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Employee Relations Practices and Firm performance: A Conceptual Model Proposal

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Employee Relations Practices and Firm performance: A Conceptual Model Proposal

Abstract:

Employee relations management has become an important topic in management sciences, for practitioners and theorists. Also, it's an aspect of human resource management that has an impact on the performance of SMEs and large firms in the 21st century due to increased competition, changing customer needs, technology and globalization in an ever-changing business environment. In the same context, global and local firms are challenged to build good relationships with their employees in order to improve their performance (financial and non-financial performance) in a changing business environment.

Aspects of employee relations that can affect firm performance include employee engagement, employee expression, and employee involvement. When it comes to performance, this is a polysemous concept that is difficult to define. However, there are several researchers who have increasingly focused on the criteria for evaluating firm performance, which are based on the financial and non-financial conception of performance, and which have a relationship with social factors.

This paper aims to shed original light on a subject that is still little addressed in management sciences. Our goal is to study the contribution of employee relations practices to firm performance.

Through a critical and in-depth reading, we will be able to propose a new research model to explain the impact of employee relations practices on firm performance.

The model developed states that employee relations practices indirectly influence the level of firm performance. Moreover, it shows that the variables related to human capital (job satisfaction), without forgetting justice at work (organizational variable) fill a central place and favor the contribution of employee relations to firm performance.

Keywords: Employee Relations, Organizational Justice, Job Satisfaction, Firm performance.

JEL Classification: J53 - J54 - L25

Paper type: Theoretical Research

1. Introduction

Companies on an international scale are more rooted in their social connections (Granovetter, 1985). In this sense, employee relations are seen as a crucial resource for achieving sustainable competitive advantage (Ricard, 2017 ; Gulati, Nohria & Zaheer, 2000).

Several authors promote the idea that employees' ability to express themselves is increasingly seen as a support for firm performance (Biétry & Laroche, 2011a, 2011b; C. Doucouliagos & Laroche, 2009 ; Laroche, 2004a, 2004a).

By giving employees the opportunity to express themselves, industrial relations practices are likely to improve social dialogue in companies (Ferracci & Guyot, 2015), just as it can trigger strikes or rallies, which disrupt the production process (Laroche, 2002).

As Coutrot indicates (1999, p. 17): « *collective phenomena are the source of both productive cooperation and social conflict: their management therefore largely determines the economic efficiency of the firm, i.e. its capacity to remunerate the capital employed* ».

In the Anglo-Saxon context, several studies have examined the influence of industrial relations practices on economic performance. The results are multiple and contradictory, which does not allow for a clear and definitive conclusion in favor or against trade unionism. Similarly, several French authors have invested in theoretical modeling in order to describe the economic usefulness of unions.

From these observations, it becomes legitimate to ask to what extent industrial relations practices influence firm performance.

Very little research has been done on the impact of industrial relations practices on firm performance. The originality of our research consists in studying this impact by opting for an HR perspective in the Moroccan context.

The question of employee relations practices in companies is nowadays unavoidable. Research in social sciences has extensively questioned the contribution of this dimension to the economic performance of the firm, but the impact on the level of firm performance is generally little taken into account.

This paper proposes to contribute to the knowledge of the influence of employee relations practices on the performance of Moroccan firms.

The objective is to study the link between employee relations practices and firm performance, opting for a vision focused on human resources management, in order to identify the different variables involved in this relation.

The initial problem of our research can be formulated as follows:

To what extent and in what way do employee relations practices influence the firm's performance level?

In this contribution, we focus on the existing links between employee relations practices and firm performance. More specifically, we identify the different variables that can influence this relation. To do so, we will present the theoretical framework of the research. Then, we will present the reference framework mobilized, justifying the theoretical approach mobilized and the theoretical base model. Finally, the model and the main hypotheses of the research are developed.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The objective of this first section is to apprehend the different key concepts, as well as the main theoretical approaches mobilized by the literature to surround the question of employee relations practices.

2.1. The key concepts of research: what is the articulation?

This first point aims at drawing up a state of the art on various key concepts related to our research problem. In this sense, they will be treated successively the following concepts: employee relations; climate and social risk, the socio-organizational reluctance, the commitment, the organizational implication and the congruence.

2.1.1. Employee relations in companies

Several authors consider employee relations in companies to be an essential factor in the proper functioning of organizations (Laroche & Wechtler, 2008).

Defalvard et al. (2008) propose a typology of power relations in the firm with four categories, taking into consideration two criteria:

- **Criterion 1:** the existence or absence of negotiation activity between employee representatives and management, as well as the intensity and themes of negotiations when they exist.
- **Criterion 2:** the methods of conflict regulation, particularly in the absence of negotiation.

For Delteil and Dieuaide, (2010), employee relations are a major issue for human resources managers because their articulation with industrial strategy strongly conditions their growth policy.

In their study, Yon and Bérout (2013, p. 173) state that: « *the new rules of representativeness having been essentially conceived with a view to securing collective bargaining, trade unions are primarily portrayed as negotiating agents, operators of social dialogue acting in interaction with employers, rather than as organizers of the workforce inserted in work collectives. Based on this observation, the challenge would then be to think about new mechanisms that guarantee the right of employees to decide sovereignly on the forms and objectives of their organizations. This would lead to a double shift: from the right to social dialogue to the right to trade union action; from "electoral democracy" to the meeting of conditions allowing employees to take effective charge of their own affairs* ».

2.1.2. Social climate and risk

For Gadbois (1974, p. 274), corporate climate reflects « *the overall perception of its members of a series of general characteristics - relatively stable - of social interactions that take place within that organization* ».

Landier et al. (2007) suggest that social climate is measured via a reference framework that makes it possible to quantify the social risk linked to social climate, but also to identify and qualify the problems and to localize this risk.

In this sense, socio-organizational reluctance represents a generic concept for measuring social risk of companies.

The social climate functions as a measure of socio-organizational reluctance. Poor social climate would be synonymous with high reluctance, while a good social climate would be linked to low reluctance (Baggio et al., 2017).

The concept of socio-organizational reluctance remains broad, and in order to apprehend it the researcher is invited to take into account other variables.

At this level, organizational commitment and involvement further clarify this multidimensional concept.

2.1.3. Organizational commitment and involvement

For several authors, employee commitment and involvement reflects the same phenomenon (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Meyer & Allen, 1984; Meyer et al., 1993).

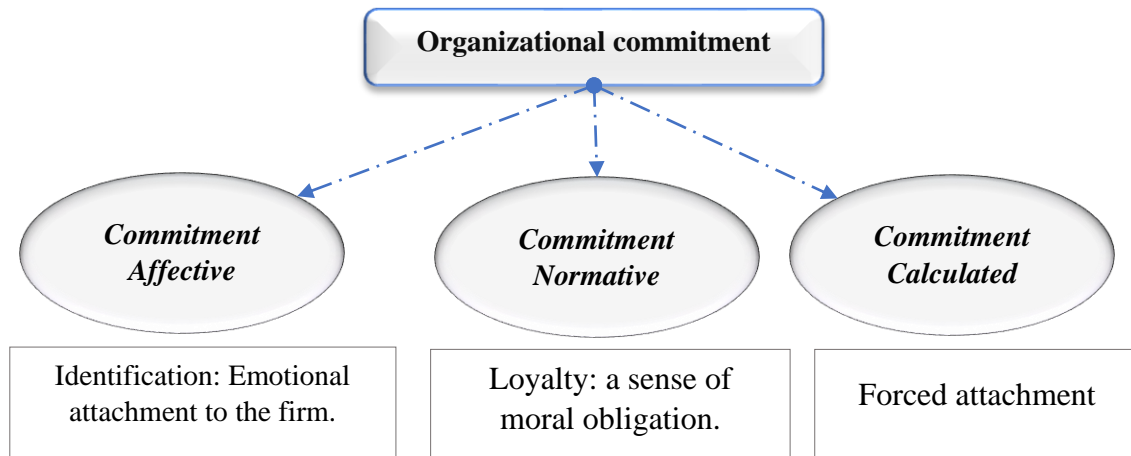
• Organizational commitment

It is generally recognized that organizational commitment revolves around the motivation of employees to act independently of personal reasons (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Meyer & Allen, 1991).

Louche and Lanneau (2004) suggest that this concept is strictly contextual. Thus, it is far from being an internal psychological factor.

Research in HRM breaks down employee commitment into three dimensions: affective commitment, normative commitment and calculated commitment.

Figure 1. The different dimensions of organizational commitment



Source : Allen & Meyer (1990)

Herrbach (2005) indicates that the measurement and linking of these three forms of commitment results in an employee commitment profile (Herrbach, 2005).

From this perspective, company managers can easily know the degree and reasons for employees' attachment to the company that employs him or her (Baggio et al., 2017).

Therefore, organizational commitment provides a measure of the phenomenon of socio-organizational reluctance. Indeed, a low level of commitment reflects high reluctance, while a high level of commitment refers to low reluctance.

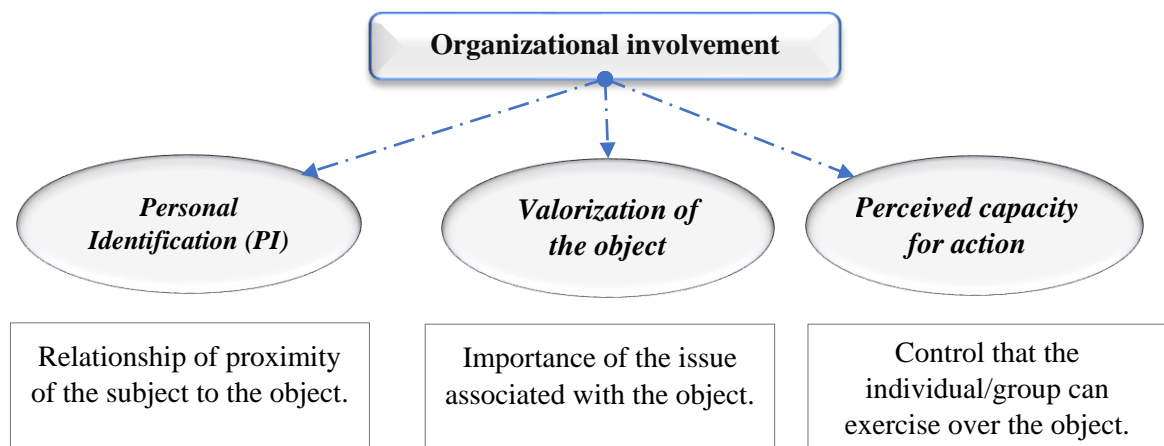
• Personal Involvement

Like commitment, employee work involvement also continues to be a measure of the degree of an individual's attachment to the organization (Meyer et al., 2002). Thus, both constructs predict the individual's connection to his or her firm/work.

We choose to make a distinction between these two related concepts. As suggested by Baggio et al. (2017), engagement is generally context related, while involvement rather reflects the bond developed by the individual towards his firm and his work and depends mainly on his personal/individual characteristics (ideologies, social representations, experiences, level of education, culture...).

Thus, involvement can take an operational form by combining three independent aspects (Rouquette, 1997). These aspects allow us to define several modes of relationship between the subject (the employee) and the object (the organization).

Figure 2. The different forms of involvement at work



Source : Rouquette (1997)

As the two concepts mentioned above, involvement allows us to measure the socio-organizational reluctance. Thus, a weak involvement gives rise to a strong reluctance, whereas a strong involvement indicates a weak reluctance.

2.1.4. Congruence

Specialists distinguish between two forms of congruence: objective and subjective (Stinglhamber et al., 2004). The first reflects the distance between the values of the organization and the employee. The second reflects the employee's assessment of the degree of congruence between his or her own values and those of the organization.

Thus, the second form of congruence predicts employee commitment to the organization (Vandenberghe et al., 2004). Many studies attest to the importance of subjective congruence between the employee and the organization.

Table 1. Research findings around subjective congruence

Firm Culture		Results
Focused on personal job satisfaction	→	Improved employee satisfaction.
Focused on respect for rules and hierarchy	→	Reduction of the quality of life at work.
Focused on the quality of interpersonal relations rather than on productivity values	→	Reduction of employee turnover

Source : Baggio et al. (2017)

Thus, subjective congruence also measures socio-organizational reluctance. With a low level of perceived congruence between the individual and the organization, organizational ill-being is established, and conversely, a high level of congruence improves the well-being of employees.

3. Literature Review

For our research, the understanding of the role of employee relations practices in firm performance is based on the stakeholder theory (ST) as a theoretical approach adapted to our problematic and the Laroche model as a theoretical base model.

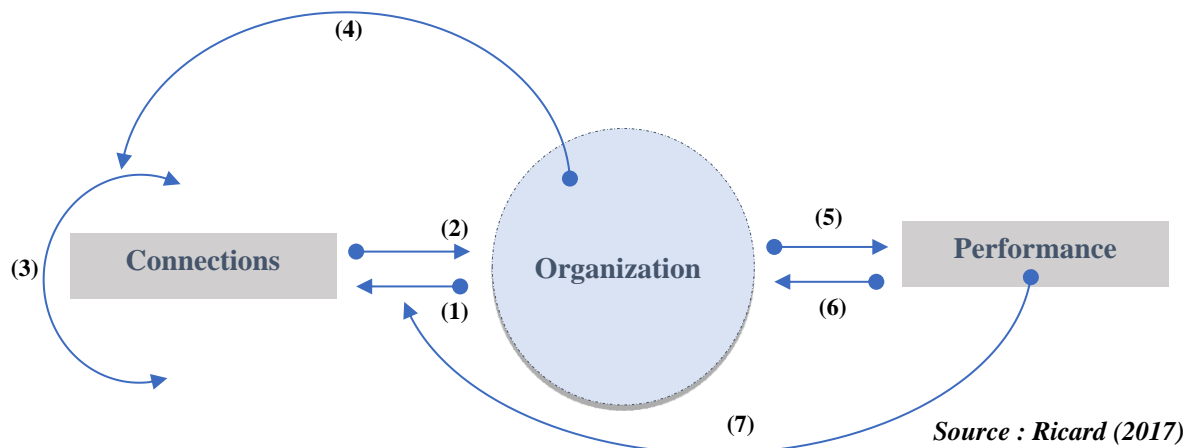
In the present research, we considered it interesting to proceed with an extension of the latter model via the addition of intermediate variables (human capital variables and organizational variables).

3.1. Stakeholder theory as a reference card for studying the contribution of employee relations practices to firm performance

The company is surrounded by several stakeholders that undoubtedly influence its decisions and strategies (Ricard, 2017). In this sense, employee relations and political connections in business constitute a resource and can impact (positively or negatively) the level of its performance.

As Ricard (2017) indicates, internal or external stakeholders represent a means to an end and an end in itself. « *The organization influences its connections (1), receives influence from them (2) and they influence each other (3). The organization perceiving an opportunity can also influence the dynamics between the connections themselves (4). This game of influence aims to improve firm performance (5). The level of performance will not only influence the organization in turn (6), but also its impact on its connections (7)* ».

Figure 3. Stakeholder dynamics



3.2. Proposal of a new model to study the impact of employee relations practices on performance

Before proposing a research model, we will decide, in order to justify the theoretical approach adopted, the basic model as well as the extension variables identified and chosen.

Within the framework of our study, we have chosen the Laroche model as the theoretical basis for our modeling. The choice of this model is explained by the number of empirical validations (Biétry & Laroche, 2011c; Doucouliagos & Laroche, 2013; Laroche, 2002, 2004a; Laroche & Wechtler, 2008).

3.3. Theoretical base model and extension variables

Laroche, (2004b) proposes a causal model to study the relation between employee relations practices and the financial performance of the firm.

To begin our theoretical modeling, we chose to opt for Laroche's (2004b) model, extending it by modifying the variable « Union action » with the variable « Employee relations practices » and adding intermediate variables that are part of the rationalization of management methods.

- Organizational justice,
- Job satisfaction.

Based on the recommendations of Laroche (2000), we have chosen to opt for a human resources management approach in order to study the relation between employee relations practices and firm performance.

Research on the influence of employee relations is mainly focused on the economic aspect. Laroche (2008) propose to measure firm performance (the result of employee relations practices) via its financial profitability (return on capital) or its economic profitability (measuring the company's capacity to maintain a satisfactory level of margin on its sales).

For our research, we choose to orient the evaluation towards the influence on the firm performance.

The following table justifies the choice of research hypotheses.

Table 2. Synthesis of research hypotheses

Hypothesis				Empirical studies
H 1	Employee relations practices	→	Job satisfaction	(Navarro-Abal et al., 2018 ; Casper, 2018 ; Gopinath & Shibu, 2014 ; Nibedita & Krushna, 2013 ; Rezaul, 2006 ; Shenoy, 2006 ; Wooden et al., 2001 ; Lester, 2003).
H 2	Organizational justice	→	Job satisfaction	(Dugguh & Ayaga, 2014 ; Iqbal, 2013 ; Greenberg, 2012 ; Thomas & Nagalingappa, 2012 ; Fernandes & Awamleh, 2006 ; Lambert, 2003 ; Greenberg, 1990).
H 3	Employee relations practices	→	Firm performance	(Hancock, 2012 ; Chaudhry et al., 2011 ; Torrington & Hall, 2006 ; Tessema & Soeters, 2006 ; Armstrong, 2006 ; Gospel & Palmer, 2004 ; Kaufman, 2004).
H 4	Organizational justice	→	Firm performance	(Krishnan et al., 2018 ; Rita et al., 2014 ; Gomes et al., 2013 ; Cunha & Rego, 2008 ; Lowe & Vodanovich, 1995 ; Greenberg & Tyler, 1987)
H5	Job satisfaction	→	Firm performance	(Bowling, 2007; Laroche, 2000, 2004b, 2006 ; Judge, Thoresen et al., 2001; Judge et al., 2001; Locke, 1970; Organ, 1977; Petty et al., 1984 ; Strauss, 1968)

Source : Authors

4. Description of the research model

We have chosen Laroche's (2004) model as our basic model. The proposed model suggests that the influence of employee relations practices on firm performance passes through several intermediate variables. Our causal model is articulated around four variables; the following table recalls the definitions adopted for our research.

Table 3. Definitions of research model variables

Variables	Definitions and measurement scales
Employee relations	For Michael Armstrong (2009), employee relations and industrial relations are interchangeable terms. He defines employee relations as follows: employee relations or industrial relations are concerned with the general management of the employment relationship, particularly terms and conditions of employment, employment-related issues, employee expression, and communication with employees.
Organizational justice	<i>Organizational justice is concerned with the perceptions conveyed by members of an organization about how they are treated more or less fairly (Langevin & Mendoza, 2013, p. 34).</i> Dimensions of justice: distributive; procedural and interactional.
Job satisfaction	« A positive or pleasant emotional state resulting from a person's evaluation of his or her work or work experiences » (Locke, 1976). « Results from the fit between the person's perceptions of the different aspects of his or her job and the perceptions he or she has of what the different facets of his or her job should be. Satisfaction depends on the level of discrepancy between what the person wants and what he or she gets out of it, » (Hauret, 2006, p. 128).
Firm performance	Is a multidimensional concept structured around several levels: financial, social and societal performance according to the logic of socio-economic analysis, the overall performance of the company is evaluated by associating short-term economic performance, medium-term performance and social performance (Germain et al., 2004).

Source : Authors

A large body of research suggests that the presence and involvement of employee relations practice influence job satisfaction and firm performance (Navarro-Abal et al., 2018; Casper, 2018; Laroche & Salesina, 2017; Gopinath & Shibu, 2014; Hancock, 2012; Chaudhry et al., 2011; Torrington & Hall, 2006; Mark Wood et al., 2001).

Similarly, Wood et al. (2001) proposed that improved firm performance depends on innovation, physical capital investment, human capital investment, work engagement, and employee relations practices. The maintenance or decline of employee relations will directly or indirectly affect these factors, thus modifying firm performance. This leads us to formulate the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. There is a positive and significant relationship between employee relations practices and job satisfaction.

Hypothesis 3. There is a positive and significant relationship between employee relations practices and firm performance.

Several research works in organizational behavior is focused on highlighting the effect of perceived organizational justice on employees' motivation, job satisfaction, involvement, and performance in the company (Krishnan et al., 2018; Rita et al., 2014; Dugguh & Ayaga, 2014; Iqbal, 2013; Gomes et al., 2013; Greenberg, 2012; Thomas & Nagalingappa, 2012).

Langevin and Mendoza (2013, p.40) state that « *while justice generates positive attitudes and behaviors, perceived injustice can give rise to a range of reactions that are harmful to the company. Thus, when an employee perceives a lack of distributive justice, he or she may be inclined to reduce his or her involvement in order to restore the balance between his or her contributions and his or her remuneration. Similarly, when procedures are perceived as unfair, employees will develop negative attitudes or behaviors* ».

The analysis proposed by Langevin & Mendoza (2013) testifies to the importance of organizational justice in improving employee behavior variables. Thus, we assume that:

Hypothesis 2. There is a positive and significant relationship between organizational justice and job satisfaction.

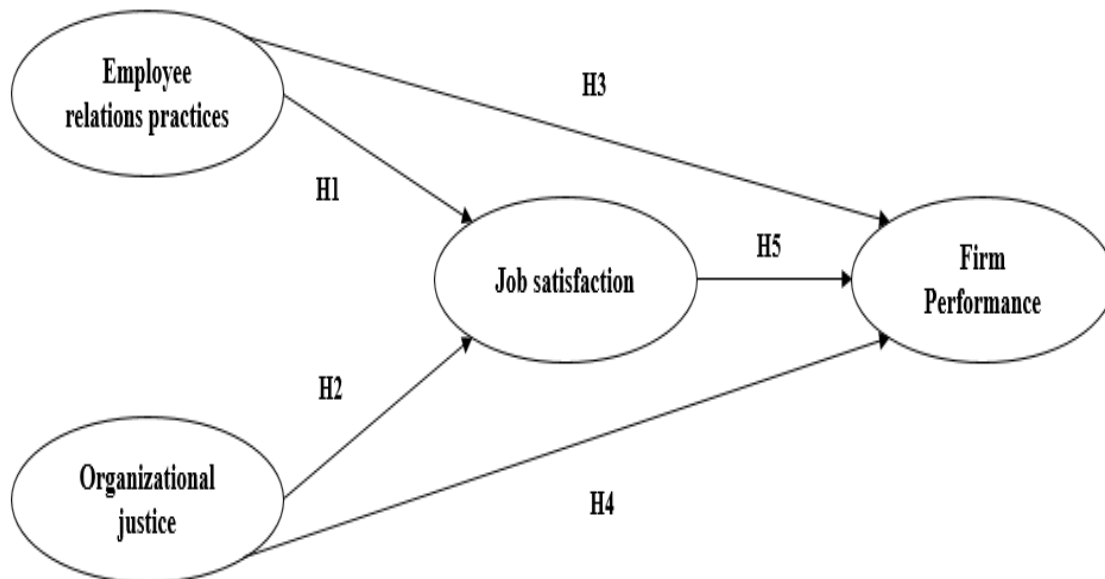
Hypothesis 4. There is a positive and significant relationship between organizational justice and firm performance.

A significant number of previous studies conclude that job satisfaction influences the level of firm performance (Bowling, 2007; Judge, Thoresen et al., 2001; Laroche, 2000, 2004b, 2006). This leads us to formulate the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 5. There is a positive and significant relationship between job satisfaction and firm performance.

The theoretical model for this research is as follows.

Figure 4. Theoretical model of the contribution of employee relations practices to firm performance



Source : Authors

This study allows us to conclude that it is relevant to analyze the influence of employee relations practices on firm performance according to the stakeholder theory.

Thus, the proposed model allows us to reinscribe the problem of employee relations practices in an organizational human resources perspective.

5. Conclusion

Employee relations through practices of mobilization, expression and company-employee commitment contribute to employee satisfaction within a company, and these practices can promote or harm people's health, and more broadly, depending on whether people feel

benevolent or aggressive, harmonious or unbalanced, fruitful or sterile, calm or tense, yes, even confident or sceptical. Their quality constitutes the quality of life at work and is therefore a major concern for employees. It is also important for companies where performance is linked to revenues, and therefore for the motivation of members and their collaborative links, which has a significant impact on the financial and non-financial performance of the company.

The central idea of our research is to study the contribution of employee relations practices to the firm performance.

Previous research suggests that employee relations practices influence firm performance (Biétry & Laroche, 2011c; Laroche, 2004b; Laroche & Wechtler, 2008). However, the modalities of influence are still problematic for companies, and continue to be of more interest to researchers and practitioners.

« *Beyond the collectivism often mentioned in the various studies on international comparisons, we put forward the hypothesis of equilibrium to characterize the enterprise in the Maghreb. The latter and the management of employees are above all concerned, directly or indirectly, with maintaining social and societal cohesion. Companies do not necessarily adopt the human resource management practices that are most appropriate to economic requirements, but rather those that appear to be the most socially accepted* » (Frimousse & Peretti, 2006, p. 154).

To our knowledge, no study has been conducted in Morocco on the links between employee relations practices and firm performance. In this sense, the major contribution of our research is to propose a new reading of the modality of influence of employee relations practices on firm performance, opting for a vision based on the theory of stakeholders.

At this level, we have proposed to integrate job satisfaction and organizational justice as variables that can explain the way in which employee relations practices contribute to the firm performance.

The next steps of our research will consist of adopting the proposed research model to Moroccan companies, via an exploratory quantitative approach in order to design the conceptual research model. The latter will be tested, thereafter, by adopting a confirmatory quantitative approach via the method of structural equations to test and validate the hypotheses and the model of our research.

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