

What is Industrial Relations?

There have been numerous attempts to define the nature of industrial relations — “the study of all aspects of job regulation,” “the study of factors that lead to industrial conflict and its resolution,” “the study of the individual and collective activities of labour,” “the study of the institutions and procedures regulating employment,” “the study of behavioural relationships in industry,” “the study of the system of rules regulating employment relationships and the process of rule-making.” Such a litter of definitions indicates that industrial relations is an area of study that has remained somewhat ambiguous, an area where discernable and acceptable boundaries have not been carefully staked out.

Industrial relations draws from a wide variety of longer-established areas of study, from economics (e.g. theories of wage determination and the analysis of labour market practices), from psychology (e.g. theories of bargaining behaviour and the analysis of negotiating skills), from sociology (e.g. studies of the impact of different ideologies and cultures on industrial relations practice), from political science (e.g. assessments of union democracy, bureaucracy and oligarchy), from history, the law, and administrative and organisational studies. Such a highly eclectic and catholic area of study as industrial relations obviously requires a correspondingly broad definition: “Industrial Relations is the study of the formal and informal rules that regulate employment relationships; the economic, social, political and institutional contexts influencing the formulation and implementation of those rules; and the processes by which the rules are established and changed.”

It is not our intention, however, to draw tight boundaries around the subject of industrial relations and only admit to the pages of this journal contributions that fall within the scope of industrial relations in whatever way we choose to define it. Rather we wish to recognise that industrial relations issues and practices impinge upon, and are in turn modified by, a wide range of influences that make up New Zealand culture. Whilst this modest journal aims, therefore, to increase understanding and to raise the level of public debate on industrial relations matters, and to provide a forum for the discussion of ideas, the development of theories, and the dissemination of research results of interest to industrial relations practitioners, it does so in the hope that such activities will inevitably lead to some broader reflection on the nature of our diverse culture.

JOHN DEEKS.