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Peering inside the 'black box': The impact of management-side representatives on the industrial relations climate of organizations

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Introduction

The industrial relations (IR) climate of an organization is a general measure of the overall tone of the labor-management relationship (Dastmalchian, 2008). It is typically measured by a set of variables that represent the norms, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors prevalent at the workplace including "fairness and mutual regard" (Dastmalchian, 2008, p 569). Research has shown that the IR climate of an organization is related to productivity, efficiency, general employee satisfaction, union loyalty, and organizational commitment (see Angle & Perry, 1986; Dastmalchian & Ng, 1990; Deery, Erwin & Iverson, 1999; Deery & Iverson, 2005; Huszczo & Hoyer, 1994; Redman & Snape, 2006; Wagar, 1997; Wagar & Rondeau, 2002). The challenge with creating positive labor-management relations is that the web of interactions that contribute to the overall industrial relations atmosphere is complex. Interactions with the potential to impact trust and fairness in the workplace occur at all levels of the organization and involve various individuals: employees, front-line managers, union stewards, union regional representatives, union executives, middle and senior managers, management-side labor relations representatives,

etc. In this research we focus on one group – the management-side labor relations representatives (MSRs) – to determine the impact that their day-to-day actions and interactions have on the overall IR climate of their organizations.

Our study develops a model that attempts to challenge and probe the universal face of 'management' at the individual level of analysis and recognizes the multitude of interactions that management-side representatives are engaged in each day. Specifically, we further unpack the 'management-related variables' of Deery and Iverson (2005) and situate some of the organizational structure and facilitative IR context variables of Dastmalchian (2008) in a previously understudied group: the MSR. The Labor Relations Department (sometimes housed within Human Resource Departments) is a key management-side player, particularly in large unionized environments. The Department includes specialist Managers and labor relations Representatives (for ease of reference both are included in our use of the term MSR) as well as support staff. This group works specifically on issues related to the labor-management relationship such as collective bargaining, grievances, arbitrations, daily interpretation of the collective agreement, participation on joint-committees, etc. They come into regular contact with front-line and upper managers and supervisors as well as union stewards, regional representatives, and executives and often intervene in the midst of conflicts among these groups. It has been noted that the specific strategies of management and union officials and the role that each plays is a critical determinant of the IR climate (Deery & Iverson, 2005); that union and management officials are instrumental in setting the IR tone through bargaining and grievance negotiation (Gordon & Ladd, 1990), and that it is detrimental to assume that a quality union-management relationship rests solely with the cooperative stance of the union (Huszczo &

Hoyer, 1994 p, 849). Despite this pivotal role, however, the activities and impact of the MSR have been often overlooked in the recent IR climate or broader IR literature.

There has been research on the impact that union stewards have on rank-and-file member attitudes and on the grievance process as union stewards act as a front-line intermediary between the rank-and-file and their union, and often between the rank-and-file and their direct managers / supervisors (see Dalton & Todor, 1981 and 1982; Darlington, 2002; Skarlicki & Latham, 1997). The MSR plays a similar and arguably significant role as the support to front-line management and counter-part to union stewards and the union executive. Yet the role of the MSR has been overlooked in the academic literature. We propose that there are actions in which MSRs engage that promote positive IR climate and those that do not. We also propose that different groups in the organization will have different assessments of the IR climate and the effectiveness of an MSR in facilitating a positive climate.

This research is valuable to the academic community in its support of greater understanding of IR climate, as limited research of this type has been conducted. But more than this, the research should help unionized organizations by cuing them to identify behaviors and actions on the part of the MSR(s) that would benefit the labor-management relationship. Finally, the impact of personal antecedents of MSRs may inform recruitment and training strategies for firms.

A Model of Industrial Relations Climate

Dastmalchian (2008) provides a comprehensive review of the development of 'industrial relations climate' as a measurable construct throughout the sociological and industrial relations literature. It is from this work that we draw our basic definitions and assumptions and gather

variables for a model we test in this study. Dastmalchian (2008; 563) states that IR climate is different from, but related to, organizational culture – "with culture signifying deeply rooted values, and climate referring to the atmosphere and the context of relationships." IR climate then refers to the nature and quality of the labor-management relationship (Dastmalchian, 2008) and it can form a bridge between structural characteristics of an organization and industrial relations outcomes (Nicholson, 1979).

Though others have been proposed (see Angle and Perry, 1986; Huszczo and Hoyer, 1994) the IR climate measure developed and tested by Dastmalchian, Blyton and Adamson (1991) is the most prevalent. The complete form of this measure consists of 20 items that represent five aspects of IR climate: fairness, union-management consultation, mutual regard, membership support for unions and union legitimacy (Dastmalchian, 2008; 569-70). Abbreviated versions have been successfully used and validated (i.e. Deery & Iverson, 2005; Wagar, 1997; Wagar & Rondeau, 2002) and the 10-item scale is acknowledged as an effective measure (Deery, Erwin & Iverson, 1999).

Outcomes

In recent decades there has been increased interest in the concept and measures of IR climate as a predictor for organizational outcomes. Studies have found positive relationships between IR climate or labor-management co-operation and outcomes such as organizational performance (Wagar, 1997), employee satisfaction (Wagar & Rondeau, 2002), productivity and customer service quality (Deery & Iverson, 2005), organizational commitment (Deery, Iverson & Erwin, 1994), union loyalty and work attendance (Deery, Erwin & Iverson, 1999; Iverson, Buttigieg & Maguire, 2003), and the success of joint union-management committees (Cooke, 1992). Some recent studies have examined labor climate and union commitment with a focus on

the individual and her relationship with her union (Snape & Redman, 2012). As well, Bacon, Blyton and Dastmalchian (2005) found associations between positive IR climate and collaborative practices between union and management when introducing organizational changes. More recently, Cheung & Wu (2014) examined labor climate in the context of leader-member exchange and participatory management. This latter study is but one example of the expansion of IR climate research across the globe. These studies help to establish the importance of the role that individuals, and the interactions between those individuals, have within the labor-management relationship. As Dastmalchian (2008; 563) concludes, "IR actors make choices about their approach and strategy...strategies based on creating IR climates rooted in trust, fairness and genuine desire to provide support and legitimacy for unions (and management) pay off and need to be an integral part of the process of IR development."

Antecedents

Given that positive IR climate has beneficial outcomes for management, unions, and employees, who then is responsible for creating these climates of trust and fairness? What role is played by management, the union, and employees themselves? The IR climate emerges out of a complex web of relationships that are shaped by the organizational and union structures and ideologies, organizational and labor-management processes, as well as the unique characteristics of the individuals involved. Dastmalchian et al. (1991) first attempted to model this complexity through the operationalization of organizational level concepts such as the organizational context (i.e. centralization and stability), organizational structure (i.e., bureaucracy and flexibility), the human resources context (i.e., HR changes and internal labor markets), and the IR context (i.e., facilitative relations, union characteristics and history, member commitment). Their analysis supported the importance of IR climate in examining organizational outcomes in unionized

environments. They concluded that the impact of organizational and structural variables on organizational outcomes can be better understood when viewed through their impact on perceptions of climate. Therefore, it is the *context* within which the interaction between labor and management takes place that is critical to achieving desired results.

The broader literature reflects three levels of analysis: organizational, work unit and individual employees (Dastmalchian, 2008). Alternatively, Kochan, Katz and McKersie (1986) address strategic, functional, and workplace levels of analysis. A criticism of research in this area is that analysis often spans these different levels in an unsatisfactory manner, challenging conclusions that attribute outcomes at one level to actions at another. Within the IR climate literature it is therefore important to more explicitly examine the context in terms of level of analysis and conduct studies which clearly identify what is happening at specific levels of interaction between labor and management. The study described here focuses on the individual level of analysis and examines the impact of characteristics and behaviors of key labor relations actors at the individual level. These organizational actors have the potential to influence a range of factors that impact IR climate.

At this level, Deery et al. (1999) provided more specificity from the perspective of individual employees. Probing for the antecedents of employee perceptions of IR climate, they modeled personal employee characteristics, work-setting or labor process variables (i.e., autonomy, job satisfaction, distributive justice), and environmental variables (namely union instrumentality). IR climate then acted as a moderator between these antecedents and measures of organizational commitment, union loyalty and absenteeism. The main conclusion was the importance of *union instrumentality*. Employees were more likely to report a positive IR climate if they felt that their union was an effective agent in representing and advancing their interests.

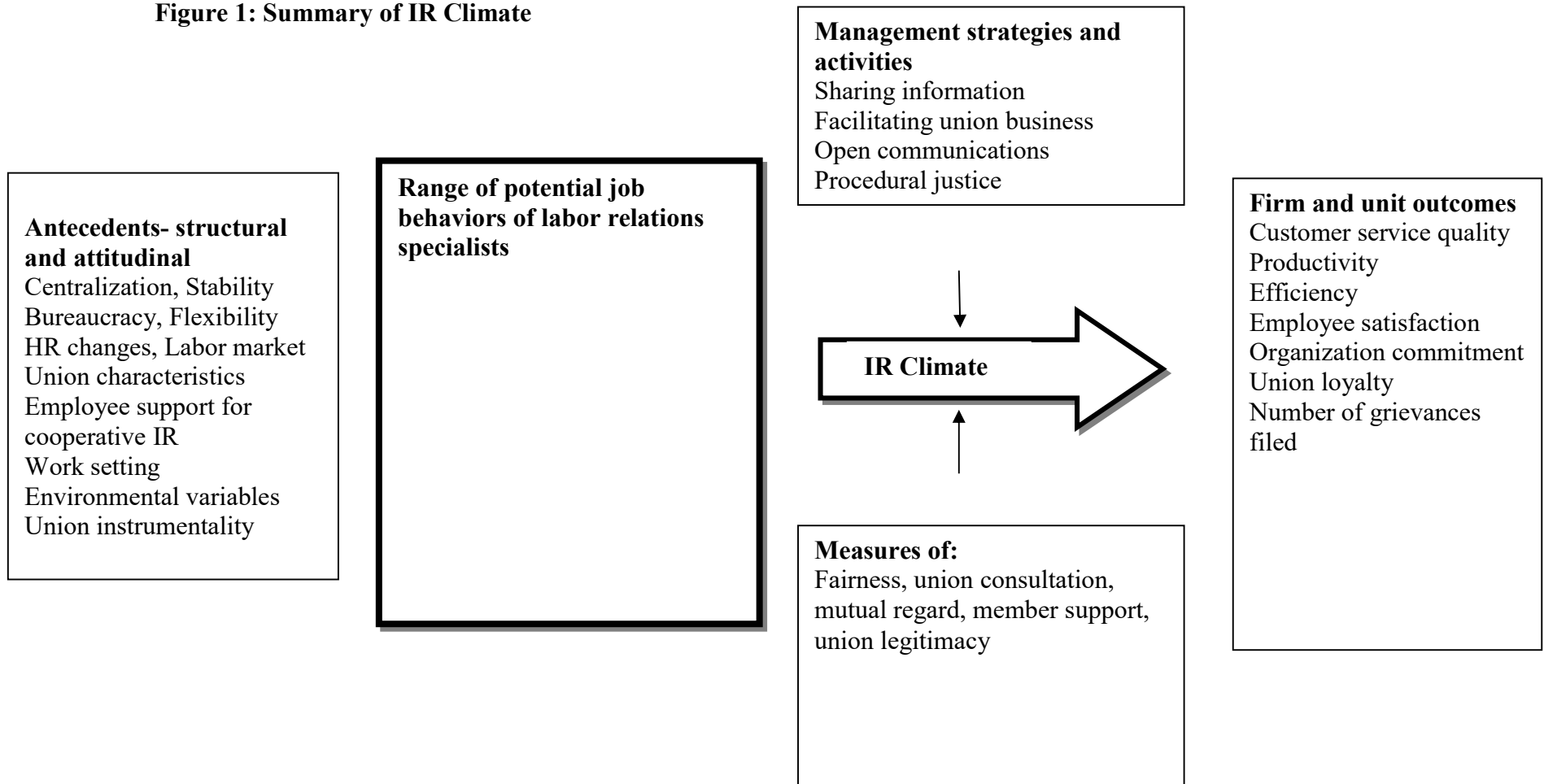Thus unions (through their officials) play a key role in the development of perceptions of labor climate.

However, union officials are just one side of this equation. In order to actively pursue their members' interests, unions must interact with management. As Gordon and Ladd (1990) show, key individuals in establishing the IR climate are *both* the union and the management officials who together set the tone for important interactions such as bargaining and grievance resolution. Indeed, it has been common to measure firm outcomes in the form of grievances filed, but Wagar (1997) notes that little attention is paid to management strategies and activities beyond corporate polices of information sharing and team-based HRM à la High-Performance Work Systems (HPWS) (see Huselid, 1995; Pfeffer & Veiga, 1999; Wood, 1999).

Deery and Iverson (2005) attempt to close this research gap with a new model of the antecedents and consequences of IR climate. They specifically model the activities and ideologies found in interactions of union and management. In their model, management-related variables include: sharing information with the union, facilitating union business, open communication with employees and procedural justice. Union-related variables include: integrative bargaining approach, responsiveness to members, and two measures of union instrumentality. Also included in their model are two employee-related variables that measure the willingness of individual employees to support cooperative labor-management relations. The authors conclude that both management and the union play a role in fostering positive IR climate – specifically that management accepted the legitimacy of the union as a stakeholder in the organization, that the union adopted a problem-solving approach in bargaining, and that there were fair procedures for resolving workplace grievances.

The preceding review of the IR climate literature is synthesized in Figure 1. The figure brings together various components of IR climate with corresponding outcomes at the unit and firm level, to illustrate the relationships defined in the literature to date. We highlight the center boxes to position our study within the IR climate gestalt, contributing an individual level of analysis focused on the MSR.

Figure 1: Summary of IR Climate

Antecedents- structural and attitudinal
Centralization, Stability
Bureaucracy, Flexibility
HR changes, Labor market
Union characteristics
Employee support for cooperative IR
Work setting
Environmental variables
Union instrumentality

Range of potential job behaviors of labor relations specialists

Management strategies and activities
Sharing information
Facilitating union business
Open communications
Procedural justice

IR Climate

Measures of:
Fairness, union consultation, mutual regard, member support, union legitimacy

Firm and unit outcomes
Customer service quality
Productivity
Efficiency
Employee satisfaction
Organization commitment
Union loyalty
Number of grievances filed

The summary above reflects the finding that, broadly speaking, management strategies impact IR climate; how and to what extent these strategies are implemented has not been fully explored. Figure 1 draws attention to the unknown impact on IR climate of individual job behaviors enacted by labor relations specialists. The current study is an additional attempt to understand the "black box" of factors that contribute to positive IR climate by exploring the perspectives of front-line management-side IR specialists. Based on a set of qualitative interviews with MSRs, a case study of a unionized public company, and a national survey of both MSRs and union representatives across Canada, we propose a model that explores how the actions and strategic choices of IR actors relate to individual characteristics and organization structure to promote positive IR climate.

Building a Model – Contributory Data and Methods

Our goal was to refine the summary in Figure 1, which was theoretically based on the extant literature, in order to examine more closely the impact of MSRs on IR climate. We accomplished this through the analysis of three different forms of data gathered at three time periods. The first two studies established measures of individual MSR behaviors and the third study tested these in a national survey.

Developing the model

First, we used data from an interview-based pilot study of MSRs (Weststar, Melenchuk & Nowak, 2008) on the content of MSR jobs. The study included 20 MSRs from across Canada. Participants were solicited through professional networks, the alumni mailing list of the Queen's University Master of Industrial Relations program and snowball sampling. Interviews were semi-

structured and lasted 40-60 minutes. They were audio-recorded and transcribed. In the interviews, the MSRs were asked questions about the content of and relationship between their job duties and performance appraisals. Participants were also asked about their relationship with their union counterpart(s), their views on the general labor relations relationship at their organization, the short version of the IR climate scale (Deery, Erwin & Iverson, 1999) as well as demographic indicators. The sample was 66% female with an age range of 36-56. The length of time in an MSR role ranged from 3-18 years and time at the current organization ranged from five months to 18 years. The sample was evenly balanced between the public and private sector and included provincial and federal public service, transport, mining and education with organizational sizes from 600-15,000 workers. All had established union contracts of 30 years or more. Interview transcripts were analyzed by three researchers who independently identified, and then collectively discussed and reconciled, the thematic codes that emerged from the data. Each interview was also summarized into a job profile for each participant which identified central job duties of the MSR role.

The second source of data that helped to define our model was collected in 2012-13 through collaboration with a large public sector organization – *Company X* - who participated in interviews and helped to develop some of our measures. This organization was intended as a research site for a full empirical test of our model with a matched-pair sample of MSRs and union counterparts. This design would have tested individual level metrics on a robust measure of IR climate in specific organizational units and at the firm level. The employer withdrew at the final hour and that version of the study was suspended. However, our interactions to that point provided valuable information to our model development process and confirmed a number of hypothesized relationships in the model.

The following section summarizes the key insights gained from the first two sources of data vis à vis our model development. We will then proceed to describe the third study that ultimately tested the our model.

Interviews with MSRs – The Importance of Trust and Proactivity:

Over 80% of the interview respondents in the first study mentioned at some point in their interview that they had positive relationships with their counterparts and/or generally positive IR climate at their organization. However, these summary judgements were often made 'on the whole' and closer analysis revealed that the MSRs placed many constraints, conditions and clarifiers on their assessment. This uncertainty is also reflected in the IR climate scale administered to each interviewee; the mean score was 3.0 on a 5-point scale. What was clear across the interviews is that IR climate is dynamic and shifting; positive relations take a long time to develop, yet are quickly disrupted. Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed variables relating to specific job characteristics and behaviors that were perceived to be connected to IR climate through the development of trust and respect. These are discussed below and were used to populate our model.

Tenure

An important theme in the interview data was that positive working relationships between MSRs and their union counterparts was directly attributed to the personal relationships that they had built with those counterparts. These relationships are usually formed over many years, and the majority of MSRs mentioned that trust and respect develop and grow over the course of a relationship:

> There was a bump in the road when he first got in. Which is a normal thing because you don't know exactly what to expect and you have to develop that relationship. You don't know how this person will deal with issues. And how you're both going to work together. It does take some time. (Interviewee I02)

One-quarter of the respondents explicitly said that early in the process of developing a relationship with their counterpart, it was necessary to "feel out" the other:

> I think something that affects labor relations climate is turnover. If it's high I think it's tougher…but slowly over time, as you start to understand each other's personalities and feel each other out, you build trust. (Interviewee I01)

The MSRs stated that this familiarization process is necessary as it acts as a foundation for all future interactions with counterparts and sets the stage for further dealings. One MSR in particular spoke to the effort required to create and maintain positive relationships and the time needed for the impact of those positive interactions to percolate throughout an organization and undo poor relations from the past:

> Understanding the history of the development of the culture of an organization is essential to assessing labor relations climate. Change takes time and although proactive measures may be in place to improve the climate, employee expectations and attitudes change very slowly. For example, 30 years of mistrust and hostile union-management relationships will not change within a couple years just because you have new participants and current progressive practices in place. (Interviewee I05)

We observed a high degree of volatility, or high positional turnover, within the organizations represented by our interviewees. There was turnover among union Presidents and representatives and among MSR clients. Note that the term 'client' was used by a number of MSRs in reference to the internal managers whom they advise and serve in labor relations matters. One MSR discussed this issue a lot and attributed managerial-side turnover to the current state of the labor market and the retirement of baby boomers while they felt that economic volatility, organizational restructuring and specific union policies relating to tenure were contributing factors on the union side. Generally speaking, these changes in personnel were felt to hamper the relationship-building of the MSRs and their union counterparts and reduce the

potential for positive labor climate. Turnover on the union side was cited as a common frustration for a number of the MSRs because every time the union representation changed, the relationship went back to "square one."

> I think every time you get a new [Union] President you have to start all over again…There is a new period of when I'm going to have to break them in or vice versa. (Interviewee I06)

That said, we observed cases where a new face and approach greatly improved relations and others where the legacy of an adversarial relationship remained despite new actors:

> …the personalities and the roles change so often. And that's the company side and also the union side. You may have had a very adversarial style person in the role for a while that could have negatively affected relations for a long time and then just have players switch. There's still a lot of damage done from the previous person. There's a lot of variables that go into it. (Interviewee I01)

Every MSRs to whom we spoke said that the level of achieved familiarity and trust had implications for all formal and informal interactions with their counterparts, including the ability to speak off the record and admit fault. Thus, tenure was included as a variable.

Cooperation

In addition, the prevailing view among the MSRs was that adversarial approaches hindered the union-management relationship. While it was universally acknowledged that MSRs and union representatives will continue to disagree over many employee/management issues, in their accounts MSRs were inclined to focus on and prefer a more cooperative, collaborative relationship. It was felt that this collaborative relationship is necessary for both parties in order for each side to provide a high level of service to their organizations:

> We have some folks on the union side that aren't extreme in their thinking. So they understand that the business has to run for them to make money. We're going to be held to account in terms of how we treat people, what we introduce. But it's not going to be at the expense of the business. (Interviewee P01)

This perception of the importance of cooperative attitudes was reinforced for MSRs when they faced high turnover in union positions. As one MSR articulated, new and perhaps more strident unionists needed to learn to work together with management within the system of labor relations and this came from exposure to front-line work with a management counterpart:

> …you got union officials who don't get communicated to enough from upper management, or [who are] mistrusting management. They sit in the board room and tackle each other. (Interviewee I01)

As a result, Deery & Iverson's (2005) measure of attitudes about the need for cooperation among IR actors was included in the model.

Specific job behaviors, Informality and Proactivity

The narratives of the MSRs we interviewed fit with research that calls for attention to the way IR or HR processes are carried out as unit-specific variables as opposed to operationalizations that just measure the existence of particular bundles of HR practices at the organizational level (see Boxall & Macky, 2009). This is because of the considerable variation in impact on occupational groups, structures and activities across an organization. *How* certain practices are employed is a key to understanding their impact. Reed (1989) also draws our attention to the importance of how and by whom interactions are carried out in a study of union organizers. He finds that the personal characteristics of union organizers influence the outcome of organizing campaigns, even when the tactics used by organizers and employers (factors known to affect vote outcomes) are controlled. This supports the notion that there is value in studying the characteristics of MSRs as well as the tactics they use in managing the union-management relationship. The interviews also resulted in job profiles which were created for each MSR interviewee. The profiles consisted of a list of specific job behaviors that we

developed into variables for the model. Behaviors included: consultation with the union, participation in union-management committees, interpretation of the collective agreement, grievance handling, arbitration, corporate initiatives, and training and coaching of front-line managers and supervisors. The interview analysis also surfaced the key themes of informality and proactivity with respect to how job behaviors are carried out. For instance, interviewees mentioned the value of face to face contact, the feeling of comfort to just 'drop in' to speak to their counterpart (either in person or over the phone), the ability to speak candidly off the record and also the ability to take action to avoid problems rather than repeatedly react to the same issues:

> …the difference between having a relationship where you can chat with someone in person, you can be so much more real in person than you can be over the phone and especially by email. (Interviewee I05)

> I think you can really tell where our relationship is when you can have your public debates, then you can go retreat yourself and the union person back and close the door and then have an honest discussion about what's going on. (Interviewee P01)

> I think anything proactive would definitely be a duty that I think companies could get to the point where they're not doing the day-to-day fire fighting…it seems like you're running around in circles fighting the same issues over and over…A lot of times changes can't be made because you're not the change maker… (Interviewee I01)

Therefore, we included measures which would allow for assessment of the frequency and perceived importance of certain MSR behaviors and also whether the interactions related to job behaviors were conducted by email, phone or face-to-face. We also included a stand-alone measure of the degree of informality in the relationship with union counterparts and a measure of the degree of proactivity in MSR behaviors.

Case of Company X: Support for the Embeddedness of the MSR

As mentioned above, a large public sector organization initially signed on as a research partner and supported the development of this study by participating in interviews and assisting with the development and operationalization of the variables in our model. The Labor Relations Department of the firm also provided insight and suggestions as well as data on their internal operations that helped to shape the measures used in the model. In particular, they shared an internal client satisfaction survey that detailed MSR job behaviors. This corroborated and helped to refine the list of job behaviors that we had built from the MSR interviews discussed above.

Through these research interactions, *Company X* became a test case in our model development process. This case illustrated the need for a model that could capture and triangulate complex relationships. As described below, it was clear from this phase of the study development that the actions of the Labor Relations Department intersect those of operational management, unions and employees at many places and create many interaction points for the feelings related to IR climate to arise.

Company X is a large public sector organization that operates across Canada. There are 5 bargaining agents who have national collective agreements with *Company X.* The Labor Relations Department employs over 100 people and is subdivided into 6 regional offices and one national office. Each regional office is headed by a regional specialist Manager and staffed by 7-8 labor relations representatives. The work of these representatives is designated by collective agreement rather than sub-regions or specific tasks; therefore, the MSRs deal exclusively with one union across all job functions and all terms of the collective agreement. These individuals are labor relations generalists in this sense. The national office is home to the Head of the Labor Relations Department as well as a Director for each collective agreement, a Director who oversees the regional Managers and one floating Director who is often devoted to strategic

issues. The national office focuses on collective bargaining and issues of national concern or implication while the regional offices deal with the issues that arise through daily administration of the collective agreement(s).

At *Company X*, the MSR interacts with all levels of operational management and also has contact with local union executives and regional union representatives. MSRs also consider other internal functional units such as human resources (HR), public relations (PR) and senior management as their 'clients' when labor-related matters are concerned.

The case of *Company X* shows that each individual involved in union-management interactions has the potential to influence relationships at various levels of the organization and, subsequently, to have small or large impacts on perceptions of IR climate. To generalize, within the operational chain of command, individual employees interact with each other and with their direct supervisors/managers who then interact with the managerial ranks above them, and so on up to the head of the company. Within the union, a similar process occurs with individual employees interacting with elected representatives such as stewards or committee members, those members interacting with the local executive, and the local executive (if applicable) interacting with larger parent unions. Between these groups, union stewards and committee members will have regular contact with front-line and perhaps mid-level managers. Union executive members or regional representatives will have more contact with mid-level to upper level managers and representatives from parent unions will interact with members of senior management. In most medium- to large-sized enterprises there are also tangential interactions among all these individuals and various levels of the HR department. A specific component of HR departments, oftentimes forming their own functional unit, is the labor relations department where MSRs are situated.
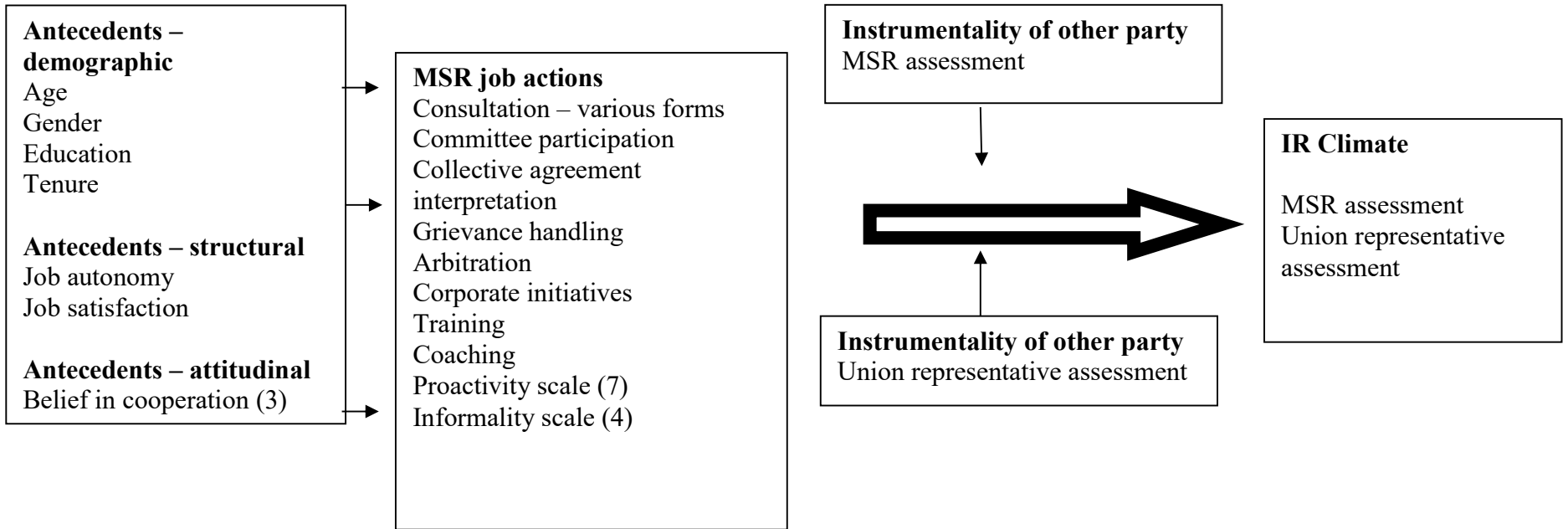
The interactions between and among the above groups can also take many forms. In all unionized environments there are formalized procedures for interactions around grievances, arbitration and bargaining. Additionally, there may be provision for joint labor-management committees on various topics and these occur with a medium degree of formality and structure (for instance, Joseph, 2003; Hall, Forrest, Sears & Carlan, 2006; Shrey, Hursh, Gallina, Slinn & White, 2006). However, there are many explicit and implicit informal interactions surrounding these formal mechanisms. Add to this the constant day-to-day informal interactions on operational matters and very quickly the 'locus' of interaction for the development of IR climate perceptions becomes impossible to specify. In actual fact it is the overall impact of all of these interactions, informal to formal and at all levels of management and union hierarchies, that contribute to a final sense of IR climate.

In order to conduct an assessment at the level of the individual and focus on the as yet understudied role of the MSR, an adjustment to the IR climate model presented in Figure 1 is necessary in order to include the new variables identified in our interviews and case study data.

Coupled with the many IR climate models currently in the literature, the preceding exploration of the interviews with MSRs and the labor relations context at *Company X* generated rich insights that permitted the development of a preliminary labor climate model with the MSR as the focus (Figure 2). We proposed that three groups of antecedents (demographic, structural and attitudinal) impact the actions and activities that the MSR carries out on the job and these actions and activities then impact the IR climate of the organization. Demographic antecedents include the typical variables of gender and age as well as tenure (which we saw was important from the MSR interviews). We also include a measure for education. This is also a standard

demographic variable, but has the added potential for import because of the growth in specialized education in the field of labor relations. We anticipate that this advanced training may impact how MSRs do their job. The structural antecedents of job autonomy and job satisfaction were retained from Deery et al. (1999) and the attitudinal antecedent of views on about labor-management cooperation was taken from Deery and Iverson (2005). We include MSR instrumentality as a moderating factor of the impact of MSR actions on IR climate to balance the inclusion of union instrumentality. As Deery et al. (1999) found, employee perceptions of union instrumentality are related to IR climate. We extend this reasoning to propose that the perceptions of instrumentality that each side has for their counterpart (i.e., how well the union representative thinks the MSR is doing their job and vice versa) will impact their working relationship and therefore IR climate.

Figure 2: Proposed Model of MSR Impact on IR Climate

Antecedents – demographic	MSR job actions	Instrumentality of other party	IR Climate

Antecedents – demographic
Age
Gender
Education
Tenure

Antecedents – structural
Job autonomy
Job satisfaction

Antecedents – attitudinal
Belief in cooperation (3)

MSR job actions
Consultation – various forms
Committee participation
Collective agreement interpretation
Grievance handling
Arbitration
Corporate initiatives
Training
Coaching
Proactivity scale (7)
Informality scale (4)

Instrumentality of other party
MSR assessment

Instrumentality of other party
Union representative assessment

IR Climate

MSR assessment
Union representative assessment

Survey Pilot Study: A Test of a Model of MSR Impact on IR Climate

The third set of data, which tested our model, was collected through an online survey of MSRs and union representatives across Canada in October 2013. The survey instrument was administered through Survey Monkey and used snowball and network sampling techniques. The authors drew upon academic and industry contacts to reach as broad a population as possible, sending 75 personalized invitations to the survey to individuals in the field of labor relations. As well, targeted invitations were sent to labor relations programs requesting distribution to their alumni and current students; LinkedIn contacts in labor relations were invited to participate by direct message and through public posts with a link to the survey, reaching 800 distinct connections; personalized invitations were sent to all Provincial and Federal labor councils, with copies to the district labor council branches across Canada for distribution to their memberships and the Canadian Bar Association Labor Law group was also invited to participate. The unions at *Company X* were also invited to maintain their participation. These participants were directed to one of four surveys tailored to either MSRs or Union Representatives, each in English or French. The survey instruments were written in English and translated by Translation Services at the L'Institut Français, University of Regina. The translated surveys were tested by a sample of native French and English speaking academics for clarity and time to completion. The surveys posed identical questions, simply replacing union with management-side labor relations department labels.

Results from the online survey

We obtained completed surveys from 384 responses (218 union, 166 MSR), the majority of whom were English speakers (207 union, 162 MSR). Of these responses 273 included

complete measures of the dependent variable (climate). Data were examined for normal

distributions and found to be acceptable for further analysis. Table 1 includes operationalization

details and descriptive statistics for the variables examined[1]. To completely explore the potential

relationships between variables in different parts of the model, we conducted a number of

correlation, t-test and regression analyses on sub-elements of our proposed model. These are

summarized below and in Tables 1-5, but first we will describe the participants in our sample

and discuss some ad hoc comparisons between the MSR and union representative sub-samples. It

is important to recall that due to the withdrawal of Company X, we did not have a matched

sample of respondents in this survey. As such, we could not conduct a full test of the model as

depicted in Figure 2 because the climate and instrumentality assessments of MSR counterparts

could not be mapped to job behaviours of those MSRs. As well, a full regression of all elements

of the model produced lackluster results due to the small sample size and large number of

variables and its results are not reported. This aspect of our study represents an opportunity for

further research using a larger sample or one matched within a single organization.

Table 1: Variable Operationalization and Descriptive Statistics

Variable (all items measured on a 6-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) unless otherwise indicated	**N**	**Mean**	**SD**
IR Climate (10-item scale from Deery, Erwin & Iverson, 1999; α = 95; sample item: A sense of fairness is associated with management dealings in this place)	273	3.27	1.25
Job autonomy (single item: I have a lot of say in deciding how to do my job)	91 MSR only	4.03	0.80
Job satisfaction (single-item: I am satisfied with my job)	93 MSR only	4.73	1.10
Cooperation (*3-item scale* from Deery & Iverson 2005; α .68: a) It is important for unions and management to work together, b) Unions should not work too closely with management (reverse), c) It is every employee's duty to ensure that the relationship between	205	4.81	1.00

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[1] Although not currently in a repository, the authors will be happy to share variables and data to support further investigation in this realm. Please contact the corresponding author.

the union and management is good)			
Informality (*4-item scale*; α = .81; a) I often speak to union clients 'off the record' to resolve issues; b) I often speak to management clients 'off the record' to resolve issues; c) Overall, I have a trusting and respectful relationship with my union clients (or the MSR) ; d) Overall, I have a trusting and respectful relationship with my management clients (or managers))	186	3.58	1.41
Proactivity (*7-item scale;* α .91: Sample items: I initiate contact with management or union clients when I foresee a problem or an issue; I often take actions in my job that prevent problems from arising in the first place)	66 MSR only	4.98	1.05
Instrumentality of counterpart MSR evaluates union rep (*7-item scale*; α .93; Sample items: Issues that are raised are addressed and/or resolved quickly, The Union rep is available when I need him/her; The Union rep provides adequate answers to ad hoc inquiries)	88	4.09	1.23
Union rep evaluates MSR (same scale with different referent; α .944)	152	3.39	1.33
Gender (categorical)	396		
Male		0.25	0.43
Female		0.25	0.43
Prefer not to disclose		0.50	0.56
Age (continuous)	384	46.3	8.15
Tenure with the organization (continuous)	205	13.42	10.3
Education (categorical)	205		
Below Masters (Union N=78; MSR N=42)		0.63	0.48
Masters or more (Union N=42; MSR N=43)		0.37	0.48
Workplace sector (categorical)	328		
Public		0.65	0.48
Private		0.30	0.46
Other (incl. both)		0.05	0.22

Comparison of MSR and Union Representatives

Our data paints the following snapshot of the typical 'labor relations actor'. On the management side, MSRs were on average 44 years old, 60% work in the private sector, and they were just as likely to be male as female. Half of our respondents were front-line MSRs and the other half were more senior managers. On the union side, representatives were on average 48 years old, almost three times more likely to work in the public sector, and just as likely to be male as female. Slightly more of our respondents were higher-level union officials as opposed to

front-line stewards/representatives. Across both management- and union-side, organization size ranged from fewer than 100 unionized members to more than 10,000. Respondents came from across Canada, with Ontario dominating, and Atlantic Canada, Quebec, and northern Canada underrepresented. We took advantage of the evenness of the management/union responses in the sample to conduct some ad hoc comparative analysis, which we discuss below.

We observed differences in the responses from MSRs and union representatives. These are summarized in Table 2. MSRs rated IR climate more favorably than their union counterparts. There were no differences in climate ratings based on gender or workplace sector (public or private). MSRs also had a more positive attitude towards cooperation in the workplace compared with union representatives.

Interestingly, there was no significant difference between MSRs and union reps in their rating of their counterpart's instrumentality which indicates that they feel similarly about their counterpart's effectiveness. Recall that this measure is the evaluation by each respondent of their frontline counterpart; we do not have a matched sample. The questions relating to proactivity and job autonomy were only asked of the MSRs so no comparisons are possible.

Table 2: Means of Key Variables for MSR and Union Representatives

	Means		SD	T-test
IR Climate	MSR:	3.88	1.15	$t(271) = -7.96^{***}$
	Union Rep:	2.79	1.10	
Cooperation	MSR:	5.30	1.06	$t(204) = -6.93^{***}$
	Union Rep:	4.46	0.66	
Instrumentality	MSR:	4.09	1.23	$t(238)=-4.06^{***}$
	Union Rep:	3.38	1.33	
Informality	MSR:	4.47	1.28	$t(184)=-7.12^{***}$
	Union Rep:	3.09	1.24	
Proactivity	MSR:	5.08	.91	n/a
	Union Rep:	not measured		
Autonomy	MSR:	4.04	.80	n/a
	Union Rep:	not measured		

*** significant at the 0.001 level

Table 3 Correlation Matrix

		Climate	Cooperation	Instrumentality	Proactivity	Informality	Job Autonomy	Job Satisfaction	Age	Tenure	Education
Climate		1									
	N	273									
Cooperation		.485**	1								
	N	206	206								
Instrumentality		.509**	.339**	1							
	N	234	206	240							
Proactivity		.430**	0.164	.281*	1						
	N	66	61	62	66						
Informality		.564**	.566**	.446**	.730**	1					
	N	186	181	182	66	186					
Job Autonomy		.255*	-0.097	0.266*	.510**	.371**	1				
	N	91	84	86	64	64	91				
Job satisfaction		.345**	0.211	.271*	.329**	0.059	.345**	1			
	N	93	86	88	64	64	91	93			
Age		-0.021	0.051	0.061	0.144	.148*	-0.083	0.123	1		
	N	273	206	240	66	186	91	93	384		
Tenure		-.310**	-0.122	-0.159*	-0.046	-0.110	-.218*	0.116	.576**	1	
	N	205	205	205	60	180	83	85	205	205	
Education		.177*	0.053	0.108	0.009	0.108	0.036	-0.010	-.248**	-.402**	1
	N	205	205	205	60	180	83	85	205	205	205

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Correlation and Regression Results

Examination of the relationships in the data indicate support for and build upon existing theory on IR climate. In our correlation analyses (Table 3) we see that the structural factors of job autonomy and job satisfaction, the measure of attitude towards labor-management cooperation, and the job behavior variables of instrumentality of counterparts, the degree of comfort in counterpart relationships (informality) and a proactive approach by the MSR to IR issues are each individually related to positive IR climate. The assessment of informality demonstrated one of the strongest positive relationships with our dependent variable of IR climate.

We also found evidence of relationships across our key independent variables. For instance, structural constraint in the form of lower job autonomy was related to the MSR taking a reactionary approach to IR issues and holding more formal relationships with counterparts. As well, holding an attitude supporting cooperation in the labor-management relationship was related to measures of informal relationships and counterpart instrumentality. We had attempted to include specific MSR tasks or job activities in our model (recall Figure 2); however, only frequent contact by phone had a slight positive relationship with climate (data not shown). Regarding instrumentality, we find that the participating MSRs are not matched to their own specific union counterpart in this study. Rather we have taken both perspectives on the construct as a larger sample and demonstrate that the measure for counterpart instrumentality is correlated with climate such that both MSRs and union reps who feel that their counterpart is doing their job well report higher ratings of climate.

Table 4: Regression Results for Independent Variables and IR Climate: MSRs

	Regression coefficient	t-statistic
Instrumentality	0.29*	2.37
Informality	0.20	1.61
Proactivity	0.23	1.88
Cooperativeness	0.19	1.52

Model 1: R^2 .087; N=61; * significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 5: Regression Results for Independent Variables and IR Climate: Union Reps

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Regression coefficient	t-statistic	Regression coefficient	t-statistic
Informality	0.43***	5.23	0.31**	3.56
Instrumentality			0.30**	3.46
Cooperativeness			0.17	1.76

Model 1: R^2 .188; Model 2 R^2 .264 N=120; **, *** significant at the 0.01 and 0.001 levels, respectively.

When we conducted regression analyses of our model, however a number of these relationships fell away. We may conclude from this analysis that although there are positive relationships across all key variables and IR climate, in the case of MSRs only their view of the instrumentality of their union representative counterpart retains a statistically significant relationship with IR climate. In contrast, the regression model for Union reps reveals that instrumentality and informality both retain relationships to positive IR climate.

A number of the personal characteristics variables also produced interesting results. Organizational tenure had a negative correlation with IR climate while education had a positive correlation. However, neither of these held in regression models (data not shown). Regarding education, we had anticipated a potential relationship with MSR behavior due to the proliferation of higher education programs in employment relations. We broke our sample into those with a

Master's degree or higher and those with less education than a Masters degree because specialized education in labor relations now tends to take place at the graduate level in Canada.[2] Of surprise to us, we found no significant relationships between education and any of our scales for MSR attitudes and behavior (cooperativeness, informality, proactivity or autonomy).

Discussion

This study drew from three unique research approaches (interviews, single case study and national self-report survey) and their resulting data samples to develop a model of the impact of front-line management-side labor relations representatives (MSRs) in shaping the industrial relations (IR) climate of their workplaces. The data is broadly applicable to the North American context since labor relations structures at the firm and union level are similar in the two counties, despite lower union density in the United States. Several industries and employers span the border, notably in the automotive sector as an example.

Starting with a model of IR climate from the academic literature (Figure 1), we applied our interview and case study data to revise the model to one that considered the actions and behaviors of the MSR at the individual level (Figure 2). A subsequent test of different facets of this model using the national survey data informed the final most parsimonious model (Figure 3). Here, we propose that personal characteristics of the MSR (such as education, age, tenure), structural characteristics of the job (such as job autonomy) and attitudes of the MSR (such as the importance of cooperation in labor relations) are antecedents to the specific actions carried out by MSRs. Second, we propose that these antecedents impact not so much the individual

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[2] French language universities are an exception; some Quebec universities offer specialized undergraduate programs in labor and employment relations, and the province regulates both an HR and an IR professional designation. However, since so few of our sample chose to take the French survey, we made an assumption that most participants received an English language post-secondary education

behaviors in which MSRs engage (as there is relatively high consistency across the MSRs in all of our samples in terms of job tasks), but the way in which these behaviors are carried out. These include measures of instrumentality (as rated by a direct counterpart), the degree of informality (or comfort) in the relationships with counterparts, and the degree to which MSR actions model a proactive versus a reactive stance to managing labor relations issues. Third, we propose that these measures of the quality and nature of the MSR actions (instrumentality, informality, proactivity) will all impact labor climate.   In short, it may not be *what* the MSR does, but *how* they do it that matters.

This conclusion begs a deeper discussion of MSR education, training and capacity. Though research has suggested that training of union stewards leads to changes in behavior that impact cooperative labor relations (Wheeler & DeAngelis, 1982) and that education influences IR climate (Deery, Erwin & Iverson, 1999), we did not find a strong relationship between educational attainment and work practices, attitudes, and IR climate in our survey. It may be that the sample was too small to show effect, but it may also be that the content and approach of specialized industrial relations and/or human resources education is not addressing these dimensions of on-the-ground practice. As scholars and teachers in the field of industrial relations, we contribute directly to the body of knowledge, theory and practice of workplace relations and to the skills base of future practitioners in the field, while at the same time supporting institutional initiatives for higher education in IR and HR. Therefore, further study into the nature and impact of specialized IR and HR education on IR climate is warranted.

Conversely or additionally, it could be that structural elements in the design of work and workplaces may be impeding realization of the full value of investment in specialized training in IR. MSRs are management employees and generally considered to be charged with

implementing management policy in the workplace. Theoretically, at least, they are appointed on merit and so qualifications, experience, capabilities, and specialized skills should predict success. Given that the literature cited earlier in this paper demonstrates the value of positive IR climate for firm outcomes, we are left to wonder why the role of MSRs has not evolved to more fully capitalize on their inherent human capital. Why have organizations not recognized the structural barriers that inhibit MSRs' ability to alter their workplace practices and so allow them move away from reactive behaviors to engage in the authentic relationship-building tasks that MSRs know would improve IR climate? These are questions for further study.

Just being in a union appears to hamper the climate rating, though this could be a reflection of an ideological stance. Our findings for instrumentality, however, indicate that there is *not* a systematic difference between the perceived use-value of the two groups that would produce consistently more negative views on the part of union representatives. This challenges the ideological argument and raises additional questions about structural factors that may impact the labor relationship in the face of or despite positive personal relationships. As well, the ratings of the effectiveness (instrumentality) of one's front-line counterpart appear to be related to both cooperativeness and positive labor climate. These findings suggest that there is more to explore in the relationship between front-line workers in labor relations vis á vis the overall labor climate of a workplace.

Figure 3: Revised model of MSR impact on IR Climate
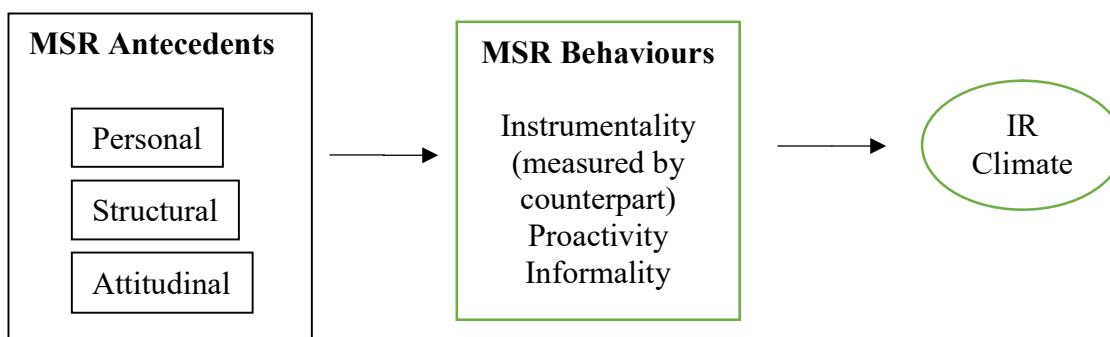
Limitations and Future Research

Our study has a number of limitations. First, we were constrained by our inability to obtain a single organization research site with both management and union participation which would have produced matched MSR-union representative samples.

As a result, the resulting third study, a national poll of union- and management-side labor relations representatives, is weakened somewhat in its ability to explore IR climate in-depth in one organization; the ability to map MSRs' actions to a climate response from union reps; and the inability to assess whether MSR actions impact their union counterpart's assessment of MSR instrumentality. As well, although we collected this data, we could not test whether coaching and training activities on the part of MSRs and directed at front-line manager 'clients' had an impact on the IR climate. This would be more possible in a matched samples study in particular if data was also collected from front-line managers. We would recommend this for future research. To further probe the 'black box' we would also recommend additional qualitative research about the specific job activities of MSRs and, as shown above, the structural constraints MSRs may face in enacting their jobs and the nature and content of specialized IR training.

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