

COMMENTS WELCOME

THE MANY MEANINGS OF COOPERATION IN THE EMPLOYMENT
RELATIONSHIP AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

Cooperation in the employment relationship continues to be a widely-lauded goal, but academics, practitioners and policymakers rarely define the concept or analyse systematically its variants. This is problematic because a lack of clarity is a significant barrier to academic discourse and practical implementation in many organizations and countries. This paper therefore carefully develops a framework that results in six key perspectives on cooperation rooted in five assumptions. In addition to fostering a deeper understanding of cooperation, these six perspectives can be used to theorise alternative employment relations paradigms when cooperation rather than conflict is viewed as the central construct. Moreover, a dynamic analysis of these six perspectives adds new insights to understanding the challenges of achieving and sustaining truly cooperative regimes, while also highlighting the need to go beyond structures and practices by incorporating the role of ideas in analyses of the success or failure of cooperative efforts.

1. INTRODUCTION

Conflict and cooperation are at the heart of employment relations, theoretically and in practice. But the understanding and use of these concepts are uneven. Conflict is more deeply theorised than cooperation, and differing paradigms are frequently distinguished by their assumptions about employment relationship conflict, not cooperation (Fox 1973, 1974; Budd and Bhave 2008; Heery 2016). In contrast, it is cooperation that is widely-embraced by practitioners and policymakers. In both realms, however, 'cooperation' tends to be used by all as a plastic term moulded to fit one's own views without defining it. This is particularly problematic because cooperation means very different things to different people. This results in inconsistency and confusion, creating a barrier to productive academic discourse and hampering the implementation of cooperation in practice. Consequently, our starting premise is a need for more attention to the concept and meaning of cooperation.

In some usages of the term 'cooperation', every employment relationship involves cooperation to the extent that the parties are participating in that relationship, even if conflictually. But that's not the usage to which we refer. Rather, our focus is the more common usage of 'cooperation', which involves some notion of working together harmoniously, but beyond that lacks clarity and consistency. There are many possible reasons for the lack of definitional clarity on the concept of cooperation, but we believe a major one is the (perhaps surprising) complexity of the concept. This leads to many different and often competing perspectives on what cooperation means and how it can/should be advanced within the employment relationship. In the context of such diversity, in this paper we adopt a broad definition and turn to exploring more systematically the different meanings, manifestations, causes, and consequences within its broad boundaries. A key revelation is that six alternative perspectives are needed to capture the full range of key views on

cooperation, and we show how each alternative is rooted in underlying values and assumptions about the nature of the employment relationship.

These six perspectives can therefore be seen as the key frames of reference that distinguish the major alternative views of cooperation. In contrast to the standard approach to frames of reference in employment relations, in which a conflict-centric analysis results in three (Fox 1973, 1974; Heery 2016) or four (Budd and Bhavé 2008) frames of reference, we argue that six frames of references are needed to adequately theorise alternative perspectives on cooperation. Conceptually, this is a significant advance in how to think about modelling the employment relationship when cooperation rather than conflict is seen as the key determinant of alternative paradigms.¹ Moreover, while Heery (2016) expertly reviews how the three schools of unitarist, pluralist, and critical thought view cooperation and partnership, we build an understanding of alternative perspectives on cooperation from foundational assumptions which results in the need for six frames of reference.

Practically, our approach to cooperation is important for helping practitioners appreciate and understand alternative viewpoints, and each of the perspectives is made clearer when understood as part of a fuller typology that explicitly illustrates alternative visions. Moreover, it contributes to overcoming the difficulties of achieving and sustaining cooperation, which are well-known, in two ways. First, by explicitly revealing distinct perspectives held by different stakeholders that are all (mistakenly) labelled as ‘cooperation’ in practice, it becomes apparent that achieving and sustaining cooperation is more difficult in the absence of a shared idea of what it means. The research literature on the determinants of cooperation’s success or failure emphasises structural factors like managerial power and

¹ Cradden (2018) also embraces frames of reference in theorising what he labels ‘cooperation’ and ‘conflict’ in the employment relationship. But his analysis is more about compliance and acceptance rather than reciprocal collaboration, so this represents a very different line of inquiry.

financial pressure (Cooke 1990; Dobbins and Dundon 2017). But as noted by Fox (1974: 271) many years ago, actors ‘perceive and define social phenomena’ through frames of reference and, in turn, ‘their perceptions and definitions determine their behaviour’ (also, Cornelissen and Werner 2014; Walsh 1995). Our framework reveals the extent to which workplace actors’ frames of reference for understanding and pursuing workplace cooperation can clash, thus creating barriers to achieving and sustaining cooperation. So this uniquely reveals the importance of aligning stakeholder visions of cooperation, rather than relying solely on appropriate processes and structures, for achieving and sustaining cooperation.

The second contribution to a deeper understanding of the difficulty of achieving and sustaining cooperation is the extension of our typology into a dynamic approach in the form of a ‘cooperation curve’. This cooperation curve illustrates that workers and their representatives as well as employers and their representatives all face the temptation to pull away from a truly cooperative relationship because of their own self-interest. So our framework reveals that the central tension within cooperation is the duality between self-interest and mutuality—self-interest can easily undermine mutuality but without some degree of responsibility for the other side’s interests, true cooperation will not be achieved. Our framework further demonstrates that it can be management or labour that is responsible for failure. This is a more nuanced approach than critical perspectives, which blame employers for the lack of cooperation, and managerialist perspectives, which blame trade unions and workers for the lack of cooperation. It is also more nuanced than debates that tend to see cooperation as always or never possible and wise. Rather, cooperation is a complicated concept and practice that requires careful examination.

2. THE WIDE EMBRACE BUT LACK OF DEFINITION OF COOPERATION

Whether phrased as ‘workplace cooperation,’ ‘employee cooperation,’ ‘labour-management cooperation,’ or in other ways, cooperation is embraced by a wide range of commentators in

diverse contexts. To provide a few practical examples, a conservative, largely anti-union employer association in Australia claims that underpinning all its activities is ‘...the fundamental belief in direct, cooperative and mutually rewarding employment relationships. [Our association] believes that such relationships at the enterprise level are the best way to achieve efficient and productive workplaces’ (AMMA 2007). A Volkswagen executive in America stated that ‘The Volkswagen Group is proud of its record of cooperation and co-determination between employees, management and the communities in which we live and work...it is a business model that helped to make Volkswagen the second largest car company in the world’ (Chattanooga.com, February 8, 2014).

Public policymakers also champion cooperation. The European Union’s Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, for example, boasted about a report that demonstrated the growth of employer-union cooperation: ‘We are seeing more and more new forms of cooperation between European employers and trade unions which bring concrete results for working people across the EU. In the evolving world of work, social partners are ideally placed to promote adaptability and to take measures for quality employment’ (European Commission 2006). The International Labour Organisation (ILO) promotes cooperation in many domains, including its high profile ‘Sustaining Competitive and Responsible Enterprises’ (SCORE) initiative, which is a modular training program focusing on developing ‘cooperative relations at the workplace’. Cooperation is also lauded in national public policy and therefore central to labour legislation in many countries. For example, cooperation has been a key object in the main labour laws of Australia for decades, irrespective of the political complexion of the government of the time (Stewart et al. 2014). Few of these practitioner/policy commentaries offer any definitions, but it is unlikely they all mean the same thing when they applaud cooperation in the employment relationship.

Within academic circles, there is a long tradition of industrial relations research focusing on cooperation and related concepts. In the USA, John Commons (1919) wrote about ‘industrial goodwill’, while Kaufman (2008: 329) argues more broadly that ‘cooperation’ was the ‘single most used word’ in American debates about industrial relations in the 1920s (see also Jacoby 1983). During the 1940s and 1950s, the National Planning Association published a series of studies on ‘industrial peace’ in the context of collective bargaining (e.g. Golden and Parker 1955), while later accounts focused on ‘integrative’ or ‘cooperative’ bargaining (Walton and McKersie 1965). More recent accounts, such as the ‘mutual gains enterprise’ (Kochan and Osterman 1994), focus on the cooperative process and especially its implications for organisational performance and employee rewards (e.g. Kochan et al. 2009). McLeod (1990) goes deeper than most in identifying leftist, centrist, and rightist views on cooperation, but the underlying bases for these perspectives are not explored.

The British literature relating to cooperation is less extensive, although ‘joint consultation’ became an important policy and research topic during and immediately after the world wars (Clegg and Chester 1954; Hall and Purcell 2012). Apart from one study of ‘industrial peace’ in the 1970s (Goodman et al. 1977), cooperation did not again become a central focus of research until a stream of projects on union-management ‘partnerships’ that resulted from their promotion by the Blair Labour government (e.g. Stuart and Martinez Lucio 2005; Johnstone, Akers, and Wilkinson et al. 2009). We could find no clear or widely-accepted definition of workplace cooperation in this literature. In a different vein, Cradden (2018) seeks to model when cooperation or conflict will characterise the employment relationship, but in his usage ‘cooperation’ is worker ‘compliance with rules and incentives’ (p. 50). As in practitioner usage, ‘cooperation’ is much used but often in very different ways.

There is also a long history of research in management and human resource management in both the USA and Britain that reflects in one way or another on cooperation. In the early decades of the 20th century, Taylor (1911: 26) argued that ‘...close, intimate, personal cooperation between the management and the men (sic) is of the essence of modern scientific or task management’. Analyses of the emergence in the 1980s of the human resource management approach to managing employees is another example in which cooperation is treated as important:

A key objective of new management strategies and reform of the employment relationship was to ‘win the hearts and minds of employees’ and to secure their cooperation and support of new business objectives. The popular cliché ‘people are our most important asset’ is indicative of organisational recognition that control and compliance is often insufficient for survival, and that the active cooperation and commitment of employees is a valuable resource offering the key to achieving a ‘competitive edge’ (Boyd 2001: 438).

More recently, similar preoccupations can be found in literatures on ‘high commitment workplaces’, ‘high involvement organisations’ and ‘employee engagement’ (Beer 2009; Truss et al. 2014), but again, despite the widespread support for and appeal to the virtues of cooperation, we could find no serious attempt in these managerialist literatures to clearly define cooperation or develop systematic analysis of its component parts.

3. DEFINING COOPERATION AND ITS KEY ASSUMPTIONS

Our definition of cooperation is a simple one: ‘*working together to the same end*’. Cooperation in the employment relationship is therefore defined as ‘managers, workers, and their representatives, if any, working together towards the same end’. This broad definition, however, needs qualification and amplification. First, ‘working together’ involves on-going ‘relationships’ that operate over a period of time rather than specific ‘events’ or

‘transactions’. These relationships involve interaction between ‘managers, workers and their representatives, if any’, but this leaves considerable space for variation about ‘who’ is involved in cooperation. In particular, the role of worker representatives is a key point of differentiation among alternative perspectives. Our definition also leaves open questions about ‘the same end’ that is being pursued through cooperation. The mutuality that is associated with cooperation confers benefit to each party and some responsibility by each party for achieving the goals of ‘other’ parties. But the nature of these goals, the level of mutual benefit, and the degree of responsibility for others’ goals are all contested issues. Much of the literature on workplace cooperation, for example, argues that deep cooperative relationships involve engagement by the parties on a wide rather than narrow range of issues, but it’s not always clear that these issues include the distinct goals of both parties. Finally, the definition says nothing about ‘how’ the parties work together: what are the structures and processes of cooperation? This silence allows different perspectives to privilege different mechanisms.

Our simple definition, then, is useful for thinking about the key dimensions of cooperation, but by itself does not distinguish alternative perspectives on cooperation. It is therefore only a starting point for a systematic consideration of different assumptions, beliefs, and perceptions of cooperation in the employment relationship.

Our deeper analysis of cooperation begins with Budd’s typology of values, assumptions and theories underlying industrial relations (Budd and Bhavé 2008; Befort and Budd 2009). This analysis, which expands upon Fox’s earlier work (1969, 1973, 1974), identifies four main perspectives: egoist, unitarist, pluralist and critical. We argue, however, that much of this previous conceptual work has been preoccupied with understanding conflict in the employment relationship rather than cooperation (more broadly, see Avgar and Owens 2014). A focus on cooperation rather than conflict leads us to need to split the pluralist and

unitarist categories, creating a total of six perspectives required to understand the full range of views on cooperation. Each perspective's overarching view of cooperation within the employment relationship is presented in Table 1. It is clear that the six views on cooperation are different from each other, and only two of them actually meet our definition of cooperation. Table 1 will be more fully explained in conjunction with a discussion of the key elements of cooperation that distinguish these views.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Together, these perspectives constitute a typology or taxonomy, which is 'a classification scheme designed for a particular purpose that groups together events or phenomena on the basis of similar characteristics' (Lewins 1992: 21). To better understand this taxonomy, and the resulting perspectives on cooperation, it is important to explicitly identify the key characteristics that distinguish these six perspectives. We believe that five key assumptions are needed to distinguish these perspectives.

3.1 Who is working together?

Managers and workers must, of course, work together in all work organisations, so this could be seen as a common feature across all perspectives on cooperation. A more nuanced analysis, however, finds important differences across the perspectives on the nature of the parties involved in cooperation. A critical perspective highlights the class nature of the parties to the employment relationships whereas a market-centric view sees the parties as atomistic agents who contract with each other when it is in their self-interest. Moreover, the perspectives differ on whether managers deal directly and solely with workers, or whether other parties are involved in the cooperative relationship, specifically organisations representing managers or workers. For some, cooperation is considered only to be possible between individuals, whereas in other views collective organisations are potential, or even

desirable, participants. These views are often related to whether unions are seen as a collective organisation of workers or as ‘third party’ outsiders.

3.2 *The compatibility of interests?*

This characteristic focuses on the aims of the parties and the extent to which their aims are compatible or mutually-achievable, thereby affecting the potential for cooperation. There are considerable differences (if not confusion) in the terminology used to describe these aims, ranging variously across interests, goals, concerns, objectives, needs, wants and motivations. Like Budd and Bhave (2008), we adopt the term ‘interests’, which, following Jary and Jary (1991: 321), is defined as ‘...the particular social outcomes held to benefit a particular individual or group. Such interests may be those recognised and pursued by the person or group, or they may be identified by others, including social scientists, as underlying or ‘objective’ interests unrecognised by the person concerned.’

Consistent with this definition, we argue that the six perspectives bring different assumptions about the interests of the parties, especially in the extent of compatibility between the interests of the parties. These differences are identified by social scientists and/or the parties themselves who adopt the respective perspectives. At one end of the spectrum are critical views in which employers and employees need each other, but have interests that are sharply antagonistic rather than compatible, while at the other end of the spectrum laissez-faire views assume that employers and employees will form and continue a relationship only when their interests are compatible. In between are varying views on the nature of overlapping and conflicting interests among the parties to the employment relationship.

3.3 *How much mutuality?*

Mutuality is the extent to which each party recognises the interests of others as legitimate and accepts responsibility for addressing others’ interests. At either end of the conceptual spectrum are views in which employers and employees are largely or entirely responsible for

their own interests, while in between are varying degrees of acceptance of the legitimacy of and mutual responsibility for employment relationship interests. The extent to which trade unions foster or hinder the achievement of mutuality is another element that separates the alternative views. At one extreme are views that criticise trade unions as unnecessary impediments to good management, the competitiveness of the enterprise or the economic prosperity of the nation (e.g. Fox 1969: 402-6). At the other are views that criticise trade unions for failing to advance the interests of their members by being too close to management (Oxenbridge and Brown 2004). These extreme positions—and many others that lie in between—reveal different assumptions about how much responsibility parties to the employment relationship should take for the interests of other parties, and especially the role of trade unions in this dynamic. The alternative views, in turn, underlie different perspectives on cooperation.

3.4 What kind of worker voice is required?

The extent to which workers are entitled to voice and the form that this voice should take also distinguish alternative perspectives on cooperation. Some perspectives believe that workers should have the right and opportunity to participate in decision-making and rule-making based on principles of human dignity, autonomy, and industrial democracy (Budd 2004). Alternatively, others might believe that workers are not entitled to such rights while differing on whether there are instrumental benefits in involving workers in decision-making. Yet another perspective equates employee voice to the freedom to choose when to work and under what contractual conditions.

3.5 Cooperation over what issues?

Perspectives on cooperation differ on the range of issues that should be included in cooperative efforts. If the employment relationship is seen through a lens of irreconcilable conflict, then it is assumed that no issues are subject to cooperation. Another possibility is

that only a narrow range of issues should be subject to cooperation, such as wages and some conditions of employment, but not issues considered to be managerial prerogatives. Others believe that cooperation should involve a broad range of issues, or that cooperation should involve whatever particular parties find to be in their mutual self-interest.

4. SIX PERSPECTIVES ON COOPERATION IN THE EMPLOYMENT RELATIONSHIP

Having explained the criteria used to distinguish the six perspectives on cooperation, we can now describe each of them in turn. Recall that each perspective is summarised in Table 1; the main assumptions that provide the foundation for the six perspectives are summarised in Table 2. We begin by examining the perspectives at either end of the continuum—a market-based or egoist perspective, and the radical or critical perspective.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

The egoist (or market) perspective is ‘rooted in the pursuit of individual self-interest by rational agents in economic markets’ (Budd and Bhave 2008: 102). The parties are highly individualised. It matters little whether there is any initial incompatibility of interests because only workers who have accepted the organisation’s goals will enter into the employment relationship. In this way, cooperation within the employment relationship is unproblematic because employees have voluntarily embraced a common interest with employers as a result of negotiations and agreement between the parties: employers provide the specified rewards to employees, while employees agree to work under the direction of the employer. Conflict is not viewed as a structural feature of the employment relationship, but is instead seen as arising from opportunism when either side breaches, or is accused of breaching, the terms of the implicit or explicit employment contract. This emphasis on market transactions means that egoism has little to say about how cooperation within the enterprise is secured after the agreement is struck. Rather, cooperation is best seen as self-interested compliance.

The critical (or radical) perspective is ‘rooted in the power and control interests of employers and employees’ (Budd and Bhave 2008: 104), which are inevitably in conflict. The parties are conceived in class terms rather than individuals or representative organisations. The interests of employers and employees are inherently separate—indeed, irreconcilable—and neither side can be expected to take responsibility for the other. Some accommodation of each other occurs because employers and employees need each other, but this is better seen as part of a continual tension between accommodation and control where control rather than consent is superior. As such, cooperation in the (capitalist) employment relationship is seen as illegitimate because it is seen as enforced compliance. It is just another mechanism by which managers control workers. It is the result of the exercise of uneven power (in the labour market and in the labour process) and it further reproduces power imbalances and the control of workers. Empirical studies in the critical tradition focus on the control strategies by which employers ‘manufacture consent’ (Burawoy 1979) and caution that the outcomes of cooperation between managers and employees have often failed to genuinely benefit workers (e.g. Kelly 2004; Bacon and Blyton 2006), and arguably cannot deliver genuine mutual gains (Dobbins and Dundon 2017).

The remaining four perspectives—two versions each of pluralism and unitarism—treat cooperation differently than the egoist and radical perspectives. By definition, pluralism demands recognition that the interests of employees and managers within the organisation are mixed: while some interests are common to each side, the importance of distinct interests are too important to overlook (Budd and Bhave 2008). Pluralism further requires that this potential for conflict, which is inherent to the structure of employment and organisations under capitalism, is legitimate and accepted on both sides. These basic requirements, however, leave open a range of pluralist possibilities, from entrenched antagonism to warm cooperation. This continuum is revealed in practices like collective bargaining. Some

bargaining relationships are highly adversarial, even though representatives of both sides recognise each other for bargaining purposes. Without challenging the legitimacy of their ‘opponents’ and expecting that agreement will eventually be reached, each side often keeps the other at ‘arm’s length’ in low-trust, rules-based relationships (Fox 1974). In contrast, other bargaining relationships are better characterised as ‘labour-management’ or ‘union-management’ partnerships, where both sides embrace cooperation, agreeing to share decision making on a wide range of issues, either through collective bargaining or other mechanisms of joint determination (Kochan et al. 2009; Avgar and Owens 2014). We believe that two separate pluralist perspectives on cooperation are needed to constructively capture the diversity of views within pluralism: adversarial pluralism and collaborative pluralism.

In adversarial pluralism there is a recognition and acceptance that managers, employees and their representatives (usually unions) are legitimate parties to cooperation, but the emphasis is more on the distinctiveness of each party’s goals than on the shared interests. While the parties acknowledge the legitimacy of the ‘opponent’s’ interests, they see no responsibility to address or defend those interests beyond what is required to maintain the relationship. In this way, opportunistic ‘wins’ to the detriment of the opponent’s interest will be seized as an acceptable, indeed desirable, outcome when circumstances permit it, but not to the extent of threatening the legitimacy or existence of the other side. The key distinction on issues is between matters that are subject to bargaining, and therefore jointly determined, and those which are left to management to decide unilaterally.

In collaborative pluralism there is also a recognition and acceptance that managers, employees and their representatives (usually unions) are legitimate parties to cooperation. But unlike in adversarial pluralism, collaborative pluralism emphasises common interests and mutual gains. This perspective assumes a preparedness of each side to take some responsibility for addressing the interests of the other side. Opportunistic ‘wins’ to the

detriment of the opponent's interest undermine collaboration, exhibit a lack of regard for the other side's interests, and are therefore not seen as legitimate.

Unitarism, as defined by Budd and Bhava (2008), rests largely on a denial of fundamental conflict between employers and employees because of the widespread embrace of the ability to create mutual gains, and an assumption that management represents the only needed source of authority within the organisation. As with pluralism, the foundational assumptions of unitarism leave open alternative perspectives that differ considerably on the extent and type of cooperation within the organisation (see also Cullinane and Dundon 2012). We identify two separate perspectives that capture the key variants: autocratic unitarism and consultative unitarism.

In autocratic unitarism the employment relationship is the province solely of managers and employees, with no role for 'third parties'. It assumes employee and employer interests to be inseparable and expects employee cooperation to flow naturally from the directions of managers. This autocratic vision allows managers to rely on property rights and superior knowledge and expertise to make unilateral decisions to advance organisational goals. Employees will comply with the directions of management—and employee compliance lies at the heart of this form of cooperation—because they are assumed to benefit when the organisation prospers. In this way, management is solely responsible for the achievement of organisational goals and the determination of most issues.

In consultative unitarism the employment relationship is again seen as the province solely of managers and employees, with no role for 'third parties'. However this is a more consultative and inclusive form of unitarism—indeed, cooperative—because management actively seeks to align employee and management interests in a participatory, consultative way rather than in a hierarchical, unilateral fashion. It is therefore management's responsibility to lead the organisation and to understand employee preferences on a wide

range of issues through structures and processes such as employee attitude surveys, counselling of employees and performance management. Managers then develop organisational policies designed to meet employee expectations and aspirations.

5. RECOGNIZING PERSPECTIVES ON COOPERATION IN PRACTICE

The key assumptions outlined in Table 2 allow us to describe six internally consistent but different perspectives on cooperation at work. In practice, however, we cannot ‘see’ assumptions. Rather, what’s observable in practice is the manifestation of these assumptions which can take many forms. We believe it is instructive to consider five key areas: the form of the processes and structures through which cooperation occurs; the types and range of issues on which the parties cooperate; the extent of information sharing; the level of trust within the employment relationship; and the presence of dispute resolution procedures (see Table 3).

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

In many respects, the critical and market-based patterns of cooperative arrangements look similar in practice. There is a lack of formal structures for cooperation, little need for information sharing, a lack of trust, and an absence of formal dispute resolution procedures. The key differences between these two perspectives is in the perceived context—is it a situation in which the two sides are seen as being forced to deal with each other on highly unequal terms, or one in which autonomous, equal agents voluntarily choose to contract with each when it serves their self-interest? Which perspective best describes each actual employment relationship is a very old debate that we cannot solve. But this reveals why some debates over cooperation specifically, and the employment relationship more broadly, can be so intense—that is, similar observable features can be interpreted quite differently based on the assumptions that comprise one’s frame of reference.

In both adversarial and collaborative pluralism, one would find formal structures for representing workers' and organizational interests, with the proto-typical example being collective bargaining. However, the assumptions that underlie these two perspectives lead to collective bargaining relationships that are expected to be significantly different. Adversarial pluralism is most likely to involve distributive bargaining over limited issues. Information is likely only shared in a strategic fashion to serve one's own interests and trust does not run very deep. Agreements are likely committed to writing, which may be legally binding in some countries, and dispute resolution is a formal process to see whether this written agreement has been violated. Adversarial pluralism is probably the most commonly practiced form of pluralism, especially in 'liberal market' economies like the USA, Britain and Australia, although the collapse of union membership and the decline of collective bargaining is reducing its prevalence overall (Doellgast and Benassi 2014).

In contrast, collaborative pluralism is likely to involve a mixture of traditional bargaining to handle distributive issues and integrative bargaining, problem solving, and/or co-determination to address matters of common interest. When successful and sustained, this involves extensive information sharing and high levels of trust. Using the distinction developed by Edwards, Bélanger, and Wright (2006) between 'control' and 'developmental' concerns, adversarial pluralism is likely focused on control issues such as the wage-effort bargain, working conditions, and the limits of managerial power whereas collaborative pluralism also addresses developmental issues like efficiency improvements, skill development, process improvement, and organizational innovation. It is only when control and development issues are both jointly addressed that true cooperation may exist. Collaborative pluralism is less frequently implemented or sustained than adversarial pluralism, but it is much studied; examples include various types of partnerships between

unions and employers in the USA (Kochan et al. 2008, 2009), Britain (Johnstone, Akers, and Wilkinson 2009), and Australia (Townsend et al. 2013, Bray, Macneil, and Stewart 2017).

In consultative unitarism, one would expect to see formal participatory structures such as joint consultation committees, interest-based problem-solving groups, or other forms of worker involvement in decision-making or consultation, although managers retain the final decision-making authority. Similar structures for dispute resolution that involve workers but leave the ultimate authority to managers are also markers for consultative unitarism. Some commentators argue that cooperation is best advanced through one-on-one conversations between individual employees and their supervisors (Francis et al. 2013), though this would not be a highly-developed structure for cooperation. In consultative unitarism, control and especially developmental issues are subject to discussion, and extensive information sharing should be present. True cooperation requires the absence of opportunistic wins by one side or the other, so trust should be high in a consultative unitarist workplace. The mining giant, Rio Tinto, could be interpreted as approaching human resource management in this way, although this is contested by critics (Mackinnon 2012; see also AMMA 2007).

Lastly, when a workplace or organization is characterised by autocratic unitarism, the unilateral decisions of management on human resource management policies are prioritised. As such, there is an absence of formal structures for employee consultation, and greater attention to control than developmental issues. Information sharing is likely to flow in one direction from managers to workers, and is better seen as communication than as a bilateral exchange of information. Trust is not a central concern and any dispute resolution procedures are likely to be manager-centric and informal, such as an open door policy. Examples of autocratic unitarism abound, including companies like Foxconn in China (Chan, Pun, and Selden 2013).

6. THE CHALLENGE OF ACHIEVING AND SUSTAINING COOPERATION

The discussion of the six perspectives and patterns in the previous two sections is valuable because it makes different perspectives on cooperation explicit, and carefully roots these differences in five key assumptions. In this way, we can better appreciate why there are different schools of thought on cooperation with such distinctive views. In turn, this provides two important ways for developing a better understanding of why cooperation is so difficult to implement and sustain in practice. The first way is fairly static—that is, different participants in the employment relationship can have very different views on cooperation (recall Table 1) due to fundamental differences in assumptions (recall Table 2) resulting in different practices (recall Table 3). So cooperation is a contested idea, and cooperation is hard to implement when the parties lack a shared vision and common understandings.

Moving beyond this static approach provides a second way to understand the difficulty of implementing and sustaining cooperation. In other words, a dynamic consideration of the tensions across different forms of cooperation helps reveal how there can be a natural tendency to move away from cooperative employment relationships unless great attention is devoted to maintaining cooperation. We capture this more dynamic and nuanced account by locating the six perspectives on what we call a ‘cooperation curve.’

6.1 *The cooperation curve*

The cooperative curve is depicted in Figure 1. The vertical axis in the diagram is the degree of cooperation in a given employment relations regime: the higher the position on the axis, the more cooperation. The horizontal axis indicates the degree of integration or separation of interests. The centre of the horizontal axis represents an integration of employer and employee interests with a high degree of mutual gains. The further from the centre in either direction, the less integration and greater separation of the pursuit of employer and employee interests. The curve itself is designed to represent a continuum, along which the six discrete

types represent important points, but the boundaries between these points are porous and there is a recognition that ‘hybrid’ positions might lie between the points.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

On the left-hand side of the curve, radicalism rejects cooperation between workers and management, whilst privileging workers’ interests, possibly to the exclusion of employer interests. Adversarial pluralism entails the recognition of both worker and employer interests, but cooperation is limited because of an ongoing contest over the distribution of rewards, often undertaken through traditional collective bargaining. Significant cooperation is only evident in cooperative pluralism, in which genuinely pluralist mechanisms have the potential to deliver mutual gains for employees and employers.

On the right-hand side of the curve, egoism sees cooperation as unproblematic, because employees are assumed to have agreed to follow the directions of management when they negotiated and accepted their employment contracts. Under autocratic unitarism, cooperation is essentially employee compliance with the unilateral dictates of management, again suggesting levels of cooperation that are modest at best. It is only cooperative unitarism that suggests any significant cooperation between workers and management, achieved through active efforts by managers to elicit worker concerns and secure cooperation by offering organisational policies and practices that meet worker expectations.

6.2 *Applying the cooperation curve*

One significant advantage of the curve is the insight it offers at the top, where cooperative pluralism and cooperative unitarism are located. There are similarities between the two categories as well as differences, while the boundary between them is less easy to establish in practice than the earlier typological discussion suggests. This accords with many empirical situations where it is difficult to distinguish between pluralist and unitarist cooperation, especially because some employment relationship practices are common to both cases. One

example is the notion of ‘non-union partnerships’ in which many of the roles of employee representatives, the issues discussed and the structures and processes of consultation look similar to those in union partnerships (Johnstone, Akers, and Wilkinson 2010). Another comes from Pyman et al. (2006) who found that many unionised workplaces with well-established collective bargaining arrangements also had individualised, non-union forms of voice and participation. Indeed, they argued that the effectiveness of voice mechanisms increased where practices associated with both pluralist and unitarism models were present.

A second use of this curve is in thinking about degrees of support or opposition to cooperation. Cooperation in its richest forms are supported in the middle of the cooperation curve. Moving one step to the left or right leads to what we think of as pragmatic opposition to cooperation. The assumptions in these perspectives are not fundamentally different from their neighbours that support cooperation, such that one could envision a shift between adversarial and cooperative pluralism or between cooperative and autocratic pluralism as being determined by a pragmatic calculation of the best way to achieve one’s goals. But further away from the centre, the assumptions have less in common with the perspectives in the middle—specifically, a rejection of shared interests in the critical perspective and a strong belief in the determinism of the market in the egoism perspective. As such, these perspectives are better characterised as principled opposition to cooperation.

But the real advantage of the ‘cooperation curve’ is that it encourages a more dynamic analysis, incorporating changes over time, consistent with the fact that cooperation and partnership are dynamic entities in practice (Dobbins and Dundon 2017). Highly cooperative employment relations regimes (i.e. those, both pluralist and unitarist, at the top of the curve) are unusual, especially in liberal market economies like USA, UK and Australia. Explaining this rarity requires answers to two questions:

1. Why is it difficult to establish cooperative employment relations arrangements (i.e. ascending to the top of the curve in Figure 1 from either side)?
2. Why is it even harder to sustain cooperation over time (i.e. staying at the top of the curve)?

Our argument is that a range of contextual factors act as forces of entropy, an inexorable downward pressure towards the disintegration of cooperation. These forces make the achievement of cooperation (either pluralist or unitarist) within the employment relationships more challenging, and the ongoing sustainability of cooperation more difficult. That is, creating and sustaining cooperation requires explicit actions to overcome a host of constraining factors; absent this, the employment relationship will default to moving toward either end of the cooperation curve.

One set of entropy factors is found among the parties to the employment relationship themselves. Narrow perceptions of self-interest can push employees, union leaders, managers, executives and others to prioritise their own needs at the expense of others, which can in turn create a backlash from others who react by prioritizing their own needs. Managers and executives might also be trained to think that it is their responsibility to craft organizational policies, and prejudices might cause them to think that they have unique expertise. Union leaders might be socialised to believe that strong leadership means winning gains for members, not cooperating with management which risks them being labelled as a sell-out. Structurally, cooperation can require more resources as consultation can be slower and less decisive than unilateral decision-making. All of these factors can push parties away from a mutual gains focus.

But it would be overly narrow to only look within the employment relationship to seek answers to the questions above. Another set of entropy factors is found in the broad economic/political/social context within which cooperative regimes must operate, at least in

‘liberal market’ economies like the USA, Britain and Australia. Drawing on the ‘varieties of capitalism’ literature, Bélanger and Edwards (2007: 720) emphasise that technology, product markets and institutional regulation ‘in combination create more or less favourable conditions for certain workplace outcomes’, including cooperation. In other words, broad ‘macro’ contextual factors that largely inhibit cooperation in liberal market economies often become embedded, or reproduced, at a ‘micro’ level in the structures and standardised processes of the individual organisation. Bray, Macneil, and Stewart’s (2017) account of the institutional ‘tide’ flowing towards adversarialism offers a similar analysis.

The impact of entropy can be seen in two examples from the literature. First, many studies of cooperative employment relations regimes have noted the adverse impact of key champions of cooperation leaving the organisation after a successful transition to a cooperative regime. The dominance of adversarialism in other organisations in the outside economy means that too often their replacements have little experience in or sympathy for the cooperative approach, making it difficult to reproduce and sustain. Second, cooperative regimes (pluralist or unitarist) are voluntary in nature, making it easier to withdraw if the cooperative relationship meets ‘bumps in the road’. Streeck (1992) argues that leaving cooperation to the voluntary choices of the parties, especially managers, misunderstands the importance of state intervention, and institutions more broadly, in moulding choice and especially in sustaining cooperation in the longer term. This is also reflected in the conclusions of Kochan et al. (2009: 63) about the Kaiser Permanents experience in the USA:

The result is that partnerships are unlikely to proliferate without strong buttressing elements from the external environment. The perspicacity and perseverance of enlightened management and union leaders working towards partnerships in specific organizations will likely not suffice to make partnerships a widespread and sustainable phenomenon in U.S. industrial

relations....Changes in law and public policy may prove necessary to shift us from a lower-performing equilibrium to the higher-performing one prefigured by KP's partnership.

7. THE IMPORTANCE OF IDEAS FOR PRACTICE

The six perspectives and patterns developed in this paper can be seen in two different ways depending on how they are being used. First, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners can use two or more of the patterns to better understand alternative ways to think about and approach workplace cooperation. It is this usage that has been emphasised in this paper to this point. To fully understand the range of possibilities for conceptualizing workplace cooperation, we assert that six frames of reference are necessary, but using smaller subsets can also instructively reveal some key insights in particular cases. For example, leaders in a unionised workplace might only need to consider the critical and pluralist variants to understand their range of options in a unionised workplace. This way of using frames of reference to understand alternative perspectives is the typical way in which frames of reference are used in contemporary employment relations scholarship (e.g. Budd and Bhava 2008; Heery 2016).

A second usage, however, needs to be emphasised; namely, seeing a frame of reference as a mental map that shapes an individual's perception which in turn influences their actions (Fox 1973, 1974; Cradden 2018).² So we need to appreciate that workers, managers, company executives, union leaders, or other participants in a particular employment relationship frequently use one of these patterns to structure their understanding and expectations about the nature of workplace cooperation, even if implicitly rather than

² To give information and experiences meaning, the human brain constructs a knowledge structure or interpretative schema. Research in the management and organizations literature typically labels these knowledge structures as 'cognitive frames' rather than 'frames of reference', and demonstrates their importance for shaping managerial decisions (Cornelissen and Werner 2014; Walsh 1995).

explicitly. If practices and discourse relevant to workplace cooperation in a particular workplace do not clash with an individual's expectations based on their frame of reference, then we would expect that individual to comply with those practices. We theorise that in order for any of the patterns of workplace cooperation to be accepted and become stable in that unit, the actors need to share (or at least not object to) a frame of reference that supports that approach to cooperation.

Seeing the perspectives developed in this paper as the range of options for an individual's frame of reference on workplace cooperation, therefore, provides additional layers to understanding why it is difficult to sustain cooperation. For starters, cooperation is expected to be difficult to maintain if key actors have divergent frames of references that yield clashing visions of workplace cooperation. Moreover, consider a workplace that is characterised by cooperation but faces an unexpected event. If individual frames of reference are not sufficiently aligned, then individuals can judge the unexpected event in different ways, leading to alternative courses of action and mistrust (Weber and Mayer 2014). Within the realm of workplace cooperation, there seem to be particular risks that management, worker, or labour union behaviour will be seen by others as opportunistic, thus setting off a clash that threatens the stability of a cooperative arrangement. This highlights the importance of recognizing the importance not only of particular workplace practices, but also of the mental models that underlie them. This recognition furthermore opens up the space to consider the role of framing practices (Benford and Snow 2000; Kaplan 2008; Weber and Mayer 2014) that can be used to align actors' frames of reference in support of creating or restoring workplace cooperation. This again reinforces the need to complement the traditional focus on material practices with an appreciation for ideational practices surrounding different workplace regimes.

8. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has argued that underlying the failure of scholars and practitioners alike to properly define the important and widely supported concept of cooperation in the employment relationship leads to confusion resulting from competing and often contradictory meanings given to the concept.

In an effort to shed light on these issues, and insert greater clarity, a typology was created to capture similarities and differences between six different perspectives on cooperation. This reveals that genuine cooperation is confined to just two of these types: collaborative pluralism and consultative unitarism. Notably, in contrast to many writers who reject true cooperation in the absence of trade unions, our framework reveals legitimate space for genuine cooperation within a unitarist frame of reference, but not unconditionally. This is an important distinction that needs to be recognised in future work. Additionally, true cooperation is not an embraced goal in four of the six categories: the critical perspective sees cooperation as a mechanism to control workers; egoism sees cooperation as largely irrelevant because it assumes the voluntary negotiation of cooperation before workers enter the employment relationship; adversarial pluralism sees cooperation on common interests as very limited, overwhelmed by conflicting interests that need to be bargained in a largely arms-length style; and autocratic unitarism largely assumes the right of employers to direct employees and expect employee compliance. A recognition of each perspective on cooperation in a comprehensive framework is important not only for understanding the range of views, but also because the substance of each perspective is only fully understood when seen in comparison with contrasting perspectives.

A dynamic analysis of these six perspectives on cooperation was then offered in the form of the cooperation curve. Amongst the advantages of this diagrammatic representation is the way it demonstrates the challenges of transitioning to either of the two cooperative

regimes (i.e. collaborative pluralism and consultative unitarism) and then sustaining such cooperative regimes. In both cases, 'entropy' is a constant danger, created by a combination of self-interest, local features, and broader economic-political-social environments within which enterprises operate.

These advances are important for employment relations scholarship and practice. With respect to the former, the six perspectives crafted here can be used to theorise alternative employment relations paradigms when cooperation rather than conflict is viewed as the central construct. Moreover, the approach developed here highlights the need to incorporate the role of ideas in analyses of the success or failure of cooperative efforts, and the dynamic cooperative curve can be useful in analysing the trajectory of cooperative initiatives (Johnstone and Wilkinson 2018). In practice, greater clarity over contrasting perspectives on cooperation can lead to greater understandings among workplace actors with differing views, and can set the stage for aligning visions rooted in frames of reference that are roadblocks to developing and sustaining true cooperation. Lastly, as trade unions lose power and influence in many countries, pluralist and critical writers are increasingly sceptical about the prospects for true cooperation and partnership because organizations are freer to implement their desired employment relations systems. It is in this environment that understanding ideas about cooperation are more important than ever because frames of reference are likely to be even more important in shaping the choices that organizations make. Putting all of this together, we believe we have identified an important path forward for better understanding and achieving the oft-mentioned goal of workplace cooperation.

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Table 1: Six Perspectives on Employment Relationship Cooperation

Perspective	Cooperation means...
Critical Perspective / Radicalism	...acquiescence by employees to employer-established goals and practices.
Adversarial Pluralism	...employers, employees, and their representatives pursuing their own goals and compromising with each other in ways that respect the legitimacy of each party's interests.
Collaborative Pluralism	...employers, employees, and their representatives working together on mutual goals and compromising on conflicting goals in ways that respect the legitimacy of each party's interests.
Consultative Unitarism	...employers and employees working together on organisational goals, in ways that are established by management through consultation.
Autocratic Unitarism	... employees following managerial directives for serving organisational goals, that in turn also are assumed to benefit employees.
Market Perspective / Egoism	...employers and employees complying with freely-entered contractual obligations in self-interested ways.

Table 2: Six Perspectives on Cooperation in the Employment Relationship—Key Beliefs, Assumptions, and Perceptions

Key assumptions	CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE/RADICALISM	ADVERSARIAL PLURALISM	COLLABORATIVE PLURALISM	CONSULTATIVE UNITARISM	AUTOCRATIC UNITARISM	MARKET PERSPECTIVE/EGOISM
PARTICIPANTS The nature of the parties to the employment relationship	Capital and labour as conflicting classes.	Management with workers and their representatives.	Management with workers and their representatives.	Management and workers; i.e., without interference from external 'third parties'.	Management and workers; i.e., without interference from external 'third parties'.	Employers and employees as rational economic agents. Individuals may receive expert advice, but no ongoing role.
COMPATIBILITY The degree to which the interests of the parties can be aligned	Sharply-antagonistic interests cannot be aligned. Consent should not be confused with alignment.	Management and workers (and their representatives) have separate interests, some in conflict.	Management and workers (and their representatives) have separate interests, some in conflict and some in common.	Management and workers share a single common interest in the attainment of organisational goals. Managerial and worker interests are largely the same.	Management and workers share a single common interest in the attainment of organisational goals. Managerial and worker interests are largely the same.	Any incompatibility of interests is resolved before the formation of the employment relationship or through contracting.
MUTUALITY Responsibility taken for advancing the interests of other parties	The nature of class struggle means neither capital nor labour are responsible for each other's interests. Parties take opportunistic wins.	Each party responsible for advancing its own interests, with minimal/no responsibility for the other's interests. Parties take opportunistic wins.	Joint responsibility to advance common interests. Parties avoid opportunistic wins.	Management takes responsibility to advance organisational goals with assistance from workers, and avoids opportunistic wins.	Management has responsibility and unique expertise to advance organisational goals, which are in the interests of both management and workers.	Each party responsible for advancing its own interests and for complying with contractual obligations. Parties take opportunistic wins.
VOICE The opportunity and/or the right to make decisions about work	Labour has the right to make decisions about work, but class conflict means they are not given the opportunity.	Workers have the right to make decisions and should have opportunities to do so.	Workers (and their representatives) have the right to make decisions and should have broad opportunities to do so.	Workers have no right to make decisions about work, but there is value in giving them broad opportunities to do so.	Workers have no right to make decisions about work, and there is little value in giving them opportunities to do so.	Employees have the right to make decisions about work before a contract is agreed; opportunities thereafter are determined by the contract.
ISSUES The range of issues which should be formally discussed	None, since the parties are in irreconcilable conflict.	Depends on what issues the parties are required to discuss, or on which they agree they have common interests.	Broad, since the more issues that are brought to the table, the greater the integrative potential to benefit of all parties.	Broad, since common interests can be found in the immediate and long term performance of the organisation.	Limited, since issues are not subject to negotiation, but decided by managerial prerogative.	Whatever the parties seek to include.

Table 3: Expected Manifestations of Beliefs on Cooperation Across Six Perspectives

Expected manifestations	CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE/RADICALISM	ADVERSARIAL PLURALISM	COLLABORATIVE PLURALISM	CONSULTATIVE UNITARISM	AUTOCRATIC UNITARISM	MARKET PERSPECTIVE/EGOISM
Structures or processes for rule-making	Rules made and enforced based on relative power. Workers have formal voice only when they have the power to enforce it.	Rules made and enforced bilaterally through formal structures representing labour and management, using distributive bargaining.	Rules made and enforced bilaterally through formal structures via distributive and integrative bargaining and/or co-determination.	Rules made and enforced unilaterally by management, after consultation.	Rules made and enforced unilaterally by management.	Rules made and enforced individually based on mutual self-interest relative to alternative options.
Issues emphasised in rule-making process	Capital and labour both focused on issues of day-to-day control.	Management and workers both focused primarily on day-to-day control.	Management and workers both focused on issues of day-to-day control and of future development.	Management and workers focused on management's goals in relation to issues of day-to-day control and of future development.	Management focused on issues of day-to-day control.	Employers and employees share goals by agreement, or the relationship dissolves.
Information sharing	None.	Strategic manipulation of information.	Extensive.	Extensive.	One-way communication.	Strategic manipulation of information.
Trust	None. Other side assumed to be guided by power.	Low. Emphasis on contractual commitments and enforcement.	High. Absence of opportunistic wins but some contractual commitments and enforcement.	Highest. Absence of opportunistic wins.	Not perceived as relevant.	None. Other side assumed to be guided by self-interest.
Dispute resolution	Absence of formal dispute resolution procedures.	Formal adjudication of contractual terms.	Issue dependent. Formal adjudication of contractual terms and integrative problem solving.	Integrative problem solving. Formal non-union dispute resolution procedures.	Processes dictated by management.	Reliance on market alternatives.

Figure 1: A Cooperation Curve Capturing the Challenging Dynamics of Cooperation in the Employment Relationship

