This paper seeks to understand the impact of geographical location on the employment relationship in the United Kingdom (UK). It investigates whether or not management make strategic decisions to locate to certain areas or whether they act in a pragmatic way. The foundations of the study lie in a number of disciplines for example economics and the study of internal migration (Bulmen, Kogan and McCarthy 1955; Belot and Ermisch 2009; Drinkwater an Ingram 2009; Hughes and McCormick 1987) as well as from employment relations (Gallie, Penn and Rose 1996; Martin Sunley and Willis 1993, 1994, 1996; Massey and Miles 1984) and sociology (Willmott and Young 2007; Willis 1977).

The work that has been undertaken in this area suggests that there are two types of individuals, those that will probably move and those that will not. Although this account is very simplistic it does offer a starting point however it should be noted that it does not account for changes in the internal or external environment which could influence the decisions and actions that individuals make throughout their life time. It should, therefore, be recognised that decisions about movement within the UK does not take place in a vacuum it is influenced by a number of factors, such as family ties, friendship networks which they called ‘cumulative inertia’ as well as level of education and length of residential time in a given area. McGinnis (1968) further argued that people who had a large number of close friends were less likely to migrate long distances and concluded that an individuals welfare depends on the number of close friendships which support them. Other factors such as sense of community and kinship strength were also seen as being important in the decision about moving or staying in a particular location.

Although the literature suggests that structural organisational change is significantly influenced by regional variation (Robson 2009) very little research has been in undertaken with regard to the impact of geographical location on the employment relationship within the United Kingdom (UK) (Massey and Miles 1984; Southall 1988; Massey and Painter 1989; Martin, Sunley and Wills 1993, 1994, 1996; McGrath-Champ 2002). Robson (2009:275) argues that during the last thirty-five years the UK has witnessed significant changes in the structure of the economy in that it has shifted from a traditional manufacturing base to the service sector. In fact Romero (2009) has suggested that there was a 54% decline in manufacturing and mining in the UK during the last two decades.

With the change in the economic base the UK has seen a transformation of working practices. It has seen the skills base of the working population shift from the dominance of blue collar workers to white collar ones. This in itself has impacted on the employment relationship however it is important to note that the impact of these changes has not been evenly distributed throughout the various regions. Robson (2009) adds that “inherited differences in industry structure mean that the impact and effects of structural change have been different for different regions”. This in turn has led to changes in the way people are managed. However, what is also very clear is that certain regional locations influenced the employment relationship through their pre-existing cultural traits which dominate the workplace relationship.
Martin et al (1994:85) add that there are three connected reasons why geographical location should be considered when looking at changes in the employment relationship. The first important factor is that the institutions that govern employment relations are “themselves geographically structured... Second, industrial relations and industrial politics are spatially embedded ... [as they] develop and are reproduced within locally-varying economic, social and cultural settings or contexts”. Thirdly the local context shapes the “strategic spaces for action by workers and employers” thus Martin et al (1994:86) argue the local context and resources are both enablers and constrainers of the employment relationship.

Thus this present study acknowledges the structural changes which have occurred however, it examines the employment relationship not through industrial sector lenses but through regional perspectives on the nature of work. It adopts an inter-disciplinary case study methodology to the collection and analysis of the data during the period 2005 to 2009.

Based on this perspective, the case study methodology was identified as offering the framework and ‘tools’ it was felt necessary to undertake the research. Hartley (1999:211) states that the “case study is an important method in industrial relations” research as it enables the “complexity of the processes of conflict and co-operation … to be described and analysed in ways which have not predetermined what constitutes conflict and co-operation for particular groups”. It is a methodology which is “tailor-made for exploring new processes or behaviours” (Hartley 1999:213).

As the epistemological perspective of the study suggests, knowledge is gained through people interacting with each other as well as the external environment and making sense of it through conceptualisation and language, the chosen methodology therefore provides the opportunity to observe, read and speak to individuals in the workplace.

Thus, the research aims were identified as follows:

- To identify and explore relationships which have a significant influence on employment relations in a range of differing locations.
- To identify cultural and socialisation influences on employment relations.
- To compare and contrast employee/employer behaviour in traditional manufacturing areas with those in rural locations and New Towns.
- To explore the impact that the industrial sector has on working practices in these areas.

In order to access the data required for analysis three organisations were identified as offering the opportunity to examine the research questions. These were a middle-sized steel manufacturing company (Steel Co), a large multi-site logistics company (Logistics Co) and a large international bank (Bank Co). The organisations were located on at least two sites and were spread throughout the UK. Due to constraints placed on the research not all sites within each company was visited. However, a wide number of regions were visited from all three organisations (see table 1).
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Company</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alston</td>
<td>Rural location</td>
<td>Steel Co</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birmingham</td>
<td>Traditional area</td>
<td>Logistics Co</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Manufacturing area</td>
<td>Bank Co</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bristol</td>
<td>Traditional area</td>
<td>Logistics Co</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glasgow</td>
<td>Traditional area</td>
<td>Logistics Co</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Manufacturing area</td>
<td>Bank Co</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livingston</td>
<td>New Town</td>
<td>Logistics Co</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milton Keynes</td>
<td>New Town</td>
<td>Bank Co</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sheffield</td>
<td>Traditional area</td>
<td>Logistics Co</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Manufacturing area</td>
<td>Bank Co</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tow Law</td>
<td>Rural location</td>
<td>Steel Co</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While acknowledging the limited nature of the literature Martin, Sunley and Willis (1993, 1994 and 1996) suggest that the geographical location has had a significant impact on the employment relationship in the UK. Clark (1989) agrees and in his American study found that tight knit communities developed a culture and work ethic which was specific to them and which was transferred to new generations of workers through the process of socialisation. He also highlighted the influence of kinship on the behaviour of workers in the USA. Researchers such as Negrelli and Sheldon (2006) and Keller (2006) have touched on the issue of geographical location in their studies of comparative employment relations in Italy and Germany however, much more needs to be undertaken in order to strengthen our understanding of the underlying theory of regional variation within the employment relationship.

The consensus at present appears to suggest that the geographical location and culture of the local community determine the way in which management and employees respond to each other (Clark 1989). Martin et al (1996:16) support this in that “different union and workplace traditions have been established in various geographical areas in different historical periods. Once established these locally-based traditions can show a high degree of persistence over a period of time and in some cases, influence the nature of future changes and developments”.

To date the data gathered from the case study indicates that employment relations vary from one geographical area to the next within the UK. It further indicates that this is not restricted to economic factors such as levels of unemployment but includes areas such as traditional cultures and relationships such as kinship and friendship. In fact, these relationships play a significant part in the behaviour of both employees as well as employers. For example, employees in traditional manufacturing areas such as Sheffield, Glasgow, Bristol and Birmingham or rural areas such as Alston and Tow Law experienced a very different employment relationship to those located in ‘New Towns’ such as Milton Keynes and Livingston.
The analysis begins by focusing on sites where location played an important part in the employment relationship. It is suggested that this was due to the local culture, historical industrial relations practices as well as being influenced by factors such as unemployment levels, increased competition and legislative changes. For example, at Logistics Co in the industrialised South Yorkshire, the data found that on the whole employees were reluctant to relocate in order to find work. The interviews indicated that not only did employees prefer to remain in Yorkshire they were not even prepared to travel more than ten miles from family and friends in order to find new employment. It is argued that their behaviour was influenced by close kinship and community ties. For example, one site manager in South Yorkshire stated that his site was situated in an area where the workforce “wouldn’t be happy to pack their bags and move away in order to find work”. He added that the community spirit was very strong in that people in the area had traditionally strong bonds to their families, friends and communities. As Martin, Sunley and Wills (1994b:85) add:

“Places differ, not only in their economic structures and functions, but also in their inherited cultural, political and social value systems. Local context plays an important role in shaping the existence and persistence of local variations in trade union traditions and industrial relations”.

Evidence suggested that both management and employees in South Yorkshire, were significantly influenced by their historical industrial relations past which had been passed down through the process of socialisation to the next generation of workers which resulted in an adversarial relationship dominated by suspicion and fear. Data gathered from other traditional manufacturing areas such as Glasgow, Bristol and Birmingham demonstrated that similar situations occurred there too. Below are some comments collected during the interviews on how some of the workforce viewed moving away to find work:

“My life is here. This is where I belong. Why would I move away from everything I know for a job. No I belong here with my family and friends. The job’s not too bad and I have mates around me” (worker from Bristol).

“I have a job here and it’s OK. I would miss my mates and family if I moved way. This is home” (worker from Glasgow).

“My family has always lived in Yorkshire. One granddad worked in the steel industry, the other down the pit. I have never thought about leaving even when things have got quite tough in work” (worker from Sheffield).

Rural areas, such as Alston in Cumbria and Tow Law in Northumberland also demonstrated that individual workers were not prepared to move away from friends and family in order to find other work and therefore became the weaker partner in the employment relationship. For example one factory worker from Alston claimed:

“Why would I want to have to move away or even drive or travel to work, I have everything I want right here…. Friends, family and the job is OK “.

Another worker from Tow Law added
“I have lived and worked here all my life why would I consider moving away from everything I have known? It wouldn’t make sense”.

“I wouldn’t want to move away, my family has lived here for generations. Why would I move. I have a job the management are fair”.

However, this was not reflected in the ‘new’ towns for example, Livingston and Milton Keynes where the data suggested employees had weaker ties to their communities and were more prepared to relocate in order to improve their employment opportunities. It is argued that this is because employees living in these areas had not developed strong historical or cultural affiliations as these towns/cities had emerged much later and had drawn new ‘nuclear’ families to the areas thus fragmenting the extended family. One worker from Livingston claimed that he would move to find work or better prospects and added that he had a young family and that it would be easy to relocate to where the jobs were.

“My kids are young and easy to move. No schools to think about just yet so I can go where the jobs are… I don’t really worry about family and friends we can keep in touch with those we really want to and visit. It’s no big deal”.

Another highlighted his flexibility by arguing that:

“Today you have to be prepared to travel for work if work dries up here you can’t just sit back. If you want to get on, and I do then you must be prepared to move to find work or travel away from home. I had a job a few years ago where I commuted, it was really hard. Much better to move. ….. Would I miss family and friends well yes I suppose so but today with cars and the internet keeping in touch is so much easier”.

From a management perspective those sites located in a traditional manufacturing area together with the rural locations the ‘power’ in the employment relationship was very much in the hands of the managers. It was clear from the data that consultation about various organisational decisions was restricted in the rural or traditional manufacturing areas. Further, management was aware of their ‘power’ and used it to improve organisational performance sometimes to the detriment of the employees welfare. For example, shift patterns were determined by management but were only released to the employees at the beginning of each week therefore making it difficult to make family arrangements.

A senior manager at the site in Birmingham stated that:

“I can make decisions in relation to the site without much consultation with either the workforce or the union. The workforce and the union both understand that it would be difficult for them to find other work around here, so generally they just accept the decisions I make”.

This was supported by the trade union representative at the site who argued that:

“management tend to limit consultation with the union and only actually fully
engage with it when the have to. It’s not the same in some of the other sires. We generally have to accept this situation as we don’t want our members loosing their jobs. That wouldn’t help any one”.

This was also reflected in Logistics Co’s use of works councils. Each site was to have a works council which was established by corporate management to ensure that the employees felt valued and to show that management was listening to what they said. Although all sites visited had a works council which met on a monthly basis they operated very differently and depended on where the site was located. For example, the employees at the site in Livingston were listened to and responded to however, sites in Glasgow, Birmingham, Bristol and Sheffield had a less responsive debate with management. There was no doubt that employees could put forward ideas and suggestions to the management however, there was little evidence to suggest management paid more than lip service to the ideas put forward. As a result employees at these sites were reluctant to spend time engaging in these meetings.

“What’s the point? We spend time thinking of possible changes and put these ideas forward but then management just do what they want with no thought of our opinions” (Employee from Logistics Co Bristol).

The sites based in the rural areas did not use work councils. Employee’s views were put forward during consultation with the trade union representative. Again it was felt that management were more powerful in the rural locations as employees were again reluctant to move away to find work. The management in the rural locations explained that staff turnover was limited because very few of their employees had their own transport or access to public transport to seek other employment. This was certainly the case in Alston which had a very limited bus service to Carlisle and Newcastle.

The data from Logistics Co and Steel Co clearly indicated that the geographical location mattered to their work forces and had a significant impact on their work forces ‘power’ within the employment relationship. Areas such as staff turnover and sickness absence was notably lower in the traditional manufacturing areas and the rural locations again perhaps indicating the work forces desire to keep their employment.

Although, as outlined above the geographical location mattered to Logistics Co and Steel Co this was not found to be the case in Bank Co. The evidence from this company demonstrated that on the whole their employees seemed happy to move around the country in fact they saw it as part of their progression through the organisation. The data also indicated that Bank Co communicated more effectively and more regularly with their workforce than Logistics Co or Steel Co. Analysis of the data suggested that Bank Co were more effective at managing their employees expectations. Another factor that needs to be considered is the type of worker we are talking about. On the whole the staff employed at Bank Co are white collar employees who have received a better level of education and are thus more receptive to the idea of relocation (McGinnis1968). Employees at Logistics Co and Steel Co were on the whole blue collar workers.

Another factor to be considered is that although employees at Bank Co accepted
relocation as part of their working lives they were merely moving from one location to another and not, as the case would be for employees at Logistics Co and Steel Co, moving from one employer to another. Perhaps the staff at Bank Co were happy to move in order to enhance their promotional prospects. In relation to the work councils Bank Co did tend to utilise the works councils forum for gathering employees opinions and reacting to their suggestions. It also consulted with the trade unions on a regular basis with regard to terms and conditions of employment.

To conclude, the evidence to date illustrates that factors such as the economic climate, changes in competition levels, employment legislation and political ideology have influenced the way British employment relations has evolved. However, it has been the geographical location which is of significant importance to British industrial relations. The data has indicated that local communities have differing historical and cultural norms and beliefs and as such react to the employment relationship differently. It has been highlighted that in traditional manufacturing areas, close kinship ties appear to dominate employee’s behaviour in that they live close to their extended families and are very reluctant to relocate in order to seek new employment. Further, within those areas, employees tend to prefer to act collectively and view management as the ‘enemy’. Therefore, at a time of poor economic performance, management tended to dominate the employment relationship even when there was a high percentage of trade union members because employees were afraid of losing their incomes as well as threatening their way of life.

However, in ‘new’ towns/cities the data suggested weaker kinship ties, perhaps due to the fact that many employees lived within a ‘nuclear family which had ‘broken’ away from their extended families in an earlier generation. Interviews suggested that employees were more likely to act individually within the employment relationship and further, that they were much more likely to relocate if they did not achieve adequate job satisfaction.

“If I don’t like the job I just look for something new, I don’t really mind if I had to move somewhere new although it would be convenient to stay put, less disruptive” (Employee from Logistics Co Livingston).

“Moving is hassle but if it means better work or more money then we would cope…. Friends and family are important but we would be able to visit. No where is really too far away today is it?” (Employees from Logistics Co Milton Keynes).

This situation implied that employees tended to have more ‘power’ within the workplace as they had the ability and the inclination to “just walk out of the door” if the situation did not suit them, even if this meant relocating to a different part of the country.

Despite these conclusions it should be recognised that perhaps some economic sectors can prove an exception to this, for example, the banking industry. The data gathered from the banking sector suggested some forms of employment had been able to transcend the geographical location of its sites through the effective way it managed its employee’s expectations. For example, there was an expectation that if an
individual joined the bank they would move around the country in order to move up the employment ladder within this sector. Belot and Ermisch (2009) argue that the more skills and education that an individual has the more likely they are to be prepared to move to find work. The study also found that employers in the banking sector invested time in creating an organisational ‘family’ which offered a certain amount of job security and protection from the outside environment. The study has indicated that employee expectations within the banking sector were carefully managed from an early stage in their careers.

“I had never really thought about not moving…I took the job after I left school and I knew that if I wanted to get on well I would have to move around the country a bit” (employee from Bank).

One of the middle managers from the Bank added:

“If people want to get on well within this sector you know when you take the job that you will be moved around so that you can experience different branches etc. It’s hard when you have a family. I wouldn’t want to be in one place for the whole of my life. It is good to see new places even if it’s only within the UK”.

Therefore, the study indicates that the geographical location is influential to the way in which the workplace relationship operates. Within traditional manufacturing organisations which are located either in traditional manufacturing areas or in rural locations. However, it was also clear that this was not the case for Bank Co. Therefore, more research needs to be undertaken in order to ascertain the impact of the geographical location on a larger number of industrial sectors.
References


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