1. HRM and trust, or trust and HRM? An underdeveloped context for trust research

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INTRODUCTION

Until recently there has been little systematic consideration of the relationship between Human Resource Management (HRM) and trust. This dearth of attention is a significant omission as it is a topic that is an important context from which to study trust, and with significant implications and benefits for organizations. Prior to joining organizations, recruitment and selection processes provide clues and signals of their trustworthiness. Existing workers, and the wider community through family and friends or via the internet, may become all too aware of their reputation as a fair and trustworthy employer. Indeed, the internet is often a repository of poor examples of HRM practices fuelled by disgruntled employees, as Goldman Sachs and others have discovered to their cost. Incidences of workplace violence can often be traced back to HRM processes, often performance management, in which the expectations and experiences of an employee and those of the designated representative of the organization have gone badly awry. Similarly, examples of unfair treatment of employees around lay-offs and downsizing often make the national news, yet HRM remains an area that is underutilized. HRM policies and practices involve the articulation and direct exposure to the values and integrity of an organization, not once but over time and from a variety of distinct sources. Thus, they can be seen as a domain that offers distillations and germane experience of trust within that distinct context. It is a domain in which the competence, or otherwise, of the organization and those tasked with delivering these systems are exposed. It is an area where comparison can directly be made by individuals reflecting on their own distinct experiences, but also through comparison with the treatment and experiences of their peers, superiors and subordinates. As Colquitt et al. (2012) showed, these experiences can help deepen their commitment to the firm, or enhance their feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty.

Research has considered the relationship between trust and HRM in various ways, for example, in terms of the consequences of HRM on trust (e.g., Mayer and Davis, 1999; Searle et al., 2011b), or as a mediator
providing an underlying mechanism or process influencing other variables (e.g., Tsui et al., 1997; Whitener, 2001), or more commonly as a moderator influencing the direction and/or strength of relationships, such as a trusting climate in work, enhancing or diminishing the impact of HRM on performance (e.g., Dirks and Ferrin, 2001; Innocenti et al., 2010; Alfes et al., 2012). However, there has been less emphasis on HRM as an antecedent, an active agent in the development and maintenance of employees’ trust in their managers and in the firm (Whitener, 1997; Tzafrir, 2005; Searle and Skinner, 2011b). The latter perspective is a far more compelling for researchers to explore and for organizations to exploit. Similarly, little attention has been paid to whether good systems might sustain organizational trust and act as a buffer to protect against poor managers (Skinner and Searle, 2011). It therefore has a potential role in repairing trust (Gillespie and Dietz, 2009).

This chapter begins by defining trust and HRM and outlines four compelling reasons for their study. Then I summarize why trust is a salient concern in an HRM context and identify distinct dimensions that are often neglected by researchers, including individual difference factors. I then review the dominant research paradigm – in particular, extant work on the influence of HRM policy assemblages and then distinct policy areas regarding trust. I highlight two emergent facets of current work: first, those concerning more frequently studied HRM practices, but from a novel Human Resource (HR) perspective; second, those offering a novel trust perspective on HRM areas, such as bullying and harassment. Next, this relationship between HRM and trust is inverted, challenging researchers to consider whether and how far trust affects HR, summarizing research on the impact of delivery on trust and consider the influence of the HR function on trust. In each section I raise key insights and indicate directions and agendas for future research.

DEFINING TRUST AND HRM

Trust concerns the perceptions, decisions and actions that arise from positive expectations, but also perceived vulnerability derived from the perceived intentions, or behaviours of another party acting as an agent of the organization; in this context the other party is clearly a collective – the organization. At this level of analysis the trust foci involve concerns about the competence, fairness, consistency and benign intent of an institution (Carnevale, 1995), or of an abstract principle (Giddens, 1990). As a result it requires the assessment, evaluation and assimilation of information from multiple sources, often from differing levels, about the organization
While this can be derived from direct experiences, third parties are a rarely considered source, such as insights obtained from witnessing how the organization deals with colleagues and other significant stakeholders. Importantly, there are certain organizational role holders whose actions and behaviours will carry more influence, such as those occupying pivotal leadership roles (see Searle and Ball, 2004; Hope-Hailey et al., 2012). Critically, an assessment of this set of collective characteristics can endure beyond the transition of any one agent (Whitley, 1987; Giddens, 1990), making issues of substitution salient concerns for trust scholars. In addition, there can be an often overlooked symbolic impact from the HR function itself, often regarded as the guardian of important aspects of trustworthiness. (These dimensions will be discussed later.)

Trust in organizations is an area where comparatively little research has been focused, especially between employees’ trust in their employing organizations (for overviews see Searle et al., 2011a). Extant research confirms that while organizational trust is related to interpersonal trust, for example the relationship between managers and employees, it is a distinct form of trust, informed by a number of factors. These include perceived organizational support (Tan and Tan, 2000), distributive and procedural justice (Cohen-Charash and Spector, 2001) as well as types of systems (e.g., high commitment HR practices) (Whitener, 1997, 2001; Searle et al., 2011b). Although most previous attention has emphasized trust as a perception (Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998), in line with Dietz and Den Hartog (2006) I have deliberately widened the scope of considerations beyond that of mere beliefs.

HRM is defined as a set of policies and practices concerned with structuring the interaction of human beings within an organizational context in order to maximize performance (Searle and Skinner, 2011a). The employee is emphasized as a valuable asset to the organization and source of competitive advantage, with HRM focusing on the alignment of a subset of organizational policies to support the overall strategy (Legge, 1995).

Scholars have argued that HRM is amongst the most influential practices on trust (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994), but there is limited research considering either distinct, or combined, policy areas. Although there may be some variation in precisely which policies and practices comprise HRM across different organizations, these areas are common to individuals’ experience of employment, if at times due to their omission. HRM touches the lives of all employees throughout their employment cycle within an organization (Searle and Skinner, 2011a) (see Figure 1.1). Even prior to joining an organization the (potential) employee gains some awareness and experience of the organization derived through these policies and their
delivery, resulting in a set of clues and signals that provide insight into potential vulnerability and expectations within that particular organizational context.

WHY TRUST AND HRM MATTER

There are four persuasive reasons why trust and HRM are important topics from both an academic and organizational perspective. First, trust has teleological merit, as trust offers significant practical benefits to organizations. Extant research shows that organizations with higher trust have enhanced effectiveness, efficiency and performance (e.g., Whitney, 1994; Kramer and Tyler, 1996; Davis and Landa, 1999; Mayer and Davis, 1999; Dirks and Ferrin, 2002; Tzafrir, 2005). Studies demonstrate that employees with high organizational trust put greater effort into their roles and engage more cooperatively with others (Podsakoff et al., 1990; Konovsky and Pugh, 1994; Pillai et al., 1999), while those who do not trust their employing organizations work less effectively (Dirks and Ferrin, 2001), engage in counterproductive behaviours (Bies and Tripp, 1996), or simply leave (Robinson, 1996).

HRM practices that facilitate the fair treatment of employees not only engender trust in the organization, but also directly influence employees’ attitudes to their work (Aryee et al., 2002). From an HRM perspective, these findings offer further confirmation for Barney and Hansen’s (1994)
contention that trustworthy firms have a competitive advantage over their rivals. Significantly, evidence shows that both the content of HRM policies, and the perceived fairness with which they are delivered are central to employees’ perceptions of organizational trustworthiness (e.g., Mayer and Davis, 1999; Aryee et al., 2002; Searle et al., 2011b; Colquitt et al., 2012). However, despite assertions that HRM are amongst the most influential areas for trust development, to date it remains an under-recognized topic.

Second, from a deontological perspective, trust has been linked to sound moral and ethical principles (Mayer et al., 1995; Schoorman et al., 1996; Becker, 1998). Perceptions of trust are driven strongly by the perceived trustworthiness of the trusted party (Barber, 1983; Kramer, 1999; Schoorman et al., 2007; Searle et al., 2011b). While trust is derived from assessment of attributes including the trusted party’s competence and predictability (Dietz and Den Hartog, 2006), it also focuses attention on two more ethical dimensions: the integrity of the organization and its agents in terms of perceived adherence to moral standards; and benevolence, which emphasizes the benign, if not positive, intentions and behaviours towards those who are trusting and their welfare. Research both conceptually and empirically argues that employees prefer to trust organizations that uphold moral and ethical standards (Gillespie and Dietz, 2009; Searle et al., 2011b).

Third, this context offers researchers insight into the critical interface between the organization’s process and systems, and what Blunsdon and Reed (2003) refer to as the ‘social system of work’; the more relational aspects in which the vulnerabilities and expectations of key stakeholders, including employees, managers, trade unions and HRM professionals, become salient. This makes it a fertile arena to explore the potential synergies and discrepancies in the trust levels of different stakeholders. It is also a dynamic context in which employees’ progress can be chartered through a cycle of HR activities. This gives potential to examine transitions through different types of trust (e.g., cognitive versus affective [McAllister, 1995], or stages of trust [e.g., Lewicki and Bunker, 1995]). Sadly, all too often HRM is a central context in which trust is breached, thus it is also a key context in which to explore the repair of trust (see Gillespie and Dietz, 2009; Hope-Hailey et al., 2012, or Gillespie and Hurley, Chapter 8 this volume for a more detailed discussion). HRM presents a crucible in which the salience of trust, or its violation, becomes germane, crystallized for both the organization and the employee.

Finally, there is considerable academic division between trust and justice researchers. Although some attempts have been made to create more dialogue between these two fields (e.g., Lewicki et al., 2005), there has been limited consensus between the two. In reviewing studies on trust and HRM, many have been undertaken by justice researchers with trust
as an important facet, while others are conducted by trust researchers with justice as a critical dimension. Recently, Colquitt and colleagues (Colquitt and Mueller, 2008; Colquitt and Rodell, 2011; Colquitt et al., 2012) have made important strides in disentangling these two domains and show their interrelationships. These recent developments indicate the value of improved conceptualization and operationalization of these two distinct dimensions, particularly the greater precision of items within scales, and in longitudinal studies. Overall, HRM presents a significant context in which the relationships between trust and justice can be explored, and more critically, one in which our understanding of how trust can be both damaged and restored can be enhanced. In summary, there are significant and under-examined benefits to be derived from studying trust in the HR context.

TRUST AND HR POLICIES

In thinking specifically about why trust is salient for HRM, vulnerability and expectations are key issues. It is argued that risk is necessary for trust to be a concern (Luhmann, 1988). Although risks can vary between employees due to different levels of dependence upon, and vulnerability towards, the organization, HR policies and practices touch all employees. Paradoxically, potential risk might be at its highest prior to employment. Here would-be employees have far less insight into whether their trust is well placed, yet scant attention has been paid to trust in this situation (see for an exception Searle and Billsberry, 2011).

The impact of distinct HR policies for trust varies considerably due to their different relative importance, and also the different frequency with which they occur during the employment cycle (Searle and Skinner, 2011a). For example, individual experiences such as recruitment and selection might have a relatively large impact when contrasted with the more frequent annual performance reviews, but this could all change following a negative appraisal with a new line manager. Trust in the manager may decline further if this same manager is witnessed bullying another employee, but turns into the erosion of organizational trust if this harassment is reported to HR but nothing is done.

In many senses trust is at the heart of the employment relationship. Although expectations and vulnerability may vary from employee to employee, there is an obvious imbalance of power between the employee and their employer. While there is a variety of laws designed to protect employees and provide some level of institutional trust (Shapiro, 1987), they nevertheless remain vulnerable to any organization that provides
the means for them and their families to thrive, and in some cases literally survive, for example in a US context through provision of health care benefits. It is worth considering further the influence of the employment contract in trust perceptions (see Weibel and Six, Chapter 3 and Vlaar, Chapter 4 in this volume for further discussion).

A DISPOSITION TO TRUST?

Individual difference is an under-researched factor underlying trust perceptions. Extant research and practical observations identifies that some individuals trust more readily than others (see Searle et al., 2011a for a discussion). Rotter (1967) outlined individuals’ readiness or propensity to trust as a personality attribute, which is a relatively stable generalized expectancy about the perceived trustworthiness of others. It has a strong connection with individuals’ awareness and tolerance of vulnerability. It has been referred to variously as generalized trust (Stack, 1978), trust propensity (Mayer et al., 1995) or disposition to trust (Kramer, 1999) and a sub-facet of the big five personality factors’ agreeableness factor (Costa and McCrae, 1992). Importantly, the inclusion of a trust-related personality dimension adds another layer to our understanding, suggesting that disposition, rather than direct experience, informs our levels of trust (Blunsdon and Reed, 2003).

The influence of dispositional trust extends beyond first-hand trusting experience. This is of particular relevance in ambiguous situations (Gill et al., 2005) or those with unfamiliar actors (Bigley and Pearce, 1998). Here situational cues will tend to be weaker, leaving greater scope for individual discretion. Studies of recruitment and selection or of periods of change should not overlook this important dimension.

The inclusion of personality can offer further insight. First, research suggests that the impact of disposition goes beyond the information available about others’ trustworthiness. For example, even where previous experience is available about the trusted party, those with higher trust dispositions still show greater levels of trust (Kee and Knox, 1970). Similarly, meta-analysis reveals its underlying impact (Colquitt et al., 2007), and as a significant predictor of organizational-level trust (Searle et al., 2011b). Second, studies suggest that propensity to trust influences the type of information that individuals attend to. For example, those with a higher disposition to trust are more positive and less suspicious in their views of others (Rotter, 1967, 1980). Thus, it may act as a filter mechanism, altering the focus and interpretations of others’ actions. Govier (1994) suggests those with high predisposition to trust are less sensitive to information
about adverse situations. Similarly, dilemma game studies reveal that participants with high propensity to trust attend more to signs of trustworthiness, while those with low trust propensity are more sensitive to signs of betrayal (Parks et al., 1996). Thus, repeated evidence of untrustworthiness is required to alter initial trust levels amongst high trust propensity employees, while their low trust counterparts need far more evidence of trustworthiness to start trusting. Recent work found that high trusting individuals attend more to others’ benevolence and integrity (Yakovleva et al., 2010). Therefore propensity can alter levels of sensitivity towards events, particularly important for issues of justice (Colquitt et al., 2007) and so is a significant dimension to include in studies of trust breakdown and repair.

**HRM IMPACT ON TRUST**

Researchers’ attention has focused on the relationship between HRM and trust, examining either distinct combinations of practices, or distinct policy areas. Within each organization, choices are made by HR professionals and senior managers about which HR strategies and policies are deployed. While legal requirements create some constraint, nevertheless the final array of organizational policies will involve active decisions, with policies providing statements of intent towards employees (Skinner et al., 2004). Their mere presence will have some impact (Guest and Conway, 2011), but so too might their omission. Employees interpret these policies together with their perceptions of managers’ behaviour as being indicative of ‘the personified organization’s commitment to them’ (Whitener, 2001, p. 530). These signals of and clues to organization trustworthiness clarify and make more predictable what is expected and required for reward and progression (Tzafrir, 2005). For example, high job security signals benevolence and care towards employees (Iles et al., 1990); similarly the inclusion of more family-friendly policies suggests concern about employees’ well-being (Grover and Crooker, 1995).

In addition to policy content, how it is implemented provides employees with tangible evidence of the extent to which management’s intentions are genuine and can be trusted (Skinner et al., 2004). Recent longitudinal research reveals how informational justice shapes employees’ subsequent perceptions of managers’ benevolence and integrity (Colquitt and Rodell, 2011). Employees are more trusting of employers who adhere to their own policies and punish those who deviate from their required norms and standards (Weibel et al., 2009). In this way features of the workplace and the interventions of managers shape perceptions of trust (Blunsdon and Reed,
2003). Taken together, HRM policies and their implementation graphically demonstrate the organization’s competence, care and concern, integrity and respect for their employees and their interests; consequently they impact significantly on the development and maintenance of organizational trust.

**Bundles**

One area that has received greater attention is distinct bundles of policies and practices termed high involvement work systems (HIWS). These are a set of practices designed to improve communication flow, promote empowerment and participation, and encourage employees to invest both tangibly, as well as emotionally, in their employer (Vandenberg et al., 1999). HIWS typically include those concerned with information sharing and employee participation, job security, performance management, and training and development (see e.g., Huselid, 1995; Delery, 1998; Boselie et al., 2005). For example, manufacturing employees’ experiences of HIWS were found to positively influence their trust in the organization but also commitment and satisfaction, while reducing stress (Appelbaum et al., 2001). Similarly, in a public sector study these practices predict employee trust in colleagues, managers and their department (Gould-Williams, 2003). A large-scale multi-organizational European study showed how perceptions of competence, but also the benevolent intent of the firm, enhanced the overall trust in the employer (Searle et al., 2011b). Importantly, this study showed it was the procedural justice derived from the delivery of these policies that was a key factor. Content and implementation are significant and distinct issues.

**Distinct Policies**

Earlier research in this field tended to study trust in line managers, rather than the organization per se and concentrated on performance appraisal (e.g., Earley, 1986; Folger and Konovsky, 1989; Dobbins et al., 1993; Mayer and Davis, 1999), or reward and compensation (Pearce et al., 2000). A seminal quasi-experimental study showed how improving performance management processes so that they addressed employees’ concerns, created a more acceptable process that increased trust in top management (Mayer and Davis, 1999). (Trust in top teams is often a surrogate for organizational trust.) Similarly, Korsgaard et al.’s work on performance management (1998) identified how subordinates’ communication style could influence managers’ fairness and, consequently, affects subordinates’ attitudes toward their appraisal decision, the manager and the organization.
Another topic of interest to both trust and justice scholars is organizational exit (Brockner et al., 1987, 1997; Brockner, 1988; Mishra and Mishra, 1994; Spreitzer and Mishra, 1997, 2002; Mishra and Spreitzer, 1998). For example, a considerable amount is known about the perceived fairness of layoffs (e.g., Shah, 2000), the type and level of support required (e.g., Armstrong-Stassen, 1994, 2002), and survivor well-being and productivity (e.g., Allen et al., 2001; Brockner et al., 2004). Until recently little empirical research had considered the impact on those directly involved with the lay-off process – HR managers. Buckley (2011) has looked specifically at the emotional effect and the impact on organizational trust for the group who deliver organizations’ downsizing strategies.

Over the last two years the topics of interest for trust researchers have expanded into previously under-researched HRM policies covering the employment cycle (Searle and Skinner, 2011b). These included recruitment and selection (Searle and Billsberry, 2011), career management (Crawshaw, 2011), promotion (Brodt and Dionisi, 2011), change (Saunders, 2011), training (Ashleigh and Prichard, 2011) and bullying and harassment (Harrington and Rayner, 2011). In addition, consideration has been given to wider issues, such as person–organization fit (Boon and Den Hartog, 2011), values (Tzafrir and Enosh, 2011) and the psychological contract (Guest and Clinton, 2011) (to which I shall return shortly). These illustrate further how germane trust can be within an HRM context.

One mechanism that has been used extensively to examine the relationship between HRM and trust is the psychological contract (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994; Guest and Conway, 2002). The psychological contract describes employees’ beliefs about the exchange relationship with the organization (Rousseau, 1995). These beliefs refer to their interpretations of implicit and explicit promises made, which often focus on HRM policies (Conway and Briner, 2009). For example, where a greater numbers of practices are included, employees can perceive that more promises have been made between the parties, while lack of provision is more likely to be linked to contract breach (Guest and Conway, 2002). Psychological contract research is often focused on employees’ unmet expectations, which ultimately leads to a perceived contract breach and a resultant loss of trust (Rousseau, 1989). This intertwined contract/trust relationship was aptly demonstrated in Robinson’s (1996) seminal study. She showed that high initial trust in an employment relationship reduced the likelihood of employees’ perceiving psychological contract breach, therefore while unmet expectations did erode their trust in the organization, the decline was less pronounced for those with higher initial trust. More recently,
contract breach and performance has been examined and differentiations made between proximal impacts, such as violation and distrust, from more distal influence on work attitudes, including organizational commitment, job satisfaction, intention to quit and work behaviours, such as performance and turnover (Zhao et al., 2007). Psychological contract research opens up possibilities for further longitudinal study of the dynamics of trust from the high point of the start of an employment relationship. Contract breaches have been shown to impact most significantly on affect and attitudes (Conway et al., 2011) and again affect is an under-researched domain for trust scholars. However, perhaps more attention needs to be paid to preventing breach in the first place, with empirical studies of how trust breach may be averted and so reduce the need for its repair (Hope-Hailey et al., 2012).

TRUST – HRM

Relatively little empirical research has looked at how trust itself might actually influence HRM policy and practices. A seminal industrial relations study contended that trust does not simply arise from existing social institutions and processes, but is also embedded within the principles that underlie these institutions (Fox, 1974). Reductions in mutual trust can be a catalyst for an intensification of control, particularly supervision. In contrast, HR managers’ high trust in employees can influence employers’ training and promotion decisions (Tzafrir, 2005). Mather (2011) contends that negotiations between managers and trade unions to secure more work for less reward undermine trust (see Lewicki and Polin, Chapter 2 in this book for more related debate).

Trust perceptions are not simply one way. Deutsch-Salamon and Robinson’s (2008) retail-based study showed how feeling trusted (termed collective-felt trust) could alter employees’ attention and behaviours to bring them more in line with achieving the goals of the organization. These changes in responsibility have two suggested components (Cummings and Anton, 1990): enhancing employees’ sense of obligation towards the firm and their part in helping to achieve organizational goals, but greater acceptance by employees of their accountability to the firm. Thus, extra-role (Pearce and Gregersen, 1991) and ‘taking charge’ behaviours (Morrison and Phelps, 1999) are further aspects of a trust dividend for organizations. Critically, organizations in which employees feel more trusted, and return such trust through taking more responsibility, should have less necessity for externally imposed controls (see Part II of this book for related discussion of controls). This raises intriguing questions
about whether high trust organizations might have further competitive advantage over their rivals through having lower costs associated with monitoring and regulating employees, but may also have distinct HRM policies.

In these final sections the two central considerations are outlined: the delivery of HRM and the HR function. Although HR may be involved in some aspects of the delivery of HRM, this chapter has identified the prominence of the line manager as the conduit for local HRM. In this last section the distinct symbolic role of the HR function is considered. Taken together, the individual and collective behaviours and decisions of these two groups are aggregated by employees to inform their general overview of the trustworthiness of the organization.

DELIVERING HR PRACTICE

The delivery of HR policy is now often the responsibility of line managers. Critically, the intent of HR practices as conceived by the HR function may deviate from that implemented by line managers. In addition, the intentions of those implementing policies may also be different from how individual employees perceive these in practice (Wright and Nishii, forthcoming). At each stage, distortion is possible, causing a disjunction between the policy as conceived by the HR function and employees’ post-delivery perceptions (see Guest and Conway, 2011). Researchers, therefore, must be cognizant when collecting information about HR policies of these possibly different views. Concerns about the manner of implementation of HRM policies and practices are important for trust (e.g., Shapiro, 1987; Perrone et al., 2003) and show the significance of justice, identified as an antecedent of trust (Begley et al., 2002; Ambrose and Schminke, 2003; Colquitt et al., 2012). Concern about the perceived fairness of decisions, procedures and actions are important considerations when determining the level and extent of trust (Leventhal, 1976; Lind and Tyler, 1988; Colquitt and Rodell, 2011).

THE HR FUNCTION

In many organizations HR professionals are responsible for tactical HRM activities (Whitener, 1997). The HR function operationalizes the organization’s strategy regarding its human resources, and has three distinct roles: creator, enforcer and maintainer. The first role is pivotal in the inception and development of HR policies to meet strategic goals, deciding which
tools and procedures an organization will utilize in particular aspects of the employment cycle. Although senior managers do play a role (Guest and Conway, 2011), this function is central to employees’ experiences in building and sustaining, or diminishing their trust in the organization (Whitener, 1997). For example, decisions to include psychometric tests may be treated by some applicants as a sign of an organization’s untrustworthiness (Searle and Billsberry, 2011).

Though normatively committed to trust-building models of employment relations, HR professionals might often paradoxically be involved in designing and implementing trust-reducing practices, such as redundancy (e.g., Spreitzer and Mishra, 1997; Allen et al., 2001). The growing emphasis on shareholder value metrics, ongoing organizational restructuring and downsizing, and the extended use of outsourcing has increasingly moved the burden of risk onto employees and away from organizations (Thompson, 2003). The current economic downturn has brought into all organizations the necessity for every employee to work longer for reduced benefits, thus trust may be challenged through an externally created psychological contract breach as retirement ages rise, or over-supply of graduates causes them to be under-employed. All of the aforementioned changes position this professional group to the fore in performing a complex role in the development, implementation and management of policies that may significantly erode trust in the organization.

Second, the HR function plays a significant part as the enforcer in organizations, ensuring policies are implemented correctly. Crucially, HRM is likely to be more prominent during conflict situations between the employee and the organization, such as a formal grievance or warning. As a result the HR profession often sits uneasily between managers and employees (Caldwell, 2003), charged by the organization with finding satisfactory solutions to meet the demands of both parties, while also protecting its interests. Harrington et al. (2012) show these tensions in the context of bullying and harassment policy, and reveal how actions designed to protect the organization, may reduce both employees’ and line managers’ trust in this function.

Finally, HR may be central to ensuring policies are delivered and managed in line with communicated objectives. Thus, HR has a pivotal role in maintaining policies and processes within organizations. An important antecedent here is perceived organizational support (DeConinck, 2011). This refers to employees’ generic beliefs about the extent to which their organization’s values contribute to their reward and well-being: HRM provides mechanisms designed to assist in the evaluation and rewarding of employees’ efforts, plus policies designed to promote well-being and reduce uncertainty. Beliefs about support have been found to
positively affect employees’ trust in the organization (Eisenberger et al., 1986, 2001).

The practice of HRM reflects the decisions and attitudes of individuals who represent the organizations in a variety of different functional capacities, with employees abstracting from these agents’ actions, signals and signs to provide clues about the organization itself. Importantly, employees respond with attitudes, beliefs and actions that focus on the organization, rather than on these distinct agents (Whitener, 1997). Recent work shows the potential value of differentiating between distinct agents (e.g., Harrington and Rayner, 2011), however, we need to look in more detail at the precise immediate and long-term impact of different functions on employees’ trust.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter the HR function and the policies and practices are shown to play an often overlooked role in organizational trust. They offer employees signals and clues that inform trust beliefs, decisions and actions. Far more attention needs to be given to the distinct influences of these groups to gain further insight into trust and HRM. Some key dimensions have been outlined, such as personality, which may significantly enhance our understanding and the ongoing value of more systematically disaggregating trust from justice. Through these steps a more nuanced study of organizational trust is emerging, widening our insight into its impact on employees’ commitment and retention. While much has been gained from large-scale survey approaches, there is a need for more person-centric perspectives (Weiss and Rupp, 2011), enabling subjective experiences of employees to emerge and so revealing how and why and to whom trust matters. The employment cycle presents rich opportunities to examine the dynamics of trust, to consider the triggers for change and through mechanisms, such as the psychological contract and employee self-regulation. Further attention to trust dynamics is vital if we are to gain real insight into how and when trust develops, but also becomes damaged. Finally, little attention has been paid to groups other than managers and their role within organizations in the development and sustaining of trust. The impact of the HR profession as enforcer is interesting and introduces the topics of conflict and sanctions, which are only just emerging in studies of trust. Trust and HRM is an exciting and underdeveloped arena for study, and a key context in which important lessons can be passed on to organizations.
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