

EXPLORING WORKPLACE INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS CONFLICT:
EXPRESSIONS AND RESPONSES USING QUALITATIVE CASE STUDIES IN A
HEALTHCARE SETTING

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INTRODUCTION

Strike activity has declined in the US (Bordogna, 2010); Australia (Healy, 2002); and Europe (Scheuer, 2006) including the UK and Ireland (Roche, 2014). Nevertheless scholars agree that this does not signal the demise of conflict at work (Hebdon et al, 1999; Gall & Hebdon, 2008; Roche & Teague, 2010; Godard, 2011, 2014) which is expressed in a multiplicity of ways (Analoui & Kakabadse, 1993). Despite this, Drinkwater & Ingram, 2005:373 conclude that research has predominantly focused on the most visible and dramatic expression of conflict: the strike. However, a result of ongoing change in the world of work, it is suggested that the expression of IR conflict is being reorganised and expressed in new ways (Edwards, 1995; Godard, 2011, 2014, Gall, 2013). Weingart et al. (2014:2) argue that "little attention has been paid to how conflicts are expressed". Thus, purpose of this paper is to explore the range of employee responses to, and expressions of workplace Industrial Relations (IR) conflict in a healthcare setting. The paper is structured as follows: first we consider previous research on the responses and expressions of workplace IR conflict. Subsequently the paper details the research context and methods employed, before outlining the research findings. Drawing on rich empirical descriptions, the paper presents the threat response theory of workplace IR conflict.

WORKPLACE IR CONFLICT

This study, situated in the field of Industrial Relations (IR) is conceptualised to be concerned with relations between employer and employee, or representatives thereof. These relations contain cooperative and antagonistic elements (Sisson, 2008), are highly interdependent (Sexton, 1996) and power asymmetric. In line with Barbash (1979:652) we agree that "[c]onflict, latent or manifest, is the essence of industrial relations". For the purposes of this study, workplace IR conflict is defined as:

'the action, or collective actions, that arise in or relate to the setting in which work is performed when one party in the interdependent and power-asymmetric employment relationship perceives that another party in the relationship is frustrating, or about to frustrate, an important concern or goal relating to work, working conditions and/or the working environment'.

Strike activity as the "traditional yardstick of workplace relations" (Drinkwater & Ingram, 2005:373), has exhibited a sustained decline.¹ This decline presents against a backdrop of change in society (Scheuer, 2006), economy (Teague & Roche, 2014) and the world of work (Wilson & Wilson, 2015; Kowalski et al, 2015). Explanations including the juridification of the employment relationship (Browne, 1994; Dickens & Hall, 2006), the individualisation of IR (Gunnigle et al, 1997; Scheuer, 2006), the introduction of state provided dispute resolution machinery (ibid); and the decline of voluntarism (King, 2007; Estreicher, 2009) have been put forward to explain this trend. Other explanatory factors include a decline in Trade Union density (Visser, 1991; Kaufman, 2004) and the coverage of collective bargaining (Scheuer, 2006). Hebdon and Noh (2013:27) note that the "... singular focus on strikes has caused some scholars to misinterpret the decline in strike rates as evidence of the lack of workplace conflict". However, scholars agree that this decline does not indicate the absence of conflict at work (Sapsford & Turnbull, 1994; Roche & Teague, 2010). Therefore, "strike activity may not be the most accurate indicator of IR conflict" (Cowman and Keating, 2013:372). More salient however is that this narrow focus has limited our understanding of a central process in the employment relationship (Hebdon and Noh, 2013). Weingart et al (2014) advise researching the expressions of conflict to improve our understanding of the conflict process, and its impact on organisations.

¹ This research makes no prediction regarding the future of strike activity. Rather we contend that the a singular focus is neither reflective of the contemporary focus, nor the complexity of the IR conflict phenomenon.

EXPRESSIONS AND RESPONSES

Hirschman (1970) provided an influential framework used to conceptualise responses to conflict. According to Hirschman (1970), employees respond to a 'decline' or IR conflict in organisations in one of two ways: exit or voice where loyalty is considered the main intervening variable. Hirschman's (1970) work was developed with broad applicability to employees, consumers and citizens. The power imbalance and interdependence of the employment relationship (Sexton, 1996; Blyton & Turnbull, 1994) are largely overlooked (Edwards et al., 1995). Consequently, Hirschman (1970:38) does not acknowledge that an employee may 'suffer in silence', not because of loyalty, but rather because exit is restricted *while* voice is deemed ineffective. Indeed, it may be that voice poses a risk to employees (Edwards *et al.*, 1995; Kassing, 2002). Nevertheless, Exit-Voice and its Exit-Loyalty-Voice-Neglect adaptation (Farrell, 1983; Rusbult *et al.*, (1988) are often used to cluster conflict expressions.

Exit

Exit refers to quitting in the workplace (Hirschman, 1970). Supporting Freeman and Medoff (1984), Batt et al. (2002) found that quit rates were lower with union representation. However, informed by Emerson's (1962) power dependency theory, we posit that exit may be curtailed when the availability of alternative employment is limited, or where sunk costs are high. Hirschman (1970) argued that when exit is restricted, voice is pursued (Gossett & Kilker, 2006). However, employees can avoid, or withdraw from the workplace in many ways. Therefore the exit response has been extended to include tardiness as poor time-keeping (Hebdon, 2005) absenteeism, or withdrawal to express IR conflict (Gall, 2013).

Absenteeism, acknowledged as an expression of IR conflict (Barbash, 1980), has low visibility. Bean (1975:98) suggests that while absence can be involuntary, it "can also be

regarded [as] a form of negative reaction to the employer". Unfairness at work can trigger stress and involuntary absenteeism, and voluntary absenteeism where the aggrieved employee avoids the workplace (De Boer *et al.*, 2002). Luchak and Gellately (1996:94) explain that absenteeism is "indirect and hard to discern given the many things absence can mean". Consequently, Behrens (2007:177) concludes that "... redirected and informal conflicts are very easy for social scientists to miss".

Employees can withdraw effort and cooperation to express IR conflict (Kornhauser *et al.*, 1954). While reminiscent of shirking (Freeman and Medoff, 1984) or neglect (Farrell, 1983; Allen & Tüselman, 2009), we consider withdrawal of effort as comparably passive. Barbash (1979) explains that the negotiation of the effort bargain is continuous at the workplace level where an employee who 'slackens' their effort is reminded of their obligations by the line manager. Withdrawal of cooperation is also considered an expression of IR conflict where employees exhibit a reduction in goodwill (Turkington, 1975).

Voice

Contemporary conceptualisations of voice are broad (see Budd, 2014). Bagchi (2011:881) considers voice as "opportunities for employees to convey their ideas and opinions" to their employer. However, Hirschman's seminal work focused on decline. Thus voice is rooted in discontent (Gorden, 1988; Edwards *et al.*, 1995:284). As such the concept of dissent offers value. Kassing (1998:183), defines dissent as "(a) feeling apart from one's organisation... and (b) expressing disagreement or contradictory opinions about one's organisation". However, voice - or dissent - has associated risk (Taylor *et al.*, 2010; Edwards *et al.*, 1995). Further, voice may be ineffective. Burris (2012:868) explains that "far fewer studies consider how managers actually respond to voice".

The use of grievance-filing can be used to operationalise voice (Boroff & Lewin, 1997). Cappelli and Chauvin (1991:3) note "[t]he rate at which grievances are filed by employees is an important measure of the state of employee relations because it is indicative of the underlying level of conflict between workers and management". However, Harlos (2001) explains that while voice mechanisms are typically formal and official, there are a range of informal options. Another distinction is whether voice is direct or representative. Informed by Freeman and Medoff's (1984), unionism is often considered as synonymous with voice (Benson, 2000). However, in the context of declining union density, non-union voice is also relevant (Hebdon & Noh, 2013; Budd, 2014)

Budd (2014) identifies as an area of inquiry ripe for integration with voice. Boroff and Lewin (1997:50) conclude that "... loyal employees who experienced unfair workplace treatment primarily responded by suffering in silence". Employees can also pursue silence to demonstrate complicit support for colleagues (Mullholland, 2004). However, silence is not just the absence of voice but rather intentional concealment of information or opinions (Van Dyne et al, 2003). Silence can be acquiescent (Gambarotto & Camozzo, 2010; Van Dyne *et al.* 2003), defensive (Morrison & Milliken, 2000) or pro-social. Thus, the forms and motives of silence are likely varied.

Gossip, murmurings, and complaining to co-workers have been identified as forms of voice (Waddington & Fletcher, 2005; Tucker, 1993; Gorden, 1988; Budd, 2014) that voice can be channelled horizontally in the workplace. Beyond the boundary of the firm, Richards (2008) reports that blogs represent a new avenue for employees to vent, and cope with, workplace conflict.

NEGLECT

Farrell (1983) extends Hirschman's (1970) framework to include neglect. Neglect is considered as passive and covert where the aggrieved employee allows the work situation to deteriorate further through reduced interest or effort; chronic lateness; absenteeism; errors; and misuse of company time (Rusbult *et al.*, 1988). Freeman and Medoff (1984) discuss related concepts of 'quiet sabotage or shirking'. Sabotage, more active than neglect, can also be considered an expression of IR conflict (Eldridge, 1973; Hebdon & Noh, 2013). Analoui (1995) explains that sabotage, as a multi-stranded phenomenon that resists definition, is indicative of underlying industrial conflict. Robinson and Bennett (1995) provide a typology of 'deviant' workplace behaviours where neglect largely relates to the category of production deviance and sabotage to the category of property deviance. However, these terms are managerial in their orientation and contain implicit value judgements.

While the Exit-Voice framework, and its later extensions (Farrell, 1983) include many expressions of IR conflict, some are notably absent. Specifically, Edwards *et al* (1995) explain that these categories cannot capture resistance which contains both exit and voice components. Therefore, the ensuing section considers resistance as an expression of IR conflict.

WORKPLACE RESISTANCE

Edwards *et al.* (1995:283) argue that research of "more covert forms of conflict which may be labelled worker resistance" is central to understanding the experience of IR systems. Resistance is considered in terms of power asymmetries and opposition through a variety of employee behaviours used to contest the management prerogative (Roscigno & Hodson, 2004; Mulholland, 2004; Hebdon & Gall, 2008; Gall, 2013). In this regard there is a clear link between workplace resistance and IR conflict. Similar to conflict, literature on resistance

crosses a number of paradigms and has a number of different meanings emerge (Rosgino & Hodson, 2004; Tucker, 1993). Workplace resistance is not discussed with any particular target but rather implicit resistance to management as an entity, or capitalism as an ideology. However, resistance to change is evident in early writings on IR conflict. Fox (1966:12 cited in Eldridge, 1973) writes:

"Like conflict, restrictive practices and resistance to change have to be interpreted by the unitary frame of reference as being due to stupidity, wrong-headedness or out of date class rancour. Only a pluralistic view can see them for what they are: rational responses by sectional interests to protect employment, stabilize earnings, maintain job status, defend group bargaining power or preserve craft boundaries."

However, the extensive managerial literature on resistance to change is not incorporated. These writings, conceptualising resistance as negative and irrational (Piderit, 2000), identify employee resistance to change as a barrier to overcome (Ford *et al.*, 2008). The pluralist perspective is seldom considered. However, Dent and Goldberg (1999) argue that employees do not resist change but rather *loss*. Consistent with Fox (1966), these authors recognise the potential legitimacy of employee concerns. However, Edwards *et al.* (1995) explain that "[t]he meanings and motives of resistance are invariably multiple". Thus, resistance, considered here as a refusal to accept or comply, may include a policy, a management strategy, directions/orders of work, change in any of these, or change as a broader focus of resistance.

In reviewing literatures on non-strike expressions of IR conflict, the variety of expressions is notable. Thus the focus of IR research on strike activity is particularly limiting. A further observation is the difficulty in categorising expressions of IR conflict.

4. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to explore the non-strike expressions of workplace IR conflict. To this end a qualitative case study method was employed. However, in line with Barbash (1979:646) who states that "[t]he nature of conflict in the industrial society is probably best understood in particular contexts", this study is located in a healthcare setting.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Healthcare, as a labour intensive industry (McDermott & Keating, 2011), consists of a number of features relevant to IR. The healthcare context is characterised by a number of IR features: high union density (Bartram et al, 2005); a multiplicity of employee groups and unions (Truss, 2003); the scope of precedent (Cowman & Keating, 2013); and professional power (Mintzberg, 1980, 1997). In addition, the healthcare context is becoming increasingly resource constrained in Ireland (Norman, 2012) and abroad (Weber, 2011). The interaction of these features signal challenging relations in the sector, (Wall, 2009; (Dobbins, 2009b)), and the potential for IR conflict.

METHODS

Despite IR traditions of inductive, qualitative, and context specific enquiry, the hypothetico-deductive approach is becoming more dominant (Whitfield & Strauss, 2000, 2008). However, Nagy Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) recommend a 'problem centric' approach where research questions drive methodological decisions. This study sought to explore resistance as an expression employer-employee conflict. Consequently, the research design is based on four in-depth qualitative case studies in large scale publically funded hospitals. This paper presents integrated thematic analysis of interview data arising from semi-structured interviews with 42 participants. Three main areas of enquiry were pursued: (i) general

questions on role and the workplace; (ii) experience and expression of IR conflict; and (iii) the impact of IR conflict. This paper draws primarily on the aggregate analysis of interview data on the expression of workplace IR conflict. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for data analysis facilitated by NVivo².

The study utilised the tracer method (e.g. Denis *et al.*, 2001) which involves selecting a single strategy and following it through its progression. This acted as a context in which the phenomenon under investigation. The tracer issue pertained to the Laboratory Modernisation and Reconfiguration Strategy (henceforth LMRS) involves significant workplace change including an extended working day, revised on-call payments, and redeployment. Implementation followed unilaterally imposed public sector pay-cuts and the breakdown of Irish Social Partnership, and non-payment of Labour Court compensation for loss of earnings.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, as analysing patterns, was used to interpret the research data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This required three iterative phases of in-case analysis: inductive, deductive, and integrative. Inductive and deductive phase required three sub-steps were followed: (a) open coding/application of start list; (b) cross coding and coding-on to identify overlapping codes and sub-codes; and (c) clustering, integration and review. The third phase of analysis involved integrating codes from phases one and two, and clustering codes into themes. In line with Eisenhardt (1989), cross-case analysis was then conducted before a review and definition of aggregate themes.

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to establish *how* employees express IR conflict in the workplace. Table 1 sets out the aggregate findings on the range of expressions identified. Excerpts of

² NVivo is a qualitative data analysis software.

coded data are provided in the first column. The second column indicates how these units of meaning were interpreted. The final two columns show how many participants³ in the study described these expressions, and how many units of meaning were coded. In line with the interpretive approach, the number of participants who described an expression or the number of units coded to a particular expression are not indicative of significance. Rather, meaning is found in what participants say. Nevertheless, Odena (2013) argues that identifying how many participants converge on a particular theme, and how many times it emerges as meaningful in the data strengthens the trustworthiness of research findings.

³ There were 42 participants across the four case study sites.

Table 1: Expressions of Workplace Industrial Relations Conflict

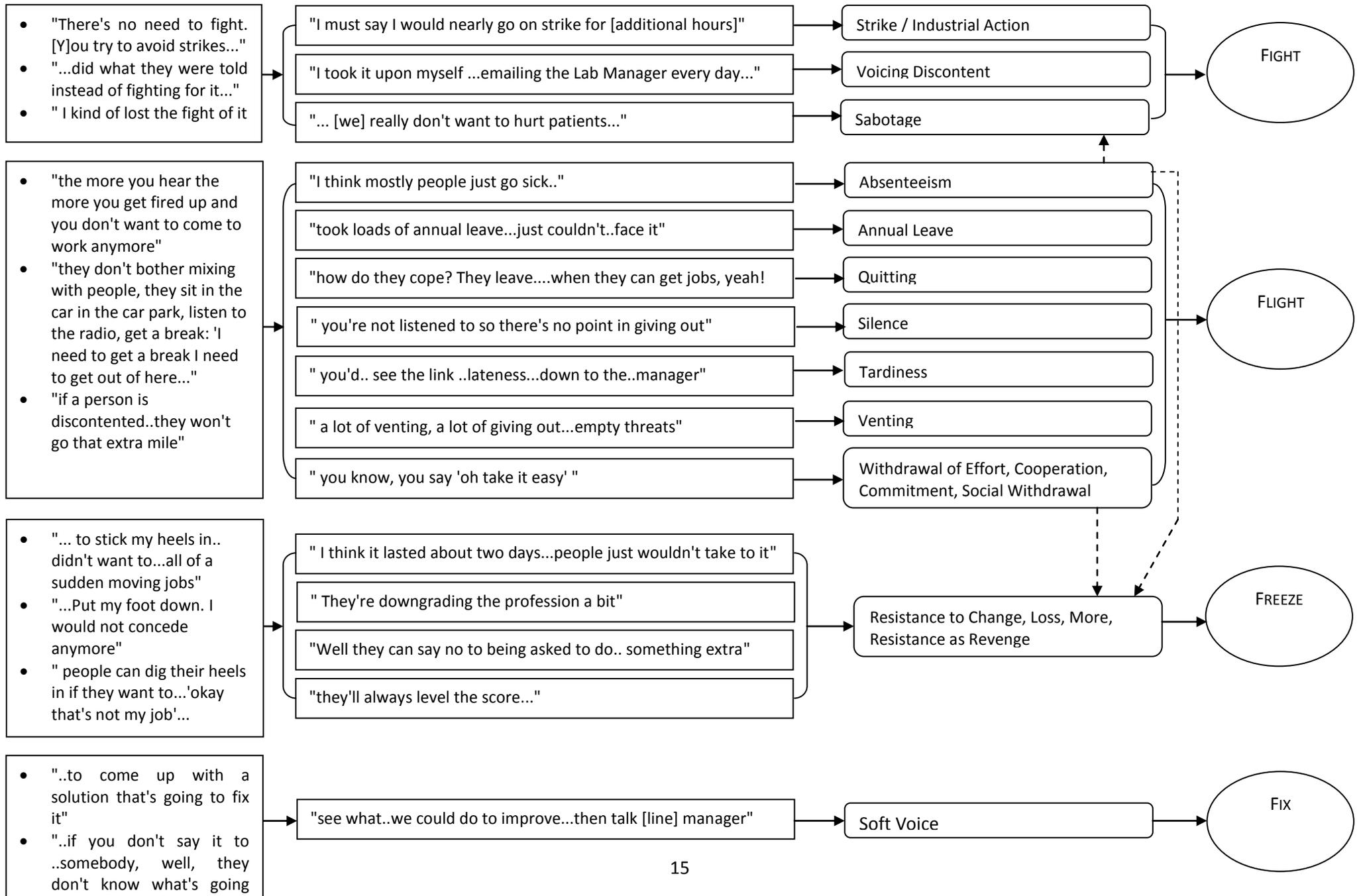
Units of Meaning/Expressions Described	Interpretation /Analysis	Participants	Aggregate References
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "... there would have been a pattern for Mondays... when the individual wouldn't turn up" • "... I think I would have to probably look down the lines of retirement and going out on the long term sick" • "Because if you get [annoyed] with somebody and you're a bit stressed, you go and ask the doctor for a sick cert" 	Absenteeism	38	554
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "... giving out to the manager, giving out to the executive, maybe the odd annual leave t..." 	Annual Leave	24	71
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "If someone is keying in demographics and there's loads of forms here and the phone is going, they're not concentrating on their work" • "'The patient's going nowhere' [so they postpone work]... 'Well, maybe an intervention might be made faster.'" 	Neglect (-)	22	71
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I just want my job... basically. We've no choice really, you know" • "Obviously, most of us still need to work, there's nobody who can say... 'okay, I don't need a job'... because we wouldn't be here now if we didn't need a job" 	Quitting (-)	27	103
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "... the flexibility in relation to change or dealing with change... is probably the biggest one" • "people kind of more or less refused to take on the roles... Yeah, maybe as they saw it, [as more] responsibility" • "I've been working here for twenty years and I have free parking, I don't know why they take that away from you" • "Because in fairness, they only had - their contracts were Monday to Friday, now you wanted them to work weekends" 	Resistance	41	889
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "... I've never come [sabotage]... never. And I think the reason for that is because you're dealing with human samples..." • "We would have had our suspicions that there was some sabotage... you know, an instruction that was issued and then... 'I was too busy to do that, I didn't get round to it'... And then it would have had huge consequences if this work wasn't done." 	Sabotage (-)	19	51
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "... we're not a country [that] needs a strike... I wouldn't be involved, I would - I don't know, maybe I'd go sick that day!" • "I think it would take - I can't imagine a strike to be honest" 	Strike (-)	30	317

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I just hope to God they don't go on strike" • "I must say I would - I would nearly go on strike for [additional hours in PSA 2]" 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Tardiness... occasionally. We did have one issue with it, but the person was told, 'Look, if there's a problem with you getting to work on time, we can shorten your lunch hour or you can take annual leave'" • "... just really time-keeping so that was an easy enough one, no matter what, you know the way, the time-keeping just seemed to be" 	Tardiness	17	52
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "People... complain about various things or there might be written complaints or verbal complaints" • "... we were giving out about it the whole time ourselves at break and lunches and I suppose everyone was just sick of talking about it then so eventually we just stopped" • "... well what you try and do is put forward, you know, try to come up with a solution that's going to fix it" • "I think most people keep their head down, they don't want to rock the boat" 	Voice	42	1335
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Well if that's the way it's going to go they're going to get less out of me" • "Do it but don't push yourself" • "They certainly don't get more cooperative" • "... not giving that commitment saying... 'We'll walk out the door'... no matter what they were leaving to the next person" 	Withdrawal	40	655

Table 1 demonstrates that, perhaps with the exception of annual leave, the data confirms the existence of IR conflict expressions listed in existing literature. However, further variants exist within these expressions. Further, denoted with a minus sign, participants expressed a reluctance to use certain forms, such as neglect, quitting, sabotage and strike.

Exit-Voice and ELVN frameworks have overlooked the specificity of the employment relationship and the variety of IR conflict expressions. Therefore, this paper presents an inductively derived framework of employee responses to workplace IR conflict. Four categories, derived from the data and linked upon iterative review to psychophysiology theory (Bracha et al., 2004; Schmidt et al, 2008), are used to cluster the array of expressions evident in the data. A data structure (Gioia et al, 2012) illustrating the thematic derivation process is illustrated in Figure 1. This demonstrates fit between data and theory. Excerpts of coded data are on the left. These units of meaning are interpreted as expressions of IR conflict in the centre of the Figure. Links are made between these expressions to four employee responses to workplace IR conflict. The arrows are not causal but rather demonstrate the progression of interpretive analysis. Dashed arrows are included where the case evidence suggests expressions are used to pursue more than one employee response. However, due to the complexity and individuality of employees, there may be more overlap than evidenced in these cases.

Figure 1: Data Structure - Workplace IR Conflict: Responses and Expressions



FIGHT

Most closely related to the classics of industrial action, the fight response involves an active challenge to management. Employees described fighting the managerial prerogative in a number of ways - some more visible than others. Notable expressions in this response category include strikes and industrial action; voicing discontent; and sabotage.

Despite direct questions on the strike, participants focused their description on non-strike expressions of IR conflict. Participants explained that if strike action was pursued it would be an extraordinary stance for the Medlab group to adopt, where strike action would take "an awful lot" (Basic Grade Medical Scientist, 2). Despite the heightened level of discontent relating to non-payment of compensation awarded by the Labour Court for loss of earnings, and impending PSA 2 negotiations, the idea of strike action elicited a response of laughter, disbelief, or fear:

"... I think it would take [a lot] - I can't imagine a strike to be honest...People actually laugh about it if there's as strike mentioned. 'We wouldn't do that! Nooo!'" [*laughs*] (Basic Grade Medical Scientist, 2).

Participants explained that employees complain to express IR conflict. Consistent with Harlos (2001), voice mechanisms described by participants ranged from informal to formal. A detailed example of voice as an expression of IR conflict was provided by a Basic Grade Medical Scientist (1) who felt that the laboratory was dangerously understaffed. This participant explains that they made several attempts to complain informally to management. However, fearful of the situation, this participant pursued the issue more aggressively:

"I took it upon myself to [*laughs*] - I was emailing the lab manager every day... saying I couldn't stand over results that are being released because there was meant to be more people on and that you're doing ten things at once. So to cover myself I was [*writing*] that to him, so [*the laboratory manager*] didn't like that and he got me to come in because it was in writing. He didn't like it because it was in writing... well

[laboratory manager] said... [laboratory manager] is a very friendly kind of, you know 'oh you can come talk to me there's no need to be writing it down'".

Formal approaches were typically described in the context of the grievance procedure. In line with HSE policies all case sites had a formal grievance procedure. However, an informal and local approach to dispute resolution was encouraged. Some participants considered this the main route for resolution. However, others held the view that grievance procedures were not used by many in the Medlab group. The use of national level IR machinery was identified as an expression of IR conflict. However, a union representative (4) explained that many employees were reluctant to pursue resolution through IR institutions due to a perception of declining efficacy, and a fear of media coverage.

Participants articulated a strong preference for direct voice. In this regard a non-union approach was favourable. A Laboratory Manager (3) noted that in most cases employees - on an individual basis - tend to "stand up for themselves" rather than relying on union representation. A Basic Grade Medical Scientist (2) concurred:

"I don't think so, I think, like, I'd still probably go to my own managers first, like, I wouldn't by pass them and go straight to the union and whatever like that if something did happen but I would probably have it in the back of my head that it probably will be going [too] far".

Participants also described the use of representative voice in the form of trade union representation and legal representation. Some explained that employees 'fight' through their trade union. However, dissatisfaction with the union was also described. This dynamic highlights the tripartite nature of the employment relationship.

Legal representation as voice was also pursued by some aggrieved employees or former employees as an expression of workplace IR conflict. HR/IR Managers noted that there have been a few recent instances:

"... one of the employees engaged a solicitor, the HSE engaged a solicitor, so it was going over and back and over and back... whereas actually after that then we had another incident where an employee went and got a solicitor... We wrote back a couple of lines. 'This is an employee of the hospital, we will obviously deal with all the issues that have arisen under the local HR policies'" (HR/IR, 3).

Sabotage is considered a fight expression where, in contrast to neglect, sabotage involves active destruction. However, sabotage - due to its concealed nature - may have limited visibility. In the case data, sabotage was discussed with incredulity and a deep concern for the patient. However, while the patient was never the target, there was some evidence suggesting that employees caused intentional harm to the functioning of the workplace.

"... we would have had our suspicions that there was some sabotage... an instruction that was issued and then... 'I was too busy to do that, I didn't get round to it'... And then it would have had huge consequences if this work wasn't done... " (HR/IR, 3).

There was also evidence of property 'deviance' (Robinson & Bennet, 1995). In one instance an employee, following a dispute with management, became aggressive in the workplace and threw empty test tubes against a wall. Another incident involved an employee punching a piece of machinery. This is consistent with Taylor and Walton (1971 cited in Eldridge, 1973) and frustration based sabotage.

FLIGHT

The flight response, rooted in self-preservation, involves retreat. Participants described physical withdrawal from the workplace in the form of absenteeism, annual leave, quitting, and tardiness.

Absenteeism, as unauthorised absence from the workplace, is often listed as an expression of IR conflict in existing literature (Belanger & Edwards, 2013). This was confirmed by employees and management. While research has been conducted to quantify absenteeism in order to indicate IR conflict (Gall & Hebdon, 2008), difficulties arise due its low visibility. Some participants noted this challenge. However, others were confident in their ability to distinguish between forms.

Involuntary absenteeism is unauthorised non-attendance at work arising due to illness. The data provided support for existing literature on the links between stress, involuntary absenteeism, and unfairness (De Boer *et al.*, 2002) or IR conflict (Fried, 1993; Muir, 1994). Participants explained that issues of discontent in the workplace caused workplace stress resulting in illness and involuntary absenteeism.

Voluntary absenteeism relates to an unauthorised absence from the workplace for reasons other than illness (Bean, 1975). Data supported the view that employees 'go sick' to express IR conflict. A trade union representative (3) identified the use of voluntary absenteeism as a "classic tool" in IR conflicts. However, this participant described no union involvement in this expression. Illustrations regarding voluntary absenteeism are provided below.

"Generally, there is a strong sense of responsibility on the part of people, you know, there's - I can think of exceptions, yes. Actually, now that I think about it, I can definitely think of one or two situations where you probably could say these people were absenting themselves [due to IR conflict]" (Basic Grade Medical Scientist, Union, 4).

"I would look - I would look significantly at absenteeism levels [as an indicator of IR conflict]" (HR/IR, 2).

HR managers were clear on the indicators of voluntary absenteeism. Indicators included patterned absence; self-certified absenteeism; unauthorised absence following or preceding an authorised absence; and absences following disputes. Self-certified sick leave was described by participants with a degree of scepticism where these absences were considered

by some as lacking legitimacy. In addition, the use of certified absenteeism was discussed as an indicator of voluntary absenteeism. Participants explained that the availability of medical certificates allowed employees to voluntarily absent themselves from the workplace:

"Because if you get [into a dispute] with somebody and you're a bit stressed, you go and ask the doctor for a sick cert. I see that a lot, not so much here... it [certified absenteeism] has been a tool And if they've been annoyed with somebody in management, they may take a week sick, you know what I mean... They get a sick cert, screw you, here's a sick cert, I'm going off [sick]" (Trade Union Representative, 3).

"... there's a couple of people who feel that, because they're in a union now or because they cry sick to their doctor all the time with stress, that they can get away with stuff and, in actual fact, they can, because they're covered, you know. I'd say definitely absenteeism, yes. I'd say there are people who go absent because they get frustrated, yeah. That's their way of dealing with it [workplace IR conflict]" (Administrative Staff, 4).

Three motives for voluntary absenteeism were identified in the data: coping, rebalancing exchange relations, and resistance. Providing support for De Boer *et al.* (2002), participants explained that voluntary absenteeism was used by employees to escape the workplace, and IR conflict. A support staff employee (1) described the recent increase in workload due to the moratorium on recruitment and promotion noting that "... people go sick" as a coping mechanism.

The 'waste of annual leave' as an expression of IR conflict was described as another method of escaping the workplace. Managerial participants explained the difficulty in providing a labour-intensive frontline service where maintaining staffing levels in the context of unpredictable attendance was a key consideration. In this regard, annual leave was restricted at times. However this was identified as a source of discontent in the workplace. In line with Junor *et al.* (2009), some employees described the use of absenteeism to resist management policy. This was described in relation to managerial action on annual leave where employees

can, following instructions that annual leave is unavailable, use absenteeism as resistance. However method displacement (Gall & Hebdon, 2008) is also plausible.

Participants identified 'quid-pro-quo' as a motive for absenteeism where employees, feeling little loyalty to the workplace, did not hesitate to 'call in sick'. This motive also featured in non-physical forms of withdrawal.

"Yeah, I found it *the [speaker's emphasis]* most demoralising thing. Took loads of annual leave, wasted annual leave because I just couldn't come in and face it" (Basic Grade Medical Scientist, 2).

"That's why sick leave is chronic in a lot of the areas, you can't get the time because you can't get people to cover... well if that's the case, I'll go sick" (Support Staff, 1).

"... I think it's very subtle. I think if people find work [the workplace, recent changes etc.] very difficult, the easiest thing... is to not be there. Well, if I don't feel up to coming into work I'll certainly take a day off sick... " (Senior Medical Scientist, 1).

Non-physical forms of withdrawal were evident as expressions of workplace IR conflict. Withdrawal of effort, and cooperation, as expressions of IR conflict in existing literature (Turkington, 1975), involve a reduction in performance and flexibility. These expressions centred on rebalancing exchange relations where employees sought to pull away from, or give less to, the employment relationship. These expressions were discussed in similar terms to a 'go-slow', and work-to-rule respectively. However, both expressions were pursued in a covert, informal, and individual manner. Participants also identified social withdrawal and withdrawal of commitment. The latter referred to the loss of the 'extra mile' where employees explained that, following a grievance, they '*just* do their job'. Social withdrawal arose where employees ceased all social engagement such as salutations, lunch breaks and non-work conversations. These expressions are illustrated below.

"People have been - I've noticed people in different sections, even lunch breaks, they don't bother mixing with people, they sit in the car park, listen to the radio and get a break: 'I need to get out of here, I've got to get away" (Support Staff, 1).

"[I]come in, do my work, go home... I would have been doing extra stuff at home. There would have been studies, there would have been courses... I do what I'm supposed to do. I'm not taking shortcuts. But I'm not interested in pursuing... anything extra, like, going to conferences or, you know, reading papers - no" (Basic Grade Medical Scientist, 2).

While previous literature considers voice, silence, and venting in tandem (Budd, 2014) the data indicates that the use of silence, and venting to express IR conflict departs from voicing discontent. Instead of communicating with management, employees use silence to withhold from management. Similarly, venting, described alongside silence, communicates discontent with colleagues, *not* superiors. Acquiescent and defensive silence were identified in the data as expressions of IR conflict. In addition, social silence and 'they should know silence' emerged. Social silence, related to social withdrawal, was frequently termed 'the silent treatment'. Participants also described withholding information from management on the basis that they - as management - should know. This highlights the employee perception of management authority and responsibility. Excerpts are provided below.

"I wouldn't go to a line manager... I just talk, like, I never stop talking, like, or - you know, or I'd have, like, a little bitch to my friends" (Medical Lab Aide, 4).

"Blanking. People not talking to you, because you can't give them everything they want, you know" (Chief Medical Scientist, 3).

"I didn't actually go to the lab manager, to be fair to [Laboratory manager]. I just decided at that point I'd go to the union because I felt [Laboratory manager] should have known about it" (Senior Medical Scientist, 1).

FREEZE

The freeze response explains why some individuals, when under threat, stay still. In many regards the freeze response is the midway point between fight and flight. While neither entirely passive nor active, freeze expressions are akin to a peaceful protest: employees 'shall not be moved'. Participants described this response as 'standing their ground' and 'digging their heels in'. The purpose of the freeze response to the expression of IR conflict is to halt

the dynamic of the employment relationship and maintain the status quo of exchange relations between the parties. The most central expression within the freeze response was resistance.

When describing their experience of IR conflict in the workplace, participants described resistance as an expression of IR conflict where employees refused to concede their position. Demonstrative of varied expression of IR conflict, there were four forms of resistance evident in the data: resistance to change, resistance to loss, resistance to more, and resistance as revenge.

Resistance to change was discussed in terms of poor trust relations where change - as an uncertain process - requires faith in management and management's agenda. This issue was described in relation to the LMRS and the extended working day. Participants felt that the articulated rationale for this change, as improved patient care, access and waiting times, was disingenuous. They explained that the true motivation was further reduction of the on-call wage bill.

Interestingly, resistance to change was not limited to employees but also management. A Phlebotomy manager (2) described an example of resistance to change in relation to an IT system where implementation of the system was reversed for a number of years. In this example, the Phlebotomy manager outlines how they were involved in resistance:

"... we just told them 'Sorry, we're not partaking in it. There is no backup, there's no IT, they don't start until later. We're not [speaker's emphasis] IT people'... When you have [large group of] Phlebotomists all standing and saying 'No, we're not doing it' you take it as no, we're not doing it and we also got the consultants behind us and we just said to them 'Look it's not working, your patients are suffering at the end of the day'"

Resistance to small scale change was also evident. A Basic Grade Medical Scientist (4) explained how employees resisted the use of a light signal system to alert employees to new

samples while a Medical Lab Aide (1) explained that [their] colleagues had resisted sitting together. Excerpts are provided below.

"Well I suppose they wanted us all to work together, the core lab, we were quite happy about it and we all - all the lab aids moved out and they'd the desks all [rounded] up... it was for everyone to... work together and ease of access... I think it lasted about two days... other people just wouldn't take to it" (Medical Lab Aide, 1).

"Yeah, it's a bit silly like so you can only make an example of somebody so much and I would put my foot down then. I would not concede anymore" (Basic Grade Medical Scientist, 4).

"Refusal to implement something new or something like that, I think. That would be the more common, yeah" (Laboratory Manager, 4)

Providing support for Dent and Goldberg (1999), the data indicates that resistance to loss is an expression of IR conflict in the workplace. Resistance to financial loss was described by participants, particularly in the context of the extended working day and revised on-call payments under the LMRS. It was broadly acknowledged that Medlab scientists "lost a lot of money" (Senior Grade Medical Scientist, 4). Despite some understanding of the management position, a view emerged that no more cuts in pay would be tolerated. However, employees resisted loss in other areas of employment. Some participants - particularly in the context of the LMRS - were concerned about loss of employment. Other issues related to the loss of concession days, free parking, and tea/coffee facilities. This is illustrated below.

"Will there be a job? Will I be offered redundancies?... "What if there's no need for me? Where will I go?... do I lose my job?", you know. So there is - there is that fear"(Union, 2).

"I suppose they were just, like, having these meetings, wanting to reverse it really, like, saying the hospital had no right to hand over the control of the car park, custom and practice come into it... 'we've always had this parking so you can't take it away from us'... you know, when there is no onus on the hospital to provide parking at all... " (Basic Grade Medical Scientist, Union, 4).

Relating to the professional nature of many healthcare employees, resistance to loss of professional status was also identified. The data indicated that professionals also resisted the loss of what makes them professionals - knowledge, ability, and, autonomy. Examples are provided below.

"I think there's huge resentment, you know, to the change in status... " (Laboratory Manager, 2).

"I don't know how that'll work. You see they've been talking about it for so long - don't know, like, we will always be keeping our lab because it's such a busy hospital, there's always going to be work here. They're downgrading the profession a bit, they want - they want a lot of lab aids to be working and only a couple of us, they're just trying to make us factory workers really" (Basic Grade Medical Scientist, 1).

Two additional forms of resistance emerged from the data. Resistance to more and resistance as revenge were described by participants. Related to the resource-constrained climate and increasing demand for healthcare (Weber, 2011), employees described how they resisted more work; more hours; and more responsibility. A Medical Lab Aide (4) explained that, following a redeployment from a small hospital, workload increased while staffing-ratio decreased. This participant explained a reluctance to take on additional duties. Managers also identified resistance to more as an expression of IR conflict:

"[They] can say no to being asked to do something, you know, something extra or something they perceive as not in their job spec" (HR/IR, 1).

"... we had some conflict would have been with [additional services]... people... refused to take on the roles so. Yeah, maybe as they saw it, [as more] responsibility" (Laboratory Manager, 4)

'Resistance as Revenge' was the final form of resistance evident in the data. Employees explained that, aggrieved with management from previous interactions, they used resistance as a means to enact revenge, push back or settle the score. Therefore, episodes of resistance

emerged where the target of resistance was not the source of discontent. Thus, there may be a time lag between reactance and expression. A Laboratory Manager (4) commented:

"They'll always level the score... okay, you get one [win] - there's always some other little change coming, you know, that you, you know, you have to be on good terms with staff because you might get one win, but you know, if you're going to keep winning in the longer term - it ain't going to work"

In one particular dispute, laboratory management requested that all windows remain closed to provide a stable temperature for machinery. A Chief Medical Scientist (2) described an instances of resistance as revenge:

"I articulated to the staff "Keep the windows closed, keep the doors closed"... I go out then and I see all the windows open and I say "Who opened the window?" and this person says "I opened the windows", "But I thought we agreed that we'll keep the windows closed?", "I opened them" and I said "No, we agreed that we keep the windows closed" so then I go around closing them. That makes me feel a bit - they're undermining my authority..."

FIX

The fix response emerged directly from the data where participants themselves described how some employees seek to 'fix' issues of discontent. In this regard, soft voice is repositioned in the fix response where employees sought to communicate solutions - rather than problems - to management. Attempts to remedy particular issues, or improve the workplace more generally were described where participants used language around 'fixing'. On the surface fixing attempts, and soft voice, may not seem a response to IR conflict. However the articulation or enactment of solutions is predicated on the existence of a problem. Further, participants themselves identified fixing a response to IR conflict. Examples are provided below.

"Well, I, like well what you try and do is put forward, you know, try to come up with a solution that's going to fix it [lab service delivery]" (Consultant, 1).

"But if somebody comes to me about it I would say "Look you... " maybe I might make some suggestions because I suppose it's a lot of information may be coming up piecemeal and somebody might come to you for, kind of saying "Can you clarify this?" or that kind of thing so I'd hope to guide them a little bit"(Basic Grade Medical Scientist, 2).

In some instances soft voice triggered discontent suggestions were ignored or dismissed as voicing discontent. This arose where laboratory management were planning to seek additional resources from the HSE. A junior group of employees thought that a change in work practices would reduce the number of additional staff required inducing HSE cooperation. However when raising this issue at the staff meeting, the participant's colleagues remained silent. This participant explained:

"I was intimidated that day because of... the reaction was not what I expected but yeah and I think as well when they felt - when they heard my boss kind of cutting me down and - and other people, I remember the *[laughs]* Haematology manager said '[Basic Grade] has some cheek!'" (Basic Grade Medical Scientist, 2).

Following this exchange, the participant stopped attending meetings and withheld all suggestions from management on the basis of this negative reaction.

DISCUSSION

The motivation for this study was the focus of previous IR research on the strike despite declining strike activity, and a longstanding view that IR conflict is expressed in a multiplicity of ways. Consequently, the research explored how employees express IR conflict.

THE THREAT RESPONSE THEORY OF WORKPLACE IR CONFLICT

This study provides a framework of employee responses to workplace IR conflict. Existing frameworks, Exit-Voice and ELVN (i) overlook the interdependent and power-asymmetric

nature of the employment relationship, and (ii) do not fully capture the variety of IR conflict expressions evident in the data. The Fight-Flight-Freeze-Fix framework begins to address these limitations.

Inductively derived from the data, these categories were linked upon iterative review to existing psychophysiology theory. Fight, Flight, and Freeze concepts are used in these disciplines to consider responses in conditions of acute stress or threat (Bracha *et al.*, 2004; Schmidt *et al.*, 2008). IR conflict can be conceptualised as stress (Fried, 1993) or threat due to the power imbalance between the parties and the high level of interdependence. Thus, this framework is better equipped to consider employee responses to IR conflict by acknowledging employee risk.

While closely related to voice and exit, the concepts of fight and flight offer a more inclusive categorisation of employee expressions of workplace IR conflict. The term exit, as largely synonymous with quitting, obscures the wide variety of withdrawal expressions pursued by employees. Similarly voice, particularly in its contemporary form (Bagchi, 2011; Budd, 2014), includes a wide variety of expressions which warrant attention in their own right. For example, while voicing discontent, silence, and soft voice are underpinned by very different motivations. These expressions are better understood, respectively, in flight and fix response categories. In addition resistance - involving elements of exit and voice - is not well captured by Hirshman's (1970) framework. The resistance expression, and its variants, are captured by the freeze response where employees 'dig their heels in' to halt the dynamic in exchange relations.

CONSIDERING CONTEXT

The findings indicate that the expression of workplace IR conflict is shaped by three context factors: patient; professionals; and the media. The viability of certain expressions of

workplace IR conflict were often linked to the patient. Sabotage was considered inappropriate in this context while strike action was further restricted by the impact - or perception thereof - on patients. Media scrutiny of the sector also acted as a moderator of IR conflict expression. Thus, non-strike expressions of IR conflict may be more attractive in healthcare.

Managerial participants held the view that 'good professionals' do not express IR conflict. However, the evidence demonstrates that professional, non-professional, senior and junior, expressed IR conflict in a variety of ways. The findings indicate that occupation groups have different preferences regarding *how* IR conflict is expressed. Evidence suggests that professionals resisted loss of status, skills and autonomy. However, professionals are increasingly pursuing resistance to more due to resource constraints and work intensification. Non-professional groups faced more options regarding the expression of IR conflict: more flexible labour markets; lower sunk costs; and less risk in expressing IR conflict. Thus different occupational groups express workplace IR conflict *differently*.

CONCLUSIONS

This research highlights that beyond the dramatic and overt, there is value in researching – with sensitive methods – the subtle, day-to-day experience of IR conflict in the workplace. This study confirms the use of a wide variety of IR conflict expressions. Thus, we conclude that the focus on the strike expression is misplaced. We provide an empirically-supported description of the range of IR conflict expressions in the workplace. However, the study is located in one national setting and one workplace setting within a pluralist context. Therefore transferability requires caution.

The paper presents the threat response theory of workplace IR conflict. This approach offers a more inclusive way to cluster expressions of IR conflict into employee responses: fight, flight, freeze, and fix. This framework is sensitive to the interdependent and power

asymmetric nature of the employment relationship. Thus we conclude that employees - when expressing IR conflict - are essentially responding to threat within an interdependent system.

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