

Employee Relations and Wellbeing

Lecture Title:

Theoretical Perspectives on Employee Relations



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**Masters in
Human Resources Management**

Learning Objectives

- Compare unitarist, pluralist, and radical perspectives on employee relations (ER)**
- Examine how theoretical frameworks influence ER strategy**
- Critique psychological contracts and their role in conflict and trust.**



Group Discussion

Why is it important to understand theoretical lenses in employee relations?



Definition of Theoretical Lens



A theoretical lens is a conceptual framework or perspective based on existing theories that directs how phenomena are perceived, examined, and understood. It influences what academics and practitioners focus on, how they frame problems, and the types of explanations or solutions they accept.

"A theoretical lens is a structured way of seeing. In ER, it determines how we view conflict, cooperation, and power" (Anfara & Mertz, 2015).

Understanding Theoretical Lenses

Purpose	Explanation	Example/Application
1. Framework for Analysis	Helps simplify and interpret complex workplace dynamics	Use different lenses to explain why a strike occurs or why management resists unions
2. Informs ER Strategy	Guides how organizations approach employee voice, conflict, and control	A unitarist approach might favor direct communication; a pluralist approach might support collective bargaining
3. Clarifies Stakeholder Worldviews	Reveals why different groups (e.g. managers, unions) see the same issue differently	A manager sees a dispute as miscommunication; a union sees it as inequality

Understanding Theoretical Lenses

Purpose	Explanation	Example/Application
4. Encourages Critical Thinking	Enables questioning of assumptions and evaluation of multiple viewpoints	Students critique whether HR policies reflect only managerial interests
5. Supports Ethical Decision-Making	Helps assess fairness and power dynamics in organizational decisions	Analyzing whether policies respect employee rights and address systemic issues

Group Discussion

**Can you explain the difference
between 'Employee Relations' (ER)
and Industrial Relations (IR)?**



Employee Relations VS Industrial Relations

Aspect	Employee Relations (ER)	Industrial Relations (IR)
Definition	Broad term covering individual and collective employment relationships	Focuses on collective relations between employers and trade unions
Scope	Includes both unionized and non-unionized settings	Primarily concerned with unionized workforces
Focus	Trust, communication, engagement, and psychological contracts	Bargaining, conflict resolution, labor law, and union negotiations
Perspective	Can be unitarist or pluralist	Typically pluralist or radical

Employee Relations VS Industrial Relations

Aspect	Employee Relations (ER)	Industrial Relations (IR)
Mechanisms	Appraisals, employee voice, engagement surveys	Collective bargaining, strikes, arbitration
Typical Role of Unions	Optional or consultative	Central actors
Practitioner Focus	HR professionals, line managers	Industrial relations specialists, union leaders
Example Activities	Coaching, grievance handling, staff development	Collective bargaining, labor dispute resolution

Comparative
Analysis:

Unitarist vs
Pluralist vs Radical
Perspectives

Unitarist Perspective

- **Views the organization as an integrated and harmonious whole.**
- **Assumes employer and employee interests are aligned.**
- **Conflict is seen as abnormal or due to poor communication or 'troublemakers'.**
- **Management prerogative is largely accepted; unions are often seen as unnecessary or disruptive.**
- **Common in traditional HRM approaches and used in organizations with strong corporate cultures (e.g., Google, Apple).**



Pluralist Perspective

- **Sees the workplace as consisting of diverse groups with potentially conflicting interests (e.g., management vs. employees).**
- **Conflict is viewed as inevitable and natural—a sign of healthy negotiation.**
- **Unions and collective bargaining are seen as legitimate structures to balance power.**
- **Inform HR strategies in unionized or public sector environments (e.g., NHS, civil service).**



The Radical Perspective

The Radical Perspective—also known as the Marxist or critical approach—views the employment relationship as inherently unequal and conflictual, rooted in the broader structure of capitalist society.

It argues that the workplace is not a neutral or cooperative space, but a site of power struggle between two primary classes: employers (capital) and employees (labor).



The Radical Perspective

Element	Radical Perspective
Core View of the Workplace	Composed of conflicting social classes (capital vs. labor) with unequal power .
Nature of Conflict	Inevitable, structural, and systemic ; arises from inherent contradictions in capitalism.
Role of Management	Seen as an agent of capital , aiming to control labor and maximize profits .
Role of Employees	Exploited class , often resisting managerial control through collective action .
View on Trade Unions	Essential for protecting worker interests and challenging capitalist power .

The Radical Perspective

Element	Radical Perspective
Collective Bargaining	A legitimate tool for redistributing power and expressing class opposition.
HR Strategy Implications	Should recognize power imbalances, allow for worker voice, and support union representation.
Typical Contexts	More visible in unionized sectors, public services (e.g., NHS, civil service), and gig economy conflicts.
Scholarly Foundations	Based on Marxist and critical theory (e.g., Hyman, 1975; Kelly, 1998).

The Radical Perspective – Critique & Relevance

The radical lens is often critiqued for:

- Overemphasizing conflict and underestimating cooperation**
- Being less practical in non-unionized or flexible labor markets**

It remains highly relevant in debates around:

- Gig economy exploitation**
- Labor rights erosion**
- Corporate accountability**



Global Organizations Reflecting the Radical Perspective

Organization/Movement	Radical Features
International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC)	Largest global union federation advocating for workers' rights, collective power, and social justice.
UNI Global Union	Represents workers in service sectors; actively challenges corporate abuses (e.g., Amazon, Starbucks).
LabourStart	A global platform supporting worker mobilization, strikes, and campaigns against multinational corporations.
Public Services International (PSI)	A global union federation defending public sector workers, often resisting privatization and neoliberal reforms.
Platform Cooperatives (e.g., Fairbnb, Up&Go)	Tech collectives run by workers—alternative to exploitative gig platforms like Uber or Airbnb.

Comparison of Employee Relations Perspectives

Dimension	Unitarist Perspective	Pluralist Perspective	Radical Perspective
View of the Workplace	An integrated and harmonious team	A collection of diverse groups with differing interests	A site of structured conflict between classes (capital vs. labor)
Assumption about Interests	Common goals and shared interests	Legitimate differences in interests (e.g., management vs. unions)	Fundamentally opposed interests rooted in economic inequality
Nature of Conflict	Abnormal, results from poor communication or bad actors	Inevitable but manageable through rules and dialogue	Structural and inevitable; a reflection of class struggle
Role of Trade Unions	Often unnecessary or disruptive	Legitimate representatives of employees' interests	Essential tools for resistance against exploitation

Comparison of Employee Relations Perspectives

Dimension	Unitarist Perspective	Pluralist Perspective	Radical Perspective
HR/ER Strategy	Emphasizes loyalty, communication, and unity	Emphasizes collective bargaining, grievance procedures, consultation	Emphasizes empowerment, union support, and systemic change
Typical Context	Private firms with strong corporate culture	Public sector or unionized workplaces	Activist labor movements, critical unions, or public sector struggles
Theoretical Roots	Systems theory, human relations school	Pluralist industrial democracy theories (Fox, 1966)	Marxist and critical theory

Case Study

“Whose perspective is it?”

- **Identify the dominant employee relations perspective**
- **Explain your choice using theoretical reasoning**
- **Discuss how each perspective would interpret or resolve the situation.**



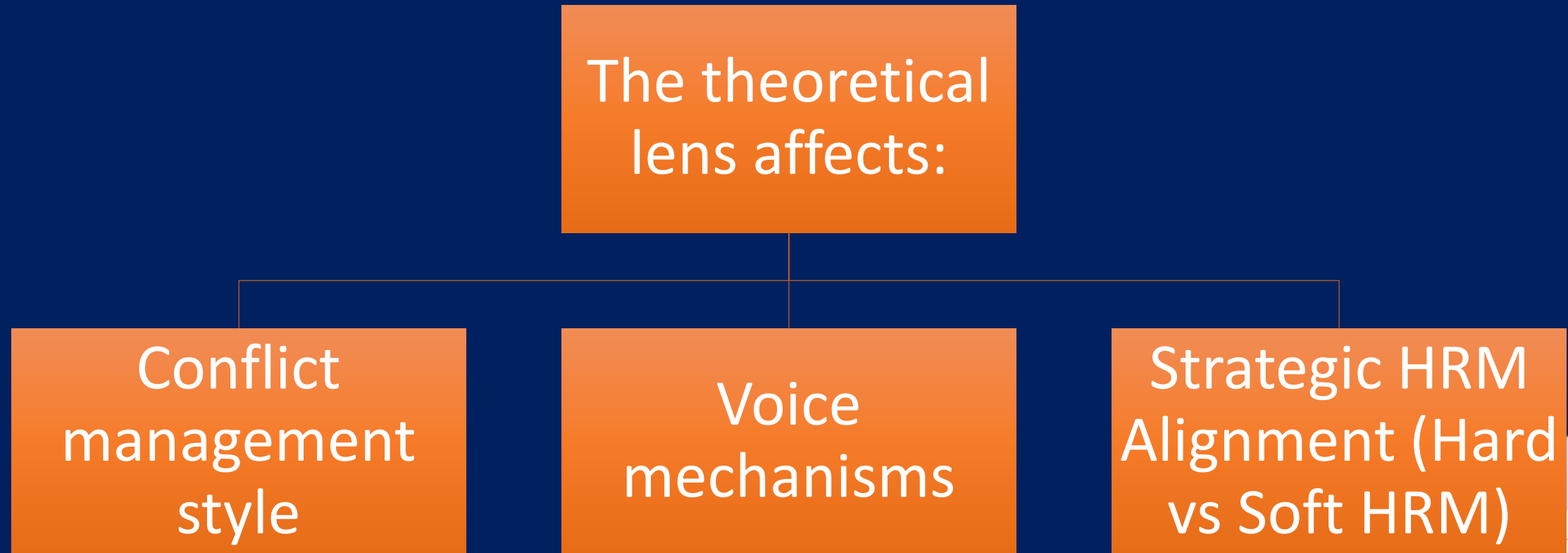


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Employee Relation Strategies

Type of ER Strategy	Features	Typical in...
HR-driven (Unitarist)	Manager-led voice mechanisms, focus on loyalty, low union presence, emphasis on harmony	Private-sector firms (e.g., tech, retail)
Union-led (Pluralist)	Formal collective bargaining, multiple voice channels, joint consultation	Public sector, large unionized firms
Conflict-driven (Radical lens)	Workers organize independently, resistance to managerial control, informal or adversarial relations	Gig economy, precarious labor environments

Employee Relations Strategies



Conflict Management Style

Each theoretical perspective offers a different assumption about the nature of conflict:

Perspective	View on Conflict	Conflict Management Approach
Unitarist	Conflict is abnormal; stems from poor communication or disloyalty	Focus on suppressing conflict, using internal grievance systems or coaching
Pluralist	Conflict is inevitable due to differing interests	Formal negotiation, collective bargaining, joint consultation
Radical	Conflict is structural and rooted in power imbalance	Direct action, resistance, advocacy through unions or grassroots movements

Voice Mechanisms (Employee Participation and Representation)

Perspective	Voice Mechanism
Unitarist	Internal channels: surveys, suggestion boxes, employee forums (non-unionized)
Pluralist	Collective bargaining, union reps, formal grievance and consultation structures
Radical	Independent worker organizing, protests, strikes, legal action, whistleblowing

Strategic HRM Alignment (Hard vs Soft HRM)

- Unitarist: Tends toward hard HRM – control-oriented, cost-driven, viewing employees as resources.**
- Pluralist: Mix of soft and hard HRM – engagement through formal dialogue but also structure and control.**
- Radical: Often critiques both; highlights how HRM can disguise exploitation or reinforce managerial power.**



Psychological Contract – Conflict and Trust

David Guest (1998) linked the psychological contract to outcomes like trust, commitment, and organizational performance. He viewed the PC as a key mediator between HRM and employee attitudes.



Key Themes of Psychological Contract

Theme	Description
Trust	Built on consistent delivery of implicit promises; essential for commitment.
Fairness	Perceptions of equity and justice in treatment, rewards, and decision-making.
Reciprocity	Mutual give-and-take; when one side gives, the other is expected to respond.

Critique of Psychological Contract

Critique	Explanation
Subjectivity	Highly individualized; difficult to measure or generalize across teams.
Managerial Framing	Managers often "frame" expectations to align with organizational goals—may obscure inequality or power imbalance.
Cultural and Generational Bias	Contracts vary across cultural contexts (e.g., collectivist vs. individualist) and generations (e.g., Gen Z vs Boomers).
Informal Enforcement	Lack of legal standing—violations may not have formal consequences.

Group Discussions

- **Split in groups.**
- **Each group will choose a particular theoretical context.**
- **Answer questions relevant to your context.**
- **Present to the rest of the team.**



Group 1 - Unitarist Perspective

1. How does the unitarist perspective influence the way managers perceive and manage the psychological contract?

(Prompt: Consider assumptions of shared goals, loyalty, and harmony.)

2. In a unitarist environment, how might a psychological contract breach be interpreted by the employer versus the employee? (Prompt: Is conflict seen as misunderstanding or disloyalty?)

3. To what extent can trust and commitment substitute for formal voice mechanisms (e.g. unions) in managing psychological contracts?



Group 2 - Pluralist Perspective

- 1. How does the pluralist lens explain the role of psychological contracts in unionized workplaces? (Prompt: Think about formal vs informal agreements coexisting).**
- 2. Can collective bargaining processes strengthen or weaken individual psychological contracts? Why?**
- 3. In a pluralist system, how might a violation of the psychological contract be addressed differently compared to a unitarist system? (Prompt: Think about institutional voice and dispute resolution).**



Group 3 - Radical Perspective

- 1. From a radical perspective, is the psychological contract a tool of genuine trust or subtle control?(Prompt: Reflect on power imbalance and managerial dominance).**
- 2. Might breaches of psychological contracts reflect deeper structural inequalities rather than isolated incidents?**
- 3. Are psychological contracts in precarious/gig work (e.g., platform-based work) illusions of mutual agreement? (Prompt: Consider Uber, Deliveroo, Amazon Flex as examples)**



THANK YOU!



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