

System and change in industrial relations analysis

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As a student of industrial relations, I am often bombarded with conflicting theories and reasons for the emergence and importance of this field.

Edmond Heery outlines and analyses the juxtaposition of two different views of modeling this vast and often debated area of industrial relations. His article looks at two types of model building in IR. First, the traditional model of systems-thinking set forth by John Dunlop, one of the pioneers of IR theory.

Introduced in 1958, Dunlop's system theory of IR tries to provide tools to understand the widest possible range of IR activities and explains why particular rules are established in particular contexts. Dunlop argues that IR can be studied as an independent field in an industrial society (much like economics). The systems theory makes use of four related elements: Actors- workers and their institutions, management, government institutions; Contexts- technical characteristics of workplace, budgetary constraints, locus and distribution of power in society; Rules- procedural and substantive; Functional ideology- integration, ie. IR regulates conflict by playing by the rules. The relationship between these elements is twofold- not only does the IR context influence the IR actors and the rules they create, the actors' shared acceptance of the common ideology (the IR game played by the rules) helps bind the system as a whole. Heery goes on to outline several criticisms of Dunlop's rather classic and still widely studied systems theory. A starting criticism of the systems theory is that it views IR as an independent field with an inherent theory.

Critics want to push back this boundary and argue that IR was and is deeply connected with and determined by economics, politics, social, domestic, and

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familial relationships of the time and place in history. Another criticism is that Dunlop has over simplified his description of actors. For example, critics argue that actors' roles are often changing with new business environments and the emergence of new actors- such as customers and community. Critics also argue that actors make different strategic choices at different levels (eg. Kochan's model), but Dunlop's model does not take his into account. The model places a lot of emphasis on roles as opposed to people, thus ignoring behavioural aspects like human motivations and preferences. Other criticisms of Dunlop go on to disagree with his premise that the function of IR is ideological- to regulate conflict and integrate actors. These criticisms range from those who argue that the ideology within IR is not integrative, but rather reconciliatory (reconcile with the dominant ideology), to those who argue that the ideology in IR is to delegitimize all actors except for workers (thus undermining employers' authority).

Others also argue that IR is non-ideological and unstable, thanks to rapid modernization and high competition. The most loudly uttered criticism of all is that the systems theory does not explain change in the field. This leads to Heery's second type of IR model building- the models of change. This type of model has a historical perspective and looks at how change occurs in IR over time. The models also examine the pattern of change and whether it is cyclical or directional, gradual, or catastrophic, and its origin- endogenous (from within the employment relationship) or exogenous (from the wider economy and society).

Heery looks at six different types of change models that are broadly divided into exogenous and endogenous. Both exogenous and endogenous models have two subdivisions each of directional (gradual and disjunctive) and cyclical change. In the exogenous-gradual model, IR change occurs due to gradual, cumulative change that is driven by forces beyond the employment control. An example is globalization. In the exogenous-disjunctive model, episodes of change are interspersed with periods of stability.

The change itself is triggered into the employment relationship by some external event, like a war. In the exogenous-cyclical model, change follows a repeating cycle of decline and renewal as IR adapts to cyclical pressures in the external environment, such as election pressures and the economy. In the endogenous-cyclical model, change occurs because of the competing drives of the actors. For example, IR is said to be both adversarial (due to the competing interests) and cooperative (due to interdependence of the parties).

Thus IR will oscillate between adversarial and cooperative mindsets depending on the context as the limitations of each approach become apparent to both management and workers. In the endogenous-disjunctive model, change occurs as a result of strategic choices of the actors within the employment relations. For example, as a result of unions' traditional marginalization of women's and minorities' issues, there has been an increased mobilization of women and minorities within unions. In the endogenous-gradual model, change is gradually driven by forces internal to IR.

This model stresses the maturing of IR institutions over time, as they become more complex and start to pursue differentiated goals- this is a model of union revitalization as a result of knowledge transfer and networking within the labour movement. Heery's review of the two types of models of looking at IR is comprehensive in looking at the criticism of the systems theory, but does not analyze the change models with the same depth. As a relatively new student in the field, I would have benefitted from a more detailed description of the change model before dwelling into its critique.

However, I felt that Heery's description of the change models was very streamlined and organized in a logical manner. I found his inclusion of a short discussion on the 'new actors' that have interests in IR, such as consumers or identity groups particularly interesting and worth considering. In the end, I do agree with Heery, and think that IR is a dynamic and complex field and it is certainly useful to have more than one perspective of studying and thinking about how these relationships are formed, changed, and managed.