

Article

Representativeness in Employment Relations and in Sociological Theories

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Abstract: In the democratic structure of the EU (European Union) the representation of employers and employees is seen as an important element for the development of the economy. It is not sufficient to have a representation of these groups, but the representation of these groups is also expected to be representative. Representativeness is often seen as an equal proportional distribution of the representatives of different groups that have to be represented. Nevertheless, representativeness can also be differently approached. In this article, we examine whether sociological paradigms can help us to get a more nuanced picture of representativeness in employment relations. For this purpose, we present in paradigms developed by Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Robert K. Merton, Talcott Parsons, and Jürgen Habermas and the exchange theory and symbolic interactionism. Subsequently, we apply these principles on some employment relations in the EU. And we finish with a discussion and conclusion, in which we support the use of a richer concept of representativeness as it is shown in some sociological paradigms.

Keywords: employment relations; trade unions; employers' organisations; representativeness



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1. Introduction

Bosch and Schmitz-Kiessler [1] illustrate how employment relations seek to make market economies better. In a changing economic setting [2], different perceptions of how employees and employers can be represented arise. The enhancement of labor–management partnership relations could create a collaborative culture by promoting institutional change and organizational adaptation [3,4]. This paper analyses representativeness as a precondition for this, providing legitimacy for the representatives of employees and employers.

Representativeness can be considered and measured in different ways [5–7]. The established European criteria [8] coexist with different national criteria of representativeness [9]. In the introduction of each representativeness study is illustrated how these criteria are implemented in the methodology of representativeness studies. At the European level, regularly updated representativeness studies are announced in a European Commission [10] Communication 448 of 1996, while an Opinion (97/C89/12) of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) [11], indicates in Article 4.7 that the Commission needs to lay down representativeness criteria and makes proposals for such criteria. Three representativeness' criteria are formally included in the European Commission Decision of 1998. This Decision considers firstly how the membership domain of organisations covers the entire sector that they are supposed to represent or only a part of that, secondly the number of member states in which the European social partner organisations has national member organisations and what their role is in collective bargaining and in other aspects of the

national sectoral industrial relations setting, and thirdly whether organisations have the capacity to negotiate and the appropriate internal structures that allow them to represent their members effectively [8]. At the national level, there are countries like France that defined legally precise representativeness criteria that need to be met if an organisation wants to be considered a national sectoral representative organisation, while other countries like the UK or the Scandinavian countries do not offer formal criteria. Instead, the representativeness of the social partners is based on their mutual recognition. In Germany, for example, the capacity to negotiate collective bargaining agreements is the main determinant of the representativeness of social partners [9]. In some countries, representativeness is strongly based on membership, while in others the election of workplace delegates from the different trade unions is the main factor to assess their representativeness. The membership strength of an employer's organisation can be expressed as a proportion calculated by dividing the affiliated companies by all the companies in the sector studied. Alternatively, the workforce of the affiliated companies can be divided by the total workforce of the sector, which will give a stronger weight if the largest companies in the sector are affiliated.

These examples show that different operationalizations of these criteria can lead to different results in representativeness studies. The methodological design of representativeness studies is thus not politically neutral. This paper aimed to raise awareness of the implications of the methodological choices made, through illustrations from different sociological theories in two ways. First, in Section 2 we present some sociological theories and make a link with what they said about the role of trade unions or the representativeness of social groups in general. Second, in Section 3 examples and applications from representativeness studies are given to illustrate how sociological theories can help to become aware of the implications of the choices made in designing the methodology on the results of such studies. The scope of a representativeness study can for example only consider the established social partners, to confirm the status quo, or it can also consider other organisations that are not yet recognized as representative in each sector at the European level and compare the accumulated representativeness or their affiliated national organisations with that of the national member organisations of the established European social partner organisations.

Democracy in Europe is based upon the freedom of association and the distinction between organisations that have their legitimacy based on their representativeness to participate in decision-making and management of the society, and other organisations also operating in the society, but without aspirations or credibility to claim legitimate participation rights. Governments are composed by delegates of political parties that have on the one hand individual members providing internal party democracy, and on the other hand obtained external legitimacy through elected representatives that correspond to some kind of support of a majority of a represented population. The regulation of employee relations and of working conditions in companies is a field of policy-making where the legitimacy of a government is to be balanced with representative trade unions and employers' organisations willing and able to self-regulate their relationship and the working conditions of the employees concerned, in collective bargaining agreements. A government can decide to create a setting to make such agreements generally binding, also to the workers that are not members of the trade union and also in companies not affiliated to employers' organisations signing those agreements. This way trade unions and employers are thus given the right to be consulted and some kind of limited legislative power over a group for which they are supposed to be representative. The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) has in Article 154 foreseen the right of representative European social partner organisations to be consulted by the European Commission. In article 155 of the TFEU, the possibility is foreseen that European social

partner organisations, at sector or at cross sector level, make an agreement that becomes generally binding for all workers and companies of a sector, based on a European Council Directive. Normally directives would get democratic approval through a vote in the European Parliament, and by being adopted by the Council of the European Union. Article 155 of the TFEU does, however, only foresee that the European Parliament is informed while the democratic legitimacy comes from the representativeness of the social partners, documented in representativeness studies [7]. This does give them the possibility to take a legislative role, to self-regulate working conditions in the sector of which they represent the workers and the companies.

Their representativeness that legitimizes this is considered here in this paper from the perspective of different sociological paradigms [12–16].

2. A Variety of Theoretical Starting Points

We start with the views of Max Weber on some forms of legitimization of authority and motivations of individuals who want to become members of an organisation. Then, we describe Emile Durkheim's perspective of rebalancing individual membership with social realism, granting social partner organisations also a will of their own beyond the simple sum of the interests of the represented individuals. In Section 2.3, we present functionalist sociological perceptions regarding representativeness. R.K. Merton provides a number of criteria to make a classification of different types of groups, while T. Parsons develops a theory of organisations. They indicate that representativeness depends also on the number of non-members and distinguishes different types of non-members, but also different types of membership, and how they form a group. In Section 2.4, we focus on the views of J. Habermas, who enlightens the often narrowly understood concept of the autonomy of the social partners as self-organized groups embedded in a wider self-organized system [16]. Section 2.5 sheds light on the perceptions of representativeness of social partners based on exchange theory notions. Section 2.6 of this paper shows how symbolic interactionist sociologies see industrial relations. They see them more as dynamic changing relations based on tensions and yet-realized aspirations, constantly challenging the stability of organisations, arrangements, and structures. Representativeness thus is confronted with continuous challenges, fragmentation, and competition within and in-between organisations, but also empowered through opportunities for learning in organisations and capacity building over time.

With all these building blocks from different sociological paradigms, applications on employment relations in Europe aim to broaden our conceptualization of representativeness in Section 3 of this paper.

2.1. Max Weber

Weber explains “Gewerkschaften” “Wirtschaftsregulierende Verbände” (economically regulative organisations) [17]. Trade unions are considered as groups of which the leaders can develop economic policies. By doing so, they regulate the internal functioning of the group and the procedures that have to be followed by the members of the unions. In order to attain their objectives, these organisations are supposed to have a certain autonomy and should have the necessary means to conduct this policy.

Weber discerns four types of social action based on the specific motivation of its members. The same types may be found in the action of union members, or alternatively the reasons why a company affiliates with an employers' organisation. The motivation of an employee to affiliate with a trade union or for companies to affiliate with an employers' organization can be instrumental rational action (“zweck rational”), value-rational action (“wert rational”), affectual behavior (“affectual”), and traditional behavior (“traditional”).

Applying these concepts on the problem of membership and representativeness of trade unions opens a rich variety of possible types of members of trade unions. Members who see the union only as an instrument to regularly attain a wage increase have another position in union action than members who see the union as an expression of the recognition of union ideology among the laborers. Members who belong to the union because in the union they feel at home with their friends may have another attitude towards union action than people who become members because it is a tradition in the family or the neighborhood. Weber focusses on the motivation of individuals to legitimize the organisation(s) power. The legitimizing individual always has the final say whether it supports the legitimization process and thus develops collective action, or not. This will depend upon the interests of the individual, as an established stakeholder in society, though stability in the legitimization process can be enhanced by reactions of the social environment when an individual declines from supporting the legitimization of the ruling organisation(s).

The three “pure” types of legitimate authority that have been discerned by Weber [17] can also be distinguished in the legitimacy of social partner organisations: first, a traditional authority based on long established cultural patterns; secondly, a charismatic authority driven by an extraordinary personality or capacities that inspire devotion and obedience; and thirdly, a rational-legal authority based on a bureaucratic administration legitimized by enacted rules. Each of these three types of authority is acknowledged by, on the one hand, (represented) citizens, and on the other hand, by those controlling needed resources (like the army, administration, and direct supporting staff). This way, Weber distinguishes legitimized authority from power, coercion, force, but also from persuasion or influence. These types may have at least a double meaning for trade unions. In the first place, the type of authority in a country determines the position of trade unions in a country, and second, life in and membership of a union might be influenced by the type of authority shared by the representatives of a union. The development of these types of authority in unions might also have an impact on the development of the membership of a union. For instance, a union that can rely on a charismatic leader might have a great attraction for possible members. Nevertheless, this might also create problems when the charismatic leader is not a member anymore. A reliable rational-legal authority might be more advantageous for a union at that moment.

2.2. *Emile Durkheim*

Different from the interpretative approach of representativeness by Max Weber, Emile Durkheim takes a positivist standpoint. Social actions like the membership of a worker in a trade union, or a company in an employers’ organisation, can according to him be altruistic or egoistic. Egoistic motives for membership of employees in a trade union can be considered if the membership is seen as a kind of insurance for when the employee might get in trouble at the workplace, in which it can count on support of the trade union. For companies, the egoistic motivation to become a member of an employers’ organisation may be the consideration that as a group they can negotiate better with trade unions and they can lobby better towards regulators and authorities for the interests of employers in a given sector than as an individual company. For workers, altruism can be understood as a form of solidarity. While for companies, the social realism of Durkheim helps to understand employers’ organisations as a collective, to which companies are driven by the wider society for the purpose of collective bargaining and joint representation towards the government. Durkheim sees in this collective action an organisation of its own right with proper (institutional) interests that can be distinct from the sum of the individual interests represented. Durkheim’s notions of material density (proportion of members and interactions between members) and moral density (unity and cohesion) inspire us to

measure organisational representativeness of the individual members as different forms of solidarity, either more mechanic or organic forms of organizational solidarity.

Emile Durkheim [18] introduces in his work “De la division du travail social” the notions of mechanic and organic solidarity. Applied on social partner organisations, mechanic solidarity is based on similarities in the characteristics or in the activities of the members of a trade union or employers’ organisation. In this model, a centripetal force [18] brings social cohesion in groups and allows them to be directly represented in the society without any intermediary, while organic solidarity results from different specialisations, leading to interdependency. In this model, there is a centrifugal force, as both the success of the entire society as of each individual depends on specialization, increasing also interdependencies. Aggregation of collective interests thus becomes more complex and can no longer be governed only by contractual relations. Complementary to this, an additional level of cooperation is required. This can be found in the form of the extension of collective bargaining agreements to an entire sector of the economy with different types of employees and companies operating interdependently. Nevertheless, both forms of mechanic and organic solidarity co-exist simultaneously in social partner organisations. As mechanic solidarity involves internal repressive force to be able to implement an agreement autonomously, it allows also an organisation to commit itself on behalf of its members.

In the commerce sector, for example wholesale companies could group themselves separately from retail companies, but with retail companies large supermarket companies could organize themselves in a different organization. Small and micro retail shops could again group themselves, seeking mechanic solidarity among companies with a lot of similarities. Among them, peer pressure would occur to focus on common interests among similar types of companies, with a similar approach to organise work in terms of opening hours, size of the shop, or location in city centers or in the outskirts.

However, if all commerce companies, wholesale, big retailers, small shops, and even e-commerce companies, all gather in one employers’ organisation, their diversity, and interdependence in the sector would be given more attention. Indeed, wholesalers and retail companies are suppliers and clients of each other and cannot do their business without the other. A larger definition of the sector can thus lead to more attention for different roles, specificities within a sector, and interdependences and for organic solidarity, in the same way, while if alternative associations are created for specific parts of a sector, an employers’ organisation only for specific types of companies, or a trade union for a specific professional group, the focus is more on their similarities and internal cohesion.

Another example could be given by standardization in bureaucratic administration, where each work is performed in a similar way as prescribed by the rules, while diversity appears between different departments as well as between different hierarchical layers. The entire society and all citizens will depend on different state functions like education, health care, transport, and safety. The interdependence of these different functions may, however, not be so strong [18].

Therefore, Durkheim also addresses the question which form of solidarity is the strongest and most stable. One could consider that in organic solidarity the number of interdependencies is higher [18]. In a changing society, one might have an initial need to gather with similar people in mechanic solidarity; though if one changes over time, this need may no longer be there, as the similarities with the others vanish. Organic solidarity can thus be concluded as stronger and more stable in changing societies. This brings Durkheim to conclude that mechanic solidarity decreases over time, while organic solidarity will become more important [18].

2.3. R. K. Merton & T. Parsons (Functionalist Sociology)

To assess the representativeness of a group, Merton [19] leads us to important reflections. The question we should ask is the following: what makes a number of people to be a group. Groups have often no clear boundaries. Some people interact often with group members, others do not, and another part comes seldom in contact with the other group members. Merton stresses three criteria to call a number of people a group. First, there should be a certain pattern of frequent interaction between the members of the group. Second, group members also should see themselves as belonging to the group. Third, group members should be seen by the other members and by non-members as belonging to the group. When membership is explicitly defined, we can speak of formal groups, and if this definition is only expressed in daily practice, this may be called informal groups.

Whether a group may be seen as complete and representative for possible members partly depends on the number of non-members. A simple definition of non-members could be the following: those persons who “do not meet the interactional and definitional criteria of membership” [19]. Nevertheless, for the action capacities of the group, it is important to know who the non-members are. First, we can make a difference between non-members eligible for membership and those who are ineligible. Employers, for instance, are not eligible for membership of a trade union. Also important is the attitude of the actors to become a member of the group. People who are indifferent to becoming a member have another meaning for a group than those who are motivated to become a member or those who do not want to become a member. Applying property space analysis on these two criteria, Merton discerns six types of non-members who might have a different meaning for the development of a group. For instance, a marginal man aspires to become a member of a group although he is not eligible. For the growth of the group, the candidates for membership are the most interesting: they aspire to become a member, and they are eligible. But the position of non-members is not the same for each group. Has the group a *closed* character, then there is more interest in a kind of elite. Not all eligible non-members will be recruited. In an open group, there is place for all eligible non-members. Also, the time perspective of non-membership is meaningful for group behavior. Non-members who were formerly members of a group express, implicitly or explicitly, a critique on the group, while those who have never been a member of the group can be seen as valuable candidates.

In order to grasp something more of the power of a group, Merton [19] offers a long list of group properties, too many to describe in this paper. Some examples include the following: clarity of social definitions of membership, degree of engagement of members in the group, actual and expected duration of membership in the group, actual and expected duration of the group, absolute and relative size of the group, completeness of the group, degree of social differentiation, shape and height of social stratification, etc.

To conclude this short overview of the study of groups by Merton [19], he warns us that we should not see all collections of people as groups of the same character. He makes in Figure 1 a difference between these types depending on the interaction between the members and the common values the members share. If we put these properties in a table, we can construct the following:

Common Values	Interaction	
	Yes	No
Yes	Group	Collectivity
No		Social category

Figure 1. A property space analysis of Merton’s criteria for a typology of groups.

A collectivity is a collection of people who share common values and feel obliged to act according to these common values. When there is a substantial interaction between actors who share common values, we can call it a group. A social category is a collection of actors who share the like characteristics without coming to interaction or sharing the same value, for instance, actors of the same sex or age. When interaction between these actors starts and develops, a social category can become a group, for instance, a group of senior citizens. The empty space refers to actors who have some interaction with one another, but these contacts are very weak, superficial, and temporary, for instance, walkers on the street. Fichter [20] calls them social aggregates. In this context, in order to assess the representativeness of a trade union, it is important to define whether a trade union is supposed to develop to a group, a collectivity, or is it enough to have just a common label. Moreover, if we want to assess the power of a trade union, it could be very fruitful to check how the different characteristics of a group are present in a union.

Contrary to Merton who focused on theories of the middle range, Parsons has developed a general theory of action. He discerns four subsystems that keep the action going and each of these subsystems fulfill a special function [21–24]. The behavioral system supports the adaptation (A) of the actors to the environment (See Figure 2). Human actors have control over their behavioral capacities and intelligence in order to adapt their body to the environment and be capable to make a living. Goal attainment (G) is realized by the personality system, which is motivated to attain some goals in life. Among other things, it also supports human interest in social justice. The social system takes care of the integration (I) of the action system by organizing the role expectations among actors that bring them to a certain level of solidarity. A correct fulfillment of the role expectations of employers and employees makes society function peacefully; if not, problems may arise. The function of pattern maintenance or latency (L) is the task of the cultural system. The transfer of values and norms in the cultural system keeps the economic system smoothly functioning. If there is a great discrepancy between the values celebrated by the different members of society, conflict is possible and can disturb the normal functioning of the social system.

A		G	
Behavioral system		Personal system	
Cultural system	Social system		
	A	G	
	Economic system	Political system	
	Cultural patterns	Societal community	
	L	I	
L		I	

Figure 2. Parsons' description of the global system of action.

The social system is too rough a description of social reality. Parsons discerns in the social system four subsystems [24]. The economic system takes care of the adaptation of the environment of the human actor. This is the world of production of goods necessary for the survival of the social system. Goals are formulated by the political system: within a political system, goals and routes to attain these goals are formulated by the appropriate units. Integration is the task of the social community. This community brings actors into line with each other and develops a level of solidarity. But without cultural patterns stressing common values and norms an integration of the social system will not be possible.

Trade unions play an important role in the economic system [24]. Unions look for a balance between work and wages (G). Labor contracts are for the unions extremely important, and this is not only about the balance between work and wages, but also about the rights of the employer to define what an employee is supposed to do (A). Parsons and

Smelser (1966) [24] see the latter as the main points of discussion between management and union. As far as the integration (I) and latency (L) function are concerned, unions are also seen as an environment where attitudes are confirmed. That means that unions support the idea of the acceptance of the social relations between worker and employer, and the idea that households trust their living to the labor market. This means that the function of unions is more than bargaining about labor situations. It also integrates the worker and his family in the wider society. Besides the task to fight for the rights of the members, the union creates by its action also self-respect and confidence, important capacities to keep the union going. Trade unions have a wider function than solving labor conflicts.

2.4. J. Habermas (*Critical Sociology*)

In the second volume of “*Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*”, Habermas [25] presents a social world composed of two opposite units the “system” and the “lifeworld”. The system is composed of institutions like the state and economy. In this system, state bureaucracy, legal regulations, political socialization, and economic privatization guide the interaction of the actors. Two important media are used to steer the system: money is used in the market relations and power in state administration and law enforcement. This system functions as instrumental-rationally or functional-rationally. On the other hand, in the lifeworld, interaction is guided by communicative rationality. This lifeworld is the world we encounter in the daily life of our family, a school, a factory, an office, and similar life situations. And life is here steered by moral and practical principles. Here money and power do not play an important role. Symbolic mutual understanding makes life acceptable. It is the world in which actors strive for social integration.

The encounter of these two worlds is not without problems and creates conflicts. Habermas [25] stresses the strength of the subsystem state and economy and its tendency to penetrate into the communicative relations of the lifeworld. This might damage good communication. The result is a lifeworld that is more and more colonized by the system. That means that social relations that were used to function on the basis of social integration and common understanding are more influenced by the exchange of money and power than before. For instance, in Belgium the relation of an unmarried, poor couple that gets support from the state is determined by the legal rules of the state (to live separately), if they want to keep the same amount of emergency maintenance allowance (if they live together in the same house, the support from the state is diminished). Habermas shows that this process of colonization of the lifeworld by the system is growing in advanced capitalist societies. Colonization of the lifeworld by the system is a growing threat for society, and this is very visible in our welfare state where the state takes more and more responsibility for family life and work situations. A lot of relations of family and work life are ruled by law and belong more to the system than the lifeworld.

This colonization process did also interfere in the life of trade unions. In the last pages of his book, Habermas [25] reflects on the social movements in Europe of the 1980s and does not see the trade unions as strong critiques of this colonization process. This critique is not anymore about the distribution of welfare in the welfare state, but it is more focused on cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization. The welfare state cannot provide solutions for this. Based on statistics provided by researchers, Habermas concludes that the “old politics” are supported by entrepreneurs, workers, and the professional middle class. They are directly involved in the production process and hope to keep it going. The “new politics”, for which a return to the lifeworld is searched, is in the hands of groups that are further remotest from the production process than those who have been mentioned before. The struggle of the “*organisierte Arbeiterbewegung*” (Organized Labour Movement) does not offer a solution for this problem, not any more than the “*bürgerliche*

Emanzipationsbewegungen" (Civil Emancipation Movement). He expects the answer for this problem to come from other action groups like the environmental movement, the peace movement, minorities, parent associations, women's movement, and the like. The latter wants to reconstruct the communicative relations in society and make some resistance against the colonization of the lifeworld.

Although this analysis sounds plausible, it is not shared by all analysts of the current trade unionism. Edwards [26] describes how trade unions fight against the colonization of the lifeworld. They bring in communicative rationality whereas state and economy try to focus on functional rationality. Edwards shows that some actions of the trade unions express the capacity of the unions to keep their former critical stance and are not reduced to the use of functional rationality as dictated by money and power. She refers to it as "Community Unionism". The issue of the minimum wage is tackled by the unions from outside the workplace. They see it as a problem of social justice in the community. This action puts the union in a position that Habermas would have called a "new" social movement. According to Edwards [26], Habermas did not pay enough attention to the power of agency. Trade unions are not passive organisations that are absorbed by the system. A second example, presented by Edwards, refers to the dispute of British firefighters in 2001–2003. The firefighters wanted a 40 percent wage increase. At the same time, the government started research for the "modernization" of the fire service, and this modernization was taken as a condition for wage increase. The consequence was that the issue of the modernization of the work style became the most important issue for the firefighters. By giving the government the right to close local stations without the consent of the local community, the firefighters felt that their community life as firefighters was under pressure. "The British firefighters were rejecting not only colonization but also the re-definition of their roles as employees that might have followed it. Instead, they wished to reassert communicatively rational action, and through it the priority of the lifeworld over the system in deciding the norms that regulate the workplace." [26,27]. In this sense, the action of the trade union of the firefighters is the same as what Habermas understood by new social movements.

If we put it strictly, Habermas' theory of communicative action does not offer a theory that guides us immediately to an assessment of the membership of trade unions. He actually denies that current trade unions still have the power a social movement needs to bring some changes in social life and gives more chances to the development of the lifeworld. Nevertheless, by criticizing trade unions he also shows the way on how trade unions can return to their former calling to contribute to the change of the lifeworld. Edwards [28], looking back at the problems of the British NUT (National Union of Teachers), paints concisely how Habermas' theory can show the way to improve the membership or to reduce the non-membership of the trade union. As said above, trade unions came more and more under the influence of the system and lost the original strength found by unionism in the lifeworld. In the example of NUT, it means that an observer should be aware that teachers have lost time to network with union colleagues in school. They do not even know who the members of the union are. There is no chance to grow social solidarity in the *society* of the union, and this makes it more possible that non-membership grows [25]. There is not only the problem of a society where a reduction in social solidarity is a fact, but there is also the need to form an individual and collective identity. To develop this personality, individuals need communicative interaction (members need to meet and talk to each other) with other members and with union leaders. If these opportunities are lacking, there is a reduced chance that an appropriate personality will develop to participate in the union. And third, because communicative interaction among union members is diminishing, it might be a problem for a union that there is not a collective union culture that is shared

by a large number of members. When collective values of the lifeworld do not survive in the union, it will be hard for the critical capacity of the union to survive. In spite of the critique of Habermas on the meaning of trade unions as valuable social movements, his theory offers a framework and a starting point to look more carefully at membership and the representativeness of trade unions.

2.5. *Exchange Theory*

Exchange theories have inspired many researchers. Among the sociologists who strongly favored the development of this theory, G.C. Homans [29] has certainly delivered important work. His main interest goes to social behavior, what he sees as the behavior of individuals. This behavior happens in interaction with others and is guided by norms born in the group. Power, authority, and influence are important determinants of social behavior. This social interaction may emerge consciously, but it may also start unconsciously. Elementary social behavior is, according to Homans [29], the “exchange of actions between at least two persons, where the action of each rewards or punishes the action of the other”. This action should be seen as action happening between two persons in the real world, and not as norms that only tell what a person should do.

This interaction between two persons is seen as the core of a group. To call an interaction pattern a group, we do not need more according to Homans [29] than the “interaction of members with one another”. The interaction between the members may be very different, and it is clear that the larger the number of group members the less interaction there may be between all members. It is here that institutions emerge: they regulate the interaction between individuals more on distance, but this does not destroy the key principle that there is also here a direct interaction between at least two individuals. This interaction is guided by norms. A norm is a statement telling how a person should act in a particular situation when s/he is expecting a reward when s/he is acting to conform the norm and punishment if the interaction is a deviation from the norm. Homans differentiates between two types of norms. The first type comes into being when most members of a group act in a particular situation likewise. The second type emerges when actors may be punished for avoiding a particular behavior. In this case, actors do not act according to these prescriptions until they realize that they will be punished when they do not follow the rule.

Searching for an explanation of this behavior, Homans [29] offers six propositions that should guide the work of the researcher: (1) the success proposition, (2) the stimulus proposition, (3) the value proposition, (4) the deprivation–satiation proposition, (5) the aggression–approval proposition, and (6) the rationality proposition (see also [30]).

Cregan [31] looks from a similar angle at the social behavior of workers in relation to the trade unions in times of industrial action at the workplace. Cregan looks at industrial action because the action of trade unions is not only visible in strikes, but also in stop-work meetings, working-to-rule, go-slows, etc. She also leaves the well-accepted approach of union membership theory that union membership is dependent on individualist cost–benefit considerations. This rather economic consideration is not sufficient to explain all forms of membership in trade unions. She includes also collective social and ideological exchange relationships. According to the principle of economic exchange relationship, union membership is the result of a calculation by the members (and non-members who want to become members), whether the payment of dues is acceptable in comparison with the benefits granted by the union. Costs are not only represented by the membership fee, but also by the time a worker has to spend in union actions, the discomfort as a consequence of union actions, the threat of actions by the management, the threat of harassment by union members, etc. Social exchange relationships are based on trust among the members and

the “mutual obligations of commitment and loyalty”. The establishment of this trust needs a long period of time. For example, as a result of union action some time ago a member has received a wage increase, and this makes the union expect loyalty of this member by participating in a new union action. If not, the worker might fear some critique. The third form of exchange, the ideological, is based on emotion. This is about trust towards the actions of the union when this action is in accordance with the ideals of the union and the member. Workers who feel that they are not treated by the management according their feeling of social justice and feel that they are supported by the union become more attached to the union and see themselves as different from other workers. These three exchange relationships can work at the same moment, but it is not so that the three exchange relationships have the same meaning for all members and non-members of a trade union. Some workers are more inspired by economic exchange relationships, while others look for more of the ideological in social exchange relationships.

Based on these ideas, Cregan [31] formulated two hypotheses. First, she expected that more non-members than members would change their membership status during industrial action in a workplace. Second, she hypothesized that more non-members would join a union in a workplace with union action than in a workplace without union action. To test these hypotheses, she looked at the industrial action in Australian workplaces for 12 months and checked whether members have left the union and whether non-members have joined. These observations confirmed the first hypothesis. Also, the second hypothesis was confirmed: “Significantly more non-members changed their membership status (i.e., joined a union) in workplaces with industrial action than in workplaces with no industrial action” [31]. The author concludes that this study shows that industrial action supports the power of collective aspects of exchange relationships and pushes the individual economic relationships to the background. The original idea that union membership mainly thrives on the waves of cost-benefit ideas is by this research refuted. This does not mean that these economic exchange relationships have no meaning for union membership as is shown in the research by Tetrick et al. [32].

Tetrick et al. [32] wanted to know whether union loyalty and union participation could be predicted by union instrumentality and perceived union support. They also wanted to know whether union instrumentality was an antecedent of perceived union support or the other way around. Union instrumentality was defined as the assessment by the members of the costs and benefits for themselves produced by the union as a representative of the members. The global beliefs of the members about the value of their contribution to the union according to the union and the interest of the union in their well-being are defined as perceived union support. It was hypothesized that these two factors would contribute to a strong loyalty or commitment to the union and consequently also guarantee union participation. Based on a survey among 148 union members in the telecommunication industry in the Midwest of the USA and multilevel analysis, the researchers concluded that union support is a result of union instrumentality and that these factors stimulate successively union commitment and union participation. The other hypothesis with perceived union support at the beginning of the causal chain and followed by union instrumentality was not confirmed. The economic exchange relationship appears to be very powerful, considering that members of trade unions are like other human beings interested in the profits realized by their behavior.

2.6. Symbolic Interactionism

Industrial relations are mostly analyzed as established relations between organized groups. Blumer [33] indicates the contrast with the reality in which those relations are dynamic, under continuous tension, with only temporary stability between successive

changes in settings and in actors. Dynamics and changes are driven by competition between companies, different parts of economic sectors, between organisations, and also within organisations. Industrial relations are moving like all human relations, requiring observations that do not only grasp situations as they are on a given moment, but also the tensions and aspirations that drive future changes and relations. This underscores the importance of representativeness studies as time-series operations, updated every 7 or 8 years.

Susanne Köpsen [34] in “Learning for renewal” indicates the link between the skills of how to handle power in opportunities to participate in decision-making or seeking solutions for problems of the represented group and how this requires training courses, communities of practice, and capacity-building initiatives.

Jill C. Humphrey [16] sees self-organized groups as a solution to the marginality of minority groups. Self-organisation is geared towards inclusion and integration in the society on more favorable terms. In the meetings of ESSDCs, there is a preparatory part of the meeting where trade union delegates meet, while in another room the employers’ organisation delegates meet separately. Also, the internal structures within social partner organisations are another example of self-organisation that aims at being more effective in the ESSDC.

Verhoeven [35] illustrates how employee representatives and trade union delegates can be selected in schools and how they can develop cooperative or conflictual strategies. Their strikes are not against the headmaster of their school, but supporting the common goal to obtain more teachers and resources for the school from the government. In this trade union and headmasters can be allies, like social partners’ expression of joint opinions towards EU policy makers. Conflicting opinions can however also be seen as a threat to the authority of the headmaster. As headmasters would prefer professionalism in schools without political tensions, they translate political problems into technical issues [36], while trade unions would be inclined to keep the political character of technical issues. Shibutani [37] sees these strategic interactions as rivalries in interdependence, as the actors continue to deal with each other continuously. A monopoly of one actor at each side may be more easy to deal with than a fragmented landscape of different actors. It does not guarantee good cooperation, as the rivalries may always be perceived as a threat for some actors. Shibutani prescribes three tactics in this perspective: negotiation, coercion, and persuasion.

3. Applications of the Paradigms on Employment Relations

For each of the different sociological perspectives, applications are given in this section from the representativeness criteria in the European Commission Decision 500 of 1998 [8], from the methodology of Eurofound representativeness studies, or from specificities of sectors, for which such representativeness studies have been conducted.

The interpretative sociological theory of Max Weber looks for meaning that actors give through their subjective experience of social realities. Equal importance is given to the expectations, concerns, and beliefs of the actors as well as to their behavior, which is more than the direct observable facts, to which positivists like Emile Durkheim limit their observations. To understand the real meaning of representativeness in each of the 27 EU member states, a combined quantitative approach and a qualitative empathic approach is needed to grasp the situation in its own interpretation, which applies to all three of the representativeness criteria in Article 1 of European Commission Decision 500 of 1998. These three criteria for national member organisations are the following:

- (a) The national member organisations shall relate to specific sectors or categories and be organised at the European level;

- (b) They shall consist of organisations which are themselves an integral and recognized part of Member States' social partner structures and have the capacity to negotiate agreements, and which are representative of several Member States;
- (c) They shall have adequate structures to ensure their effective participation in the work of the Committees.

The first criterium for representativeness is about the sector relatedness, how the membership domain of national sectoral trade unions and employers' organisations matches partly or completely the entire scope of a sector. An example of how interpretative sociology helps to better understand the sectors comes with the sea fisheries sector, which is not part of the food producing sector, but because of the specificities of the work of seafarers, and the fact that they are represented by (maritime) transport trade unions, it is closer linked to the transport sectors. A good understanding of the different parts within a sector also helps to better understand the entire sector. For example, the construction sector covers large public works, like bridges, tunnels, or roads, but also an entire house that is being build, or special construction sector crafts, like electricity works, painting, or flooring. The chemical sector for example covers basic chemicals, specialty chemicals (like for example glue, paint, cleaning products, etc.), pharmaceuticals, rubber, and plastics.

The second representativeness criterium in the European Commission Decision 500 of 1998 mentions that national social partner organisations need to be recognized as an integral part of the social partner structures of the country. This cannot be measured by one similar European-wide standard, like for example the involvement, or not, in collective bargaining. On the contrary, this needs to be assessed in each country within the wider context and history of the social dialogue setting of the country. This justifies an approach where national representativeness criteria are taken into consideration, when considering the status of trade unions and employers' organisations. For the data collection of the trade unions and employers' organisations in each country, a specific national expert is collecting information about the representativeness of these organisations in that country. This data collection includes the meaning of representativeness in his or her national reporting. The reason for this procedure is that it is hard for one single researcher to grasp those different meanings in each of the different situations.

The different types of legitimacy distinguished by Weber [17] may also help to understand the third representativeness criterium: national trade social partner organisations need adequate internal structures to ensure their effective participations in the European social dialogue [38] or in Commission Consultations. Durkheim would have considered whether European social partner organisations can have their own reasons as a group, beyond the sum of the interests of each individual member organization. This would not only depend on the type of leadership, but also on internal structures and whether decision-making happens based on unanimity, majority voting, or as a form of organic solidarity, where interdependencies help to overcome internal differences.

Durkheim [18] distinguishes mechanic solidarity based on similarities, from organic solidarity that is based on interdependency between different specializations, which also helps to better understand sector relatedness. Mechanic solidarity is found in the food and drink sector, where for each different type of food product specific associations exist, but also organic solidarity in umbrella organisations covering all types of food and drink production together. At the European level, FoodDrinksEurope is an umbrella organisation covering the employers of the entire sector, while there are also specific European associations for different food products and for different types of drinks.

Mechanical solidarity can also be found in the audiovisual sector, where different employers' organisations cover the producers of movies or television programs on the one hand and the broadcasters on the other hand. Those producers are mostly smaller

companies, while the broadcasters are larger companies, either formerly state-owned broadcasters, or commercial ones. The formerly state-owned broadcasters are represented by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), while the commercial ones are represented by the Association of Commercial Television in Europe (ACT). The producers are represented by the International Federation of Film Producers' Associations (FIAPF) and the European Audiovisual Production Association (CEPI). The employers of the radios are represented by the Association of European Radios (AER). Also, at the trade union side, there are different European trade union organisations for journalists, musicians, actors, and technicians and all other employees in the sector that are represented by UNI Europa—Media, Entertainment & Arts (EURO-MEI). The journalists are organised in the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), the musicians in the International Federation of Musicians (FIM), and the actors in the International Federation of Actors (FIA).

A good example of organic solidarity can be found in the three parts of the civil aviation sector, i.e., the airlines, the air traffic controllers, and the ground handling activities. These three are strongly interdependent, although their activities are very different. Some professions, like pilots and air traffic controllers, have very specific trade union organisations, while the European Transport Federation is organizing all employees in the sector.

It is not because positivists ignore this subjective meaning and interpretation that their contribution is not valuable here. Positivists like Emile Durkheim look at representativeness as a fact that can be counted and calculated like in mathematics. This is how the number of trade union members is divided by the total number of employees in a company or a sector to calculate trade union density rates. In a similar way, the number of affiliated trade unions to a European trade union organisation are counted and divided by the total number of trade unions in a sector to calculate the organisational density rate. This is clearly a positivist approach of studying representativeness.

Furthermore, positivists consider social realities as facts that can be tested and verified, like as it is obtained in chemistry and physics. Positivism, applied to representativeness studies, gives the collected data after they are verified by social partners and cross-checked by different actors, in an iterative process, the status as proven facts. This transforms a collection of data from each of the 27 EU member states into a report that is after its final evaluation by all the actors involved considered as a picture, mapping the reality as it is at that moment in time, based on the available information. This process has, however, its limitations one should be aware of. When it comes to membership data, the membership databases of trade unions or employers' organisations may be for all their members together, without specifying which one is active in a particular sector and which one is active in another sector. In some countries, such a database can exist at the regional level, without a possibility to gather the data from the different regions together to get the number for the entire country, as there is no willingness to disclose such political sensitive information. For these reasons, there are often only estimates communicated when it comes to the number of members. The reliability of the calculated density rates based on such estimates can be questioned. Allowing different organisations from each country to check and cross-check the data from all the organisations of that country is a form of triangulation in the methodology aimed at increasing the reliability of the findings in representativeness studies.

Robert K. Merton [19] points also at the importance of the boundaries or limitations of representativeness. This happens by comparing the members with the different types of organisations that are not affiliated to European social partner organisation and are as such not represented in the European Sector Social Dialogue Committee (ESSDC). Merton would also mention former members that have stopped their membership; those that are

not yet members, but interested in joining; and those that are indifferent, not interested in membership. This underscores the importance of listing the relevant national organisations not represented by European social partner organisations, or those that are affiliated to other European organisations that are not involved in the ESSDC, but nevertheless have some representativeness.

Membership of one employers' organisation in the European employers' organisation is considered as one unit that has the same value, as the membership of another organisation. The meaning, but also the value of each membership can, however, differ, which positivism does not allow including in its calculations. For example, the membership of the largest companies in a sector as corporate members in an employers' organisation is of another nature than the membership of very small companies. The amount of membership fee they contribute to the functioning of the organisation will be larger for very large companies. Also, the influence larger companies have in the organisation will increase with their larger contributions in the budget of the organisation, because the organisation is also financially dependent on their membership. In the postal and courier sector, for example, the formerly state-owned postal company used to have a monopoly, but despite liberalization it will still have a very large part of the market share in the sector. That large national postal company can because of its size defend its interests on its own without being dependent on an employers' organisation to gain sufficient collective weight in collective bargaining with trade unions, or in lobbying authorities. Their role as a member in an employers' organisation is, however, crucial for their representativeness in terms of membership strength, but also in terms of their position in the sectoral industrial relations setting. The motivation of such large companies to become a member of the employers' organisation can be to avoid that the employers' organisation would undertake actions against the company's interests. If this large company wants to undertake constructive initiatives, it can choose to do so at the company level, while its sector-level membership is more geared towards negative motivation, to avoid what is not wanted. A smaller company may have more constructive interests in being a member of the employers' organisation, as it wants to be part of information and consultation procedures which as a smaller company it would not get, but as part of the employers' organisations it may have the chance to advocate its interests. Attention for different kinds of motivations for membership in employers' organisations is key in interpretative sociology.

Symbolic interactionism [33] adds another interactive dimension to the meaning given to the processes of actors. Representativeness may, for example, also have a meaning in processes of mutual recognition, which are applied in, for example, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, and the UK [9]. The importance and role of trade unions and employers' organisations come from their willingness to recognize each other, cooperate in social dialogue, and in negotiating collective bargaining agreements. In a similar way, a national trade union or employers' organisation, which at company level can have a relatively small degree of recognition in its industrial relations system, may gain extra importance through its involvement in social dialogue at a sector or higher cross sector level. Different views and expectations regarding membership and participation in an employers' organisation may lead to tensions that lead to a dynamic of changing settings over time. Blumer [33] thus correctly points out that industrial relations, and also representativeness, should not be seen as stable industrial relations settings written in stone, but as a potential dynamic, driven by different aspirations of different types of actors involved in it. An example of such different aspirations and how they can eventually change a European sectoral social dialogue setting can be found in the road transport sector that also covers the urban public transport activities. The trade unions and employers' organisations from the urban public transport activities would prefer a separate ESSDC. The employers from the road

transport sector would prefer to keep both activities together in one single ESSDC because they cover the freight road transport, the private sector passenger road transport, but also the private sector companies that operate the outsourced bus lines from the urban public transport activities.

Symbolic interactionism helps us to see these dynamics combining actions of cooperation in social dialogue and conflictual interactions in collective bargaining or industrial action (strikes). Interactions through shared participation in European social dialogue settings between employers and trade unions from one country that previously refused to dialogue or cooperate at the national level may also shift their views on each other's organisations as a consequence of their involvement and cooperation at EU level.

Functionalists, like Parsons [22] and Merton [19], also have a proper way to see different aspects of representativeness as interconnected. Each aspect would contribute to a different function in the entire system. An example of this can be found in the French approach of representativeness. Because of the low degree of trade union membership in France, there are clear rules, that do not look at membership, but at the outcome of the elections of trade union delegates for work councils at the company level to measure the relative representativeness of trade unions. The elections for workplace employee representatives thus have another function for the representativeness of an organisation—then the membership of workers in a trade union [9]. Because there is a very low trade union membership rate in France, the proportion of elected trade union delegates at the workplaces can be seen as a functional equivalent for the membership strength, even though membership can be withdrawn and it can also include further involvement of the member in the organisation, while a vote in an election is only one single input in time. Membership can come with occasional or continuous internal participation in the trade union's decision-making, and this can be the vehicle to provide for a negotiating mandate, or approve or disapprove draft agreements that have been reached, while a draft collective bargaining agreement can be endorsed in a ballot among all employees, not only the members, which subsequently serves the function of wider representativeness legitimizing the extension of the collective bargaining agreement to non-members.

Functionalists open the door for seeing evolutions, like in organisms with different functions in a body, that adjusts like species do in evolution theory. This functionalist approach to change over time is based on consensus in the system, whereas the critical sociology sees only the conflictual interests as drivers helping or hindering change. And as stated above, symbolic interactions realize to combine within its observations cooperative and conflictual interactions. But, let us first return to see how the functionalists perceive different elements of representativeness as parts of a harmonic consensus-based system.

The membership of a company in an employer's organisation can be considered as a financial transaction of a paid membership fee, in return for the provided services to the affiliated companies. The budget of a European social partner organisation coming from the membership fees of the national affiliates determines the autonomy of the European organisation to develop its own policies beyond the sum of the individual interests of the affiliated organisations. The commitment of the member may be limited to the payment of the membership fees, or it may also involve political support, or the input of expertise, or a contribution to build coalitions within the organization, or its participation may also have the function of voting in a decision-making process. Structural functionalism opens our eyes for different formal types of membership and learns to distinguish full membership from an observer status. In the European Commission decision 500 [16], there is a functionalist criteria prescribing that a European social partner needs to have appropriate structures that enable them to participate effectively in European social dialogue.

In the social exchange theory [29], membership of a company in an employer organisation is a transaction where the membership fee is considered as a cost, and the benefits of the membership are balanced out in terms of added value of the membership fee investment. An example of this economic rational can be found in the UK system of trade union recognition at the company level [9]. The management of a company may voluntarily recognize a trade union for collective bargaining negotiations, or this recognition can be refused. If it is refused, the trade union can request statutory recognition by the Central Arbitration Committee (CAC). If this CAC finds that 10% of the employees are unionized, a secret ballot is organized, of which the costs are equally distributed between the management and trade union(s). To obtain statutory recognition via this ballot, support is required of half of the voters, and the supportive voters need to be at least 40% of all the employees. Because of this arrangement of having to share the costs of the ballot, social exchange theory reassures us that actors will reason economically. Management will thus avoid the costs of a ballot and recognize a trade union voluntarily if it is clear that half of the employees are supportive to this. Trade unions, however, may refrain from calling for a ballot (and having to take up half of its costs) if they clearly do not have the required support among employees.

Social exchange theory assumes that member companies can more or less calculate whether the price of membership is acceptable in comparison with the risks of exclusion from decision-making if they refrain from membership. If the price is not acceptable, the union can save the membership fee, and the time to spend being involved in the employers' organisation. This cannot reasonably be expected from individual members. Therefore, the importance of paying attention to the motivation to be a member stressed by interpretative sociologists cannot be ignored. Max Weber [17], for example, does not only stress instrumental rational motivation and value-rationality, but also traditional grounds for membership. In social exchange theory, membership would mainly be assessed by referring to the goal rational motivation, which is a simplification of the reality. Exchange theory helps to see that cooperation of social partners in representativeness studies can be motivated by the reward of them being recognized as a representative social partner organisation. Historically, the 1951 European Coal and Steel Treaty included a strong institutionalized social dialogue, because both sectors were well organised, and had to be granted their European social dialogue structures in return for their approval and support for this European Coal and Steel Community.

Critical theory conceptualizes industrial relations as a power struggle. European social partner organisations are inclined to safeguard their position as most representative organisations and may want to overestimate their representativeness and try to influence researchers in this way. Simultaneously, the representativeness of rival organisations may be criticized or questioned, in an attempt to reduce this, which could help their relative importance.

The reticence or refusal of trade unions to reveal the number of their members may also be a way to protect themselves from the dominance of the system over their lifeworld, and their autonomy as a social partner organisation. The European commission as a system indeed introduced rules for European social dialogue and has made it dependent on its financing, subordinating the specificity of the lifeworld of some sectors and some specific actors. Critical sociology can thus encourage us to reflect openly on the methodology used in studying representativeness to check whether this methodology is not assuming an objectivism that is in fact re-enforcing the status quo of colonization practices. Consideration for potential adjustments to the standard methodology may also open up the analyses for other aspects of representativeness that empower the lifeworld and its actors. For example, the European commission has not created a new ESSDC between 2010 and

2022 [26] and tried to gather other existing ones that are closely related, like for example the leather sector and the footwear sector. When the trade unions and employer organisations from the aerospace sector asked for a separate European sector social dialogue [39], the reply from the European Commission [40] indicated the expectation that the ongoing representativeness study for the metal sector would provide information about the social partner organisations' representative for that sector. In this context, there was a demand to provide research findings that would justify and support the political decision to integrate aerospace within the metal sector of the European Social Dialogue Committee (ESSDC). While, for shipbuilding, a separate ESSDC exists [41], whereas in principle these economic activities are also part of the scope of the metal sector of the ESSDC. Another example is the establishment of a European social dialogue for the football sector in 2008, while several years before efforts to make a European social dialogue for all sports failed. Habermas would point at the importance of huge amounts of money involved in the lifeworld of professional football to explain this. While for the power aspect, the importance of the capacity to negotiate needs to be studied in each representativeness study. Article 155 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union [42] gives social partners the power to make agreements that can be implemented as a European Council Directive, for which no vote in the European Parliament is needed, because the representativeness study legitimizes the decision-making power of social partners to regulate the working conditions in their sector.

Symbolic interactionism indicates that industrial relations research needs to consider the changes in the sectors and the changes aspired in the relations and in the working conditions in the sector. Studying the representativeness of social partners should also include the dynamics in the sector, the aspirations and tensions. Examples of such changing settings can be found in the postal sector and in the telecom sector. Historically, the postal sector was dominated by the former state-owned post companies that are all affiliated to PostEurop. Since the postal sector has been liberalized, there are many other courier companies, and some of the formerly state-owned companies are now competing with the incumbents in other countries. The package delivery activities of courier companies is in fact not much different from the last mile delivery from freight road transport, bringing the postal sector and the road transport sector towards each other. Another example is the telecom sector, which historically was also dominated by state-owned monopolists. Here we find liberalization, but also technical changes that brought changing settings of the sector. Nowadays, telephones are not only mobile, but also more like computers, which has brought the IT and ICT sectors to merge with the telecom sector as one.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The switching from one sociological theory to the next and back has illustrated how looking at different theories can help to understand representativeness better, to consider additional aspects of representativeness, and to seek improvements in the methodology of how representativeness can be studied. The different theoretical perspectives allow industrial relations researchers to become aware of the implicit choices and the consequences of these choices. The examples in this paper have illustrated that the scope and approach of representativeness studies have an impact on the data collected and the results of the analyses. The context in which these studies are performed has an impact on the setting of ESSDCs [8,43]. The already recognized social partner organisations will want to keep their representativeness status, as this ensures their role in the ESSDC, access to project based funding, the right to be consulted by the European Commission, and the possibility for them to request that a European agreement is implemented through a Council Directive. The acceptance of other organisations as newly representative is sometimes perceived

as a threat to the already recognized social partners, which might make the compromise seeking in the ESSDC more complicated. On the other hand, it may increase the overall collective representativeness of all the European social partners together in the ESSDC. The tension field caused by the different interests of the different organisations may put pressure on the researcher and on the methodological approach. In this context, this paper has helped to see clearer the alternative perspectives and the implications they may have for the research on representativeness and the results of such studies. When a sector changes, due to liberalization, technological change, or innovation in the sector, this may also lead to the creation of new organisations or a new balance between existing organisations. This is a reason to regularly update representativeness studies and keep an eye on how the methodology can be adjusted to the specificities of each sector and how it is developing over time.

This paper shows that representativeness in employment relations is not something that simply can be defined based on some distributions of the members of labor organisations. This would be a too simple representation of social reality. The study of some sociological paradigms above offers the possibility to leave that simple picture. These paradigms have very different characteristics but share also many similarities. The advantage of relying on them helps the researcher to come to a reliable understanding of the representativeness (or the limitations of representativeness) in employment relations. Most of these paradigms place the problem of representativeness in the own character of the society in which these relations are studied. In the explanation above, Weber [17], Durkheim [18], Parsons [22], Merton [19], Blumer [33] and Habermas [25] explicitly ask attention for the character of collective behavior and the kind of society in which this behavior takes place. But not all stress the same method for understanding human behavior. M. Weber [17] and H. Blumer [33] opt for an interpretative approach, starting from the interpretation of the behavior of individuals, but they are aware that these interpretations are also linked to a wider society. This individualism is also visible in the approach of the exchange theory by Homans [29], but here the individual is more seen as a calculating actor always eager to find some satisfaction. Durkheim [18] and the functionalists try to come to a good understanding of social behavior by focusing on the social structure in which people act. J. Habermas [25], to conclude, asks our attention for two approaches: an interpretative approach to study the “lifeworld” of daily life and a structural approach of the system. Paying attention to both parts of social reality and the interpenetration of both in each other will certainly contribute to the improvement of the study of representativeness in employment relations.

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