

Legitimacy and employment relations research – special issue call for papers

Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society

Guest editors:

Andy Hodder, University of Birmingham, a.j.hodder@bham.ac.uk

Genevieve Coderre-LaPalme, University of Glasgow, genevieve.coderre-lapalme@glasgow.ac.uk

Colm McLaughlin, University College Dublin, colm.mclaughlin@ucd.ie

Ruth Reaney, Queen's University Belfast, r.reaney@qub.ac.uk

Chris F Wright, University of Sydney, chris.f.wright@sydney.edu.au

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 delegitimizing 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.

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).

References

Budd, J., Pohler, D. and Huang, W. (2022) 'Making sense of (mis)matched frames of reference: A dynamic cognitive theory of (in)stability in HR practices', *Industrial Relations*, 61(3): 268-289.

Cartensen, M. and Hansen, M. P. (2019) 'Legitimation as Justification: Foregrounding Public Philosophies in Explanations of Gradual Ideational Change', *European Journal of Political Research*, 58(2): 582–602.

Cartensen, M., Ibsen, C. L., and Schmidt, V. (2022) 'Ideas and power in employment relations studies', *Industrial Relations*, 61(1): 3-21.

- Chaison, G. and Bigelow, B. (2002) *Unions and legitimacy*, Ithaca: ILR Press.
- Clegg, H. (1972) 'The Obligations of Universities to Management', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 61 (241): 11–21.
- Culpepper, P., and Regan, A. (2014) 'Why don't governments in Europe need trade unions anymore?', *Socio-Economic Review*, 12(4): 723-745.
- Dobbins, T., Johnstone, S., Kahancová, M., Lamare, J. R. and Wilkinson, A. (2023) 'Comparative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on work and employment—Why industrial relations institutions matter', *Industrial Relations*, 62(2): 115-125.
- Doellgast, V., Bidwell, M. and Colvin, A.J. (2021) 'New Directions in Employment Relations Theory: Understanding Fragmentation, Identity, and Legitimacy', *ILR Review*, 74(3), pp.555-579.
- Dowling, J. and Pfeffer, J. (1975) 'Organizational Legitimacy: social values and organizational behaviour', *Pacific Sociological Review*, 18(1): 122-136.
- Dufour, C. and Hege, A. (2010) 'The legitimacy of collective actors and trade union renewal', *Transfer*, 16(3): 351-367.
- Flanders, A. (1961) 'Trade Unions in the Sixties'. *Socialist Commentary*, August.
- Fransen, L. (2012) 'Multi-stakeholder governance and voluntary programme interactions: legitimation politics in the institutional design of corporate social responsibility', *Socio-Economic Review*, 10(1): 163-192.
- Hauptmeier, M. and Heery, E. (2014) 'Ideas at work', *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 25(18): 2473-2488.
- Heery, E. and Frege, C. (2006) 'New Actors in Industrial Relations', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 44(4): 601-604.
- Hodder, A. and Martínez Lucio, M. (2021) 'Pandemics, politics, and the resilience of employment relations research', *Labour and Industry*, 31(4): 430-438.
- Hyman, R. (2008) 'The state in industrial relations', in P. Blyton, N. Bacon, J. Fiorito and E. Heery (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Industrial Relations*, London: Sage, 545-552.
- Ibsen, C. L. (2016) 'Making sense of employer collectivism – The case of Danish wage bargaining under recession', *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 58(5): 669-687.
- Johnson, C., Dowd, T. and Ridgeway, C. (2006) 'Legitimacy as a Social Process', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 32(1): 53-78.
- Marsden, R. (1982) 'Industrial relations: a critique of empiricism', *Sociology*, 16(2): 232-250.
- McLaughlin, C. and Wright, C. F. (2018) 'The role of ideas in understanding industrial relations policy change in liberal market economies', *Industrial Relations*, 57(4): 568-610.
- Mundlak, G. (2009) 'Addressing the Legitimacy Gap in the Israeli Corporatist Revival', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 47(4): 765-787.
- Palazzo, G., and Scherer, A. (2006) 'Corporate Legitimacy as Deliberation: A Communicative Framework', *Journal of Business Ethics* 66: 71–88.
- Piore, M. (2011) 'Whither Industrial Relations: Does It Have a Future in Post-Industrial Society?', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 49(4): 792-801.

Reynolds, L., Koenig-Lewis, N., Doering, H. and Peattie, K. (2022) 'Competing for legitimacy in the place branding process: (re)negotiating the stakes', *Tourism Management*, 91, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2022.104532>.

Simms, M. and Charlwood, A. (2010) 'Trade unions : power and influence in a changed context.' In: T. Colling and M. Terry (eds.) *Industrial relations : theory and practice*. Chichester, Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, pp. 125-148.

Strauss, G. and Feuille, P. (1978) '*Industrial Relations Research: A Critical Analysis*', *Industrial Relations*, 17(3): 259-277.

Suchman, M. (1995) 'Managing legitimacy: strategic and institutional approaches', *Academy of Management Review*, 20(3): 571-610.

Suddaby, R., Bitektine, A. and Haack, P. (2017) 'Legitimacy', *Academy of Management Annals* 11 (1): 451–78.

Wright, C. F. and McLaughlin, C. (2021) 'Trade union legitimacy and legitimization politics in Australia and New Zealand', *Industrial Relations*, 60(3): 338-369.