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Pandemics, politics, and the resilience of employment relations research

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic has profoundly altered people's experiences of work around the world. In doing so, the crisis has appeared to change the public narrative on work and employment, and consequently has highlighted the continued relevance and value of employment relations as a field of study, in terms of both policy and research. In this paper, we reflect on the implications of the Covid-19 outbreak for the field of employment relations. We argue that the current crisis has highlighted the resilience of the field of employment relations, reminding us of its critical relevance to academic and public interest (although for how long is another matter). However, this can only be understood in the context of the broader dynamics and issues facing this field of study. We outline the challenges faced by academics and practitioners working in this area to build upon this new found attention to ensure that employment relations issues remain central in terms of research, teaching and public policy.

Introduction

The Covid-19 global pandemic has fundamentally changed people's working lives across the world. It is too soon to note the full impact of the pandemic, economically and socially, but it is apparent that the ramifications will be substantial (Borland and Charlton, 2020; Fletcher et al. 2021). What is clear, however, is that one consequence of the pandemic has been the change in the public narrative around work and employment. Put simply, employment relations[1] and worker issues have become, for the time being at least, increasingly important once more. Terms like 'worker safety', 'the value of work' and 'key workers' have entered political discourse. Work (and the lack of it) has been pushed to the centre of government and societal responses to the pandemic either through the plight of 'key' ('critical') workers, those working from home, or those unable to work (e.g., in hospitality and many of the creative industries). As noted by Hodder (2020, 268) 'The crisis illustrates the continued relevance and importance of employment relations as a legitimate field of study, in terms of both research and policy'. We build on this observation in this article and reflect on the implications of the Covid-19 outbreak for the field of employment relations (broadly speaking). We

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argue that the current crisis appears to have repositioned the field of employment relations, bringing it back into the centre of academic and public interest, although for how long is another matter. Much of this 'repositioning' is in part due to the way the field of study – broadly speaking – has widened its remit and role, and has continued to emphasise the problems of work and its deregulation and degradation due to other structural changes and crises such as the financial crisis of 2008 and subsequent economic austerity. The challenge is for academics and practitioners to build upon this sudden interest and attention to ensure that employment relations issues – and their regulation – remain central in terms of research, teaching, and public policy, and are viewed as a pivotal feature of a social and economic sustainability. We discuss such matters in the context of the broader dynamics and issues that have been facing this field of study.

Crises and change: highlighting the contributions of employment relations as a field of study

The study of employment relations has centred on understanding the employment relationship and all issues associated with employment (Edwards 2005). Despite the increasingly fragmented nature of the employment relationship due to employers' pursuit of labour flexibility (Rubery 2015), and the decline in the prevalence of the standard employment relationship, heightened by the growth in the gig economy and bogus self-employment (Wright et al. 2019), we argue the term 'employment relations' is still relevant for studying people at work. However, as the opening editorial of this journal reflected (Littler 1987), the study of work relations is broad and has always spanned different methodological and theoretical approaches. Thus, the wide lens through which we study work and employment that draws on sociological, and political disciplines amongst others, is advantageous to an employment relations approach, following Edwards (2005, 267): 'This gives it an openness to a range of intellectual approaches and sensitivity to day-to-day realities'.

Yet despite this, employment relations as a field of study is often 'deemed to be irrelevant in a modern business school' (Darlington 2009, 1), sometimes referred to by those outside the field as a 'dying subject' (for a response and discussion see Martinez Lucio 2009, 85) that has been eclipsed by human resource management (HRM) (although the latter has been fundamentally shaped by employment relations, critical management studies and the sociology of work). We do not seek to repeat the well-worn debate between advocates for employment relations and advocates for HRM even if some argue that they can coexist alongside one another (Boxall and Dowling 1990, 204; Boxall 2018, 23; Littler 1987) especially as some aspects of the latter have been modified due to the intellectual impact of the former within some contexts.[2] Yet the debate surrounding the implications of the pandemic highlights the curious, continuing reinvention and broadening of employment relations in recent decades (partly due to its greater overlap with the sociology of work) and that there are, as noted by Meardi (2014), advantages from differentiating employment relations from mainstream HRM. This is important at a time when *some* business schools have steadily re-oriented themselves around unitary or managerial approaches to matters of work and employment, often ignoring the breadth and critical traditions that exist – this is in part a reflection of the

internal changes within business school governance (see, for example, Darlington 2009; Huzzard et al. 2017; McCann et al. 2020).

Of course, there are issues that have been identified by a range of scholars as to the historic limitations of employment relations as a field of study, such as its lack of intersectional sensitivities (McBride et al. 2015) which form part of a long and important concern with the absence of a focus on questions of race, for example (Carpenter 1926, 820; Lee and Tapia 2021), and gender (Rubery and Hebson 2018; Howcroft and Rubery 2019). Much work has been done to address these limitations, although such transitions are by no means complete. The broadening of the study of work is an ongoing project and has been pushed for some time (Stewart 2004; Heery et al. 2008). As such, we have seen changes within the field of employment relations – away from its once narrow focus on trade unions and collective bargaining – with questions of migration (Haque and Haque 2020), wellbeing/health and safety (Willis 1989; Shahbaz and Parker 2021), equality (Howcroft and Rubery 2019), ecology (Snell and Fairbrother 2010; Douglas and McGhee 2021), diverse types of participation and 'voice' mechanisms within and beyond work (Nechanska et al. 2020; Townsend and Loudoun 2016; Walker 2020), and other themes moving closer to the centre of concerns.

In the current context, dominated by Covid-19, we have seen a wide range of interventions from academics dealing with different dimensions of the work and employment, following in the long line of policy interventions by employment relations academics (see Heery 2016, 65–67; 104–107). There has been a plethora of printed media, blogs and social media activity that has shone a light on both the impact of the pandemic on working conditions, and the fundamental, underlying socio-economic problems the pandemic has revealed, particularly in the more de-regulated and market-oriented labour markets and economic systems where the quality of 'work' has been side-lined in governmental policy. These many works illustrate issues and debates that have long been important in studying the world of work and are the product of projects that predate the pandemic and that focus on key underlying issues.

There are too many to outline in such a short space, however, for example, pieces that have highlighted the issues faced by those undertaking previously undervalued work (both skilled and unskilled) that is essential to the functioning of the economy have been common. Winton and Howcroft (2020), and Cai et al. (2020) have written on value in supermarkets; and the value of work more generally has been addressed by Martinez Lucio and McBride (2020), Koepp (2020) and Johnson (2020) amongst others, touching on existing debates about 'good jobs', 'bad jobs', 'dirty work' and 'decent work'. How the current health crisis has thrown the work of both nurses and cleaners, for example, into the centre of discussions is clearly apparent. What is more, questions of gender and race have also come to the fore given the demographics of the 'key workers' under discussion (Mora and Schickler 2020). A range of interventions have questioned the way such work has been undervalued and hidden in recent years (Chebley et al. 2020). Other interventions have examined the vast technological and gendered challenges associated with homeworking, although it is important to ground this work in the vast existing literature on the area (Hodder 2020; Hennekam and Shymko 2020). We have also seen an emphasis placed on questions of health and safety due to the risks of travel, working in groups, and the lack of personal protective equipment (Taylor 2020; Williams 2020). This has led to the re-emergence of health and safety debates in the light of the legacy and impact of de-

regulation and anti-regulation discourses and policies in this area (see Tombs 2020; James 2021). The disruption to transport, logistics and supply chains has also drawn attention to sustainability of supply chains, both economically and environmentally (van Barneveld et al. 2020).

Alongside these substantive employment issues, there is also a greater interest in the way questions of collective worker participation in the workplace, but also at the level of the state, have been emphasised as ways of creating a more effective and engaged response based on sustainable and decent forms of work (Coulter 2020). How this new interest in the policy role of unions within government and employer circles develops, however, is unclear especially in more liberal market models. Clearly, we cannot begin to do justice to the array of interventions published since 2020, as well as the many written previously that have resurfaced and been brought back into current discussions due to the way they have illustrated the range of employment issues outlined above. It is, however, important to highlight how academics researching work and employment relations have drawn attention to the plight of workers during the current pandemic, ranging from those who have been 'central' to the organisational response to it, to those employed in 'non-essential' services and thus unable to work (see, for example, Churchill 2020).

Why the resurgence of an employment relations approach should be sustained

Why is this important or relevant? The current pandemic throws into the public view the fundamental way the field of study has evolved and the sheer range of substantive employment issues that are increasingly addressed. It also shows how academics in the area have been observing deficiencies in work and the way workers are treated (such as the growing insecurity within the labour market in forms of contracts and management forms of control, amongst others), and the costs that emerge from these strategies of marginalisation. There has been an increasing level of attention paid to the hidden and 'other' dimensions of work beyond 'established' and 'stable' workplaces. What is more, some would argue that the social and economic costs of undermining collective voice and representation, de-regulating worker rights and creating a fundamentally fragmented workforce have been the centre of academic discussions for some time in and around employment relations, and this has had the ironic effect of expanding the lens of analysis. Thus, amongst the longstanding sea of concerns about the nature and future of the field (see Strauss 1989), there (hopefully) is a reason to be optimistic as the pandemic has illustrated the importance of employment relations. Whilst Dundon (2019, 7) was writing before the onset of the current crisis, we argue the pandemic has demonstrated that 'the subject area is rich, dynamic, and engaging of policy challenges; and labour agency is creative, with mobilising forces showing signs of a challenge to structural inequalities'.

We argue that the dominance of a problem centred orientation within employment relations research (Kochan 1998, 32) is why we are seeing renewed interest and focus on the area. To those inside the field, this will not come as a surprise: 'The agenda of industrial relations research and teaching thus has fundamental moral and practical importance' than many other fields of study in contemporary business schools (BUIRA 2009, 53). This can be seen through the tackling of 'grand challenges' long before many other business

school disciplines started on their fashionable quests regarding social responsibility and sustainability (for example, Commons 1919). However, it is crucial to use this social and political repositioning to accentuate the work of employment relations academics (and other critical scholars of work and employment) through a resurgence of the teaching of employment relations in business schools. The role and purpose of a business school have long been debated at length (Clegg 1972; Martinez Lucio 2009; Huzzard et al. 2017) and since the Covid-19 outbreak, there have been calls for business schools to systematically adapt their curriculum (Alim 2020) in terms of engaging with a broader critical social science approach. There is now an opportunity for employment relations to reassert its relevance in the contemporary business school. After all, work is central to questions of how a society and economy functions, sustains, and transforms itself, and these debates need to be drawn out beyond the easy rhetoric of social responsibility, which is pre-dominantly viewed through a managerial prism (Hanlon and Fleming 2009). The need for this is clear from the current concern with work and the recent interventions of related academics in light of Covid-19. However, much depend on the ways in which the trajectory of change within business schools unfold, especially in the light of the increasingly dominant neo-liberal stance on critical approaches (see Parker 2018).

Concluding comments

Debates ebb and flow. There are many reasons why a particular set of concerns take centre stage. Often it can be related to the sheer significance of events that lead to a call on those academics engaged with such topics, even when there is political filtering at play that ensures certain questions are highlighted over others. In recent years, there has been a cacophony around new research on the importance of the degradation of work, although how this has impacted policy significantly in a context where de-regulation and market-oriented labour market reform are dominant is open to question. Nevertheless, for some time now, the future of work has been the focus of a range of conferences and projects that have shaped the nature of the way we view change (see Nolan 2003; Lansbury 2018; Howcroft and Rubery 2019). Yet even with the marginalisation of critical scholars within some business schools, an issue we need to be sensitive to in any discussion of the field of study and its development, the sheer expanse of work and scholarly activity has been extensive. This has been driven by the expansion of the employment relations research agenda and its interdisciplinary, open, and critical orientation.

The Covid-19 pandemic (as with other crises or critical incidents) shows us that events and key incidents can cast a spotlight on a specific set of academic activities. Research and activities that had previously been obscured or marginalised in policy or media terms can suddenly be pushed to the centre (even if only temporarily), but for this to happen you need more than just 'circumstance' – you need a body of academics who have laboured on a set of topics in a broad and multi-dimensional manner that have the materials, perspectives and narratives ready to intervene.[3] Sustaining the interest will be an important part of the work academics need to do, although this should not become an end in-itself or disconnected from ongoing and systematic research and engagement. What has also emerged is the importance of the various independent networks that academics forge between and, importantly, beyond the university which ensure progressive and

critical research is not dependent on current fads and fashions, or research council politics and ideologies. These are key to sustaining the community of scholars if (or when) suddenly the gaze of the 'establishment', 'media', or the 'public' refocuses, or simply drifts away. If this happens, employment relations matters could be once more seen, unfortunately, and incorrectly, as an antiquated interest pertaining to parts of the 20th Century. Thus, we argue the Covid-19 pandemic has inadvertently further reminded the 'establishment', 'media' and the 'public' of the importance of 'a set of issues around *the politics of work* that will endure regardless of whether the subject is known as industrial relations, employment relations or human resource management' (Frege et al. 2011: 209, our emphasis). The challenge is to ensure that it remains front and centre, or visible at least, in post-pandemic academic and policy arenas.

Notes

1. In this article, we use the term employment relations as an equivalent to industrial relations.
2. It must also be said that the drivers of interest in industrial or employment relations have always varied and been ambivalently related to questions of improving fairness or justice at work or restricting conflict within it: hence, one cannot approach this subject without an appreciation of the politics of work, and thus employment relations.
3. We acknowledge that there is always the risk that such moments quickly come to an end, or become overloaded with interventions, not least due to the neo-liberalisation of the university and way academics themselves must intervene commercially (and literally market their work) and thus refine their focus or purpose (Stewart and Martinez Lucio 2017). What is more, there is increasingly an obsession with activities such as blogging and policy briefings which are sometimes an end in themselves, let alone a part of the expected profiling of one's academic 'brand'.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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