Rigour mortis? A methodological examination of workplace case studies

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There is a long established and much venerated tradition of research within the sociology of work and industrial relations that is characterised by detailed case studies of firms or workplaces and use qualitative research methods such as semi-structured or depth interviews, focus groups and periods of observation. Such studies aim to provide context-sensitive analyses of a wide range of employment-related phenomena and generally take a pride in having a greater concern with theoretical matters than quantitative survey based research. Despite the prominence of workplace case studies there has been remarkably little reflection on the methodological aspects of these studies.

This paper draws on a systematic evaluation of the methods used in workplace case studies published in nine of the major British and American journals in industrial relations and the sociology of work, namely the British Journal of Industrial Relations, Economic and Industrial Democracy, European Journal of Industrial Relations, Industrial & Labor Relations Review, Industrial Relations, Industrial Relations Journal, New Technology, Work and Employment, Work & Occupations, and Work, Employment & Society. The focus is on papers published between 2001 and 2013 in order to capture the ‘state-of-the-art’. The evaluation is based on a list of 28 criteria that covers issues of research strategy and design, internal and external validity as well transparency of procedure and reliability.

Despite using rather conventional indicators of research quality, and despite focusing on major peer review journals, the current ‘state-of-the art’ is marked by an extraordinary lack of attention to issues of validity and reliability in the conduct of workplace case studies. For sure, the scores on some quality indicators, such as the justification of sampling strategies and the use of different methods of data collection are not as low as others. But the results on the very reasons for conducting case studies and using qualitative methods are very disappointing. The presumption must be that the use of case studies and associated methods of gathering evidence are deemed to be self-evident.

The paper closes by considering whether workplace case studies hold the position of an unquestioned faith. If attempts to challenge specific practices within this approach are to be met with the claim that it is an unwarranted attack on the entire case study tradition then we will struggle to bring the practice of workplace case studies in line with developments in case study analysis across the social sciences.