Where do migrant workers fit into the picture? The apparent invisibility of cultural diversity factors in industrial relations research.

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Abstract

This paper asks why there is a relatively little focus and research in Australian industrial relations on the role of immigrants and their interface with workplace restructuring, workforce development, enterprise bargaining and union participation. Australia has the highest proportion of overseas born workers of any developed country with over 200 language groups represented, and a strong ongoing immigration program which is filling a wide range of skill shortages. The issues and challenges this raises have been long documented by other disciplines which are often seen as ‘feeder’ disciplines for industrial relations. Immigration is likely to be a continuing factor in economic development at national and enterprise level, with significant implications for industrial relations on the ground. A number of possible explanations for this gap in research and thinking are presented and some future strategies are outlined.

Introduction

The average person in the street knows the significance of immigration to Australia’s economic development and prosperity, even if, in a substantial minority of cases, they are unsympathetic to immigration per se. We hear daily in the media about the contribution of immigration to population growth, housing prices, urban sprawl, social issues and economic progress. There are positive and negative representations, but there is no question that immigration is a staple topic of Australian popular debate and discussion.

Yet in the industrial relations arena, particularly in the academic literature, there is a strange silence and many gaps in the discourse where you would expect the question of immigrant workers and employment relations to appear. There are relatively few papers presented at AIRAANZ conferences that deal directly with issues of race, ethnicity and culture in industrial relations. At the recent IIRA conference in Sydney, there was no stream where such papers could be readily presented, despite the fact that international immigration is a major and often contentious topic of other international conferences in the social sciences, and in policy making within the OECD. Is this apparent silence in Australian academia due to indifference, ignorance, ambivalence or denial of the multicultural realities of the Australian labour market and industrial relations landscape? This paper seeks to explore some of these issues.

Before examining the issues, it is worth scoping the context of these questions.

Immigration in context
As observed elsewhere, in 2006 Australia had a population of 21 million, a quarter of which was born overseas in over 200 countries (ABS, 2006; quoted in Bertone & Monani, forthcoming). A total of 44 per cent of Australian residents were either born overseas or had at least one parent who was born overseas (ibid.). This extraordinary diversity in terms of country of origin was reflected in our workforce, with 23% of Australian workers being born overseas. The proportion of overseas born workers in Australia is generally much higher than that for other OECD countries, including major countries of immigration such as Canada and the United States.

The spread of overseas born workers varies across industries and particular sectors of industry as well as occupations. When mass immigration began after the Second World War, the majority of immigrants were relatively low skilled and blue collar (Jupp, 2002). They became the staple workforce in major nation building industries such as building and construction, transport and infrastructure, vehicle manufacturing, telecommunications and other manufacturing sectors such as food, clothing and electronics, many of these being highly unionised sectors. They also formed a significant part of the agricultural workforce, and established a disproportionate number of small businesses, some of which grew into highly successful national and transnational enterprises (Collins, 2003).

By the late 1980s, governments of both persuasions established a new direction for economic development through the concept of Australia as a Knowledge Economy, and immigration policy shifted markedly in line with this goal. Unskilled and family migration began to shrink in volume, to be replaced by ever-increasing proportions of skilled migrants, who in aggregate were more educated than the receiving population. By 2008/9 the majority of immigrants were classified as skilled, most of them English speaking and many of them selected to meet skill shortfalls in the Australian workforce, as set out in the immigration department’s Migration Occupations in Demand List.

Whole swathes of the professions became reliant on imported immigrant workers – more than a quarter of all nurses, and close to half the medical and paramedical workforce were made up of immigrants (Hawthorne, 2006). The accounting, IT and engineering professions also drew heavily from overseas born workers (ibid.). Trades shortages also led to significant intakes of immigrant workers – pastrycooks, hairdressers, mechanics and so on.

Throughout this time, the industrial relations literature focussed on the more disadvantaged immigrant workers, such as those left jobless by tariff reductions and industrial restructuring in the manufacturing industries (see for example, Pearce et al. 1995; O’Loughlin & Watson, 1997), others who were being marginalised by enterprise bargaining (Alcorso, 1994; Bertone et al., 1995; Testi, 1996), and those who were bearing the brunt of the most radical flexibilities in workplace practices and regulation, such as outwork, downsizing and work intensification (Weller, 1999; O’Donnell, 1994; Cregan, 2001).

Some colleagues and myself wrote for a time on the research we’d conducted into the relationship of Australian trade unions with their immigrant members (see, for example,
Bertone & Griffin, 1992; Nicolaou, 1991) These contributions drew their inspiration from early IR contributors such as June Hearn and Constance Lever-Tracey and Michael Quinlan, who had pioneered the study of immigrant workers in the trade union movement (see Hearn, 1974; Lever-Tracy & Quinlan, 1988). However, despite the growing size of the immigration intakes and increasing sophistication and complexity of entry systems (such as the introduction of temporary stay visas, expanded holiday makers intakes and capacity for on-shore overseas students to apply for permanent residence), relatively little research was conducted in the 1990s and 2000s into the new challenges and issues surrounding the role of immigrant workers in the Australian labour market in the context of a rapidly changing regulatory landscape and an economic structure that had shifted decisively towards service and knowledge-based industries.

My own doctoral work aimed to map these significant changes over some two decades to draw conclusions about a constellation of patterns that could be said to characterise the work experience of immigrant workers, based on their occupations and the place they occupied within the employment relations system (see Bertone, 2008). Caroline Alcorso continued to make important contributions to our understanding of the linguistic and cultural challenges faced by immigrant workers in the hotel industry, a disproportionate number of whom were grossly overqualified for their jobs as room cleaners and most of whom, in her case studies, were trade union members (Alcorso, 2003).

But overall, the coverage of immigrant workers in industrial relations literature has been thin and patchy, with large areas of interest such as the role of temporary visa workers and skilled workers in the employment system generally being neglected.

In contrast, the interest of other disciplines outside industrial relations – and from which IR literature often draws – in immigrant workers and their performance in the labour market has hardly abated. There has been a steady stream of literature over at least two decades coming from the labour economists, for example, measuring the ‘performance’ of immigrant workers in terms of key indicators such as employment, unemployment, under-employment and occupational mobility (see for example, Kler, 2006). Sociologists have had a long standing interest in cultural diversity in society and within organisations, as have Australian education and training academics, social service practitioners and even some psychologists.

So why the relative lack of interest or representation of cultural diversity factors in the world of industrial relations research?

There could be a range of factors. In discussion with colleagues, and in surveying the vast literature in Australia and overseas on issues as cultural diversity, immigration, multiculturalism, managing diversity, equal employment opportunity, racism and social exclusion, and in particular, taking account of the historical stance of trade unions towards immigration in Australia, it is possible to discern a number of potential reasons why this is the case.
Of major importance could be the signals sent by the Australian labour movement about the place of immigrants in the employment system, and the extent to which this may have influenced the tenor of IR research. While embracing mass immigration, the Australian trade union movement has traditionally demonstrated ambivalence or silence in its stances on specific issues, such as asylum seekers, temporary workers and immigration targets. The tenor of the policy discourse where it has occurred has often centred on concerns about the potential displacement of local workers by immigrants (particularly during recessions), the need to skill up local workers rather than import skilled immigrants, objections to the exploitation of immigrants, particularly temporary workers, and fears about the potentially negative effect of immigration on workplace bargaining and wages/working conditions. It also remains the case that at the top echelons, the majority of trade union leaders derive from Anglo-Celtic stock, whether Australian or overseas born.

The Australian Labor Party, now in government at federal level and in many states, has similarly exhibited a high degree of ambivalence in its treatment of immigration policy, particularly with respect to unauthorised arrivals such as asylum seekers. More recently, there has been a public media furore about a range of violent incidents against overseas students, many of whom will become permanent citizens when they graduate. Many of these students are already working in Australia, often in low paid exploitative jobs. The response of the Labor Federal government has been to deny racism as an element in such attacks, emphasising instead the opportunistic nature of these violent crimes, which in most cases have been perpetrated by young, disadvantaged Anglo-Celtic youths (Babacan et al., forthcoming). Employers and employer associations, for the main part, have been fairly silent about these issues.

Also at the federal government level, there has been a distinct policy shift away from the recognition of ‘special interest groups’ to a more place-based social inclusion agenda. This kind of policy shift tends to de-emphasise issues of cultural difference to focus on geographic or regional disparities of access and opportunity. It also leads to a sense of unease about naming differences and dealing with the complexities this gives rise to. To recognise difference may seem to risk ‘dividing’ the community and undermining efforts to create a socially cohesive society. Multiculturalism in this context becomes reduced to a policy of tolerance for diverse cultural and linguistic practices rather than a framework for maximising the opportunities and contributions of all strata of society.

Industrial relations academics do not operate in a social vacuum. Like other members of society, they are open to societal influences regarding the content and nature of discourses about immigration, multiculturalism, population growth and racism. It is also possible that the leaders in IR thought, many of them members of the Babyboomers generation, some of them Generation X, reflect the more monocultural and earlier traditions of the IR discipline as it was framed in the early years of immigration, when cultural diversity was something that characterised the blue collar strata of society, rather than the halls of academia. In this regard, it would also be instructive to analyse the proportion of IR academics who come from...
culturally diverse backgrounds. That proportion may well be lower than found in the general community.

Some colleagues have suggested that the paucity of university curricula in mainstream IR courses around cultural diversity themes, has led to the incapacity of people graduating into the IR field to conceptualise or come to terms with the rapid changes in ethnicity and culture occurring in our workforce. It does appear that few bachelor or postgraduate degree courses in IR offer compulsory units in cultural diversity or managing diversity, and where they exist, they are usually offered as electives. However, once again, it is academics who design the curricula, so the argument may be a circular one. If IR academics represent the older, Anglo-Celtic dominant culture of society, they are less likely to see the need to include cultural diversity content into the curriculum.

There may also be another factor emanating from these curriculum gaps. It may be that IR academics are unable to conceptualise the specific IR challenges and issues raised by a multicultural workforce. Without sufficient knowledge about the particular concerns and issues of immigrant workers in Australia, it is difficult to conceive how there could be any theorisation of the challenges for collective bargaining, democracy and participation in the trade union movement and within organisations.

Yet IR academics would only need to sample the voluminous literature that is available even in Australia from those feeder disciplines, as mentioned above – labour economics, sociology, education and training, public policy, psychology – to see that the industrial relations issues generated by a culturally diverse workforce are significant.

These issues include, but are not limited to:

- Employment barriers for newly arrived immigrants, with implications for recruitment policy and equal employment opportunity
- The need of many immigrants for English language and cultural awareness training on the job (and concomitant needs to train the local workforce on cultural diversity issues)
- Cultural and linguistic challenges in communicating effectively with immigrants as employees and trade union members (with implications for collective bargaining and union democracy)
- Issues around job security, wages and working conditions for immigrant workers (and relative differences or inequities vis a vis local workers)
- The needs of some immigrants for special leave provisions or cultural provisions, such as prayer times for Muslims and observance of religious/cultural holidays
- Ongoing concerns of immigrants around undervaluing of skills and being placed in jobs for which they are overqualified
- Career path barriers facing many immigrants, particularly those who are highly skilled
• Issues around employee voice and participation at the leadership levels of the trade union movement.

What can be done?

It is clearly not enough to name the problem, if indeed it is considered to be a problem. This paper has argued implicitly that it is important to increase the amount and range of research in industrial relations around the role of immigrant workers vis a vis the trade union movement, employment structures and rules, workplace change, economic change and employer policy.

Immigration has a vital role to play in national productivity and workforce development, no more so than in a country like Australia which generates insufficient skilled labour to meet its growth aspirations as a knowledge economy and is competing with other immigrant receiving countries for the most desirable and mobile global workers – the highly skilled and English literate. Immigration poses significant challenges for the union movement and bargaining structures. A number of unions such as the LHMWU and the TCFUA have clearly recognised this, as they have grappled with the demands and challenges of a highly diverse membership for some decades.

However, this realisation seems to be lagging for the IR academic profession. Despite the Global Financial Crisis, it is widely recognised that Australia will continue to face serious skills shortages. This was acknowledged recently in a speech by ACTU President Sharan Burrows at the IIRA Conference in Sydney, last September. With bipartisan consensus on the general size and composition of immigration intakes, there is little likelihood of current immigration trends falling away. Australia will continue to take in large numbers (about 200,000-250,000 net) of immigrants per year. Some will enter into employment which is highly unionised, others will not. Some employers such as the Swedish seat belt manufacturer, Autoliv, will continue to lead the way in the management of a multicultural workforce and profit by it. Others, such as the banks, will continue to extract the productivity and market share gains offered by ethnic niche services and multicultural marketing, by utilising the cultural and linguistic skills of their multicultural workforce.

The industrial relations discipline will be poorer and much narrower than it needs to be if it does not come to terms with these changes and reflect the cultural diversity of the Australian workforce in all facets of its research.

We can begin to redress this shortfall in our thinking and research by:

• Establishing a cultural diversity stream at AIRAANZ conferences (broadly defined to include intersection with gender, race, disability and other areas of difference)

• Inviting key note speakers from Australia and overseas to address us in this area of research
• Actively targeting and inviting contributors from feeder disciplines to present their cultural diversity research where it has relevance to IR agendas and issues
• Develop a community of interest group within AIRAANZ to develop and promote a research agenda around cultural diversity in industrial relations
• Lobby government agencies for special purpose research funding in this area
• Link our research with the many industry, government and community ventures which are targeting cultural diversity at work, such as the ANZ’s refugee mentoring program and state government skilled migration programs.

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