

1. Theories used in employment relations and human resource management

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THE ROLE AND PURPOSE OF THEORY

It is perhaps easier to explain what theory is not rather than what it is. Theory is not facts or data. Nor is theory a hypothesis, or a case study. It is not a literature review. A theory is a set of general principles or ideas that are meant to explain how something works, and is independent of what it intends to explain. The purpose of a theory (or set of theories) is to help explain what causes something to occur, or to inform us of the likely consequences of a phenomenon. In so doing, theories can be more or less abstract, and be pitched at different levels – explaining society, processes, relations, behaviour and perceptions. For practitioners, theories can enhance understanding and inform decision-making. For researchers, theories shape the framing of their data, and are often presented as an essential part of any well-designed research project. Reflecting this, Hambrick (2007: 1346) argues that theory is essential for a field to flourish and advance. Indeed, many management journals require scholars to make a ‘theoretical contribution’ to get published, prompting something of an obsession with a theory-driven approach in management-related areas. Thus, while recognizing the value and importance of theory, we offer a cautionary note. Specifically, we suggest that it may be fruitful for a field to support initial consideration of phenomena-driven trends or patterns before becoming fixated on having a theoretical explanation. For example, that smoking can cause harm and ill health in humans does not need a theory to prove its validity (Hambrick, 2007). Reflecting this, in disciplines such as sociology, economics and finance there has been less of an ‘essential need’ to publish with some new theoretical development in mind. Instead, *ideas, logics, concepts, premises* are given due attention and the notion of exploring data is seen as valid and valuable in deciding if certain issues or phenomena are in themselves evident or emergent. Where this is the case, theory can then help to understand and explain such issues. Theory is therefore a crucial lens on the world, one that provides value in addressing both evident *and* emergent issues. Notwithstanding that empirics and theory both contribute value and vibrancy to a field, our focus here is on the role of theory, and some of the specific theories used in employment relations (ER) and human resource management (HRM) research.

In helping to understand general phenomena or emergent concerns (for example, why do workers go on strike?; or why do employers push workers into a position of striking?; or if gender pay inequalities have persisted for decades despite equality pay legislation, in

what circumstances are they present?; or what are the implications of the ‘gig’ economy for workers and organizations?), researchers can generate new theory, elaborate it or test it (Cornelissen and Durand, 2014). Theory generation occurs when research produces propositions regarding relationships evident in findings. Theory elaboration occurs when already known phenomena enable us to ask the how and why questions from which understanding and theory are enhanced or expanded (Lee et al., 1999). Last, theory testing can uphold or refute existing explanations, leading to enhanced theoretical confidence – or prompting refinement. Each of theory generation, elaboration and testing can improve explanations and predictions for practitioners and researchers alike, and emanates from one of three main approaches to theorizing: inductive, deductive and abductive.

For *deductive* approaches to theorizing, researchers use existing theories to generate expectations that are tested in data, with theory potentially amended in the light of findings. For *inductive* approaches, researchers start their sense-making independent of theoretical preconceptions, abstracting from patterns in data that are used to develop new, or refine existing, theory. Both approaches therefore engage with theory – at the outset and end-stage of research, respectively (Ashworth et al., 2019). A third approach, *abduction*, implies a wider engagement with theory during the research process. Abduction starts with interesting phenomena or surprising findings but, to recognize these, researchers must be sufficiently aware of existing theories (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). Theorization emerges as researchers identify how their data contests or adds to these existing theories. Thus:

Rather than engaging with the scholarly literature at the end of the research project, as inductivist approaches have often advised, researchers who take abduction seriously need to have extensive familiarity with existing theories at the outset and throughout every research step. (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014: 42)

The process of theorization varies in line with the distinct philosophical assumptions and approaches evident across disciplines (for example, see Cornelissen, 2017; Llewelyn, 2003; Welch et al., 2011). In particular, there is a connection between the way we view the world (our theoretical frame of reference), the research methods used to collect and analyse data and particular styles of theorizing. Cornelissen (2017: 370) describes this as an ‘imprinting’ effect such that ‘theorizing styles and methods combine into explanatory programmes: common ways of conceptually representing, and then explaining, managerial and organizational phenomena’. Put simply, the theories we use shape what we focus on in our research, how we explore it and how we explain it. Theory can therefore inform – but also limit – our view of the world. From this perspective, it is important to be cognizant of what the theories we use throw into shadow as well as what they might enlighten. It is also important to recognize that there seems to be a narrowing of theorizing styles across management as a whole, with theorizing from qualitative approaches increasingly restyled along more traditionally quantitative variance modes (Cornelissen, 2017; Cornelissen and Durand, 2014; Delbridge and Fiss, 2013; Llewelyn, 2003). Does this matter? Some suggest that the focus on translating qualitative data into transferable explanatory factors (Bluhm et al., 2011) has potential to reduce empirical and theoretical richness (Cornelissen, 2017) – with adverse implications for theoretical advancement and the quality of our explanations and prediction.

Aligned concerns are evident within the broadly defined fields of ER and HRM. Some suggest that, despite their multidisciplinary roots, ER and HRM are being colonized by a narrow positivistic paradigm, with a loss of emphasis on the asymmetric nature of the employment relationship (Godard, 2014). In particular, it has been suggested that the shift to micro-level theorizing, particularly the positivist ontology of the industrial-organizational psychology and neo-classical economics branches of HRM, has led to poorer and inferior explanatory utility concerning the complexity of work and employment relationships, resulting in the encouragement of ‘instrumental narcissism that critical theorists have warned of’ for decades (Godard, 2014: 6). In addition, it is suggested that an aligned desire for so-called ‘scientificity’ of measurement – via an imprinting effect – is leading not only to a focus on a pure ‘one-best’ ontology, but to the variance methods associated with this and rising in prevalence across management studies (Delbridge and Fiss, 2013). In reflecting on these themes, Guest (1997) suggests that the sophistication of the statistics employed in HRM has come at the expense of theoretical advancement. In a related vein, Harley (2015) suggests the lack of methodological diversity in high performance work systems (HPWS) research is striking, indicating the emergence of a singular ‘way’ for HRM research that may elevate quantitative approaches. Paauwe (2009) refers to this as ‘me too’ type research that rarely, if ever, produces advances in understanding. Described as informed by psychological methods and a pseudo-science of econometrics, this is perceived to privilege the basis of truth as some divine or innate natural law of the universe, rather than the uneven and subjectively determined facets of human behaviour and interaction in a work (social) setting. Importantly, whilst Troth and Guest (2019: 3) caution against ‘overgeneralised criticism of psychologically informed HRM research that ignores its contribution’, even critics such as Godard (2014) do not suggest that psychological (or positivistic) research is without value. Rather, he and others suggest that such approaches risk becoming dominant, premised on false presumptions of being scientific, and thereby marginalizing other legitimate bodies of theory within ER and HRM.

One response has been to call for a more critical, theoretically and methodologically diverse field, informed by macro- and meso-level multidisciplinary theory (Godard, 2014; Harley, 2015). In essence, it has been argued that if we overly narrow our theoretical frames, then the quality and breadth of insight and theoretical advancement in HRM and ER, and the robustness of research, teaching and practice in these areas are likely to be reduced. In response to such calls and concerns, Dundon and Rafferty (2018) suggest a shift from a pro-market research-focused paradigm to a pro-business ontology that is further reflected in educational and learning pedagogy. They argue that, while the former leads to a focus on shareholders and HR practice is justified on the basis of market return or profitability, a pro-business approach has a broader group of stakeholders including employees, representative bodies (union and non-union), non-governmental organizations, civil-society organizations, suppliers and community groups connected and linked to the business units’ activity.

Before we turn to consider specific theories in the field of ER and HRM, we summarize potential overarching concerns with the use of theory and theorization. First, we note that at a time when practitioners and scholars both speak of innovation, theoretical developments are rarely innovative (Harley, 2015). Worse, journal rankings, reviewing and organizational pressures on scholars encourage incrementalism and retrofitting data

to theory rather than genuine theoretical development. They also undervalue important phenomena-driven data and identification of trends that may be necessary before theorization, and indeed in order to theorize. In response, we follow others in suggesting the importance of a theoretically diverse field that engages with macro-, meso- and micro-oriented theories to support issue-based phenomena, and that cumulatively illuminates socio-political, economic, organizational and individual influences (cf. Godard, 2014). Second, we recognize the benefits of methodologically diverse and interdisciplinary approaches (Cornelissen, 2017; Harley, 2015). Like others, we emphasize the complementary contributions of qualitative and quantitative research (Lee et al., 1999). Third, we reiterate the value of a broad view of HRM and ER as ‘a field of study’, embedded in and connected to societal, organizational and wider policy concerns (Cullinane, 2018). Next, having detailed the important role of theories both in creating understanding and enabling prediction, and in shaping the future of the field, we turn to consider key theories within ER and HRM.

THEORY IN HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS

HRM and ER hold central the notion of policies that operate to affect and regulate work and the management of employment, and are concerned with the activities and experiences of actors within the employment relationship. Within this volume, we use the term HRM and ER as a ‘catch-all’ for the management of paid employment: research labelled industrial relations, personnel management, people management or labour relations in different parts of the world. However we note that ER has, throughout the last couple of decades, become increasingly used as broader nomenclature for the field. Indeed, even the International Labour and Employment Relations Association (ILERA) has changed its name to reflect the increasing use of the ER label.

This volume takes stock of some but by no means all of the key theories used within the ER and HRM field. We set out to provide a summary for all interested parties of what theory does, how each theory has developed, under what circumstances they provide utility, and where they do/do not deliver on their explanatory or predictive power. Importantly, this is not a volume seeking to develop an overarching theory to explain ER and HRM. Rather, it aims to review some of the prominent and emerging theories used within the fields of ER and HRM and how they may assist, or not assist, with a research problem or project. In so doing, we note that the study of the employment relationship and the actors involved is one of contested ideological terrain. Different theoretical frames and concepts can lead to people talking past each other, based on their world view. Thus, a wider aim is to encourage broad theoretical understanding and support engaged conversation across the field – notwithstanding likely enduring ideological differences (cf. Heery, 2016).

Institutional ER scholars may be very focused on the way the government, courts, arbitration commissions and unions interact; while at the other end of the scale, organizational behaviour (OB) and industrial-organizational (I/O) psychology researchers are more likely to be interested in matters of the individual, and neo-classical economists look for the individual’s utility maximization as, at the firm level, profit and productivity

drive incentives. Sociologists and labour process scholars may have concerns with issues of conflict, exploitation and societal systems of governance. Labour lawyers might focus on explaining jurisprudence, regulations and the making of work and employment rights and obligations. There is, of course, a wider range of research topics within this spectrum. ER has traditionally taken an analytical and normative approach to understanding how democracy has (or could) be transferred from the political sphere to the economic sphere of society (Tapia et al., 2015). This field of study dates back more than 120 years to the pioneering work of Sidney and Beatrice Webb in the UK. While the Webbs were very interested in the study of trade unions, the role of unions has declined markedly in the last two decades in most democratic nations. With what is commonly called a representation gap, many ask how this can be explained and what theory can tell us. Answers may reside in theory that explains the exploitative nature of capitalism; or theory on the roles of individual actors and institutions. Theories of power and control may be invoked concerning democracy and representation. In addition, explanations for democracy at work may be found in theories of pluralist engagement, or the way social exchanges unravel in complex work and employment relationship settings (Geare et al., 2014). Moreover, answers may be sought in combinations of theoretical insights, and thus no single theory is likely to give a comprehensive answer.

While there have been attempts to provide a general or 'meta-theory' for the employment relationship; for example, Dunlop's (1958) 'Industrial Relations Systems' theory, or Fox's 'Frames of Reference' (1966) typology, most ER theories operate at the middle range. One of the doyens of industrial relations, Hugh Clegg, includes a final chapter entitled 'Definitions and theories' in his 1979 *Changing Systems of Industrial Relations in Great Britain* text. He concludes that there is no general or grand systems theory in employment relations (and as a developmental extension, HRM) and that Marxists, pluralists, labour economists and sociologists all seek to explain the processes of rule-making at work, typically by studying collective bargaining. While Clegg was acutely aware of theoretical developments to the field, he is renowned for suggesting that an 'an ounce of fact is worth a pound of theory' (Ackers, 2007: 79; Brown, 1998: 849). In contrast to ER, theories that are used within the realm of HRM (particularly towards the OB and I/O end of the spectrum) have a more micro orientation. A criticism levied is that these tend to neglect events at the meso and macro environmental levels which can explain the phenomena more so than individualistic traits (Godard, 2014), even though the latter may be of interest and importance in their own right. Both middle and micro-range theories allow for specific and testable hypotheses (critical for any useful theory) and, therefore, can contribute towards the explanation of phenomena and predict potential outcomes. Hence, all theoretical development at the middle and micro levels provide fuel for debates that continue to aim towards meta-theory development.

One theory that has proven to be particularly valuable within the study of the employment relationship is the previously mentioned 'frames of reference'. Fox (1966) argued that the employment relationship can be studied through one of three frames of reference: unitarist, pluralist and radical. Heery's (2016) in-depth analysis contends that these three frames endure in their use and value, evident both in textbooks and teaching, as well as academic research. Each offers a different understanding of the way in which work and employment relationships are managed, regulated and modified over time. These are underpinned by:

competing assessments of the relative interests of workers and employees, which generate very different standards for evaluating the real world of work and sharply contrasting programmes for practical action. (Heery, 2016: 1–2)

Unitarist frames are characterized by perceptions of shared employer and employee interests and a focus on cooperation; pluralist approaches recognize some divergent interests and focus on conflict resolution; while radical frames assume opposing interests and worker exploitation (Heery, 2016). Typically, but not completely, ER research has adopted radical or pluralist approaches, while HRM often fits within the unitarist domain (although many HRM researchers offer radical critique and pluralist alternatives to the unitarist assumptions of HRM, for example, see Legge, 1995; Marchington et al., 2016; Storey and Sisson, 1993).

Fox's frames of reference does not mean that there is not an element of shifting sands within this categorization. One very good example of this comes with the growing research on HPWS. The HPWS phenomenon has been studied from various perspectives. One strain is the 'best practice' or universal theory of HRM (Huselid, 1995; Pfeffer, 1998), predicting that the adoption of certain HR practices will lead to better outcomes for organizations (for example, labour productivity, financial performance). The unitarist undertone here is that employees should benefit both intrinsically and extrinsically from the HPWS approaches, such as job enrichment, work–life balance, higher than usual remuneration packages, and employers enjoy sustained competitive advantage and performance. In contrast is an alternative strain, known as 'best fit' HRM (or contingency theory), predicting that HRM bundles of practices will not be universally applicable as outcomes are contingent on certain factors, such as the life cycle of the firm, market competition, low cost or quality enhancement strategy, or the occupational categories and skills of workers (among other contingencies) (Boxall and Purcell, 2011). Other perspectives find greater theoretical relevance in terms of 'resources and processes' as a way to explain unique performance-driven outcomes from management people at work; what has become known as the Resource-Based View (RBV) of the firm (Barney, 1991). Yet others find better theoretical explanation for HPWS from the wider exploitative tendencies of capitalism and managerial power as sources that result in forcing workers to work harder, not necessarily smarter (Ramsay et al., 2000; Thompson and Harley, 2007). Kelly (2004), arguably from a radical frame of reference, goes so far as to suggest that HPWS will have a devastating effect on employees in the longer run as they will provide a more managerialistic and individualistic agenda to work. Thus, even within one stream of HR and ER research, multiple frames of reference may be evident, informed by different theoretical starting points that are, in turn, associated with different methodological traditions and approaches to theorizing. Next we consider some of the theories evident and emerging in HR and ER.

APPROACH AND STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

When developing this volume we asked authors to answer five key questions to ensure consistency in the themes addressed within the chapters, while enabling the authors the freedom to analyse and critique theory as appropriate. The five questions are:

1. What does this theory attempt to explain or predict?
2. How did this theory develop in the ER/HRM field?
3. Where has this theory demonstrated high quality utility?
4. What has this theory failed to explain adequately?
5. Where does this theory have scope for development?

These questions aim to support people interested in the ER and HRM theories considered to gain insight into their key strengths, potential limitations and scope for future development. The selection of theories is not exhaustive, although it does offer a broad spectrum. While there may be some valid debate as to why some theories and not others have been included, we have attempted to cover significant aspects of, and actors in, the employment relationship. Hence, we have three parts. These are titled: 'Systems and historical development', 'Institutions' and 'People and processes'. 'Systems and historical development' is presented first, and includes eight chapters. Cumulatively, these chapters chart the historical development of theories that align with the frames of reference and evidence how middle theories of ER and HRM have evolved.

We start with Roger Seifert who reviews Marxist theory and how this has influenced the field. Seifert asserts that Marxism is important and effective in explaining the tensions and complexities of work and employment relations. Marx embraced dialectical materialism and this captures wider changes to society which explain and predict work and employment realities. Marx, as Seifert points out, was scathing of the notion that the capitalist system's exploitation of the workforce was a scientific law, as economists often claim. Furthermore, on reading Marx, it is evident that Marx himself was an 'early adopter' of avoiding long working hours, arguing that profits would remain intact and productivity would increase with shorter working days (*Capital*, 1887 [1954]: 207–13). Seifert concludes that Marxist theory remains relevant as it provides an 'empirically based alternative to the overly bland assumptions of most managerialist accounts of key issues' relating to ER and HRM.

Our next chapter examines one of Fox's frames of reference, pluralism. Peter Ackers argues that classical pluralism as a 'liberal-democratic voice' has been found wanting, given an over-reliance on declining institutions such as trade unions and, in particular, collective bargaining as joint rule-making collaborations. Indeed, with the decline of unions, the rise of managerial HRM, and substantial labour market changes such as increased participation of women in the economy, Ackers argues pluralist theory needs rethinking. Recent policy initiatives including union-management partnerships, family-friendly policies and challenges faced from identity politics prompts Ackers to rethink the roots of political pluralism and argue for broader dialogue not only at the workplace but also among wider society as a central contribution to ER and HRM, from what is a neo-pluralist view.

Next is the theory of management as a science. At the end of the twentieth century 137 members of the Fellows Group of the Academy of Management voted Frederick Winslow Taylor's *The Principles of Scientific Management* (1914) to be the most influential management book of the twentieth century (Bedeian and Wren, 2001). Niall Cullinane and Jean Cushen review the origins of, and principles behind, Taylor's work and conceptualize Scientific Management as a response to the problem of labour power conversion. They proceed to consider scientific management's limitations while identifying the politics of

production, the complexity and variety of job tasks and alternative employer priorities as significant countervailing forces against Taylorism in practice.

Our fourth theory reflecting historical developments is labour process theory (LPT), presented by Shiona Chillias and Alina Baluch. Since Harry Braverman's 1974 book, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, LPT has provided substantial sociological and political theory contributions to the understanding of ER and HRM. Through identifying trends in the nature of work, skills, technology, and commenting on managerial regimes including HRM, LPT has remained core to understanding wage-effort exchange relationships even as the nature of capitalism has evolved. Chillias and Baluch argue, though, that cracks have appeared and have been plastered over by integrating and importing explanatory concepts that stray from LPT's core. Despite this, LPT remains relevant in contemporary workplace research.

Next, Sarah Jenkins examines the Human Relations School (HRS) of management. The foundations, contributions and contemporary legacies of the HRS and neo-HRS are explained via their respective emphasis on solving the problems of industrialization (via consideration of social and human needs, the influence of work groups and acknowledgement of good worker/manager relations) and solving the problems of bureaucracy (via meaningful work). Yet, despite their seemingly humane orientations, Jenkins identifies their shared focus on leveraging workers' capabilities primarily for the benefit of the firm. Jenkins subjects their influence on contemporary HRM to a detailed critical appraisal, situating the approaches within the wider historical, social and economic context of American industrial capitalism and explicating their underpinning assumptions and oversights. Ultimately, Jenkins suggests the benefits of looking forward to a more critically informed HRM rather than back to the HRS.

Peter Boxall and Meng-Long Huo wrestle with the notion of HPWS theory, how it evolved, and what value it adds to our understanding of work and employment relationships. HPWS is an ambiguous concept according to the authors, who focus on two streams of debate within the research – one concerned with which work systems prevail, and the other questioning how work systems can be improved and for whom these improvements occur.

Brian Harney presents an overview of systems theory in Chapter 8 before tracing its historical antecedents and key domain assumptions. The chapter reviews some valuable applications of systems thinking in ER and HRM before evaluating limitations and future prospects. Overall, the chapter surfaces the long-standing tensions between the intuitive appeal of systems logic and difficulty surrounding its application. The chapter concludes that despite these challenges, the changing nature of work and fracturing of work boundaries provide a strong mandate for a systems theory renaissance in HRM and employment.

Our final chapter in the systems and historical development part comes from Andrew Timming. This chapter is a departure from the sociologically and psychologically derived chapters in this volume, discussing the capacity for researchers to engage with evolutionary theory within the field. Timming reflects past researchers to argue that individuals are imbued with non-social instincts and impulses that carry important evolutionary meaning, and these instincts do not disappear as an employee enters the gates of their workplace. According to Timming, 'pre-cognitive instincts' direct many actions of human resource managers and employees.

'Institutions' are the focus of the second part of our volume with five chapters, starting with Victoria Wass reviewing personnel economics. This approach is premised on the search for general principles through the application of economic and mathematical approaches. It focuses on modelling agents' responses to changes in external incentives. Wass introduces principal agent theory, which is central to personnel economics. The principal agent problem stems from the inefficiencies arising where a principal (organization) employs an agent (an employee) to work on their behalf. The two have divergent interests. Theory attempts to explain the conditions (the principal agent problem) and mechanisms whereby mutual gains can be achieved. This is illustrated using performance-related pay (PRP) as a potential solution to the principal agent problem. A range of conditions necessary for PRP to work are detailed, as are associated complexities. Having illustrated the approach, Wass differentiates between criticisms of theory and those of practice. She concludes by reiterating the promise of personnel economics, identifying further areas of HRM where it could be applied, and suggesting that HR professionals could benefit from increased awareness of the approach and its contributions.

Regulation has long been a central feature of the employment relationship and Mark Bray and Peter Waring outline Labour Regulation Theory. The authors explain the processes by which the rules of work are determined and the substantive character of the rules themselves. After discussion of the concepts of 'complexity' and 'congruence', they detail the manner in which the influence of institutional and market forces shape 'regulatory spaces'. Their role as power sources affecting worker rights has a long pedigree of importance for the field (cf. Hancher and Moran, 1989). Bray and Waring suggest that the explanatory power of Labour Regulation Theory is increasing and provide a roadmap for how further enhancements may occur.

Geoffrey Wood and Matthew Allen provide a chapter on institutional theory, arguing that the business systems approach seeks to explain why and how economic activities are carried out differently in different contexts. In order to explain this phenomenon, the business systems framework focuses not only on external and governance dimensions but also on two broad categories of practices: delegation from employers to employees and interdependence between employers and employees. Wood and Allen argue that the business approach draws attention to fundamental firm variation, unlike many perspectives in business and management that tend to emphasize homogeneity.

Glenn Morgan and Heike Doering re-examine the Hall and Soskice (2001) theory relating to varieties of Capitalism (VoC). This is one of many theoretical frameworks that consider the institutional context and the way in which this context affects the strategies and structures of organizations. The authors recognize that while criticisms of VoC remain, the literature has moved beyond a narrow range of capitalisms and is beginning to expand into understanding 'new' employment relationships, for example, the gig economy.

Anne Keegan, Julia Brandl and Ina Aust provide an overview of the nascent use of paradox theory in HRM as our final chapter in this part. Paradox theory recognizes the contradictory yet interrelated aspects of organizations and their environments, and highlights how individuals and organizations respond to the tensions engendered. Keegan and colleagues recognize a historical emphasis on one side of organizational tensions within HRM, and scope for considering both sides to progress HRM scholarship. The authors review the main tenets of paradox theory, the treatment of tensions in HRM,

and the application – and limitations – of paradox theory in HRM to date. On this basis they outline potential trajectories for developing paradox studies, including developing attention to both benign and less benign paradoxes; exploring the use or abuse of power in managing paradoxical tensions; and highlighting the reality of living with, rather than resolving, such tensions.

Our third part draws down to the level of ‘People and processes’. Human capital theory is reviewed by Jonathan Winterton and Kenneth Cafferkey who argue that resources are exploited, whereas capital is invested, so the semantic difference between HRM and human capital is one regarding an emphasis on development which offers a more differentiated consideration of people at work and a more nuanced assessment of the labour force. Winterton and Cafferkey trace the development of human capital from the work of Adam Smith (1776), through Karl Marx (1887 [1954]), Gary Becker (1960), Jay Barney (1991) and finally the work of David Lepak and Scott Snell (1999). The authors argue that human capital is largely context driven at an individual, organizational and national level, thus making comparisons particularly difficult. Winterton and Cafferkey conclude by developing a new approach to assessing human capital within organizations by drawing on Ability, Motivation and Opportunity (AMO) theory.

Many of the meta-theories that provide the background of HRM and ER research were developed at a time when the object of analysis was the male manufacturing worker. Anne-marie Greene dives into feminist theory, reviewing two classic and very influential workplace studies, Anna Pollert’s *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives* published in 1981 and Cynthia Cockburn’s *Brothers: Male Dominance and Technological Change* published in 1983. Greene uses these studies as exemplars in order to illustrate the contribution of feminist theory to ER, tracing a line from their key philosophical underpinnings, objectives, methods and findings, to the developments of theory with impact on the field of study as a whole.

Neve Isaeva, Colin Hughes and Mark Saunders focus their chapter on trust theory, by initially defining the nature of trust and its antecedents. The authors recognize its historical roots in both psychological and sociological perspectives and how these influence the organizational context of ER and HRM studies. The authors conclude that there remain areas where knowledge about trust in ER and HRM is more limited, particularly in relation to virtual teams and distrust, before they outline opportunities for further development of theory and argue for a more epistemologically pluralist future.

Social exchange theory (SET) is increasingly popular in HRM research and Christine Cross and Tony Dundon review its antecedents in some of the classical sociological studies of worker and human behaviours, such as those from Gouldner (1955, 1960), Blau (1964) and Fox (1974), as well contemporary and psychological approaches (for example, Homans, 1961). SET can be used to unpick some of the more refined and nuanced social relationships that influence work and employment, typically the dynamics of trust and power between employer and employee, trade unions, customers and other stakeholders with an interest in the firm and its HRM practices. SET relates strongly to notions of a psychological contract in that relationships are more than monetary and legal constructs, yet the theory also has limitations and constraints.

Shakespeare in *As You Like It* says that ‘all the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players’. It is this idea that provides a backdrop for Qian-Yi Lee, Keith

Townsend, Ashlea Troth and Rebecca Loudoun's contribution on role theory. In the workplace, employees are asked to play roles that fit the expectations of the context in which they find themselves. However, sometimes people are asked to play multiple roles, and occasionally these lead to an incongruence that is problematic for the individual. Role clarity, ambiguity, conflict and overload are key elements of the development of role theory and the authors present a review of these elements after they explore the evolution of the theory proper.

Organizational justice theory is our next chapter from Melinda Laundon, Paula McDonald and Abby Cathcart. These authors suggest that there has been a plethora of research and 'pop management' publications preoccupied with perceived fairness within organizations and that organizational justice theory can assist in answering pertinent questions about such. This is a theory that is not about objective measures, rather individual's perceptions of fairness or unfairness. Furthermore, decades of research in the area link many outcomes, including job satisfaction, job performance and organizational citizenship behaviours, to perceptions of justice.

In the next chapter, Ashlea Kellner, Kenneth Cafferkey and Keith Townsend critique Ability, Motivation and Opportunity (AMO) theory as being poorly defined and vaguely tested, and suggest that the intuitive appeal of the theory is primarily due to its malleable nature in fitting/retrofitting almost any HRM research. The authors go on to suggest that present understanding of AMO theory is far removed from its theoretical underpinnings and that the application of AMO severely restricts any comparison of research or the generation of a cumulative body of knowledge. A new, preliminary model of AMO is introduced addressing the inherent complexities and relationships between all of the components of AMO, HRM practices and a broad range of outcomes.

Next, Keith Whitfield critically examines the Resource-Based View (RBV) as another process-led theory for HRM, noting that its appeal stems in part from the key role it affords to the way HR practices add value to organizations. This arises as it focuses on internal factors as the route to competitive advantage, via organizations that enable the emergence of processes that are premised on valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable resources. Developments of the approach include both core and dynamic competencies, with the latter countering claims regarding the static nature of the RBV. However, Whitfield also details a retreat from the RBV, explained with reference to critiques of the approach including lack of specification of key terms and causal paths, a tautological nature, inconsistent empirical findings, and lack of theoretical and practical value-added relative to other existing frameworks. For the RBV to have a strong future, Whitfield suggests the importance of theoretical refinement, empirical deepening and practitioner engagement.

Anna Bos-Nehles and Mieke Audenaert provide us with some insights into leader-member exchange theory, or LMX. This chapter considers the relationship between managers and employees, and suggests that LMX theory can explain differences between how people are managed at work. By distinguishing between high and low quality LMX exchanges, and economic and social exchanges, scholars can understand why some employees perceive more or less HRM practices and express higher or lower levels of job satisfaction, commitment or performance. Bos-Nehles and Audenaert present ways in which HRM and LMX combine to affect employees, and end with the development of a research agenda for the use of LMX theory in HRM research.

The final chapter of this volume is presented by Lorraine Ryan, Caroline Murphy and Daniel Troy, focusing on the processes of social mobilization theory. The latter is a theory that helps to understand conflict within a workplace, examining the stages through which individuals can develop a sense of shared injustice, to which they may take action together as a collective group in solidarity to redress a perceived injustice. Collective mobilization theory has received widespread attention in ER scholarship, primarily from Kelly's (1998) adaptation of Tilly's (1978) social movement theory, and also from recent reviews considering the theory's application and theoretical development (see Gall, 2018; Heery, 2018). Notwithstanding debate, mobilization theory seeks to explain critical factors such as attribution, power and leadership that influence the capacity of a group of individuals to engage in collective action.

CONCLUSION

Compiling an edited collection on theory is an arduous task as theory itself is difficult to define. Theory is not data, case studies or statistical reporting. Nor is it the description of an issue or problem. Theory is about general principles of explanation and understanding: a toolkit or a lens to shed light onto a particular phenomenon. This volume brings together chapters by several leading scholars from different disciplinary perspectives, each of which seeks to illuminate the development, utility and future prospects of a specific theory used in one or more approaches to the analysis and research of HRM and ER. We acknowledge that this volume is by no means a definitive list of theories in HRM and ER. In contrast, it is merely an introduction to some of the most prominent established and emerging theories from the perspectives of historical development, institutions, people and processes. We hope it is a useful resource and prompts reflection both on the theories we use and how we use them.

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