COMPETING FRAMES OF REFERENCE ON THE EMPLOYMENT RELATIONSHIP AND THEIR IMPORTANCE FOR THE STUDY OF WORK

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Abstract

An enduring tradition in Industrial Relations scholarship theorizes the importance of competing frames of reference that individuals have on the employment relationship. Alternative frames embody differing assumptions on the degree to which employer and employee interests are mutually (in)compatible and on the nature of markets. IR frames scholarship reveals how these alternative mental models produce clashing understandings of key issues such as power, managerial practices, government regulation, and labor institutions. Moreover, IR scholarship also applies frames analyses inward to the academy to explain disciplinary differences in scholarship on work and employment, including conflicts over recommended avenues for improving work and employment. In this chapter, we sketch the key aspects of four alternative frames and use targeted examples to highlight how this helps us understand disciplinary differences in topics and policy recommendations.

Researchers in many disciplines and fields study work and employment, including industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology, human resources (HR), organizational behavior (OB), and industrial relations (IR). But they often have unique foci and approaches. For instance, those trained in I-O psychology pride themselves on the empirical rigor and relevance of their work. The idea of the "scientist-practitioner" is a key goal. This work first aims to help employers identify the best possible workers through systematic measurement of individual differences and worker skills. They advocate the use of structured interviews to reduce demographic biases (Levashina et al., 2014), empirical evaluation of the adverse impact arising from insufficiently grounded selection and development practices (Sackett et al., 2022), and objective indicators of employee performance (DeNisi & Murphy, 2017). Other I-O psychology research has sought to improve worker well-being through enhancing person-environment fit with interest inventories and job assignment (e.g., Kristof-Brown et al., 2017; Hoff et al., 2020), providing worker autonomy and satisfying working conditions (Humphrey et al., 2007), and enhancing management practices to produce a sense of organizational justice (Colquitt et al., 2013). Additional advocacy centers around management actions to reduce danger and mitigate workplace stressors through careful analysis of working conditions and management practices that can be implemented to reduce indices of injury, stress, and illness (Christian et al., 2009; Elovainio & Virtanen, 2020). All of these processes are designed to maximize organizational performance and employee well-being through the use of expert judgment in support of better managerial decision-making. On the other hand, while agreeing that worker justice and well-being are important, IR scholars are more likely to believe that their attainment requires institutional interventions that enable workers to extract improvements from managers. Moreover, for IR scholars, improvements in worker justice and well-being can be legitimate

even if they come at the expense of organizational performance. It is partly for these reasons that IR scholars have been critical of what's viewed as an overly managerialist orientation in I-O psychology, HR, and OB scholarship and practice (e.g., Cullinane & Dundon, 2006; Godard, 2014; Kaufman, 2020; Korczynski, 2023).

IR scholars have long viewed these different approaches as resulting from variation in the dominant frame of reference across disciplines. A person's frame of reference—that is, their "conceptual structure of generalizations or contexts, postulates about what is essential, assumptions about what is possible, and ideas about what will work effectively"—provides the lens through which people perceive and interpret the world around them (Thelen & Withall, 1949, p. 159; Goffman, 1974). Whether labeled a frame of reference, cognitive frame, mental model, schema, or something similar, many disciplines study the ways in which a "mental template that individuals impose on an information environment to give it form and meaning" (Walsh, 1995, p. 281) shape behavior and decision-making (e.g., Benford & Snow, 2000; Cornelissen & Werner, 2014; Klasche & Selg, 2020; Preuss & Fearne, 2022).

There are two distinctive aspects of the use of frames of reference in IR scholarship. First, the dominant application is the employment relationship. So when IR scholars consider an individual's frame of reference, they are focusing on an individual's frame of reference relating to the employment relationship—that is, what is someone's structure of assumptions, ideas, and generalizations about "the connection between employees and employers through which people sell their labor" (Budd & Bhave, 2019, p. 41). In fact, this focus on the employment relationship is so deeply ingrained that IR scholars often just say "frame of reference" without specifying that this is in reference to the employment relationship; we will follow that convention in the remainder of this chapter. Note carefully that the employment relationship is meant to capture

the dynamic between workers (and their associations) on the one side and their managers, employers, and employers' associations on the other. This encompasses many possible levels of interaction, from organizational-level determination of employment terms to micro-level supervisor-employee relations. The employment relationship can involve collective dynamics (e.g., workers engaging in collective action aimed at organizational leaders to influence their terms and conditions of employment), but it does not capture the interpersonal relationships among workers as they do their jobs (e.g., members of the same team).

It has long been theorized that individuals hold different frames of reference about the employment relationship. The contrast between unitarist and pluralist frames, which continues to be central today, is commonly attributed to Fox (1966, 1974), but Hodder (2024) credits Ross (1958) with first identifying this distinction using these terms, while acknowledging that these ideas can be traced even earlier (e.g., Selekman 1947; Maier, 1948). Foundational IR scholarship theorizes alternative frames of reference on the employment relationship (Budd & Bhave 2019; Heery 2016, 2024; Godard 2017; Cradden 2018), harnesses contrasts across frames to understand alternative perspectives on central labor-management relations issues (Bray et al., 2020; Budd & Bhave 2008; Heery 2016, 2024; Kaufman 2016), and documents empirical support for the presence of different frames among managers (Geare et al., 2014; Godard, 1997). Recent applications include using alternative frames to better understand case studies of particular labor-management relationships in the UK and Republic of Ireland (Dobbins et al., 2021), Italy (Gasparri, 2021), Brazil (Marzionna 2023), and China (Liu & Li, 2023), and theorizing how clashing frames between workers and managers affect stability and conflict in workplace practices (Budd et al., 2022).

A second distinctive aspect of frames of reference in IR scholarship is using them to understand our own disciplinary approaches to the study of work and employment. In other words, IR scholarship does not just analyze the implications stemming from a frame of reference (on the employment relationship) held by managers, workers, union leaders, policymakers, and other actors in the world of work, but also applies analyses inward to the academy to explain disciplinary differences (Heery, 2016, 2024; Budd, 2020). For many IR scholars, differences in the dominant frame of reference (on the employment relationship), not methodology or levels of analysis, is the key feature that distinguishes different disciplines that research work, as alternative frames point scholars toward particular topics as well as normative ideals. In short, IR scholars generally subscribe to a pluralist or critical view (or some variant or combination—Ackers, 2021; Dobbins et al., 2021), and see I-O psychology, HR, and OB as being rooted in a unitarist frame of reference, again with important implications for research and practice. Other scholarship, such as mainstream labor economics, is often rooted in a neoliberal frame.

Admittedly, much scholarship on work, workers, or employment-related topics does not include a model of the employment relationship that specifies the structural nature of the relationship between a worker and their employer. However, implicit visions of this relationship tend to prioritize certain topics. Moreover, it is always the case that when we attach value judgements to a set of results or provide implications for what leaders, policymakers, or others should do, then we are implicitly drawing on a model of the employment relationship that prioritizes certain objectives or outcomes and that makes assumptions about the nature of power between workers and employers (Budd, 2020). In this way, frames of reference on labor-management relations are relevant to all scholarship on work.

In this chapter, we sketch the key aspects of four frames—neoliberalism, unitarism, pluralism, and critical—and then use a few targeted examples to highlight how recognizing foundational frames helps us understand disciplinary differences in topics and policy recommendations.[1] While each of us, and each reader, too, has their own beliefs about the employment relationship, explicitly or implicitly, our goal is not to advocate for the superiority of one perspective. Rather, we seek to reveal key differences that are often unrecognized with the goal of increasing understanding, enhancing disciplinary approaches, and facilitating greater collaboration.

Four Frames of Reference on the Employment Relationship

A frames of reference approach posits that an individual or group of individuals— including scholars and technical experts—has a largely singular conceptualization of the employment relationship that applies to the otherwise diverse forms of this relationship across occupations, industries, legal categories, countries, and time. We group the possibilities into four views of the employment relationship: a mutually-advantageous trade among self-interested agents in a free market ("neoliberalism"), a long-term partnership between employees and employers with common interests ("unitarism"), a bargain between stakeholders with some competing but legitimate interests ("pluralism"), or an unequal power relation embedded in complex social hierarchies ("critical"). Each frame of reference reflects a mixture of assumptions on the (in)compatibility of employees' and employers' employment relationship interests along

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[1] This four-frame categorization is based on Budd and Bhave (2008, 2019), Befort and Budd (2009), and Budd et al. (2022). Heery (2016, 2024) uses three frames by combining neoliberalism and unitarism which we believe masks key differences. In more targeted applications, Godard (2017) uses five frames while Bray et al. (2020) use six; in each of those applications, distinctions within the pluralist and/or unitarist frames are useful, but are unnecessary here.

with the nature of employers, employees, and markets (see Table 1). Admittedly, these are stylized, simplified presentations of sophisticated schools of thought, but are useful for capturing key differences (Budd & Bhave, 2008, 2019; Heery, 2016; Budd et al., 2022).

Central to the employment relationship is each party's objectives or interests (Budd, 2004). Workers might want income, fair treatment, a sense of self-worth, or other things. An employers' interests might include profitability, cost-effective service delivery, employee loyalty, or other things. The contrasting frames have somewhat different emphases in this regard, especially the contrast between labor as an economic commodity serving largely economic objectives in the neoliberal frame, and the rejection of labor as simply a commodity in favor of more fully human views of employees in other frames. But what really distinguishes the four frames are differing views on the degree to which employer and employee interests are mutually (in)compatible (see Table 1).

The pluralist frame derives its name from its belief in a plurality of employment labor-management interests. In other words, employers and employees are assumed to have a mixture of common and conflicting interests, and—crucially—employers' and employees' interests are legitimate even when they clash.[2] This means that one group's interests should never consistently dominate the other; instead, a balance should be sought (Budd, 2004). Pluralists also view labor markets as imperfect so they are neither deterministic nor fair (Kaufman & Barry, 2014). It then follows that the employment relationship is seen as a bargaining relationship in which stakeholders try to find combinations of win-win arrangements satisfying their common

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[2] This is not the same as a pluralist organization as defined by Morrison and Milliken (2000) in which diverse employees can express multiple opinions. The "pluralism" in the pluralist frame of reference on the employment relationship stems from diverse stakeholders—especially organizational owners and workers—with sometimes competing interests.

interests along with compromises that balance their competing objectives. Note that the assumptions of imperfect markets and of some conflicting employer-employee interests mean that neither markets nor managers will consistently serve workers' interests. So institutions such as labor unions, works councils, and mandated labor standards are important within the pluralist frame. In the academy, pluralist perspectives are most likely found in IR and institutionalist labor economics, and sometimes also within sociology and law.

The unitarist frame derives its name from its belief in a unity of employment relationship interests. That is, a key assumption in unitarism is that employers' and employees' interests are largely compatible rather than conflicting. For example, satisfying employees' interests in, say, decent pay and fair treatment will make them loyal and productive, thereby serving employers' interests in profitability, which then allows the organization to continue to treat its employees well. The emphasis, then, is on organizations finding best practices that align everyone's interests which is, by assumption, mutually beneficial (Boxall, 2013). Unitarism typically rejects the determinism of economic markets, leaving space for organizations and their leaders to freely craft successful alignment strategies and practices. But unions or other institutional interventions are seen as unnecessary because employers have a self-interest to find mutually-beneficial practices. Unitarism can be pursued collaboratively (Bray et al., 2020), but it is much more common to instead view organizational leaders as uniquely qualified to design solutions for workers (and society), resulting in unitarism embedding the elitist ideology of managerialism (Klikauer, 2015; Smith et al., 2022).

Psychological theorizing plays a prominent role in the unitarist paradigm, so scholars in I-O psychology, HR, and OB are generally placed in this camp (at least by IR scholars). In unitarist scholarship, worker well-being is important (Gabriel et al., 2022; Yoon et al., 2022). But

it is often pursued in the context of mutual employer-employee interests, even if implicitly. This is seen, for example, in the OB definition of employee voice that includes the requirement that it have "the intent to improve organizational or unit functioning" (Morrison, 2011, p. 375), or in mindfulness research that strives to improve employees' psychological well-being through time management and introspection without challenging the work pressures and demands that produce stress and dissatisfaction in the first place (Glomb et al., 2011; Eby et al., 2019). Note further that the unitarist frame also shapes how one sees conflict and power differentials in the workplace. These are important topics in unitarist scholarship (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008; Tepper et al., 2017), but they are treated primarily as interpersonal phenomena that prevent or reveal a lack of alignment rather than conflict and power being fundamental to structural imbalances of power rooted in labor markets and institutions.

A third important frame of reference is neoliberalism, which is rooted in neoclassical economic thought and rests on a set of assumptions that employers and employees are rational agents pursuing their self-interest in economic markets that approximate ideal competitive conditions. In neoliberalism, the market resolves issues of interest incompatibility. An employee will continue to work for an employer as long as the employee believes that this is the best deal for them, and similarly for the employer. Moreover, ideally competitive ("perfect") labor markets are both determinative and fair, putting them at the center of neoliberal thinking. Under these assumptions, the neoliberal frame sees the employment relationship as a voluntary, mutually-beneficial economic transaction based on what the labor market will allow. HR policies and practices are largely seen as implementing the dictates of the market, while unions and mandated labor standards are seen as welfare-reducing interferences with autonomous agents.

At the other end of the spectrum is the critical frame of reference. Where neoliberalism sees the employment relationship as the free exchange among equals, the critical frame sees the employment relationship as a deeply unequal social relation. Employers and employees are viewed as having sharply-antagonistic interests such that markets, other institutions, and discourse are intentionally constructed by a dominant group in order to maintain its superiority (Heery, 2016; Thompson & Newsome, 2004). To emphasize, an important feature of the critical frame is that labor-management relations are seen as one piece of a larger socio-political-economic system through which elites are able to reproduce their dominance, albeit with some accommodation of the interests of the weaker party in order to foster the compliance and "coerced consent" of organizational actors, especially workers (Godard, 2017).

Different strains within the critical school of thought emphasize particular divides between the dominant and subordinate groups. Marxist and related perspectives focus on unequal power relations between workers and organizations ("class"), feminist and critical race perspectives focus on unequal power relations across gender (Greene et al., 2024) and race (Lee & Tapia, 2021), and intersectionality approaches emphasize combinations of difference (Cho et al., 2013; Lee & Tapia, 2021). But they share the assumptions regarding fundamental conflicts of interests, unequal power dynamics, and non-neutral institutions and discourse, and critically treat identity differences as fundamental where other frames of reference ignore them or treat them superficially rather than as tightly intertwined with power. Academically, the critical frame is most closely associated with Marxist, radical, heterodox, feminist, and critical race scholarship in sociology, economics, industrial relations, and elsewhere.

Applications of Frames to Research Topics in Work and Employment

Employee Voice

Perhaps some of the clearest delineations between the unitarist perspective that IR scholars have argued dominates in fields like HR, OB and I/O psychology, on the one hand, and pluralist or critical perspectives that are more prevalent in IR, on the other hand, can be found in the research on employee voice across these fields. These distinctions have been extensively documented by IR scholars (Barry & Wilkinson, 2016; Kaufman, 2015), but they have been more recently acknowledged by OB scholars as well (e.g., Morrison, 2023). The latter have typically conceptualized employee voice as an individual discretionary behavior and its definition includes the requirement that it have "the intent to improve organizational or unit functioning" (Morrison, 2011, p. 375). Employee voice in this literature is often divided into two categories: prohibitive (we should not do) and promotive (we should do) (Liang et al., 2012; Morrison, 2023), and the failure of voice has been categorized as silence, which is generally viewed as negative for both employees and organizations (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Pinder & Harlos, 2001). Voice is thus viewed primarily as productive employee behavior that articulates a set of proposed improvements and activities that would facilitate the achievement of end objectives that the organization, managers, and employees all care about. Note carefully the connections to unitarist foundations emphasizing alignable rather than conflicting interests across stakeholders.

In pluralist and critical IR, voice is also a means to an end, but is conceptualized as allowing for the end objectives of workers to conflict with the employer's objectives. For instance, workers might use collective voice to seek equity and justice through (re)distribution of organizational profits from shareholders and executives to workers, or to demand that

organizations provide redress for previous and ongoing gender and racial pay inequities. IR scholars are thus much more likely than those in I-O psychology, OB, and HR to support a conceptualization of voice as important for employees to be able to meet their own objectives, even if voice does not improve organizational functioning.

IR scholars also conceptualize voice as an important end itself regardless of its outcomes, to satisfy employees' needs for self-expression and self-determination (Budd, 2004; Wilkinson et al., 2020; Shipton et al., 2024). While this conceptualization of voice could be viewed as consistent with research on self-determination theory in I-O psychology (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2005), a common definition of voice in the IR literature is "the ability [for workers] to have *meaningful* input" and participation in decisions that affect their working lives (Budd, 2004, p. 23). Remember that pluralist and critical IR scholars believe that there are structural imbalances of power in the labor-management relationship. These allow organizations to prioritize their own interests and erect barriers for employees' seeking to have their voices not only heard, but also to have their concerns addressed. In sharp contrast to unitarist approaches, those who adopt critical and pluralist perspectives therefore believe that employees will have limited self-determination and access to *meaningful* voice if there is no corresponding countervailing power prompting managers to negotiate with them or even to take their concerns seriously when their objectives conflict with those of the organization.

Like IR scholars, scholars in I/O psychology, HR, and OB recognize that managers may be resistant to employee voice (Ashford et al., 2009); however, in the latter fields this resistance is often viewed as a management failure that can be corrected through training and mentoring, rather than the structural feature of an inherent conflict embedded in the employment relationship. Since unitarists define voice in ways that benefit the organization, it is axiomatic

that managers should encourage internal voice mechanisms such as employee surveys, suggestion programs, and 360-degree performance feedback to receive employee perspectives on what improvements could be made. Consistent with perspectives in IR, unitarist scholars have recognized that employees may be afraid to speak up for fear of retaliation from their manager (Detert & Burris, 2007). However, unitarist assumptions mean that employee silence is only viewed as a "problem" insofar as the productivity-enhancing capacity of employee voice is not being effectively utilized, and so 'best practices' such as ensuring privacy on employee surveys are viewed as effective solutions to overcome these issues (Smith & Fortunato, 2008; Saari & Scherbaum, 2011).

While pluralist scholars agree with the unitarist perspective that employee voice can be very effective when employee interests and objectives are aligned with those of managers and the organization, pluralists see employee voice as legitimate even when employees raise concerns or aspire to achieve objectives that conflict with organizational objectives. For instance, consider employee whistleblowing. When employees publicly disclose illegal and unethical actions taking place within an organization, this kind of voice can be very deleterious for the organization's reputation. Most scholars would not consider illegal and unethical actions of managers or organizations acceptable means to achieve organizational objectives because in the long-run these actions could undermine the organization's ability to function and survive if they are not addressed. So, across perspectives there would be a recognition that organizations should enact internal incentives and protections for whistleblowers (Miceli et al., 2009).

However, whistleblowing is a unique area where unitarists would advocate for extensive legislative protections for worker voice, while pluralist and critical IR scholars argue that extensive protections for all forms of worker voice are necessary, and rooted in the need for

ensuring workers have access to not only legislated protections, but also collective forms of power, to protect themselves from retaliation. Through the lenses of these frames, we cannot *solely* rely on the voluntary implementation of voice mechanisms by managers or specialized legislation or processes to encourage and protect employee voice. Unions, which institutionalize and legalize collective forms of worker voice, force an organization's owners and its managers to engage in regular deliberative processes to consider the potential negative impact of its objectives, strategies and practices on its employees' objectives as well as its own.

Lastly, the neoliberal frame also has unique implications for conceptualizing and appraising employee voice. First, voice is seen as being exercised by one's feet in terms of choosing what economic relationships to engage in or to quit. That is, if you do not find something favorable, you can exercise your autonomy by exiting (Hirschman, 1970). Second, productivity-enhancing voice mechanisms would be seen as driven by market competition. Third, collective voice that increases worker power is seen as a form of monopoly that distorts competition and reduces economic efficiency (Epstein, 2019).

Conflict and Dispute Resolution

Another area of study where differences can be clearly observed between competing frames of reference is on the topic of conflict and dispute resolution. A neoliberal frame points toward economic markets as resolving conflicts, as captured by the frequent dictum, if you don't like your job, quit. The unitarist, pluralist, and critical frames see conflict in more complicated ways. A recent empirical study illustrates quite clearly that different frames of reference of union leaders and managers impact how workplace conflicts related to bullying are interpreted and managed (Marzionna, 2023). In fields that adopt more unitarist frames such as I-O psychology, HR, and OB, the focus is generally on the antecedents and consequences of different types of

conflict that play out in the workplace, for instance, as can be seen in Jehn's (1985) seminal

framework. Some types of conflict (e.g., task and process) are considered more constructive than

other types (e.g., relationship conflict), and conflict resolution focuses on the development of

individual skills and competencies to deal with the effective resolution of the different types of

conflict.

As we have outlined, a fundamental assumption in the unitarist perspective is that there is

an absence of structural conflict in the employment relationship. Thus any workplace conflicts

that arise can be fully resolved if the "right" HR processes and practices are put into place and/or

individuals are trained in strategies and tools to help them deal with their own and others'

emotions and move toward depersonalizing conflict. Since by assumption conflict does not

reflect structural conflicts, in a unitarist perspective it is ultimately viewed as an outcome of the

interpersonal interaction(s) between people who are not well-trained in how to find integrative

(e.g., win-win) solutions, or who are lacking the necessary skills and competencies in effective

conflict resolution. Thus, unitarists would recommend that managers and leaders should be

carefully selected based on their ability to self-regulate their own emotions and on their

individual competencies in conflict resolution, or receive training in these skills.

Pluralist and critical frames view employment-related conflict as institutionalized into the

structure of the employment relationship. Neoliberalism provides the intellectual foundation for

giving operational and legal primacy to property rights over labor rights, and thus creates a

value-ordering that places the employer's interests as the owners of the means of production (and

managers as the agents of representing those interests) above the workers' interests within

organizations. The unitarist perspective would not fundamentally dispute this hierarchy of rights.

This value-ordering is fundamentally disputed by pluralists, who argue that all interests are

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legitimate and so a balance of interests should be the goal, and non-market institutions are required to counter managerial prerogatives. More radically, critical scholars argue that labor rights should be given greater value than property rights and see the employment relationship as deeply-contested terrain. Because there is widespread acquiescence to the neoliberal "hierarchy of rights" in liberal market economies, pluralist and critical scholars believe that conflict does not always overtly manifest itself within the employment relationship, but that when conflicts do occur, they are usually resolved in favor of the organization and its managers. Management has the right and authority to make decisions about the use and allocation of resources, regardless of how efficient or effective these decisions are in either the short or long term.

Pluralists (and critical scholars) believe that employers and managers will not willingly give up the authority they have to decide whose objectives are legitimate and will therefore dominate when there are conflicts. This structural perspective on power and legitimate authority in pluralist and critical frames is fundamentally different than how power and authority are normally conceptualized in the neoliberal and unitarist perspectives. In the latter perspectives, power is either not viewed as important, or is primarily based in the individual, and explored through topics such as charisma, influence, and persuasion. The individual approach to understanding power can be very effective, because it recognizes and encourages everyone to make use of the agency they have in any situation, and to consider how to use the power they may wield in positive and pro-social ways, especially when they are in leadership positions.

While some unitarists recognize the importance of position-based power, this frame underemphasizes the institutionalized legitimacy of these position-based sources of power, including how and why some individuals in certain roles wield more power over others in organizations in the first place. Structural and position-based power are taken for granted, and

their legitimacy is rarely questioned from a unitarist frame of reference. However, from a critical frame in particular, organizations and workplaces are sites of contestation where broader societal conflicts and power struggles play out. And so, who gets to decide what cannot be separated from the formal and informal institutions that give some individuals and groups more authority over others and allow some groups to have their interests and objectives met while others are unable to do so. This is the major reason why pluralist IR scholars view collective bargaining, backstopped by unions and labor law, as one possible way to counteract the institutionalized imbalance of power that workers face when conflict arises over their own objectives that may conflict with those of the organization.

Staffing Processes

Perhaps no topic has received as much attention in I-O psychology as methods for employee selection and placement. The I-O psychology perspective is outlined in the *Principles for the Validation and Use of Personnel Selection Procedures* (Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, 2018), which is routinely used as a foundational document in the U.S. court system. This document explicitly states, "The field of personnel selection psychology aims at improving the quality of personnel selection decisions through the systematic development, evaluation, and implementation of job-related selection systems" (p. 3). In this document, the word "validation" appears 219 times, the words "statistical" and "statistics" are mentioned 73 times, and "job performance" is mentioned 142 times. As such, the document is clearly designed as a technical guidebook for practitioners who are collaborating with organizational leaders with the unitarist mindset that effective organizational practices that not only serve the organization's interests but also those of employees at the same time. Well-trained or informed managers are key in unitarist thinking and validation strategies, selection for

outcome criteria, communication, and the utility of tests are all directed toward those who will administer and implement decisions based on these selection procedures with the goal of finding employees who will be successful. Most employees are targets of selection practices rather than involved in the design and implementation but are assumed to benefit from being selected for jobs in which they will be productive and find rewarding. This largely assumes away systemic conflict when selection procedures are designed rigorously and empirically validated.

But selection systems can be viewed through competing frames. For example, several studies have investigated how the race of hiring managers relates to the rate of hiring Black applicants, with the majority of these studies showing that Black hiring managers increase the recruiting and selection of Black applicants (e.g., Carrington & Troske, 1998; Stoll et al., 2004). Through a unitarist lens, this would be seen as an organizational failure in that other managers are not equally successful in the recruitment and selection process, leading to a questioning of why this variation occurs, and a corresponding search for interventions (or new managers) that would create better outcomes for organizations and employees. Pluralist and critical perspectives, in contrast, might see this variation as reflecting the power of organizations to determine employee outcomes that reflect the prerogatives of managers and organizations to the detriment of employees, requiring stronger remedies than those voluntarily adopted by organizations. As a second example, consider a selection process that aims to identify workers who will be loyal and committed to the organization. Through a unitarist lens, this is important for achieving fit, leading to employees and organizations who are successful in ways that are mutually-beneficial (Barrick & Zimmerman, 2009). Through a pluralist or critical lens, however, this can be seen as a strategy for maintaining corporate power by weeding out troublemakers who might favor unionization (van den Broek, 2003).

Socialization Processes

Following the selection of workers, methods for bringing new employees "onboard" are emphasized in I-O psychology research and HR practice. Much of the earliest work in this regard came from the field and adopted a skeptical view about pressures to conform to organizational expectations (VanMaanen & Schein, 1979). As time progressed, however, increasing attention was paid to the benefits for the organization that could be derived from workers acquiring knowledge regarding group norms through institutional practices. This bundle of activities, including formalized group trainings, reviewing the organization's history, and passing on organizationally specific expectations for performance and role-oriented behavior, helped employees achieve positive adjustment by adopting management-established norms (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2007; Bauer et al., 2007). The next stage of research in this domain noted that employees also had a responsibility to facilitate their socialization through proactive efforts to seek information, feedback on their role-oriented performance, and group norms (e.g., Boulamatsi et al., 2021; Saks et al., 2011; Zhao et al., 2023). Whether seen as the responsibility of the organization or also of the employee, there is a strong unitarist foundation when the core activities that onboarding seeks to fulfill are mutually beneficial, including job satisfaction, organizational commitment, role clarity, and retention.

A smaller but growing number of studies have emphasized how new hires can change their jobs or achieve financial or psychological well-being, primarily through either support or undermining from the organization or managers. Some of the studies that have addressed new hire well-being are worth noting; these take on topics like organizational pressures to engage in excessive alcohol consumption (Liu et al., 2015), psychological strain experienced by newcomers (Ellis et al., 2015) and the deleterious effects of organizational pressure to act in

ways counter to employee's ethical standards (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2012). If these types of threats to new hire well-being are seen as a managerial failing, and that these failings should be redressed because it will benefit new hires and the organization alike, then this would reflect unitarist thinking. Some others have emphasized the ways employers can enhance newcomer well-being by facilitating worker self-expression to achieve joint ends of commitment, satisfaction, and performance (Cable et al., 2013), which again reflects the unitarist perspective.

The pluralist perspective on newcomer adjustment instead would pay attention to how power dynamics shape newcomers' decisions regarding how and when to adapt their behavior and whether there are mechanisms that might even the balance of power. Interestingly, despite the emphasis on organizationally relevant outcomes, the "liabilities of newness" have been considered among newcomers (Morrison & Vancouver, 2000). New hires have few close relationships to draw on, an underdeveloped understanding of organizational politics, and are potentially in a position to be socially marginalized. The literature on newcomer adjustment focuses on how newcomers seek to adjust quickly. This might implicitly indicate the power imbalance in newcomer-organizational relationships: employees change themselves to fit the organization's needs rather than vice versa. From a critical frame, onboarding and socialization practices are seen as conscious yet subtle and disguised corporate strategies of control to get employees to sacrifice their own interests in the service of organizational goals while buying into corporate narratives that their interests are mutually-compatible (Grugulis et al., 2000). Embedded in thinking that looks for when employees conform against their own interests is allowing for competing rather than largely alignable interests in the employment relationship. And different assumptions embedded in different frames of reference on the employment relationship push researchers to study different aspects of employee socialization.

Idiosyncratic Deals

        Organizational psychologists recognize that worker preferences vary greatly, and as such, they have directed their attention to the study of idiosyncratic work arrangements, abbreviated to "I-Deals" (Rousseau et al., 2006). Example elements of I-Deals include providing employees with opportunities to pursue new career tracks that better align with their skills, providing financial incentives for a specific area of work in which the worker excels (e.g., providing bonuses tied to making new client connections for a salesperson who is exceptionally good at that task), or minimizing the time an employee needs to spend on certain tasks they find especially onerous (Rosen et al., 2013). Such deals are typically struck during the hiring process as an inducement to join the organization or in response to an external employment offer–exactly the points at which workers have the most market power.

        Through a neoliberal lens, I-Deals can be seen as the natural result of the employment relationship being a market-driven transaction in which workers have different preferences and alternative opportunities. Through a unitarist or pluralist lens, they can be viewed as important ways for improving worker well-being by opening up fixed and uniform terms of employment for customization, perhaps in ways that also benefit the organization. Where unitarists and pluralists might diverge, however, is that the latter would also see I-Deals as valuable if they improve worker well-being at the (limited) expense or organizational outcomes. Such arrangements can be especially beneficial for those who do not conform to the "ideal worker" stereotype, such as workers who need scheduling flexibility because of child or elder care responsibilities, remote work for those who face transportation barriers, or task accommodations for individuals with disabilities. Pluralists would also be more likely to question whether the use of individualized negotiation tactics also discourages workers from banding together for

collective bargaining—a result that would be interpreted very differently through unitarist and pluralist lenses. Through a critical lens, I-Deals could be seen as an (episodic) accommodation of worker interests as part of the ongoing cycle of conflict and accommodation between employers and employees that have conflicting interests but also need each other (Edwards, 1986). Moreover, a focus on I-Deals and psychological contracts is seen by critics, who embrace pluralist or critical frames, as assuming away power imbalances and detaching the employment relationship from wider societal dynamics (Cullinane & Dundon, 2006; Korczynski, 2023).

Conclusion and Future Research

This chapter aims to show that different frames of reference on the employment relationship have often been either explicitly (though more often implicitly) adopted across scholarship on work in different fields, and even across different scholars and studies within the same fields. Our intent is not to promote a particular frame or perspective as "right", or to make anyone feel as though they need to defend their own frame. A person's frame is their frame. Rather, we believe that adopting a contrasting perspective through elucidating the assumptions that broadly underpin alternative frames can help us better understand ourselves, and also lead to a deeper understanding of others' perspectives on topics we all care about: work and employment, and workers, managers, and organizations. Becoming conscious of and questioning our own assumptions ensures that we do not fall prey to our own ideological lenses and cognitive biases, which allows us to better understand the world around us. And more importantly, as we start to recognize the presence of frames of reference in ourselves and others, we will only become more effective at identifying the sources of problems at work and in organizations and in proposing effective solutions. At the very least, it helps us to be more mindful of the assumptions we each make as scholars about the issues that we believe are important, as well as the reasons

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underpinning the interventions we are more likely to favor and the ones we are more likely to criticize.

Our scholarship would benefit from considering the ways in which we could integrate insights that might come from viewing a problem through the lens of different frames of reference on the employment relationship. For example, I-O psychologists can enhance their research by turning their considerable expertise in measurement and data analysis to include more direct consideration of workers' goals that do not align with organizational goals, their direct involvement in decision-making processes, and the role of structural power. Moreover, pluralist and critical IR scholars would benefit from greater consideration of the normative ideal in I-O psychology around the importance of developing rigorous measurement and models, and getting these tools and techniques into the hands of both management and workers, with the goal of improving organizational functioning and worker well-being.

By accepting that conflict is inherent in the labor-management relationship, some pluralist scholars have proposed that focusing on the sources of conflict, rather than the types of conflict, is a fruitful area of inquiry and integration between fields like IR, I-O psychology, HR, and OB, and points to a need for developing different approaches to effective dispute resolution depending on its source: psychogenic, cognitive, or structural (Budd et al., 2020). For instance, while some conflicts may be able to be fully dealt with by providing individuals with skills and tools in conflict resolution (recall the interpersonal emphasis on conflict in I-O psychology, HR, and OB scholarship), when the underlying source of conflict is structural and arises from fundamentally different stakeholder objectives, a more effective solution might be to balance the different interests by negotiating compromises that everyone can live with in order to continue to work together to achieve other shared or overall objectives. Or, if the parties cannot negotiate a

compromise, there may be a need for an independent third party to be brought in to arbitrate between the interests of the parties to ensure that the interests of managers and organizations do not always dominate.

There is also scope to find conceptual areas of integration across different perspectives on employee voice and voice mechanisms that would be fruitful avenues for further research. Some previous examples of this can be found in the literature exploring the outcomes for workers and organizations across unionized and non-unionized organizations that adopt high involvement work practices (e.g., Pohler & Luchak, 2014). Both unitarist and pluralist scholars believe that the withholding of employee input can be harmful for organizational stakeholders, and so research focused on exploring what actions could be taken to encourage employee voice could begin a conversation about what mechanisms and protections would be most effective. Another area of overlap is that both unitarists and pluralists mostly agree that employee satisfaction is an important outcome, both because it means employees may feel that their objectives and needs are being met, and because satisfied employees are more productive employees. Perhaps, then, some questions that scholars from different perspectives could agree are important and work together to answer include: "what are the most effective ways to encourage employees to feel safe in using their voice to meet their own objectives?" and "which mechanisms would be most effective at enhancing employee satisfaction with their jobs and organizations?"

Another potentially fertile area for future integrative research is exploring how employees are socialized under different power relationships. Studies of how experienced employees can better negotiate job changes, thereby fundamentally altering the nature of their work, demonstrate one way changes in the balance of power alter the nature of work conditions. At a higher level, the influence of worker collectives and institutions like unions on socialization

practices and the negotiation of work roles could be evaluated based on a broader set of behavioral outcomes. One might expect that in a pluralistic organization, employees would have more exposure to mechanisms for changing the nature of their work or expectations for what channels they might access if they wished to do so.

Greater collaboration across fields requires a deeper understanding of often hidden assumptions. This is what our explicit treatment of frames of references aims to promote. Ultimately, these frames compete with each other and cannot simultaneously be true, at least in a particular setting if not more generally. But recognizing these differences can reveal that there is more to discover.

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Table 1. *Four Frames of Reference on the Employment Relationship*

The Employment Relationship	Compatibility of Employer and Employee Interests	Employers	Markets	Emphasis
<td colspan="5" align="center">The Pluralist Employment Relationship</td>
A bargain between stakeholders with pluralistic economic interests and unequal bargaining power	Employers and employees have some common interests and some separate conflicting interests that should be balanced	Profit-maximizing organizations that have some economic conflicts of interest with employees	Imperfectly competitive so that there are imbalances in bargaining power between employees and employers	Balance
<td colspan="5" align="center">The Unitarist Employment Relationship</td>
A long-term partnership between employees and employers who share a unity of interests	Employers' and employees' interests are largely the same, and can be mutually fulfilled with best practices	Profit-maximizing organizations with a self-interest to align their interests with those of their employees	Important for establishing broad parameters for terms and conditions of employment, but not completely deterministic	Alignment
<td colspan="5" align="center">The Neoliberal Employment Relationship</td>
A mutually-advantageous trade in a free market by self-interested economic agents	The parties will contract with each other if their own interests are sufficiently served relative to alternatives	Black boxes of profit-maximizing technologies that optimize the use of factors of production and respond to market pressures	Key driver of the employment relationship to match self-interested employees and employers; ideally, perfectly competitive	Exchange
<td colspan="5" align="center">The Critical Employment Relationship</td>

				Domination
An unequal power relation embedded in complex socio-politico-economic inequalities	Employers and employees have sharply-antagonistic interests that cannot be aligned	Powerful members of dominant social groups with systemic advantages over (some) employees	One part of a broader socio-political system that perpetuates structural inequalities between employees and employers	