
Introduction

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About the Guest Editors

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Research in HRM is highly diverse in topics and themes, levels, perspectives, methods, and subjects and stakeholders. Research questions are guided by practice, but can also be theory-driven. Studies can be macro-, meso- or micro-oriented, with topics ranging from cross-national and industry based influences on HR policies to intra-individual motivational processes in the workplace. HR practices, policies, and professionals can be the independent, the moderator or the dependent variable in a research design. This immense diversity can be seen as one of the strengths of HRM research, but can also be considered as a weakness: too little focus and no uniform paradigm, making it difficult to build a coherent theoretical framework, which stimulates empirical research and which increasingly strengthens the field into a well-established academic discipline. Before introducing the papers in this Special Issue on "Diversity

in HRM research”, we will highlight some of the different themes, levels, perspectives, methods, and subjects and stakeholders in HRM research. We will end our editorial with some starting points of how to build bridges between the many different perspectives.

Diversity in HRM research

Diversity in themes

HRM research covers a broad range of themes, such as strategic HRM, international HRM, HR practices, employment relations, effects of HR and line manager relationships, leadership, careers and learning. In 2004, Hoobler and Brown Johnson (2004) analysed HRM publications in the top HRM journals from 1994 through 2001 by topic, research technique, level of analysis, and data source. They found that 37 per cent of the 467 articles focused on traditional functional areas of selection, compensation, training, and employee performance evaluation, 18 per cent dealt with individual or organisational level performance or strategic human resource management, and 14 per cent focused on international HR. In line with Ferris *et al.* (1999), they conceptualised HRM as a function with three dimensions:

1. functional;
2. strategic; and
3. international.

The most important recurring theme in strategic HRM is the relationship between HRM and organisation performance. Boselie *et al.* (2005) reviewed empirical articles on this relationship published in international refereed journals between 1994 and 2003, and found that even research on this specific relationship is diverse in levels, methods, perspectives, and subjects.

Diversity in levels

Partly due to the diversity in themes, HRM research is also characterised by diversity in levels. Although scholars often distinguish between micro and macro research, studies on HRM are conducted at the international level (e.g. De Cieri *et al.*, 2007), the industry level, the organisational level, the business unit or department level, the team level, and the individual level. Hoobler and Brown Johnson (2004) found that 51 per cent of the HRM publications published in the top HRM journals were at the policy-level analysis (i.e. organisational or group level), 47 per cent at the individual level, and just 1 per cent at the industry level. In 2002, Wright and Boswell (2002) proposed a typology of HRM research based on two dimensions – i.e. level of analysis (i.e. individual, group or organization) and number of practices (single or multiple) – and found that HR research at the micro level focuses on single HR practices, whereas HR research on the macro (i.e. organisational and business unit) level focuses on multiple HR practices (and their effect on performance). Boselie *et al.* (2005) indeed found that 60 per cent of the studies on the HRM-performance link is performed at the organisational level, 29 percent at the business unit level, and 16 percent at the individual level. One of Wright and Boswell’s (2002) recommendations was to perform multi-level research. This recommendation was picked up by seven percent of the studies found in Boselie *et al.*’s (2005) review.

Diversity in perspectives

Besides diversity in themes and levels, there is also a huge variety in theoretical perspectives on HRM, originating from different disciplines. These are, for example, new institutionalism (e.g. DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; originating from industrial relations), resource dependence theory (e.g. Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978; originating from organizational sociology and strategic management), agency theory (e.g. Jensen and Meckling, 1976; originating from

economics), and social exchange theory (e.g. Blau, 1964; originating from psychology) (Wright and McMahan, 1992). Fleetwood and Hesketh (2008) reviewed theories useful for theorising on the HRM-performance link. They found a plethora of theories, such as the bundling or internal fit approach, expectancy theory, and the critical-evaluative model. Boselie *et al.* (2005) concluded from their review that the three theories used most often to theorise on the HRM-performance link are:

1. contingency approaches;
2. high-performance work systems (including AMO theory, of which the central elements are ability, motivation and opportunity to participate; Appelbaum *et al.*, 2000); and
3. the resource-based view.

Diversity in methods

Many special issues (e.g. Stone-Romero, 2008) and articles (e.g. Gerhart *et al.*, 2000) have pointed out methodological problems in the field of HRM, and how to overcome them. Nevertheless, Hoobler and Brown Johnson (2004) found that in most HRM publications quantitative methods, particularly regression analysis, were used to test the hypotheses (58 per cent). Qualitative methods (including case studies) were employed in 24 per cent of the HRM publications and 18 per cent of the articles were theory pieces. Experimental studies, longitudinal and social network studies were scarce in HR research. Finally, Wall and Wood (2005) evaluated the methodological rigor of studies on the HRM-performance relationship and concluded that there are three weaknesses in this research; the reliance on single-source measures of HR practices, the use of small samples with low response rates, and the lack of longitudinal studies.

Diversity in subjects and stakeholders

Research in HRM is mostly conducted among HR and line managers. Boselie *et al.* (2005) found that 46 per cent of the studies examining the HRM-performance link used HR managers as their respondents, 42 per cent used line managers, 22 per cent used employees, and eight percent used employee representatives. In 33 per cent of the studies multiple respondents were used. These studies show that different respondents rate HRM differently. Increasingly there is a focus on measuring perceptions of HR practices among employees, incidentally making use of attribution theory (Nishii *et al.*, 2008; Sanders *et al.*, 2008; Li *et al.*, 2011) or climate theory (Schneider, 1990; Takeuchi *et al.*, 2009), representing the shared perceptions of employees, implying that the employee is back centre-stage in the equation between HRM and outcomes (Guest, 2011). Of course, not only actors within organisations, such as employees, line and HR managers, are subject of HRM research, also governments and citizens (societal value), employee representatives, and potential new employees can be the subject of HRM research, and should be included in HR research.

Being triggered by the above outlined variety in approaches, the Dutch HRM Network organized its sixth international conference, “Capitalizing on Diversity in HRM Research” (November 2009). The conference aimed to highlight HRM research in its full diversity and to build bridges between the many different perspectives. It aimed to start conversations and discussions between HRM researchers from different backgrounds and help leverage (or capitalise on) this diversity to spark new and groundbreaking ideas of both academic and practical importance. In this Special Issue, we have selected and incorporated papers of the conference, which illustrate the diversity in themes, levels, methods, and subjects in HRM research.

Overview of the papers in this Special Issue

In the first contribution, entitled “Antecedents of front line managers’ perceptions of HR role stressors”, Gilbert, De Winne and Sels investigate the impact of HR devolution characteristics, characteristics of the HR devolution context and personal characteristics of the front line managers on front line managers’ perceptions of two HR role stressors, i.e. HR role ambiguity and HR role overload. Using a sample of 169 Belgian front line managers from 47 organisations survey data were analysed by means of moderation regression analyses, taking into account the nested nature of the observations. This paper is especially interesting because the authors apply role theory (Kahn *et al.*, 1964) in a new context, i.e. the HR role of front line managers, and provide HR practitioners with insights into the conditions needed to avoid perceptions of HR role stressors among front line managers.

In the second contribution, entitled “HR transformation and shared services – adoption and adaptation in Swedish organisations”, Boglind, Hällstén and Thilander focus on the HR function itself. They report on the basis of seven in depth case-studies how Swedish organisations adopt and adapt Ulrich’s idea of transforming the HR function in the direction of the so-called “three-legged stool” approach, which emphasises the need for a division of HR activities among HR centres of expertise, HR shared service centres and HR business partners. Making use of institutional theory the authors analyse this transformation process of adoption but also adaptation to the local context and the role of different actors in that process. Their paper is especially interesting because the authors use the concept of the “travelling ideas” by Czarniawska and Sevon (1996), which implies that once an idea or concept like the “three-legged stool” approach travels from theory to practice, there is a process of “re-packing” going on by the different actors involved resulting in variety and divergence. Reading this fascinating story from theory to practice generates welcoming insights in “best practice” translation and adaptation to the specific local conditions and preferences.

In the third contribution to this special issue entitled “Variations in evaluative repertoires: comparing employee perspectives on training and development in Germany and Russia”, Pernkopf-Konhäusner and Brandl apply a theory which is less well-known in HRM theorising – i.e. convention theory (see Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991). The authors are able to analyse employee expectations towards training and development and link them to the specific social context. Convention theory distinguishes different evaluative repertoires (market, industrial and domestic), and these can be used as higher order principles to explain from which perspective employees evaluate training and development activities. The argumentations and justifications people give in their account of possible benefits of training or related preferences can be unravelled as they follow certain principles of justice, which apparently vary across different societal contexts, in this case the same kind of firms, but one operating in Germany and the other in Russia. Countries which – on the basis of this comparative case-study approach – apparently differ in their national evaluative repertoire.

In the fourth contribution entitled “Combining diverse knowledge: knowledge workers’ experience of specialist and generalist roles”, Kelly, Mastroeni, Conway, Monks, Truss, Flood and Hannon aim to unpack the notions of specialist and generalist human capital from an employee perspective and examine how knowledge workers in pharmaceutical firms in Ireland and the UK experience working in specialist and generalist roles. The authors took a qualitative approach and interviewed 55 knowledge workers as well as nine HR/training and development managers to triangulate the data. These interviews reveal that the commonly made distinction between specialist and generalist human capital is not so straightforward from an employee perspective. More specifically, Irish and UK knowledge workers distinguish four categories of specialist-generalist human capital. These findings have

important implications for the types of HR practices organisations should adopt to achieve organisational learning.

In the fifth contribution of this special issue entitled “Employment relationships as drivers of firm flexibility and learning”, López-Cabrales, Valle and Galan try to answer the question whether the employment relationship (i.e. mutual investment relationship) is associated with functional flexibility and organisational learning (i.e. exploratory versus exploitative), and if functional flexibility mediates the relationship between mutual investment employment mode and organisational learning. Using a sample of 183 Spanish firms in the food industry, survey data from HR managers and production managers in each firm were analysed using cluster analysis, MANOVA and regression analyses. This paper is especially interesting because the authors combine a series of variables that have rarely been studied in combination: employment relationships, functional flexibility and exploitative versus exploratory learning. In addition to a broader understanding of the different variables the findings reinforce the strategic role of HRM through its contribution to the development of learning.

In the final contribution, entitled “Underemployment among recent graduates: a review of the literature”, Scurry and Blenkinsopp aim to bring together different perspectives on and conceptualisations of graduate underemployment from various disciplines such as sociology, economics, and psychology. The authors systematically review the interdisciplinary literature on graduate underemployment by answering the question “What is graduate underemployment?”. The literature review reveals that the objective perspective, in which the level of utilisation of individuals’ human capital is compared to an accepted standard for their referent group, dominates research on graduate underemployment. The authors thus emphasise the need to study graduate underemployment from a subjective perspective (i.e. taking into account the expectations and meaning making of the graduates themselves), and point toward the relevance of theoretical frameworks from career studies – specifically those on the objective-subjective duality of career, career indecision, and career success in this regard.

Capitalising on diversity in HRM research

Building bridges

With the articles in this Special Issue, we aimed to illustrate the diversity in themes, levels, methods, and subjects in HRM research. We would like to end our editorial with some starting points of how to build bridges between the many different perspectives.

Building bridges through different levels

As suggested earlier by scholars in the field of HR (Ostroff and Bowen, 2000; Paauwe, 2009; Wright and Boswell, 2002), one way to build bridges between the many different perspectives is making use of multilevel approaches. These calls for more multilevel research in HR seem to be picked up as recent studies in HR research more often use multilevel designs (Croon and van Veldhoven, 2007; Gilbert *et al.*, 2011; Liao *et al.*, 2009; Li *et al.*, 2011; Sanders *et al.*, 2008).

Building bridges through different perspectives

Another way to build bridges is by combining or integrating different theories or perspectives. Some scholars already aimed to do so. For example, Ferris *et al.* (2004) proposed a multilevel conceptual framework incorporating environmental factors, stakeholder interests, employee behaviours, etc., able to encompass and accommodate research streams from both systems theories as well as the strategic perspective. Similarly, Paauwe (2004) built his so-called contextually based human resource theory in which strategic management, resource based view and institutional theory are combined, encompassing both an actors’ as well as systems’

perspective. Finally, Van de Voorde *et al.* (2011) integrate attribution and climate theories in HR research (see also Nishii *et al.*, 2008).

Building bridges through different methods

Combining different methods or using more advanced methods is another fruitful way to build bridges. Quantitative and qualitative research are often separated, but an analytical approach (as favoured, for example, by Boxall *et al.*, 2007) requires taking into account or using a contextually based approach, which very often as a first stage uses a qualitative approach in order to have a quantitative follow-up phase which better takes into account the specifics of the context (see, for example, Veld *et al.*, 2010). Similarly, to understand the so-called “black box” – i.e. mechanisms underlying the HR practices-organisational performance linkage – research should be sensitive to institutional and cultural context, focusing on formal and informal relationships between employees, supervisors and HR managers and the means by which these organisational participants enable and motivate one another. Therefore, multilevel, social network and longitudinal research which make it possible to take into account the fact that employees are embedded in relations (social network research), in teams and organisations (multilevel research) and in time (longitudinal) seems to be more popular than ten years ago (see also Sanders and Castro Christiansen, 2011).

Building bridges through different subjects and stakeholders

A final way to build bridges is by integrating multiple subjects or actors in HR research. Earlier research has revealed that perceptions of HR practices differ among different actors (Liao *et al.*, 2009; Sanders and Frenkel, 2011). Therefore, multiple informants should be used to measure the presence of HR practices (Gerhart *et al.*, 2000) or employment relationships (López-Cabrales *et al.*, 2011). The focus on multiple stakeholders also implies more attention for balancing outcomes in terms of efficiency gains versus employee wellbeing (Peccei, 2004; Van de Voorde, 2010).

We hope that building bridges through levels, perspectives, methods, and subjects will strengthen the field of HR studies into a well-established academic discipline.

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