

Legitimacy and employment relations research – special issue call for papers

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This special issue invites contributions which utilise, extend and theorise the concept of legitimacy to employment relations (ER). Legitimacy has been used in sociology (Johnson et al., 2006), political science (e.g. Cartensen and Hansen, 2019; Fransen, 2012), marketing (Reynolds et al., 2022) and management (e.g. Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975; Suchman, 1995) to theorise support for different types of organisations – for example, trade unions, employers and governments – and their activities. Despite its relevance there has been limited engagement with the concept within ER. Yet, the weakening of institutions and normative frameworks has led to questions regarding the legitimacy of ER actors (Doellgast et al., 2021).

Much of the existing ER scholarship on legitimacy has focused on the legitimacy of trade unions. Trade union legitimacy has been linked implicitly or explicitly to key concepts and processes including trade union identity, power resources and collective action (Wright and McLaughlin, 2021; Dufour and Hege, 2010; Simms and Charlwood, 2010; Culpepper and Regan, 2014). Chaison and Bigelow's seminal contribution to this scholarship (2002) drew on management theory and, in particular, the work of Suchman (1995), who defined legitimacy as 'a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate, within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions' (1995: 574).

Suchman's conceptualisation focused primarily on the nature of legitimacy. He outlined three types – pragmatic, moral and cognitive. Pragmatic legitimacy derives from the rational self-interest of stakeholders, with legitimacy being granted to an entity in exchange for corresponding benefits. Applied to trade unions, members bestow pragmatic legitimacy on them in return for representation in collective bargaining. Moral legitimacy is not contingent upon particular benefits, but is predicated on whether the conduct and actions of an entity are considered morally upright. Flanders (1961: 21) famously spoke of the need for unions to act as a "sword of justice" rather than "vested interests" seeking only to advance their members' interests. In supporting the rights of migrants in the context of anti-migrant discourse, or lobbying for improvements to the minimum wage, which will benefit many non-union members, unions could increase their moral legitimacy with the wider public. Cognitive legitimacy is based on widely held and taken-for-granted assumptions and norms that are deeply institutionalised. Cognitive union legitimacy is evident, for example, in the Nordic countries where union involvement in sectoral wage bargaining and the development of labour market policy is accepted as the norm (Wright and McLaughlin, 2021).

Whilst Suchman's framework has been influential (Chaison and Bigelow, 2002; Wright and McLaughlin, 2021), other authors have looked at other dimensions of legitimacy. For example, Dufour and Hege (2010) focussed on the groups that grant legitimacy to unions and the trade-offs involved. They identified two approaches: external legitimacy, where third parties such as employers and the state recognise the validity of a union's claims, and internal legitimacy, which relates to those within the union and representative capacity. Despite these efforts to conceptualise legitimacy, there is still today 'no common understanding of what the legitimacy of unions means or why it matters' (Chaison and Bigelow, 2002: 2).

Despite these advances in understanding legitimacy in relation to unionism, there is a need to develop this growing area of interest into a coherent research agenda examining legitimacy in the field of ER more broadly. Such research needs to go beyond a focus on unions and consider legitimacy holistically in the context of other actors, such as managerial ideology (Budd et al., 2021), employer associations (c.f. Mundlak, 2009; Ibsen, 2016), the state (Hyman, 2008), and the so-called 'new actors' in ER (Heery and Frege, 2006). To date, legitimacy has only been addressed implicitly or in passing in these areas, and the field of ER would benefit from a more developed and unified research agenda. We invite contributions to develop existing research and draw greater attention to the legitimacy of different actors and the development of relevant theories and concepts that can aid understanding of legitimacy within this field.

To do so, this special issue seeks to complement the recent and growing interest in the role of ideas and power resources in ER research (Hauptmeier and Heery, 2014; McLaughlin and Wright, 2018; Cartensen et al., 2022). Notwithstanding the split within this literature regarding the continued value of a materialist analysis of ER (for competing perspectives see Hauptmeier and Heery, 2014; Cartensen et al., 2022), it is helpful to build on this work in the context of legitimacy. In particular, this research has advanced our understanding of the mechanisms involved in helping to create, frame, sustain, and/or alter legitimacy of any given actor in the ER sphere. Such work recognises the limitations in conceiving of legitimacy as a purely static property, and the need to view legitimacy as more of a process, where legitimacy is contested and evolving (Suddaby, Bitekine and Haack, 2017), what Fransen (2012) referred to as legitimation politics. There is need for greater legitimacy analysis of employer behaviour, particularly in regards to the moral legitimacy of unlawful, unethical or unsustainable employment practices, such as breaches of labour standards in supply chains, poor job quality and wage theft. As Palazzo and Scherrer (2006) argued, changing societal expectations mean that moral legitimacy has become the crucial battleground as firms promote their corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability credentials in order to be seen as socially acceptable. There is no doubt that some corporations engage in 'CSR washing' to try and offset negative publicity, but the wider point is that discursive struggles ensue aimed at legitimating and delegitimising certain practices, which are worthy of analysis (Wright and McLaughlin, 2021).

We also invite contributions that reflect on the legitimacy of ER as a field of study. There have been various contributions which have questioned the longevity of an ER approach to understanding work and employment, its alleged 'empiricism' and the position of ER academics within business schools (see for example, Clegg, 1972; Marsden, 1982; Strauss

and Feuille, 1978; Piore, 2011). Such questions over the legitimacy of the ER field have focussed on the extent to which ER has been eclipsed by a more managerialist approach to work under the guise of human resource management. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has shone a spotlight on the continued value of applying an ER lens to the world of work as ER issues became central to public concern (see Dobbins et al., 2023; Hodder and Martínez Lucio, 2021). We invite contributions to examine the legitimacy of ER in this context.

We therefore invite contributions to this special issue in the following areas:

- Legitimacy of ideas in ER policy
- Legitimacy of frames of reference and managerial prerogative
- Employer associations and legitimacy
- The role and legitimacy of the state in ER systems
- Trade union legitimacy including new/independent unions, 'traditional' forms of unionism, and peak level union organisations
- Industrial action through the lens of legitimacy
- Legitimation politics and ER
- The continued legitimacy of ER as a field of study

These topics should be seen as illustrative rather than exhaustive. However, in order to be considered for inclusion, contributions should demonstrate the importance of legitimacy in the ER arena. Contributions to the special issue may be empirical, analytical or conceptual. We welcome contributions from any methodological approach.

All interested contributors should submit an extended abstract (max. 1,000 words) via email to one or all of the guest editors. The extended abstract must clearly outline the research question or purpose of the proposed paper, as well as how the paper advances our understanding of legitimacy in ER research. For empirical papers, abstracts must include a brief description of the empirical analysis used and/or an outline of the theoretical framework applied.

As part of this process, we will hold a paper development workshop as part of the Industrial Relations Theory Study Group at the ILERA World Congress 2024, New York, 26-30 June, 2024. The workshop (to be held on 26 June) will provide further editorial guidance and an opportunity to gain feedback on ideas/work in progress. Those invited to participate in the workshop will be asked to submit an 8,000-10,000 draft paper to the guest editors two weeks prior to the workshop. Please note that participation in the workshop will not be a guarantee of acceptance of the paper for the special issue. While participation in the workshop is not a requirement for consideration of a paper for the special issue, authors are strongly encouraged to participate.

Those unable to participate in the workshop are required to submit a 1,000 word abstract outlining the research questions, research design and anticipated contributions of their paper, which will then be reviewed as part of the same process.

The deadline for submitting extended abstracts is **1 November 2023**. Feedback on all abstracts (including decisions on abstracts submitted to the workshop) will be provided on all abstracts in mid-November. The guest editors will not provide editorial assistance for extended abstracts.

The deadline for the submission of full papers will be **31 August 2024**. All full papers will undergo double-blind review by a minimum of two reviewers. There is no guarantee that submitted papers will be accepted for publication. We anticipate publication of the special issue to be in 2025.

Any questions relating to the special issue should be directed via email to the guest editors (contact details above).

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