reference and provides additional insights. Unlike Heery who looks at differences in academic perceptions and prescriptions of participation, Kaufman seeks to theorise the factors that would give rise to changes in voice practices themselves, and his overall finding, seeking to predict the future of voice in the USA, is one of pessimism. He outlines a range of contextual antecedents of voice opportunity such as the national mode of regulation, labour market conditions (for example, low or high firm profits and high or low levels of unemployment), differences in corporate governance arrangements that align more with either shareholder or stakeholder interests, and the extent to which firms make extensive use of internal vs. external labour markets. Kaufman's prediction is that under increasingly competitive market conditions employers will make greater use of external labour markets with a consequent decline in voice opportunity (that is those opportunities provided through internal voice and grievance processes and HRM), and that this will lead unhappy employees to choose 'exit' rather than speaking up.

For Kaufman this trend aligns with what Budd and Bhave (2008) call the 'egoist' frame of reference. The egoist frame is itself aligned to neo-liberalism and is used as a term to summarise a world view in which markets are perfectly competitive and are governed purely by supply and demand transactions. Here, actors are assumed to be self-interested and rational. In such markets, exit is costless, and voice unnecessary because labour is a treated as a commodity. Consequently, egoists advocate the removal of regulatory constraints and institutional hurdles, which undermine the free exchange of labour between its seller and purchaser. As noted, Budd and Bhave argue the need to add the egoist frame as a fourth frame of reference because the unitarist frame does not properly capture the deregulatory and commodifying features of neo-liberal employment relations.

As similar critique of the traditional frames has been made by Purcell (1987). Purcell argued that the unitarist and pluralist frames, on their own, did not adequately explain variation in the way employers treated workers, which he labelled management styles. Purcell preferred the terms individualism and collectivism, where individualism denoted the extent to which management sought to develop individual workers (and this could range from low to high, with labour control at the low end and extensive employee development at the high end). Similarly, collectivism related to

the extent to which management supported workers having a collective voice and influence in decision making.

As Gospel (2019:17) notes:

> *In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most employers were what might be termed 'unitarist' and believed that they had a right unilaterally and directly to dictate aspects of work and employment. The period after the Second World War saw a shift in a more 'pluralist' direction and a greater preparedness to admit employee representation in the form of trade unions and collective bargaining. Such systems grew and predominated through the early postwar years in many industries, especially in manufacturing. However, beginning in the 1970s, there has been a shift away from such managerial ideologies and their replacement by new forms of joint consultation, direct voice, and employee involvement of various kinds, such as participation in small groups and team working.*

In a longitudinal study Poole et al (2005) examined managerial attitudes over a period of dramatic change in British industrial relations, taking snapshots at 1980, 1990 and 2000. Over these time periods the studies found that British managers' attitudes to trade unions in particular had softened but in some respect this was predictable given the dramatic decline in union density and influence over the 20 years. Across the time periods managers had however remained opposed to the pluralist notion of unions engaging in shared decision making (Poole and Mansfield 1993; Poole et al 2005:127). In this sense it would be highly questionable to argue that the sharp decline in anti-union sentiment reflected a significant shift in managerial ideology.

This literature review provides a backdrop to the Special Issue which takes a fresh look at the frames of reference. In doing so the special issue asks, Do the traditional frames continue to provide insights into the perceptions and behaviour of employers and employees? If not, how might existing frames be broadened by new (or indeed historical) developments and insights? This special issue contains a rich mix of papers, including theoretical, empirical and historical contributions to the debate on frames of reference. In an historical paper Gold argues that Fox's highly influential frames of reference were anticipate more than 100 years earlier in literature from Victorian Britain. Gold analyses Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* to reveal differing perceptions about the employment relationship which he claims are evidence of early frames of reference. As Gold notes, the 1840s were marked by turbulence, 'with industrialisation and urban poverty underpinning the emergence of Chartism and the call for political reform, which duly attracted the attention of novelists' including Dickens, Gaskill, Disraeli and others. *North and South* explores this turbulence through the evolving personal relationships of its principal characters, which include a mill owner (unitarist), militant trade union leader (radical) and a liberal observer (playing the role of pluralist mediator between the mill owner and union leader); and is set in a strike that followed a pay cut in a Manchester cotton mill.

Gold attempts to draw parallels between Gaskill and Fox, and he argues that in Gaskill's writing there is a political agenda, which urges a reform of capitalism, and yet there is also a strong pluralist prescription for relations between labour and capital to be more firmly grounded in mutual trust and cooperation. This call, he claims, echoes a perennial tension in industrial relations between a pluralist working within the system, through such measures as greater consultation, participation and voice; and more radical prescriptions to reduce fundamental inequalities.

Dobbins, Dundon and Hughes revisit Fox's (1979) distinction between pluralism as a theoretical value concept, and the extent of its praxis. These authors suggest that pluralism in 'action' is both neglected, and that it is very different from pluralism as a 'concept', and they compare the potential efficacy of 'radical-pluralism' and 'neo-pluralism'. They draw on empirical data and the analysis of employment relationships in two unionised public transport sector organisations, each with a history of robust labour-management dialogue differing forms of labour militancy, one in the UK and the other from the Republic of Ireland. The article shows the 'zones of contention' within the contemporary pluralist frame of reference between the 'radical-pluralist' synthesis and 'neo-pluralism' with the pluralist frame of reference on three interrelated themes, firstly contextualising employment relations; secondly asymmetrical power relations and thirdly structured antagonism. Despite empirically demonstrating some shared territory between neo-pluralists and radical pluralists, the authors argue that the radical-pluralist framing of the employment relationship is better equipped than neo-pluralism to provide deeper and contextually sensitive understandings of the realities of unequal work relationships. The paper also asserts that radical-pluralism incorporates democratic emancipatory alternatives for societal and workplace justice in order to transform values into actions, and that radical public policy reforms are required to narrow the gap between pluralism as a concept and its real world application with neo-pluralism understating the scale of radical reforms required to change the status quo.

Van Buren, Greenwood, Donaghey and Reinecke bring political philosophy to bear on frames of reference in order to give the frames more contemporary relevance. The authors apply Chantelle Mouffe's concepts of agonism and dissensus to the current debate about frames. Agonism reflects the ongoing struggle between parties who contest power within a regulatory space. Importantly, agonism recognises the inherent legitimacy of parties whose interests and views place them in direct conflict, and in this way the authors position agonism as a complement to pluralism. In this paper the authors use to the case of the Accord that was put in place following the Rana Plaza tragedy in the Bangladesh ready-made garment industry as an example of agonism. The paper also has a broader ambition in that it seeks, by showing how agonism and dissensus can enhance the frames, to possibly reconcile what have emerged as competing versions of pluralist thought. The authors claim that 'What is particularly noteworthy is that the concept of agonism, where divergences between parties are viewed as both inevitable and constructive in developing relationships, can bridge the chasm between the radical pluralist and neo-pluralist frames which has emerged in recent years.' The paper is a timely reminder that while we have seen in other contributions that our frames of reference can influence work in other fields, such as inter-organisational trust relations, IR can also benefit from theories and concepts developed in other fields that may deepen and extend our understanding of our own frameworks.

In an empirical offering, Kaufman, Barry, Wilkinson, Gomez and Lomas use a four-country survey data set with detailed workplace information collected from nationally-representative samples of 7,000+ non-supervisory employees in Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, and United States, to calculate and plot individual country-level distributions of workplaces ordered from lowest employment-relations 'temper' score to highest score. They measure workplace IR temper with a new construct created for this purpose, a 'Relational Quality Index' (RQI), based on answers to six questions Fox identifies as key frame behavioral indicators. The RQI scores are graphed as frequency distributions for the four countries, showing not only the cross-section pattern of employment relations within each country but also the comparative pattern across the four countries. Two

plausible boundary criteria are specified as the lines of difference that divide the distributions into low, medium, and high RQI workplaces and associated radical, pluralist, and unitarist frames. They then extend the analysis and, with multiple regression and additional SWERS data, attempt to identify specific workplace attributes that explain the low-to-high pattern of RQI scores. The aim is not to test or authenticate the frames model but to identify and measure the proportion of workplaces (organizations, enterprises, firms, etc.) in each of the four countries that, as judged by their low-medium-high RQI score, fit respectively into radical, pluralist, and unitarist frames. They report that greater perceived common interests are associated with higher RQI, along with a wide range of other factors (e.g., positive/participative management style, strong employee voice/influence channels, high-quality management/workforce human capital). Surprisingly, however, more extensive use of core HR practices, and presence of an HR department, have a negative association with RQI.

The paper by Gaspari applies frames of reference to the case of employers' corporate welfare initiatives in Italy. This contribution to the Special Issue highlights the enduring relevance of FoR as this is an emerging issue which is at the nexus of contemporary industrial relations and social policy. Gaspari's paper engages with two bodies of literature. In one part he highlights how corporate welfare programs can be situated in an analysis of classic social policy literature, including the work of Titmuss, Korpi and Esping-Anderson. Here, corporate welfare is brought back to social policy theory with concerns raised about the so far partial diffusion of corporate welfare to certain regions and sectors of the economy only, and the potentially regressive nature of such private schemes. The paper also engages strongly with frames of reference. It does so by using case studies to analyse the tendencies of company welfare to promote either unitarism or pluralism. The paper finds evidence of both with an influential role played by institutional actors such as political parties and industrial relations think tanks. Important among these influences is that the tendency of corporate welfare to promote unitarism is tempered by the involvement of unions, and the paper explores the diverging interpretations of two union confederations towards corporate welfare; the class-based approach of the CGIL and the society-based approach of CISL. In conclusion, the paper finds a strong link in the class-based approach to the more critical and adversarial, rather than collaborative/partnership, elements of pluralism (see above).

Finally, Ackers provides a critical commentary on the five papers in this special issue and relates them to the development of neo liberalism, arguing that IR pluralism needs to re-engage with pluralist political theory as part of a broader debate about the nature of liberal democracy. As he notes, frames of reference has played a central role in IR social science lifting the field above descriptive empiricism and encouraging debate around social philosophy, social science, and public policy. But given radical change in the last fifty years with more diverse workforces in the context of global markets, he asks if we can adjust the old lens to these changed realities. He looks at the papers in relation to questions about three thematic dimensions of Fox's frames: the cases for radical pluralism versus neo-pluralism; the border between neo-pluralism and neo-unitarism, as a form of paternalism; and the question of how to operationalize the frames as a research method. Ackers then illustrates how his neo-pluralist perspective can be used to explain the issues raised in these articles. Overall, he concludes that despite his criticisms, the papers in this special issue allow us to consider how to take forward Fox's approach.

Our view in putting forward this special issue was that a review and re-examination of frames of reference was both important and timely given the many changes currently impacting work and employment. Our hope is that in this wide ranging set of papers we have not only reflected on and

celebrated the influence of Alan Fox on our thinking in the field of I/ER, and in a variety of different contexts, but also charted a forward-looking research agenda which continues to use his insights and apply them to the field as well as developing and continuing to engage with them.

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