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Respective Roles of Employer Strategies
and Institutions on Job Quality:
The case of household services sector in
Belgium

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Summary

This article analyses human resource strategies within the firms, and their interactions with the institutional context, in new services – personal and household services – and how they respectively contribute to employment integration of low qualified workers. Our contribution develops an original framework articulating neo institutionalist approaches and the social regulation theory allowing an in-depth understanding of human resource management, considered as a set of social norms partly determined by the regulatory context and subject to internal interactions between social actors. Results indicate only limited institutional pressures on human resource management practices, what emphasizes the management leeway in defining human resource management. Organizations operating within a similar institutional context develop diverse human resource practices, which in turn generate contrasted outcomes in terms of job quality. This leads us to stress the diverse modes of management developed by organizations in the sector.

Keywords: Human Resource Management, Job quality, Neo institutionalism, New Services, Social Regulation Theory

JEL Classification: C61, etc.

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RESPECTIVE ROLES OF EMPLOYER STRATEGIES AND INSTITUTIONS ON JOB QUALITY

THE CASE OF HOUSEHOLD SERVICES SECTOR IN BELGIUM

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This article analyses human resource strategies within the firms, and their interactions with the institutional context, in new services – personal and household services – and how they respectively contribute to employment integration of low qualified workers. Our contribution develops an original framework articulating neo institutionalist approaches and the social regulation theory allowing an in-depth understanding of human resource management, considered as a set of social norms partly determined by the regulatory context and subject to internal interactions between social actors. Results indicate only limited institutional pressures on human resource management practices, what emphasizes the management leeway in defining human resource management. Organizations operating within a similar institutional context develop diverse human resource practices, which in turn generate contrasted outcomes in terms of job quality. This leads us to stress the diverse modes of management developed by organizations in the sector.

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1. Introduction

The development of the sector of personal and household services in the European Union, with its population of low-qualified workers, emphasizes the interest of looking more closely at working conditions and the quality of employment in this type of fast-growing economic activities (European Commission 2013, Eurofound 2012). Research has demonstrated the role that national level institutions play in determining job quality, and notably for low wage and low-qualified workers in new service activities (Batt and al., 2010; Doellgast and al., 2009; Gautié and Schmitt, 2010). However, research data (Batt and Nohara, 2009) also established that some variation may occur from one firm to another within a given institutional context.

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This paper aims at looking at the influence of institutions but also of employer strategies on job quality, by the means of an analysis of these issues in a number of companies within the specific sector of personal and household services.

With a view to examine the role played, respectively, by institutions and by employer strategies, the paper draws on a conceptual framework articulating neo institutionalist contributions (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; DiMaggio and Powell, 1997; Hall and Soskice, 2001) with the social regulation theory (Reynaud, 1988; De Terssac, 2003). Neo institutionalist authors share the idea that the institutional context is key in determining in-company decisions and practices. In such a perspective, organizations would tend to develop homogenous strategies and behavior when they belong to a common institutional environment. Yet, employers are not completely bound by the institutional context (Klarsfeld et al., 2012). If there are trends towards homogeneity (DiMaggio and Powell, 1997), one also observes a degree of diversity in practices at company-level within the same institutional context. Reynaud's social regulation theory brings an interesting explanation to this phenomenon, emphasizing social actors' leeway as well as their interplay and interactions, and how these shape or reshape external rules related to the institutional context.

The model developed in Belgium, the "service voucher" scheme, is a major vector in creating regular work for low-qualified workers in a number of pre-existing or newly created companies. Two sector-level joint committees negotiate collective agreements for these companies. The paper analyses diversity among companies that implement HR policies, in the sector, under the same committees, before examining the effect of these practices on job quality.

The article is divided into five sections. The first one sets out the conceptual framework, building up from neo-institutionalist contributions and social regulation theory. The second section outlines the key concepts for understanding job quality and human resource management strategies. Section three describes the empirical field explored - the "service voucher scheme" in Belgium - and the methodology used to analyse the fieldwork data. The last two sections respectively summarize and discuss the major research findings.

2. Institutional context, isomorphism and diversity of firm practices

To what extent are human resource strategies, and their impact on job quality, similar between firms that act within the same institutional context? To what extent, by contrast, are they distinct? To tackle these questions, this section draws upon two main theoretical contributions: neo-institutionalism, on the one hand, and the social regulation theory, on the other hand.

2.1. The Role of institutions: Towards homogeneity?

Neo-institutionalist contributions share the common assumption that the institutional context is key in determining management strategies within organizations. In this view, organizations are 'embedded' in a wider environment that includes social practices, norms, rules and values, commonly referred to as 'institutions' (North, 1990) or 'organizational field' (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; DiMaggio and Powell, 1997). The approach emphasizes a tendency for organizations to develop similar strategies when they belong to the same institutional context.

Similarly, yet from a different angle, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) observe that in a specific organizational field, "*there is an inexorable push towards homogenization*" due to isomorphic pressures (DiMaggio and Powell 1983:148). In this perspective, Paauwe and Boselie (2003) stress the relevance of sociological neo-institutionalism to explain how the institutional setting shape human resource policies. They examine thoroughly the different institutional mechanisms – mimetic, coercive and normative (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) – that are likely to affect the employment relationship and associated human resource policies and practices (Paauwe and Boselie, 2003). In their view, mimetic mechanisms refer to the "*imitation of strategies and practices of competitors as a result of uncertainty, or fashionable fads in the field of management*", coercive mechanisms concern "*the influence of the trade unions, the labour legislation, and the government*", normative mechanisms characterize the effect played by the professionalization of some groups of workers (formal education, professional networks) (Paauwe and Boselie, 2003: 60). These isomorphic pressures favour homogeneity of HR strategies and policies across organizations belonging to a specific institutional environment (Paauwe and Boselie, 2003). Accordingly, the leeway of organization-level management in developing and implementing HR systems and strategies is limited by institutional pressures and constraints (Boon et al., 2009: 495).

Neo-institutionalists in political economy, influenced by Hall and Soskice (2001), examine how national institutional contexts and companies interact and how this interaction influences managerial choice. For the 'Varieties of Capitalism' approach, organizations tend to develop similar strategies and adopt the same behaviour when they belong to the same institutional context. Hall and Soskice outline five spheres that condition strategic interactions: industrial relations, vocational training and education, employees, corporate governance and inter-firms relations. Organizations must develop relationships with these different spheres in order to solve coordination problems, often considered to be critical for the development of their key competencies, and act efficiently (Hall & Soskice, 2001). Managerial choices, including human resource management policies, result from coordination mechanisms between the organization and its context. Although the "Varieties of

Capitalism” approach has been used to apprehend national influences, it provides a useful conceptual framework to understand interactions between managerial strategies developed by the firms and institutional variables within a specific national environment.

The different types of neo-institutionalist contributions emphasize how interactions between institutions and firm are decisive in determining what happens within the firm. Yet, organizations are not entirely constrained by the institutional environment in which they operate. As some argue, employer strategies are not completely bound by the institutional context, neither are they totally free to act (Klarsfeld et al., 2012). As emphasized by Lounsbury (2008), there is a need to consider new perspectives for institutional analysis, by looking at “organizational heterogeneity and practice variation” (Lounsbury, 2008, p.351). In line with those considerations, there is clearly a need to broaden the scope of neo institutionalism approaches and provide a deeper understanding of the diversity of strategies and practices between organizations that share a similar environment, and to consider further the strategies developed by the different actors within the organization.

2.2. Diversity across organizations: a ‘Reynaldian’ approach

Reynaud’s social regulation theory provides an interesting insight to explain variations in human resource strategies and job quality across organizations within a common institutional environment. Social regulation theory (Reynaud, 1988; Reynaud, 1989; De Terssac, 2003) focuses on social actors’ leeway, their interplay and interactions in the organization. In line with the strategic analysis developed by Crozier and Friedberg (1977), Reynaud develops a theory of social regulation defined as « *actors’ ability to create rules and to consent to them* » (De Terssac, 2003: 20, our translation). In this perspective, Reynaud investigates the mechanisms that contribute to the creation and diffusion of the rules in the organization (Amblard et al., 1996; De Terssac, 2003).

The core concepts in social regulation theory are ‘rules’ and ‘regulation’. Rules refer to negotiated constraints defined by social actors (De Terssac, 2003; Reynaud, 1989) and are seen as guiding principles, a “guideline for action” (Reynaud, 1997: XVI). Reynaud (1999) as well as Havard and Krohmer (2008) emphasize the constraining nature of rules and argue that ‘the rules of the game’ do not result from individual preferences nor interests (Reynaud, 1991; Havard and Krohmer, 2008), but rather from interactions between social actors. Rules at play are not stable, nor fully constraining, for the members of the organization. Considering the relatively unstable nature of rules (Reynaud, 1988), it is essential to look at the process of regulation to understand how rules are created, transformed and modified as the result of actors’ leeway and interactions.

Reynaud identifies two sources of regulation: control regulation and autonomous regulation. Control regulation relates to any production of rules designed by a specific group to constrain others. Autonomous regulation refers to the creation of rules by a group for itself. As an example, when management defines schedules that employees have to respect, this takes part in control regulation. When employees define, for themselves, what names they use to designate the bosses, this is autonomous regulation. In practice, the two types of regulation interact: effective working time on the shop floor, for instance, results from implicit transactions or arrangements between time constraints defined by management and what employees themselves consider as acceptable working time.

From such a perspective, human resource management practices cannot be considered as embedded only within a specific institutional frame made up of wider norms and rules. They are, rather, subject to interplay between social actors. Social regulation theory stresses the importance to consider actors' interactions and negotiations in order to understand how 'the rules of the game' (Reynaud, 1989), at play within the organization, are determined.

Considering the two theoretical inputs together, one can conclude that the institutional context sets a number of rules and norms that weight on human resource management (non-discrimination, wages levels, compulsory days of training, etc.) but these may be interpreted, or even discarded, by management. Within the company, those external rules interact with the norms set up by management and employees themselves. As an example, non-discrimination norms may stem from the institutional context, and particularly from the law, but social norms at play within the company may differ fairly largely from official norms, as soon as internal players apply their local rules in terms of discrimination, deciding – implicitly or explicitly – to reject any member from a given community, for instance.

Accordingly, isomorphic pressures meet actors' autonomy and their role in defining the rules and norms that they apply within their own organisation: human resource policies and job quality will therefore include some degree of isomorphic pressure, but also be specific to a given company because local actors interpret external norms and create their own set of local rules. The question remains, then: what is the degree of isomorphic homogeneity of HR policies and job quality between firms belonging to the same institutional context? What is, corollary, the degree of diversity between those firms?

3. Human resource management strategies and job quality outcomes

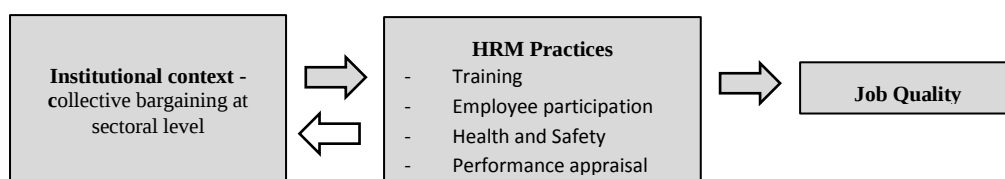
In order to grasp the diversity of employer strategies and their impact in terms of job quality, we refer to research coordinated by Gauthier and Schmitt (2010) on low-wage work. With a view to operationalize the notion of job quality, we use their work to contrast 'high road' and 'low road' in human resource strategies. Gauthier and Schmitt do not make a clear distinction between human resource strategies on the one hand and job quality on the other hand. Indeed, 'high road' strategies are associated with higher wages, functional flexibility featuring high training, attention brought to working conditions and health and safety, whereas 'low road' strategies are related to non-standard forms of employment, increased pace of work, lower wages, etc. (Gauthier and Schmitt, 2010).

That is why Guest's work on HRM performance is useful here to make a clear distinction between "HR practices" on the one hand and "outcomes" on the other hand (Guest, 1997). If we focus on HR strategies, regardless of their outcomes in terms of job quality, high road HR strategies can be characterized as high training policies, a wage policy setting wages above the market, well-developed communication policy, a long-term career policy. We assume that those strategies will be more likely to favour job quality. By contrast, low road HRM strategies refer to rare training, a wage policy limited to the allocation of a minimum wage, limited communication policy, labour force managed on an ad hoc and short-term basis.

Exploring the notion of "job quality" emphasized the difficulty to apprehend such a multidimensional concept (Muñoz de Bustillo et al., 2009; Davoine et al., 2008). Although themes surrounding this notion received a growing interest in the last decades, so far there is no consensus on a definition of this notion in Europe (Davoine et al., 2008). The notion of job quality covers a large number of factors. Ten dimensions identified in the literature have been used in this research to create a general indicator: autonomy, physical working conditions, wage, employment security, skills development, social environment, hours of work and flexibility, work-family balance, career opportunities, and voice.

Accordingly, if diversity of managerial practices is confirmed, we can assume that job quality outcomes tend to differ in relation to the strategies implemented internally. High road HRM strategies should therefore tend to favour a higher job quality outcome.

Figure 1. Framework for the analysis: respective influence of institutional variables and HRM practices on job quality



4. Methodology

4.1. Hypotheses

This article seeks to test two main hypotheses. First, integrating neo institutionalist contributions and the social regulation theory, one can expect that although there is a tendency to homogenization due to isomorphic pressures, organizations belonging to a similar institutional environment will develop differentiated human resources practices. Second, if diversity of managerial practices is confirmed, we can assume that job quality outcomes tend to differ in relation to the strategies implemented internally. The second hypothesis then states that differentiated human resource strategies generate contrasted outcomes in terms of job quality.

4.2. The case of 'service voucher' in Belgium

The 'service voucher' system is an interesting empirical field to analyse the diversity of HRM policies and job quality because it represents the growing importance of new 'front-line service work' as conceptualised by Bélanger and Edwards (2013), but also because it includes a large proportion of low-wage workers with little qualification.

Following public authorities impetus, the 'service voucher' scheme was introduced in Belgium in 2001 (Henry et al, 2009), then funded by the federal State and the Regions. The service voucher system in Belgium gathers approximately 835,000 users, more than 2,700 enterprises and 149,827 workers (IdeaConsult, 2013).

It is organised by the means of vouchers or coupons: users pay for coupons that allow them, « with the help of the financial aid from the state, in the form of subsidy, to pay for housework services » (Nyssens et al., 2009: , 2) provided by companies that employ workers. Users who want to use housework services purchase vouchers at the price of 9 € each. Each voucher costs in fact 22, 04 € (SPF Emploi). The Federal government contributes and pays for the difference in order to cover charges such as wage, supervision, training of workers (Defourny et al., 2010). The system therefore works with a specific employment relation in a triangle: one providing company who is the employer, one worker, and one user for whom the workers will provide housework services. It is largely supported by public funding, for the sake of the fight against undeclared work and higher employment rates among low-qualified workers.

Employers in the field operate with the same activity in their specific market and in the same legal environment that closely organizes the 'service voucher' system. Focusing on a specific activity and market, it is essential to look more closely at the collective bargaining taking place at the sectoral level. In Belgium, joint committees are permanent bodies representing employers' associations and trade unions. They aim to gather companies practising the same types of activities in order to constrain

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them to rules and norms related to working conditions. The sector-level collective agreements that require consensus from both parts, compulsorily apply to all companies and all workers in the sector. Two joint committees are active in the 'service voucher' market: one is the 'committee for home-help services and for elderly persons' carers' and the other is the 'committee in charge of temporary work and proximity services'.

The empirical research was meant to test two hypotheses: firstly, in line with neo-institutionalist claims, the common sector-level institutional environment leads to equal firm-level HR practices and job quality; secondly, similar HR policies lead to equal outcomes in terms of job quality.

Sample and procedure

Data have been collected in 2012 in the sector of household services in Belgium. Written questionnaires composed of items proposing Likert-scale format responses, binary 'yes' and 'no' questions have been created and addressed to workers. The questionnaire was inspired by the prior European Working Condition Survey (EWCS) and by validated scales in work and social psychology, with a view to capture the HR practices implemented in the organizations as well as the level of job quality. Authors have notably emphasized the richness of the EWCS to apprehend job quality (Muñoz de Bustillo et al., 2009).

The research team chose to use a non-probability sampling design. The field of housework services is not easy to reach because it is geographically dispersed; it changes over time; and it is composed of a large number of small and medium size companies. The sample is thus set on a voluntary basis. The survey targeted three types of providers: social enterprises dedicated to employment integration, homecare service agencies, and private for-profit organizations. The objective was to obtain a relatively equal number of organizations willing to take part in the survey for each category of providers. In practice, the questionnaire was administered to 600 workers split between 47 selected organizations (17 For Profit Organizations, 17 Work integration social enterprises and 11 homecare services agencies) in the Walloon Region and Brussels Region. The survey addressed mostly low skilled workers. The sample is composed of 98% of women and is distributed mainly with workers educated at lower secondary education (40%) and workers educated at upper secondary education (40%).

Measures

HRM practices. Employee participation. The following items have been selected to attest the presence of employee participation (1) Consultation before new decisions, (2) Consultation through formal management meetings (3) Consultation through unions meetings (4) Expressing voice informally (adapted from EWCS).

Training and development is measured through four different variables: (1) the quantity of training, (2) training not related to the job, (3) training taking place outside working hours and (4) varied and numerous training activities.

Health and Safety. Two variables are used to measure health and safety: (1) the equipment and (2) the information provided by the company (adapted from EWCS).

Performance appraisal is characterized in this research by 5 different items: (1) recognition, (2) career opportunity, (3) training needs, (4) pay rise, (5) discussion on work situation. Those items have been created based on the notion of formal assessment presented in EWCS. (See table 1 in appendix for more details)

Job quality dimensions.

Ten dimensions have been selected in the literature to measure job quality (*for detailed information, see table 2 in appendix*).

Wage was assessed by four items: 1) hourly wage, 2) bonus and remuneration, 3) fringe benefits, 4) transport fees paid. *Employment security* was assessed by the level of employment security perceived, using items derived from the job insecurity scale (De Witte 2000, $\alpha = .70$). *Flexibility and working hours* was measured by five different variables: 1) fixed schedule, 2) work in the evening, 3) work during weekends, 4) no flexibility with clients, 5) no flexibility with organization. *Work-family balance* was assessed by the work-family balance scale (Netemeyer and al. 1996; $\alpha = .87$). To measure *career opportunity*, we used the career opportunity perceived scale (Lievens, Van Hove & Schreurs 2005). *Voice* was measured by 4 items: 1) possibility to express his point of view, 2) unions representation, 3) possibility to exchange with colleagues and 4) possibility to discuss with supervisors. *Skills development* was assessed by four items: three items chosen based on the skills utilization scale (adapted from Kiffin-Petersen & Cordery, 2003 and COPSQ) and one item testing the employability. *Social environment* was tested by three items from the scale of Morgeson and Humphrey (2006, $\alpha = .65$) on the support perceived from colleagues and five items from Barnett and Brennan, 1995, $\alpha = .91$) testing the support perceived from supervisors. *The autonomy* was measured by the level of autonomy perceived scale (Parker, 2003, $\alpha = .82$). For the *physical working conditions*, we used three items from the scale of Morgeson & Humphrey (2006) on work conditions, and two items adapted from the EWCS and Morgeson and Humphrey (2006, physical demands) ('no painful or exhausting postures', no lift or move of heavy objects or people').

5. Research finding

5.1. HRM practices factors

Factor analyses[‡] have been performed separately on the HRM practices in order to isolate latent variables. A principal component analysis on *health and safety* items highlighted one major factor that accounted for 65% of the total variance. Multiple correspondence analysis operated on *performance appraisal* items indicated one leading factor accounting for 62 % of the total variance. A multiple factor analysis was performed on *training and development* items. Two factors were retained. The first factor determines the quantity and the variety of training activities, what will be referred to as professional training, and represents 29% of the total variance; the second factor explains 24% of the variance and refers to extra training taking place outside working hours. A multiple factor analysis was applied to the *participation* items and indicated two main factors: formal participation (29% of the total variance) and informal participation and during unions meetings, accounting for 26% of the total variance.

5.2. Job quality indicator

Factor analyses performed on the different job quality dimensions emphasize the following results. One factor was identified for *employment security*. The *flexibility* items can be split into two major factors: (1) Low flexibility; (2) standard working hours. Multiple factor analysis performed on *wage* items indicated two principal factors: (1) monetary compensation and (2) other remuneration (fringe benefits, transport fees). Principal components analysis for *physical working conditions* items highlighted one leading factor. Principal component analysis on *voice* items revealed two main factors accounting respectively for 45% and 27% of the total variance: (1) exchange views; (2) express one's voice freely and through union representatives. Principal components analysis for *autonomy* items suggests one single factor (60.5% of the variance). Principal component analysis on *work-family balance* items indicated one single factor. Items covering *career opportunities* were also split into one factor. One factor emerged regarding *skills development*. The analysis performed on *social environment* items attested the presence of two main factors: (1) relationship with supervisor and (2) relationship with colleagues.

[‡] Considering the data were of different nature, different extraction techniques have been applied. Principal component analysis was used for quantitative variables (Escofier and Pagès, 2008); multiple correspondence analysis was applied to dimensions compiling qualitative variables; and multiple factor analysis for dimensions measured by both quantitative and qualitative variables (Escofier & Pagès, 1994; Pagès, 2002). The Kaiser criterion was used for factors extraction, but the cumulative percentage of variation explained (cumulative factors explaining at least 50% of the total variance) and the interpretability of factors were also taken into consideration.

Each job quality dimension was characterized by one or two factors. With the objective to create a global job quality indicator, we followed several steps (See method used by Maisonnasse et al., 2010). First, we re-created the job quality dimensions by summing the different factors weighted according to their contribution to the percentage of variance explained[§]. Accordingly, ten dimensions related to job quality were re-created and a global indicator for job quality was then calculated as the mean of those dimensions.

5.3. Questioning isomorphic homogeneity

Do joint committees favour similar human resource strategies in the different firms operating in the sector? With a view to answer this question, this section aims at evaluating the degree of isomorphic homogeneity in the development of HR practices in organizations belonging to the same joint committee.

To determine the relationship between joint committee and the HRM factors, one-way ANOVA was performed. Results reveal mitigated influence from joint committees. The joint committees were found to be statistically significant on *professional training* ($F(1,417) = 4.13, p=.043$), the *performance appraisal factor* ($F(1,598) = 11.5, p=.001$) and *informal participation and during unions meetings* ($F(1,598) = 5.83, p=.016$). Differences can be noticed between joint committee 322.01 (for temporary work and proximity services) and joint committee 318.01 (for home-help services and for elderly persons' carers) on those three HR factors. Joint committee 322.01 reported significantly more professional training ($M=0.11, SD=1.34$) than joint committee 318.01 ($M=-0.25, SD=1.30$). Firms in joint committee 322.01 display higher development in performance appraisal policy ($M=0.125, SD=1.75$) than JC 318.01 ($M=-0.47, SD=1.72$). And joint committee 322.01 presents higher mean as far as informal participation is concerned ($M=0.05, SD=.99$) than JC 318.01 ($M=-0.19, SD=1.05$).

By contrast, factors such as *health and safety*, *formal participation*, and *training outside working hours and not linked to the job* do not show convincing results, with no constraining effect coming from the context. This reveals that collective bargaining at sectoral level does not totally constrain decisions regarding HR policies within the firm.

[§] *proportion of variance explained by the factor itself divided by cumulative percentage of variance explained by the set of retained factors*

5.4. *HR strategies and contrasted job quality outcomes*

The second hypothesis considers the effect of HR practices on job quality outcomes. We entered the HR factors into a regression analysis, using the job quality global indicator as the dependent variable.

Control variables age, gender and educational level were entered in the first step, then we added the six HR factors. The multiple regression model with all predictors produced $R^2 = .128$, $F(9,379) = 6.179$, $p < .0001$. Considering the limited number of variables, it gives a first indication on the relation between HR factors and the level of job quality. The more organizations invest in human resource management practices, the more the level of job quality increases. More specifically, three predictors have a positive influence on the global job quality indicator: *informal participation policy* ($\beta = .205$, $t(388) = 4.227$, $p < .0001$), *health and safety policy* ($\beta = .176$, $t(388) = 3.59$, $p < .0001$), and *performance appraisal* ($\beta = .146$, $t(388) = 2.96$, $p < .005$). Those results show the relative importance of each independent variable, with *performance appraisal policy* and *participation policy* ahead. Professional training, extra training, and formal participation on the contrary, do not show significant results.

6. Discussion

If the two hypothesis proposed were confirmed, it would mean that, according to the first hypothesis, the institutional context has a strong impact on human resource policies within firms, which would in turn lead, according to the second hypothesis, to a degree of homogeneity between companies operating in the same institutional setting due to isomorphic pressures, and finally to similar outcomes in terms of job quality.

With a view to test the first hypothesis, data analysis examined the influence of the institutional context on HRM practices. Both the sector of activity and the joint committee under which firms operate characterize the institutional context of the companies. Although theoretical contributions inspired by neo-institutionalism assume that there is a tendency for organizations operating within a common institutional context to develop similar practices, our research findings do not fully confirm the assumption. In a highly coordinated market economy like Belgium, where law strictly regulates activities of 'service voucher' companies, while collective bargaining stemming from joint committees precisely circumscribes employment relations, we expected that firm-level HR policies within the shared institutional setting would be homogenous. This is not the case.

Being covered by a given joint committee has some influence on HR policies designed within the firm, but not as strongly as expected, and not for all policies. If the context of sector-level industrial relations has significant impact on professional training policy, performance appraisal and participation, by contrast it does not seem to affect other practices in the fields of health and safety, formal participation and extra training. What is particularly striking here is that the joint committee exerts a rather mitigated influence on HR practices.

This means that isomorphic pressures, either coercive or mimetic, have limited impact. Managerial leeway remains in defining HR policies. As a consequence, even within the same legal and normative context, and under common provisions of collective agreements, firms generate diverse HR practices. This also means that the influence of the institutional context does not apply homogeneously to all company-level practices. This is an invitation to nuance, or relativize, the role of institutions in firm strategies, which can have a different degree of variation from external norms. The second hypothesis assumed that differentiated human resource strategies would generate contrasted outcomes in terms of job quality. Not surprisingly, empirical data confirm that diverse routes in human resource strategies lead to contrasted outcomes in terms of job quality. Organizations implementing 'high road strategies' involving the development of long-term HR practices favour higher job quality. Evidence from the field of housework services in Belgium corroborates previous findings identified in the literature.

In sum, institutional norms and rules that regulate employment relations in the 'service voucher' sector do not have homogenous and linear impact within firms. At company level, policies and practices implemented by management can differ from external provisions, and they are decisive in determining, *in fine*, job quality for workers.

Accordingly, neo-institutionalist approaches should not lead us to overestimate the coherence between company-level practices and their specific institutional context. Institutions matter, indeed, but management strategies also do...

As expected from our reflection based on social regulation theory, company-level players have a degree of autonomy that they use to interpret, modify, ignore or reject the norms and rules specified by the institutional environment. Diversity of managerial strategies in organizations belonging to the same institutional context reflects a degree of discrepancy between the formal policy and its transposition into practice. Social regulation theory helps us understand how norms at play in the organization are created, modified by actors' interplay and leeway. Reynaud's notion of control regulation can be seen as the rules discussed within the joint committee

and that should be applied in organizations operating under its scope. Autonomous regulation refers in this context to the rules and norms created by different members of the organization through their interactions and interplay. They interact, exchange, and therefore constantly play on norms and rules that are in principle applicable to them. In other words, managerial practices are designed in line with the norms and rules coming from the context, but management and the employees in the organization also have room for manoeuvre, and they interpret and adapt those rules to their own perception of the reality in the firm.

In turn, this means that one should not overestimate the degree of internal coherence between different HR policies and practices implemented within the firm. One difficulty in neo-institutionalist approaches is certainly the underpinning supposed degree of coherence: in the 'Varieties of Capitalism' approach, specifically, firms' strategic behaviour, conducted by rational choice, is supposed to be highly consistent with the institutional environment, which also suggests that different managerial policies within the firm are coherent. Our research results indicate that different HR policies do not fit into a 'nice harmonious whole' but may be disparate.

This raises further questions. One is: how can one explain diversity in firm-level policies, if one does not want to discard simply and totally neo-institutionalist inputs? Three lines of interpretation can help us conceptualise further the relationships between institutional settings, HR policies and job quality.

The first one refers to the notion of institutional context as such. Examined at micro-level, that is, at the level of the company, there is no one single and coherent institutional environment at play. Instead, several institutional contexts intervene: legal provisions in economic and financial fields, commercial regulation, legal and conventional regulation of employment relations, industrial relations system at national and sectoral level, etc. They do not necessarily form a coherent set of norms that shape a clear pattern for firm strategy. In the case of 'service vouchers', for instance, external norms stem from law on the activity itself, from the Belgian legal and conventional context, from joint committees, etc. While labour law tries to favour long-term employment, economic and commercial rules allow for extensive use of short-term contracts. Incoherence or disparate institutional influences should therefore be taken into consideration.

The notion of 'institutional work' proposed by Lawrence et al. (2009) offers a second tool to try to conceptualise better the links between institutional settings, HR policies and job quality. If institutions act on firm-level actors, the latter also act on institutions. They do not simply conform to institutional norms; they actively try to define their own rules and norms, and to have an influence on their institutional context. Implementing their own HR policies and practices can be a means, be it implicit, to challenge external norms.

This idea, in turn, leads to social regulation theory again. External norms stemming from the institutional setting constitute what Reynaud calls ‘control regulation’, by which groups of actors define rules and norms that apply to others. Local actors always have a degree of autonomy that they use to define their own norms. In practice, what happens is a compromise between control regulation and autonomous regulation. Accordingly, in this case, management can use its own autonomy to develop its own way of managing human resources and promoting employment quality, or not. Understanding the interplay between institutional norms and local actors’ autonomy is key in conceptualising further the relations between institutional settings and company practices. Finally, this means that we need to understand more finely regulation processes that take place at the ‘boundaries’ of the firm, between the norms and rules defined by the institutional context and the norms implemented within the company. Reflecting in terms of processes would also mean being able to take inconsistencies, experiments and contradictions into consideration.

7. Conclusion

Over the last two decades, neo-institutionalist approaches acquired strong influence in the analysis of company strategies and job quality. Both in their economic and in their sociological versions, they stress the coherence between a given institutional context and company-level strategies and their impact on job quality.

This paper intended to challenge such a claim for coherence, by asking a fairly provocative – and ambitious – question: what is the respective influence of managerial strategies within the company and of the institutions ‘outside’ the company, on job quality?

Trying to answer the question, we did not want to discard neo-institutionalist inputs, which usefully highlight interdependency between companies and their institutional setting. On the other hand, we found useful to open up the perspective with insights from social regulation theory, which shows that norms and rules that actors generally follow, according to definition of institutions proposed by North (1990), do not simply apply to passive actors. Local actors have a capacity of autonomy that they use to interpret, change, adapt, refuse, ignore rules or, simply, to develop their own.

In this perspective, the paper examined human resource practices within firms and their interactions with the institutional context in new services – ‘housework services’ – and how firm strategies and institutions respectively contribute to job quality for low-qualified workers.

Empirical data collected in front line service work, in the specific ‘service voucher’ sector in Belgium, indicate that institutional influences remains partial. In a highly

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coordinated market economy like Belgium, where law strictly regulates activities of 'service voucher' employers while collective bargaining stemming from joint committees precisely circumscribe employment relations, we expected that firm-level HR policies within the shared institutional setting would be homogenous. This is not the case.

Being covered by a given joint committee has some influence on HR policies designed within the firm, but not as much as expected, and not for all policies. What is particularly striking is that joint committee exerts a rather mitigated influence on HR practices. Institutional norms and rules that regulate employment relations in the 'service voucher' sector do not have homogenous and linear impact within firms. At company level, policies and practices implemented by management can differ from external provisions, and they are decisive in determining, *in fine*, workers job quality. Accordingly, neo-institutionalist approaches should not lead us to overestimate the coherence between company-level practices and their specific institutional context. Institutions matter, indeed, but management strategies also do.

8. References

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Table 2: Job quality measures

Job quality dimension	Variables	Questions
Wage	Hourly wage	How much do you get paid hourly? (adapted from EF 10 EWCS)
	Monetary compensation	My salary includes bonus or other remuneration (lunch voucher, birth premium, holiday bonus?) (Yes/No – adapted from EF7 EWCS)
	Fringe Benefits	My salary includes fringe benefits (medical care assistance, social housing, life insurance,...) (Yes/No- EF7 EWCS)
	Reimbursement of transport fees	My transport fees are paid by my organization (Yes-No)
Employment security	Employment security perceived	(De Witte, 2000 ; $\alpha = .70$; 7 items likert scale ‘totally agree’ – ‘totally disagree’) There is a risk that I will lose my present job in the near future I feel uncertain about the future of my job I think that I will lose my job in the near future
Flexibility and hours of work	No flexibility	There are changes in the time schedule (Y/N – adapted from Q37 EWCS) The company requires flexibility (Y/N – adapted from Q30 EWCS) Users require flexibility (Y/N – adapted from Q30 EWCS)
	Standard working hours	I work in the evening (>6pm) (Likert Scale frequency – adapted from Q33 EWCS) I work on weekends (Likert scale frequency – adapted from Q34-35 EWCS)
Work Family Balance	Work family balance scale (Netemeyer et al. 1996 ; $\alpha = .87$)	The demands of my work interfere with my home and family life The amount of time my job takes up makes it difficult to fulfill family responsibilities

		Things I want to do at home do not get done because of the demands my job puts on me My job produces strain that makes it difficult to fulfill family duties Due to work-related duties, I have to make changes to my plans for family activities
Career opportunity	Career opportunity perceived adapted from (Lievens, Van Hoya & Schreurs, 2005)	The organization offers a lot of opportunities for advancement The organization offers diverse career opportunities There are opportunities for advancement to higher level jobs
Voice		Possibility to express his point of view freely (Likert scale) Possibility to express his point of view through unions representative (Likert scale) Possibility to exchange with colleagues (Likert scale) Possibility to discuss with supervisors (Likert scale)
Skills development	Skills utilization (adapted from Kiffin-Petersen & Cordery (2003) and COPSOQ)	My job provides the opportunity for learning and growth in competence and proficiency I participate in activities which allow me to learn new skills In my job, I learn new things
Social environment	Support perceived from colleagues (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006 ; $\alpha = .65$) Support from supervisors (Barnett & Brennan, 1995 ; $\alpha = .91$)	I have the chance in my job to get to know other people People I work with take a personal interest in me I work in a friendly work environment Your supervisor's respect for your abilities Your supervisor's concern about the welfare of those under him/her Your supervisor paying attention to what you have to say Your supervisor appreciate your work

Your supervisor gives you support

Autonomy	Level of autonomy perceived (Parker, 2003 ; $\alpha = .82$)	Do you decide on the order in which you do things ? (autonomy over timing activities) Do you set your own pace of work? (autonomy over timing activities) Can you vary how you do your work? (autonomy over methods) Can you decide how to go about getting your job done? (autonomy over methods)
Physical working environment	Work conditions (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006, and EWCS) Effort / posture (adapted from Physical demands, Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006 and EWCS 24)	The workplace is free from excessive noise The climate at the work place is comfortable in terms of temperature and humidity The job has a low risk of accident. The job takes place in an environment free from health hazards (e.g. chemicals, fumes etc.) No painful or exhausting postures (Likert) No lift or move of heavy objects or people (Likert)
