The Drunkard's Search: Looking for 'HRM' in all the Wrong Places

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Abstract and Key Results

- Specific concerns have been raised about the ontologies and epistemologies that have dominated HRM research and the concomitant ubiquity of positivistic research methodologies. These concerns have also given rise to calls for more pioneering research framed within alternative paradigms. This paper considers the theoretical and practical value of alternative approaches to the study of HRM.
- Results show, drawing on interpretive studies of HRM rooted in different epistemologies, ontologies, and methodologies that a composite body of HRM scholarship is needed, where dominant and emerging approaches to the study of HRM are mutually supportive.

Key Words

Human Resource Management · Performance Appraisal · Positivism · Interpretivism

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Introduction

The human resource management (HRM) field has experienced significant growth since its inception about a century ago (Dulebohn/Ferris/Stodd 1995, Jamrog/Overholt 2004). Commencing as a minor area of specialism and oftentimes regarded as a 'sub theme' of other fields such as industrial relations (Kaufman 2002, 1993), it is now very much a field in its own right. Its status in the academic community, for example, is reflected in dedicated journals, associations and undergraduate and postgraduate study. Yet, recent developments notwithstanding, the field continues to endure considerable growing pains as HRM scholars struggle to explain its parameters and objectives: what is its core focus? What are its unique characteristics? Is it a science? If so, how is it different from, or similar to, other sciences? What are the ontological and epistemological assumptions necessary for a science of HRM? Is there a grand theory of HRM? Is a grand theory needed? Clearly, these are broad ranging questions which merit serious attention. While we do not seek to answer all of them here, we identify them in order to acknowledge the evolving nature of HRM theory and practice.

The specific purpose of this paper is to identify the value of alternative research processes and techniques used to "discover" knowledge, i.e., those located outside dominant ontologies and epistemologies, and their potential contribution to a richer body of research and practice in HRM. To that extent, the paper builds on the work of Ferris et al. (2004) who suggest that the study of HRM is dominated by a limited ontology that would benefit from research conducted within alternative paradigms. The ubiquity of the dominant ontology is, arguably, due to the resistance to alternative paradigms that characterizes much of North American HRM scholarship. Yet, it is notable that such resistance is also evident in other parts of the scholarly world. Indeed, in referring to the general lack of acceptance of different paradigmatic approaches to HRM research, Brewster (1999, p. 49) states that "like the fish's knowledge of water, these researchers not only see no alternatives but do not consider the possibility that there could be any ... some of those who become aware of the alternative paradigm respond ... by denying the value of the alternative ...". Extending the debate further, this paper suggests ways in which theoretical, conceptual and empirical work conducted in different epistemologies, ontologies and methodologies, adds value to HRM scholarship. Yet, moving away from traditional debates about the superiority of one paradigm over another, the paper contends that the dominant positivist paradigm and emerging paradigms of interpretivism both offer valuable insights into HRM theory and practice. Thus, we argue for a more composite body of scholarship where different paradigms are used in a mutually supportive manner.

It is notable that historically much of the HRM research conducted in the United States is firmly embedded in a positivist paradigm, characterized by a focus on cause-effect relationships, statistical tests, and predominantly linear thinking (Brewster 1999, Mendenhall 1999). Thus, this paper will begin by tracing the historical development of HRM research in the United States, juxtaposing it with the relatively broader paradigmatic scope that characterizes some of the more recent approaches to the study of HRM. It will briefly consider how these emerging approaches have been established outside the US, focusing specifically on themes relating to empirical research and theory construction. Our main contention in this regard is that the relatively greater paradigmatic openness that exists in

HRM research outside the US maybe closely connected to the limited presence of scientific management (Taylorism), particularly when compared with Taylorism's impact on management practice in the US. Having said that we acknowledge explicitly, that not all research in the US is located within a positivist paradigm. Likewise, not all research located outside the US is characterized by paradigmatic liberalism. Yet, hyperbole notwithstanding, it is notable that a positivist research agenda drives much of the publication in North American-based journals, the criteria for research funding, professorial hiring and tenure and promotion practices.

Having discussed the dominance of positivism in contemporary HRM scholarship, the paper will then problematize the idea of HRM as a 'scientific' field, focusing specifically on the limitations of relying solely on a positivist research paradigm. The idea of HRM theory will then be introduced, paying specific attention to the limitations of viewing HRM in a one-dimensional and largely uncritical fashion. The paper briefly considers HRM scholarship in general and then focuses on performance appraisal in particular to highlight the value of multidimensionality and paradigmatic diversity. The concluding section of the paper will suggest that unless HRM scholarship embraces diverse ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies, it will be restricted to a narrow understanding of HRM processes and practices. Moreover, it will continue to reflect a one-dimensional voice that emphasizes the development of prescriptive, 'evidence-based best practices' that are intellectually and paradigmatically limited and often practically unhelpful.

HRM in the United States: History and Characterization

Characterizations of HRM research as they have developed in the US are, as one would expect, essentially specific to the respective context and driven predominantly by American scholarly concerns and requirements. Legge (2005, p. 3), for example, suggests that:

"In part under the influence of US academic imperialism, modernist positivistic perspectives are now dominant. ... The favoured theoretical foundations of today's debates and research are institutionalist and resource-based value theories, reflected in evidence-based approaches that privilege the search for causal relationships in the service of performativity."

There is, for example, a tendency among some US-based scholars to adopt a limited conceptualization of an integrative HRM, preferring to conceive of it as an identifiable field that can be located at a specific point on a continuum between 'macro' and 'micro' approaches to the study of organizations that includes organizational behaviour, industrial/organizational psychology, organizational theory, and strategic management. By comparison HRM scholarship outside of the US can be characterized as showing a considerable willingness to embrace more emic concerns, in both a cultural and institutional sense. This diversity is important and necessary because it signals the existence of multiple bodies of HRM scholarship (Wright/Snell/Dyer 2005, Bamber/Lansbury/Wailes 2004, Brewster 1999, Sparrow/Hiltrop 1997, Moore/Jennings 1995). Such multiplicity is analogous to the discussion of multiple 'capitalisms' (Whitley 2000, Whitley/Kristensen 1996, Amin 1994, Best 1993, Clegg 1990). Thus, for example, accepting that HRM emerged as

"a scientific field of inquiry" alongside the emergence of scientific management, the welfare work movement and industrial psychology which "merged to form HRM" (Ferris et al. 2004, p. 233) presents an interesting contrast to the evolution of other, specific forms of 'people management', which have been very different elsewhere, partly because of the diversity in the institutional and social arrangements of capitalism (Bamber/ Lansbury/Wailes 2004, Whitley 2000, Hampden-Turner/Trompenaars 1993, Lane 1989). There are also several substantive themes that differentiate HRM practices in the US from, say, other parts of the world, (and other parts of the world from each other) e.g., the role of trade unions and employee representatives in the employment relationship and higher levels of government intervention in organizational issues (Bamber/Lansbury/ Wailes 2004, Sparrow/Hiltrop 1997). Lane (1989), for example, has traced the different approaches to HRM in Germany, France and the United Kingdom to show how the manufacturing industry and the relationships between management and labour developed uniquely in the respective contexts. Similarly, Sparrow and Hiltrop (1997) contend that HRM in Europe is different from that of the US because of cultural factors (such as understandings of distributive justice), institutional factors (e.g., the scope of labor legislation, social security provisions, and the role of trade unions); and more direct interventions by the state (including state ownership of business enterprises). Whitley (2000) has offered similar observations on Korea, Japan and overseas Chinese businesses and institutional structures.

It is also important to note that the idea of what HRM is, if it is anything at all, will influence scholarly activity in relation to it. Clark and Pugh (2000) for example, note that the evolution of HRM scholarship in Europe will relate to its acceptance as a practitioner discourse in organizations and as an academic discipline. In Spain, they suggest there is no existing discourse of 'HRM'. In Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden, HRM is viewed as a multidisciplinary area that is influenced by and encompasses economics, industrial relations, the sociology of work and organizations, organizational behaviour, social and organizational psychology. Thus, approaches to the study of 'HRM' will be driven by the disciplinary concerns and methods of other areas. Likewise in Britain and Germany the meaning of HRM is contested and this academic contestation leads to a variety of ontological, epistemological and methodological approaches to its study (Clark/ Pugh 2000).

Consideration of the contextual and institutional influences on HRM practices also moves some way towards explaining the dominance of scientific management in US scholarship. Thus, for example, the existent literature suggests that HRM began as a field of inquiry around the time of World War I, with the merging of "scientific management," the welfare work movement, and industrial psychology (Ferris et al. 2004, Jamrog/ Overholt 2004, Dulebohn/Ferris/Stodd 1995). Labelling the work of Frederick Taylor and associates (Taylor 1947) as *scientific* management is, in itself, a telling indicator of the nature of scholarly thought in the US at that time, and ever since, in the HRM field. The relationship between science and scientific study and HRM, was seen as an imitative mirror image of the physical and natural sciences, even though the focus of study (people as opposed to objects) was accepted as fundamentally different. It was assumed that "reality" existed and could be studied through a systematic process of hypotheses development and testing borrowed from the natural sciences. It was also assumed that theories

and "laws" of HRM could then be developed and universally applied across similar work settings as prescriptions for action. These ontological assumptions, cornerstones of positivist scholarship, continue to dominate HRM scholarship.

Given the centrality of ontology and epistemology and their concomitant influence on HRM research, it is worthwhile exploring the notion of scientific management a little further here. Drawing largely on laboratory settings, Taylor utilized time and motion studies to improve work efficiency in ways that could be generalized across multiple organizational settings (Steers/Mowday/Sahapiro 2004). This methodology marked the beginning of HRM as a science, characterized by a one 'best' research practice, which could in turn be used to furnish 'best' work practices. While those in the welfare work movement tried to mitigate the negative effects of the early industrialized work environment with paternalistic benefits, scholars in industrial psychology have, to a large extent, cemented the field firmly in the domain of positivism (Johnson/Cassell 2001, Blum 1949). In fact, the contemporary focus on industrial/organizational (I/O) psychology in the US is a distinguishing feature of HRM scholarship, emphasizing 'good science' by replicating the study of the natural and physical world. Indeed, this emphasis is in part based on a commitment to 'scientific' research in HRM built on positivist methodologies (Ferris/Hall/Royle/Martocchio 2004).

While the field of HRM has evolved through the human relations movement and more recently into the era of strategic HRM, the overall approach to conducting empirical study has remained relatively consistent. In fact, the Hawthorne experiments, which heralded the beginning of the human relations movement (Steers/Mowday/Shapiro 2004, Thompson/McHugh 1995), and testing the effects of various HRM functions and processes on firm performance, which is characteristic of the strategic HRM School (Becker/Huselid/Ulrich 2001, Becker/Huselid/Pickus/Spratt 1997), may have consolidated the dominance of a positivist paradigm. As Johnson and Cassell (2001, p. 126) suggest, the field of I/O psychology, a field closely related to HRM in North America, remains essentially "entrenched in the positivist paradigm."

Thus far, our discussions have outlined the connectivity between a country's historical development and institutional and cultural frameworks and its HRM activities and practices and respective scholarship (Bamber/Lansbury/Wailes 2004, Budhwar 2004, Sparrow/Hiltrop 1997). Our purpose is to provide a flavour of these issues, not a detailed critique. This connectivity presents a significant challenge for HRM scholars interested in exploring and/or adapting different paradigmatic approaches to the study of HRM (Wright/Snell/Dyer 2005). As Brewster (1999, p. 48) states, in reference to the dominant universalist paradigm and deductive research in the US:

"... even where the data and analyses are sound, however, a disadvantage of this paradigm, perhaps of US research tradition in particular, is that the pressure to publish and the restricted nature of what is acceptable has led to much careful statistical analysis of small-scale, often narrow, questions whose relevance to wider theoretical and practical debates is sometimes hard to see. This has been summed up ... in the notion of the 'drunkard's search' – looking for the key where visibility is good, rather than where the key was lost."

The story of the Drunkard's Search is often used as an analogy to describe researchers' attempts to seek the easy route in scholarly inquiry. According to one version of the story, a drunk staggers out of a pub after an evening of fun and loses his car key along the way.

However, he starts to search frantically under a street lamp some distance away from where he lost it. Asked why he was not searching where he lost it, he replied that "there is more light here ... it is brighter". Like the "drunkard's search", HRM scholars tend to look in other locations in an effort to find the metaphorical key. The path to inquiry and publishing positivist-based research is brightly illuminated but the key may be elsewhere. Thus, the task now is to "retrace our drunken steps" and re-examine our assumptions about the nature of science and existing knowledge in HRM. It is to those assumptions that we now turn.

Assumptions about the Nature of 'Science' and HRM

Even as we may debate the character of HRM and HRM scholarship and how they vary according to distinctive cultural and institutional contexts, there are more fundamental concerns that also demand attention. The idea of 'science' and the extent to which HRM can be considered a science is especially pertinent here. The extent to which a given field has the status of science is closely connected to broader understandings about the nature of 'science' and the concomitant themes of ontology, epistemology, conceptualizations of individual action and research methodology. Thus, in the sections below we explore the status of HRM as a science by juxtaposing alternative ontologies, epistemologies and research methodologies and considering their potential contribution towards a broader understanding of HRM. We do this by referring to research undertaken in HRM generally, and specifically on performance appraisal.

Positivist Ontology, Epistemology and Methodology

A positivist ontology assumes that "the social world exists independently of an individual's appreciation of it" (Burrell/Morgan 1979, p. 4) and can therefore be understood as a collection of 'facts'. HRM scholars operating within ontological positivism assume a world of actors and agents that can be understood by drawing on scientific validity and reliability to measure its reality and their effects. In order to deal with applied problems and guide further research, this form of scientifically informed investigation requires clear definition of major constructs and relationships (Burrell/Morgan 1979). Hypothesizing and testing of relationships is offered as the "correct approach" to ensure systematic HRM theory development.

'Ways of seeing' represented in different ontologies has a close connectivity to epistemological 'ways of knowing'. As already noted above, research conducted within a positivist ontology seeks to find regularities and causal relationships between variables, either to verify or falsify hypotheses (Burrell/Morgan 1979). Implicit in positivist ontology and epistemology is the idea that if certain prescriptions are followed, because they derive from systematically conducted research activity, precise desirable outcomes can be expected and, indeed, predicted. Thus, individual action can be determined, at least to some extent, as a result of the 'science' that underpins it. This expectation is explicit in Locke's and Latham's work on goal setting theory (Locke/Latham 1996). In HRM more broadly, it translates into prescriptions for 'best practice' or 'evidence-based practice', as

suggested in much of the positivist literature cited above. Thus, there are 'best practices' for recruitment and selection, training and development, rewards systems etc. Furthermore, if there is an objective world within which it is possible to 'discover' things (Durkheim 1938), methodologies need to be used that enable their discovery and the cause-effect relationships that are viewed as valid and reliable. Thus positivist ontology emphasizes methods that can be statistically validated and from which generalizations can be made.

Interpretivist Ontologies, Epistemologies and Methodologies

Positivism and postpositivism are well versed arguments in the literature as the received wisdom in social and behavioural science (Fuller 2006). Non-positivism and anti-positivism, however, which are broadly grouped under an interpretivist paradigm, are not so clearly delineated. As Burrell and Morgan (1979, p. 227) note "the interpretive paradigm embraces a wide range of philosophical and sociological thought which shares the common characteristic of attempting to understand and explain the social world primarily from the point of view of the actors directly involved in the process". In general, then, interpretivism is a paradigm, a set of interrelated assumptions about the social world which provides a conceptual framework for its study. These assumptions include, ontologically, the idea that there are multiple, constructed realities, not simply one truth. Thus epistemologically, interpretivism is concerned with knowing about specific realities. Moreover, knowing about those realities means being part of them or in them. A corollary of this assumption is that individual action can only be explained by investigating the experiences and thinking of actors in the social world, and methodologies are required that enable access to those experiences and thinking.

Such is the variety of both interpretivist thought and method that any summary is likely to exclude as much as is included. For present purposes we paraphrase the work of Gubrium and Holstein (1997) with respect to the application of interpretivism to an understanding of the social world. They argue that although interpretivism can be undertaken through many different streams of thought, these streams share certain common elements. First, scepticism; interpretivists are sceptical of received wisdom. Their methods are designed and used to challenge the 'commonsensical', the 'obvious' and the 'real'. Second, interpretivists are committed to close scrutiny and have a primary concern to understand and document the world at close quarters. Third, individuals are viewed as active agents who create, develop and design their lives and the social worlds in which they live. Fourth, interpretivists celebrate subjectivity both in themselves and in their research subjects. Finally, the innate complexity of the social world is highlighted. Life in the social world is unable to be fully described and explained because it is ambiguous, discontinuous, fragmented, compartmentalized and differentiated (Gubrium/Holstein 1997).

Although this overview provides a useful insight into some of the basic assumptions of interpretivism, there is also considerable diversity between different interpretive perspectives. Indeed, the extent of diversity among interpretive perspectives far exceeds that which can be found within the positivist tradition. Thus, for example, while we might be able to differentiate between those seeking to verify hypotheses and those seeking to falsify them (positivists and postpositivists) the apprehension of something very close to

'the truth' remains paradigmatically possible. Furthermore, qualitative research is often used in research to falsify accepted wisdom and thus operates within a postpositivist paradigm (Ponterotto 2005). In comparison, differences within interpretivism are wide ranging. For example, 'interpretivists' broadly defined may subscribe to difference ontological perspectives. They may also differ on the processes of 'knowing' and how what we know is constructed (epistemological differences). The values that drive the interpretivist research may also differ fundamentally (axiological differences), as will the methods that they use and the rhetorical structure, or language, they use to represent and interpret their findings. This has led Mingers (1992) to suggest that such research suffers from the problem of the unquestioned answer to be juxtaposed with the unanswered question that is highlighted as a problem with positivist research.

The task of making sense of the range of interpretive thought has been undertaken elsewhere (Burrell/Morgan 1979). For the purposes of this paper and particularly in the context of our objective to consider interpretivist work in HRM, we use three of the four approaches "whose procedural idioms have made their mark on contemporary qualitative research" according to Holstein and Gubrium (1997, p. 6). First, there is *naturalism,* the objective of which is to understand social reality 'in the raw', as it is experienced by participants. It seeks to describe people and their interactions and behaviours as they occur, unfold and happen. Methods associated with naturalism require researchers to be engaged with the world in which participants operate (ethnography), or find ways of accessing that world (in-depth interviewing). It is considered important to collect data from life as it is led from natural settings. A researcher, using appropriate methods, has the task to get close to 'the action', yet remain somewhat apart from it. This distance would be reflected in the description and interpretation of data. The second approach, ethnomethodology, we prefer to identify as *constructionism* as it is concerned with how reality is actually constructed through human interaction, and in particular, through language (Burr 2003). Constructionism is not simply about how reality is influenced by context as some writers suggest (Ponterotto 2005), but concerns how the context is actually shaped through language and human action. A range of methods have been utilized by constructionists to study individual behaviour and interaction, including interviewing and discourse analysis (Burr 2003). Finally, we will consider HRM in relation to *postmodernism*, itself a complex philosophy. Of importance here is Foucault's work suggesting, among many other things, that the human subject is not 'neutral' or 'given', but is rather produced in a certain way through the exercise of techniques that coerce individuals to conform to certain acceptable ways of being. The identities that individuals adopt are imposed and thus to be an 'acceptable' individual means conforming to acceptable ways of 'being'.

Thus far, we have introduced positivist and interpretivist approaches to ontology, epistemology and research methodology. While we have suggested some of the common elements of interpretivism we have also attended to three different 'sub-streams' or 'schools': naturalism, constructionism and postmodernism. In order to develop our argument further we will now consider how scholars located within each of the different paradigms have attended to the study of HRM more broadly defined. We will then focus specifically on how performance appraisal (PA), as a central feature of HRM, has been addressed by scholars located within each of the different paradigms.

Exploring Positivist and Interpretivist Approaches to the Study of HRM

Positivist Approaches to the Study of HRM

Following Legge (2005) and Watson (2004), we recognize that the study of HRM is dominated by "the unquestionably modernist perspective of positivism" (Legge 2005, p. 337). HRM scholars operating within this ontology understand HRM as existing independently of actors or agents. Thus in order to understand it, scientifically valid and reliable methodologies must be constructed to measure its reality and effects (e.g., Beer et al. 1984, Fombrun/Tichy/Devanna 1984, Guest 1987). The HRM literature is replete with attempts to demonstrate such regularities and relationships. For example, strategic HRM 'best practice' (Paauwe/Boselie 2005, Lui/Lau/Ngo 2004, Becker/Huselid/Ulrich 2001, Pfeffer 1998), HR 'bundles' (MacDuffie 1995, Guerrero/Barraud-Didier 2004), 'strategic fit' models (Boxall/Purcell 2003); recruitment and selection (Cervino/Bonache 2005, Chapman/Zweig 2005); psychological contracts (Robinson/Morrison 2000); organizational commitment (Moorman/Blakely 1995, Organ/Ryan 1995); organizational justice (Folger/Cropanzano 1998); training and development (Littrell/Salas 2005); rewards (Jenkins/Gupta/Mitra/Shaw 1998); job design (Kelly 1992); and performance management (Hennessey Jr./Bernardin 2003). To a large extent, the aim of this genre of research activity is predominantly prescriptive, where efforts are made to indicate to practitioners the 'best way' to do HRM, either generally or within particular domains of the HRM system. Beer et al.'s (1984) model of the determinants and consequences of HRM policies is an exemplar. In this model stakeholder interests influenced by situational factors, such as the existence of trade unions, drive HRM policy choices that in turn determine HRM outcomes and long–term consequences. If research can determine under what conditions certain HRM policy choices should be made to generate positive HRM outcomes and performance, then we have developed 'best practices', either universally or contingently. Definitions of 'outcomes' and 'performance', however, remain ambiguous within these models (Paauwe 2004).

Positivist research in HRM is driven with a concern for the better management of the 'human resource'. It is therefore managerialist in its orientation, seeking to provide HR managers with better 'tools' with which to manage employment relations. This constitutes a prescriptive approach to HRM that critical scholars believe ignores the broader organizational, economic and socio-political environment within which HRM practices are constructed (Legge 2005, Watson 2004). With few exceptions (Guest 1999) positivist research in HRM has a tendency to represent only the voice of those who seek to use HRM practices to manage better the human resource. To that extent, it can be juxtaposed with interpretivist approaches which seek to move away from prescription towards "critical social scientific analysis" (Watson 2004, p. 448). It is to these perspectives that we now turn.

Interpretivist Approaches to the Study of HRM

Naturalism

We have already noted that the objective of naturalism is to understand social reality 'in the raw', as it is experienced by participants. Thus, for example, in an important volume of edited papers, Clark et al. (1998) ask the question what has been the experience of those who have experienced HR initiatives? The papers in the volume are concerned with examining HRM "from the perspective of those on the 'receiving end'" (Clark/Mabey/Skinner 1998, p. 1). In HRM specifically the voice of the individual employee has rarely been elevated. Important contributions to the study and practice of HRM can, therefore, clearly be made by elevating this voice. For example, while attempts at developing 'best practice' in HRM in an abstract sense is important and valuable it is also important to know how such practices will impact the consumer (the employee) at the point of contact. As Clark et al. (1998, p. 7) note, it "is they, after all, who are expected to enthusiastically engage with and fully participate in the HR strategies promulgated by senior management in their organization". In that respect, papers in the Mabey et al. (1998) volume support an in-depth understanding of whether HRM initiatives are actually delivering on their promises, and in particular, the extent to which promises to be more strategic and beneficial to employees are being realized. Through a range of qualitative methods such as single and multiple case-studies, interviewing and non-participant observation in a variety of organizations, a more detailed picture emerges of the impact of a number of HRM initiatives. These include initiatives for empowerment and total quality (Rees 1998, Glover/Fitzgerald-Moore 1998); changing corporate culture (Martin/Beaumont/Staines 1998); training and development (Heyes 1998); performance related pay (Kelly/Monks 1998) and career transition (Mallon 1998). These contributions suggest that HRM initiatives are received in ways that generate resistance *and* acceptance, and often create ambiguity and uncertainty. The extent to which they are/become 'best practices' is limited because of the inordinately high-expectations that are contained within the rhetoric that promotes their use. In summarizing, Mabey et al. (1998) argue that 'receiving-end' research generates several important insights about HRM. First, it suggests that those on the 'receiving-end' of HRM initiatives are not "passive recipients" (Mabey/Skinner/Clark 1998, p. 242), but "have been shown to be co-creating, improvising, resisting and recasting particular HRM interventions". In other words, what ends up being HR practice in any given organization is not that which is imposed by management, but what emerges through a negotiated arrangement within the employment relationship. Second, naturalistic research on those impacted by HRM initiatives helps to develop new ways of assessing the value of HRM, such as a sense of justice and employees' perceptions of gain and loss through such initiatives. Third, it is important to 'hear' more than the voices of managers articulated in new HRM initiatives and particularly to understand how HRM concerns the creation of workplace identities that fit the 'spirit of the times'. In relation to this last point it enables a more informed debate concerning the morality of HRM and questions about whose purposes it serves (Legge 2005).

Constructionism

In the section on naturalism above, we referred to the idea, following Mabey et al. (1998), that employees who are exposed to HRM initiatives are not passive recipients but co-create the outcomes of such initiatives. In one sense this process of co-creation of HRM outcomes is constructionism, i.e., that which we ultimately see as HRM practices, in any given organization, is the product of a process of negotiation, resistance and compromise. To illustrate this with respect to organizational approaches to HRM in general we refer to Watson's (2004) work on *Moddens Foods*. Watson (2004) argues that instead of working to develop prescriptions for 'best' HRM practice scholars should be analyzing how practice is actually constructed within specific organizational contexts. He goes on to argue that "it is impossible to see how this can be done without relating HRM to broader patterns of culture, power and inequality" (Watson 2004, p. 450). In his case study, he is particularly interested in organizational politics and that "full weight is given to both human/managerial agency and structural circumstances" in an understanding of how HRM practices are constructed.

Through a "narrative of the actual" (Steyaert/Janssens 1998) and using the technique of ethnographic fiction science (Watson 2000): (the representation of ethnographic material in a concise, creative fashion), Watson (2004) suggest that disagreements among senior management lead to a division of one company into two. More specifically, in relation to HRM his case suggests that "interests, values and interactions of strategy-makers" (Watson 2004, p. 461) shape how HRM policies are formulated. Furthermore, he suggests that the micro-politics that occur within organizations can only be understood within the 'macro' structures and processes operating at the political-economic level" (Watson 2004, p. 462). For example, the existence of 'refugees' in the UK make available a cheap source of labour that influences decisions about work practices and design and may fit the values of a senior manager who believes that such cheap labour opportunities should be exploited. Watson rejects the idea that managers in his case company simply reacted contingently as a "result of some automatic system adjustment" (Watson 2004, p. 463). Rather: "It came about, instead, as the managers interpreted the market, technological and other contingent circumstances and matched these perceptions, in various ways, with their own values and interests before 'pitching in' to the debates and arguments about how the business was to be run in the future and human resourcing policies and practices shaped."

We observe here how constructionism de-emphasizes the possibility of prescription and best-practices. Rather, it suggests that HRM practices emerge and evolve from interactions within specific circumstances. Here the emphasis is analyzing what actually happens rather than what should happen. Normative model building is replaced by an understanding of the processes of construction. The link between analysis and practice is facilitated in that we have a better understanding of what people actually do. This allows practitioners to reflect on the extent to which their own actions, judgements, biases and attitudes produce what they end up managing as HRM (Cunliffe 2004, 2001).

Postmodernism

We focus here on a Foucauldian approach to HRM as our exemplar of postmodernism. Barratt (2002, p. 189) suggests that a Foucauldian analysis of HRM:

"... has served to reframe, to call into question or problematize a field which the orthodox texts habitually represent in strictly technical apolitical terms. As such, Foucauldian studies have foregrounded the relationship between the practice of HRM and the operation of power, the role of human resource management practices in defining or enforcing identities on subjects in the employment relationship, the assumptions about the organization of work which human resource practices presuppose and function to normalise or naturalise as common sense."

The work of Townley (1994, 1993) has been particularly influential in this regard. Unlike other interpretivist approaches, a Foucauldian approach sees HRM as a discourse derived from attempts (techniques) to organize the employment relationship. HRM as a 'body of knowledge' "operates through rules of classification, ordering, and distribution; definitions of activities; fixing of scales; and rules of procedure, which lead to the gradual emergence of the HRM discourse" (Townley 1993, p. 541). The purpose of such organizing in the form of salary scales; competency frameworks; objectives; psychometric testing etc in HRM is partly to create the appropriate organizational subject; the appropriately constructed individual for employment in the contemporary organization.

Foucauldian approaches to HRM highlight and challenge the 'rhetoric' of HRM discourse. HRM techniques are, therefore, understood as a non- neutral set of political tools that could be implemented amorally. Put another way, they are a package of devices that seek to make people 'governable'. This approach problematizes conceptions of HRM as an apolitical 'body of knowledge', by introducing ideologically-based conceptions of 'control' and/or 'productivity'. It suggests, therefore, that power and the exercise of power permeate all HRM practices through the construction of a particular kind of knowledge and the creation of a particular kind of organizational person (subject).

Having considered the study of HRM more broadly, we turn now to the specific HRM practice of performance appraisal (PA) and consider it through the lenses of positivism, naturalism, constructionism and postmodernism.

Exploring Positivist and Interpretivist Approaches to the Study of Performance Management and Appraisal

Positivist Approaches to Performance Appraisal

Positivism commences from the assumption that 'performance' is identifiable, definable and measurable. It also assumes that processes can be discovered through which performance can be augmented. Thus, causal relationships between variables can be uncovered systematically and utilized to determine what actions and behaviours are necessary in order to enhance performance as it has been defined by the organization and/or a manager.

Goal-setting theory is firmly established as an integral part of performance appraisal, where goals are critical in directing human action because they make it purposeful. In-

deed, Locke and Latham (1996) write that "the ultimate basis of goal-directed action is the organism's need to sustain life by taking the actions its nature requires", thus it is biologically based, and that "goal-setting theory specifies the factors that affect goals, and their relationship to action and performance" (Locke/Latham 1996, p. 5). Scholarship framed within positivism offers widespread confirmation of the 'phenomena' that enable performance to be managed and enhanced, e.g., difficult goals lead to higher performance than easy goals, provided that the former have valence for the individual actor; specific goals lead to higher performance than 'do your best' statements; feedback is important; commitment to goals is important and so on. Thus, while we apparently know what will lead to enhanced performance, individual actors must behave in specific ways in order to achieve those levels (Arnold/Cooper/Robertson 1995). From this perspective, setting goals emerges as an important mechanism for enhancing performance and the process of doing so is considered scientifically 'validated' and therefore a 'social fact'. Moreover, achievement of goals, it is assumed, can be clearly measured as having been achieved or not, once they have been agreed between manager and employee.

Performance appraisal has been the subject of much positivist study with widespread attempts to demonstrate which work arrangements might allow for reliable and valid performance assessment; how appraisers can assess performance accurately; and how rational criteria can be developed for measurement (Hennessey Jr./Bernardin 2003, Arnold/Cooper/Robertson 1995). A key component of this approach is the need to verify or falsify hypotheses as part of a 'scientific' endeavour. Folger and Cropanzano (1998), for example, contend that performance appraisal is less about accuracy of assessment and more about fairness, and have offered prescriptions for improving performance appraisal such as demonstrating support and participation and/or using *only* constructive criticism to increase perceptions of fairness about the process.

Interpretive Approaches to Performance Appraisal

The prescriptive nature of positivist approaches to performance appraisal offer some insight into how performance appraisal and goal-setting *should* operate in an ideal environment. However, interpretivism challenges the assumption that such ideal environments exist at all, or are likely to ever exist. This challenge evidently limits the potential success of positivism to the extent that variables within a given context match the 'ideal'. Moreover, interpretivist approaches suggest that some, if not all, of these variables may be unchangeable in an ideal way and that performance appraisal takes place in complex and often mysterious ways. Thus, a key aim of interpretivism is to understand the ways in which performance appraisal evolves by taking into account respective contextual and individual processes.

Naturalism

We have already noted that while positivist study of performance appraisal and goal-setting identifies general rules that can be applied to the design and conduct of performance appraisal systems, these are rarely applicable in 'real' organizational contexts, where contextual variables will determine the way such systems actually operate. Thus, for exam-

ple, in a study of the performance appraisal of public accounting interns, Beard (1997) found that while performance appraisal is undertaken the interns "were frequently dissatisfied with the quality of information received" (1997, p. 16). Eleven interns kept journals of their personal experiences of work and were interviewed upon completion of their internship. Beard (1997) argues that the culture of public sector accounting focuses performance appraisal on outcomes not employee development. Consequently, interns developed what she calls 'intuitive evaluation'; in other words, they found ways of getting feedback outside of the formal performance appraisal system. This informal feedback was instigated, however, by the interns themselves, not by the public accounting firms.

Beard (1997) suggests that modernist, formal performance appraisal systems are no longer relevant in a "post-positivist work environment" (p. 23). They are inadequate to the task of appraising performance where work is no longer mechanistically performed with strictly defined job responsibilities. While it is easier to measure outcomes, a continuing focus on them in performance appraisal directs attention away from the way work is done and needs to be done. If people are appraised in a manner that is inconsistent with the way work needs to be done it will lead to dissatisfaction and demoralization. Beard's (1997) study points to the need for performance appraisal systems to be designed in a context-specific way, taking into account the micro-level circumstances of an industry or firm.

Constructionism

Barlow's (1989) case study of a specific performance appraisal system offers a particularly useful exemplar of a constructionist approach to the latent functions in management appraisal. The case study also reflects the potential contribution of a more critical approach to HRM practices by suggesting that although the intended function of the respective management appraisal system was to evaluate managerial achievement in reaching objectives and results; its latent functions were ultimately more consequential. In particular, the study suggested that rewards, especially promotion, were based more on political processes involving senior management than 'objective' criteria. In that particular organization, any manager who wished to progress in the organization needed to recognize that the formal process of appraisal was an institutionalized myth. Thus, the formal appraisal system operated as a smokescreen, which "provided a façade behind which myths of technique and irreconcilable contradictions of power were sheltered from examination" (Barlow 1989, p. 512). Senior management could continue to protect entry to their cadre through social selection by relying on the formal system of management appraisal to avoid scrutiny. The specific value of this type of research is that it allows access to the micro-practices of everyday life while raising critical questions about ethical practice and the abuse of power.

The idea that performance appraisal systems are smokescreens constructed to hide more insidious activity is an important one. It draws attention to the importance of connecting HRM activity generally and performance appraisal systems specifically to wider systems of power as they operate in organizations and society. Far from being neutral and rational ways of objectively measuring performance, we observe how performance appraisals may reflect the exercise of power and domination in organizational contexts. This

finding also encourages a concern for issues of morality in the conduct of HRM practices, which can further encourage debate over a more 'humane' body of HRM practices (Legge 2005).

Postmodernism

As an exemplar of postmodern thinking we again use Foucauldian approaches to understand performance appraisal. Townley (1994, 1993) has been at the forefront of Foucauldian thinking in HRM generally and performance appraisal in particular. Central to her work is Foucault's concept of disciplinary power. Here, performance appraisal is one of a set of techniques that classify and order individuals as subjects. Performance appraisal systems operate in a largely unnoticed way to create, define and enforce an identity on employees while they are at work (Barratt, 2002). To that extent, employees are controlled indirectly through performance appraisal systems which shape the contribution they make in any given workplace. Performance appraisal is first and foremost about making employees governable in a certain way through techniques of classification, monitoring and measurement (job description, job analysis, goal-setting etc). Equally important is the idea that employees become self-regulating; in effect they control themselves as techniques and systems of HRM create a self-controlling subject. Employees self-monitor their behaviour and attitudes to ensure that they conform to the appropriate 'truth'. If they do not conform they will have to take corrective action to get back on track; an idea implicit in the notion of ongoing and constant feedback in performance appraisal.

A further line of Foucauldian inquiry that has relevance for performance appraisal is the concern with the development of identity. Du Gay et al. (Du Gay/Salaman/Rees 1996), for example, have suggested that the recent concern for inputs as well as outputs in relation to performance has led to the prominence of the idea of competencies and competence frameworks, particularly for managers. From a Foucauldian perspective such frameworks are driven by dominant political rationalities that privilege the 'enterprising' individual. Competency frameworks often highlight the importance of 'initiative', 'intrapreneurship' and 'enterprise' as characteristics of "good" managerial behaviour and attitude. A broader 'regime of truth' (Foucault 1995) defines the competencies a manager should have and their performance will be judged against whether managers have successfully internalized this identity (McKenna 2004, 2002).

Conclusion: Moving Towards a more Composite and Dynamic Body of HRM Theory and Practice

The specific purpose of this paper has been to identify the value of alternative research processes and techniques that may be utilized as part of a composite and ultimately richer and more valuable body of HRM scholarship. We have focused especially on ontological, epistemological and methodological themes juxtaposing the dominant approaches located within positivism with alternative approaches located within specific 'sub-schools' of interpretivism. In order to ensure that the paper is appropriately contextualized, we began by discussing the dominance of positivism in US-based HRM scholar-

ship. This was juxtaposed with the willingness of scholars in other regions, notably Europe, to embrace more emic concerns. The diversity in substantive themes between scholarship in different geographical locations was also introduced. Yet, we also acknowledged that such characterizations can also be challenged where, for example, some scholars in the US have also engaged in research that is located outside the dominant paradigm. Similarly positivism is also present in some areas of European HRM scholarship. Assumptions about the nature of Science and HRM research more broadly were then introduced, again from the different ontological, epistemological and methodological perspectives of positivism and interpretivism.

The main body of the paper addressed positivist and interpretivist approaches to the study of HRM more generally and then to the particular domain of performance appraisal. We acknowledge that the dominant positivist approach has made a valuable contribution to the evolving body of HRM research and practice. Thus, for example, we identify the potential value of the existent prescriptive understanding of performance appraisal processes. Yet, if HRM scholarship and practice are to evolve into a richer body of knowledge, its current trajectory, understood as 'more of the same' or a rejection of one paradigm in favour of another, must be challenged. In other words, our search for a deeper, more complex understanding of HRM theory and practice must extend beyond the well-trodden debate about the superiority of positivist over interpretivist approaches or vice versa. Instead, we must be prepared to embrace a diversity of approaches, which may challenge the very premise of what we have constructed thus far.

A theory of HRM informed by critical perspectives and critical theory would allow for an understanding of HRM as part of an architecture that operates to protect the position of the power elite, economically, socially, culturally and politically. Such an approach derives from an epistemological and ontological position that is diametrically opposed to the kinds of theories proposed within a managerialist tradition. Yet, taken together, both perspectives have the potential to provide a richer overall body of knowledge. Thus, rather than being forced to accept either one perspective or the other, we suggest that an organized system of critical knowledge can be applied to HRM in such a manner that is as 'valid' as those proposed by managerialist thinkers. For example, the discussion of naturalism highlighted how interpretivist research can give 'voice' to those affected by HRM initiatives. The notion of giving voice to the usually unrepresented is academically important. Given that HRM is fundamentally an applied discipline, knowing what employees make of HRM initiatives is of obvious importance. Constructionism can bring attention to the underlying political, emotional and psychological processes that influence the creation and operation of HRM practices, as in Barlow's (1989) study. Knowledge of these processes enables researchers and practitioners to engage with them. As with Morgan's (2006) metaphorical exploration of organizations and Mintzberg et al. (2005), exploration of strategy, HRM should be viewed from many perspectives and not just those that emphasize rationality. Constructionism enables researchers to see how HRM practices are politically constructed, or how they might be psychological representations of particular individuals and HRM departments. Post-modern approaches enable the exposition of manipulation, injustice and immorality in HRM practices and may facilitate the development of more humane and ethical systems of managing the employment relationship.

Drawing on our 'drunkard' metaphor, rather than searching only where there is light or where the light is bright, HRM scholars are better advised to look in all places. In that way they can be more certain of a more thorough and ultimately more valuable body of knowledge. A search for a theory of HRM that is permeated by paradigmatic intolerance may render us blind to alternative and ultimately important bodies of knowledge and data. It may also lead to a search for the impossible or irrelevant. A more composite body of scholarship would recognize and indeed embrace theoretical and practical diversity that is informed by multiple ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies rather than the dominant concern for prescription. By the same token however, it would also reject calls to abandon prescription. Instead, prescription would be held alongside alternative and critical insights into practice. Such a move would enable practitioners and researchers alike to develop a more dynamic understanding of their experiences and understanding of HRM practices. Moreover, prescription and related advice emerging from such an openly composite body of scholarship might ultimately be more useful.

Indeed, it seems intuitively important that HRM research is concerned with the voice and concerns of both managers and employees.

In this paper we have referred to interpretivist work (Mabey/Skinner/Clark 1998) that gives voice to those on the 'receiving-end' of HRM practices. Rather than offering prescriptions for 'best HRM practices' this work considers the impact of such prescriptions and finds mixed results. This evidently caters to the needs of practitioners in that they need to know about the impact of HRM initiatives in order that they may plan and act accordingly. Yet, it is equally important for practitioners to have some guidance or framework as to what might be implemented. The prescription of more positivist research is well-positioned to provide such a framework. Thus, we observe how one body of scholarship may provide managers with a prescriptive framework while another allows them to be better informed of the implications of their actions. This may support the prevention of problems or at least allow managers to be better prepared for problems when or if they do arise. Focusing specifically on scholarship in performance appraisal, for example, HRM practitioners may draw on contemporary positivist theory to understand some of the criteria that can be utilized, e.g., importance of goals, giving feedback etc. Interpretivist work which gives voice to employees could be used as a complementary resource in order to ensure that the implementation of such policies/prescriptions takes into account their views and experiences of the process itself. What we observe here, then, is an approach which embraces and caters to the needs and experiences of multiple stakeholders – i.e., managers and employees rather than either one or the other.

The constructionist school of interpretivism draws attention to how HRM practices are constructed within the interactive milieu of organizational life. Thus, while drawing on positivist prescriptions of how to implement a specific performance appraisal system, for example, a manager might also draw on constructionism in order to understand how either their own values or the values of others might impact on the overall efficacy of the system. This also allows and, indeed, encourages managers to understand and gain insight into their own assumptions (Cunliffe 2004, 2001) Emphasising those recommendations further, our contention is that managers need to openly discuss the relevance of such insights or they will be forever locked into the smokescreen of hyperbole and rhetoric that surrounds much prescription for HRM practices. Yet, interpretivists must also engage

with the positivists if their cause is to be incorporated into HRM practice. Using perspectives in a complementary rather than exclusive manner will facilitate more effective performance appraisal from both the perspective of the employer and the employee.

Thus far we have argued for the complementarity of differing perspectives as a mechanism for moving towards a richer body of HRM scholarship and practice. Our contention is that it facilitates a move away from the 'stalemate' of 'positivism versus interpretivism' and or 'qualitative versus quantitative' debates that have characterized not only HRM scholarship but also many other areas of management research. Yet, we acknowledge that there are significant problems in recommending such a move. Thus, for example, there is in constructionism and certainly postmodernism a level of critical thinking that fundamentally rejects the idea of HRM and contends that its only concern is supporting organizational 'performance' and competitiveness (Watson 2004). Those scholars may reject outright the proposition that their work can be used to complement or overcome the limitations of prescriptive scholarship. Similarly, they may actively oppose all suggestions that their work might be used to further embed managers' power over employees. Indeed, they might conceivably contend that their entire 'raison d'être' is to expose, not support, the agenda of HRM as a set of techniques that are rooted in a particular socio-political and economic system, time and place, and whose aim is to enhance control over employees and to create a conforming 'subject'. However, we contend that a willingness to embrace a composite body of HRM research may also expose and lead to the elimination of some of those negative practices. Thus, it may indeed further the cause of critical interpretivists working in the HRM field to allow their work to be used in a complementary fashion and stimulate the kind of debate that is now occurring in the field of management study more broadly (Clegg 2006).

As a final note, we acknowledge that Watson (2004) is correct to contend that a critical social science analysis of HRM is needed to understand better how HRM policies and practices develop within specific organizational circumstances. Yet, we also contend that such an approach would be rendered more effective if it were used in a complementary fashion. That is to say, alongside contemporary theories – positivist, managerialist or otherwise. By definition HRM practices are a set of techniques for managerial action. Thus, our contention is that rejecting dominant positivist views simply in order to 'ring in' more critical and or interpretive perspectives runs the risk of 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater'. Instead, a more composite and diverse body of HRM research and practice is required in order to satisfy the needs of its diverse body of stakeholders. Furthermore, such diversity of approach is required wherever 'HRM' research is conducted in order that practitioners acquire a more composite picture of the HRM phenomenon.

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