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Are Unions Still a Topic for Industrial Relations Research?

Rémi Bourguignon and Heidi Wechtler *

1. Introductory Remarks

In 1993, Bruce E. Kaufman published a convincing and detailed study on the evolution of the discipline of industrial relations. He maintained that in the 1980s the world had undergone a change. To practitioners, unions seemed to play a less relevant role because of the decline of the unionized sector and the adversarial relations resulting from collective bargaining. According to the author, it would be essential for industrial relations scholars to readjust their focus towards human resource management. Otherwise, “an academic field built on the study of unions will perforce have to shrink in tandem”¹. This point is made cogently when he describes the mechanism by which the demand for practitioners affected the field dynamics. HR courses were more and more valued by employers and professional opportunities for scholars moved from IR departments to business schools. In other words, the relevance of a topic is determined by the academic marketplace. This assumption is based on “the idea of a market of concepts competing with each other, where the best concepts will find the widest diffusion”².

Acknowledging the foregoing challenges, Kaufman proposed a strategy to transform IR “from the study of unions and collective bargaining to the

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¹ B. E. Kaufman, *The Origins and Evolution of the Field of Industrial Relations in the United States*, ILR Press, Ithaca, NY, 1993.

² A. Nicolai and D. Seidl, *That's Relevant! Different Forms of Practical Relevance in Management Science*, in *Organization Studies*, 2010, vol. 31, 1257-85.

study of all the practices, behaviours, and institutions relevant to the employment relationship”³. This strategy is based on three requirements: the name change – to broaden the scope of the field – the repositioning of IR research by adjusting mainstream IR journals’ editorial policy, and strategic decisions made by the Industrial Relations Research Associations to support a broad definition of IR.

On the basis of these considerations, this research note intends to provide an empirical analysis of trade union research evolution throughout IR literature along the last two decades. In the next section, we briefly review both previous discussions about the relevance of unions in IR research and some empirical available works.

2. Previous Discussions about IR Orientation

Kaufman’s historical survey revealed how critical the union topic became to the field. He considered the importance given to unions in academic publications as an indicator of the paradigm orientation of scholars, for example when he calculated “the proportion of articles that pertained to three broad subject areas: unions and collective bargaining, labor economics, and personnel and organizational behavior in order to evaluate the actual place of each paradigm”⁴. However, there was no common consensus on the way forward for repositioning IR research.

In a deliberately provocative manner, Dunn contrasted old and new industrial relations systems. He described the former as narrow, static and pessimistic, turning industrial relations into trench warfare. From this perspective, the relations between labour and management are intrinsically adversarial. Unionization and collective bargaining are presented as fundamental ways to ensure that the workers’ interests are taken into account in managerial decisions. Dunn argued that this vision should be replaced by the new industrial relations, which is more optimistic and oriented towards the promotion of human resource practices meant to reconcile workers and management. His argument was that the world had changed: Unionism was experiencing a secular rather than cyclical decline and was no longer a prospect for the future in post-industrial, post-Fordian and post-modernist times⁵.

³ B. E. Kaufman, *op cit*.

⁴ B. E. Kaufman, *op cit*.

⁵ S. Dunn, *Root Metaphor in the Old and New Industrial Relations*, in *British Journal of Industrial relations*, 1990, vol. 28, 1-31.

In the early 2000s, this economic evolution formed the core of the controversy between Godard and Delaney⁶ on the one hand, and Kochan⁷ on the other hand. Godard and Delaney termed the new industrial relations paradigm the ‘high performance paradigm’ and developed a critical analysis of its intellectual foundations. More specifically, they expressed their scepticism about any post-industrialist economy. Indeed, the concept of post-industrialist economy includes the idea that, starting from the 1980s, the search for competitiveness would have led to the reconciliation of the interests of workers with those of employers. Based on this perspective, a significant challenge for managers should be to adopt new policies and strategies that enhance cooperative employment relations in order to value human capital. In other words, the employers’ interests become the only outcome that matters since they integrate workers’ well-being. This is the reason why “in the new paradigm, the study and promotion of new work and HRM practices replace research on unions and collective bargaining as the field’s core”. According to Godard and Delaney, this ideological swing meant abandoning the pluralist conception as the foundation of industrial relations to rejoin the unitarist ideal. In the following issue of *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, Kochan challenged this reading. He was of the opinion that the call for a readjustment of the industrial relations paradigm is the consequence of a positive rather than a normative orientation; that is, the emergence of the high performance paradigm would actually be driven by observed changes in the world of work. To support his thesis, he refers to numerous case studies – including the famous book he wrote with Katz and McKersie, *The Transformation of American Industrial Relations* – which showed that changes in workplace practices were largely introduced by management in the early 1980s. These observations indicate that unions were no longer to be considered as the driving force behind innovation in personnel practices.

Finally, while some scholars directly called for reducing the amount of research dedicated to unions, others warned “against an ahistorical and institutionally blind managerial orientation”, advocating for re-establishing

⁶ J. Godard and J. T. Delaney, *Reflections on the “High Performance” Paradigm’s Implications for Industrial Relations as a Field*, in *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 2000, vol. 53, 482-502.

J. Godard and J. T. Delaney, *On the Paradigm Guiding Industrial Relations Theory and Research: Reply to Thomas A. Kochan*, *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 2001, vol. 55, 542-4.

⁷ T. A. Kochan, *On the Paradigm Guiding Industrial Relations Theory and Research. Comment on John Godard and John T. Delaney, “Reflections on the ‘High Performance’ Paradigm’s Implications for Industrial Relations as a Field*, *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 2000, vol. 53, 704-11.

a common intellectual vision and for recognizing differing theoretical assumptions across different schools of thought. In order to generate productive debates, it is necessary to move away from the promotion or discredit of a specific institution⁸. The foregoing discussion shows that there is great uncertainty about the future for union research in the IR field.

3. Empirical Studies on Union Research in the Industrial Relations Literature

The amount of empirical available work draws a blurred picture of union research. For example, Kaufman⁹ has observed nuanced evolutions according to the journals considered. In the *ILR Review*, the proportion of articles dealing with unions decreased dramatically from 68% to 33% between the late fifties and the late seventies. Conversely, in *Industrial Relations* the proportion stood at around 50% between 1961–5 and 1975–9. Counting articles published in three journals (*ILR Review*, *Industrial Relations*, *Journal of Labor Research*), Jarley *et al.* estimated that 58.5% of articles dealt with unions over the period 1986 to 1995¹⁰.

Two contributions by Mitchell¹¹ and Frege¹² directly questioned the tendencies in the 1990s. These studies are based on common methodological principles, and compare the literature between two periods. Each survey considers an extensive range of articles published in academic journals and conducts manual analysis to identify the topics covered, using this method to observe the developments in the field. However, while the methodological principles are alike, there are some discrepancies that limit the comparability of the two studies. First, the periods surveyed are different. Mitchell described the field in the 1960s

⁸ J. Godard, *An Institutional Environments Approach to Industrial Relations* in C. J. Whalen (ed.), *New Directions in the Study of Work and Employment: Revitalizing Industrial Relations as an Academic Enterprise*, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2008. K. Sisson, *Revitalising Industrial Relations: Making the Most of the “Institutional Turn”*, in *Warwick Papers in Industrial Relations*, 2007, n°85.

⁹ B. E. Kaufman, *op cit.*

¹⁰ P. Jarley, T. D. Chandler and L. Faulk, *Maintaining a Scholarly Community: Casual Authorship and the State of IR Research* in *Industrial Relations*, 2001, vol. 40, 338–43.

¹¹ D. J. Mitchell, *IR Journal and Conference Literature from the 1960s to the 1990s*, in *Human Resource Management Review*, 2001, vol. 11, 375–93.

¹² C. Frege, *Varieties of Industrial Relations Research: Take-over, Convergence or Divergence?* in *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 2005, vol. 43, 179–207.

while Frege considered the 1970s. Second, the scopes vary considerably, too. Frege's objective was to capture variations in the field according to country-specific traditions, so she selected several journals representing the USA, Great Britain and Germany. Mitchell's analysis was limited to the USA and concentrated on two major US journals. However, Frege's presentation 'by journals' allows comparable observations about the US context. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there are major differences in the authors' coding principles. The *a priori* classification of industrial relations themes is not identical in both studies. Frege attributed a unique theme to each article (the main topic), while Mitchell took account of several themes, contending that topics are not isolated. For these reasons, the two studies are difficult to contrast and deliver contradictory accounts of the interest for unions as an academic domain. Mitchell observed a fall in content about this topic from 66.2% in the 1960s to 43.6% in the 1990s, while Frege reported an increase from 10.8% in the 1970s to 16.6% in the 1990s. More precisely, the degree of evolution noted by Frege is stable in the US context (thus comparable to Mitchell's study) and growing in the British context. A possible explanation to reconcile these divergent outcomes could be the global decline of the topic, along with a change in its analysis. Unionism might well shift from being a trivial aspect to becoming a main concern; yet this might result in speculation, with this comparison that gives us little information about the actual trends.

Finally, it is difficult to appreciate how relevant unions have been in industrial relations publications over the last two decades. The main purpose here is to empirically clarify this aspect. We intend to describe the evolution of the field by means of a computer-aided text analysis applied to abstracts of articles published in eight authoritative journals between 1990 and 2008. The following questions will be dealt with: To what extent has the interest for unionism evolved during this time? Has research on unions changed over time?

Table No. 1. Previous Topical Analysis in the Industrial Relations Literature

	Period	Academic journals	Number of articles	Method	Main observations
Mitchell (2001)	1962–3	<i>Industrial & Labor Relations Review</i>	196	Manual coding	The proportion of articles dealing with unionism decreased from 66.2% in the 1960s to 43.6% in the 1990s
	1997–8	<i>Industrial Relations</i>			
Frege (2005)	1970–3	<i>Industrial & Labor Relations Review</i>	1,309	Manual coding	The proportion of articles dealing with unionism increased from 10.8% in the 1970s to 16.6% in the 1990s
		<i>Industrial Relations</i>			
	1994–2000	<i>British Journal of Industrial Relations</i>			
		<i>Industrial Relations Journal</i>			
		<i>Industrielle Beziehungen</i>			

Source: Authors' Own Elaboration.

4. Methodology

4.1. Journal Selection

Like Mitchell and Frege, we were careful to circumscribe the field of research to ensure a relative disciplinary homogeneity. For example, we excluded journals that are more directly linked to the field of labour economy or history. Consequently, we selected eight renowned journals: *British Journal of Industrial Relations*; *Economic and Industrial Democracy*; *European Journal of Industrial Relations*; *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*; *Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society*; *Industrial Relations Journal*; *Journal of Industrial Relations*; *Labour: Review of Labour Economics and Industrial Relations*. It should be noted that the Canadian journal *Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations* could not be integrated into the corpus for technical reasons. The journal is bilingual and does not provide abstracts in English for articles written in French. We assume that it would have been unsatisfactory to introduce only articles produced in English. Despite this shortcoming, the selection is in line with our objective to describe publications falling under the rubric of “industrial relations”. It follows that our sample is not representative of all research on

employment relations since, as the literature revealed, proponents of PM largely publish their works in HRM journals. In addition, our sample does not exhaust research on unionism because such research is also covered by fields like sociology, HRM and law.

Two aspects should be pointed out about the time-frame covered by our sample. First, while the reviewed works compared two distinct time-periods, here we adopted a longitudinal approach, considering an exhaustive collection of articles published over 19 years (between 1990 and 2008). Second, we started our review considering 1990, that is the year regarded as the starting point of the crisis affecting the discipline of industrial relations. In the end, the bibliographic database query based on these two criteria allowed us to collect 3,621 articles. Among this corpus, a sample was singled out corresponding to articles dealing specifically with unionism. An article is thought to deal with unionism when this wording appears at least once in the title or the abstract. Some 1,410 articles fell within this category, that is 39% of the corpus (see Table No. 2).

Table No. 2. Sample of the Study

Journal	Ticker	Origin	First pub.	Total corpus		Articles dealing with union	
				Freq	%	Freq	%
British Journal of Industrial Relations	BJIR	Britain	1963	470	12,98	237	16,81
Economic and Industrial Democracy	EID	Sweden	1980	354	9,78	149	10,57
European Journal of Industrial Relations	EJIR	European	1995	226	6,24	138	9,79
Industrial & Labor Relations Review	ILRR	USA	1948	644	17,79	219	15,53
Industrial Relations Journal	IRJ	Britain	1970	520	14,36	188	13,33
Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society	IR	USA	1961	470	12,98	236	16,74
Journal of Industrial Relations	JIR	Australia	1959	395	10,91	166	11,77
Labour: Review of Labour Economics & Industrial Relations	LAB	Italy	1987	542	14,97	77	5,46
Total				3621	100	1410	100

Source: Authors' Own Elaboration.

4.2. Computer-aided Text Analysis

We used SPAD software to run a computer-aided text analysis (CATA)¹³ and go through the content of the articles. This methodology has several advantages. First, it enables the handling of significant amounts of text, as in the present case. A manual analysis of 1,410 articles would have needed several codings and faced the risk of coding heterogeneity. Second, this technique reduces bias induced by a manual analysis, an aspect also signalled by Frege: “classifying topics proved difficult. Articles were classified according to their main topic, but frequently articles covered several topics and it was not always easy to decide on the most important one”¹⁴.

In our case, the analysis does not deal with isolated themes but with automatic clusters of meaningful words, representing consistent semantic fields. The statistical analysis of the relationships between words can translate into a text meaning, ensuring the typology of these texts. This is a quantitative statistical method applied to words for which the non-obstructive propriety is specially adapted to longitudinal studies¹⁵ (Iker and Klein, 1974).

We replicated this methodology and applied it to the abstracts of the articles collected. Considering the size of the corpus, the extraction of the full content of every article was extremely difficult and our main objective was to analyse a representative extract. We preferred to analyse abstracts rather than titles or keywords because they seemed rich enough to detail potential thematic diversity and, at the same time, concise enough for authors to identify the significant themes of their research. Titles and keywords were considered too restricting.

On average, the 3,621 abstracts analysed were 113 words long. Our starting dictionary contained 16,646 different words. In order to conduct statistical analysis, it was necessary to reduce the number of words to obtain a satisfactory ratio between the number of individuals (articles) and the number of variables (words). This operation required three steps:

¹³ SPAD has been referred to as powerful content analysis software and other academics in social sciences have already used it to cover research themes. See especially R. Franzosi, *Quantitative Narrative Analysis* in *Quantitative Applications in the Social Sciences*, Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks - CA, 2010, or D. Spini, G. Elchereth and D. Figini, D., *Is There Space for Time in Social Psychology Publications? A Content Analysis across Five Journals*, *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 2009, vol. 19, 165-81.

¹⁴ C. Frege, *op cit*.

¹⁵ H. P. Iker and R. H. Klein, *Words: A Computer System for the Analysis of Content*, *Behavior Research Methods and Instrumentation*, 1974, vol. 6, 430-38.

deleting words with non-consistent meaning; regrouping closely related words (e.g. with the same grammatical roots or synonyms); and deleting low frequency words (used fewer than 15 times in the whole corpus). We obtained a consolidated dictionary of 753 root words. The validity of the individuals versus variables ratio is confirmed by a significant chi-squared test ($p < .001$).

5. Results

We present our results by first providing a quantitative description of the development of trade unions as a topic in the field, then supplying an inductive typology to qualitatively describe the contents of the literature.

5.1. *The Global Development of Trade Unions as a Topic in the IR Literature*

Table 3 indicates the proportion of articles dealing with unions in each journal for four sub-periods. It also establishes whether this growing or declining share is statistically significant. Many observations can be made looking at this table.

First, one might note that unions remain an important subject. In total, 40% of the articles in the industrial relations field deal more or less directly with this question. A major indication here is that this proportion has been relatively constant over the last two decades. However, some considerable variations can be seen depending on the journal under investigation. Most recently, only 11% of articles have addressed unionism in *Labour* while some 58% have done so in *European Journal of Industrial Relations* and in *Industrial Relations*.

Noticeable differences exist also in terms of trends. For example, we observed a significant decrease in *Industrial Relations Journal* and *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* in the early 1990s, from 46% and 41% to 35% and 26%, respectively. Conversely, coverage of this topic in *British Industrial Relations Journal* and *Industrial Relations* remained stable. It seems that editorial policy played a key role. The only journal to report a growing interest in unionism is Swedish *Economic and Industrial Democracy*. Since Sweden is well known for its cooperative labour-management relations, we have to recognize the weakness of the sometimes hypothesized link between the adversarial nature of labour relations and the academic interest in unions.

An important point here is that since 1995, the interest towards this field has remained steady, with significant changes reported in the first part of

the 1990s, as a consequence of the debate on the scope of industrial relations originated in the same year. In some journals, the share of articles dealing with unions decreased (ILRR, IRJ, LAB). Others continued to publish a comparable proportion of articles dealing with unions (BJIR, JIR, IR) while only one of them increased the number of these articles. A content analysis of union research is now provided to complement our quantitative investigation.

Table No. 3. Inter-period Comparison of Union Research's Place in the IR Literature

		Ratios and Percentages						Significant changes between periods					
		Period						Period					
Journal	n	1990–4		1995–9		2000–4		2005–8		I vs. II	II vs. III	III vs. IV	period
BJIR	470	$\frac{59}{118}$	50%	$\frac{61}{105}$	58%	$\frac{66}{133}$	50%	$\frac{51}{114}$	45%	ns.	ns.	ns.	ns.
EID	354	$\frac{26}{86}$	30%	$\frac{42}{89}$	47%	$\frac{34}{88}$	39%	$\frac{47}{91}$	52%	↑**	ns.	↑*	**
EJIR	226	-		$\frac{45}{78}$	58%	$\frac{53}{79}$	67%	$\frac{40}{69}$	58%	-	ns.	ns.	ns.
ILRR	644	$\frac{85}{210}$	41%	$\frac{52}{158}$	33%	$\frac{53}{164}$	32%	$\frac{29}{112}$	26%	↓*	ns.	ns.	*
IR	470	$\frac{55}{120}$	46%	$\frac{51}{109}$	47%	$\frac{63}{125}$	50%	$\frac{67}{116}$	58%	ns.	ns.	ns.	ns.
IRJ	520	$\frac{59}{129}$	46%	$\frac{36}{125}$	29%	$\frac{51}{146}$	35%	$\frac{42}{120}$	35%	↓***	ns.	ns.	**
JIR	395	$\frac{38}{91}$	42%	$\frac{42}{93}$	45%	$\frac{36}{93}$	39%	$\frac{50}{118}$	42%	ns.	ns.	ns.	ns.
LAB	542	$\frac{26}{119}$	22%	$\frac{19}{139}$	14%	$\frac{18}{154}$	12%	$\frac{14}{130}$	11%	↓*	ns.	ns.	*
Total	3621	$\frac{348}{873}$	40%	$\frac{348}{896}$	39%	$\frac{374}{982}$	38%	$\frac{340}{870}$	39%	ns.	ns.	ns.	ns.

Ratio is the number of articles dealing with unions on the total sample

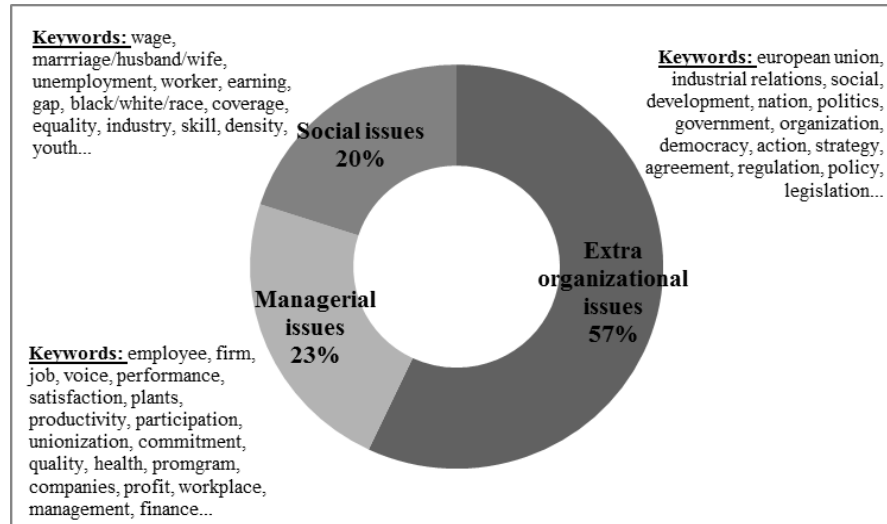
*Statistically significant at the .10 level; **at the .05 level; ***at the .01 level.

Source: Authors' Own Elaboration.

5.2. Union Research: An Inductive Typology

To highlight the diversity of the issues covered in union research, we conducted a hierarchical ascendant clustering analysis on a correspondence factor investigation of a words contingency table. This operation allows for an inductive elaboration of a typology of the main research themes in articles dealing with unions. Each article is placed in a single category, depending on its associations of vocabulary. Three categories emerged from this process (Figure No. 1)¹⁶.

¹⁶ In fact, four clusters emerged but the last one was neglected since it only aggregated nine outliers.

Figure No. 1. Typology of Topics in Articles Dealing with Unions

Source: Authors' Own Elaboration

5.3. First Category: Environmental Issues

The first category includes 57% of the articles published between 1990 and 2008 and questions unions through environmental perspectives (European Union; government; legislation; state; institutionalisation and so forth). Two main issues can be identified. A first set of articles in this category is concerned with union and industrial relations legislation. Since union behaviour is embedded in the legal context, some contributions address the effect of this environment on union decline or union effectiveness. Other articles place unions in the context of economic globalisation, which is viewed as a challenge for unions, managers and policy makers. Recurrent items include the difficulties of multinational companies which are confronted with a diversity of industrial relations systems, and the restructuring of European collective bargaining.

5.4. Second Category: Managerial Issues

The second category represents 23% of the sample and deals simultaneously with unions, on the one hand, and employees, productivity, performance, and personnel policies, on the other hand (firms; jobs; performance; productivity; management; training, etc.). The

articles in this category see unions and management practices as interrelated. The two regulatory principles, collective bargaining and human resource management, coexist and interact; an important challenge, for both scholars and practitioners, is to understand this interaction. A number of practical cases can be pinpointed. The most intuitive one is that of the unionized firm; some scholars seek to understand the effect of union presence on the economic variables and personnel management policy of unionized firms. Other cases for interaction between collective bargaining and human resource management are studied. For example, the non-recognition of unions challenges wage-setting arrangements and human resource management. Some of these articles also question the reverse link, that is the impact of managerial practices on the demand for union representation. It is significant that these research strands transcend the division between pro and anti-union: some address this problem with the objective of renewing unionism, while others want to guard against the demand for unionization.

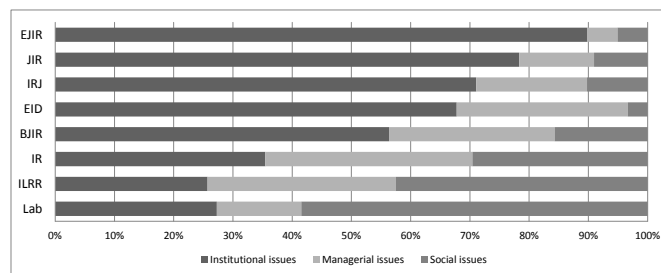
5.5. *Third Category: Social Issues*

The final category groups 20% of the articles surveyed and emphasizes social questions (wife; race; youth; pension; part-time; discrimination, etc.). The objective here is to examine the willingness and ability of unions to deal with new divisions. Indeed, due to individualization and job segmentation, workers can no longer be considered as a homogeneous group. Several individual and professional issues become critical for unions. Among these are unemployment, age and gender – but also aspects such as part-time versus full-time job and low-skilled versus high-skilled work.

This classification of articles covering unionism indicates that union research is dominated by environmental issues (57% of all articles) questioning their role in terms of governance at a macro level. Other articles are on an individual or organizational level and are characterized by managerial or social outcomes. The distribution of these three types of articles varies considerably according to the journal considered (see Figure 2). For example, 90% of the union-related articles published in *European Journal of Industrial Relations* deal with environmental issues while *Labour* gives special attention to social issues, which represent nearly 60% of union-related publications.

It is interesting to note that journals giving particular relevance to union research – EIJR, JIR, IRJ, EID, BJIR – are precisely those that mainly relate the topic to environmental issues, while journals in which union research is hardly covered promote managerial and social issues. These observations allow us to imagine a segmentation of journals around two research traditions: internalist and externalist¹⁷. Some journals remain representative of traditional externalist IR by giving priority to union research focused on factors external to the organization. Other journals seem to make a kind of «HRM turn» within industrial relations, with their editorial policy promoting internalist work and, by consequence, limiting union research to that concerned with organizational or individual aspects. Tellingly, some journals take an ambiguous position with regard to this division. The *Industrial Relations Journal* reduced the amount of articles dealing with unions but gave importance to environmental issues. On its part, *Industrial Relations* maintained a stable proportion of articles on unions but balanced the three types of related issues.

Figure No. 2. The Representation of the Three Categories in Each Journal



Source: Authors' Own Elaboration.

¹⁷ B.E. Kaufman, *op cit.*

6. Conclusion

The thorough investigation of the publications in mainstream IR journals over the last twenty years shows a growing schism within the community and a segmentation of journals. In the early 1990s, union research was homogenously distributed on IR journals and as a topic concerned from 40% to 50% of articles. In the following twenty years, union research became more variously distributed. While it remained an important topic in some journals, its relevance dwindled in others. Moreover, they seemed to prioritize environmental issues over managerial ones, reflecting the repositioning of IR towards a more internalist perspective.

Obviously, these results should be confirmed by further research since some questions remain to be explored. Interviews could complement the quantitative analysis in order to establish the assumed change in editorial policy of each journal. Did journals explicitly reposition themselves? Did authors differentiate IR journals to submit articles dealing with union issues? Supposedly, we should also broaden our research focus, for instance to include methodology and theory.

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