From Intended to Actual and Beyond: A Cross-Disciplinary View of (Human Resource Management) Implementation

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Despite increasing interest in human resource management (HRM) implementation as an explanation for the association between HRM and firm performance, considerable confusion remains about what *implementation* means. In order to develop conceptual definitions of HRM implementation and implementation effectiveness, this study builds on three different literatures outside the HRM field (strategy, innovation, and change management), which have addressed this topic extensively. As a result, implementation is characterized as a dynamic process, involving the interaction among multiple actors, starting with the adoption of a new practice and ending with its routinization. This is distinguished from implementation effectiveness as an outcome of that process. The study helps to achieve construct clarity, hence providing a more solid basis for future research and allowing for a better consolidation of findings. The authors also develop an agenda for further research by reviewing a number of theoretical and methodological approaches that have been used in implementation research across fields, including HRM. Overall, the study aims to establish implementation research as a highly relevant academic and practical quest not only in HRM, but also in other management literatures.

Introduction

While the positive association between strategic human resource management (SHRM) and performance is well established (Heffernan *et al.* 2016; Jiang *et al.* 2012; Lin *et al.* 2016), interest remains in better understanding how this relationship comes about (Guest 2011). The fact that many companies end up adopting similar HRM policies and practices (Makhecha *et al.* 2018) with dissimilar results suggests that what makes a difference is not only *which* practices are used, but rather *how* they are used, even if these two questions are necessarily intertwined. Hence, more attention needs to be paid to the quality of such practices and their implementation (Guest and Bos-Nehles 2013). Implementation problems may relate

to a variety of situations, for example, line managers' deficient use of HRM policies (Bos-Nehles *et al.* 2013; Woodrow and Guest 2014), employees defending their right to use HRM policies that are ignored by their managers (Budjanovcanin 2018), or HRM departments looking for ways to influence the line to follow their newly created policies (Trullen and Valverde 2017; Trullen *et al.* 2016). A focus on implementation assumes that practices designed at the corporate level (i.e. intended HRM practices) may differ from those that are actually used across the organization (i.e. actual HRM practices), which in turn may be different from those experienced by different actors involved (i.e. experienced HRM practices; Makhecha *et al.* 2018; Piening *et al.* 2014; Wright and Nishii 2013). Whereas HRM process

research (Hewett *et al.* 2018; Ostroff and Bowen 2016; Sanders *et al.* 2014) has traditionally dealt with employees' perceptions, understanding, and attribution of HRM practices, the present study focuses on implementation more broadly, looking not only at HRM sensemaking but also at the specific roles that different actors (HR professionals, senior management, line managers, employees, etc.) may play in the generation, development, and execution of HRM policies (Steffensen *et al.* 2019).

For the past two decades there have been repeated calls in the HRM literature to address implementation issues (Becker and Huselid 2006; Ferris *et al.* 1999; Gratton and Truss 2003; Guest 2011; Nishii and Wright 2008), and it seems that research on this topic is on the rise both by the increase of individual articles (Arthur *et al.* 2016; Dewettinck and Vroonen 2017; Fu *et al.* 2018; Makhecha *et al.* 2018; Nishii and Paluch 2018; Russell *et al.* 2018; Yang and Arthur 2019) and the recent appearance of special issues (Bondarouk *et al.* 2018; Bos-Nehles and Bondarouk 2017). This is encouraging, but there is still a lack of understanding of what HRM implementation means. For example, some see it as a process (Woodrow and Guest 2014), whereas others tend to emphasize a state or end result (Sikora and Ferris 2014); some think it begins with the intention to introduce a new HRM practice (Guest and Bos-Nehles 2013), or that it is even intertwined with its design (Currie and Procter 2001), whereas others argue that implementation occurs only after the design (McCullough and Sims 2012); some see implementation as an emergent and unbounded process (Raja *et al.* 2010; Van Mierlo *et al.* 2018), whereas others distinguish a set of beginning and end stages (Guest and Bos-Nehles 2013); some see implementation as performed mainly by line managers (Kehoe and Han 2019; Sikora and Ferris 2014), whereas others include a wider variety of actors (Trullen *et al.* 2016). Without a clearer conceptualization of HRM implementation that builds connections with other related constructs such as HRM design, HRM adoption, or HRM effectiveness, it remains very difficult to develop a coherent set of implementation research questions and findings.

Furthermore, the HRM literature tends to confound implementation with successful or effective implementation. Often, an 'implemented' HRM practice is simply equated to a 'successfully implemented' or 'effectively implemented' HRM practice, with no focus on the process that led to the state of effectiveness or success. And when an effort is made to demonstrate what an effectively implemented HRM practice looks like, the main emphasis is on contrasting whether the actual practice resembles as much as possible the practice that was initially intended (Guest and Bos-Nehles 2013; Khilji and Wang 2006; Wright and Nishii 2013). Yet, such an approach does not take into consideration the possibility that HRM practices may change during implementation, as employees and line managers use them and try to integrate them into existing systems (Bos-Nehles *et al.* 2017; Kehoe and Han 2019; Van Mierlo et al. 2018). Therefore, detecting a difference between actual and intended may not necessarily be a sign of ineffective implementation.

Such a lack of clear conceptualization of HRM implementation prevents the consolidation of research findings. This is further complicated by the fact that studies addressing HRM implementation are commonly not connected to other implementation studies. Hence, while there are studies addressing HRM implementation in a variety of HRM functional domains, for example, performance appraisals (Farndale and Kelliher 2013; Van Waeyenberg and Decramer 2018), HRM information systems (Kossek *et al.* 1994; Vargas *et al.* 2018), or flexible work practices (Budjanovcanin 2018; Friede *et al.* 2008; Straub *et al.* 2018), the discussion of findings and main stated contributions of the studies primarily relate to the HRM functional domain literature, rather than to implementation studies. To sum up, the current HRM implementation research remains scattered and, more importantly, lacks a clear definition of the phenomenon of study. As a result, the field lacks consolidation as well as its own specific agenda that guides future research efforts.

This study aims to address these shortcomings. In order to do so, we build on literatures that have already addressed the topic of implementation extensively – namely strategy, innovation, and change management – and attempt to bring some of their insights into the HRM arena. We contend that these three areas deal with problems similar to those encountered in the implementation of HRM initiatives. When organizations implement strategic decisions, innovations, and change projects, similar issues to those encountered in the implementation of HRM initiatives may arise, such as the need to clarify objectives, to involve sometimes sceptical stakeholders, or to help users unlearn old routines and learn new ones. In fact, HRM policies have often been described as a particular type of administrative innovation (Damanpour 1987; Evan 1966; Wolfe 1995), and while not all HRM initiatives

necessarily involve organizational changes, they often do modify relevant routines and patterns of interaction within the organization (Ruta 2005). Similarly, the implementation of highly effective HRM practices has been deemed essential for strategy implementation (Hitt *et al.* 2017; Hrebiniak and Joyce 1984). In sum, we argue that, at a broader level, implementation processes in innovation, change, and strategy tend to involve a strong human component, often connected to the introduction of HRM initiatives.

By building on these different literatures, this study achieves two objectives. First, to develop, establish, and explicate grounded definitions of HRM implementation and HRM implementation effectiveness, which afford clarification of each concept in isolation and a distinction between the two. Second, to provide directions for framing new research questions and establishing a research agenda on HRM implementation, both in terms of theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches. With the achievement of these objectives, this paper aims to contribute in the following ways. First, it aids the HRM implementation literature on its route to consolidation by setting a common conceptual ground and a variety of promising avenues for further research. Second, it engages with the HRM process literature by complementing and expanding the inputs from HRM system strength (Ostroff and Bowen 2016; Sanders et al. 2014) and HRM attributions (Hewett *et al.* 2018, 2019; Sanders *et al.* 2015). Indeed, an implementation lens increases the diversity of available perspectives in process research by including questions on power and politics, emotions, or discourse and practice, among others. Third, it contributes beyond HRM to the field of management research, as the cross-fertilization of ideas used to bring available knowledge from other disciplines to the HRM arena can also be fed back to those disciplines, as has proven useful in other areas (e.g. Corlett et al. 2017; Schmitt et al. 2018). Overall, this paper contributes by bringing to the fore the relevance of implementation for academics and practitioners alike.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. We begin by outlining the methodology used for approaching the strategy, innovation, and change implementation literatures. Next, we build on these research fields in order to review the different meanings attached to implementation and provide our own definition. Finally, we put forward new directions in terms of theories and methodologies that could be used to advance research on HRM implementation.

Conceptualization of implementation: Lessons from other fields

The present section reviews the implementation literature in the related fields of strategy, innovation, and change. The aim is to generate a definition of HRM implementation, which aids in the construction of an implementation language as a common ground that researchers and practitioners alike can build on. To do so, in the Methodology section we first justify the choice of the three examined fields of literature and describe our search strategy. We then analyse what elements these fields can bring to the conceptualization of HRM implementation and HRM implementation effectiveness, and on that basis, derive our own definitions. Table 1 at the end of this section outlines the sources of our conceptualization of HRM implementation in order to signpost the features on which we have built our analysis.

Methodology

There is a solid basis of groundwork in the areas of strategy, innovation, and change, which has dealt extensively with implementation, addressing problems similar to those encountered in the implementation of HRM initiatives. Hence, to meet the current challenges in HRM implementation research, we do not need to start from a blank canvas. The choice of these three literatures does not mean that other related fields (e.g. public administration, education, or healthcare) have not adequately addressed the topic of implementation. However, in this review we are interested in centring our attention on the very definition of implementation and need to isolate any elements that may be specific to an activity sector. A focus on sector-based domains would have the disadvantage of being more contextual in its treatment of implementation issues, hence limiting the potential for translation of ideas across fields. Thus, we focus only on concept-based areas (strategy, innovation, and change) rather than sector-based literatures (public administration, education, and healthcare). This is consistent with our own object of interest, HRM – a content-based field in itself.

Our approach to the analysis of these literatures as regards implementation is similar to that of other review studies (e.g. Currie *et al.* 2017; Moeller and Maley 2018; Mowbray *et al.* 2015; Tweedie *et al.* 2018) in the sense that we did not aim to peruse every implementation article, but instead analysed some

of the most relevant publications in each discipline. Our aim was not to carry out a systematic literature review on implementation, but rather to build on a broad and diverse range of studies in order to develop new theoretical and methodological insights on HRM implementation. Nonetheless, we tried to be as comprehensive as possible in order to identify the main themes and advances that each of these fields bring to the knowledge on implementation. With that aim, we included both older and newer relevant literature in each field in our search. We used Web of Science to carry out the literature search. Our inclusion criteria involved academic publications in the English language that included both the word *strategy* (and subsequently *innovation* and *change*) and any variants of *implementation*, such as *implementing* or *implement*, in their title, without time restrictions. This initial search resulted in a list of 295 articles for strategy, 131 for innovation, and 135 for change. We then shortlisted 25 articles in each area by rank ordering them based on the number of citations they had received in the database. In shortlisting articles, we excluded those published in journals without impact factor or connected only marginally to implementation. Next, we carried out a second search with the same inclusion criteria that focused on articles published in the last 5 years. The rationale for this second search was to avoid penalizing and subsequently missing more recent contributions, given that articles published earlier had more chance of obtaining citations. This second search resulted in 99 articles for strategy, 53 for innovation, and 45 for change. After excluding articles published in journals without impact factor and those only marginally related to implementation, we ended up with a list of 20 articles for strategy, 16 for innovation, and 8 for change. All of these articles were added to the initial collection of 75. In total, we reviewed 119 academic publications dealing with implementation in the fields of strategy, innovation, or change. Additionally, when some of these articles referred to other articles that were not in our list but were deemed relevant because they somehow dealt with the conceptualization of implementation, we also reviewed those additional items as considered appropriate.

Defining implementation in related fields

Definitions of implementation differ among studies and are usually conceptualized either as a *process* or as a *state*. In a process interpretation, implementation unfolds over time, whereas in a state interpretation,

it is commonly regarded as an outcome (Real and Poole 2005). This section examines the positions that the reviewed literature has taken on this matter, as well as the characteristics of each view in order to later inform a choice that can help define HRM implementation and serve further HRM implementation studies.

The most quoted and used definition of implementation is a *process* definition, where implementation is understood as a 'transition period during which targeted organizational members ideally become increasingly skilful, consistent, and committed in their use of an innovation' (Klein and Sorra 1996, p. 1057). This process perspective is shared by many researchers (more than two-thirds of studies reviewed), who describe implementation as a critical period in which ideas need to be developed into routine practice by neglecting useless ideas and implementing those with promise (Somech and Drach-Zahavy 2013), or as a 'complex dynamic process created by the interaction of multiple feedback mechanisms' through which participants in an organization develop commitment to using a newly adopted idea (Repenning 2002, p. 110). Scholars from the change management and strategic management domain would mostly agree on the conceptualization as a process (Coeurderoy *et al.* 2014; Greer *et al.* 2017; Miller *et al.* 2004; Noble and Mokwa 1999; Piercy 1998; Sandoff and Widell 2015; Shimizu 2017). As such, they talk about a change process (e.g. Prasad 1993), a transformation process (Heracleous and Barrett 2001), a process of achieving strategic objectives (Parsa 1999), or a process of completing the projects to assist an organization in realizing its goals (Gottschalk 1999). A process definition of implementation implies that one can distinguish various stages, starting from initiation or adoption (Canato *et al.* 2013; Hausman and Stock 2003; Klein and Sorra 1996; Pennings and Harianto 1992; Prasad 1993; Schultz *et al.* 1987), continuing with adaptation and acceptance, and ending with routinization (Choi and Chang 2009; Fidler and Johnson 1984), institutionalization (Chiaroni *et al.* 2010; Pauget and Wald 2018), incorporation (Rajagopal 2002), compliance (Marcus 1988; Repenning 2002), or stabilization (Robey *et al.* 2002).

Those who define implementation as a *state*, in contrast, do not see it as a multistage process, focusing instead on one particular point in time. These authors may focus on the start of the implementation process and interpret implementation as a proxy for adoption (e.g. Li *et al.* 2017). Some change and

strategic management scholars refer to implementation as the actual introduction of a new practice into the organization (e.g. Canato *et al.* 2013) or the decision to use organizational systems (Shaw *et al.* 2001). Some others, especially innovation scholars, would focus on a later point in time, when the transition period is over. For example, they would argue that an idea is implemented when it is put into practice (Axtell *et al.* 2000) or when it is used to its full potential (Mignon 2017), rather than simply adopted.

After examining the characteristics of the process and state conceptualizations of implementation in the reviewed literatures, we align with the interpretation of the phenomenon as a process view, since the state view does not sufficiently encompass the whole experience of implementation. Indeed, an idea will typically evolve and be modified between adoption and routinization in a process of translation (Spyridonidis *et al.* 2016; Zmud and Cox 1979), while routinization only occurs later, when users have accepted the new idea and its use becomes taken for granted (Ahire and Ravichandran 2001; Pauget and Wald 2018; Rajagopal 2002). During implementation, however, initial ideas may change in a rather fluid process, because they were incomplete or in need of refinement when first adopted. Real and Poole (2005) labelled this view of implementation as adaptive, distinguishing it from a more fixed view in which an idea is complete or mature when implementation starts. In line with the adaptive view, we understand implementation as an 'intermediate process' (Choi and Chang 2009; Robey *et al.* 2002) where things happen between both flagpoles (i.e. adoption and routinization) as the original idea may be adapted, customized, redesigned, or improved. This means that implementation is an evolving effort (Repenning 2002) in which employees change their behaviours depending on the initiatives and the feedback offered by their managers (Battilana *et al.* 2010; Gilley *et al.* 2008; Higgs and Rowland 2011), as well as the normative pressures they experience to identify and comply with the new ideas being introduced (Jiao *et al.* 2015). Users, implementers, or even designers themselves may modify the intended ideas by redesigning or customizing them to fit specific situations and actors' needs. This iterative perspective thus avoids a simplistic and overtly rational view of implementation as mere execution (MacKay and Zundel 2017), and it is shared by several authors (Greer *et al.* 2017; Leonardi 2015; Piercy 1998) who argue that formulation and implementation are two intertwined processes.

Implementation effectiveness

It is at the point of routinization that we must assess or judge the effectiveness of implementation. The majority of scholars from all three disciplines (i.e. strategy, innovation, and organizational change) tend to define implementation effectiveness as a state or outcome concept, such as the consistency and quality of targeted organizational members' use of the new idea or practice (Choi *et al.* 2011; Klein and Sorra 1996), the extent to which the practice is accepted and used (Abernethy and Bouwens 2005; Joshi 2017; Ruta 2005; Shum *et al.* 2008), assimilated into a unit's work processes (Choi and Chang 2009), integrated into an organization's operations (Dooley *et al.* 2000; Lin 2008), rooted in discursive deeper structures (Heracleous and Barrett 2001), or implemented on time, at reasonable cost, and with acceptable risk (Arvidsson *et al.* 2014). Still, conceptualizing effective implementation from a state or outcome perspective, but with a stronger focus on the extent to which implemented ideas are similar or close to intended ones, some change management and strategy researchers define implementation effectiveness by looking at the difference between intended ideas and implemented ones (e.g. McDermott *et al.* 2013). Similarly, for Morgan *et al.* (2012), implementation effectiveness depends on whether the firm's tactical actions and resources deployed are aligned with the firm's planned decisions. Finally, Cadwallader *et al.* (2010) wrote about the successful translation of a strategy into results. In all these cases, an implicit – and sometimes explicit – assumption was that effectiveness can be gauged or assessed by means of evaluation tools and control systems (Micheli *et al.* 2011; Naranjo-Gil and Hartman 2007).

Less common but worth mentioning are the conceptualizations of implementation effectiveness from a process perspective. Some authors focus, for instance, on the level of decision adoption in the organization, whether by concentrating on the speed of the implementation of decisions (Dooley *et al.* 2000) or by looking at factors involved in all stages of the implementation, such as idea formulation, execution, and follow-up (Brenes *et al.* 2008). Finally, it is interesting to note that implementation effectiveness may be understood in terms of process if it is associated with the concept of sustainability. Buchanan *et al.* (2005), for instance, broadly referred to change sustainability as 'the process through which new working methods, performance goals and improvement trajectories are maintained for a period appropriate to a

given context' (p. 189). This view suggests that implementation effectiveness is something that has to be maintained and reinforced over time.

It should be noted that implementation effectiveness is not equal to idea effectiveness. Klein and Sorra (1996, p. 1058) explained that the former is a 'necessary but not sufficient condition' for the latter. An idea would be very 'unlikely to yield significant benefits to an adopting organization unless [it] is used consistently and well'. However, an idea's being effectively implemented does not guarantee that it will, in fact, prove beneficial for the organization (Arvidsson *et al.* 2014; Klein and Sorra 1996). In any case, overall effectiveness does seem to follow implementation effectiveness. The HRM literature has recognized this as well, by noting that 'even if the intended HRM practices are well designed, they will be ineffective if they are not properly implemented' (Bos-Nehles *et al.* 2013, p. 862).

A proposed definition of HRM implementation

Informed by the reviewed conceptualizations, synthesized in Table 1, which have brought us to clearly align with a process view of the phenomenon of implementation, it is now possible to offer our own definition of HRM implementation as a *dynamic process that starts with the decision to introduce a new (or significantly change an existing) HRM policy or practice (also known as adoption), during which relevant HRM actors (such as line managers, HR specialists, user employees) engage with it, interacting among themselves and attempting to shape it to fit their requirements and needs, until the policy or practice becomes routinized.*

Table 1 summarizes the sources that have contributed to our definition. While Table 1 shows that there are many commonalities in how they approach implementation, there are also some differences across literature domains in terms of how each emphasizes different aspects. For example, the literature on innovation places a stronger focus on the stages of implementation and end users' reactions, while from strategy there is an emphasis on organizational structures and middle managers, and on multiple actors and their interactions in organizational change. In this section, we elaborate on the core elements of this definition.

A dynamic process. The first element of the definition acknowledges looking at implementation from a dynamic perspective rather than from a static view.

This means that HRM practices keep evolving during implementation (Van Mierlo *et al.* 2018), being modified and refined so that they can be used more effectively (Bos-Nehles *et al.* 2017; Real and Poole 2005). As a result, an implementation process does not follow a linear, compliant route in which HRM practices are fixed after adoption.

From adoption to routinization. The definition clearly delineates when implementation takes place. It starts right when the decision to introduce a new policy or practice is made, a marker point usually considered as *adoption*, and it finishes when the policy or practice is used in a routine fashion. By routine use we understand an automatic use, which makes the practice more homogeneous every time it is enacted (whether frequently or not), and thus becomes less malleable or likely to be modified (Bartunek *et al.* 2007; Piening 2011; Tyre and Orlikowski 1994). How long this period will last depends on each case, with some HRM policies being implemented almost automatically, while others take years to be definitively established, and some never manage to reach that stage.

A new policy or practice. Implementation will take place only when a new policy or practice is introduced. By 'new' we refer to HRM policies or practices that are new to a specific firm or unit, even if these policies or practices have previously been adopted by others elsewhere. Moreover, an already existing HRM policy or practice that is considerably modified and reintroduced to improve its effectiveness may also be understood as a 'new' policy or practice (e.g. Van Mierlo *et al.* 2018) if it significantly changes the ways in which the policy was used in the past and its users and implementers perceive it as a different policy. A significant change means that an existing policy or practice becomes qualitatively different (e.g. a 360° feedback mechanism is introduced into an otherwise traditional performance management process), rather than incrementally modified.

A focus on multiple actors. While the user perspective is very widespread, especially in the innovation literature (Klein and Sorra 1996), the present definition takes a broader perspective, more commonly found in the change management literature (e.g. Canato *et al.* 2013; Heracleous and Barrett 2001; Raja *et al.* 2010), and includes other multiple crucial actors such as designers, promoters, or enforcers of a practice. The most studied actors involved in implementation in the HR literature are by far line managers

Table 1. HRM implementation definition sources

Our definition	Influences of HRM literature	Influences of innovation literature	Influences of strategy literature	Influences of change literature
Dynamic	Dynamic HRM implementation (Bos-Nehles et al. 2017; Budjanovcanin 2018; Van Mierlo et al. 2018) Non-linear process (Bondarouk et al. 2018)	Adaptive view (Real and Poole 2005) Complex dynamic process (Repenning 2002) Evolution (Mortara and Minshall 2011; Repenning 2002) Modification (Marcus 1988) Ongoing work activity (Fidler and Johnson 1984)	Continuous adjustment and adaptation (Lee and Puranam 2016; Shimizu 2017) Formulation and implementation intertwined (Leonardi 2015)	Dynamic process (Coeurderoy et al. 2014; Guiette and Vandenbempt 2017; Huy et al. 2014; Kellogg 2012; Raja et al. 2010; Walsham 1992) Context and power dynamics (McDermott et al. 2013) Cultural dynamics (Canato et al. 2013) Symbolic interactionism (Prasad 1993) Dialectics of change (Robey et al. 2002)
A process	HRM implementation process (Bondarouk et al. 2018; Bos-Nehles and Meijerink 2018; Bos-Nehles et al. 2017; Budjanivcanin 2018; Van Mierlo et al. 2018)	Process theory of innovation implementation (Chiaroni et al. 2010; Choi and Chang 2009; Chung et al. 2017; Jiao et al. 2015; Klein and Sorra 1996; Pauget and Wald 2018; Real and Poole 2005; Repenning 2002; Somech and Drach-Zahavy 2013) Diffusion process (Fidler and Johnson 1984; Leonard-Barton 1987; Lin 2008; Rajagopal 2002; Yetton et al. 1999) Translation of innovative strategies into results (Cadwallader et al. 2010)	Process view of strategy implementation (Gottschalk 1999; Miller et al. 2004; Noble and Mokwa 1999; Parsa 1999; Piercy 1998; Sandoff and Widell 2015)	(Organizational) Change process (Canato et al. 2013; Coeurderoy et al. 2014; Heracleous and Barrett 2001; Higgs and Rowland 2011; Huy et al. 2014; Jones et al. 2005; Kellogg 2012; Krovi 1993; McDermott et al. 2013; Parsons et al. 1991; Prasad 1993; Raja et al. 2010; Robey et al. 2002; Ruta 2005; Shum et al. 2008; Van de Ven and Sun 2011; Walsham 1992; Zmud and Cox 1979) Meaning-making/sense-making process (Guiette and Vandenbempt 2017; Sonenshein 2009, 2010; Sonenshein and Dholakia 2012)
From adoption to routinization		Adopted to committed use (Klein and Sorra 1996) Adoption to routinization (Choi and Chang 2009; Gilley et al. 2008; Rajagopal 2002) Adoption to implementation (Hausman and Stock 2003) Motivation to legitimation (Pauget and Wald 2018) Unfreeze to institutionalizing (Chiaroni et al. 2010)	From strategic decision to full integration (Dooley et al. 2000) Adoption to new embedded organizational routine (Arvidsson et al. 2014; Chen et al. 2014) Getting to know about strategic decision to be practiced within the local context (Sandoff and Widell 2015)	From adoption to cultural change (Canato et al. 2013) From introduction to sustained change (Heracleous and Barrett 2001) After formulation, before evaluation (Huy et al. 2014) After planning and before stabilization (Guiette and Vandenbempt 2017) From initiation to evaluation (Zmud and Cox 1979) From preparing to sustaining (Kumar et al. 2011)
A new policy or practice	New HRM policy (Bondarouk et al. 2018; Guest and Bos-Nehles 2013; Stirpe et al. 2013)	A new idea (policy or practice) is an innovation	New strategy in different domains (e.g. marketing, IT, etc.)	By default, the 'change' is the introduction of the new system, practice, structure, etc.

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued

Our definition	Influences of HRM literature	Influences of innovation literature	Influences of strategy literature	Influences of change literature
A focus on multiple actors	Multiple HRM actors (Bondarouk *et al.* 2018) HRM and line managers (Bos-Nehles *et al.* 2017) Line managers and employees (Bos-Nehles and Meijerink 2018; Bos-Nehles *et al.* 2013; Khilji and Wang 2006; Van Waeyenberg and Decramer 2018) HR managers, line managers, and employees (Makhecha *et al.* 2018) HR departments and line managers (Trullen *et al.* 2016) HR practitioners, employees, and senior professionals (McDermott *et al.* 2013) Various line manager hierarchies (Op de Beeck *et al.* 2016) Multi-hierarchy and multi-level line managers, employees, and HRM professionals (Van Mierlo *et al.* 2018)	Various organizational members (Klein and Sorra 1996; Schaarschmidt 2016) Different managers (Michaelis *et al.* 2010; Pauget and Wald 2018; Somech and Drach-Zahavy 2013) Managers and users (Chung *et al.* 2017; Choi *et al.* 2011; Pauget and Wald 2018; Slaughter 1993) Employees, external experts, and managers (Choi and Chang 2009) Innovation developers and potential or actual users (Leonard-Barton 1987) Organizational staff of low and high/medium level, partners, suppliers, and volunteers (Li *et al.* 2017) Supplier–manufacturer dyads (Joshi 2017)	Managers and employees (Greer *et al.* 2017) Top managers, lower-level managers, and employees (Chen *et al.* 2014; Shimizu 2017) Senior and middle managers (Ahearne *et al.* 2014) Sales managers and sales employees (Hayati *et al.* 2017) Members of marketing and HR departments (Chimhanzi and Morgan 2005) CEO, medical centre director, and department manager (O'Reilly *et al.* 2010)	Reformers and defenders (Kellogg 2012) Stakeholders, including management, users, designers, etc. (Heracleous and Barrett 2001; Prasad 1993; Walsham 1992) Implementation/change participants (Huy *et al.* 2014; Zmud and Cox 1979) Distributed change agency (McDermott *et al.* 2013) Peers, supervisors, trainers, etc. (Coeurderoy *et al.* 2014) Leaders and members at different levels (Canato *et al.* 2013) A wide range of actors (Guiette and Vandenbempt 2017; Johannsdottir *et al.* 2015; Sonenshein 2010; Shum *et al.* 2008; Van de Ven and Sun 2011)
Interactions among actors	Social exchange relationships between HRM actors (Bos-Nehles and Meijerink 2018) Interactions between HRM actors (Boada-Cuerva *et al.* 2019; Bondarouk *et al.* 2018; Brewster *et al.* 2013; Kuvaas *et al.* 2014; Makhecha *et al.* 2018; McDermott *et al.* 2013; Op de Beeck *et al.* 2016; Trullen and Valverde 2017; Van Mierlo *et al.* 2018)	Interaction of multiple feedback mechanisms (Repenning 2002) Inter-organizational relationships (Chiaroni *et al.* 2010; Mignon 2017)	Co-creation by managers at different levels and employees (Greer *et al.* 2017) Upward and downward influence of middle managers (Ahearne *et al.* 2014)	Interrelations among implementation participants (Prasad 1993; Zmud and Cox 1979) Interactions of power and politics (McDermott *et al.* 2013; Walsham 1992) Mobilization and counter-tactics (Kellogg 2012) Fragmented, competing, and, complementary discourses (Heracleous and Barrett 2001) Dynamic, relational, and iterative relationships (Huy *et al.* 2014)

and HR specialists, but recent contributions are beginning to highlight the role of employees (Bos-Nehles and Meijerink 2018), CEOs and top management (Boada-Cuerva *et al.* 2019), or self-managing teams (Renkema *et al.* 2020). Trade unions and external consultants have not yet received sufficient attention, but their role in the implementation of HR practices should not be overlooked. Thus, the definition includes all organizational stakeholders who may directly or indirectly engage with the new practice.

The definition also indicates that the actors who will be relevant may be different ones in each implementation instance, depending on the type of practice introduced, the type of organization where it is introduced, and so on. For example, a policy to facilitate expatriates' adaptation to their destination will have a limited number of users, whereas a compensation management intranet may be used by all employees. Similarly, the designers of a practice could be the in-house HR specialists or an external HR service provider. Thus, the actors who are involved with a new practice at different levels and with varying responsibilities and sources of influence must be identified for each implementation process, in order to determine who precisely they are on each occasion.

Interactions among actors. An additional advantage of our focus on multiple actors is that it necessarily highlights actors' interactions (e.g. conflict, collaboration) as an important object of study. Although HRM actors may have different functions, together they are responsible for the implementation of HRM practices. To manage these tasks, they need to cooperate and interact with each other (Kuvaas *et al.* 2014; Makhecha *et al.* 2018) by engaging in 'partnerships' (Bos-Nehles and Meijerink 2018; Whittaker and Marchington 2003) or by sparring with the other actors to effectively implement HRM practices at the operational level (Björkman and Søderberg 2006). Each actor will be able to advance a particular view on how to use a policy or practice to a greater or lesser extent, depending on their balance of power and on how much effort/energy they are willing to devote to move the practice in their desired direction (Budjanovcanin 2018; Trullen and Valverde 2017).

A proposed definition of HRM implementation effectiveness

In line with our previous arguments, we need to distinguish HRM implementation as a process from the outcome of that process, which we label as HRM

implementation effectiveness. We can hence say that *HRM implementation effectiveness occurs when the relevant organizational actors use an HRM policy or practice consistently, skilfully, and in ways that are congruent with its original purpose, even if the policy or practice has been modified during the implementation process.* Again, several considerations need to be made to better understand this proposed definition.

Distinguishing process from outcome. The outcome of implementation can only be evaluated once the implementation process is over, that is, when the policy or practice is routinized. While we adopt a process perspective in looking at implementation, we use a state perspective when looking at its outcome, as we focus on the final result. As explained earlier, the outcome of implementation is different from the outcome of the overall policy or practice, which does not depend exclusively on the implementation process. Routinization of a policy or practice does not necessarily imply effective implementation, as policies may be routinized in dysfunctional ways. It is also possible that a practice is abandoned before becoming routinized, resulting in a failed implementation.

Consistent and skilful use. This means that in order to distinguish implementations that are more effective from those that are less effective, we need to look at the extent to which any target organizational actors for a particular policy or practice use the practice when needed (consistently) and use it well (skilfully), for example, supervisors not only filling out their forms on time, but also providing qualitative comments in their performance appraisals and offering team members an opportunity to discuss those. Ultimately, we are referring to an engaged or committed use as opposed to a merely compliant use or even a non-use (Klein and Sorra 1996, p. 1058). While compliant use may be better than non-use, committed use is considered a more effective outcome of the implementation process. Social cognitive theory suggests that users can become skilful and consistent in their use of policies, for example, by mastery modelling (Bandura 1986).

Congruent with its original purpose. Given that implementation processes involve interactions among a variety of actors as they attempt to shape the policy or practice that will finally be routinized, it follows that the actual implemented practice will more than likely differ from the one originally designed. Although the modification of the practice may be part of the

implementation process, the actual practice should still accomplish the objectives for which the organization adopted it, regardless of how closely it resembles that. While some authors propose that implementation effectiveness occurs only when there is an exact match of intended and actual practices (Khilji and Wang 2006), our view acknowledges that changing the practice in the implementation process does not necessarily diminish the quality of implementation (Bos-Nehles *et al.* 2017), as long as the final practice can still fulfil its original purpose. In other words, effective implementation cannot involve the loss of one or more core features of the practice or idea being implemented (Bartunek *et al.* 2007).

Broadening the implementation horizons: Theoretical and methodological avenues for future research

A better understanding of what implementation means is an important step towards advancing research in this area. Clarity in construct definition allows researchers to share a common language and build on each other's findings (Suddaby 2010). However, we think that higher levels of consistency in conceptualization are not at odds with richness and diversity in both theoretical and methodological approaches. Better and more realistic solutions to implementation problems are likely to be found when practitioners are able to draw on scholarly work embracing a diversity of perspectives – be those political, technical, psychological, and so on (Söderlund 2011). Pluralistic approaches also have the advantage of raising greater scholarly interest in implementation. With these ideas in mind, in this section we draw on current theoretical and methodological perspectives on implementation found in the literatures reviewed in order to identify particularly promising avenues for future research on HRM implementation.

Conceptual perspectives on implementation

Although there is a diversity of theoretical perspectives within HRM implementation research, some of the most commonly used conceptual frameworks include HRM system strength (Bowen and Ostroff 2004; Guest and Conway 2011; Stanton *et al.* 2010) and intended–actual–perceived HRM frameworks (Bondarouk *et al.* 2009; Makhecha *et al.* 2018; Woodrow and Guest 2014). In addition, studies ad-dressing the role of line managers in implementation more specifically have often adopted AMO (ability, motivation, opportunity) theory (Bos-Nehles *et al.* 2013; Trullen *et al.* 2016; Van *et al.* 2018), social exchange theory (Bos-Nehles and Meijerink 2018; Gilbert *et al.* 2011; Purcell and Hutchinson 2007), signalling theory (Dewettinck and Vroonen 2017; Straub *et al.* 2018), sensemaking theory (Kossek *et al.* 2016; Nishii and Paluch 2018; Shipton *et al.* 2016; Stirpe *et al.* 2013), and again HRM system strength (Gill *et al.* 2018; Nishii and Paluch 2018; Sikora *et al.* 2015).

In sum, and with some recent exceptions (e.g. Gill *et al.* 2018; Russell *et al.* 2018; Van Mierlo *et al.* 2018; Vargas *et al.* 2018), the theoretical grounding of HRM implementation research so far has been based either on very HRM-specific frameworks such as HRM system strength (Bowen and Ostroff 2004) and intended–actual–perceived (Wright and Nishii 2013), or on much broader theories such as social exchange or sensemaking. Hence, we contend that HRM scholars could benefit from expanding their theoretical toolbox by incorporating some of the theoretical frameworks associated with implementation in other fields. We review some of these theoretical frameworks in order to suggest research topics that could be tackled by HRM implementation studies. Table 2 summarizes our findings by highlighting where the HRM literature has anchored its conceptual frameworks vis-à-vis the other reviewed literatures, and underscores where there is more experience or more gaps in HRM (represented with more or less densely filled boxes in the HRM literature column). The specific research topics for HRM implementation that we suggest within each of the conceptual approaches proposed are located in the right-hand column.

Power perspectives.   The adoption and development of new policies may be driven by a variety of motivations, values, intentions, hopes and, in sum, the specific agendas from those championing them. Thus, their design may reflect different underlying values regarding employees. It follows that implementations of particular policies may be perceived as beneficial by some and detrimental by others. The extent to which different organizational actors oppose, resist, or try to shape or influence implementation processes to their own benefit is a key topic in implementation research (Guth and Mcmillan 1986; Huy *et al.* 2014; Robey *et al.* 2002). Whether their efforts are successful will in turn depend on their power sources (e.g. social capital) as well as their skills in shaping

Table 2. Suggested conceptual frameworks and corresponding topics for the further study of HRM implementation

Conceptual frameworks	Examples from reviewed studies	Examples from the HRM literature	Possible research lines for further study in HRM implementation (HRMI)
Power perspectives	Ahearne et al. (2014), Chimhanzi and Morgan (2005), Guth and Mcmillan (1986), Huy et al. (2014), Johannsdottir et al. (2015), Joshi (1991), McDermott et al. (2013), Parsa (1999), Parsons et al. (1991), Piderit (2000), Robey et al. (2002)	Budjacovnanin (2018), Kossek et al. (1994), Trullen and Valverde (2017), Woodhams and Lupton (2006)	- Unveil the ways in which HRMI processes alter the balance of power among stakeholders within the organization. - Investigate how different actors resist and/or shape HRMI depending on their interests and their power sources. - The extent to which the interplay between stakeholders result in more or less implementation effectiveness ('dialectic/participative processes' or 'unwanted interruptions'?)
Structural views	Atkinson (2006), Gosselin (1997), Govindarajan (1988), Gupta (1987), Heracleous and Barrett (2001), Maxwell et al. (1997), Micheli et al. (2011), Skivington and Daft (2007), Thorpe and Morgan (2007)		- Effects of centralization of decision-making on HRMI. - Effects of policy formalization on HRMI. - Effect of different types of control systems on HRMI. - Interactions between type of strategy and centralization/formalization in relation to HRMI.
Practice-based approaches	Arnaud et al. (2016), Arvidsson et al. (2014), Canato et al. (2013), Gylfe et al. (2016), Leonardi (2015), Marin et al. (2016)	Sandoff and Widell (2015), Van Mierlo et al. (2018)	- Role of management tools (e.g. SWOT analysis) and texts (e.g. executive briefings) in HRMI. - Role of middle managers in appropriation and variation of HRM ideas during HRMI.
Contextual approaches	Choi and Chang (2009), Choi et al. (2011), Klein and Sorra (1996), Kwon and Zmud (1987), McAdam et al. (2010), Somech and Drach-Zahavy (2013) Institutional: Kellog (2012), Kennedy and Fiss (2009), Kraatz and Zajac (1996), Lounsbury (2001), Westphal et al. (1997)	Dewettinck and Vroonen (2017), Gilliland and Schepers (2003), Kossek et al. (2016), Sikora and Ferris (2014), Stirpe et al. (2013), Vermeeren (2014), Woodhams and Lupton (2006)	- Investigate organizational enablers (e.g. culture, climate, leadership, resources, and incentives) of HRMI. - Show the impact of macro-contextual variables on implementation processes (e.g. national culture, legislation, industry, etc.). - Categorize and characterize implementation processes depending on types of practice.
Emotions	Aslam et al. (2018), Balogun et al. (2010), Bartunek et al. (2006), Choi et al. (2011), Huy (2011), Huy et al. (2014), Vuori and Huy (2016)	Cooke (2006)	- Relationships between cognitive appraisals of HRM (e.g. legitimacy judgements, perceived usefulness) and emotional reactions. - Effects of emotional reactions on HRMI. - Emotional contagion during HRMI.

adopted practices (Ahearne *et al.* 2014). Previous research has addressed different types of actors, depending on the level of analysis. For instance, some authors have examined the power of organizational units vis-à-vis headquarters (Parsa 1999), others have focused on the relationships between different departments within the organization (Chimhanzi and Morgan 2005), and still others have looked at individual actors such as middle managers (Ahearne *et al.* 2014).

It has been acknowledged that introducing and implementing HRM innovations may alter the power dynamics within an organization, both across departments (e.g. elevating the status of the HRM department) and within the HRM department itself (Kossek *et al.* 1994), and that some HRM decisions in areas such as performance management and selection are often political (Ferris and King 1991), but relatively little work has been done in HRM implementation adopting a power perspective (for recent exceptions, see Trullen and Valverde 2017 and Budjacovnanin 2018) and observing how different actors influence such processes. Thus, understanding change 'resistance' in complex ways that overcome the agent–recipient dichotomy (Johannsdottir *et al.* 2015; Joshi 1991; Parsons *et al.* 1991; Piderit 2000), as well as adopting critical perspectives (Alvesson 2009), can be helpful avenues for the study of HRM implementation.

Structural views. Structural views on implementation (Noble 1999) address questions such as the impact that centralization of decision-making within the organization (Thorpe and Morgan 2007), formalization of strategy (Gosselin 1997; Skivington and Daft 2007), or the type of control systems have upon implementation effectiveness (Atkinson 2006). To date, though, there is no work that we know of in this area within the HRM literature. Such questions could thus be explored in HRM implementation research, while also incorporating the study of additional contingency variables such as the type of strategy (Gupta 1987).

Practice-based approaches. A different conceptual perspective that could also contribute to expanding the scope of research questions tackled in HRM implementation is that of practice-based approaches. Practice-based approaches are concerned with 'understanding central questions about how agency and structure, and individual action and institutions are linked in social systems, cultures and organizations' (Golsorkhi *et al.* 2015, p. 2); they have been used suc-

cessfully in implementation research in the fields of strategy (Arnaud *et al.* 2016) and change management (Canato *et al.* 2013). Researchers in this tradition offer in-depth analyses of what actually takes place during the formulation and implementation of new policies, with a focus on the specific activities and tools they involve (e.g. SWOT analysis) and the context in which these are used. Also connected to practice-based approaches that are broadly understood, translation theories deal with how new ideas, practices, or technologies are blended, modified, adapted, or reinvented by actors as they appropriate the same ideas in different contexts (Spyridonidis *et al.* 2016). Although there have been calls for a practice-based approach to HRM in general (Björkman and Lervik 2007), there is very little HRM research in this area. And yet, HRM implementation seems an ideal setting for the use of such frameworks (Van Mierlo *et al.* 2018).

Contextual approaches. Implementation processes may vary a great deal (e.g. regarding the number and variety of actors involved, timing, complexity) depending on a diversity of contextual factors (Farndale and Paauwe 2018; Kehoe and Han 2019) at different levels of analysis, such as macro (industry, national culture, legislation), mezzo (organizational size, structure, culture, climate, human capital), or micro (type of practice being adopted).

Firstly, with some exceptions (Farndale and Sanders 2017; Gilliland and Schepers 2003), the role of macro factors in HRM implementation has not been explored. There is a long tradition of research looking at how national culture affects the adoption of new HRM practices in multinational companies (Rosenzweig and Nohria 1994), but this research tends to focus more on adoption rather than implementation per se. Recently, Farndale and Sanders (2017) have argued that national culture may interact with HRM system strength in shaping employee outcomes. Secondly, several HRM studies have already addressed the role of mezzo contextual predictors of effective implementation such as organizational culture and climate (Sikora and Ferris 2014), transformational leadership (Vermeeren 2014), or senior management support (Kossek *et al.* 2016). A crucial contextual aspect at the mezzo level is the extent to which senior management and the HRM department provide line managers with clear and adequate policies and procedures, while at the same time avoiding overtly restricting line managers' discretionary powers to adapt policies to their local contexts (Bos-Nehles *et al.* 2013). Thirdly, at the micro

level, implementation processes may also vary depending on the type of HRM practice that is being analysed. Some HRM practices, such as compensation (e.g. wage rates), may be implemented rather automatically once established; meanwhile others, like performance management, may require the contributions of several actors, such as HRM professionals, senior and line managers, and employees all along the way, taking a much longer time to be routinized. The idea that implementation processes depend on the type of practice being introduced is not new, and it is also found in the innovation literature (Rogers 1962; Tornatzky and Klein 1982).

Finally, it is worth noting that, in order to consider context in implementation studies, there are some conceptual backgrounds readily available in the management literature that may aid further research efforts. For example, the fads/fashion vs evidence-based debates could apply here. While under institutional isomorphism companies adopt similar practices to those around them, in some cases this is done by simply benchmarking and imitating competitors, disregarding other elements of their specific context. As a response, evidence-based principles could aid implementation decisions and processes by taking into account more specific elements of the company's context and assessing the impact of different policies (Rousseau 2006).

Emotions. A final caveat goes to work that incorporates emotions in implementation processes. This has been considered in the three literatures analysed (strategy: Balogun *et al.* 2010; Huy 2011; change: Aslam *et al.* 2018; Bartunek *et al.* 2006; innovation: Vuori and Huy 2016), studying how managers' emotions can play a crucial role in the adoption of new policies or practices by shaping their attitudes and behaviours. This research shows how emotions are connected to other relevant implementation constructs such as legitimacy, judgements, resistance behaviours, and managers' social identities. Yet, there is almost no work in HRM implementation that incorporates the role of emotions – see Cooke (2006) for an exception – whether about managers or other actors involved in HRM implementation processes.

Other conceptual backgrounds that have been usefully employed for implementation research to date include symbolic interactionism (Prasad 1993), structuration discourse (Heracleous and Barrett 2001), and narratives and sensemaking (Guiette and Vandenbempt 2017; Sonenshein 2010). Although these studies differ in significant ways, they all share the assumption that communicative actions such as narratives, discourses, and metaphors are key to understanding how implementation unfolds. Thus, the underpinnings of social constructionism are a common conceptual feature of such studies. Similarly, most of these approaches share the common running theme of considering implementation as a process with dialectic assumptions (Robey *et al.* 2002). This is commensurate with the definition of implementation to which we have contributed earlier, and suggests a need to conceptually anchor implementation studies in process theories.

Because these conceptual approaches also have consequences for how research is carried out, it is important to pay attention to how implementation research could be undertaken looking ahead. With this idea in mind, we now turn to an examination of methodologies that could help in this endeavour.

Methodological approaches to implementation

We have argued that the theoretical grounding of previous HRM implementation work was limited, but this same logic does not apply to the array of methodologies used. Indeed, as noted by Bainbridge *et al.* (2017), there has been a broad-based improvement in the methodological underpinnings of HRM research, which is also evident in the area of implementation. An overview of HRM implementation research articles shows a mix of quantitative (Bos-Nehles and Meijerink 2018; Trullen and Valverde 2017; Vargas *et al.* 2018) and qualitative (Budjanovcanin 2018; Makhecha *et al.* 2018; Trullen *et al.* 2016) methodologies, often combined (Purcell and Hutchinson 2007; Woodrow and Guest 2014). Overall, this research has followed similar methodologies to those commonly used in HRM journals, including cross-sectional (Chow 2012; Dewettinck and Vroonen 2017) and, on occasion, longitudinal (Araten-Bergman 2016) survey designs, as well as the use of comparative case studies (Najeeb 2013; Stanton *et al.* 2010) and multilevel analyses (Bos-Nehles and Meijerink 2018; Van Waeyenberg and Decramer 2018), all aptly contributing to develop knowledge on HRM implementation.

Despite this methodological diversity, HRM implementation research can still benefit from a wide variety of methodological approaches encountered in our review of other implementation literatures. Table 3 provides a list of different research designs that are found in implementation research, and could also be adopted in HRM-focused implementation work,

Table 3. Suggested research designs for the further study of HRM implementation

Research designs	Examples from reviewed studies	Examples from the HRM literature to date	Possible research lines for further study in HRM implementation (HRMI)
Literature reviews	Noble (1999)	Mirfakhar et al. (2018)	- Conceptualization of HRMI. - Operationalization and measurement of HRMI. - Identification of relevant HRMI-related constructs. - Development of testable propositions.
Interview studies	Guth and McMillan (1986)	Budjanovcanin (2018), Evans (2017), Friede et al. (2008), Harris (2001), Harrington et al. (2012), Kossek et al. (2016)	- Understand the perspectives of different organizational actors on HRMI. - Understand line managers' rationales for the adoption (or lack) of HRM policies.
Single case studies	Arvidsson et al. (2014), Chen et al. (2014), Huy (2011), Marin et al. (2016)	Bondarouk et al. (2009), Bos-Nehles et al. (2017), Cooke (2006), Currie and Procter (2001), Kossek et al. (1994), Raja et al. (2010), Ruta (2005), Woodrow and Guest (2014)	- Describing the implementation problems associated with the adoption of new HRM practices. - Investigating what factors contribute to more effective HRMI. - Exploring the relationships between different actors (line managers, HRM professionals, and employees) in HRMI. - Development of testable propositions.
Comparative case studies	Maxwell et al. (1997), Morrow and Mowatt (2015), Sandoff and Widell (2015)	Makhecha et al. (2018), Najeeb (2013), Parkes et al. (2007), Parry and Tyson (2011), Piening et al. (2014), Stanton et al. (2010)	- Inductively generating lists of main obstacles and facilitators to HRMI. - Find patterns across cases that predict successful vs failed HRMI. - Development of testable propositions.
Cross-sectional studies	Colgate and Danaher (2000), Govindarajan (1988, 1989), Gupta (1987), Gupta and Govindarajan (1984), Johnson and Sohi (2017), Kim and Mauborgne (1991), Morgan et al. (2012), Noble and Mokwa (1999), Roth et al. (1991)	Bos-Nehles et al. (2013), Chow (2012), Farndale and Kelliher (2013), Guest and Conway (2011), Klaas et al. (2012), Marescaux et al. (2013), Ryu and Kim (2013), Stirpe et al. (2013)	- Association between HRMI outcomes and different antecedents (supervisors support, devolution to the line, etc.). - Exploring similarities and differences in HRMI perceptions across actors.
Longitudinal and time studies	Arvidsson et al. (2014), Chen et al. (2014), Huy (2011), Miller et al. (2004)	Araten-Bergman (2016)	- Identifying patterns of causality in predicting HRMI success or failure. - Understanding the co-evolution of contextual factors (e.g. structure, climate, etc.) and implementation attitudes and behaviours through time. - Examining how time itself affects the sensemaking process of different actors.

(Continued)

Table 3. Continued

Research designs	Examples from reviewed studies	Examples from the HRM literature to date	Possible research lines for further study in HRM implementation (HRMI)
Multi-level studies	Ahearne et al. (2014), Coeurderoy et al. (2014), Hayati et al. (2017), Kleinbaum and Stuart (2014)	Bos-Nehles and Meijerink (2018), Dewettinck and Vroonen (2017), Van Waeyenberg and Decramer (2018), Vargas et al. (2018), Vermeeren (2014)	- The interaction of organizational level (e.g. culture, climate, existing HRM policies), group level (e.g. leadership, group identity, trust) and individual level (e.g. beliefs, skills, etc.) in influencing HRMI. - Exploring the relationships between intended (organizational-level), actual (group-level), and perceived (individual-level) HRM.
Social network analysis	Ahearne et al. (2014), Hayati et al. (2017)		- Understand how employees' social networks (e.g. advice, friendship, etc.) affect HR and line managers' actions in the adoption of new HRM policies and practices. - Investigate how line managers' position in social networks within the organization affect their reactions to the introduction of new HRM policies and practices and the effectiveness of their implementation behaviours.
Diary studies	Bendixen and Ellegård (2014), Diedrich and Guzman (2015)		- Tracking of managers' and employees' reactions to the introduction of new HRM practices, and how different events during implementation affect those reactions.
Action research	Beer and Eisenstat (1996)	Van Mierlo (2018)	- Collaborating with practitioners in designing and introducing a new HRM initiative or change to address a particular problem within the organization, and investigating different aspects of its implementation through time.
Experimental and quasi-experimental designs	Alavi and Henderson (1981), Hansen and Norup (2017), Kivimäki et al. (1997)		- Establishing cause-and-effect relationships between implementation-related variables. - Testing the effectiveness of different implementation strategies in multi-unit settings.
Discourse analysis	Heracleous and Barrett (2001), Pors (2016), Sonenshein (2010), Yanow (1993)	Bondarouk et al. (2009)	- Analysing how different actors make sense of HRMI by looking at their use of verbal and non-verbal language. - Unveiling used the contextual, political, social, and psychological factors that influence HRMI through the analysis of language.

detailing some of the potential research lines that could be addressed in each case. As with Table 2 on conceptual frameworks, the more and less dense boxes in the column of HRM implementation examples show how some of these research designs have been extensively, or scarcely, used by HRM authors. In the following paragraphs, we concentrate solely on the methodological approaches that have not yet been given sufficient attention.

Literature reviews. This is an important tool in order to map the field of implementation research in HRM and be able to delineate future research areas and consolidate knowledge that is to some extent scattered across the general HRM literature. Although Mirfakhar *et al.* (2018) recently did one such review focusing on antecedents of effective HRM implementation, there is still a need for a more comprehensive view of the HRM implementation field, for example by means of systematic reviews and, in due time, meta-analytic approaches.

Longitudinal studies and the incorporation of time. The need for more longitudinal studies on HRM implementation, whether quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods, cannot be emphasized enough (Guest 2011), given the scarcity of longitudinal work in the HRM field (Ployhart and Hale 2014). The early work of Pettigrew (1985, 1987) can serve as inspiration for studies that take into account the historical and contextual elements that surround the implementation of HRM. This type of work would necessarily be intensive in terms of data collection, combining both retrospective and real-time accounts and observations, as well as a great amount of secondary data (Canato *et al.* 2013), involving data collection at several points in time (e.g. Choi and Chang 2009). Longitudinal work can help establish causal patterns between implementation predictors and outcomes, such as the extent to which institutional (e.g. climate) and individual (e.g. personal attitudes) factors actually affect practice use (Araten-Bergman 2016). While a process view of implementation necessarily benefits from longitudinal research designs, there are also attached difficulties, chiefly in terms of difficulty of access and resource intensiveness, but also others such as deciding on the appropriate time frame for the study, dealing with participant attrition, or handling missing data (Bednall 2014).

The recognition of the role of time in implementation studies, however, needs to go beyond simply endorsing longitudinal research, and thus we recommend that researchers amplify their lenses to consider temporal research (Roe *et al.* 2009) in a wider, more holistic sense. Temporal research not only entails the consideration of when is the best time to take measures in longitudinal work or using time as a background, it also proposes making time a more focal construct of organizational research, particularly at the micro level (Shipp and Cole 2015), by incorporating retrospective and anticipated respondent accounts, as well as both objective and subjective perceptions of the temporal frames in which events evolve (Dawson 2014; Shipp and Cole 2015). These proposals are highly relevant for implementation research if we are to capture the unfolding developments that occur throughout an implementation process, particularly since the storytelling and sensemaking of various informants can be enriched by considering different concepts of both linear and nonlinear time (Dawson and Sykes 2019).

Social network analysis. Social network approaches can be useful for understanding how underlying structures of communication, friendship, advice, and the like within organizations may affect implementation processes and outcomes (Kase 2014). The existence of strong ties between policy promoters and recipients, as well as among recipients themselves, is likely to increase the effectiveness of the implementation process. Implementation is expected to be faster and recipients' use of new policies higher when key (central) actors in the network are persuaded to adopt a particular practice (Krackhardt and Hanson 1993) or when they take a proactive role in developing initiatives (Pappas and Wooldridge 2007). HRM researchers could study how the type (strong vs weak) and number (density) of ties among different organizational actors (and especially line managers) might affect implementation effectiveness. Similarly, they could investigate how different levels of betweenness or centrality of different organizational members (or even business units) in different networks (e.g. trust network, communication network) affect implementation. To date, this is an area that remains unexplored in the HRM implementation literature.

Diary studies. Another interesting methodology that allows tracking implementation processes through time, especially on a more micro basis, is that of diary studies (Ohly *et al.* 2010) in any of a variety of forms (e.g. event sampling, experience sampling, daily diaries). Diary studies allow researchers to study ongoing experiences and events by having

participants take periodic or event-based assessments about the activity or phenomenon being studied. Diary studies are often used in individual-level studies aimed at predicting well-being and performance, and their use should also be relevant for implementation researchers. For example, Bendixen and Ellegård (2014) combined occupational therapists' diaries with in-depth interviews to investigate how their job satisfaction was affected during a departmental merger. There is a potential for incorporating similar analyses in HRM implementation work, for instance, by investigating employees' reactions to the introduction of new policies in real time.

Action research designs. By its very nature, implementation research should be well suited to the use of action research designs (Van Mierlo 2018). These could be broadly characterized by 'an involvement with members of an organization over a matter which is of general concern to them' (Eden and Huxham 1996, p. 75), with the aim not only of helping the organization, but also of generating scholarly knowledge. As with other Mode 2 research approaches (Guerci *et al.* 2018), action research involves collaboration between researchers and practitioners in establishing the goals of the research and reaching a joint diagnosis of the situation. As with case studies, HRM implementation studies adopting such a design are better able to integrate contextual and historical aspects into their research findings. This is also a good way to develop process theories that show the dynamic and iterative nature of implementation, while pointing out the main threats to implementation effectiveness. Finally, action research designs would be commensurate with the research-as-practice frameworks proposed in the previous conceptual perspectives section.

Experimental and quasi-experimental designs. Conducting experimental studies allows researchers to draw cause-and-effect conclusions, something especially relevant in HRM process research (Jorgensen *et al.* 2016). By using experimental designs, researchers can test how, for instance, HRM attributions (e.g. internal vs external, cost vs quality) affect recipients' attitudinal and emotional reactions to HRM innovations (Rafferty and Sanders 2018; Yang and Dickinson 2014). Quasi-experimental designs can also be useful and allow for testing some of these relationships in real settings, complementing rather than replacing lab experiments (Yang and Dickinson 2014). For example, in a quasi-experiment it is possible to test the relationship between differ-

ent leadership styles (e.g. participatory, directive) or implementation strategies (e.g. different levels of devolution to the line) and outcomes in different units of the same organization. Some organizational units may be used as controls, undergoing standard implementation approaches, whereas other units may undergo treatments attached to the different conditions (leadership styles, etc.). Such studies may involve the collection of panel data before, during, and after the implementation takes place.

Discourse analysis. There is a long tradition, especially in the organizational change literature (Heracleous and Barrett 2001), of analysing communicative actions (narratives, discourses, metaphors) in order to understand how implementation unfolds. A focus on discourse allows researchers to understand the contextual, political, social, and psychological factors that underlie HRM implementation, which have earlier been noted as key elements in order to understand the processes and mechanics of implementation. With some exceptions (Bondarouk *et al.* 2009), discursive approaches remain scarce in HRM implementation work.

In contrast to the conceptual recommendations in the previous section, which shared a common running theme, our overall endorsement in terms of methods with which to address future implementation research has to do with maximizing the array of research design approaches, data collection techniques, and analytical tools available to researchers. In this sense, Table 2 highlights the type of questions that could be more adequately linked to each of the main methodological approaches proposed in this section. It is important to note that, in many cases, the suggestions made involve fieldwork with a high degree of complexity, whether in terms of the time invested, the number of actors needed as informants, and the depth required from their accounts, or the multilevel nature of the data to be collected. The road ahead for implementation research may therefore be empirically challenging.

Contributions and concluding words

HRM implementation effectiveness is a necessary, albeit not sufficient, condition for overall HRM effectiveness (Woodrow and Guest 2014). Yet, a recent systematic review of the HRM field (Markoulli *et al.* 2017) suggests that, in attempting to understand the HRM–performance relationship, scholars

have concentrated on the 'linkage model' (Guest and Bos-Nehles 2013, p. 79), which focuses on the effect that HRM policies have on employees' attitudes and behaviours (Jiang *et al.* 2012), while downplaying a second relevant pathway, namely that of the effectiveness of HRM practices through their implementation.

Perhaps because implementation seems to be intuitively understood as the process of putting an idea or plan into effect, or because it is often dismissed as a practitioner problem, the fact is that work in this area remains underdeveloped, including a need for clarification in the conceptualization of HRM implementation. On the basis of a cross-disciplinary approach, we have provided an explicit definition of HRM implementation, which should allow researchers to agree on the main features of the phenomenon and build on each other's work, while maintaining a certain degree of flexibility to accommodate a diversity of research interests. We argue that implementation is better understood as a dynamic process, in the sense that it may evolve in different directions but nonetheless has a starting and ending point. We also assume that, depending on the type of practice, multiple actors, rather than just line managers or employees, may exert their influence in such processes. Finally, we distinguish implementation from implementation effectiveness, which in turn differs from overall HRM effectiveness.

This study also provides an overview of promising theoretical and methodological approaches that could be used in HRM implementation research. By focusing on different theoretical lenses (highlighted in Table 2), this study provides new avenues for future research on HRM implementation. Similarly, new research questions may call for an intensification of research designs that are multilevel, multi-actor, and multi-moment on the one hand, and for the utilization of a broader range of methodologies than those commonly encountered in the HRM literature on the other hand (as highlighted in Table 3). Hence, by expanding the types of methodologies used, we are also able to embrace a more diverse set of research questions and improve our understanding of implementation. More generally, our study contributes to ongoing discussions on HRM processes, with their focus on how employees attach meaning to HRM systems (Ostroff and Bowen 2016; Sanders *et al.* 2014). Acknowledging the relevance and impact of HRM process research to date, we concur with Steffensen *et al.* (2019) that a broader view which is not only focused on employee attributions (Hewett *et al.* 2018, 2019; Nishii *et al.* 2008; Sanders *et al.* 2015), but also includes the activities through which HRM content is implemented, may shed light on the relationship between HRM and its outcomes.

The study has some limitations. First, by deciding on particular selection criteria (e.g. focusing only on peer-reviewed journal articles) we may have left out potentially relevant research on implementation. This is also true for our selection of subject domains, which excluded sector-based literatures such as healthcare and education. Finally, our use of number of citations as a criterion for shortlisting the articles included in the review had some shortcomings, such as penalizing the inclusion of more recent studies and ignoring relevant research that was not picked up by other researchers. To avoid the first problem, we also reviewed articles published in the last 5 years, regardless of number of citations. Our aim with the review was to be quite comprehensive and diverse in article selection, but not exhaustive, given the broad nature of the implementation field.

A final caveat goes to the cross-disciplinary nature of this paper. The original aim of the study was to inform HRM implementation research by building on implementation research in other fields. Rather than 'reinventing the wheel', our review of the literature in strategy, innovation, and change management allowed us to borrow ideas from these fields and use them in the context of HRM implementation in a cross-disciplinary manner (Stember 1991). In doing so, though, we note that these other literatures can also learn from each other, as well as from previous HRM work. Hence the parentheses around the words *Human Resource Management* in the title of this paper, meaning that it can be read both from a specifically HRM perspective and more generally from a management perspective.

The ultimate goal is to provide a common language and overall picture of the implementation field, but without losing any of its richness and diversity, as has been noted for other management topics (Corlett *et al.* 2017). We hope that this paper will be helpful in this direction to all implementation scholars from different management areas.

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Note: Papers marked with an asterisk indicate that they were part of the reviewed collection.

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