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Navigating the shifting landscapes of HRM

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ABSTRACT

A confluence of mega-trends mean that HR is experiencing disruption and change on an unprecedented scale. This special issue is designed to inform our understanding of these shifting landscapes of HRM. In this overview we detail the broad contextual backdrop of key changes, before providing an overview of the six articles that make up this special issue. The articles cover agile HR, HR disruption, strategic human capital, employee health and safety, HR co-creation and global flexible working arrangements. We conclude by threading key insights together with suggestions on how theory and research might seek to better embrace disruption and navigate the shifting landscapes of HRM. This includes striving for interdisciplinary insight, finding motivation in practice, looking back to go forward, using multiple pathways for understanding, challenging assumptions and accommodating HR agency. The understanding and insight offered in this special issue hold special relevance in the context of the COVID-19 crisis.

I am of the wind…
A wisp of the battering wind…
I trail my fingers along the Alps
And an avalanche falls in my wake…

(The Destroyer, Lola Ridge)

1. Introduction

'The Destroyer' by Irish poet Lola Ridge eloquently depicts how a 'wisp of the battering wind' and seemingly gentle breeze can 'hurriedly sweep aside' and 'tear at the pillars of the world'. So it is too that gradual change and innovation on the periphery of HR practice can quickly overtake the centre. The question is whether current theoretical understanding of HR is receptive to such changes, especially those that might challenge core assumptions and entrenched research streams. Instead of engaging with contemporary developments and challenges a concern is that "much of SHRM research is stuck still arguing about and addressing twentieth-century concerns" (Wright, Nyberg, & Ployhart, 2018, p. 142). In the absence of critical reflection and future focused exploration HR theory and research risks becoming victim of a 'status quo bias', providing a limited internal market for ideas (Kaufman, 2012, p. 32). The theme of this special issue is how HR theory might seek to acknowledge and accommodate its own 'wisp of battering wind' in order to better navigate the shifting landscapes confronting the field. Even before the dramatic occurrence of COVID-19 significant questions were being asked of HR including the applicability of current theories to the new world(s) of work enabled by technology (Connelly,

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Fieseler, Černe, Giessner, & Wong, 2020), the extent to which scholarship reflected the contemporary challenges confronted by practitioners (Snell & Morris, 2019), and whether emergent forms of organisation might serve as a catalyst for new theoretical approaches (e.g. see Baum & Haveman, 2020). Successfully navigating the shifting landscape mandates challenging our existing theoretical compass (Cooke, 2018; Stone, 2007) in order to provide augmented and alternative theoretical approaches more akin to dynamic global positioning systems (GPS).

In this introductory article, we begin by reviewing the current state of play in HRM highlighting some key deficiencies in dominant approaches. We follow this by detailing the contextual backdrop to our special issue in the form of significant changes and challenges impacting how people are managed. We then introduce the six papers that make up the special issue. These papers cover a diverse range of cutting edge topics including human capital, digital disruption, health and well-being, agile HR, HR co-creation and Iinternational assignments. The final section brings together insights from these contributions to outline prospects for HR theory and research.

2. HRM at the cross-roads

There is little doubt that HRM scholarship has an impressive track record (Chadwick & Flinchbaugh, 2020), evidenced by cumulative research insights (Jiang & Messersmith, 2018) and progress along a well-travelled road (Wright & Ulrich, 2017). However, this progress does not automatically equate to an ability to accommodate or navigate change and challenges. As Roupmi and Delery note, in evaluating progress "the focus should be on the quality and not the quantity of relevant research" (2019, p. 424). Scholars have recently raised concerns about the route taken by existing research, the method and direction of travel, as well as the ultimate destination (Godard, 2020; Kaufman, 2020; Kehoe, 2019). A brief assessment of the dominant systems and strategic research strands of SHRM is instructive in this respect.

Explorations of the HRM-performance relationship have served as 'the fundamental and defining research question in strategic HRM' (Jiang & Messersmith, 2018, p. 8) reflected in a vast outpouring of research and subsequent meta-analysis of practices and effects (Combs, Ketchen, Hall, & Liu, 2006; Posthuma, Campion, Masimova, & Campion, 2013). Yet despite the intuitive appeal of a universal impact of a system of HR practices on performance, there is a growing sense that this dominant focus may have hindered rather than helped progress; that a narrow focus along a singular path has come to the detriment of innovative scholarship and alternative insights. This myopic focus has been particularly exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Collings, McMackin, Nyberg, & Wright, 2021). In terms of the capacity to acknowledge and accommodate contemporary changes and challenges, a focus on horizontal fit or the synergy of HR practices has been limiting in perpetuating an internal bias (Lee, 2020). Jiang and Messersmith's (2018) meta-review is illustrative. They find a substantive dominance of five internally focused theories (the resource-based view, the behavioral perspective, human capital theory, social exchange theory and ability-motivation-opportunity (AMO)), with only 15% of theories offering an external orientation. This criticism also features in debates over the psychologisation of HR research (Godard, 2014; Kaufman, 2020; Troth & Guest, 2020).

An under appreciation of context is linked to a second concern with HRM-performance research; a failure, or conceptual inability, to incorporate novel or contemporary HR practices. In essence, the central premise of best practice limits variation (Chadwick & Flinchbaugh, 2020). Hardly surprising therefore that a review 495 empirical studies covering 516 HR systems finds that half of them use the category of 'other' as a Trojan horse to sneak in more cutting edge practices of the likes of diversity and inclusion, mentoring, attitude surveys and exit management (Boon, Den Hartog, & Lepak, 2019). These are the very practices that one would expect to be explicitly called out and explored. This highlights the paradoxical flaw at the heart of universal, best practice HR prescriptions; if creating value stems from defying rather than converging on averages, best practice HR stumbles in theorising and operationalising differentiation, and thereby represents nothing more than an operational efficiency (cf. Porter, 1996). Demonstrating this reality, a review 144 studies over the period 2006–2017 finds that 85% modelled a single HR system rather than explore any alternatives (Chadwick & Flinchbaugh, 2020). The waters that HR-performance researchers advocate to practitioners are therefore prescriptions for red oceans full of like-minded firms, competing on the same HR terms. This jars with much of what we know about employer branding and the evolution of talent management (Collings, Mellahi, & Cascio, 2019). As Margaret Heffernan (2020) forewarns in her treatise 'Uncharted: How to Map the Future Together', the inevitability built into best practice prescriptions serves to discourage questions of practical relevance. Research streams like HR process research have offered a route to progress understanding beyond the content of HR practices, however here a universal undertone re-appears in the 'unfortunate' neglect of an overarching 'defining strategic focus' such as service or innovation or variety in HR systems e.g. low versus high road approaches (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004, p. 203; Ostroff & Bowen, 2016, p. 206).

Turning to the so called strategic models aligning HR to the strategic intent of an organisation, empirical support has been equivocal (Jackson, Schuler, & Jiang, 2014, p. 25). One particularly relevant concern, and possible explanation for ambiguous findings, is that HRM theorists have clung to outmoded views of key concepts, not least strategy and fit (Han, Kang, Oh, Kehoe, & Lepak, 2019). HRM research tends to draw on narrow and classical definitions of strategy implying pre-determined consensus and a one-way sequential progress from formulation through implementation, all of which implies that achieving fit is a once off structural intervention. Yet strategy often emerges retrospectively, while rigid 'fit' may actually hinder the innovativeness and flexibility mandated for success. It is long recognized that "the body of work on strategic HRM tends not to reflect much of the debate about the utility of strategy" (Nkomo & Ensley, 1999, p. 343). Notably absent is a sense of the nature of strategic decision making around how HR delivers value, the trade-offs and best bets inherent to the strategy process, and the nature of value creation in terms of how HR can foster and leverage firm level heterogeneity (Chadwick & Flinchbaugh, 2020; Delery & Roumpi, 2017; Kaufman, 2012). Recent research points to more dynamic considerations including the 'duality of fit' (Han et al., 2019) and a broader sense of environmental fit

e.g. the impact of peer companies' in informing HR adaption (Jiang, Takeuchi, & Jia, 2020). These would seem especially pertinent factors in the context of change and challenges. Allied to these concerns, Snell and Morris (2019) note that interpretations of 'fit' in strategic HR, tend to be grounded in classical assumptions of stability and equilibrium resulting in what are dangerous 'calming notions' of optimization and competitive advantage. Finally, there is something of an implicit determinism underpinning dominant fit models as HR managers are expected to choose and operate from a predetermined and narrow palette of HR options. By implication there is limited room for HR agents in either directing the organisation, 'interpreting' the environment or engaging in autonomous behaviour beyond that focused on bridging the gap between intended and experienced HR (see Kehoe & Han, 2020; Lee, 2020; Steffensen, Ellen, Wang, & Ferris, 2019).

Based on this brief review it is perhaps unsurprising that questions remain as to the route, method of travel, direction and ultimate destination of HRM scholarship. Scholars variously find that the 'field is stuck a little' (Snell & Morris, 2019), warn of a 30 year 'dead-end' (Kaufman, 2020), promote 'important questions that remain answered' (Roumpi & Delery, 2019, p. 433) and/or suggest the field is only truly getting started (Chadwick & Flinchbaugh, 2020). Such arguments are reinforced by a 'mismatch' or void in addressing the actual concerns and challenges experienced by HR practitioners and organizations (Batt & Banerjee, 2012; Rynes, Colbert, & Brown, 2002). For example, the nature of HR responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, including why and how different organizations responded as they did is an important question. Unfortunately, insights to such questions are not immediately evident from extant research. Meister and Brown (2020) argue that "this is HR's moment to lead organizations in navigating the future". Working with over 100 Chief HR Officers they detailed future HR responsibilities in the form of individual and organisational resilience, organisational trust and safety, creativity and innovation, human-machine partnerships and data literacy (see also Collings, Nyberg, Wright, & McMackin, 2021). Fresh thinking and novel ideas are clearly mandated so that HRM theory and research can effectively engage with and address emerging 21st-century challenges. As the next section details, the context for such introspection is significant.

3. The shifting landscapes of HRM

The contextual backdrop for a re-assessment of HRM is profound. The global economy is at an inflection point with significant implications for how we conceptualise and understand HRM. Even prior to COVID-induced transformations, headline statements on the changing nature of work and employment were commonplace. Megatrends including resurgent nationalism, technological disruption, changing demographics and diversity have dramatic consequences for how people are managed (Cascio, 2019; Sheppard & Droog, 2019; Stone & Deadrick, 2015). Practitioner reports identify a range of fundamental challenges which are impacting the legitimacy of the existing global order; asymmetry and wealth disparity, technological disruption, ageing, polarization and declining trust in institutions (Sheppard, Zarubina, & Jenkins, 2020). To this list one could add the ecological crisis confronting the globe, specifically the implications of climate change and broader stakeholder concerns for corporations and their objectives (OECD, 2020; Stahl, Brewster, Collings, & Hajro, 2019). In this section we briefly capture some of the key aspects of these mega-trends and their likely implications for HR. As a 'people-based crisis', the COVID-19 pandemic evidently provides an extremely relevant and compelling backdrop to such considerations (Alvarez & Porac, 2020; Strack et al., 2020).

3.1. Polarization & asymmetry

The premises of globalization have come under threat from a populist narrative, impacting traditional assumptions concerning the mobility of talent and sources of value creation (Horak, Farndale, Brannen, & Collings, 2019). Disruptive changes to immigration, most notably in the US and Europe, have changed the dynamics of talent accessibility, forcing employers to revaluate strategies for talent acquisition and retention (Cumming, Wood, & Zahra, 2020). Unsurprisingly geopolitics is once again at the top of the corporate agenda as organizations attempt to navigate a retreat from free trade and freedom of movement towards a new reality of fracturing relations, fragmented supply chains and protectionist migration policies (McKinsey, 2020). These and other political changes have the potential to alter the global talent landscape with significant implications for HRM. They are likely to complicate traditional perspectives on convergence and divergence, mobility and employee well-being. Any progressive narrative of inclusion risks being undermined by 'anti-pluralism', understood as "hostility to immigrants, specific categories of the poor, and, in many instances, women" (Cumming et al., 2020, p. 526). Underpinning these shifts is a 'current of disenchantment' (Baum & Haveman, 2020, p. 271), only reinforced by the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 along socio-economic, ethnicity, race and gender fault lines (Avery, 2020). Evolutionary psychology suggests awareness of the presence of disease heightens fear of outsiders and discrimination (Spicer, 2020). The poor terms and conditions experienced by workers on the front-line of health care provision and services is made more obvious by a seemingly contradictory designation as 'essential workers'. Polarization and asymmetry question the basis of much of the prescribed unitarist logic of theory and understanding (Geare et al., 2014), not least shifting and broadening definitions of what constitutes core talent and pivotal roles. There is much to explore in how HR can be part of a conversation to provide the best support to acknowledge and redress inequality, discrimination and variability of access to employment and differing modes of working. HR is not alone in this challenge, the OECD (2020) has recently called for a 'redefining' of the growth narrative "to put the well-being of people at the centre of our efforts".

3.2. Technology & disruption

A further area for theoretical debate and exploration concerns the role of data and technology. Do key trends present another opportunity for HRM to develop strategic value, how does the HR profession manage the technology interface, and how might

analytics offer opportunities to extend and expand HR's reach (e.g. gamification, sensors, 3-D technology or automation)? We are seeing increasing use of data and analytics to make more informed decisions around HRM (Gubbins, Harney, van der Werff, & Rousseau, 2018). However, it is clear that our understanding of this has been limited (Marler & Boudreau, 2017), while few organizations demonstrate true human capital analytical capabilities (Minbaeva, 2018). Meanwhile, predictions on the extent of disruption and job displacement stemming from technological advances, including artificial intelligence and automation, range from apocalyptic to more trivial. Either way the shift calls for better understanding of the skills required for HR professionals and the tools, techniques and frames that offer the greatest potential for advancing the theory and practice of HRM in this domain. Evidently, technology not only changes the nature of work, but equally the nature and skills required by the workforce (Collings & McMackin, 2021; Roumpi & Delery, 2019). For some AI represents a threat to work and employment, particularly in low skilled or manual roles, while others may view it as a means of emancipating the working class and improving work life balance. Evidently on-going technological innovation means that nature and meaning of work will continue to evolve (Connelly et al., 2020). Emerging research is likely to focus on potential unintended consequences of technological interventions, including the impact of remote working on innovative capacity; ethical considerations around employee data, the impact of smart technology; and the blurring between employee influencers and organisational branding (Lee & Hannah, 2020), coupled with serving a broader community purpose through conscious innovation and education about mis-information.

3.3. *The future(s) of work*

We are also in the midst of a significant debate concerning the future of work and employment. Indeed, some have gone as far as to argue that the nature of the global workforce and talent markets are changing fundamentally, and moving 'beyond employment' (Boudreau, Jesuthasan, & Creelman, 2015). These changes are reflected in the increasing use of talent platforms to match contractors with available work. At the lower end of the so-called gig-economy much of the intellectual debate has rightly focused on the conditions and welfare rights of "non-workers" in these new working relationships and the implications for their standard of living, working hours and well-being. This is a group who have been particularly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the higher end, these alternative employment platforms are argued to provide increased control over work, greater work-life balance and the opportunity for more meaningful work (Wood, Graham, Lehdonvirta, & Hjorth, 2018). Yet significant questions remain around personal and professional identity, work-life integration and sustainable careers in these contexts. Some argue that we are witnessing a significant shift of risk and uncertainty from the employer to employees (Dundon & Rafferty, 2018). Theoretical conversations are required to unpack the HRM implications around managing risk and compliance in these relationships, combined with how to effectively manage these emerging forms of work (Morris, Shenkar, & Mackey, 2019). Similarly, the implications of blurring organisational boundaries and how they might serve to reinforce or redefine structural barriers in, and to, employment warrants critical consideration. Appreciation of context therefore needs to move beyond a narrow focus on national or sectoral factors to better embrace critical eco-systems, key stakeholders and the shifting boundaries of work (Rubery, 2015; Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015). Similarly, debate is likely to continue as to the most appropriate unit of analysis to provide insights on the transformation of work e.g. tasks versus jobs (Jesuthasan & Boudreau, 2019), employees versus non-employees (Altman, Kiron, Schwartz, & Jones, 2021), historic versus real-time performance data (Hamilton & Sodeman, 2020).

4. Overview of the special issue and papers

The context of these complex challenges (DeNisi, Wilson, & Biteman, 2014) provide an opportune time for reflection and reconsideration of HRM. What fresh perspectives and ideas will result in us more effectively addressing 21st-century challenges? Evidently firms are already grappling with these challenges in ways we have not allowed for in extant theory. The discourse of the Future of Work is commonplace, yet implications for HRM theory are only emerging (Connelly et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated existing trends, but were these sufficiently acknowledged in the first instance? This special issue brings together papers which explicitly explore how we should theorize and futureproof HRM, complementing contributions which have mapped the current HRM landscape (Markoulli, Lee, Byington, & Felps, 2017). This mode of critical questioning and exploration is likely to leave academics and practitioners alike better equipped to navigate the future landscapes of HRM, offering a pathway to achieve the ultimate criterion of relevance and impact (Klimoski, 1991).

The genesis of this special issue on 'Navigating the Shifting Landscapes of HRM' relates to the theme of the Academy of Management's 3rd HR Division International Conference hosted by Dublin City University in January 2019. The conference had a broad scope calling for contributions that challenged traditional assumptions and highlighting new areas for research, not least as related to the changing nature of work and role of technology. While our initial submissions pre-date the COVID-19 crisis, it is clear that the themes and the general logic hold great relevance in this challenging era. We are delighted to bring together a collection of six excellent contributions for this special issue. The work of these scholars is considered, impactful and prescient in mapping out areas of HR and research agendas which will help us in navigating the winds of change.

In "Rediscovering the 'Human' in strategic human capital" Patrick Wright (2020) argues that the field of strategic human capital has become dominated by 'economics based logic'. This is reflected in implicit assumptions related to rational decision making, instrumental understanding of the role of social capital, and a narrow focus on value. To rebalance understanding, Wright calls for a (re)emphasis on human nature, including via explorations of free will, identity, purpose, community, and value. Such considerations are shown to expand the assumptions underpinning strategic human capital to offer a more holistic and relevant appreciation of the likely determinants of employee behaviour. Wright concludes his treatise by outlining areas where economic and psychological

perspectives can overlap to advance understanding and future research.

According to Helen De Cieri and Mila Lazarova (2020) few can question the "critical need to build HR-relevant knowledge of how to manage the health and safety of employees." Their paper "Your health and safety is of utmost importance to us" reviews research on the occupational health and safety of international employees from 180 articles spanning four disciplines. While understanding is fragmented, a critical recurring theme is how international work exposes employees to a significant range of organisational health and safety risks. A core contribution of the paper is a multi-level summary framework mapping the core dimensions of occupational health and safety factors associated with international work and providing a road map for future research. The final section of the paper illuminates how HR research can be strengthened by taking on board interdisciplinary insights.

In "A Theory of HR Co-Creation" Rebecca Hewett and Amanda Shantz (2021) introduce the process of HR co-creation as "a continuous process in which HR and stakeholders create value through collaborative efforts to problem-solve and innovate in the design and use of HR practices to help them to better satisfy stakeholders' needs." Challenging traditional one-dimensional conceptions of value in HR by drawing on the principles of service dominant logic, Hewett and Shantz offer a novel understanding of how HR creates value both in design and use. Notably, their principles of HR co-creation focus on an integrative view of value creation which allows for multiple stakeholder concerns. The value of HR co-creation is usefully located with respect to a multi-stakeholder approach to HR, HR process research, and research on employee involvement and participation. Importantly, an overarching co-creation framework is presented highlighting the necessary conditions, processes and outcomes of HR co-creation as illuminated through key propositions. This directly sets up a rich opportunity for further research and co-understanding in this critical space.

'Agile for HR' by John McMackin and Margaret Heffernan (2020) is motivated by the gap between practitioner recognition of the potential value of increased HR agility in response to environmental uncertainty and the limited theoretical exploration of same, captured in the sub-head "Fine in practice, but will it work in theory?". McMackin and Heffernan provide a critical distinction between HR for implementing agile and agile for HR. Focusing on the latter, they direct much needed attention on the HR function and the role of operational strategy. An historical overview exploring the alignment between HR operational strategy, HR strategy and organisational strategy reinforces that while management of the HR function was once a core focus, the structure of the HR function and deployment of HR resources have been relegated from key models in SHRM. The paper concludes via two case examples demonstrating agile for HR in practice, and calling for research on HR operational strategy as a pathway to reconnect with practitioners.

Stefan Jooss, Anthony McDonnell and Kieran Conroy (2020) explore the topic of 'Flexible Global Working Arrangements'. Their point of departure is that much of our understanding of international travel is premised on long-term expatriation. They propose a focus on flexible global working arrangements (FGWAs) understood as "situations where employees physically engage in working internationally as part of their substantive role for a condensed and defined period ranging from one day to up to one year". Drawing on an integrative review of 100 peer-review articles, and informed by a value creation framework, they find that FGWAs may confer significant but unrealised value for MNEs alongside having hidden, adverse consequences for individuals. Notable, is a lack of research insight into the HR function's input or oversight in coordinating and supporting FGWAs. They argue that research should embrace work on strategic IHRM targeted at leveraging the value creating capacity of sustainable FGWAs.

Taking disruption as its theme, and similarly motivated by the challenges of practice, 'Disrupted HR?' by Dana Minbaeva (2020) offers a provocation exploring mega-trends impacting HR. The paper focuses on the flexible workforce, the digitalization of business models, and artificial intelligence and machine learning noting that HR research has "overlooked potential paradigm-shifting possibilities" and disruptions caused by these mega-trends. Two questions are asked of each trend, specifically what is being disrupted in practice and what is required of HR research to equip HR professionals with the knowledge required to deal with these disruptions. For each mega-trend Minbaeva holds out hope for solutions that challenge the "field's legacy mind-sets" e.g. assumptions related to work (uncoupling time, place, and tasks), better understanding of digitalization (doing versus being digital) and prospects for analytics and machine learning (automation versus augmentation). The paper concludes with a clarion call for researchers to embrace and engage with practitioners in order to confront and navigate such strategic inflections points.

5. Navigating the pathway forward: Key themes and research avenues

The papers in this special issue bring together leading edge ideas to inform future HRM research. From these contributions we can make some important observations about how ideas and assumptions in HR research might be been mined, coalesced and extended. While not exhaustive, these key points offer a useful point of entry for those seeking to advance understanding of the shifting landscapes of HRM.

- *Strive for interdisciplinary insights*

Researchers should be open to recalibrating, developing and challenging extant theory. Yet HRM research has been criticized for failing to recognize and incorporate major developments in adjacent literatures, be it institutional work (Lewis, Cardy, & Huang, 2019), or strategy (Chadwick & Flinchbaugh, 2020). De Cieri and Lazarova's (2020) review of occupational health and safety research spanning four disciplines finds detrimental blind spots and limited cross-pollination of ideas. A consequence is that HR scholarship ignores critically relevant research insights provided by health sciences. Jooss, McDonnell, and Conroy' (2020) review stresses the merits of International HRM and International Business Scholars working together to unpack the value-creating capacity of flexible global work arrangements, but equally the importance of gaining important insights from 'a range of fields' including economic geography, risk management and supply chains.

In a piece that cites Richard Dawkins and Stephen Hawking alongside HR practitioners, Wright (2020) provides a timely reminder

that there is much human capital research can learn from (re)visiting insights from cognate disciplines such as psychology. Such direct explorations provide a natural route to enlarge our understanding of the human experience. Interdisciplinary insight can also foster novel applications and challenges to convention. Hewett and Shantz's (2021) paper draws on the marketing concept of service-dominant logic to suggest a revised approach to how the value of HR practice is understood and manifest. Similarly, the papers find inspiration from concepts born of software development in the form of agile (McMackin & Heffernan, 2020) and nuanced understandings from technology management (Minbaeva, 2020). While crossing disciplinary divides is no doubt challenging on many fronts (Molloy, Ployhart, & Wright, 2011), it is a task that offers reward in terms of renewed and refreshed thinking of the kind frequently lacking on the HR research hamster wheel. As Batt and Banerjee concluded almost a decade ago based on their review of 1000 HR research articles: "a broad research agenda with an interdisciplinary backbone would create a more powerful platform for HR scholars to address the dramatic changes in the world of work in the twenty-first century" (2012, p. 1757).

- *Offer multiple pathways to understanding*

The special issue papers span a spectrum of theoretical and conceptual foundations. Insights are developed through multiple forms ranging from provocative pieces, through systematic reviews to more conceptual and historical overviews. There is a richness in the variety of approaches brought to bear to inform understanding of key challenges (Klein & Potosky, 2019). This serves as a caution against approaches which implicitly promote best or narrow ways of understanding (e.g. reviews of the field founded exclusively on quantitative research or meta-analysis of narrow empirical studies) (Edmondson & McManus, 2007; Jackson et al., 2014). The papers propose multi-level and integrative explorations characterized by cross-level effects spanning levels (i.e. top down and bottom up) (De Cieri & Lazarova, 2020) and/or stakeholders (e.g. HR sphere, user sphere, and the joint sphere) respectively (Hewett & Shantz, 2021). In this way the papers highlight a diversity of insight to be gained from a healthy and complementary biosphere of HR scholarship.

- *Find motivation in practice*

We believe the papers in this issue provide a rejoinder to severe criticisms of an academic-practice gap in HR (Rynes, 2007). McMackin and Heffernan (2020) take calls from practitioners as their cue for an exploration of agile for HR to meet the requirements of fast paced environmental change. Similarly, Minbaeva (2020) details HR disruptions happening in practice as a motivator to disrupt HR theory and understanding, recognizing that business transformation is a preoccupation of HR leaders. Drawing on a value lens, the outcome of Jooss et al.'s (2020) systematic review is an appreciation of how HR departments might better leverage the value from flexible global working arrangements. These examples challenge simplistic criticisms of demand-side scholarship. HR is inevitably a phenomenon driven field (Cooke, Schuler, & Varma, 2020), suggesting that future innovations in scholarship should come from occasionally looking around versus projecting ahead unperturbed. As Ployhart and Bartunek (2019) strongly advocate, engaging with the challenges and the paradoxes of practice can be a key catalyst for better theorizing. This is something that can be reinforced by an infrastructure which recognizes and supports those that chose to 'work in the middle' through sustained engagement with practice (Lawler & Benson, 2020). True currency can come from appreciating that theory and practice form two sides of the same HR coin.

- *Look back to go forward*

There is certainly scope for HR research to revisit the field's foundational work as "the seeds of important conceptual ideas have been neglected" (Jackson et al., 2014, p. 2). McMackin and Heffernan's (2020) review of the evolution of operational strategy finds that that the initial emphasis afforded to the role, impact and organisation of the HR function has strangely dissipated over time (in theory at least). They revert to the foundational work of Baird and Meshoulam (1988), and specifically their emphasis on 'management of the function', to argue that the concept of internal fit should be broadened. De Cieri and Lazarova (2020) speak of a 'duty of care for employees' akin to that found in early welfare oriented approaches. Recent historical excavations of the field's origins have similarly provided for a re-emphasis on multiple stakeholder concerns (Beer, Boselie, & Brewster, 2015), a more nuanced conceptualization of control and commitment (Wright & Ulrich, 2017) and a recognition of the role of context and determinants of HR (Jackson et al., 2014). This moves understanding beyond superficial citation of earlier work towards more detailed engagement.

Historical sensitivity attunes researchers to the broader zeitgeist informing thinking and the trajectory of research. Wright's (2020) piece on 'rediscovering the human in strategic human capital' hints at how the pendulum of emphasis in a field can swing too far in one direction, leading to a narrowing of focus and emphasis. Arguably over time the key concepts of fit and systems in HR have been similarly subject to a gradually more parse and narrow meaning. For example, Harney argues that systems thinking has "been incorporated into study of employment, and HRM in particular, in a very narrow fashion which does not do justice to either its historical legacy or future potential" (Harney, 2019, p. 123). Ironically one way to navigate the future of HR is through excavating the insights of the past, focusing on what has changed, but equally on what remains the same; how HR ideas and history rhyme. Those seeking inspiration can explore challenging questions like those posed by Fred Foulkes (Foulkes, 1975) over four decades ago "can people who work at home, say, be trusted to work for an organization as though they were at the factory or office?" … Can supervisors, under job enrichment, trust employees to check their own work and make decisions previously made by supervisors?" (1975, p. 84).

- *Surface, challenge and revisit assumptions*

The contributions provide a timely reminder of the need to provocatively revisit and challenge the key underlying assumptions

guiding HR research (also see Kehoe, 2019). Hewett and Shantz (2021) challenge traditional understanding of what constitutes value in HR (one dimensional) and introduce a relational, and multi-stakeholder alternative (three dimensional). They are motivated by the reality that 'although assumptions about value are rarely explicitly stated in the HR literature, they instil a philosophy that guides our research questions and methods, seeping into the way that we conceive of value'. Pat Wright (2020) rebalances assumptions on the determinants of employee behaviour questioning economical beliefs that have 'come to dominate the SHC [strategic human capital] literature so profoundly as to limit the questions that can be asked and the lenses through which the questions might be viewed and answered'. Minbaeva grapples with HR's 'legacy mind-set', using disruptions evidenced in HR practice to show that "certain [HR] assumptions need to be released because they have been challenged, if not disrupted, by the rise of digital technologies" e.g. those binding time, task, and place together. The imprint of disciplinary myopia in informing the emphasis of employee health and safety research is illuminated by De Cieri and Lazarova's review. Finally, the papers by McMackin and Heffernan and Jooss et al., challenge traditional conceptions of HR for agile and expatriation, to offer alternative definitions and enlarged understanding. Evidently HR research would benefit from hanging a question mark on dominant assumptions. By way of example, Chadwick and Flinchbaugh (2020) argue that embracing a broader view of what is "strategic" opens up a 'wide range of new SHRM research questions'. Typically, insufficient questioning of competing HR systems, antecedents, critical contingencies, unintended consequences, and failure limit understanding. There seems to be an implicit protect and build mentality to the detriment of engaging and assessing alternatives. HR science should be a process, not a position, thereby encouraging researchers to test, challenge and reconsider the fields self-evident truths.

- *Recognize and accommodate agency*

Much research emphasis in HR has either downplayed HR agents or imbued them with a sense of rationality that makes for hollow decision making and a limited zone of influence (see Steffensen et al., 2019). Wright's contribution breathes life into the determinants of behaviour by highlighting the complexity and import of free will, identity, purpose, community, and value. Both McMackin and Heffernan and Jooss et al., provide a much needed focus on the operation and value adding capacity of the HR function. Minbaeva similarly provocatively questions how HR can create value including "How are actors and their actions affected when organizational permanence no longer exists?". Hewett and Shantz's theory of co-creation is firmly grounded on engagement and on-going interaction with a range of HR stakeholders. Jooss et al., and De Cieri and Lazarova offer a critically important perspective on employee experiences of international work, including an examination of negative consequences and unexpected outcomes (albeit those of professional workers). De Cieri and Lazarova's emphasis on the health and safety of employees is particularly prescient as this is now centre stage for organizations (Caligiuri, De Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke, & Zimmermann, 2020).

In various ways the papers therefore point to the on-going need to bring the agency of HR back to the centre of analysis. This is significant as best practice HR and many fit/matching models are founded on an implicit determinism, leaving little room for the agency of HR managers (or workers and their representative bodies), who are expected to choose and operate from a predetermined and narrow palette of HR options. Unsurprising that there have been calls for the return of management to HRM and the integration of leadership and HR studies (Nishii & Paluch, 2018). Absent considerations of heuristics, power and influence, and (re)interpretation of evidence, key HR decisions and decision makers appear ghost like with little sense of the 'practical agency of HRM or what HRM practitioners do' (Vincent et al., 2020). This is strange considering how early work in this area mapped out the on-going identity and legitimacy challenges for HR professionals and their functions (Legge, 1978). Critically, complete understanding of HR can only ever be achieved through exploring employee experiences, and not just those most immediate or obvious to the interests of employers (Guest, 2017; Yang et al., 2019). One of the impactful lessons of COVID-19 is a reflection on the full spectrum of worker experiences and roles, especially those deemed essential by society that have been hitherto silenced or underrepresented in our scholarship.

6. Conclusion

This special issue set out to explore how scholarship might navigate the shifting landscapes of HR. To navigate means to proceed carefully or to find one's way. In order to successfully engage in this task HR research needs to further embrace context and accommodate uncertainty in the spirit of agile understanding. As per Alvarez and Porac uncertainty should "be sought out for its generative capacity as much as it is avoided because of its vicissitudes" (2020, p. 12). As a deep historical rupture, COVID-19 dramatically brings the topics discussed in our special issue articles to the fore, notably employee health and well-being, digitization, agile HR, and a (re)focus on the human. While HR scholarship cannot predict with certainty, it can foster understanding of the capabilities required to navigate, mitigate and manage change and challenges. This is our grand challenge. The papers and insights in this special issue provide us with confidence that we can navigate such change and continue to build strong conceptual foundations and understanding of HRM which provides both flexibility and stability. In this way HR scholarship can be sensitive to both the subtle 'wisp of wind' of the periphery, and equally stand strong against what Lola Ridge's poem depicts as the inevitable "wind that is battering at your gates".

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