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## **Situating Human Resource Management in the Political Economy: Multilevel Theorising and Opportunities for Kaleidoscopic Imagination**

### **Abstract:**

This article introduces a special issue on *Situating Human Resource Management (HRM) Practices in their Political and Economic Contexts*. We develop a novel multilevel framework for exploring the political economy of HRM and use this to position the articles in this SI. We argue that the study of HRM is often too narrowly constructed within a psychological, positivistic paradigm and at an organisation-level, and that that situating HRM in its political and economic context requires a more inclusive, interdisciplinary approach that includes the use of *kaleidoscopic imagination* and *meta-theoretical bricolage*. By embracing a theoretically pluralist approach to studying HRM, researchers are better able to analyse how different levels of the political economy interact with specific HRM practices to impact value creation. We conclude by discussing the contribution of this article and the special issue, as well as highlighting avenues for future research.

**Key words:** HRM, political economy, theoretical realism, multilevel theory, kaleidoscopic imagination.

### **Practitioner Notes:**

#### *What is known:*

- Despite empirical evidence that “sophisticated” approaches to HRM can improve performance, such practices are not widely adopted and when adopted are rarely sustained over time.
- HRM practices and outcomes are influenced by various political and economic conditions, but these are usually not examined systematically in “mainstream” research on HRM.

#### *What we add:*

- We develop new ways of theorising multilevel relationships between HRM outcomes and broader political and economic conditions.

- We advance the concept of “kaleidoscopic imagination” for theorising such multilevel relationships.

*Practical implications:*

- We argue that value creation processes are multilevel. Those who recognise this can better understand how HRM adds value (e.g. to enterprises, employees, and societies) in relation to other elements of the political economy.

## **Introduction**

This article introduces the special issue *Situating HRM Practices in their Political and Economic Contexts*. We argue that HRM research can be fruitfully developed by applying a political economy perspective. We identify the political economy in terms of the material, social and economic relations of production, reproduction and (re)distribution, which we argue requires multilevel theorisation. We combine interdisciplinary research bridging the sociology of work, comparative employment relations and HRM, and comparative political economy, which has developed a range of theoretically sophisticated and useful insights. These help to explain how and why HRM practices and outcomes are embedded in and shaped by the broader political economy (e.g. Marchington & Grugulis, 2000; Thompson, 2003; Morris et al., 2018). Building on Thompson & Vincent (2010), we develop a multilevel framework to situate HRM in such a context, which is constituted of: natural and abstract resources; cultural knowledge systems; employment relations; employing organisations; inter-organisational relations; and financial, regulatory and governance systems.

We also make the case for practising a *kaleidoscopic imagination* when theorising such complex issues. Political and economic contexts of HRM are highly variable, and so researchers should consider multiple theories and perspectives when seeking to explain variation in HRM practices, their internal dynamics, and associated performance and distributional outcomes. We highlight how combinations of theories are often needed to shed light on more granular data about the relations between institutions, power relations in the political economy and HRM decisions in employing organisations. This implies a commitment to reflexive social

science and theoretical pluralism, where researchers seek to integrate and reconcile multiple theoretical lenses to develop novel insights. In these circumstances, the task of researchers becomes *meta-theoretical bricolage* or synthesis (Pawson, 2013; Brannan, et al., 2018), which requires the use of diverse theoretical resources, heuristically, intuitively, and abductively, to seek better insights and explanations.

We start our article by contrasting our approach with positivist or telescopic approaches that dominate “mainstream” HRM. In doing so, we identify tensions in this literature, as well as in practitioner experiences and discourses, which are best explained with reference to the political economy. Following this critique, we outline our theoretical framework and introduce the articles in this special issue. Our discussion then considers the *kaleidoscopic imagination* metaphor, its implications for research practice, and avenues for future research.

### **Beyond the missing context in mainstream HRM research and practice**

We developed our contribution as we sought to build from the theoretically and methodologically diverse articles in this special issue. This diversity is no surprise: political and economic contexts are varied. However, sensitivity to this diversity has been missing from much mainstream HRM or ‘strategic HRM’ research (Delbridge et al., 2011). Batt & Banerjee (2012: 1745-6), for example, reviewed 1000 HRM studies in management and HRM journals after the mid-1990s and found that most studies (particularly those in US journals) treated context as background, and that few examined the impact of institutional setting on HRM systems.

“Mainstream HRM” has three distinguishing features that have limited its analysis of political and economic context. First, organisational psychology and organisational behaviour are the dominant sub-disciplines of the mainstream (Kaufman, 2020), to the exclusion of multidisciplinary (Goddard, 2014; 2020) and employment relations (Budd, 2020) perspectives. Second, the field has developed a central focus on linking organisation-level “strategic” HRM and organisational performance (Paauwe, 2009; Boxall & Purcell, 2016). Third, there is a tendency to use quantitative and positivist methods that focus on organisation-level outcomes (Fleetwood & Hesketh, 2010).

### *Psychological perspectives*

In relation to the first of these limitations, psychological perspectives have focused on connecting workers' attachments in employment relationships and performative outcomes in teams, work units and/or employers. Consequentially, job and worker characteristics, such as psychological contracts (Robinson, 1996) and abilities, motivations, and opportunities (Boxall & Purcell, 2016) are often prioritised when explaining differences in the design and effectiveness of HRM systems. Also, relations between individuals and organisation-level HRM practices tend to be prioritised.

#### *Linking organisation-level "strategic" HRM and organisational performance*

Theoretically, and in relation to the second of our concerns, "internal fit" between the "right bundle" of HRM practices is seen to result in a better or more efficient alignment of employee behaviours and organisational goals. The objectives of HRM are thus defined in unitarist and performative terms. The practical agency of HRM managers always "makes a difference" to either organisational outcomes, such as productivity, innovation, and/or sales, or to employee-level outcomes, such as rates of labour turnover and/or absenteeism, levels of engagement and job satisfaction (Weiss & Morrison, 2019).

Tensions in employment relations are typically either neglected in mainstream HRM theories or treated as endogenous to employers - wherein HRM practitioners' 'rational' choices follow from calculations that certain HR practices complement existing resources and strategies. For example, the resource-based view (RBV) of the firm (Barney, 1991) argues firms have an advantage when they have access to inimitable and valuable resources. To be performative, HRM practices should thus increase organisational stocks of resources, broadly defined. Kinnie & Swart (2013) develop this argument, that resource-based advantages include *human capital advantages* (skills), *social capital advantages* (trusting/reciprocal relations), and *organisational processes advantages* (where practices, values and organisational systems align), which can all be enabled by appropriate HRM practices. Consequentially, the stock of resources in an organisation should expand and, assuming additional resources generated are always equitably shared, this constitutes a mutual gain for all stakeholders.

This argument commits to two ideas. First, properly enacted HRM practices can enable employing organisations to develop mutually useful resources (Becker & Gerhart, 1996; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). Second, employees are likely to find it easiest to identify with their

employer and become motivated to perform when HRM practices are articulated around an appropriate and identifiable core set of values, such as service to the customer and/or quality in design and function (Purcell, et al., 2009).

Whilst theoretically sophisticated, this *value-based* approach remains restricted to employer level considerations. The movement is from aggregated organisation-level resources to HRM practices which inculcate employees' value systems in a way that enables resource development. A limited one-way pattern of causation is implied, from resources to practice-based prescription to performative outcome. Problems become "implementation or communication issues," with little attempt to theorise the contextual reasons for these problems or conditions for overcoming them.

#### *Quantitative and positivist methods that focus on organisation-level outcomes*

Thirdly, many mainstream studies are empirically rigorous, providing valuable material to inform future research, such as empirically establishing a positive relationship between sophisticated HR practices and performance at the level of the employing organisation or team. These contributions quantify whether employers conforming most closely to a specified HRM model perform better, at least in some ways, than those which do not (Messersmith et al., 2011; Shin & Konrad, 2017). Such studies typically report a positive association between "sophisticated" HRM – variously referred to as high-involvement, high-performance, or high-engagement practices – and measures of individual or organisational performance. Many studies are 'post predictive' or based on analysis of cross-sectional data that can confuse the direction of causality (Sengupta & Whitfield, 2011: 101), while longitudinal research reports more mixed results (Saridakis, et al., 2017). However, there is strong evidence across multiple industry contexts that HRM practices such as investing in worker skills and participation improve performance, particularly where they are backed up by strong job security arrangements (Appelbaum et al. 2000) and where they produce mutual gains through improving employee well-being (Peccei & Van De Voorde, 2019).

Given such consistent findings about the performance benefits of these latter practices, it is surprising that there are relatively few examples of the full implementation of sophisticated HRM on a long-term basis. For instance, an international study of airlines could not find any examples of employers that implemented sophisticated HRM strategies consistently over a

long period, with the possible exception of Southwest Airlines (Bamber, et al., 2009). Employers in liberal market economies (LMEs), such as the USA and UK, are less constrained by strong regulation than other economies, particularly those in Northern Europe. Yet, most employers in LMEs take a short-term and piecemeal approach to HRM (Godard, 2004). Survey evidence also consistently suggests strategic HRM practices are secondary to operational and administrative concerns (Gifford, 2007; Boudreau & Lawler, 2015).

*From “implementation issues” to the partial failures of HRM?*

To explain the obvious gap between the theoretical promise and practical reality of HRM, a broader perspective is needed. While contextual variables such as location, labour laws, industry and union presence are sometimes included in mainstream HRM models, they are often treated as controls – with the objective to evaluate the general or universal contribution of HRM to performative outcomes (Fleetwood & Hesketh, 2010). This narrow focus on the success or failure of HR practices within employer boundaries identifies the disjuncture between HRM theory and its practical context: limiting our focus to factors within the employing organisation obscures our understanding of those factors. Strategies are, after all, essentially a response to the external world as well as the internal one (Whittington, 2000; Harvey & Turnbull, this issue).

Tensions between the influence of an external context and the “internal fit” of HRM practices are reflected in longstanding debates in the HRM literature (Delery & Doty, 1996; Clinton & Guest, 2013) about whether sophisticated HRM is universally beneficial *or* contingent and/or in need of alignment with other factors, such as the types of labour used (Lepak & Snell, 1999), employer strategy (Schuler & Jackson, 1987), or product life cycle (Hendry & Pettigrew, 1992). We use the term *market-based* approaches as a catchall for contingency and/or configurational theories (Vincent & Hurrell, 2019). The argument is that configurations of HRM practices should be adapted to the business strategy as well as the product and/or labour market circumstances of the employer. Lepak & Snell (1999), for example, prescribe ‘commitment’, ‘compliance’, ‘productivity’ and ‘collaborative’ types of HRM ‘architectures’ and associate these with specific categories of ‘unique’ or ‘valuable’ human capital. However, and similar to mainstream arguments in general, analytical focus is on the “external-fit” of HR practices rather than how ‘strategic positioning’ takes place (Kaufman, 2020).

Arguably, market- and value-based drivers of HRM reflect underlying tensions in the political economy, which is also observed in tensions between the various roles of HRM practitioners. On the one hand, market imperatives impel employers to reduce labour costs through layoffs, outsourcing, and contingent working arrangements, which violate psychological contracts and worker commitments (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Where HRM practitioners prioritise the financial interests of employers [e.g. profits, interest payment, return-on-investment and dividends], their role as ‘employee champions’ tends to diminish (Marchington, 2015). This is most often the case in price-competitive market segments, where sophisticated HRM practices may become a drag on business performance as their cost conflicts with shareholder demands for short-term savings via downsizing and reductions in employment costs (Kaufman, 2015).

On the other hand, value-based outcomes appeal to employees’ personal values to produce “strong cultures” (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004), and so must also appeal to senses of equity and procedural justice that appear to transcend cultures (Jiang, et al., 2017). Where HRM practitioners act as ‘employee champions’ to ensure fairness, transparency and a value-consistent approach, the financial interests of employers are likely to become compromised as more of the resources developed are returned to the point of production and/or as interest-based tensions paralyse decision-making (see also Hyman, 1987).

Arguably, HRM researchers and practitioners inevitably make politically contentious choices when they simultaneously advocate for market-based and value-based drivers of economic performance, with different choices typically offering alternative routes to partial failure (Hyman, 1987; Vincent & Hurrell, 2019). Such dilemmas emerge from fundamentally competing interests in negotiations over resources. For example, value-based forms of HRM practice are likely to emerge only under benign market conditions, and such practices tend to be systematically eroded when competition impels employers to make tough choices about resource allocation (Ramsay, 1977). The sweet spots in which value-based arguments can be consistently applied may be fewer and further between. To maximise profitability, employers will often be obliged to substitute the value-consistent ‘carrot’ with the market-driven ‘stick’. The negotiated orders inherent to workplaces in capitalist political economies thus lead to contests over the logics of HRM practices that place HRM practitioners in a perpetual political bind.



## **HRM within a Multilevel Political Economy**

The unitarist, psychologically centred, performative, and managerial agenda which dominates mainstream literature and practitioner discourses neglects fundamental tensions in the political economy of work which appear crucial when explaining HRM practitioners' roles. We seek to address this problem through developing an original framework for analysing the political and economic contexts of HRM, drawing on research from the sociology of work, employment relations and comparative HRM, and comparative political economy. This allows us to theorise the multi-layered relationships among contextual factors that shape HRM decisions and the outcomes associated with those decisions.

Our model is based on theoretical realism, theoretical pluralism, and a critically pragmatic inter-disciplinary research agenda. We use the term theoretical realism as shorthand for various philosophical approaches, including critical (Edwards, et al., 2014), policy-based (Pawson, 2013) and pragmatic (Watson, 2010) forms of realism. In realist modes of inquiry, events, or the things we observe to happen, are the consequence of their causal circumstances or histories. These causal antecedents can be known, with various degrees of precision, through a variable combination of theoretical concepts and empirical data (Fleetwood, 2005). However, knowing the causal history of complex social phenomena, such as the relations between HRM and the political economy, is no easy task because reality is hierarchically organised and emergent within an overlapping arrangement of entities (people, teams, organisations, sectors and societies, etc.).

The sociology of work and, in particular, labour process theory (LPT) (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999), has examined connections between "higher level" social structures and processes, such as scientific management (Braverman, 1974) or financialisation (Thompson, 2003), and workplace level outcomes which shape (and are shaped by) HRM policies and patterns of employment. The objective is to reveal how a variety of stratified cultural and market-based forces, such as economic cycles and diversity-based differences, interact and affect, *inter alia*, the way that voice, skill and control are shaped, or the levels of influence workers and employers exert in decision making (Cockburn, 1983; Grugulis & Lloyd, 2010).

This stream of research, often implicitly, reflects a philosophical position that is consistent with critical realism (CR). Like CR, LPT commits to a hierarchical reality of interacting entities, or a

multi-layered political economy (Thompson & Vincent, 2010). Also consistent with CR, LPT recognises that local and subjective interpretations influence perception and experience (O'Mahoney & Vincent, 2014). Within this tradition, labour process researchers typically use workplace or organisation-level qualitative, "embedded" (Yin, 2003) and/or "extended" (Burawoy, 1998) case-study data to explore and theorise the relationship between the political economy of work and subjective experience of work. Thus, LPT case studies engage directly and explicitly with (various conceptions of) context in seeking explanation of how HRM, and other organisational outcomes, are operationalised in practice.

Employment relations more often engages with HRM scholarship 'on its own terms', and so can be viewed in more pragmatic and less theoretically abstract terms. Researchers typically begin with pluralist, rather than unitarist, assumptions, concerning the distinct and legitimate interests of labour and management within organisations. This has led to a focus on the role of trade unions in negotiating or partnering over the introduction of sophisticated HRM; as well as the importance of the broader negotiated framework of rules (e.g. job security) to the success of these practices (Batt, et al., 2002; Kochan, et al., 2009). Scholars in the comparative employment relations and HRM fields study how national varieties of capitalism or business systems may encourage different sets of HRM policies that complement employers' competitive strategies in global markets (Bamber, et al., 2021; Edwards & Rees 2017). Stronger or more inclusive national regulations, labour laws, welfare states, and collective bargaining arrangements may also strengthen labour's countervailing power; which, in turn, encourages employers to invest in 'high road' models of HRM through constraining 'low road' alternatives (O'Brady 2020).

Recent scholarship on the comparative political economy of work seeks to bring together these literatures. Contributions examine the role of the macro and meso institutions of interest in comparative employment relations and HRM (such as vocational training systems, corporate governance and finance, industrial relations, and the welfare state) in shaping the workplace-level issues of most interest to labour process scholars, such as skills, control and resistance (Hauptmeier & Vidal, 2014). A central focus here has been on the political dynamics in global value chains and fragmented production networks, whereby employers exploit regulatory gaps and offshoring to escape from institutional regulation of work – thereby encouraging more low-road (and less high involvement) HRM practices (Newsome, et al.,

2015). Another important focus, drawing on the employment relations literature, is union strategies that seek to resist workplace segmentation and worker precarity – and thus, in a sense, encourage or force managers to adopt sophisticated HRM practices through closing ‘institutional loopholes’ and establishing inclusive regulation (Doellgast, et al., 2018).

These traditions combine to demonstrate that HRM practices and outcomes are shaped in different ways and in various places by, *inter-alia*, national and transnational governance regimes and organisations; specific employers and labour representation arrangements; national and international relations between employers across markets; financial institutions; other interest groups and the parts of organisations; transcendent cultural systems or ways of knowing, and how cultural knowledge is reproduced by groups of people across social formations; and, the diverse forms of resources that are contested therein. Therefore, it is a significant challenge to ascertain which of these factors are causally most significant. At a basic level, we need theoretical resources for understanding the variable influence of these interacting components of the political economy on emergent events, such as the activities of HRM practitioners, as well as the impact of those events, such as the enactment of HRM practices. We integrate this domain of theorising in Figure 1, as a hierarchically organised system of interacting and refracting influences that affect, but do not determine, the *practical agency of HRM* or what HRM practitioners do.

## FIGURE ONE ABOUT HERE

### **Natural and Abstract Resources**

The foundation or bottom level of the figure comprises natural and abstract resources, which includes things like people’s bodies, raw materials, artefacts, tools, machinery, and money, which organisations variously depend on. In Marxian terms, this is the economic base of the social relations of production (Marx, 1977). In Bourdieusian terms, resources are diverse forms of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic species of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). The value of all resources is recognised, contested and socially constructed by people and social groups of various kinds, and then realised within markets and broader cultural systems. The values of natural and abstract resources are thus always generated within relations that inhere across higher levels of the political economy. Take, for example, Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital. This is not only a property of the individual: as *embodied cultural capital* [viz. skills and human

capital]. Valuable forms of cultural capital also depend on relations of development and recognition. It emerges over time within, *inter alia*, qualification and education systems. The value of embodied cultural capital is thus constituted at higher-levels, as *institutional cultural capital*.

### **Cultural Knowledge Systems**

The processes that constitute resources, across all higher levels, are variously known and contested within cultural knowledge systems, which are themselves constituted of the narrative, ideal and conceptual orders that people use to make sense of the world. This comprises the next level of Figure 1, which includes the variable “knowledge” of lay-people, HRM practitioners’ “know how”, and the “expertise” of “scientific” HRM researchers. At this level, knowledge claims are contested, and matters become, more or less, known. It is here that the programme theories and ideological currents of HRM are debated and decisions about practices are made. This level can be seen to contain both the collective *property register* within social groups and/or across a broader cultural system (Archer, 1988), and variously enculturated individuals or *habitués* of agents who are then positioned in relations (Bourdieu & Waquant, 1992): including in employment relations.

### **Employment Relations**

Local cultural systems are subject to contest and revision, with differently positioned groups (economically and organisationally) emerging as having distinctive interests that can be identified in terms of beliefs, values, routines and/or ways of knowing (Sayer, 2005). Class positions, statuses and/or structural positions in workplaces have implications for values and ethical dispositions, which then shape inter-personal and inter-group interactions. In the contexts of employing organisations, these differences are manifest as employment relations, the next level up of Figure 1. Via employment relations, different types of workers and their representatives in workplaces interact to contest the organisation of and evaluations within production systems. Struggles in employment relations systems result in various local outcomes, which can be categorised, according to the logic of the labour process, in terms of, for instance, workplace resistance, compliance, consent, accommodation and conflict. Employment relations are then manifest within employers, but they also emerge at higher levels, or “beyond the factory gates”, as illustrated by general strikes or demonstrations about proposed changes to labour laws. Employment relations institutions such as trades unions are

real in that they have their own strategies, interests and agendas, or proclivities to act, which have implications for other agents and agencies in the political economy.

### **Employing Organisations**

Employment relations are, at a local level, contained in employing organisations, which constitute the middle-range in the political economy. Organisations are real entities and special institutions (Fleetwood, 2015), which are relatively autonomous “things in themselves” (Edwards, 1990), with capabilities or collective properties, labour processes, interest groups, cultures, and routines, through which they and their potentials and impacts can be identified. Employing organisations are the level at which the practical agency of HRM is assumed to be specifically causal, and so this represents a level at which all HRM research is obliged, in some way, to be engaged.

### **Inter-Organisational Relations**

Employers, then, also have various types of external relationships, which we divide for practical purposes into two types. The first, and the next level of Figure 1, is constituted of other organisations that employers are engaged with in *transactional relations* or economic exchanges. At this level, research has investigated how inter-organisational relationships have implications for the conditions of employment and, therefore, HRM (Rubery, et al., 2002). For example, managers may use outsourcing to discipline the internal workforce through benchmarking HRM practices and demanding concessions that bring down internal labour costs in return for insourcing or job security agreements (Doellgast, et al., 2016).

The way in which employers are embedded in global value chains (GVC) is crucial for understanding the stability within employment relations. The GVC concept describes the totality of relations between workplaces that design and develop, produce, market, distribute, support and recycle the production of goods and services. It thus concentrates at an inter-organisational level and considers how workplace positions in these relations affect organisation-level outcomes (Gereffi & Fernandez-Stark, 2011). Lakhani et al. (2013) argue highly skilled and stable employment systems that should, theoretically, benefit from value-based approaches to HRM, are only likely in either large, hierarchical and centrally coordinated employing organisations, or in *relational contracts*: partnerships between various employers, which cooperate in the development of more complex goods or services. Elsewhere, less

skilled and more fractious employment systems are more likely, and employers are often less willing to invest in sophisticated HRM practices (see also Lepak & Snell, 1999).

### **Financial, Regulatory and Governance Systems**

The top level of our theoretical model offers a catchall for a range of additional external institutions, organisations and inter-organisational relations, which we term financial, regulatory, and governance systems. Studies that take a broader political economy perspective consistently find that agents and agencies external to employers are often crucial to the emergence and success of HRM. For example, a study of firm-level employment systems in Japan ascribed variations to a combination of strategic choice and increasing variation in the meso-level institutional pressures that are experienced at organisational level (Morris et al, 2018).

The most common focus in comparative research is on systems of institutions in the political economy, including industrial relations and labour market institutions, welfare states, financial markets, training systems, and corporate governance systems. For example, ownership and investment structures can affect HRM practitioners' strategic priorities (Liu, et al., 2014). Financialisation and the prioritisation of short-term financial returns narrow the scope for long-term commitments to employees (Thompson, 2003; Appelbaum & Batt, 2014). Different combinations of institutions can also provide resources for managers to implement sophisticated HRM models (through high levels of employee skills, access to long-term finance, or participation rights) or constraints on 'low-road' models (through minimum wages, employment protections, sectoral collective bargaining, and a high 'social wage' provided by welfare states) (Doellgast & Marsden, 2019).

The interests and concerns of agents and agencies in financial, regulatory and governance systems often overlap. For example, in Northern Europe a stakeholder approach to economic management recognises that diverse groups have a collective interest in economic organisations, and so supports the creation and normalisation of dispute resolution (Mayrhofer, et al., 2012). At other times, and as demonstrated repeatedly in the contributions in this special issue, the interests of such agencies form the basis for systemic tensions or socio-cultural conflict in the political economy, which agencies must accommodate, eradicate or transform (see also Archer, 1988).

### **Linking Articles in the Special Issue to the Framework**

The other articles in the special issue illustrate the usefulness of our framework in theorising the role of the different contextual layers of the political economy in shaping HRM practices and outcomes. None of the articles examines the full array of relationships and variables included in the framework, but rather they examine various combinations of these tiers and the relations among them. Together, they demonstrate how specific layers are more salient within explanations of different topics, issues and subjects in the field of HRM research.

McCann & Monteath (this issue) develop a Bourdieusian analysis using detailed qualitative data about managers returning from international assignment to Japan to explore interactions between *resources* and *cultural knowledge systems*. They argue that culturally entrenched practices in Japanese internal labour markets, which are analysed as a distinctive field of employment, impel repatriates to reform or revert to previously developed habituses, or ways of being, that tend to conform to local and male-dominated norms and rules, such as long working-hours with 'undefined and pragmatic' job-roles. Their insightful analysis demonstrates that this field, and the habituses of its members, continues to be ill-disposed to the enactment of supposedly performative (and Western) expectations about the management of repatriation.

The intersections of *resources* and *cultural knowledge systems* and agents with different positions or roles in *employment relations* can also be studied to explain HR policy formulation within *organisations*. Senior executives and HRM practitioners have different power-positions in employment relations systems and are variously or differently attentive to ideas about sophisticated practices. These dynamics can be seen in Thomas & Greasey's (this issue) article, in which they draw on Actor Network Theory to consider organisation-level qualitative data about the social construction of knowledge surrounding HR analytics and evidenced-based practice. They argue that political issues surrounding the production, dissemination and use of HR data places HRM managers in an ambiguous position. Senior managers were found typically to value quantitative data that demonstrates value-adding interventions, and so they put pressure on HRM practitioners to demonstrate performance. However, HRM practitioners preferred qualitative and narrative knowledge and thought a quantitative methodology 'fails to reflect the complexity of HR issues and potentially undermines their efforts to improve the

workplace’(page – at proofing). Ultimately, the performative demands of senior managers served to intensify HRM practitioners’ positions as ambiguous “middle people”, compromising the professional projects of the practitioners studied.

Two contributions to this SI link the political economy of HRM more directly to relations between *cultural knowledge systems*, *employment relations* and *financial, regulatory and governance systems*. Roper & Higgins (this issue) provide a mixed methods analysis using national and organisation level data to argue that HRM practitioners often gain power, influence, and credibility at the level of the workplace by using their expertise in managing tensions, conflict and regulation. Despite this, at a national level the discourses within professional associations remains wedded to abstract and business focused strategic concerns, which reflects neither the reality of HRM nor the mechanisms through which HRM practitioners routinely gain influence.

Wood et al. (this issue) also examine how hierarchic power relations influence HRM knowledge and practices, and vice versa. This contribution considers the rise of right-wing populism in the USA and UK, and how this relates to HRM. The authors argue that ‘poor HRM’ contributes to the rise of right-wing populism as an employment relations climate conditioned by neo-liberal employment preferences is likely to impel the conditions of insecurity on which right-wing populism relies. At the same time, the discourses of right-wing populism, which act against inclusivity and international integration, make solving the problem more difficult while making “hard” organisational solutions more attractive.

Both these contributions are astute in identifying the interplay of discourses at different levels of the political economy, and analysing how these imbue the relations of production with a specific structuring logic. Specifically, “upper level” discourses have various relations with the local practical order of HRM practitioners. Debates are thus often between interest groups across levels within *employment relations* systems who hold different worldviews or interests or adhere to different *cultural knowledge systems*.

*Financial, regulatory and governance systems* provide both resources and constraints that shape the interests and power of different groups within *employment relations* and *organisations*. The role of these dynamics in negotiations between managers and the



representatives of workers, including unions, is a theme across several of the articles. Dobbins et al. (this issue) considers how employers can circumvent meaningful workplace-level employee voice when confronted with regulatory requirements. Using data from four Irish case studies, the article develops conceptualisations of employee silencing and explores how employers' actions prevent regulations that might otherwise increase dialogue and information sharing with the workforce. Employers can perform practices that conform only in a 'ritualist', surface-level and perfunctory manner, or they can 'retreat' and reject or ignore regulatory goals in the effort to obviate voice. The data illustrate how, in the case of the European Union (EU) Directive Establishing a General Framework for Informing and Consulting Employees, such actions were deployed at workplace-level to preserve employers' preferences to withhold information and avoid dialogue.

The article by Harvey & Turnbull (this issue) studies HRM practices and outcomes at Ryanair, the Irish-based and generally profitable budget airline. They critique existing RBV arguments (as summarised earlier) for concentrating on organisation-level resources and omitting external "strategic markets factors" (SMFs), including industrial relations features such as employment laws, union organisation, and collective bargaining agreements, which can constrain employers' ability to reduce costs and/or maximise profits. They demonstrate that Ryanair has been able to make disproportionate financial gains across more regulated EU labour markets by using a configuration of HRM practices in which workers experience more precarious Irish-style terms of employment. Ryanair's competitive position emerges from taking advantage of imperfections in SMFs rather than from the inimitability of internal resources. Ultimately, whilst Ryanair's low-cost model is mimicable, it has been able to gain an advantage by exploiting regulatory voids in the European aviation market – a situation that may be unsustainable as Ryanair's actions have created increasing tensions with unions and European regulatory authorities.

While *inter-organisational relations* play a role in several of the articles, they are most central in Carsten et al. (this issue). This article demonstrates how agents in *employment relations* are engaged with or use different resources from *financial, regulatory and governance systems* to shape HRM policies within a networked production model. The authors use longitudinal case study data from two German Airports to explore the vertical disintegration of employers into "service delivery networks". They consider the potential for the emergence of "network-

oriented HRM practices”, using a “strategy-as-practice” perspective, and then empirically examine the emergence of recruitment, pay and training, and whether these practices become strategically managed across organisational boundaries. They observe that political game-playing between various employers in the network leads to a piecemeal introduction of a network-oriented HRM strategy. Carsten et al. also find that ‘stakeholders like worker representatives as well as local and federal state politicians make a difference in pushing management towards the introduction of network-oriented HRM practices’ (page – at proofing).

The last two articles in this special issue make a similar movement, from *financial, regulatory and governance systems* to how agents in *employment relations* formulate *organisation-level* HRM practices and outcomes. They both focus on a distinctive set of diversity-based challenges – which can be considered to be grounded in contesting traditional *cultural knowledge systems*. Reichel et al. (this issue) uses quantitative comparative methods to analyse data from 172 executive boards in five European economies. They demonstrate that external institutional pressures relating to the promotion of women helped explain female and HRM practitioner’s representation within executive boards. They conclude that organisations yield to institutional pressures to promote women by appointing women with HRM expertise to board positions – a function perceived as matching women’s stereotypically assumed talents.

Finally, the article by Roumpi, et al. (this issue) also uses a comparative quantitative data, this time from 201 US-based Fortune 1000 companies over a period of seven years, to explore how regulatory and organisation-level factors influence the adoption of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT)-friendly HRM practices. The authors use institutional theory to hypothesise that protective state laws and state conservatism impact the adoption of LGBT-friendly practices, and that these effects are moderated by the beliefs and values of powerful organisational agents (CEOs and boards of directors). While the study finds that laws that protect LGBT employees against discrimination had no significant impact on the likelihood of adopting LGBT-friendly practices, state conservatism did impact the adoption of these practices and effects were moderated by the political orientations of senior personnel. Both these contributions to this SI amply demonstrate that institutional context has a direct bearing on the authority and determination of HRM policies and practices; as well as possibilities for

drawing on diverse resources to challenge the traditional knowledge systems that underpin those practices.

### **Discussion and Conclusion: Kaleidoscopic Inquiry and the Future of HRM Research.**

Where theories about the political economy are used to inform HRM research, assessment at multiple levels of analysis is required to understand how processes come together, within and beyond employing organisations (Healy, et al., 2017; Greer, et al., 2019). It is here that, we argue, the idea of kaleidoscopic imagination can help. A kaleidoscope is a child's toy consisting of a cylinder with an eyehole at one end and a transparent circular mechanism at the other. This circular mechanism contains a series of radially fractured and differentiated lenses that interact to refract any light entering the cylinder as the mechanism is turned. This light, then, shines through more granular and/or translucent material, such as coloured plastic beads or paper, which is also being churned when the mechanism turns. The outcome is an ever-changing pattern of shapes.

Let us imagine the granular matter is data about patterns of activities and outcomes somewhere within the political economy, broadly defined, and that the refracting lenses are the theories that we use to understand the parts of the political economy and how they interact. When calibrated correctly, the theories [or lenses] should always be aligned in such a way as to reveal, as precisely as "the state of the art" allows, the granular material being observed. In this way, the task of the researcher, like the toymaker, is to ensure the lenses are always aligned to shed the best possible light on the granular material, at the particular point[s] of observation.

Methodologically, or to calibrate the kaleidoscope, the researcher should move reflexively and iteratively between the granular material, or data about the political economy, and existing theory about layers of the political economy and their interrelatedness. At this point, research necessarily involves *metatheoretical bricolage* or synthesis (Pawson, 2013; Brannan, et al., 2018). Importantly, where existing theory fails to explain observations made from the data, which it frequently should, this suggests an opportunity to seek and/or develop novel theoretical combinations and resources (Burawoy, 1998).

In turn, any new knowledge generated affects the quality and evolution of ideas within the political economy as a whole, to the extent that it informs the concepts used in sensemaking within lay, practitioner and scientific communities. Thus, and over time, the quality of the theory we use to decide what to do shifts and changes, and so our knowledge is both our lens on the world *and* part of the granular matter of the political economy: observations about how people make sense of their own realities is always important (see also Giddens, 1976).

The usefulness of the theory we use to analyse HRM practices and outcomes is thus vital to the impact academe has on our own communities and within the practical order. For this reason, we argue that reframing debates away from telescopic mainstream approaches and towards political economy-based arguments is important for numerous reasons. Primarily however, narrowly focussed mainstream prescriptions typically neglect or misstate the role of value creation and redistribution in the political economy. As mainstream perspectives focus on managerial agency in unitary employers and are often based on a business-focused performative agenda, their contributions tend to obfuscate rather than clarify the granular materiality of value. In contrast, we argue studies of practices and outcomes of HRM should benefit from a deeper contextualisation of value creation and redistribution, in their specific political economic circumstances and in ways that engage with the systemic nature of capitalism (Vidal, et al., 2015).

Extending a more inclusive and theoretically pluralist agenda is arguably increasingly important. The issues HRM practitioners are obliged to deal with are increasingly complex and multifaceted. For example, employing organisations say that they are seeking to involve employees in corporate responses to societal demands with regard to diversity, social responsibility and sustainability (Williams, et al., 2010), but these issues cannot be reduced to performative agendas or organisation-level factors and forces. ‘Categories’ of work – from precarious labour to professional work – are socially constructed in complex ways (Spicer & Böhm, 2007), which affects how integration into organisations and labour processes is justified (Håkansson & Isidorsson, 2012). The rise of the ‘gig economy’, the growing importance of ‘digital labour’, new sites of production such as ‘co-working spaces’, working from home and increases in casual work and zero-hour contracts (Rubery, et al., 2016; Wood, et al., 2019) combine to make notions of unitary employment increasingly untenable.

Alongside these developments, we are also witness to new forms of organising and, in turn, an increase in the significance of new narratives and the influence of different actors and interest groups (Doellgast, et al., 2018; Benassi, et al., 2019). For example, the delegation of labour matters (such as the use of agency workers or recruitment agencies) to various intermediaries raises questions of accountability and responsibility that challenge the conventional role of HRM practitioners (Rubery, et al., 2002). Current global crises – particularly those associated with climate change and pandemics like COVID-19 – will reshape global competition and value chains, and encourage new institution building efforts by unions and governments. Such developments in the political economy, be they technological advances, demographic changes, global pandemics or international economic shifts, are producing significant changes in the world of work (Delbridge & Sallaz, 2015), and meaningful debates on such issues will require examining inter-relationships between economic, workplace, political, social, and environmental problems, and the structures of capitalism (Adler 2019).

In the short term it may be tempting for researchers to focus at micro-levels, since it is easier to test parsimonious theories and causal relationships at these levels. However, this narrow lens obscures or neglects the multiple factors shaping management decisions and their outcomes within an organisation's broader contexts. To develop a deeper appreciation of HRM, researchers should explore how HRM practitioners and other managers perceive, respond to, and use the political and economic contexts of HRM. Such contributions would build on past comparative research to theorise and empirically examine the behaviour of managers across different jobs, workplaces, employers, industries, and societies. A central and evolving question concerns how institutions and employer-level strategies channel similar competitive pressures associated with globalisation and financialisation, differently or otherwise, and their implications for HRM policy (Sheehan & Sparrow, 2012: 2393; Delbridge et al., 2011; Morris, et al., 2018). Here, kaleidoscopic forms of imagination can help to broaden appreciation of the situated character of HR practice by encouraging researchers to engage with a range of agencies and influences, within and beyond employing organisations, when explaining patterns in the empirical data.

Progressing this agenda may require a rethink of research methodologies and theory-building practices. There is a need for more mixed methods research; for instance, qualitative case studies analysing the mechanisms linking HRM practices with outcomes combined with

quantitative studies that test the moderating effect of political and economic factors on these relationships. Meanwhile, researchers using traditional survey-based and archival performance or personnel data should also seek to interview a range of stakeholders, to study the situated actions of HRM practitioners, as well as employees and their representatives. This will support better survey design, with measures appropriate to industry and workplace settings, and help to develop more contextualised theoretical models that explain interactions among HRM discourses, practices, and outcomes (Morris, et al., 2019). This type of research is essential to progressing the relevance and influence of HRM research. Work that remains focused at the organisational-level is likely to become ever more distanced from the assorted experiences of HRM practitioners and their situated practices of value building. Our analysis suggests that managers and policymakers should also consider how their efforts to create value are embedded in and enabled by the multilevel contexts of their work, and we offer an original framework that can help them to navigate this practical reality.

As this special issue demonstrates, contextual conditions are worthy of HRM researchers' careful consideration as they combine to affect and enable the ideas, practices, and impact of HRM practitioners. Consider, for example, the differences between national varieties of capitalism and even more so between the global south and the global north, or between market economies and former communist economies like China or between sectors that were devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic and those that prospered. A central challenge for future research is to develop new insights into both the reasons for diverging strategies and outcomes, as well as the shared dynamics connecting diverse national political economies, sectors, and workplaces. Without a comprehensive, inclusive, and multi-lensed appreciation of the context of HRM, researchers' capacities to provide both *useful* and *insightful* analyses will be fundamentally circumscribed.

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