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Citation for final published version:

Edwards, Tim and Kakavelakis, Konstantinos 2022. Problematism people management practices: a critical realist study of knowledge sharing. *Journal of Critical Realism* 21 (1) , pp. 46-64.  
10.1080/14767430.2021.1992734

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767430.2021.1992734>

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# **Problematizing People Management Practices: A Critical Realist Study of Knowledge Sharing**

**Journal title:** Journal of Critical Realism

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**Conflict of Interest Statement:** The authors confirm that the research was conducted with the full co-operation of the research participants. There are no conflicts of interest in so far as the research was independently conducted without research funding from other partners. The authors also confirm that this a joint piece of research with the submitted manuscript agreed upon by both contributors.

**Acknowledgements:** The authors would like to thank the guidance and support provided by Dr Anna Galazka and the two reviewers involved in the development of ideas in the paper.

## **Problematizing People Management Practices: A Critical Realist Study of Knowledge Sharing**

### **Abstract**

Within the field of Human Resource Management (HRM), it is assumed people management practices, including teamworking and cultural initiatives enable knowledge sharing because they encourage employees to work collaboratively. Perhaps less well understood are occasions when such efforts fail to create knowledge sharing arrangements. Our case study of a merger explores knowledge sharing because of the emergent properties generated by the organisational changes instigated after the acquisition. Our contributions concern the linkages between people management practices their contexts, the agency of employees and knowledge sharing. First, we employ the overarching critical realist concept of emergence to situate the introduction of people management practices in support of knowledge sharing, to examine how such efforts create the emergent properties to either share *or* not to share knowledge. This helps us counter normative appraisals of HRM practices treated as unequivocal or symmetrical with knowledge sharing. Second, we refine the idea of communicative reflexivity to explain why employees might decide to engage or withdraw from collaborative work. By focusing on reflexivity as not just an ‘internal dialogue’ but also as an ‘external conversation’ we demonstrate how and why such *interaction* is an additional and significant form of mediation between social contexts and practice. Exploring knowledge sharing (or not) as a property of emergence that is reflexively monitored by actors in direct conversation with others allows us to explore how the ‘exterior’ mediation of reflexivity shapes the intentional actions of actors.

**Key words:** Human Resource Management, People Management Practices, Communicative Reflexivity, Emergence, Knowledge-Sharing.

## Introduction

Within the academic field of Human Resource Management (HRM) scholars have theorised how people management practices - broadly reflecting cultural and team-based organisational initiatives (Wright, Dunford, and Snell, 2001) - present opportunities to create the context for knowledge sharing (Cabrera and Cabrera, 2005; Currie and Kerrin, 2003). Such studies support the belief that with the right systems in place managers can orchestrate within the workforce a shared perception of an organisation's strategic goals (Cabrera and Cabrera, 2002). Their value is in establishing role-related expectations encouraging employees to knowledge share, which is seen as good for themselves, their fellow workers and the organisation (Cabrera and Cabrera, 2005; Gagne, 2009; Liu and Liu, 2011).

Faith in the utility of people management practices has, however come under scrutiny, as some scholars complain that little explanatory progress has been made to account for how, or why, such practices invariably fail to deliver the means to organise work processes in consistent and predictable ways (Delbridge, 2011; Delbridge and Keenoy, 2010). This apparent mismatch points to explanatory tensions between such interventions conceived as the normative basis for coordinated action and what managers and their employees experience. A critical approach is to treat knowledge sharing as the complex outcome "of human agency operating within a context of societal and political economic circumstances" (Watson, 2004, 453). Such a view calls into question the extent people management practices, seen as discrete interventions, shape in some predictable fashion the motivational contexts for knowledge sharing (Prieto-Pastor, 2010). Our contention is that such practices are not immutable or unequivocal (de Certeau, 1984; Seidl, 2007) but are *situated*, shaped by unfolding social relationships, organisational and cultural settings (Tsoukas, 1996).

In this article, we explore how social contexts shape people management practices that may or may not lead to knowledge sharing. By recognising social context as crucial to the explanatory

endeavour (Mutch, Delbridge and Ventresca, 2006) we draw on the philosophical ontology of critical realism (Archer, 2003; Elder-Vass, 2005; Fleetwood, 2009; Edwards, O'Mahoney and Vincent, 2014) to explain (rather than predict) the dynamic (not unitary) relationship between human actors, management interventions and the social structures shaping knowledge sharing in organisations.

Our conceptual endeavour is built around an empirical study of knowledge sharing in a post-merger organisation. The case study involves a UK brewer acquired by a European operation and focuses on the HRM initiative introduced to transform sales – our study focuses on the way market and organisational changes shaped efforts to instil knowledge sharing, as part-and-parcel of the new sales approach and how this was exercised and actualised within the sales department.

To examine the consequences of the merger for understanding knowledge sharing, we outline a critical realist ontology to explain the relationship between structure and human agency; that is, we begin by exploring how social structures shape activity and how individuals reflexively monitor their actions (Fleetwood 2005; Hesketh and Fleetwood 2006). In explaining our case study, we enlist the concept of emergence to frame the reconfiguration of sales employees, sales practices, and customer relationships post-merger (Archer, 2003; Lawson, 2015; Elder-Vass, 2005; Smith, 2010). Emergence is an overarching concept within critical realism that offers an antidote to normative HRM studies, which treats social capital – the building blocks for knowledge sharing (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998) – as in some way synonymous with teamwork and cultural initiatives (Gagne, 2009). Instead, our view of knowledge sharing focuses on the contradictions that can result from management efforts to build new structures and relations around shared understanding. Following emergence such arrangements have intrinsic properties, which as we will show, include the potential to (a) share knowledge or (b) not to share knowledge. Our evaluation of whether the introduction of people management

practices leads to knowledge sharing is based on a (re)examination of reflexivity, which is the *mechanism* that explains the causal powers of emergent properties (Archer, 2003).

Exploring reflexivity as the mechanism explaining the causal powers of the merger allows us to examine the consequences of the merger and its impact on knowledge sharing when certain organisational arrangements persisted despite efforts to instil alternatives. Our refinement to reflexivity is in examining ‘external conversations’ in respect of communicative reflexivity as a particular mode of deliberation; our endeavour is to elaborate occasions when sales operatives reflected *with others*, when considering problematic sales negotiations. Building on the idea that reflexivity is the ‘internal dialogue’ used by people to activate the causal powers of structures we propose that such conversations can be exterior to persons, indicating that social *interaction* is a further form of mediation between social contexts and practice (Caetano 2015). Our contribution to HRM inspired knowledge sharing scholarship is to reject a deterministic stance that appreciates the potential for fallibility in our own approach too. First, emergence explains the potential of people management practices to create a context for employees to either share and/or not to share knowledge. We evaluate knowledge sharing in terms of the intrinsic constitution and structure of these practices within changing organisational contexts, the properties they produce (to share knowledge or not) and the powers they yield. (Fleetwood, 2009). Second, our study illustrates that the properties and the powers they might yield must always be actualised by actors drawing attention to the relational fault lines that shapes whether knowledge sharing takes place or not in organisational contexts. We outline the structure-agency mediations relating to ‘exterior’ interactions constituting reflexivity to understand the situated deliberative actions of the sales operatives.

The paper proceeds by discussing critical realism as a particular ontological perspective that can help to examine knowledge sharing. We then draw on the overarching idea of emergence and subsidiary concept of communicative reflexivity (that we refine) to explore the contextual

dynamics shaping knowledge sharing in our study, which we present as a feature of unfolding organisational contexts and agentic intention. The next section describes the research site and methods; here we frame and summarise our argument before discussing our research findings and outlining some limitations in our study. The final section concludes.

### **A Critical Realist Ontology for Understanding Knowledge Sharing**

Critical realism is a “philosophical approach that seeks to be an ontological “underlabourer” for a range of substantive theories in the natural and social sciences” (Mutch, 2004, 430). It is premised on a view of the social world consisting of actors and social structures; that is; social structures are drawn upon by actors as they reflexively perform their actions (Fleetwood 2005; Hesketh and Fleetwood 2006). Central to this approach is the idea that conditioned action is best understood when agency and social structure are treated as analytically distinct social phenomena (Archer, 1995, 2003). By keeping action and structure separate it is possible to ascertain how structures shape action. This is important for our endeavour because we hold to the idea that structures represent the mechanisms “that give rise to action, manifest not in the form of deterministic outcomes but rather as empirical tendencies” (Delbridge and Edwards, 2013, 934).

To explain the limits and chances for knowledge sharing in organisations it is necessary to understand the relationship between mechanisms and agency, which in critical realism is made possible using a stratified ontology that consists of three nested domains – the empirical, actual, and real. The domain of the empirical is made up of events that form the basis of common-sense observations that are always mediated by beliefs, norms and values (Fleetwood 2005). Next, the domain of the empirical is nested in the domain of the actual, which are the empirical events that may or may not be experienced by humans (Bhaskar 1979; Outhwaite 1987). In turn, the domain of the real consists of mechanisms; that is, ‘the real is to be found in the causal mechanisms that produce the event states that we record as the “actual” and it is these causal

mechanisms that [social] scientists are concerned to identify and explore' (Mutch et al., 2006, 611). Put simply, mechanisms generate *actual* events, which may or may not be experienced in the domain of the *empirical*.

To explain the dynamic interaction between mechanisms and agency we turn to Archer and what she describes as “morphogenetic cycles”. We are interested in the “emergent properties of the social, which emerge out of human activity over time and turn back to confront human actors with circumstances which are not of their own making, circumstances which provide both constraints and possibilities” (Mutch, 2004, 433). This relates to the antecedent conditions for interaction – social interaction is made possible because of these properties and yet how actors respond to these conditions depends on their own experiences and dispositions which explains the persistence or otherwise of such arrangements. This confirms that ‘the emergent properties of structures and the actual experiences of agents are not synchronized’ (Archer, 1995, 149). Actors have differing understandings of their contexts, which means that not all actors experience the same structures in the same way, and this has implications for how they reflexively monitor everyday situations.

### **Emergence and Knowledge Sharing**

HRM scholarship has made progress in theorising how people management practices create the contexts for collaborative actions to flourish (e.g., Cabrera and Cabrera, 2002; 2005; Prieto-Pastor, 2010; Gang et al., 2009; Liu and Liu, 2011). Although this scholarship offers useful insights into the way people management practices can be the source of social capital (Nahapiet and Goshal, 1998) we caution against studies that pronounce the utility of HRM. Such views have for the most part been based on psychological theories that provide an account of agency as self-action. This treatment is evident in, for example, Gagne’s work (2009, 574) when they argue autonomous motivation is a major determinant of knowledge sharing, because “people’s attitudes towards sharing will become more positive when they internalise the value of sharing



knowledge”. This focus on the individuals is further revealed in the work of Liu and Liu (2011) who argue self-efficacy enables knowledge sharing because actors “act” on the basis of cost-benefit judgements. The commitment of scholars interested in the role played by HRM inspired initiatives is in the way such practices can create a particular context that aids and facilitates knowledge sharing. In particular, they “describe network relationships in terms of interpersonal trust, existence of shared norms and identification with other individuals in the network” (Cabrera and Cabrera, 2005, 722).

While it is tempting to attribute causal significance to social capital, which is the product of certain sets of structural, cognitive, and relational dimensions (Nahapiet and Goshal, 1998), it is also flawed in so far as the connection between such dimensions is not necessarily uniform or predictable (Hesketh and Fleetwood, 2006). The trouble is that while managers might have faith in the introduction of people management practices, such as cultural initiatives to create shared understanding, the relationship between practice and understanding is rarely linear. To evaluate the dynamics of such processes we draw on the critical realist concept of emergence, which is “operating when a whole has properties or powers that are not possessed by its parts” (Elder-Vass, 2008, 316). This version of the concept differs from lay interpretations, which focus on emergence as the arrival of a new phenomenon. Our interest is in the possibility that people management practices have emergent properties, which is when practices arranged in a specific way (organisational setting) have causal significance:

“It is the particular relations that exist between the parts when they are organised into just this sort of whole that led to the whole being more than the sum of its parts, in the sense that the whole has properties that the parts would not have if they were not organised into this sort of whole” (Elder-Vass: 2008, 285).

For analytical purposes, to understand the emergent properties of such an arrangement it is necessary to identify the “*whole* to which it belongs, the kinds of *parts* and *relations* that make up this kind of whole, and the *mechanism* by which these parts and relations combine to produce the *property*” (Ibid 2008, 285, *italics in original*). Organizational arrangements can be

considered the *wholes* we are interested in (Elder-Vass, 2005). Such wholes are “composed of human individuals (their parts), organised through the roles they occupy in the organisation (which define the relations between them), and the consequence of these people acting in these roles (the generative mechanism) is to produce the capabilities of the organisation as a whole” (Elder-Vass, 2008, 288). The properties of such arrangements do not have causal significance unless they are structured: an organisation “may be defined as *a persistent whole formed from a set of parts, the whole being significantly structured by the relations between these parts*” (Elder-Vass, 2005, 317 *italics in original*). In the natural world, the causal properties of water are not found in oxygen or hydrogen but rely on the specifics of the chemical relation of the parts. Our ability to extinguish a fire depends on this relationship rather than the aggregation of hydrogen and oxygen molecules (Collier, 1998).

For emergence to happen in the social world we must understand the *structuring of relations* between actors. Our interest in a merger means existing commitments are called into question – changes in the marketplace call for a new approach to business, which is when practices and relations are subject to change and this is when pre-merger and post-merger conditions collide. Emergence allows us to capture the shaking out of roles, the reconfiguration of employees, and changes to role-related expectations. How these features come together is crucial as this sets the context for amongst other things knowledge sharing, and how this occurs depends (as described above) on a causal structure or mechanism (Bhaskar, 1978). To understand what happened needs to be seen as a product of how operatives and customers make sense of the merger: what was seen as appropriate or not given these social conditions. The *mechanism* through which such choices are made is human reflexivity, which works through emergence (Archer, 2003). In this respect, emergent properties are not only possessed by social structures but are part-and-parcel of reflexivity which is a feature of human personhood. As Smith states, human causal capacities “exist as emergent from the human body living in its natural and social

environments” (2010, 43). Of interest is the way such capacities are brought to bear, which we consider by investigating reflexivity as not just an ‘internal dialogue’ but also involving ‘external conversations’, which are shaped by the working relationships and experiences of the operatives and customers involved in the merger.

### **(Re)-examining Reflexivity**

To understand the influence of the changing constitution of the ‘parts’ and ‘relations’ following the merger we draw on the notion of reflexivity. Actors (the ‘parts’) are distinct from the social interactions (the ‘relations’) they embark upon and as such, they have the capacity to monitor social situations. That is, “persons interact as distinct entities. From those interactions, patterns of social relations emerge at another level of reality that are durable, historically continuous, and capable of exerting influence on other entities, including those from which they emerged” (Smith, 2010, 328). For Archer (2000, 2003), human actors possess a continuous sense of self and their own subjective reflexivity, which allows them to define their own projects in the course of colliding with the social world. For her, reflexivity is the “regular exercise of the mental ability shared by individuals to consider themselves in relation to their social contexts and vice versa” (Archer, 2007, 4). While such ideas coincide with the pronouncements of HRM scholars (e.g., Liu and Liu, 2011; Cabrera and Cabrera, 2005) the key difference is in how we represent the relationship between contexts and human actors, which must allow for competing properties to become actualised in the same situation.

According to Archer (2003), how actors reflect to themselves varies albeit the process remains an ‘internal dialogue’. She refers to four specific reflexive modes: communicative reflexives, autonomous reflexives, meta reflexives, and fractured reflexives. This work is important as the different modes of reflexivity indicate the various ways actors engage with social structures. We focus on communicative reflexivity, as a discrete mode of deliberation because our aim is to show the importance of ‘external conversations’ in confirming a shared view of the world.

Communicative reflexives are individuals who reflect upon themselves in ways that disclose the importance of ‘contextual continuity’ – they do this intersubjectively because their internal deliberations are made with reference to individuals that hold similar orientations, and because of this, their opinions matter. This perspective follows the idea of knowledge sharing that is premised on the benefits afforded by collaborative relations that exist among likeminded actors (Nahapiet and Goshal, 1998). Communicative reflexives also identify with the “‘unproblematic dovetailing’ of their concerns and a considerable ‘contentment’ with their established practices” (Archer, 2003, 184). For the purposes of the current analysis ‘contextual continuity’ is bracketed by the pre- and post-merger organisational setting and how this involuntarily shaped the situations confronted by the sales operatives. We explore the merger as a distinct social setting made up of actors operating within a temporal framework informed by practices pre-merger, as well as efforts to change the way beer was sold. The ‘unproblematic dovetailing of concerns’ refers to a commitment by actors to the appropriate and successful completion of sales transactions with customers while ‘contentment with their established practices’ draws attention to the utility of sales practices. Our contention is that communicative reflexivity is mediated ‘externally’ as well as ‘internally’, and it is the nature of these social relations (who is involved, who is doing what) that provides insight into the unpredictability of HRM inspired initiatives introduced to enable knowledge sharing.

The focus on inter-subjectivity is key because while Archer acknowledges that communicative reflexives involve conversations with others this remains an extension of the internal dialogue as opposed to a new form of mediation (Caetano, 2014). We suggest that in the context of the sales department, communicative reflexivity dominates as a form of reflexivity because the idea of contextual continuity is key to understanding how sales operatives tried to make sense of the disruptions of the merger (in conversation with others). The dovetailing of concerns and

contentment with established practices sheds light on how the various sales operatives made sense of the merger given their relative work experiences and expectations in the department. Actors deliberate their various courses of action, and this process shapes their relations, and yet they also reflect on their social relationships thus influencing the production of various outcomes. This account of reflexivity entails a dual analytical dimension whereby reflexivity is not only aimed at the context shaping action but also at relationships, which underpin personal projects. Thus, people management practices are always nested within existing social arrangements. Explaining knowledge sharing when organisational arrangements are under merger conditions means characterising the persistence and shift in the structuring of relations among the parts of the merged organisation. The new sets of relations shape action, but this is just not a process of following role-related prescriptions. The inter-subjective monitoring of events confirms the importance of existing relations in terms of the perceived benefits of re-creating those relations based on new rules and this, as we will show is dominated by “external conversations, whereby expectations, goals and projects are contextually negotiated in the presence of and with the participation of other subjects” (Caetano, 2014, 67).

Emergence offers insights into the structuring of relations post-merger. Our analysis focuses on these social relations as they unfolded in the sales department, and in particular, how sales operatives conducted business with customers following the introduction of teamworking and cultural initiatives to support knowledge sharing. The potential of such an initiative to ensure change is a feature of the choices and actions of the sales employees. Our consideration of the success of knowledge sharing is based on an assessment of how operatives monitored business transactions given these changes.

### **Research methods**

Our data stem from an exploratory study of situated learning and knowledge sharing following an acquisition in the UK brewing sector. Fieldwork took place over a two-year period between

2006-8 in an organisation that acquired an independent UK brewer. While several years have elapsed since the original research was undertaken a new analysis of data allows us to shed additional ‘critical light’ on these unfolding events. The original focus was the sales section of a subsidiary. This section had four teams with thirty-nine operatives led by a team leader. Following the merger, around one third of the unit’s staff consisted of new recruits, something that altered the group dynamic in the section; each of the teams consisted of new recruits and existing members of staff. Fieldwork was conducted to identify issues of interest (Bryman, 2001) that was achieved employing purposive sampling (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

As part of the original research process the fieldwork involved 29 tape-recorded interviews with team managers (n=4), new telesales recruits (n=11) and established sales operatives (n=12). The interviews gave information about their work biographies (shaped by their tenure in the department) as they attempted to understand the impact of these changes. In addition to interviews, communication workshops and team meetings were observed; these were aimed at staff confirming the company’s new strategy. Finally, documents pertaining to the merger and the company’s plans were consulted. Interviews touched upon changes in sales practice and associated challenges. Sales operatives were invited to reflect on the process and discuss how they learned their role post-merger. Knowledge sharing emerged as an important theme from interviews with operatives and managers with the latter discussing their role in socialising employees into the changes in practice as well as the rationale for knowledge sharing.

Having created a basic database from this original research the authors revisited the findings to consider the challenges of knowledge sharing and it is at this point the concept of emergence was discussed as an overarching framing device and communicative reflexivity was considered as a possible explanatory concept that could be refined. Following Jennings, Edwards, Jennings and Delbridge (2015, 118) a second order analysis then arose, based on “fresh and open-ended inductive analysis of an existing data set”. The first step in this second-order analysis involved

an assessment of the interview data and the archive collected to establish a temporal perspective of the changes in the telesales role and how the transaction between sales and customers was reconfigured into a new sales model. As a result of this process we identified two analytic periods. The first one pertained to the pre-merger sales context where knowledge sharing was not a priority, due to work design, whilst the second – which became the focus of this paper – pertained to managerial attempts to re-shape sales encouraging a move to knowledge sharing.

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INSERT TABLE I ABOUT HERE  
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Building on our timeline of events we started engaging with open coding, revisiting the data and developing first order categories (Table I) about managerial attempts to re-define sales and promote knowledge sharing as well as the way in which staff responded. In relation to the latter our categories pertained to distinct ideas about the post-merger sales practice on the part of the more experienced staff. We made this distinction because the reorganisation included a group of new sales operatives; they had no previous experience of working in the brewer. This change was also accompanied by the creation of a customer services department that had responsibility for the needs of customers, which had been the responsibility of sales before the merger.

Following on from this stage of analysis we engaged with axial coding exploring the links among first order categories. This involved creating second order categories that included the theme “People Management Practice - knowledge sharing” that resonated with arguments in HRM scholarship (Cabrera and Cabrera, 2002; 2005). In relation to sales and knowledge sharing we identified themes of judgement making (evaluating what is important and favouring a particular plan of action). The judgement making themes related to the idea of evaluating task related issues as well as workplace relationships and this provided an interesting analytical lens. Here we deployed an analytical framework to unpack how operatives reflexively monitored their engagement in sales as a communicative activity in relationship with important

others, including customers and other sales operatives. This monitoring was explored (as an external conversation) in how operatives *evaluated, deliberated, and dedicated* commitments to sales practice. This helped us to spot different relationships when role-related decisions revealed loyalty to others. These differences in validating the sales process were attributed to variations in how communicative reflexivity was enacted because sales operatives had clearly defined roles to follow, after the merger. In this respect, we argue that assuming uniformity in role-related expectations did not adequately explain how sales and knowledge sharing was actualised (Table II).

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INSERT TABLE II ABOUT HERE  
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Emergence draws attention to the relations among different sets of operative framed by (i) the mix of established sales operatives and new recruits, (ii) the new customer services department (iii) the new sales model and (iv) the introduction of people management practices to support knowledge sharing.

### **The Findings: Emergent Properties within Sales**

To begin, we detail sales practice and the newly introduced people management initiatives used to support the new sales model. The HRM-inspired knowledge sharing interventions reflected efforts to create a context to motivate staff to develop sales practices through collaboration, to see the intrinsic value of sharing knowledge for themselves and the organisation (Gagne, 2009; Prieto-Pastor 2010; Liu and Liu, 2011). The sales department was transformed post-merger with new operatives in place and re-defined roles reflecting customer service provision being moved to a new unit. Here staff followed plans to change how sales was performed. Following integration, the key focus was on selling own brands using structured pricing, which effectively eliminated the need for negotiated pricing, but included educating customers in selling beer as a quality product. To enable this process line managers ran *training sessions on quality*:



“In terms of training, one of the things we did was to run group sessions which were a very open and honest kind of forum. For example selling brands...we looked at brands like Ferrari, Gucci...brands that are totally sold on the image rather than the price (Team manager 3).

The shift from sales negotiation to brand recognition required operatives to re-think their role – knowledge sharing would enable them to operationalise what was being asked providing support in the way sales was conducted. These efforts were backed-up by cultural initiatives including a company-wide communication exercise that educated staff of changes occurring in the beer-selling market. Other initiatives included creating a ‘wall board’ that was placed at the entrance of the sales office to highlight the successes of employees in meeting sales targets.

“These boards are updated every month around best performance within the office, who’s performed well, who’s got a good story to tell” (Team manager 4).

Management supported the sentiments of the wall board with an annual ceremony.

“What we are trying to do, on the cultural side, is we try to explain to employees that we are a recognising culture that rewards excellence... Nominating your peers is giving some recognition, how you have changed your ways of working because of something that someone else has done...Getting people to think about lessons they can take from people in terms of learning occurring in everyday work” (Team manager 2).

These post-merger changes in operations and role responsibility confirmed new organisational arrangements and rationale to support customer relationships. At a fundamental level, the role of operatives was re-defined with customer services moving elsewhere while the emphasis on quality introduced new negotiation rules. Although the plan signalled changes to customer relations that were broadly welcomed in the conduct of the training sessions and efforts to create understanding around brand recognition, problems with the customer service provision in day-to-day sales surfaced in the conversations with sales operatives and customers. The controversy related to how customer complaints were dealt with by the new customer services unit. This was often reported as inadequate by the customers in conversation with the sales operatives:

“The relation with the customers was undermined relatively by this [customer service centralisation]” (established sales 4)

How this was dealt with confirmed the delivery of alternate remedies to the same problem and by different members of sales. We contend these competing readings of the same situation, which led to different responses (which set the context for knowledge sharing practice) reflects the recombination of sales operatives, redefined roles, the recasting of customer relations and introduction of HRM inspired people management practices. The intrinsic constitution of the newly restructured department resulted in distinct pairings of operatives, experienced and new recruits, working with customers. It was in this context that many operatives shared concerns over the impact of the merger on the quality of service:

“Talking to customers about quality...it’s time that you change them as well, because customers also used to talk about structure, pricing, profit, and it’s getting them to appreciate that we are now on a different level and our business promoted on the basis of quality” (telesales 4).“Before we dealt with all the customer service issues ourselves, whereas now you don’t know what is happening with your account until you might find out there is a problem” (established sales 8)

The legacy effects of the relations reflected a particular focus relating to customer expectation and service between established operative and customer:

“From a telesales perspective the customer had learned to trust this person [sales operative], because if he [or she] had a service problem and that person solved it, then it enhanced the relation that they had with one another. As a result of this, we would have more sales as well. So the relation with the customers was undermined relatively by this [customer service centralisation]” (established sales, 5).

For experienced sales operatives the new reality called into question how they dealt with customer relations, if there was a problem. Problems led some to selectively ignore the new sales regime. Their focus was on recovering failings, as opposed to following the prescribed role, which was orientated around selling quality products. This contrasted with the new sales recruits who dealt with customers entirely from this perspective rather than trying to deal with failed customer service (such as delivery arrangements):

“Before that [centralisation] happened, a lot of your time was spent on it, you could have spent half a morning trying to arrange a delivery. Now, we are more free to sell and meet our targets” (new sales 6).

The focus remained educating customers. Efforts were directed towards improving sales and not issues that were no longer their concern or responsibility (which was a departure from the way many experienced colleagues read the same situation). Significantly, variation in action served to create and catalyse tensions among experienced sales operatives and new recruits, which was most readily felt around knowledge sharing:

“I have got newer people in my team who are perhaps looking for someone to take a lead, but when they are encouraged to be open with what they think, if they are challenged in a negative way by one of the people that have been here for longer it can be quite demotivating for them [the new people]. So, for that reason there is a tendency of new recruits to share [knowledge] among themselves” (team manager 4).

The merger revealed new emergent properties that lead to the gradual unfolding of opposing alliances. The extent to which such divisions influenced knowledge sharing is explained in the constitution of these localised alliances and how these were actualised.

### **Communicative Reflexivity**

As Archer (2003) notes, communicative reflexivity is a form of shared orientation to common commitments. Our contention is that this process relies heavily on external conversations, as in the context of the sales department, which was subject to disruption and re-organisation. Our analysis focuses on sales transactions between operatives and customers and how these were conducted in respect of customer satisfaction. This can be explored as a three-fold process entailing *evaluation* of the social situation, *deliberation* over what should happen next and *dedication* to the chosen action. We consider such commitment in respect of occasional failings around sales transactions (Table III). Here we outline communicative reflexivity in respect of *morphostatic causes* to explain arrangements that confirmed the legacy effects of pre-merger customer relations and *morphogenetic causes* (Elder-Vass, 2005) that confirmed post-merger HRM inspired efforts to change sales practice, which is important because this set the context for the potential to share or not to share knowledge.

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INSERT TABLE III ABOUT HERE  
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In the case of *morphostatic causes* our focus is the relationship between *experienced operatives and customers* with a history of conducting and securing business, pre-merger. This draws attention to the actions of experienced operatives as monitored their relationship with the world around them. In this case, doing their job was understood in relation to not only the new sales model but also with how things were previously done, which relied on one-to-one negotiations and validation of customer relationships. The ‘problem’ was that in-line with past negotiations customers informed sales operatives of service failings. Customers often harked back to the old way of doing things especially if the new customer services department failed to offer the answers they wanted to hear. For many experienced operative’s customer concerns were *evaluated* as a problem *they* were expected to deal with. The *deliberations* over what to do in response to these failings were considered during the sales interaction (kept between operative and customer, cutting out the customer services department and other sales operatives). The reasoned response was to *dedicate* efforts to find solutions, which created precedents in the problems addressed by these operatives (albeit consistent with past protocols). We refer to these emergent properties as morphostatic causes because it is the combination of operator past experiences and customer relationships that we see the causal impact of legacy arrangements despite efforts to change the sales model post-merger.

In contrast *morphogenetic causes* arose when the *new recruits looked to each other* rather than customers to make sense of customer complaints. Customer negotiations reflected the role criteria that were set down post-merger and for the most part such actions were uncontroversial. This was a different *evaluation* of the same situation, as these new operatives confronted failed customer relations in terms of a prescribed solution led by the customer services department that was confirmed in discussion with other new sales operatives. When we refer to emergence,

we recognise the importance of the social relations situating action. The *deliberations* of the new recruits ensured customer negotiation were focused on sales. Such a *dedicated* response confirmed a formal response to creating continuity in understanding and acting the new roles out. The relations structuring actions remained closely tied to role-related expectations. These emergent properties are morphogenetic because the combination of new understanding, a new customer relations department and approach to selling products presented the opportunity to consolidate new sales practices and knowledge sharing as part-and-parcel of this work post-merger.

A defining feature of communicative reflexivity is the idea of contextual continuity. However, contrasts in how new and experienced operatives conducted their work presented various and conflicting framings of continuity. These divisions were amplified because the local conditions created competing orientations and outcomes that had consequences for knowledge sharing.

**The Property: to (a) share knowledge or (b) not to share knowledge**

Operatives confronted the same situation differently and this concerns the mechanism shaping certain decisions (i.e., to share or not to share knowledge). Our contention is that ‘external conversations’ mediated action; action was shaped in the way actors encountered customers and other colleagues. Reflexivity occurred in the context of the micro-mediations involving different pairings of actors (operative-customer and operative-operative); the sales operatives involved in these mediations tried to bring order to sales transactions, which was based on different appreciations of sales practice and how this was to be actioned.

For new operatives monitoring their understanding in respect of other new recruits there was a coherence to dealing with customer problems that conformed to management expectations of their role. The deliberative effort to discuss issues amongst themselves became a resource that was targeted to sales issues (*morphogenetic causes*). The ideas and insights for solving such problems became the content of the wall board in the sales department and reflected efforts to

embed the new approach to sales. The property (a) to share knowledge was part-and-parcel of these external conversations about what could happen next and how sales should be exercised. The property (b) not to share knowledge was a feature of how the *new recruits* monitored the actions of established operatives in finding solutions to customer complaints. As an outcome, the new recruits' evaluation of such actions (*morphostatic causes*) created a feed-back loop that led to the exclusion of experienced operatives from their external conversations and by implication, knowledge sharing activities. The reasons are two-fold: first, the actions of experienced operatives were deemed to be invalid as they broke the new rules. This effectively shattered the continuity sort by the new recruits, creating 'red flags', including, for example, possible solutions to problems excluding the new customer services unit (which were deemed as unwanted by the new recruits). The lessons learnt from such negotiations were therefore beyond requirement and of little value to the day-to-day task of sales and were not actively sought. Second, and as a result, the new recruits were reluctant to confer with these 'rogue' operatives about their concerns over what should happen. This excluded the experienced sales operatives from the micro-mediations around the new sales model and by implication helped undermine their inclusion in sales practice more broadly. Here we assess the role of interaction as an important mediating mechanism between context and practice (as exercised by the new recruits); that is, exclusion from 'external conversations' reinforced exclusion from knowledge sharing because discussions about new sales practice were synonymous with the need to share experiences.

## **Discussion**

This study shows how the merger shaped knowledge sharing. Emergence produces properties, to either (a) share knowledge or (b) not to share knowledge. Communicative reflexivity (with morphogenetic and morphostatic causes) is the *mechanism* explaining why some operatives chose to share knowledge with their colleagues or not and this concerned the particulars of the

‘external conversations’ of operatives (who was involved and who was excluded) as they made sense of sales post-merger. We believe such an analysis explains why HRM interventions fail to organise action in consistent and predictable ways.

The new sales model - supported by teamwork and the cultural initiative - was not uniformly instructive despite management efforts to enculturate knowledge sharing. This is because the merger created new combinations of actors around the sales role that revealed different interpretations of contextual continuity. The pairing of experienced sales operatives and customers confirmed relations and responsibilities defined by prior social expectations (i.e., morphostatic causes). It is within the context of these micro-mediations that experienced sales operatives calculated whether to ignore the concerns of customers or to take matters into their own hands. This interaction helped the operatives decide what was a priority and how such problems might be actioned and resolved. However, the pairing of operative and customer was not uniform when we consider the new sales operatives – they were less experienced and did not have the same relationship with customers. Contextual continuity was premised or framed by evaluations involving individuals without the same depth of knowledge; that is, emergent properties are also a feature of human personhood (Smith, 2010). Their concerns were framed differently, and mediated with other new recruits, which explains the importance of who is involved in the ‘external conversation’. The move by the new recruits to rely on fellow new recruits to resolve questions of ‘what should happen next’ (and not the customer) confirms a subtle difference in the constitution of the micro-mediations, when notions of continuity had a different set of properties (morphogenetic causes). And this external orientation is significant because as the new recruits monitored sales practice, they also excluded operatives from their external conversations effectively removing them from involvement in knowledge sharing.

Our framing of this process gives due attention to communicative reflexivity, which in this context includes an ‘external’ mode of mediation, which counters the assumption that HRM

practices have intrinsic value in creating a shared new context. Seen in respect of different combinations of actors (with different experiences) efforts to establish contextual continuity may not lead to social cohesion or some unitary notion of social capital (Cabrera and Cabrera, 2005). Knowledge sharing does not necessarily follow linear fashion commitments to building collaborative arrangements because this ignores the micro-mediations of reflexive actors that are rarely uniform but are always situated.

Our contribution to existing studies of people management practice is to interrogate the idea that knowledge sharing is motivated by positive notions of self-action, of the intrinsic value of such activities in a work context. In terms of the actions of management we indicate that for the most part operatives accepted the value of knowledge sharing, supporting the prescriptions and empirical evidence of HRM scholarship (Gagne, 2009; Liu and Liu, 2011; Cabrera and Cabrera, 2002; 2005). However, we would suggest that failure to share knowledge was not to do with the intrinsic value of such action but reflected how actors understood their relations with other operatives and customers. This was a shared evaluation but based on very different sets of experiences, expectations and social relations. Concerns over the opinion of others – a crucial element – in reflexively monitoring situations depended on who the important other was and in what context such evaluations were set. This was revealed in the importance given to past relations by experienced operatives and how the new recruits made judgements about these relations in terms of their own responsibilities and how this shaped their social relations with other new recruits.

Our contention is that we only understand the outcomes of social interventions if we take time to explore the properties that give rise to them and the mechanisms that actualise and therefore change/sustain contexts. The potential for people management practices to enable knowledge sharing only worked when operatives chose to make them work *and* were placed in the ‘right’ conditions to enable this to happen. The realities of knowledge sharing relate to these distinct



relations and how operatives made judgements in relation to important others. This was not a harmonious situation in so far as existing operatives valued relationships built up over time, which contrasted with the new recruits who were more concerned with immediate transactional realities. The fact that existing arrangements enabled 'outdated' practices to persist became a problem because this 'marked out' individuals as disruptive. The different pairings of actor monitored negotiations in ways that were entirely coherent to those that were involved in the reflexive moment. The problem was that such self-monitoring based on external conversations created divisions that represented opposing views of the same situation.

Building the context for knowledge sharing depended on how such practices were assessed in relation to sales practice. Because the new recruits started their evaluation from a different point of connection with customers and colleagues this evaluation stood in stark relief to the way the established operatives interpreted events. The property not to share knowledge was actualised because such evaluations were integral to the micro-mediations of the new recruits. Arguably, the new recruits did not set out to withdraw from sharing knowledge with other more experienced operatives, rather the unfolding events made such action more likely.

### **Limitations**

Before concluding the study, it is perhaps worth noting that while the current paper has focused exclusively on communicative reflexivity it is not our intention to suggest that other forms of reflexivity were not present in the study. Our preferred bracketing of contextual continuity to the merger allows us to focus on *interactions* in sales but this is not to suggest the case did not include, for example, the possible role of autonomous reflexives striving to follow their own path in dealing with the merger. Nor do we deny the chance that some individuals could be characterised as fractured reflexives unable to contemplate the new world of sales, finding themselves 'displaced'. Rather, our analysis was deliberately targeted in what is claimed and here we have deliberately focused on refinements to communicative reflexivity.

## **Conclusions**

Our approach has been to draw attention to the relations structuring HRM interventions and the evaluation of events by human agents (Hesketh and Fleetwood, 2006). This two-stage analysis focuses on context and then the relationship of agents to these conditions. In the case of the merger, we mapped out the changes in terms of changes to the beer sector and the merged organisation. Situating knowledge sharing in this way has allowed us to zoom-in on the micro mediations surrounding sales that confirms the agentic intention of operatives and important others who helped them make judgements about the way to deal with sales queries. While such interventions presented knowledge sharing as an option it also created divisions, which opened the potential to not to share knowledge. Emergence does not infer continuity in a normative sense but confirms a range of emergent properties that might be actualised through the process of human reflexivity and as we have tried to show when considered as a feature of external conversations, this situates HRM practices in the societal and political economic circumstances (Watson, 2004).

Our contributions are both empirical and theoretical because we offer a nuanced understanding of the contested nature of knowledge sharing (Kamoche, Kannan, and Siebers, 2014). We draw attention to the concept of emergence to explore the complexities of organising and the impact of implementing HRM practices in support of knowledge sharing. Competing notions of contextual continuity are made evident in the relationality of operatives as they made sense of sales and customer relations post-merger. To show how this shaped knowledge sharing we empirically evidenced communicative reflexivity to reveal distinctions in the way operatives made judgements about their work. This reflexive moment - in relation to important others - informed the extent to which knowledge sharing was actualised. Here we also refine work on reflexivity (Archer, 2003) to emphasise reflexivity as not just an 'internal dialogue' but also an external conversation. Consideration of morphogenetic and morphostatic causes (Elder-Vass,

2005) draws attention to distinct emergent properties that can exist in a shared context, which when bracketed with micro-mediations among individuals confirm knowledge sharing as a product of these shared experiences that reveal important distinctions in the situated nature of human reflexivity.

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**Table I: First Order Concepts**

Re-shaping sales	Introducing knowledge sharing	Divergent readings of sales post-merger	Prioritising different sets of relationships
<p>“It’s about getting the right price, telling the customers about the price they charge and the margin they make, consumers they are getting and helping to build value. Now they are getting to see how it works, while during the integration and right after it they had no vision of how this is going to work” (team manager 2)</p>	<p>“We want people to be creative. What is important is to develop the skill base and develop the knowledge widely enough... so that they can adapt the knowledge to a selling conversation and be able to speak as wide enough as they possibly can” (section manager).</p>	<p>“I think that this [customer service involvement] is driven by customer expectation as well, because the customers expect a level of service and perhaps are not getting that” (established telesales 1)</p>	<p>“The relation with the customers was undermined relatively by this [customer service centralisation]” (established telesales 4)</p>
<p>“There is a department that focuses on selling and adds value through selling [telesales] and also there is another department that focuses on customer service and delivers the best service it possibly can” (section manager)</p>	<p>“What “Brewer” wants to do is to have key brands, that people want at a fixed price, so now tele account managers have to be creative, on how they sell our brands and what we are trying to do with quality and visibility, and of course they cannot do that totally on their own” (team manager 4)</p>	<p>“Now [following centralisation of customer service), we are more free to sell and meet our targets” (new recruit 6)</p>	<p>“You might have heard that ‘customers here expect us to sort things out for them’, but it’s always some customers with some people” (new recruit 2)</p>

**Table II: Summary of Second Order Concepts**

<p><b>Communicative Reflexivity – morphogenetic causes</b></p>	<p><b>Evaluation:</b> reveals concerns with performative competence, which is viewed as the attempt to strictly embed the new sales model.</p>
	<p><b>Deliberation:</b> reveals the tendency of new recruits to deliberate among themselves, as well as customers (but not experienced operatives).</p>
	<p><b>Dedication:</b> reveals commitment to performing the role without deviating from post-merger conventions.</p>
<p><b>Communicative Reflexivity – morphostatic causes</b></p>	<p><b>Evaluation:</b> reveals concerns of loss of revenue due to customer service inconsistencies. Performative competence is viewed in line with embedding the new sales model in light of legacy customer relations.</p>
	<p><b>Deliberation:</b> reveals a tendency among the experienced operatives to engage in informal conversations with customers who share the same long-standing relationships and with those colleagues who ‘understood’ the immediate challenges of customer service failings.</p>
	<p><b>Dedication:</b> reveals a tendency to engage with customer service to maintain existing customer relations.</p>

**Table III: Sales Practice and Knowledge Sharing**

<p><b>Communicative Reflexivity – Morphogenetic causes</b></p>	<p><b>Evaluation</b>          “That [engaging with customer service] stops progress... You will always hear about the only time that [city in South Eastern England] made a mistake, you will never hear about the 500 times they did it right” (new recruit, 2)</p> <p>“There have been occasions when the customer service hasn’t been great. Rather than write that off and say it was a one off situation we will feedback to them and it won’t happen again, people tend to say ‘they [customer service] can’t deal with that”. (new recruit 1)</p> <p><b>Deliberation</b>          “You always talk to friends and peers about a problem rather than maybe the more senior members [incumbents] of the department... you don’t try to teach the old dog new tricks”. (New recruit 4)</p> <p>“I wouldn’t feel comfortable to ask any of the older people here” (new recruit 5).</p> <p><b>Dedication</b>          “Time should be spent on selling and talking quality and customers should appreciate the fact that they can phone up and talk to a [customer service] person rather than wait for the tele-account manager” (new recruit, 2).</p> <p>“As with anything, centralisation makes sense. Now, we are more free to sell and meet our targets” (new recruit 7)</p>
<p><b>Communicative Reflexivity – Morphostatic causes</b></p>	<p><b>Evaluation</b>          “The business is precious to us, coming down to targets that we have to meet, and we don’t want to lose anything, we don’t want customers to go somewhere else”. (experienced telesales 8)</p> <p>“I lost an account this morning because the customer was dissatisfied with the way [city in south eastern England] handled their problem” (experienced telesales 11).</p> <p><b>Deliberation</b>          “We talk to each other cause we try to find out what is happening, what is not happening, what is working [with customers] and what is not.” (experienced telesales 7)</p> <p>“In my case if I talked to someone I would just talk them through the exact conversation, what happened, what the outcome was.” (experienced telesales 8)</p> <p><b>Dedication</b>          “I like being involved and know everything that is happening and sorting things for them [customers] because you also build trust in this way.” (experienced telesale 5)</p> <p>“I would rather have been involved in customer service issues because I don’t think a lot of my customers are getting a satisfactory service from the new department” (experienced telesales 4).</p>