

Equality and Diversity in Employment Relations: Looking in and pushing out of the Industrial Relations academy

This special issue arose in conjunction with the British Universities Industrial Relations Association's (BUIRA) decision in 2009 to formulate an equality and diversity policy that included proposals for implementing improved equalities practice. Specifically an Equality and Diversity Working Party was established from amongst BUIRA members to draw up an equality statement and to investigate whether BUIRA's procedures and practices with regard to equalities and inclusiveness could be improved. BUIRA's Equality and Diversity Policy was presented, discussed and approved by members at the 2010 BUIRA AGM during the association's 60th Anniversary Conference, held at Manchester Metropolitan University (BUIRA, 2010).

From 2007 to 2010 both of the editors of this special issue were officers of the Association and in that role launched this Special Issue in an open call for papers to explore the past, present and future of industrial and employment relations scholarship in any aspect of equality and diversity. There were two main and timely reasons for doing this. Firstly, it would serve as a public statement that BUIRA took its responsibilities towards equality and diversity seriously. Mainstream employment relations discourse has traditionally tended to reflect a masculine, trade union and manual worker perspective, such that public perceptions of the field of study have assumed a narrower view than is increasingly the case. Although studies beyond the 'malestream' agenda have been increasing over time and now reflect a much more diverse and complex set of constructs and concepts, this body of scholarship still remains relatively small. Hence, the second reason for commissioning this special issue is that it would serve as a dedicated vehicle for increasing the stock of scholarship in this significant but still too small field.

The four papers in this special issue are all authored by BUIRA members and their scope is illustrative of the increasing range and depth of contemporary scholarship on equality and diversity issues in the field of employment/industrial relations (IR). While gender continues, understandably, to be the dominant focus for IR research on equalities, there is a growing body of work on other dimensions of oppression and workplace discrimination, most often articulated through the potent concept of multi-level intersectionality. Indeed, the first two articles by Holgate *et al* and Ledwith offer rare, thought provoking evidence and ‘insider’ analyses of professional and workplace discrimination and prejudice experienced by IR scholars. In both cases, they see their contributions as revisiting and building on the issues and debates addressed in the earlier, seminal ‘Gender and Industrial Relations’ special issue of the *Industrial Relations Journal* (Healy et al, 2006). By contrast, the remaining two articles demonstrate the increasing ‘reach’ of IR equality and diversity research. The third article by Colgan and McKearney explores the effectiveness of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) workplace networks as expressions of ‘employee voice’. While the final article by Hopkins examines the integration of ‘diverse workforces’ in the wake of large-scale migration to the UK following the major expansion of the EU in 2004.

Jane Holgate and colleagues were all members of the BUIRA Equality and Diversity Working Party, referred to above. In their article, ‘Equality and diversity in employment relations: do we practice what we preach?’ they build on the policy research undertaken by the working party. For the original report they carried out a survey of BUIRA members and interviewed past presidents of the association. In the article they develop the research as a case study of an academic association, including an additional retrospective, historical assessment of BUIRA’s organisational evolution. From a methodological perspective, they offer interesting and insightful reflection on the action-based process of producing policy for their *own* academic association via their *own* professional research practice.

Holgate *et al* develop a multi-level, intersectional approach to analysing the contours and dynamics of continuing discrimination and disadvantage within IR scholarship and its academic community. They argue that while their findings reveal that IR has extended its research agenda over recent years there remains much to be done, as the increased emphasis of most equality and diversity debate tends to equate to gender (i.e., women) and that there is minimal attention to other strands such as sexual orientation, religion and belief. Despite this, their findings also reveal that BUIRA continues to be valued across its entire membership spectrum, as an organisation that gives ‘voice’ to IR scholars and campaigns to defend the field as important and relevant in the UK academy and more widely in public policy debate.

Sue Ledith’s article, ‘Outside, inside: gender work in industrial relations’ neatly complements Holgate *et al* by offering a fascinating examination of the experiences of women working within the IR academy and the recent claim that IR is now open to feminist analysis. Her data – which includes her own experience – is rare, challenging and striking in the level of intimate honesty offered by respondents about their mix of frustration, anger, delight, pride and enduring commitment to the IR field over the years. Indeed, as one of the article’s reviewers tellingly commented this is ‘new and important material’, while another applauded Ledwith ‘for being so brave’. Ledwith’s conclusion is that despite ‘considerable movement so far, we have to shift the balance much further if the IR academy is to make a gender turn and outsiders move inside’. Finally, she welcomes BUIRA’s Equality and Diversity initiative but pointedly notes that all of the working party’s members are women.

The third article turns the spotlight outside the academy by offering an example of the broadening range of research undertaken by IR scholars on equality and diversity in contemporary employment. Fiona Colgan’s and Aiden McKearney’s contribution, ‘Visibility and voice in organisations: lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered employee networks’ demonstrates the analytic strengths that an IR perspective brings to studies of LGBT activism and politics in the workplace. They critically assess the extent to which LGBT employee networks provide an effective vehicle for employee voice, as

part of the on-going struggle to combat discrimination and harassment at work. Their extensive research was undertaken in 14 UK organisations, including 149 in-depth interviews with LGB employees, from which they found that the networks are valued as important steps in the right direction. However, perceptions of the degree of effectiveness largely turned on the extent to which they were self-organised – often set-up as LGBT union groups - or as company sponsored networks, where being independent of management influence and business-oriented agendas was a common concern. Colgan and McKearney conclude that while participation in networks is variable amongst LGB employees, there is sufficient evidence to argue that they do provide voice and concrete progress in a way that complements and revitalises existing workplace LGBT activism.

The final contribution from Ben Hopkins on the experience of migrant labour in the UK demonstrates that IR is capable of contributing an innovative and distinct research agenda within the equalities and diversity arena. The article is an example of the research emanating from BUIRA's thriving and growing migrant labour study group. In his article, Hopkins offers an assessment of the dynamics involved in integrating a diverse workforce in the UK, comprising workers from throughout the EU, especially the new accession states. In particular, he explores the relationship between British workers and migrant employees. This is a topic that gained much political significance following the strike and protests by Lindsey Oil Refinery (UK) workers in 2009 against the employment of foreign workers at the site - where the slogan 'British jobs for British workers' was prominent - sparking a ferocious debate within the labour movement. As such, it is also a prime example of the contemporary relevance of IR research in public policy debates.

Hopkins argues that based on his study of five food manufacturing companies the prevalence of low-level English language skills amongst migrant workers combined with their common contractual status as third-party agency employees and union opposition to short-term contracts, accentuated the differences between them and British workers. The consequences for employment relations between native and migrant workers was that they tended to be strained, with the latter unlikely to be unionised and confined to low skilled and low paid work.

Editing this special issue has been a privilege. As former officers of BUIRA, we are especially gratified that the UK IR community continues to demonstrate a vibrant commitment to addressing the contradictions in its own practices by giving voice to its disadvantaged members, diversifying its 'membership' and creating an ever-more inclusive environment. Equally, as the latter two articles demonstrate, IR continues to innovate and expand its research horizons in the area of equality and diversity. In doing so, its research is marked by IR's own particular perspectives and expertise on workplace dynamics and employment relations. Nevertheless, as we look to the future it is evident that for IR, it is a case of *challenging work in progress*, both inside and outside of the academy.

References

BUIRA (2010) *BUIRA Equality and Diversity Working Party: Report to 2010 AGM*
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Healy, G, Hansen, LL & Ledwith, S. (2006). 'Editorial: still uncovering gender in industrial relations'. *Industrial Relations Journal*, 37(4): 290-298.