

THE CASE FOR PSYCHOLOGY IN HRM RESEARCH

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Abstract

A recent literature has developed criticizing the growing influence of a psychological perspective within research on human resource management (HRM). This paper addresses and rebuts the various criticisms and outlines the positive contribution of work and organizational psychology to HRM research. In looking to the future and the continuing development of HRM research, we argue that there is a need to engage in research that is multidisciplinary, multilevel, multi-stakeholder and multi-method. We propose a number of research topics that meet these criteria and to which work and organizational psychology can offer a distinctive contribution. We call for other disciplines to make a more positive contribution to ensure that HRM research continues to flourish.

Analysis of human resource management (HRM) journals reveals the extensive use of psychological concepts and theories. This has not gone unnoticed by scholars from other disciplines who have sometimes been critical of what they see as the unwelcome but increasingly widespread role of psychology within HRM research, what Godard (2014) termed the psychologization of HRM. Their criticisms, which have surfaced among other places in previous HRMJ provocations, raise a number of concerns. They matter because behind them is the implication that a psychological perspective either threatens progress in HRM research or sends it in the wrong direction (Harley, 2015; Kaufman, 2012; 2015a; Siebert, Martin, & Bozic, 2016). For example, they argue that psychological research is excessively managerial and unitarist, that it is highly individualistic and is overly wedded to a

quantitative methodology. These kinds of gross generalizations require a response which, to date, has not been forthcoming.

The first aim of this paper is therefore to address and rebut criticisms of the psychological contribution to HRM research. The second aim is to demonstrate how a psychological perspective is contributing to HRM research. This has not previously been undertaken in the context of the HRM literature. In so doing, we also raise questions about the nature of the contemporary contribution to HRM research provided by other disciplinary perspectives. The third aim is to outline and illustrate how psychology can contribute most fruitfully to HRM research when it is integrated into a multidisciplinary, multilevel, multi-stakeholder and multi-method approach. This extends previous analysis of the HRM research agenda. It is based on our view that HRM as an area of enquiry is best served by such an approach and, if HRM research is to flourish, we need to step out of our disciplinary silos. We identify a number of new as well as some established but unresolved areas of enquiry, outline related research questions, illustrate the distinctive contribution of psychological research and present both the potential of, and the challenges of integrating psychological research with other analytic perspectives.

The psychological approach

We begin by clarifying what the psychological approach is (and is not). Psychology is the scientific study of how people think, feel and behave, and the goals of work and organizational psychology (W/O psychology) are “to better understand and optimize the effectiveness, health, and wellbeing of both individuals and organizations” (Rogelberg, 2016, p. xliii). This view is further encapsulated on the SIOP (the North American Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychologists) website with industrial and organizational psychology defined as “the scientific study of working and the application of that science to

workplace issues facing individuals, businesses, and society” (SIOP, 2018). W/O psychology is therefore concerned with the human experience of work. It draws on theory and concepts from mainstream psychology, especially social psychology and it overlaps with the cognate field of organizational behavior (OB). While a major strength of psychology is the adoption of the scientific model (Hodgkinson, 2006), which makes it conducive to deductive research and hypothesis testing, it also embraces inductive research (e.g., Symon & Cassell, 2012) and the multi-stakeholder perspective. Given its focus, W/O psychology should be in a strong position to provide a significant contribution to HRM research.

Framing the psychological perspective on HRM

Attempts to draw hard and fast boundaries around what we mean by HRM are likely to be futile. There are inevitably areas of overlap with, for example, industrial/employment relations and health and safety at work. Boxall and Purcell (2016, p. 28) note that “Human resource management is the process through which management builds the workforce and tries to create the human performances that the organization needs”. HRM research, *inter alia*, explores these processes, the contexts within which they are derived and enacted, the actors involved and their consequences for individuals and organizations. Given its broad focus, HRM inevitably draws on a range of disciplinary and sub-disciplinary perspectives such as industrial relations, strategy, sociology and economics as well as psychology and OB.

Markouilli, Lee, Byington and Felps (2017), in their systematic review of the HRM literature, identify five broad topics that have dominated HRM research and writing. They describe these as strategic HRM, experiencing HRM, employment relations, international HRM and assessing people. Boxall, Purcell and Wright (2007) identify three topic areas, namely micro, strategic and international HRM, while Wright and Boswell (2002) and Lepak, Jiang, Han, Castellano and Hu (2012) broadly distinguish macro and micro perspectives. The

different disciplines that engage in HRM research have particular strengths in some of these areas. Psychology is likely to be particularly associated with micro perspectives and with topics such as experiencing HRM and assessing people.

Analysis of the evolution of HRM helps to set the role of psychology in a wider context. Contemporary HRM can trace its origins to three main sources. The first is the longstanding tradition of theory, research and application of industrial relations and personnel management. For much of the 20th century, collective bargaining, participation in decisions and the role of employee voice were central concerns for researchers and practitioners alike. However, as Kochan, Katz and McKersie (1986) argued, industrial relations was transformed, initially in the USA and subsequently in most advanced economies, by a shift in power, partly facilitated by managements' espoused focus on mutual gains, an approach that also heralded the arrival of contemporary HRM.

The second source of HRM is the field of business strategy. A concern with strategic fit is typified by the work of Schuler and Jackson (1987) who link competitive strategy to internal requirements including the kind of people and behavior needed to achieve strategic goals and, in turn, the kind of HR practices required to ensure that the right people and behaviors are in place. A second strategic perspective, the resource-based view of the firm, suggests that human resources potentially provide a crucial source of competitive advantage (Barney & Wright, 1998). As Markouilli et al. (2017) note, there is a major stream of strategic HRM research mainly exploring the relation between HRM and firm performance.

The third influence on HRM is what Americans call Industrial-Organizational psychology and Europeans call work and organizational psychology (for consistency, we use the term W/O psychology). It has advanced knowledge about a range of HR practices such as selection, training and appraisal. Its research also often focuses on the outcomes for individuals of their experience of HRM such as job satisfaction, engagement, stress, and labor

turnover. It can be difficult to draw a boundary between research conducted under the rubric of W/O psychology, OB and HRM since all can focus, for example, on employee attitudes and behavior. However, since criticisms are typically directed at psychological research on HRM and in organizational settings more widely we will proceed with this in mind.

Psychologists approach HRM research from a number of different perspectives. Several articles have observed how HRM research conducted in the USA, often with a unitarist perspective and focus on outcomes of interest to managers, differs from that in Europe, Australia and Canada where a more pluralist perspective influences research (e.g., Cascio & Aguinis, 2008; Guest, 1994; Strauss, 2001). W/O psychologists and others with an interest in international HRM (see, for e.g., Holman, 2013; Dowling, Festing, & Engle, 2013) draw attention to national and cultural distinctions and the need to look beyond the traditional Western perspectives on HRM and associated values.

It is also important to distinguish between academics who conduct psychological research in HRM and psychological consultants who work closely with managers to promote organizational goals. We share concerns about the application of psychological techniques in the service of attempts to improve organizational performance if this is achieved at the expense of workers and other stakeholders. Finally, it has been claimed that the scientist-practitioner gap has been widening (Hodgkinson, 2006; Kaufman, 2012) resulting in a potential disconnection between the knowledge that academics are producing and the knowledge that practitioners are applying. Criticism of the activities of consultants should not, however, be generalized to W/O psychology researchers in HRM.

What is not acceptable is misplaced and over-generalized criticism of psychologically-informed HRM research that ignores its contribution, not least to the improvement of workers' wellbeing. In what follows, we therefore address and rebut general criticisms of

psychological research in the broad field of HRM before offering an alternative perspective highlighting the distinctive contribution of psychology to HRM research.

Countering the criticisms of psychological research in HRM

To counter the criticisms directed at psychological HRM research, we will identify and describe each major criticism, evaluate it and provide a counter-case. We acknowledge that *some* criticisms have validity with respect to *some* psychological HRM research. The danger lies in general statements about all W/O psychological research. It is also important to recognize that in singling out psychological HRM research for criticism, other disciplines, notably economics, are also open to some of the criticisms discussed below.

Attempts to categorize the various critiques of the role of psychology in HRM research risk setting artificial boundaries. Bearing this in mind, we address four substantive areas of criticism of psychological research in HRM. These are unitarism and managerialism; individualism and decontextualization; the psychologists' view of the worker; and positivism allied to quantitative research. We believe the first two classes of criticism are more extensive and more pervasive.

Unitarism and Managerialism. Perhaps the most widespread criticism of HRM research in general and that of W/O psychologists in HRM in particular is that it adopts a *unitarist approach* conceptualizing the organization and its stakeholders as having a single set of what are essentially managerial goals and values (Cullinane & Dundon, 2014; Redman & Snape, 2016). For example, Harley (2015, p.401) claims that W/O psychological theory addressing power and voice has “built into it a unitarist bias that leads to uncritical and managerialist assumptions about significant workplace phenomena.” Similarly, Barry and Wilkinson (2016, p.263) focusing on OB, suggest the “OB conception of voice is narrow because OB researchers view employee behavior from a unitarist lens in which what is good for the firm must be good for the worker.” A particularly strident accusation of managerialism is

Godard's (2014, p.8) assertion that "I-O psychologists are inherently anti-union" and "potentially totalitarian" (p.7). Greenwood and Van Buren (2017) note that concepts frequently explored by W/O psychology researchers such as commitment and engagement invariably reflect and help to promote unitarism and management interests.

We agree that some HRM research by W/O psychologists on topics such as high performance working, commitment and talent management can reflect a unitarist approach. However, it is important to appreciate that the psychological approach is not unitarist *per se*. Indeed, there is a broad range of psychological theories (e.g. social identity theory; psychological contract theory; emotional labor theory) that analyze the competing interests, beliefs and behaviors of different stakeholders.

There are also many examples of research using psychological concepts that adopt a pluralist approach to HRM. These include work on competing commitments to company and union (Angle & Perry, 1986; Cohen, 2005) and the extensive body of work by W/O psychologists using exchange theory to study the employment relationship (for example, (Tsui, Pearce, Porter, & Tripoli, 1997; Zhang, Tsui, Song, Li, & Jia, 2008). Also see Euwema, Munduate, Elgoibar, Pender and Garcia's (2015) exploration of negotiation and social dialogue. Research on topics such as the impact of HR policies on the experience of temporary contracts (De Cuyper & De Witte, 2007) and job insecurity (Sverke et al., 2004) typically utilize a pluralist framework and set the research in the context of wider economic and institutional factors.

We would hope that much psychological HRM research is useful to management. Nonetheless helping to improve selection or training can benefit both the organization and its employees. Unions invariably call for more investment in training, and improving training activity is a far cry from being anti-union. Criticism of anti-unionism also ignores psychological research on topics such as participation (Heller, Pusic, Strauss, & Wilpert,

1998) and the role of industrial democracy in job design (Emery & Thorsrud, 1976). Much HRM-related research by W/O psychologists is concerned, directly or indirectly, with workers' experience of HRM and their wellbeing and can be critical of a management stance that ignores this issue. Indeed, Markouilli et al. (2017) note that "experiencing HRM" is the fastest growing area of HRM research. In summary, while psychological research on HR practices may be useful for managers, and some HR research undertaken by W/O psychologists can support the interests of management, this does not in itself make W/O psychological research on HRM in general unitarist, managerialist or anti-union.

De-contextualization and Individualism. Another charge is that psychological research with its focus on the individual and an individual level of analysis *de-contextualizes HRM*, neglecting the wider institutional context. For example, Thompson (2011, p.11) suggests that "structural equation modelling cannot compensate for the absence of any serious account of the structural constraints of changing forms of capitalist political economy operating on HR practices in the workplace". We agree. But since this was never the intention behind a statistical technique favored by some psychologists, this criticism is misplaced.

Much depends on what is meant by context. The "O" in the terms W/O and I/O psychology implies a focus on the organizational context and this is reflected in research; indeed a major stream of research explores organizational climate (Patterson, Warr, & West, 2004; Schneider, 1990). However, it is fair to claim that W/O psychologists pay less attention to the external institutional context that can influence HR activities. In this respect, Kaufman's (2015a) concern about the failure to give sufficient weight to economic considerations and Thompson's (2011) argument about the lack of interest in wider institutional factors such as financialization are valid. Equally, some of those adopting an institutionalist approach pay insufficient attention to employee attitudes and behavior. This criticism also ignores multilevel psychological research that captures data at different levels

(e.g., Simosi, Rousseau, & Daskalaki, 2015; Synard & Gazzola, 2018). Furthermore, psychologists from the Tavistock Institute long ago championed a socio-technical (Trist & Bamforth, 1951) and open systems approach (Trist, 1965) that seeks to incorporate external context into analysis of behavior in organizations.

The criticism that HRM research by W/O psychologists adopts an *individualistic perspective* often seems to come from those whose own theoretical and research interests lie at a different level of analysis. For example, Kaufman (2015a, p.112) is concerned that “The standard HRM model, therefore, is in many representations a (mostly) closed system. This narrowness arises, in part, because the research stream has become increasingly unbalanced in its emphasis on individual and psychological determinants”. However, there is also criticism from within psychology. Bal and Doci (2018, p. 22) argue that W/O psychologists have been captured by and help to promote a neoliberal ideology reflected in “an increasing interest in individually-focused research topics such as individual deals, employability, job crafting and proactivity”. Furthermore, “When WOP scholars emphasize the importance of organizational outcomes and the individualized and competitive nature of work, they are actively contributing to an (neoliberal) ideological underpinning of the contemporary workplace” (p. 30). We recognize that an individual-level focus is psychology’s ‘bread and butter.’ But focusing on workers and their attitudes and behavior as a point of departure in HRM research is often at least as relevant to workers’ concerns as some of the research conducted at organizational and institutional levels. The mistake is associating the individualism of the neoliberal economic and political rationality with the focus of W/O psychologists on individual behavior. The association may be tempting but is largely false.

Psychologists’ naïve view of the worker. A further criticism is that W/O psychologists view employees as puppets to be controlled by ‘management’ through HRM practices. For example, Godard (2014, p.10) claims that, “I-O psychologists seem to view human beings

almost as if they are billiard balls, subject to rather simple laws of behavior and with no capacity for independent thought or action.” and as “objects to be manipulated, disciplined and controlled” (p.11). Expressing concern about the application of a psychological perspective, Alvesson and Willmott (2002, p.357) state there is “an essential continuity of themes (managing the ‘insides’ of employees rather than their external behavior) and mechanisms, including those associated with soft HRM, such as induction, training and promotion procedures.” Thus, it seems the W/O psychological approach to HRM is misperceived by some as viewing employees as ‘putty’ to be molded, via HRM practices, into the ‘organizational ideal’.

This criticism is particularly vexing to W/O psychologists who would deny that individuals enter workplace encounters with a tabula rasa mind and then proceed mechanically to process information shaped by HR policy and practice. Indeed, career-related research by W/O psychologists demonstrates the importance of previous experiences within a wider social, educational and economic context as shaping career preferences and responses to management action (Savickas, 2002). Similarly, developmental psychology applied to work settings, focusing on concepts such as vocational maturity, recognizes the importance of pre-work experiences and learning (Super, 1992). Self-determination theory (see Ryan & Deci, 2000) with its focus on autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and internal locus of causality and research on proactivity (Parker, Williams, & Turner, 2006) are other examples that challenge this criticism. In short, it reflects a naïve view of psychologists’ concept of workers.

Naïve causal models and an excessive focus on quantitative research. W/O psychologists (and others) are also criticized for presenting *naïve causal models* linking management policy to outcomes with a “boxes and arrows” approach. Harley (2015, p.402) suggests “The result of this focus on (one kind of) rigor is a narrowing of the kinds of questions that are asked and

written about. Those that can be dealt with ‘rigorously’ get addressed and others do not”. The objection seems to be the analytic level and content of theory and the relative neglect of contextual issues. A counter to this criticism is that testing (and refuting) hypotheses drawn from theory using carefully designed research and quantitative analysis is one well-established way of advancing HRM knowledge. In doing so, W/O psychologists may be seeking to answer research questions that differ from those considered more important by critics. In any case, using a positivist scientific method is not the only way psychologists seek to advance theory and knowledge and other research is more exploratory with qualitative studies leading to theory development. (e.g., Kahn, 1990; Schein, 1978). Testing and refining theory about human behavior and its policy antecedents is not naïve.

Linked to the criticism of naïve causal models, the research methods of W/O psychologists are also criticized for being overly *positivist and quantitative*. As Harley (2015, p. 402) notes, “The reason that the increasing statistical complexity of research is a matter of concern is that the more complex the method becomes the more the energy of researchers goes into technique, potentially at the expense of theory and practice”. We make no apologies for psychological research methods. However, this criticism ignores the inductive, qualitative and exploratory HRM research undertaken by psychologists as well as use of methods such as interviews (Kahn, 1990), diary studies (Clinton, Conway, & Sturges, 2017) and critical incidents (Herriot, Manning, & Kidd, 1997) that enrich HRM research. We note that much of the contemporary research on HRM by sociologists and economists is highly quantitative and is increasingly using psychological concepts such as wellbeing (e.g., Bryson, Dale-Olsen, & Barth, 2013). Both quantitative and qualitative research by W/O psychologists and others have a place in HRM research.

In summary, we challenge the various criticisms of HRM research undertaken by W/O psychologists and the general argument about the psychologization of HRM research.

Psychology, like other disciplines, is wide-ranging in its approach to research and W/O psychologists, like those from other disciplines, have diverse values and goals. It is therefore not surprising to find that some of those involved in HRM research are susceptible to the criticisms outlined above. Equally there are many to whom they do not apply. The danger lies in tarring all psychological research with the same brush by making general criticisms that do not stand up to close scrutiny, thereby dismissing the significant contribution made by psychological HRM research.

Behind some of the criticisms is a concern that W/O psychology research is sometimes dominating the academic journals to the detriment of developments in the field. Our response to this is two-fold. First, we would suggest that the problem lies with the failure of those working within different conceptual and research paradigms to offer sufficient ground-breaking advances in HRM theory and research to shape the research agenda; they might also want to look at journal editorial policy (Pratt & Bonnacio, 2016). Secondly, we believe there is a compelling positive story to tell about the contribution of W/O psychology to advancing HRM research; therefore we now turn to the positive contribution of psychological research.

Contributions of psychological research in HRM

We believe that psychologically-focused research has made and continues to make at least four main types of contribution to HRM. The first concerns the development of effective HR practices. For decades, psychologists have conducted research on practices such as selection, training and appraisals advancing our understanding of best practices (e.g., Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009; Levy & Williams, 2004; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). Research findings sometimes help to improve management decision-making. The motives behind such decisions may be perceived by employees as beneficial or damaging to their interests; indeed

research on HR attributions reveals that employee responses depend in part on these perceptions (Nishii, Lepak, & Schneider, 2008).

The second contribution has been to improve our understanding of outcomes. Unlike the focus in much HRM research on business performance, W/O psychologists have highlighted a range of employee-centered outcomes, recognizing employees as important stakeholders in HRM. Some of these are negative outcomes such as absenteeism (Johns, 2011) and stress (Cooper, Dewe, & O'Driscoll, 2001) while others are more positive such as job satisfaction (Spector, 1997) and physical, psychological and social wellbeing (Grant, Christianson, & Price, 2007).

A third contribution has been the development and application to HRM of psychological theory which has influenced HRM research and practice in numerous ways. For example, at the individual level, theories of motivation, personality, decision-making, learning and training, assessment, self-identity, emotions, wellbeing, stress and coping, job design, social perceptions, attributions, job engagement and employability are all extensively utilized. At the group level, theories about social identity, conformity, cohesion, communication and autonomous work-groups are widely utilized. At the organizational level, theories of leadership, organizational climate, values, negotiation, conflict, resistance to change and organizational change processes are all influential. This is an illustrative rather than exhaustive list and some of these theories have also had valuable input from other disciplines but they highlight the breadth of the contribution of psychological theory to contemporary HRM research.

The fourth contribution of psychology to HRM research is its broader set of values. For example, a focus on HR strategy can sometimes blind us to its impact on employees. For W/O psychologists, the individual is the primary focus, the dominant level of analysis and also the point of departure in considering the influence of other factors. This provides one of

the distinctive contributions of psychology to HRM research. Psychological research can point to ways of effectively managing workers but equally is concerned with the impact of HRM on these workers. When this impact is negative, psychological research is often able to highlight this, reflected perhaps in bullying or stress and point to remedies such as, for example, application of the job-demands-resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007)

The concern about psychologization and the argument that psychological ideas are increasingly dominant in HRM research should perhaps be not so much a criticism of psychology as of other disciplines that have failed to offer relevant insights. Discussing industrial relations, Ackers (2006, p.214) notes “for the past two decades, much of IR has been devoted to ‘debunking’ transient HR fads, like empowerment, concocted by gurus and consultants, rather than building and developing academic concepts”. There is, however, another side to the story. Lepak et al. (2012), building in part on the earlier article by Wright and Boswell (2002), argue that strategic HRM has much to learn from “micro perspectives” by which they mean W/O psychology and OB. This seems to be a case of strategic HRM seeking out neglected micro perspectives rather than an invasion by W/O psychology. Reflecting a unitarist perspective, they consider that there are many concepts to be utilized to improve understanding of how HRM can more effectively enhance firm performance. We believe much of the energy and innovation in HRM research is coming from W/O psychology and OB perspectives. This needs to be balanced by greater contributions from other disciplines. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that psychologically-oriented research can omit important influences on HRM, and HRM research is more likely to advance within a better integrated academic framework. What we believe this might look like is set out below.

The future of HRM research: Multidisciplinary, multilevel, multi-stakeholder and methodologically pluralist

HRM research appears to be thriving. There are several core HRM journals as well as others in mainstream management, in work and organizational psychology and in industrial relations that also provide valuable input. Yet Kaufman (2012) has provocatively argued, after 30 years, HRM research in the USA deserves a failing grade. Echoes of this sentiment can be found in analyses of progress in research exploring the link between HRM and performance (Beer, Boselie, & Brewster, 2015; Guest, 2011). However, while constructive criticism is helpful, progress will not be achieved in HRM research and theory, as well as policy and practice by sniping from the sidelines at research that challenges preferred values. If HRM research is to continue to flourish and progress, it needs to meet certain general criteria (irrespective of discipline) which can serve as a basis for considering new areas of enquiry while also helping to refocus existing topics.

The broad criteria we believe necessary to advance HRM research are that it is multidisciplinary, multilevel, multi-stakeholder and eclectic in method. We acknowledge that this call is not novel (e.g., Jackson, Schuler, & Jiang, 2014; Ployhart & Hale, 2014; Wright & Boswell, 2002) and, in repeating this call, we appreciate the difficulty and complexity of doing high quality research that meets these criteria. Thus, we present a necessarily aspirational framework for a proposed future research agenda in HRM. However, in identifying certain research topics, what is distinctive about our approach is an attempt to highlight in particular the potential contribution of W/O psychology while setting it in the context of other relevant perspectives on HRM research. In elaborating on the four criteria, we illustrate what we have in mind by offering some directions for HRM research where we believe W/O psychology can make a valuable contribution alongside other disciplines. We have selected topics that fall into two broad categories; firstly, there are some in emerging

research areas of relevance to HRM and secondly, there are unresolved but important topics within mainstream HRM research. In each case, we have chosen topics where there is the potential for a major contribution from W/O psychologists but which also have policy implications for HRM that extend beyond the traditional domain of W/O psychology.

Multidisciplinary. Many HRM research questions require a multidisciplinary perspective. Our call for multidisciplinary research in HRM reflects the longer standing call for a multidisciplinary approach in management research. For example, Agarwal and Hoetker (2007, p.1320) argue, “we need to be wary of bondage to a singularity of discipline focus that can blind us to other useful perspectives. Productive yet cautious interactions may require management researchers to move outside our comfort zones and grow through a disciplined integration of relevant perspectives”. A similar call has recently been made by an Editorial in the Academy of Management Journal (Shaw, Tangirala, Vissa, & Rodell, 2018).

Examining a multi-faceted problem through various lenses is essential to understand current and emerging HRM topics of an increasingly complex nature. One emerging topic that should be particularly amenable to multidisciplinary HRM research is the impact of artificial intelligence (AI). Advances in AI will alter the trajectory of occupational change and employment growth, replacing some routine knowledge work while placing greater emphasis on tasks that employees uniquely supply as a *complement* to AI (i.e., tasks comprising problem solving, adaptability and creativity) (Autor, 2015). This is likely to affect a wide range of jobs at different levels. For example, much of the work traditionally undertaken by trainees entering professions such as accountancy, insurance and law may become obsolete as AI takes over these tasks. This raises challenging questions for HRM about the selection, training and career paths of those entering these professions. In studying the impact of AI on HRM, there are clear roles for researchers in the fields of labor economics, informatics, institutional sociology and HRM. W/O psychologists, working

alongside engineers and IT specialists developing AI, as well as industrial sociologists with an interest in organizational structures and changing power relationships, can research changes in selection, training and education, job design and careers patterns and their impact on employees.

A second increasingly important topic is the challenge to the HR function to support inclusiveness at work. Many economies have a large number of marginalised young people and others suffering relatively minor mental health problems who are not in work. The challenge, through training, work design and flexible work arrangements is to develop HR policy and practice to draw them into employment. W/O psychologists are well-placed to contribute to this and there are interesting initiatives underway (Zijlstra, van Ruitenbeek, Mulders, & van Lierop, 2017) but it will involve a collaborative effort with labor economists, sociologists and lawyers who can address the wider contextual and policy influences on inclusiveness.

The first general recommendation for future HRM research is therefore to move outside disciplinary silos. There are important emerging research issues that lend themselves to interdisciplinary research – and this applies to psychology as much as to other disciplines. This is not an argument for abandoning research on topics of distinctive disciplinary expertise but to consider in addition issues that can have wider implications for HRM policy and practice.

Multilevel. Wright and Boswell (2002) have called for multilevel research in HRM to ‘desegregate’ those operating at psychological and strategic levels. Others within W/O psychology, such as Hackman (2003), have lauded the benefits of cross-level research. There is a strong case for psychologists to embrace a multilevel perspective, particularly in areas of HRM research sometimes neglected by W/O psychologists such as international HRM. We illustrate our case with two areas of HRM-related research that we believe will be enriched

by a fuller adoption of a multilevel perspective to which W/O psychology can make a distinctive contribution.

The first topic is the gap between intended and implemented HR practices reflecting the call to give greater prominence to HR processes. Much research has explored the concept of a strong HR system (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004) which requires a multilevel framework. The failure to establish the measures of the proposed dimensions (Ostroff & Bowen, 2016) suggests that it is time to rethink this concept, perhaps supported initially by qualitative research. W/O psychologists have contributed to this topic by using attribution theory (Hewett, Schantz, Mundy, & Alfes, 2017) and signaling theory (Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011) to explore how employees perceive the motivation behind HR practices. Despite the initial assumption that HR policy could be attributed to external and internal factors (Nishii et al., 2008), most research has ignored external factors. A multilevel approach, taking full account of institutional factors such as legislation on HR practices (for an early example, see Koys, 1991), would enrich this line of research. There is also little research on the role of resistance when certain HR practices, perhaps those allied to performance management, are negatively perceived. Further development of HR implementation theory is warranted. Allied to this, we know very little about the processes whereby HR practices are introduced and abandoned by organizations and the role of institutional factors versus individual proactivity on the part of HR or other managers. W/O psychology can offer insights at the individual and group levels but advances in knowledge will benefit greatly by addressing them within a multilevel framework.

A topic moving to the front of the research and policy agenda is variously termed good, decent or healthy work. This has been promoted at the international level, for example through the European Lisbon Treaty and at the national level, for example, by the Scottish Carnegie Trust. Some economists have become interested in ‘happiness’ at work and beyond

(Layard, 2011) while psychologists have a longstanding interest in wellbeing (Grant et al., 2007) and work design (Parker & Wall, 1998). However past research has consistently shown that effective action requires sustained support from higher levels. It therefore suggests a multilevel analysis of power relations and pressures for change, echoing the interest in a ‘strong’ HR system (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004) and the need to give greater consideration to the context, broadly defined, that helps to determine good work. Allied to this, there is a need to conceptualize, analyze and research ‘good work’ and to understand the institutional contexts in which it can thrive. For the HR function, a relevant question is – who designs jobs?

Linked to the scope for multilevel research on good work, there is scope to promote research on the quality of working life (QWL), an issue returning to the fore with a new generation of workers, changing patterns of work and the growth of the gig economy. Early QWL research adopted a multilevel and multidisciplinary perspective including a focus on national policy and government-sponsored, research centers. Recently, Grote and Guest (2016) have called for a reinvigoration of research on QWL, emphasizing topics such as work-life balance, flexibility at work and workplace democracy which are all central to HRM and to W/O psychology. A further variant on this is the work of scholars at Berkeley who are promoting multilevel interdisciplinary research on healthy workplaces (healthyworkplaces.berkeley.edu) involving architects and environmental specialists as well as social scientists. W/O psychologists have a strong research track record in this field, reflected, for example, in output in journals such as *Work & Stress* and *The Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*. But the impact of their insights depends on understanding the organizational structures, strategic priorities and power relationships that determine whether their findings are adopted and implemented by HR departments and others within organizations. For this, a multi-level analysis of influences on impact is required.

Multi-stakeholder. If we consider whether hospitals are healthy workplaces, this is likely to incorporate a range of stakeholders including patients, employees, managers, the community and politicians. This leads to the third component of a more integrated research agenda. The early Harvard-based view of HRM (Beer et al., 1985) advocated a multi-stakeholder approach to HRM research and practice. However, as Beer et al. (2015) note, research has largely neglected a stakeholder perspective in favor of a narrower focus on organizational outcomes. Furthermore, a review by Van de Voorde, Paauwe and van Veldhoven (2012) of quantitative studies of mutual gains could find relatively few good quality studies, indicating the lack of interest in the topic.

We believe there is a case for adopting a multi-stakeholder perspective to explore the scope for mutual gains from HRM. As Guest (2017) has argued, previous research has typically adopted models that focus on performance and consider employee outcomes almost as an afterthought. This contrasts with the early work on the AMO model by Appelbaum and colleagues with backgrounds in sociology and industrial relations (Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg, & Kalleberg, 2000) whose interest lay in the feasibility of mutual gains. A more radical alternative is to build a model of HRM that focuses on employee wellbeing, a topic central to the work of W/O psychologists, as a potential path to mutual gains (Guest, 2017). At the same time, research should be tempered by consideration of the economic costs and benefits (Kaufman, 2012)

Another topic that reflects a stakeholder perspective is the role and changing nature of the employment relationship. In an era when we increasingly have to look beyond trade unions there have been welcome steps towards multidisciplinary analysis of employee voice (Kaufman, 2015b; Mowbray, Wilkinson, & Tse, 2015). There is also a need to incorporate concepts such as voice, trust and fairness into mainstream HRM research (see, for example, Searle & Skinner, 2011; Siebert et al., 2016). This is likely to require multidisciplinary and

multilevel research to incorporate both representative systems at a collective level and social exchange concepts such as the psychological contract at the individual level. In summary, we strongly advocate the adoption of a stakeholder approach to HRM research. With its distinctive focus at the individual and group levels, W/O psychology can offer insights into the employee perspective and interests but this has to be sit alongside the interests of other stakeholders which can often more usefully be considered within other disciplinary frameworks of analysis.

Methodological Pluralism. The research method should reflect the nature of the research question being explored. Careful theory testing with clear hypotheses, ideally using longitudinal data and sometimes complex statistical analysis, an approach often favored by psychologists, has a valuable place in HRM research; but it also has limitations. We believe that advances in HRM theory and research require both quantitative and qualitative research methods. In noting the absence of data on why HR practices are introduced or dropped, it is likely that such questions might best be answered by semi-historical analysis (e.g., Ackers, 2006), evaluation of HR fads and fashions (Wefald & Downey, 2009) and high-quality case studies. There is also a richness in the use of critical incidents to answer the “why” and “how” questions that can less easily be explored with quantitative methods (Woodrow & Guest, 2017). What is required is an appropriate combination of quantitative and qualitative research; HRM research is more likely to advance through methodological pluralism than narrow insistence on the superiority of a specific approach. A recent review (Pratt & Bonnacio, 2016) found that leading US journals publishing W/O psychology research accepted very few qualitative papers. Fortunately, HRM and organizational journals are much more eclectic and W/O psychologists are well-placed to contribute to methodological pluralism.

Final reflection and conclusions

This paper has sought to address and rebut general criticisms of psychological research in HRM. In doing so, we have acknowledged that some criticisms are at least partly

justified. There appears to be a divide between much research in the USA and increasingly south-east Asia that is more unitarist and managerial, and that in Europe, Canada and Australasia where a more pluralist and critical perspective can be found, including among W/O psychologists. Furthermore, the dominance of leading US journals and what Ackers (2006, p.215) described as “American academic imperialism” can create the impression that much psychological research on HRM is overwhelmingly unitary, managerial and quantitative. Indeed, some of the criticism may be directed primarily at American research. What we have not accepted is the general criticism of all psychological research and we have set out what we believe is its valuable contribution to HRM research. W/O psychologists like those from other disciplines with an interest in HRM operate in a range of different national contexts including some where there are stronger pluralist institutions and values. However, even in these countries there are pressures for academics to produce research that is acceptable in American journals.

It has been argued that articles appearing in HRM and related journals increasingly draw on psychological concepts. If we accept this, HRM *has* become at least partly psychologized and this reflects considerable credit on psychological HRM research. But, as already noted, it is also a criticism that other disciplines (with some exceptions) have been less successful in developing novel theoretical and research insights that have attracted the wider HRM research community. Sometimes, there has been a tendency instead to offer critical analysis of the research that is produced, often by psychologists. There is a place for this but there is a need for a more positive position of the type that can be found in some of the more thoughtful analyses (e.g., Boxall & Purcell, 2016; Paauwe & Farndale, 2017). We believe that an overly critical perspective is ultimately damaging for the future of HRM research. We have therefore set out a framework for a more integrated approach to HRM research to which W/O psychology should make a full contribution.

We have illustrated the types of contribution we have in mind firstly with what we believe are examples of important emerging research topics such as the impact of AI, inclusiveness at work and consideration of quality of working life in the context of the growing gig economy; and secondly by highlighting persisting research topics close to the ‘heart’ of HRM such as the link between HRM, performance and well-being, the challenges of HR implementation and the management of the changing employment relationship. In each of these areas, W/O psychology has a major part to play but, we have argued, will do so most effectively when set within a wider analytic context. We advocate this approach in the knowledge that there are considerable pressures to pursue research on micro-level topics using methodologies likely to get published in many leading journals and which also reflect current management agendas. Recognizing this, our plea is for what we might term reflective research so that even in developing topics at a micro- and individual-level full consideration is given to the four criteria we have set out as guides to effective HRM research. Clearly, there is also a need to demonstrate the benefits of the challenging approach we have outlined. In the meantime, we believe it needs advocating to stimulate the kind of vigor and innovation required if HRM research is to flourish in the years ahead.

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