

Transformation of the Employment Relationship

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Abstract

Employment relations are implicit or explicit contractual arrangements that specify the reciprocal expectations and obligations linking employers and employees. They encompass a wide range of phenomena, including work organization, governance, evaluation, and rewards. During the past quarter century, the standard employment relationship that was normative in much of the world during the twentieth century declined in favor of various nonstandard employment relations involving more tenuous employer–employee linkages. The transformation of employment relations has been associated with a wide range of phenomena including growth in economic and social inequality, shifting career patterns, and changes in the organization of work.

INTRODUCTION

Employment relations are implicit or explicit contractual arrangements that specify the reciprocal expectations and obligations linking employers and employees. They encompass a wide range of phenomena, including work organization, governance, evaluation, and rewards. Work and employment are vitally important to individuals, organizations, and societies, so the study of employment relations is central to numerous subjects in the social sciences, including the origins and maintenance of economic inequality and social stratification; the operation of labor markets; mechanisms of skill acquisition and career mobility; recruitment, selection, hiring, and promotion processes; and the governance and control of work activities within organizations. As the link between individuals and their employing organizations, employment relations provide a theoretical linchpin connecting multiple levels of analysis: macrostructures such as economic, political, legal, and social institutions; mesoscopic (middle-range) aspects of work groups, firms and interfirm networks; and microlevel features of employment including individual work experiences and rewards.

As employment relations are shaped by and embedded in the social, psychological, economic, political, historical, spatial, and legal linkages between employers and employees (Baron, 1988), research about them requires a multidisciplinary standpoint incorporating insights from sociology, economics, social psychology, law, political science, social geography, history, industrial relations, and management. Moreover, employment relations are highly context-dependent, making comparative studies indispensable. For example, well-developed firm-internal labor markets in Japan reflect both cultural understandings of the importance of the group in Japanese life and essential features of Japanese management practices (Lincoln & Kalleberg, 1990). Historical and cross-national analyses of employment relations highlight limitations of universal models of employment systems, helping us to understand better how labor markets and other institutions interact with culture and worker agency to produce changes in the structure and processes of work and employment.

During the past quarter century, understanding employment relations took on increasing importance in the United States and other industrial countries, as some linked growing polarization between “good” and “bad” jobs and increasing inequality in income, job, and employment security, hours worked and other labor market outcomes to changes in employer–employee work arrangements. These changes are also associated with transformations in the organization of work, especially shifts away from arrangements that internalize jobs within bureaucratic organizations toward ones involving external contracting and other interorganizational relations (Kalleberg, 2011). We outline the nature and consequences of these recent developments in employment relations.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

Employment relations range in scope from broadly defined relational exchanges to narrowly delimited transactional ones. Close relational linkages between organizations and their employees reflect mutual commitment, often having open-ended duration and providing training as well as welfare supports for employees such as health insurance and retirement benefits. Transactional relations are more exclusively instrumental, entailing little commitment and often only the exchange of money for work performed within a fixed time frame. They lack elaborations—such as training, welfare provisions, or an expectation of ongoing employment—that are typical of relational exchanges. Theories and research on labor markets document over-time swings between transactional and relational employment relations.

STANDARD EMPLOYMENT RELATIONSHIP

Much foundational research on employment relations takes the *standard employment relationship* (SER) as a reference point. SERs involve relational exchanges and were the norm in industrial nations for much of the twentieth century, emerging in the United States in the 1930s and blossoming in the post-World War II years as part of the social contract that accompanied the spread of Fordist mass production and the ascendancy of large organizations. SERs carry appreciable overhead costs because of the range and duration of the commitments they incorporate. Although the SER was normative during this period, it was far from universal within the United States labor force then; it was found mainly in larger organizations and concentrated among white-collar employees (usually men) in managerial occupations and blue-collar workers in certain organized industries. The “permanent employment” regime in Japan—also generally limited to men working in large organizations—resembles the SER.

Accounts of the emergence of the SER attribute it to factors linked to the interests of both employers and employees. Some Marxist authors contend that the SER is a form of bureaucratic control used by capitalists to divide the working class, while non-Marxists emphasize the efficiency gains and reduced transaction costs that accrue to employers by virtue of the internal training and firm-specific capabilities deriving from bureaucratic employment relations. Unions favored the development of SERs as a means toward providing greater due process and achieving equity in their relations with employers, thereby limiting the arbitrary exercise of authority by foremen in “drive systems” of personnel management that pressured workers to work hard through fear and intimidation. Nonunionized firms often created SERs in an effort to forestall future unionization efforts.

Features that typify the SER include the exchange of employee labor for monetary compensation, performance of work on a preset schedule at the employer’s place of business and under its control and direction, and jobs having well-defined boundaries and descriptions. It often, but not always, involves full-time employment and a shared expectation of continued employment contingent on satisfactory employee performance. SERs amount to a psychological contract in which employers pledge job security in exchange for employee loyalty.

SERs were the normative foundation of the framework within which labor law, collective bargaining, social security systems, and other features of welfare regimes developed. These institutions assumed models of employment relations and the family having a full-time, primary-breadwinner husband, and a wife who cared for children and the home. Post-World War II welfare

regimes sought to address risks associated with the SER, namely unemployment for the main source of income. Unemployment insurance schemes provided support for the breadwinner (and hence the family) predicated on the assumption that periods of joblessness would be relatively short and associated with generally brief business-cycle downturns.

The SER provides a basis for much theory and research in organizational sociology, institutional economics (e.g., transaction cost economics), industrial relations, and other fields. Models define internal labor markets, for example, as within-firm employment systems having job ladders, with entry restricted to the bottom rungs and upward movements associated with the progressive development of skills and knowledge. Careers within internal labor markets assumed extended employee commitment to an organization. Stratification research examines rates and patterns of individual mobility along job ladders within large corporations. SERs also were a foundational concept in theories of the design, division of labor, and control of work within bureaucratic organizations. They are key features in accounts of the process of internalization, which altered organizational boundaries by transforming former contractors and others outside the organization into regular employees. The development of modern personnel and human resource management systems accompanied the internalization of employment relations.

NONSTANDARD EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS

Beginning in the mid-1970s (in the United States, often the 1980s in many European countries and the 1990s in some Asian nations), changing conditions in political, social, technological, and economic environments prompted governments and organizations to seek greater flexibility in employment systems. Increased price competition and more fluid capital markets put greater pressure on firms to maximize profitability and to respond to rapidly changing consumer tastes and preferences. Sluggish economic growth triggered high unemployment and made it clear, especially in Europe, that economies could not generate enough jobs to assure all workers of full-time wage employment. Rapidly proliferating computer-based technologies made quick adaptation to changing market opportunities both possible and necessary. Together, these changes made the fixed costs and overhead obligations associated with the SER less viable for employers, ushering in an emerging new economic order fundamentally distinct from the bureaucratic model of work.

While some employment systems modeled on the SER certainly remain in place, others were dismantled in favor of new ones resting on what has come to be known as *nonstandard employment relations* (Kalleberg, 2000).

While these take several distinct forms, in general they tend to be more transactional exchanges than the SER, and they provide less employment security than the SER. Among them are contract work and temporary employment—both direct hires engaged on a fixed-term basis and workers procured via intermediary organizations including contract companies and temporary help agencies. Some analysts regard part-time work as a nonstandard relation. Labels including alternative work arrangements, market-mediated arrangements, nontraditional employment relations, flexible staffing arrangements, atypical employment, precarious employment, disposable work, and contingent work also refer to nonstandard employment relations.

Nonstandard employment relations depart from the SER in one or more ways. First, in some, the employer–employee relationship is mediated via a third party rather than direct. Such arrangements “externalize” administrative control and legal responsibility for employees who may perform work activities for several work organizations. The worker’s *de jure* employer is an intermediary organization rather than the *de facto* employer that pays for and makes use of the worker’s labor. In these nonstandard employment relations, the meanings of the terms *employer* and *employee* become ambiguous because facets of employment that are intertwined in the definition of the SER are distributed across different organizations. In temporary help agency employment, for example, the intermediary agency is the worker’s legally defined employer, but actual work is performed at and for—and directed by—distinct client organizations. Workers employed by contract companies often perform their activities at a client’s site but take direction from the contract company itself. In both forms, the duration of worker–client engagements can vary widely. These arrangements are products of social and political negotiations: in the United States, for example, temporary help agencies and their corporate backers fought for over four decades to designate such agencies as employers in legal terms, rather than merely as employment brokers that connect job seekers with employers.

Second, some nonstandard work carries no assumption of continued employment, in contrast to the SER in which the expectation is that employment will be at least open ended with an indefinite future, if not “permanent.” While some temporary workers transition into regular employment with a client after a provisional short-term engagement, temporary employment is usually just that. Apart from workers procured via intermediary agencies, organizations may hire temporaries directly for a fixed term, or on an on-call basis to cover absences of regular employees or to manage high but transient workloads. Fixed-term contracts have become particularly important in countries where legal provisions make it difficult

for employers to terminate indefinite-duration contracts, such as France, Germany, Italy, and Spain.

Third, still other nonstandard work arrangements, including self-employment and independent contracting, collapse the employer–employee distinction. In these situations, workers administer and direct their own activities and are paid by clients for services performed or goods provided, not as employees providing labor power.

Finally, some work arrangements deviate from the norm of full-time employment. Controversy exists as to whether all part-time work should be considered nonstandard, because many less-than-full-time jobs incorporate all other features of the SER. Some part-time arrangements represent employer accommodations to employee preferences for reduced hours and more flexible schedules. Other part-time jobs, however, are highly insecure, lacking enhancements such as benefits, training opportunities, and the expectation of continuity. Many employees in such part-time arrangements would prefer full-time positions.

A principal driver of movement away from SERs toward these forms of nonstandard work was employer desires for greater flexibility in relations with employees—transforming labor into a variable rather than fixed cost, thereby facilitating adaptability. As well, technological improvements in communication and information systems made it easier for organizations to specialize their production, assemble temporary workers quickly for projects, and rely more on outside suppliers. New legal regimes contributed to the growth in nonstandard work by constructing employment relations that allow employers to avoid the mandates and costs associated with labor laws that provide protection for permanent employees. So too did demographic shifts in labor force composition involving growth in worker groups—such as married women and older people—who sometimes prefer the flexibility that nonstandard arrangements offer, although not necessarily the associated insecurity.

Not all nonstandard employment relations are disadvantageous for all employees relative to SERs. Certain high-skilled workers can garner higher economic rewards as independent contractors or consultants than they might as employees. In these instances, nonstandard arrangements allow workers to capitalize on abundant market opportunities and demands for their skills.

It is tempting to interpret the growing prominence of nonstandard employment relations in recent years as an “evolution” beyond the SER, but nonstandard employment relations are by no means new. Producers have always been able to choose between internally “making” (i.e., hiring, training, and directing) workers within organizations and “buying” them in external labor markets via formal or informal contracting, a classic

choice central in transaction cost economics theory (Williamson, 1985). History is replete with examples of flexible labor markets characterized by unstable, temporary work and peripheral labor force attachment, and many employment relations that do not involve full-time work accompanied by open-ended employer–employee commitments. For instance, under the “inside contracting” system in nineteenth-century U.S. manufacturing, management engaged contractors, provided them with machinery and factory space, supplied raw material and capital, and sold products, while the contractors were responsible for organizing production and hiring, paying, and directing the actual workers. Indeed, the historical anomaly may be the efficiencies associated with SERs and internal labor markets in the post-World War II period, not the use of nonstandard employment relations. Nonetheless, the latest incarnation of nonstandard employment relations does have novel features that distinguish it from earlier ones. Contemporary nonstandard employment relations increasingly involve labor market intermediaries, and expansion in their use leads toward production systems that can be termed aptly as *network* organizations.

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

A transition in the organization of work from bureaucratic to more flexible forms accompanied the shift from the SER to nonstandard employment relations. Several central strands of research examine these interrelated changes and consequences ensuing from them.

First, some debate the extent to which recent growth in nonstandard employment relations constitutes a structural transformation, as opposed to an episodic upturn due to business-cycle fluctuations. Advocates of a cyclical interpretation observe that small decreases in the use of nonstandard work arrangements (such as temporary agency work) tend to accompany declining unemployment rates. By contrast, those contending that expansion in nonstandard relations signals a fundamental transformation argue that temporary and contract employment are now well institutionalized and therefore legitimated as “best employment practices” that enhance effectiveness and efficiency, especially in the face of changed conditions brought about by increasing globalization and rapid technological change.

Second, the growth of organizational forms such as contract companies, subcontractors, and temporary help agencies underscores the increasing prominence of network relations among organizations within contemporary production systems. These lead to interorganizational forms of cooperative endeavor characterized by reciprocal communication and exchange governed by relations of mutual trust between parties, rather than either the

market logic of price or the hierarchical command and control regimes that internally coordinate self-contained organizations. Similar to nonstandard employment relations, network forms of organization are not new. Many claim that they now are more common, however, because global and segmented markets provide a fertile environment for networking, and cheap information technology enables the creation and maintenance of rich, multifaceted interorganizational ties.

The turbulent environments that led nonstandard employment relations to emerge also encourage employers to manage resource dependencies, cope with rising uncertainty, and enhance competitiveness by developing greater interconnectedness with other organizations. Some organizational networks form when large, vertically integrated firms achieve greater flexibility by spinning off or divesting themselves of former parts of themselves and instead establishing collaborations with other firms. Two examples of ongoing network arrangements involving close collaboration are multinational joint ventures and producer-supplier alliances. Other shorter term systems are constructed to accomplish single projects, after which they disband; examples include the temporary organizations organized by home-building contractors and film production companies. These systems rely on trust, sharing of implicit knowledge, and strong economic incentives to complete their joint projects efficiently. Firms such as consulting companies also organize internal project teams, combining and recombining both specialists and multiply skilled staff members to suit the circumstances of a task or engagement.

Organizational networks incorporating diverse types of nonstandard employment relations can help organizations achieve both numerical flexibility (i.e., calibrating workforce size to changing demand levels) and functional flexibility (adjusting their complement of available skills and capabilities and shifting assignments of employees to tasks depending on demand). Outsourcing functions such as production, maintenance and repair, clerical support, and other activities to contract companies—rather than using employees within the organization to perform them—is one means of obtaining numerical flexibility. Functional flexibility can be achieved via collaborative relations among specialized suppliers and producers, as illustrated by networks for specialized garment production in the Emilia-Romagna industrial district of Italy, or the networks formed within regions in which computer-oriented firms are concentrated, such as the vicinity of Route 128 in Massachusetts or Silicon Valley, California. Close, trust-based relations among organizations in these networks enable producers to reconfigure their relationships with suppliers and to develop interorganizational competencies, thus achieving “flexible specialization”

by acquiring and redeploying resources as needed to adapt to changes in environmental circumstances.

The growth of network organizational forms and nonstandard employment relations holds important consequences for individuals' careers. Research on "boundaryless" careers underscores the unraveling of firm-internal labor markets, so that career mobility increasingly takes place via movements between rather than within organizations. Such career patterns require adaptable and flexible skill sets. The pace of change in product/service markets requires that workers possess diffuse skills suitable to performing multiple tasks, rather than acquiring only those needed to perform the activities specified by a stable, well-defined job description. As careers more often unfold between rather than within particular organizational settings, employers may increasingly rely on external hiring as a means of acquiring workers with needed skills and capabilities, instead of developing them internally via training programs. Employer investments in developing both general and firm-specific skills are placed at risk when employees are apt to move to another organization after completing training programs, prompting employers to shift responsibility for skill acquisition to workers.

KEY ISSUES AND CHALLENGES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Changes in employment relations are key elements in a number of key research questions on agendas for future investigations of work, employment, social stratification, organizations, and related topics.

KEY ISSUES

Many macrostructural forces that prompted the recent expansion of non-standard employment relations will likely to continue to influence the nature of employer-employee ties. Economic pressures such as price competition among producers distributed across the globe will encourage employers to continue seeking flexible relations with employees. Technological innovations will facilitate this by reducing further the costs of contracting, enhancing its efficiency, and enabling organizations to outsource more of their activities (e.g., professional and customer services).

The rising exposure of workers to market forces that ensues from employers' search for greater flexibility renders them more vulnerable and may lead to demands for greater social security and welfare provisions that better protect workers. Increased calls for such social protections seem especially likely to arise in places in which SERs, and hence security, were widespread in the past—such as the United States and Europe. New social protections need

not be tied to particular employers, as health and retirement benefits currently are in some places. One alternative model may be found in the various “flexicurity” systems that provide employers with flexibility and employees with security, as in employment systems found in Denmark and the Netherlands. In Denmark, employees have few job protections but the availability of generous unemployment benefits and active labor market policies provides considerable opportunities for retraining that facilitate employees’ transitions to new jobs. In the Netherlands, workers in nonstandard employment relations enjoy many of the same social protections as those who work in SERs.

It is also likely that employers, especially large ones, will attempt to develop open-ended employment relations in an attempt to retain highly skilled workers. It is unlikely that these will approach the stability and permanence of SERs, in view of the enhanced opportunities for interfirm mobility that the global economy and technological advances of recent years have unleashed. Rather, occupational labor markets segmented according to possession of particular skill sets are apt to exercise increasing influence on career paths, permitting people to move between employers in order to best utilize and enhance their skills. In addition, growing emphasis on entrepreneurship will probably fuel rises in the numbers of high-skill independent contractors willing and able to sell their services and products to a wide market of producers requiring their specialized capabilities.

A central issue for the future concerns the implications of changing employment relations for social and economic inequality. Rising inequality constitutes a major challenge for the United States and many other industrial countries. Much of it is attributable to the enormous growth in the wealth and income of the top 1% or 2% of households within the population, some of this in turn reflecting the financialization of the economy and returns to stocks and investments rather than disparities in earned income. The close linkage between employment and earnings suggests that changes in employment relations are also an essential part of the explanation, however. In particular, growth in nonstandard employment relations increasingly exposes some workers to market opportunities and pressures, allowing those with more education and certain highly marketable skills to realize high returns to their human and social capital while severely limiting the options and security of others. The growing marketization of employment relations contributes to rises both in high-wage jobs for workers with more education and skills and in low-wage, low-quality ones for vulnerable workers who lack institutional protections. Such polarization in job quality is, of course, of greater consequence in liberal market political economies such as the United States, where many benefits are tied to employment rather than provided by the state.

The growing legitimacy of temporary help agencies raises several vital questions about future configurations of employment relations. Among these is that of the role such agencies play in shaping individuals' careers. Employers are increasingly using temporary help agencies to screen prospective employees during a trial probationary period that involves no commitment to a continued employment relationship. To what extent do temporary help agencies provide bridges to permanent and rewarding employment for workers, rather than confining them to a series of short-term, dead-end jobs? Working in temporary help agencies is likely to be more beneficial in countries where social insurance and welfare benefits are not contingent upon particular forms of employment. The triadic employment relationship that arises in much temporary employment—involving the worker, the *de jure* employer (the temporary help agency) and the *de facto* employer (the client organization)—similarly poses several important dilemmas. Among them is that of the locus of responsibility for training—whether it is provided by the agency or the client or acquired by workers outside of the employment relation via educational organizations or private providers. Finally, rises in temporary employment raise questions about the organization of work, which commonly requires that agency-supplied workers and regular employees in an SER work alongside one another. Under what conditions will they be able to cooperate with each other, when are conflicts likely to arise, and how can they be managed effectively?

The transformation of employment relations also raises significant research questions about interactions between work and other societal institutions. In particular, the decline in the SER and the continuing weakening of unions (in the United States and in industrial nations generally) have been accompanied by vast changes in the legal framework of the employment relationship. Much past labor law assumed an SER-like relationship involving one employer and one employee. The emergence of triadic employment relations calls for revisiting and updating these laws to address, among many other things, quandaries such as the locus of liability for harms encountered by workers during employment. Which organization—the client or agency supplying labor—bears responsibility in the case of injuries ensuing due to accidents (e.g., in cell tower work or in the petrochemical industry)? Which of them is responsible for unemployment and health insurance and other forms of social protection, if the government does not provide these as benefits of employment? As well, industrial unionism and collective bargaining was modeled on the SER, so union decline raises questions of who—lawyers, government officials, union leaders, or employees themselves—now is best able to represent workers' interests in their relations with employers? Are new forms of unionism/worker power viable and appropriate in view of increased worker mobility among firms?

Finally, it is important to ask about the impact of changing employment relations on family dynamics, and vice versa. The increased uncertainty and unpredictability introduced by nonstandard employment relations hold negative consequences for career development in many industrial countries and in turn may lead to postponement of marriage and childbearing, among other impacts on the family. This is especially acute in countries such as Japan, for example, where declining economic opportunities among men are associated with reductions in marriage and below-replacement fertility levels. U.S. evidence indicates that marriage rates have declined among less-educated whites and that marriage may be becoming deinstitutionalized as a framework for family formation. At the same time, other changes including the growth in dual earner families may pressure employers to accommodate the careers of skilled women by developing mechanisms that facilitate work–family balance, potentially introducing further polarization by skill in employment conditions.

These issues raised by changing employment relations will preoccupy researchers in a variety of social science disciplines. The focus of such research needs to encompass the full range of job rewards that workers seek—extending beyond earnings to consider flexible schedules or control over work, for example—and that employers therefore should consider when organizing workplaces. Understandings of how employer and employee visions of the psychological employment contract have changed—from relational ones resting on mutual loyalty and commitment to transactional ones in which employers regard workers as a source of short-term benefit and employees view the skills and experiences they acquire as a basis for obtaining jobs elsewhere—need to be refined. Public policy faces the issues of how to address problems ensuing from the growing precariousness of work and the uncertainties built into new employment relations and how to promote employability security if job security is elusive. Moreover, labor law must address the new risks and challenges posed by the greater movement of employees among workplaces.

CHALLENGES

Future research on employment relations will require improved data on organizations and their employees. Organizations will continue to be key actors in shaping the nature of employment relations, but declines in the length of employee–employer attachments and the increasing complexity and variety of contemporary employment relations pose challenges about how best to gather and record information about them. We need, for example, better information on the nature and scope of employer–employee contracts and on employees’ duration of employment and mobility between

employers. The U.S. Census Bureau's Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics data on firms and employees are a very promising data resource in this regard, as it tracks the movement of workers both within and between employers, thereby clarifying career patterns and permitting assessments of hypotheses about changing rates and correlates of interfirm mobility. Other useful data sets for analyzing career patterns in the United States include the Panel Study of Income Dynamics and the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth.

Some countries, notably in Scandinavia, assemble registry data on individuals and often their employers. These repositories of administrative data provide valuable, comprehensive information on the nature of employment relations. Similar information would also be very helpful in studying employment relations in the United States, but creating and disseminating such data bases—which include such highly sensitive material as income tax records—would have to surmount serious privacy challenges. Among other exemplary international data efforts relevant to studying employment relations are the longitudinal data sets assembled and harmonized by the Luxemburg Income Study, and the Measuring the Dynamics of Organizations and Work (Meadow) project that coordinates the collection of data on organizational change and work across more than a dozen European countries. In addition, repeated cross-sectional surveys of adult populations, such as the U.S. General Social Survey and its counterparts elsewhere, provide important information about trends in the subjective correlates of employment relations, such as job satisfaction, perceived security in jobs and employment opportunities, and other work orientations.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Employment relations link individual workers to their organizations and other economic and social institutions. Changes in social, economic, political, historical, spatial, and legal institutions have profound effects on employment relations—and thereby on individuals—and reciprocally are affected by these institutions. The past quarter century has witnessed a transition in the normative form of the linkages between employers and employees, moving away from the SER toward a variety of nonstandard employment relations. While nonstandard employment relations are not new, they depart from the relative certainty and growth that typified employment relationships during the three decades following World War II. Expansion in nonstandard employment relationships is associated with, and poses questions regarding, a wide range of phenomena including the growth of economic and social inequality, shifting career patterns, and changes in the organization of work. Better understanding of the nature and consequences of these

changes is a major priority for social scientists seeking to enhance the quality of individual work experiences and the competitiveness of organizations and societies alike.

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