View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk

brought to you by CORE

provided by LSE Research Online

In search of theory? The workplace case study tradition in the 21st century

LSE Research Online URL for this paper: http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/103926/

Version: Published Version

Article:

McGovern, Patrick ORCID: 0000-0003-3984-2080 (2020) In search of theory? The workplace case study tradition in the 21st century. Industrial Relations Journal, 51 (3). 136 - 152. ISSN 0019-8692

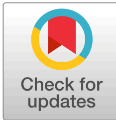
https://doi.org/10.1111/irj.12285

Reuse

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence. This licence allows you to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon the work, even commercially, as long as you credit the authors for the original work. More information and the full terms of the licence here: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/

lseresearchonline@lse.ac.uk
https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/

Industrial Relations Journal ••:••, ••–••
ISSN 0019-8692



In search of theory? The workplace case study tradition in the 21st century

ABSTRACT

Workplace case studies have been valued by some for their ability to advance theory while others dismiss them as little more than descriptive stories. This paper presents a detailed content analysis of case study articles to assess the relative balance between theory, conceptual analysis and description. Drawing on a random sample of papers (n = 173) published in leading journals, I find that fewer than one in seven are descriptive papers while only one in ten are theory oriented. Using three criteria, I identify exemplars of theoretical and conceptual analysis and show how these may be used to advance the field.

1 INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of a lengthy review of the field of industrial relations, Roy Adams concluded that despite some cross-fertilisation, the area remained 'one of isolated tribes of labor researchers carrying out their work either in ignorance of, or in deliberate disregard for, the work of other groups' (1993: 150). One example of this division is the very differing views held about the role and nature of workplace case study research. Some scholars, usually of a quantitative orientation, view case studies as essentially descriptive exercises. In the United States, the Wisconsin School of institutional labour economics that emerged after the First World War was criticised by later generations of labour economists for its reliance on an inductive case study approach to gathering evidence. In the words of Ronald Coase, 'without a theory they had nothing to pass on except a mass of descriptive material waiting for a theory, or a fire' (Boyer and Smith, 2001: 201). It must be admitted that this emphasis on institutional fact-finding and description was more than a matter of method as Hugh Clegg, a leading figure in the Oxford School of industrial relations, famously remarked some decades later that 'an ounce of fact was worth a pound of theory' (Brown, 1998: 849).

By contrast, pleas for more and better theory in industrial relations have included calls for greater use of inductive case study research because of its ability to generate theoretical insights through the intensive observation of workplace interaction (Brown and Wright, 1994; Cappelli, 1985: 108; Godard, 1994: 11–12). Indeed it is well known that case studies are the dominant form of research within the Labour Process tradition that self-consciously presents itself as a theory building project

❒ Patrick McGovern, Department of Sociology, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK. Correspondence should be addressed to Patrick McGovern, Department of Sociology, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK.
Email: p.mcgovern@lse.ac.uk

© 2020 The Authors. Industrial Relations Journal published by Brian Towers (BRITOW) and John Wiley & Sons Ltd
This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

(Edwards, 2007: 19; Thompson and Smith, 2009: 258). Furthermore, organisational scholars who subscribe to critical realism claim that the case study is *the* basic design for realist research. Put simply, their argument is that the goal of research should be to identify sequences of causation or causal mechanisms and case studies are, from their perspective, ideal for that task (Ackroyd and Karlsson, 2014: 24).

Regardless of whether or not we accept that the development and testing of theory is the primary task of the social sciences (King *et al*., 1994: 19–23), it is still of critical importance that we examine the intellectual thrust of the research that is currently undertaken. Though plenty has been written about what qualitative case study researchers should do, this paper addresses the empirical question of what it is that these researchers actually do when integrating theory with empirical evidence. This paper presents the first systematic survey of contemporary workplace case study research in order to examine the kind of studies that are undertaken and to identify possible models for future research. Specifically, I examine the amount of workplace research that (i) draws on theory to frame research questions; (ii) uses those questions to select cases; and (iii) discusses the implications for theory in the conclusions. Using these criteria, I then identify and discuss exemplars of theory-oriented studies while also highlighting examples of a previously ignored type of case study, namely, concept-led studies.

2 THE ROLE OF THEORY IN WORKPLACE CASE STUDY RESEARCH

Proponents of case studies as a means of developing theory within the fields of industrial relations and the sociology of work draw on three distinct arguments. The first, which can be traced back to the early decades of the 20th century, concerns the long-running debate with economics over the nature and dynamics of the employment relationship. Both the early institutionalist economists in US labour relations and the sociologists associated with the Human Relations perspective objected to the depiction of workers as individualistic utility maximisers pursuing narrowly conceived economic interests guided only by the invisible hand of market forces. Instead, they advocated a 'go and see' approach of fieldwork-based case studies on the basis that this provided a more realistic account of the social norms and customs that shaped behaviour on the factory floor. In doing so, they would practise a form of inductive theory building using propositions that were based on the regularities they observed in the behaviour of work groups, workplaces and trade unions (Kaufman, 2004: 98–101).

Writers who have drawn on institutionalist perspectives would subsequently champion this approach as they challenged economic conceptions of labour markets from a different direction. Labour Process scholars, along with institutional labour economists, argue that capital hired only the capacity to work rather than a fixed quantity of work when hiring workers (Thompson, 1983; Nolan, 2012). This fundamental indeterminacy means that employment contracts are always incomplete and so the employer has to organise a labour process that turns this capacity to work into labour that produces value in the form of commodities and services. However, when confronted with the more mind-numbing forms of work associated with the scientific management and the rise of the factory system, Labour Process scholars highlighted the tendency for workers to resist a labour process that strips them of their autonomy and skills (Edwards, 1979). In the context of this 'contested terrain', Paul Edwards, a leading figure in the Labour Process tradition, insists that 'detailed case studies and

© 2020 The Authors. Industrial Relations Journal published by Brian Towers (BRITOW) and John Wiley & Sons Ltd

ethnographies have been, and should be, the preferred approach' for the theoretical analysis of the contradictory relationship between capital and labour (2007: 19).

The second major argument for using case studies as a means of generating theory emerged from post-war American sociology. Derived from Merton's (1968) influential programme of 'middle-range' theory, it offered a clear intellectual justification for micro-level studies of a vast range of social life that could include organisations, occupations and trade unions (Kelly, 1998: 20–21). Appropriately, middle-range theories were defined as those: '… that lie between the minor but necessary working hypotheses that evolve in abundance during day-to-day research and the all-inclusive systematic efforts to develop a unified theory that will explain all the observed uniformities of social behaviour, social organization and social change' (Merton, 1968: 39). The challenge for social researchers was to step back from the description of empirical regularities and try to explain them. Such explanations inevitably required a set of concepts that enabled abstract generalisation and, ultimately, consolidation into general theoretical accounts of whatever sub-class of events or phenomenon was being studied. Significantly, Merton insisted that such explanations had to set out the conditions under which these generalisations held and this insistence on clarifying the scope of any explanation helped middle-range practitioners avoid the excesses of Parsonian 'grand theory' (1968: 287). This conditional approach would be developed further in a series of celebrated studies by Merton's own students (e.g. Blau, 1963; Gouldner, 1954).

The third strategy is to use case studies to shed light on theoretical puzzles, anomalies or cases that deviate from theoretical expectations. Significantly, this approach represents a deliberate step beyond the descriptive 'go and see' roots into the realms of causal analysis and explanatory social science. A classic example is Lupton's (1963) examination of the 'restriction of effort' associated with piecework payment systems. Though 'Jay's Electrical Components' and the 'Wye' Garment factory both operated payment by results, Lupton was intrigued by the fact that workers only engaged in 'fiddles' in the electrical engineering firm. Following a systematic comparison of the two cases, he concluded that controlling labour costs was not a priority for the management at 'Jays' as they enjoyed an oligopolistic market position. Lupton's research, as Edwards and Bélanger (2008) observed, was the first in a series of workplace studies that would examine how structural conditions such as market position, technology and work organisation would all influence patterns of workplace relations.

3 THEORY AND CASE SELECTION

Case selection plays a critical role in case study research. Much of the overall quality of the research will depend on demonstrating that the chosen cases are *cases of* whatever wider phenomenon is motivating the research while also providing a basis for drawing generalisations (Gerring, 2004). Of course, the criteria for selecting cases will vary according to the goals of the research, and it must be acknowledged that the goals may lie somewhere between descriptive and explanatory. Sometimes the aim may be simply to explore a new phenomenon, such as the emergence of call centres during the late 1980s. But even here there is a purposive logic of case selection in that the cases are selected precisely because they possess characteristics that are associated with the phenomenon of interest.

Unfortunately, there is a great deal of confusion surrounding sampling for theoretically oriented case studies. Much of this relates to the conflation of theoretical sampling with purposive sampling. Strictly speaking, theoretical sampling is the form of

© 2020 The Authors. Industrial Relations Journal published by Brian Towers (BRITOW) and John Wiley & Sons Ltd

sampling associated with the grounded theory perspective developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Theoretical sampling, as Glaser noted, is 'the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyses his data and decides which data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges. This process of data collection is controlled by the emerging theory, whether substantive or formal' (1978: 36). What is often overlooked here is that theoretical sampling involves the repeated sampling of new and different cases as the analysis develops. By contrast, most of the sampling undertaken outside of grounded theory is on a one-off basis.

In terms of what is generally known as purposive sampling, some of the most influential accounts come from Mitchell (1983) and Yin (1984). Both seek to distinguish it from the logic of statistical generalisation that underpins quantitative forms of research. Mitchell put it in these words: 'In case studies statistical inference is not invoked at all. Instead the inferential process turns exclusively on the theoretically necessary linkages among the features in the case study. The validity of the extrapolation depends not on the typicality or representativeness of the case but upon the cogency of the theoretical reasoning' (1983: 207). In this view, to quote the much cited textbook by Yin, the researcher is 'seeking to generalise his or her findings to some broader theory rather than to some wider population' (1984: 36). This is indeed the position developed by Eisenhardt in an influential paper within the management literature that addressed the concern that the cases may not be representative. The purpose of case research, she argues, is to develop theory rather than test it, and so cases are selected because they are particularly suitable for illuminating and extending relationships between concepts (Eisenhardt, 1989: 536–537; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007: 27).

Another approach, which applies to explanatory forms of research, is to deliberately select cases that exhibit a range of variation that the research seeks to explain. King and colleagues, for instance, argue that such variation is essential if small *N* studies are to make a meaningful attempt to establish causality (1994: 139–147). This could include, for example, instances where an outcome occurred in one case but not in another. Lupton's study, which we mentioned earlier, provides an early example of this kind of research design. What is essential is that theoretically relevant comparisons are built into the design of the research to address the guiding research question. In short, case selection plays an essential role in case study research regardless of whether the aim is to describe a new development or to explain differences across case study organisations. As the selection of case studies may also include the scope conditions for whatever phenomenon is being investigated, I argue that it should therefore be adopted as a criterion for examining the integration of theoretically inspired research questions with empirical evidence.

4 RESEARCH METHODS

To capture the current 'state-of-the-art' of qualitative workplace case study research, I conducted a detailed content analysis of articles published in 11 leading specialist journals. I chose journals over books because journals make their reputation by setting the standards for the integration of theory with empirical research. Those chosen include the *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, *Industrial Relations*, *Industrial Relations Journal*, *Journal of Industrial Relations*, *New Technology, Work and Employment*, *Relations Industrielles*, *Work and Occupations*

© 2020 The Authors. Industrial Relations Journal published by Brian Towers (BRITOW) and John Wiley & Sons Ltd

and *Work, Employment & Society*. Though the selection includes journals from Europe, Australia and North America, I have included five British-edited journals because case study research has long been a distinctive feature of the British tradition of industrial relations research (Frege, 2007: 54–55).

Using simple random sampling, I selected a single issue from each journal for each year between 2000 and 2014.[1] On this basis, 165 journal issues were drawn from a population of 678 issues as part of a wider project on theory and methods in workplace research (McGovern and Alburez-Gutierrez, 2017). Articles were selected from those issues for coding if they (i) were full-length articles and not Research Notes; (ii) contained the words 'case study' or 'ethnography'; (iii) drew on primary research; (iv) focused on specific organisations or workplaces (or workplace-based unionism); and (v) the research was either exclusively or primarily of a qualitative nature. Of the 973 articles that were examined across 165 issues, 173 met these criteria (17.8 per cent). Given claims of a possible decline in the flow of workplace case studies (Frege, 2007), it is worth adding that we found a steady flow of papers across this period (McGovern and Alburez-Gutierrez, 2017: 105).

For the purposes of this paper, each article was then read and coded for any discussion of theory, concepts and case selection. I defined material as theoretical if it offered either a distinct set of related propositions or if it self-consciously offered a general orientation or perspective. To help confirm the latter, I also examined whether articles identified with a particular theoretical school or perspective. The NVivo 'nodes' for theory were refined as further distinctions became necessary. Following the work of Abend *et al*. (2013), I also distinguished between articles that were primarily concerned with making causal arguments and those in which causal generalisations were either less central or absent. Papers were classified as causal if causal claims featured in their main argument. In doing so, the aim was to further explore the claim that workplace case studies are largely descriptive and unable to offer generalisable explanations (e.g. Boyer and Smith, 2001; Katz and Keefe, 1992: 65).

The articles were read and coded by two people. Extensive cross-checking was undertaken within and between the NVivo and SPSS coding. Generally, the aim was to capture objective information about the research whether this was in textual or numerical form. In the latter case, simple count variables were created that would reveal, among other things, the types of case studies, the proportion engaged in causal analysis and the types of sampling strategy among other things.

5 TYPES OF WORKPLACE CASE STUDIES

As indicated earlier, any attempt to examine the general nature of workplace research has to begin with an appreciation of the aims of that research. However, mapping the types of case studies according to their aims proved to be a challenging task. An initial attempt to apply the influential classification devised by Lijphart (1971: 691) had to be abandoned because some categories did not apply (e.g. 'deviant cases') while others were not included. Eventually, I created an inductive typology that distinguished between descriptive, conceptual and theoretical papers as well as the substantial number that generated or tested propositions. But even this categorisation, which is essentially about the purpose of the research, did not reveal very much about the kind of

[1]I used a random number generator to select each issue from a range of numbers whose upper limit matched the total number of issues that the journal published per year.

© 2020 The Authors. Industrial Relations Journal published by Brian Towers (BRITOW) and John Wiley & Sons Ltd

argument advanced in the article, especially if it is not descriptive. To that end, I present a cross-tabulation of types of case study research by whether or not the article presents a causal argument (Table 1).

What this analysis reveals is that descriptive papers were not the most common type. Rather, papers that offered an empirical proposition or hypothesis made up over half of all papers (56.9 per cent). So what do these papers do? Generally, they contained clearly stated empirical propositions that were the culmination of the research effort. These propositions invariably contained a key concept even if this was not part of a conceptual or theoretical framework. Inferences were drawn from empirical observations to guiding concepts such as employee empowerment (e.g. Hales, 2000), labour–management partnerships (e.g. Harrisson *et al.*, 2011) or non-union employee representation (e.g. Donaghey *et al.*, 2012). Causal arguments were also very evident as papers sought to explain, for instance, the impact of technological change on earnings (Hunter *et al.*, 2001) or the cross-national differences in the employment practices of a multinational corporation (Kahancová, 2007). But, for the most part, these papers were not of an explanatory nature. Rather, they set out an original empirical claim or else challenged those made by other researchers.

The descriptive case studies comprised less than one in seven papers (15.0 per cent, Table 1). By descriptive I mean papers that described a particular case or set of cases in an inductive manner without offering a distinctive empirical claim. The emphasis was often on describing, in rich detail, what was often an instance of change at work (e.g. Fisher, 2004). In doing so, some argued that a certain factor or type of labour should be incorporated into analyses of particular kinds of employment (Cooke, 2003). Others simply explored new phenomena such as employer tactics following the introduction of a new union recognition legislation (Perrett, 2007). Though such studies may be atheoretical, dismissing them as merely descriptive is mistaken not least because description plays an important role in the social sciences particularly when capturing new developments (King *et al.*, 1994: 55–63). It so happens that new developments are part and parcel of the world of work and this indeed may be one of the reasons why case studies continue to thrive within this particular field.

Overall, more than one quarter (29.5 per cent) of the research engaged with theoretical, conceptual or typological issues. That is, these were papers in which the motivating theory or concept was revisited in the concluding sections in order to tease out the implications of the findings. It is probably no surprise to learn that theory-oriented studies were far more likely than not to be of an explanatory nature. The one paper

Table 1: Types of workplace case studies

Research purpose	Causal article		Total (%) (*N*)
	No (%)	Yes (%)	
Theoretical	1.6	28.0	9.2 (16)
Conceptual	16.3	8.0	13.9 (24)
Typological	4.1	12.0	6.4 (11)
Propositional	56.9	52.0	55.5 (96)
Descriptive	21.1	0.0	15.0 (26)
Total	100.0 (123)	100.0 (50)	100.0 (173)

© 2020 The Authors. Industrial Relations Journal published by Brian Towers (BRITOW) and John Wiley & Sons Ltd

that did not seek to present a casual argument used the work of Pierre Bourdieu to understand symbolic struggles between managers and employees over whether or not interactive labour within a South African leisure resort constituted the work of 'service professionals' or was something more akin to background manual labour (Sallaz, 2010). Nonetheless, it is notable that only one in ten (9.2 per cent) articles was concerned primarily with theoretical matters (theory confirming, extending or model building). On this basis, it would be difficult to claim that case study research generally has a strong theoretical orientation.

6 THEORY AND CONCEPTS IN WORKPLACE CASE STUDY RESEARCH

6.1 Formulating workplace research

One way of examining the theoretical ambitions of a study is to examine how theory is used to conceptualise phenomena, to formulate questions and to make connections between different aspects of the case being studied. I examined whether the paper offered a theoretical discussion either in the form of a distinct set of propositions or else through a general orientation or perspective. To be precise, the literature review was scrutinised to see if the discussion was primarily about theoretical matters (i.e. a theory-oriented paper). Second, I then undertook a softer test which was to see if the literature review was informed by theory even if discussions of theory did not dominate the literature review. Third, the articles were read to see if they self-consciously identified with a particular theoretical perspective. Obviously, this is a somewhat weaker measure as papers may refer to a specific theoretical orientation without setting that out in any detail.

Significantly, one quarter of the papers (24.2 per cent) contained literature reviews that engaged with theoretical issues. This rose to around a third (31.8 per cent) for papers containing some reference to theory even if only to mention it in passing. A similar proportion (31.9 per cent) named specific theoretical orientations with the most popular being institutional theory and comparative variants (8.0 per cent) followed by Labour Process theory (3.4 per cent).

6.2 Case selection and generalisation

As noted earlier, one of the distinctive features of case study research is that cases are selected purposively. That is, they are selected precisely because they are an instance of some wider phenomenon or class of events. But when the papers were searched for case selection strategies, only half (46.8 per cent) indicated that they selected their cases purposively. A not dissimilar proportion was found within the papers we have identified as theory oriented (56.3 per cent) while descriptive papers were the least concerned with this issue (34.6 per cent). Without some kind of sampling strategy, it is, of course, difficult for such studies to have a basis for drawing generalisations. Earlier, I noted the influential argument by Yin to the effect that the goal of case studies is not to draw empirical generalisations for some wider population but rather to 'generalise his or her findings to some broader theory' (1984: 36). When I examined articles to see if they tried to generalise to theory or a theoretical model, I found that only one in twenty papers (5.2 per cent) did so. Even when a broader measure was used that simply asked whether papers discussed, commented on or even mentioned theory, this increased to only one in five papers (21.8 per cent).

© 2020 The Authors. Industrial Relations Journal published by Brian Towers (BRITOW) and John Wiley & Sons Ltd

Table 2: Examples of theoretically oriented papers based on three criteria

Author	Subject	Theory informed	Case selection	To theory
Edwards *et al.* (2006)	National industrial relations systems and MNC restructuring	Institutionalist	Critical case of MNC restructuring across four countries	Institutionalist approaches to comparative analysis should include the material interests of organisational actors
Hernandez (2006)	Democracy in a worker cooperative	Marxist	Properties—'economically stable'; Mexican cooperative laws	Argues for a focus on 'contradictory process'
Atzeni and Ghigliani (2007)	Workers' self-management	Marxist	Difference—different industries with different production processes	Importance of structural perspective in the context of capitalist system
Blyton and Jenkins (2013)	Worker responses to two factory closures	Mobilisation theory	Comparative case design: different collective responses	Importance of leadership in developing collective action frames
Schröder (2013)	Offshoring decisions of MNCs	New economic sociology	Comparative case design: different offshoring decisions	Limits of rational choice models; influence of morality on an economic decision—outsourcing
Frangi (2014)	Individual and collective actions to improve pay	Varieties of capitalism	Concept led: 'truly global' MNC in manufacturing	Inserting workers 'embedded agency' into varieties of capitalism models

© 2020 The Authors. Industrial Relations Journal published by Brian Towers (BRITOW) and John Wiley & Sons Ltd

To put it bluntly, the findings on case selection and theoretical generalisation are quite bleak. If the selection of cases is central to case study designs, then this is not a consideration for a substantial proportion of the research regardless of whether it aims to be descriptive or explanatory. Where theory does appear in the formulation of research questions, it rarely appears when it comes to interpreting the results.

6.3 Exemplars

In this context, it is all the more important to note the small number of papers that seek to integrate theory and evidence in a sustained manner. That is, the research problems they set themselves are informed by theory; the cases are selected purposively, and they relate their findings to a theoretically informed question. These may be unashamedly modest criteria, but the bald fact is that very few of the papers adhere to these criteria. The papers described in Table 2 are among the very few that meet the criteria.

One of these studies is Blyton and Jenkins's (2013) examination of differing worker responses to factory closures in South Wales. In addition to addressing the three criteria, I have chosen this study as an example of the kind of explanatory research that is possible with case studies. The research question is framed explicitly within mobilisation theory as developed by John Kelly (1998). Blyton and Jenkins are keen to refine Kelly's approach by looking beyond union organisers and officers as the key agents in the mobilisation process. By drawing on a 'close comparison' between two factories that shared many common features, they were able to identify 'certain key variables' that help explain why one workforce mobilised against closure while the other did not. The paper concludes with a thoughtful discussion that seeks, as Yin (1984) would have it, to generalise to theory by concentrating on causal factors. Now their list of causal factors contains many that are common to analyses of worker mobilisation, namely, a sense of collective injustice, the identification of the employer as the source of that injustice, and actors who could organise campaigns around those grievances. Blyton and Jenkins were nonetheless able to extend mobilisation theory by emphasising how 'factors both inside the factory (the nature of work organization) and outside (the close connection between the workplace community and its geographic location) contributed to a social coherence among the Burberry workers that interacted with the social processes of leadership and organization' (749). Crucially, it was a combination of the national union resources, elite local allies such as politicians and the framing of the closure in moral terms that led to mass mobilisation in one case but not in the other. The national union played a critical role in securing support from other unions for the Burberry workers while politicians were essential in gaining support through the media.

Of course, there are limitations to Blyton and Jenkin's work. One could, for instance, argue that mobilisation against closure is rather rare and so their study does not really modify mobilisation theory but rather extends it to outlier cases. In this regard, the fact that one company (Burberry) was a high-profile international consumer brand made it easier for local actors to mobilise public support through the media. Nevertheless, Blyton and Jenkin's study is a surprisingly rare achievement even on the modest criteria proposed here.

© 2020 The Authors. Industrial Relations Journal published by Brian Towers (BRITOW) and John Wiley & Sons Ltd

Table 3: Examples of concept-oriented papers based on three criteria

Author	Subject	Key concept	Case selection	Contribution
Poggio (2000)	Gender and workplace segregation	Segregation	Segregation across organisations in different industries	Segregation is produced by gender cultures within individual organisations
Frost (2001)	Union responses to workplace restructuring	Union capability	Variation in union ability to respond to workplace restructuring	Identifies the characteristics of national unions that shape local responses
Charles and James (2003)	Gender dimensions of job insecurity	Job insecurity	Cases across different sectors	Distinguishes three types of insecurity: job, employer and labour market
Lopez (2006)	Emotional care and in nursing homes	Emotional labour	Different cultures of care at similar nursing homes	Concept generation: ‘organised emotional care’
Chugh and Hancock (2009)	Aestheticisation processes in interactive service work	Aesthetic labour	Stylised and brand conscious hair dressing salons	Bodies of employees contribute to the aesthetic landscaping of the workplace just as much as furniture and lighting
Rolfsen (2011)	Partnership between union and employer	Labour–management partnership	High level of partnership	Involved in organisational development projects; informal human resource managers; implementing decisions
Ilsøe (2012)	Decentralised bargaining and working time zflexibility	Flexicurity	Companies that had concluded agreements on flexible hours	Division within the Danish economy between hard and soft versions of flexicurity

© 2020 The Authors. Industrial Relations Journal published by Brian Towers (BRITOW) and John Wiley & Sons Ltd

7 BEYOND THEORY: CONCEPT-LED RESEARCH

The focus on theory (or the lack thereof) could distract from what has become an important flow of research that has been overlooked in reviews of the general sub-fields of work and employment relations. That is, there were more papers that focused on the analysis of concepts (13.9 per cent) than on engaging with theory (Table 1).

Indeed, it is worth adding here that there was also another strand engaged in the analysis and development of typologies (6.4 per cent). Typologies, which are organised systems of types, are a long established analytical tool in the social sciences. They are especially useful in explaining the meaning of a concept by mapping out its dimensions across rows and columns. A basic distinction may be made between descriptive typologies, which serve to identify and describe the phenomenon being investigated, and explanatory typologies in which the cell types are the outcomes to be explained and the rows and columns contain the explanatory variables (Collier *et al.*, 2012: 218). Though they may appear old-fashioned, descriptive typologies were used productively in several articles covered by this study including Greer and Hauptmeier's (2008) analysis of transnational forms of labour organisation, Håkansson and Isidorsson's (2014) use of Heery's (2004) typology of union responses to agency work and Pulignano's (2011) analysis of the restructuring processes undertaken by multinational companies across Europe.

Of course, the analysis of concepts is sometimes confused with theory, possibly because of the assumption that the specification and clarification of concepts somehow constitutes theory. Concepts, as Merton explained, are an indispensable part of theoretical analysis, but they only prescribe what is to be observed; it is only when they are organised into a conceptual framework that a theory begins to emerge (1968: 143). Significantly, three quarters of the literature reviews (75.8 per cent) presented a key concept.

Goertz (2006: 237) insists that concepts play two crucial roles in social research: as the constituent parts of theory and as an essential element in case selection. We have seen that much of the concept-led research uses concepts that are not related to any particular theory or theoretical perspective. In terms of case selection, case studies are inevitably a *case of* something (Gerring, 2004: 341-3) and describing that something generally means using a concept to establish the nature of what is being studied. Different concepts, for instance, will lead to the selection of different kinds of cases (e.g. a strike versus a revolution). Furthermore, the testing of theories requires the examination of both positive and negative cases (e.g. where social revolutions occurred and where they did not).

Concept-based rationales were offered to justify the choice of cases in roughly one in ten papers (10.4 per cent). That is, cases were selected as instances of workplace segregation (Poggio, 2000), aesthetic labour (Chugh and Hancock, 2009) or flexicurity (Ilsøe, 2012). Given the prevalence of this form of research, an attempt was made to identify those papers that met three similar criteria to those used earlier in identifying theory-oriented papers. That is, the literature review discussed a key concept, the cases were selected purposively and the conclusions related the findings directly to the key concept. Again, this produced a relatively small number of papers (Table 3). Nonetheless, these seven papers provide another example of how to go beyond descriptive research and offer abstract ideas that transcend time and place.

A striking example of this kind of work is Steven Lopez's (2006) development of the concept of organised emotional care from an ethnographic study of work routines in

© 2020 The Authors. Industrial Relations Journal published by Brian Towers (BRITOW) and John Wiley & Sons Ltd

old people's homes. Like many other scholars interested in interactive service work, Lopez's study was inspired by Hochschild's (1983) classic analysis of the work of airline cabin crew and the subsequent literature examining her concept of emotional labour. For Hochschild, emotional labour occurs where employees manage their feelings so that they meet with organisational standards for customer care. On reviewing the extensive literature on emotional labour, Lopez identified a gap in the existing research that raised the question of whether it is ever possible for organisations to support relationships with customers that are mutually rewarding on an emotional level without having the organisations making them think and feel in specific ways. Such a question, Lopez argues, cannot be properly addressed through the concept of emotional labour because it assumes that imposing feeling rules is the only way to manage emotion.

As in the earlier example of Blyton and Jenkins, the research question influenced the choice of case study organisations. Here, the organisations were chosen so that they were similar in all but one respect. They were all non-profit county-owned care homes; they were all unionised, and the employees in each home were demographically similar. However, the difference was that one of the homes ('Pines') subscribed to a formal care philosophy that was aimed at identifying and addressing residents' emotional and social needs (139). One consequence of this selection was that Lopez was able to plot the homes along a continuum with emotional labour at the coercive end and organised emotional care at the other. At the 'Meadows', the care staff performed emotional labour by bringing their feelings and outward displays of emotion into line with managerial requirements while at 'Pines', the employees entered into relationships with residents that were systematically organised though the content of those relationships was left to the individuals involved. In other words, they were free to be themselves (Lopez, 2006: 155–156).

Lopez opens his conclusions by noting the limits of Hochschild's concept of emotional labour. As he rightly acknowledges, 'concepts do have a way of expanding over time to fill the available theoretical space—but dealing with empirical anomalies by emptying theoretical concepts of their specific predictive content is exactly the wrong way to go' (157). The 'Pines' case demonstrates that something like his concept of organised emotional care is necessary because emotional labour is not the only possible way of managing the emotional aspects of interactive service work.

Lopez shrewdly addresses the problem of generalisation by treating his cases as heuristic devices that enable him to distinguish between different kinds of emotional interaction in service work (137). He acknowledges that organised emotional care may even be an outlier in the nursing home industry (158). But the value of his cases, as he rightly argues, does not depend on how common organised emotional care may be within service industries. Rather, Lopez advances the field by specifying and delimiting a new concept and by suggesting where it might be found.

8 CONCLUSIONS

Some years ago, the venerable Oxford sociologist John Goldthorpe denounced what he deemed to be a long-standing scandal in sociology: the lack of integration of empirical research and theory (2000: 190–191). Would it be fair to throw the same accusation at workplace case study research? One answer is that it is unfair because a substantial amount of research is simply trying to describe the latest in the unending series of changes within the world of work. Description may be a basic task within the

© 2020 The Authors. Industrial Relations Journal published by Brian Towers (BRITOW) and John Wiley & Sons Ltd

(social) sciences, but it is nonetheless an important one. Without good descriptions, there cannot be good explanations (King *et al.*, 1994: 34–35).

Another response would be to argue that it is naïve to see case studies as a major source of theoretical progress because this somehow ignores much of what case study research does well. Generating and testing theory from case studies is not as straightforward as implied by Yin (1984), for instance. It assumes, as Ragin has observed, that researchers have well-developed and testable theories to hand when the reality is that this is often quite rare. Instead, Ragin insists that much of case-oriented research is actually spent defining the topic, clarifying theoretical concepts and either generating or refining hypotheses (1994: 109–134). In this regard, it is worth remembering that a substantial proportion of workplace research either offers new propositions or tests existing ones.

Nevertheless, two important problems remain. The first is that it becomes difficult to develop a body of knowledge that accumulates over time if the research amounts to little more than 'piecemeal empiricism' (Merton, 1968). At some point, descriptions and propositions have to be transcended if we are to make the kind of theoretical advances that are essential for the survival of employment relations as an area of intellectual inquiry. Without constantly renewing our theories, we will be unable to organise the collection of facts in a way that gives the field a distinct and coherent identity that enables it to thrive alongside occasional rivals such as organisational behaviour and labour economics.

At the very least, a greater effort has to be made to *theorise*, which for Swedberg (2016) is the process of generating explanations and identifying mechanisms as a prelude to the final formulation of theory. Here, theorising belongs to the context of discovery, which is precisely one of the strengths of qualitative case study research. But the challenge is not only to use case studies to explore new developments but also to offer explanatory accounts that set out the sequences of causation or causal mechanisms behind these developments. Of course, these mechanisms cannot be directly observed, but their operating processes can be delineated from empirical observations using a mixture of intuition and logical reasoning. Crucially, I believe a shift towards mechanism-based explanations would help to renew the workplace tradition by drawing on developments in critical realism (e.g. Ackroyd and Karlsson, 2014) and analytical sociology (Vaughan, 2009).[2]

The second problem is that the workplace case study tradition seems to be producing numerous propositions that are not taken up and tested through large-scale surveys by our quantitative colleagues. Are we indeed Adams's (1993) 'isolated tribes' of researchers who make little reference to work that is not share our methodological orientation whether qualitative or quantitative orientation? Is this because case studies are repeatedly dismissed by quantitative colleagues as being merely descriptive? Or is it because the kind of empirical generalisations on offer are not considered significant enough to warrant large-scale testing? For these and other reasons, it is extremely important that we identify and learn from existing efforts to integrate empirical research and theory. Such shared exemplars are, as Kuhn (1962) noted, important for scientific development because they provide models for resolving research

[2]An attempt was made to count the number of papers analysing social mechanisms but it was abandoned because there were so few.

© 2020 The Authors. Industrial Relations Journal published by Brian Towers (BRITOW) and John Wiley & Sons Ltd

problems. At the very least, we need to start a conversation about how we identify such work.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Diego Alburez-Gutierrez for his invaluable research assistance, Gabriel Abend and Ed Heery for their generous comments and Peter Nolan for his advice. This research benefited from funding provided by STICERD at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

References

Abend, G., C. Petre and M. Sauder (2013), ‘Styles of Causal Thought: An Empirical Investigation’, *American Journal of Sociology*, **119**, 3, 602–654.

Ackroyd, S. and J. C. Karlsson (2014), ‘Critical Realism, Research Techniques, and Research Designs’, in P. K. Edwards, J. O’Mahoney and S. Vincent (eds), Studying Organizations Using Critical Realism: A Practical Guide (Oxford, Oxford University Press) pp. 22–45.

Adams, R. J. (1993), ‘All Aspects of People at Work: Unity and Division in the Study of Labour and Labour Management’, in R. J. Adams and N. M. Meltz (eds), Industrial Relations Theory: Its Nature, Scope, and Pedagogy (New Brunswick, IMLR Press/Rutgers University) pp. 119–153.

Atzeni, M. and P. Ghigliani (2007), ‘Labour Process and Decision-Making in Factories under Workers’ Self-Management: Empirical Evidence from Argentina’, *Work, Employment and Society*, **21**, 4, 653–671. https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017007082875.

Blau, P. M. (1963), The Dynamics of Bureaucracy: A Study of Interpersonal Relationships in Two Government Agencies (Chicago, University of Chicago Press).

Blyton, P. and J. Jenkins (2013), ‘Mobilizing Protest: Insights from Two Factory Closures’, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, **51**, 4, 733–753. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8543.2012.00906.x.

Boyer, G. R. and R. S. Smith (2001), ‘The Development of the Neoclassical Tradition in Labor Economics’, *ILR Review*, **54**, 2, 199–223.

Brown, W. (1998), ‘Clegg, Hugh Armstrong’, in M. Poole and M. Warner (eds), The Iebm Handbook of Human Resource Management (London, International Thomson Business Press) pp. 847–852.

Brown, W. and M. Wright (1994), ‘The Empirical Tradition in Workplace Bargaining Research’, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, **32**, 2, 153–164.

Cappelli, P. (1985), ‘Theory Construction in IR and Some Implications for Research’, *Industrial Relations*, **24**, 1, 90–112.

Charles, N. and E. James (2003), ‘The Gender Dimensions of Job Insecurity in a Local Labour Market’, *Work, Employment and Society*, **17**, 3, 531–552. https://doi.org/10.1177/09500170030173007.

Chugh, S. and P. Hancock (2009), ‘Networks of Aestheticization: The Architecture, Artefacts and Embodiment of Hairdressing Salons’, *Work, Employment and Society*, **23**, 3, 460–476. https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017009337060.

Collier, D., J. LaPorte and J. Seawright (2012), ‘Putting Typologies to Work: Concept Formation, Measurement, and Analytic Rigor’, *Political Research Quarterly*, **65**, 1, 217–232.

Cooke, F. L. (2003), ‘Maintaining Change: The Maintenance Function and the Change Process’, *New Technology, Work and Employment*, **18**, 1, 35–49. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-005X.00109.

Donaghey, J., N. Cullinane, T. Dundon and T. Dobbins (2012), ‘Non-union Employee Representation, Union Avoidance and the Managerial Agenda’, *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, **33**, 2, 163–183. https://doi.org/10.1177/0143831x11401924.

© 2020 The Authors. Industrial Relations Journal published by Brian Towers (BRITOW) and John Wiley & Sons Ltd

Edwards, R. (1979), Contested Terrain: The Transformation of the Workplace in the Twentieth Century (New York, Basic Books).

Edwards, P. K. 2007. "The State of the Labour Process Debate after 25 Years: Some Reflections from Industrial Relations and Industrial Sociology." Paper presented at the 25th International Labour Process Conference, Amsterdam.

Edwards, P. and J. Bélanger (2008), 'Generalizing from Workplace Ethnographies: From Induction to Theory', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, **37**, 3, 291–313.

Edwards, T., X. Coller, L. Ortiz, C. Rees and M. Wortmann (2006), 'National Industrial Relations Systems and Cross-Border Restructuring: Evidence from a Merger in the Pharmaceuticals Sector', *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, **12**, 1, 69–87. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959680106061369.

Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989), 'Building Theories from Case Study Research', *Academy of Management Review*, **14**, 4, 532–550. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1989.4308385.

Eisenhardt, K. M. and M. E. Graebner (2007), 'Theory Building from Cases: Opportunities and Challenges', *The Academy of Management Journal*, **50**, 1, 25–32.

Fisher, M. (2004), 'The Crisis of Civil Service Trade Unionism: A Case Study of Call Centre Development in a Civil Service Agency', *Work, Employment and Society*, **18**, 1, 157–177. https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017004040767.

Frangi, L. (2014), 'Introducing Workers' Embedded Agency: Insights from the Brazilian Subsidiaries of a Multinational Corporation', *Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations*, **69**, 1, 60–85.

Frege, C. (2007), Employment Research and State Traditions (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

Frost, A. C. (2001), 'Creating and Sustaining Local Union Capabilities: The Role of the National Union', *Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations*, **56**, 2, 307–335. https://doi.org/10.2307/23077478.

Gerring, J. (2004), 'What Is a Case Study and What Is It Good for?' *American Political Science Review*, **98**, 2, 341–354.

Glaser, B. G. (1978), Theoretical Sensitivity: Advances in the Methodology of Grounded Theory (Mill Valley, CA, Sociology Press).

Glaser, B. G. and A. L. Strauss (1967), The Discovery of Grounded Theory (New Brunswick, Aldine).

Godard, J. (1994), 'Beyond Empiricism: Towards a Reconstruction of IR Theory and Research', *Advances in Industrial and Labor Relations*, **6**, 1–35.

Goertz, G. (2006), Social Science Concepts: A User's Guide (Princeton, Princeton University Press).

Goldthorpe, J. H. (2000), On Sociology: Numbers, Narratives, and the Integration of Research and Theory (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

Gouldner, A. W. (1954), Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy: A Case Study of Modern Factory Administration (New York, The Free Press).

Greer, I. and M. Hauptmeier (2008), 'Political Entrepreneurs and Co-managers: Labour Transnationalism at Four Multinational Auto Companies', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, **46**, 1, 76–97. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8543.2007.00667.x.

Håkansson, K. and T. Isidorsson (2014), 'The Trade Union Response to Agency Labour in Sweden', *Industrial Relations Journal*, **45**, 1, 22–38. https://doi.org/10.1111/irj.12040.

Hales, C. (2000), 'Management and Empowerment Programmes', *Work, Employment and Society*, **14**, 3, 501–519.

Harrisson, D., M. Roy and V. H. Iii (2011), 'Union Representatives in Labour–Management Partnerships: Roles and Identities in Flux', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, **49**, 3, 411–435. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8543.2009.00758.x.

Heery, E. (2004), 'The Trade Union Response to Agency Labour in Britain', *Industrial Relations Journal*, **35**, 5, 434–450.

© 2020 The Authors. Industrial Relations Journal published by Brian Towers (BRITOW) and John Wiley & Sons Ltd

Hernandez, S. (2006), 'Striving for Control: Democracy and Oligarchy at a Mexican Cooperative', *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, **27**, 1, 105–135. https://doi.org/10.1177/0143831x06060593.

Hochschild, A. R. (1983), The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling (Berkeley, University of California Press).

Hunter, L. W., A. Bernhardt, K. L. Hughes and E. Skuratowicz (2001), 'It's Not Just the ATMs: Technology, Firm Strategies, Jobs, and Earnings in Retail Banking', *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, **54**, 2A, 402–424. https://doi.org/10.2307/2696101.

Ilsøe, A. (2012), 'Signs of Segmentation? A Flexicurity Perspective on Decentralized Collective Bargaining in Denmark', *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, **33**, 2, 245–265. https://doi.org/10.1177/0143831x11408144.

Kahancová, M. (2007), 'One Company, Four Factories: Coordinating Employment Flexibility Practices with Local Trade Unions', *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, **13**, 1, 67–88. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959680107073968.

Katz, H. and J. H. Keefe (1992), 'Collective Bargaining and Industrial Relations Outcomes: The Causes and Consequences of Diversity', In D. Lewin, O.S. Mitchell and P. D. Sherer (eds) *Research frontiers in industrial relations and human resources*, (IRRA, Madison) 43–75.

Kaufman, B. E. (2004), The Global Evolution of Industrial Relations: Events, Ideas and the IIRA (Geneva, International Labour Office).

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

King, G., R. O. Keohane and S. Verba (1994), Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research (Princeton, Princeton University Press).

Kuhn, T. S. (1962), The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago, Chicago University Press).

Lijphart, A. (1971), 'Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method', *American Political Science Review*, **65**, 03, 682–693.

Lopez, S. H. (2006), 'Emotional Labor and Organized Emotional Care: Conceptualizing Nursing Home Care Work', *Work and Occupations*, **33**, 2, 133–160. https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888405284567.

Lupton, T. (1963), On the Shop Floor: Two Studies of Workshop Organization and Output (Oxford, Pergamon Press).

McGovern, P. and D. Alburez-Gutierrez (2017), 'Who Takes Workplace Case-Study Methods Seriously? The Influence of Gender, Academic Rank and PhD Training', *Industrial Relations Journal*, **48**, 2, 98–114.

Merton, R. K. (1968), Social Theory and Social Structure (New York, Free Press).

Mitchell, J. C. (1983), 'Case and Situation Analysis', *The Sociological Review*, **31**, 2, 187–211.

Nolan, P. (2012), 'Understanding the Employment Relationship: Markets, Hierarchies and Power', *Industrial Relations Journal*, **43**, 4, 359–369.

Perrett, R. (2007), 'Worker Voice in the Context of the Re-regulation of Employment: Employer Tactics and Statutory Union Recognition in the UK', *Work, Employment and Society*, **21**, 4, 617–634. https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017007082873.

Poggio, B. (2000), 'Between Bytes and Bricks: Gender Cultures in Work Contexts', *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, **21**, 3, 381–402. https://doi.org/10.1177/0143831x00213006.

Pulignano, V. (2011), 'Bringing Labour Markets 'Back In': Restructuring International Businesses in Europe', *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, **32**, 4, 655–677. https://doi.org/10.1177/0143831x10392395.

Ragin, C. C. (1994), Constructing Social Research: The Unity and Diversity of Method (Thousand Oaks, CA, Pine Forge Press).

Rolfsen, M. (2011), 'How Close Can We Dance? Labour–Management Partnership on a Borderline', *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, **32**, 4, 591–608. https://doi.org/10.1177/0143831x10387837.

© 2020 The Authors. Industrial Relations Journal published by Brian Towers (BRITOW) and John Wiley & Sons Ltd

Sallaz, J. J. (2010), 'Service Labor and Symbolic Power: On Putting Bourdieu to Work', *Work and Occupations*, **37**, 3, 295–319. https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888410373076.

Schröder, M. (2013), 'Should I Stay or Should I Go? How Moral Arguments Influence Decisions about Offshoring Production', *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, **34**, 2, 187–204. https://doi.org/10.1177/0143831x12440465.

Swedberg, R. (2016), 'Before Theory Comes Theorizing or How to Make Social Science More Interesting', *The British Journal of Sociology*, **67**, 1, 5–22. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12184.

Thompson, P. (1983), The Nature of Work: An Introduction to Debates on the Labour Process (Basingstoke, Macmillan).

Thompson, P. and C. Smith (2009), 'Waving, Not Drowning: Explaining and Exploring the Resilience of Labor Process Theory', *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal*, **21**, 3, 253–262.

Vaughan, D. (2009), 'Analytic Ethnography', in P. Hedstrom and P. Bearman (eds), The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology (Oxford, Oxford University Press) pp. 688–711.

Yin, R. K. (1984), Case Study Research: Design and Methods (Thousand Oaks, Sage).

© 2020 The Authors. Industrial Relations Journal published by Brian Towers (BRITOW) and John Wiley & Sons Ltd