

Frames Of Reference

Alan Fox's (1966) highly influential way of looking at the employment relationship describes managers having alternative 'frames of reference'. Everyone has a frame of reference, which can be understood as a lens through which one sees employment relations. He described three ideal (in the sense of 'perfect example') frames - pluralist, unitarist, radical - people usually just talk about pluralism and unitarism.

- *Frames* "[A] sociological viewpoint may help in the construction of a frame of reference through which the problems of industrial relations can be seen realistically and laid more open to solution... perception... determines judgments, which in turn determines subsequent behaviour."
- *Unitarism vs Pluralism* "An alternative way of presenting this distinction would be to ask: 'What is the closest analogy to the enterprise - is it, or ought it to be, analogous to a team, unified by a common purpose [unitarism], or is it more plausibly viewed as a coalition of interests, a miniature democratic state composed of sectional groups with divergent interests over which the government tries to maintain some kind of dynamic equilibrium [pluralism]?"
- *Unitarism* "A unitary system has one source of authority and one focus of loyalty, which is why it suggests the team analogy. What pattern of behaviour do we expect from the members of the successful and healthy functioning team? We expect them to strive jointly towards a common objective, each pulling his [sic] weight to the best of his ability. Each accepts his place in his function gladly, following the leadership of the one so appointed. There are no oppositionary groups or factions, and therefore no rival leaders within the team. Nor are there any outside it; the team stands alone, its members owing allegiance to their own leaders but no others."
- *Pluralism* "In place of a corporate unity reflected in a single focus of authority and loyalty, we have to accept the existence of rival sources of leadership and attachment. They need to be accepted above all, by whoever is ruling the plural society in question." Fox A. (1966) *Industrial Sociology and Industrial Relations*, Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, Research Papers 3, HMSO, London

True or False

1. Employees do not have frames of reference
2. HRM is unitarist
3. There are no rulers in a pluralist organisation
4. Unitarists believe trade unions are unnecessary
5. Pluralists believe trade unions exist to cause conflict

Personal Opinion

1. Do you think Fox's views are still relevant today? Why / Why not?
2. Would you describe yourself as unitarist or pluralist, or neither?
3. Think of an organisation you've been a member in - was it unitarist or pluralist, or neither?