

**BRINGING WORKERS BACK IN:  
A COMPARATIVE ASSESSMENT OF EMPLOYEE ORIENTATIONS' TOWARDS HRM  
IN IRELAND AND NEW ZEALAND**

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## RATIONALE

Studies of Human Resource Management tend to suffer from a major deficiency; employee voice is neglected (Marchington and Grugulis, 2000). As an indicative example, only one of the twenty-five HRM-Performance studies reviewed by Wall and Wood (2005) incorporated data collected from employees. This paper is an attempt to address this imbalance by bringing workers back into HRM analysis. However, we do so in a manner which focuses on employee orientations, that is the underlying beliefs and values shaping workplace relations in contrast to simply exploring employee outputs in the form of 'responses' to various HRM practices (e.g. Purcell and Kinnie, 2007: 548). Indeed, the logic of our argument holds that an understanding of the former is a prerequisite to understanding the likely nature of the latter. Specifically, we argue that until employee orientations in the form of workplace values and beliefs are explored and accommodated we risk perpetuating HRM prescriptions based upon unfounded unitarist assumptions concerning the nature of the employment relationship.

In order to explore the nature of employee orientations the paper grapples with a central paradox underpinning HRM theory and research, namely that HRM endeavours to create a unitarist workplace while at the same time presupposing its existence. A unitarist workplace is one where *all* interests coalesce around official objectives and healthiness stems from there being only one legitimate source of authority (Fox, 1966). A key implication is that worker's voice is readily ignored as the objectives of employees are seen to naturally conflate with those of management. This viewpoint is manifest in the 'consensus orientation' found in an extensive content analysis of HRM research (Francis and Keegan, 2006: 233). Interpretations of HRM as 'employee champion/advocate' or strategic partner are central to this unitarist revival (Keenoy, 1990). Likewise, consider the most recent focus on the psychological contract; here is a language of individualism, obligations, implicitly shared understandings and mutual reciprocity. In contrast, an Employment Relations perspective recognizes the inherent tensions and inevitable contradiction that characterize employment relations between managers and workers. From an ER perspective worker's voice is a vital input shaping the nature and form of eventual workplace outcomes. To date however, these divergent orientations towards the employment relationship have become taken for granted within their respective fields as being 'correct', without being subject to empirical scrutiny (Geare et al., 2006).

The current research will seek to rectify this empirical void. To do so this paper reports on the findings from a research collaboration between researchers in New Zealand and Ireland exploring employee workplace values and beliefs in both countries. In particular, the paper will consider the extent to which managerial and employee orientations coalesce and also the extent to which orientations differ at various levels of abstraction comparing '*general*' empirical values and beliefs (beliefs about 'what is' in society) more '*specific*' empirical values and beliefs of respondents about their particular organization (beliefs about 'what is' in their current workplace). The paper proceeds as follows. The next section briefly elaborates on the theoretical underpinnings of the HRM project, and the neglect of employee perspectives in studies. Following on from this possible divergent ideological orientations are presented, with the methodology section illustrating how these were examined among worker and managerial respondents in Ireland and New Zealand respectively. Findings are then presented before key implications for the HRM project are discussed.

## **SOME UNRESOLVED ISSUES IN HRM**

While the HRM literature has witnessed dramatic growth over the last three decades, this in itself does not guarantee progress towards theoretical sophistication. As Guest (1997: 263) acknowledges, there may simply be “statistical sophistication ... at the expense of theoretical rigour.” However, two of the leading American HRM academics are in no doubt that there has been so much progress that the journey is virtually over. Not only do they know what HRM is, they know precisely its effect on performance. Huselid and Becker (2000: 851) affirm that “our judgement is that the effect of a standard deviation change in the HR system is 10 - 20% of a firm’s market value”. More recently Becker and Huselid (2006: 918-921) claim they have found:

“Widespread acceptance among senior HR and line managers of the notion that an appropriately designed and implemented HR strategy can make a managerially significant contribution to their firms financial performance ...In the past 15 years, the field of HRM has had a remarkable influence on both the academic literature and management practice”.

However, not all are so sanguine. On the important issue of the effect of HRM on performance Wright et al. (2008: 410) consider that Huselid and Becker’s work lacks:

“Sufficient methodological rigour to demonstrate that the relationship is actually causal in the sense that HR practices when instituted lead to higher performance”.

This suggests there is not even Guest’s “statistical sophistication” to compensate for the lack of theoretical rigour. Others are also not as convinced as Becker and Huselid about the beneficial influence of HRM on management practice. An HRM consultant Armstrong (2000: 586) claims that “as theory, HRM has little or nothing to offer personal professionals”. Similarly Keenoy notes that “the more researchers have undermined the normative, prescriptive and descriptive integrity of HRMism ... the stronger it gets”(1999: 1). Overall, a key irony is that HRM is still plagued by the same issues in terms of definition, performative impact, and lack employee orientation that characterised embryonic work in the field.

### **The definition of HRM**

Over twenty years ago Guest (1987: 503) observed “that HRM is a term which is now widely used but very loosely defined.” Such little progress has been made that a recent review of some 1,764 articles notes the *‘indeterminacy of the term’* (Keegan and Boselie, 2006: 1493) while another review of 104 articles finds that “*no consistent picture exists on what HRM is or even what it is supposed to do*” (Boselie et al., 2005: 81). While Becker and Huselid (2006: 899) are very assured in their view that SHRM is clearly different to HRM in that it is concerned with:

“Organisational performance rather than individual performance ... (and emphasises) ... HR management systems ... (rather than) ... HR management practices”

Their viewpoint is far from universally held. One of the American gurus in the field, Strauss (2001: 873), presents a counter view that HRM is a “relabelled (or at most

repackaged) version of the old field of personnel.” The difficulty of reaching consensus is further confounded by the *atheoretical* foundation of much HRM theory and research (Stone, 2007). Where theoretical frameworks are deployed they tend to serve as part of the rationale for studies or are used to lend weight to findings, rather than to directly underpin research (Boselie et al., 2005: 71). HRM therefore lacks anything resembling a useful or meaningful theoretical framework as “*much of the effort to define a theory of HRM is based on ‘ideal’ models of practices*” (Hendry, 2003: 1341). This is most apparent in the narrow research agenda which has consumed HRM research since the mid 1990s.

### **HRM and performance**

The basic issue is whether HRM practice does influence organisational performance and if so under what conditions. Despite claims to the contrary the claims of a link are not universally held with key findings described as “highly questionable” (Ramsay et al., 2000: 521). Likewise Paauwe and Boselie (2005: 74) point out that “there is little or no convincing empirical evidence that coherent and consistent systems or bundles automatically lead to higher performance’. In this research it is intended to ascertain if unitarist and pluralist orientations offer explanations for differences in perceptions of HRM as this may therefore potentially assist our subsequent understanding of how and why HRM influences performance. Despite origins ranging back as far as World War 1 (Kaufman, 2007) current HRM literature had its major impetus primarily from a small number of books published in the US (e.g. Beer et al., 1984). UK contributions were to a degree reactions to the US initiators (Legge, 1995). According to Brewster (2007: 771) two key assumptions underpinned this nascent HRM, namely a) that the employing organisation has a degree of autonomy with regard to managing people, including freedom to operate with minimal influence from trade unions or countervailing pressures, and b) the notion that the subject is founded upon a strategic approach to people management which has performative implications. Rather than examine such assumptions it is still the case that most authors remain concerned with methodological and not philosophical debates around HRM (Delaney and Godard, 2001: 421), thereby leaving them ignorant of the potentially fragile ideological undercarriage of the HRM project (Strauss, 2001: 890). This is perhaps most evident in the reality that employee voice and worker outcomes have largely remained dormant (Marchington and Grugulis, 2000) or ‘non-existent’ (Applebaum et al., 2000: 13) in HRM research.

### **The lack of workers’ voice**

Guest (1999: 5) was concerned that “from inception human resource management reflected a management agenda to the neglect of workers concerns”. However since then overall progress in incorporating employees has been fairly minimal. As an example, only one of the 25 studies reviewed by Wall and Wood (2005) and 11 out of 104 (10.5%) studies reviewed Boselie et al., (2005) actually researched employees perceptions and experiences of HRM. More concerning is the fact that leading US researchers such as Becker and Huselid (2006) are still remarkably unconcerned that most data about HRM are obtained from HR managers alone. They state that “the wisest use of scarce research resources should be devoted to increasing overall response rates among well - crafted single respondent surveys” (2006: 913). In contrast others have highlighted the importance of shifting HRM’s gaze to better understand “the complex and various motivations that lie behind people’s actions” (Bolton and Houlihan, 2008: 10). One of the key contentions of the current research is that worker voice is lacking because employee workplace values and beliefs have been

hitherto assumed as a given. Yet given that unitarism appears to be the key presumption upon which the viability of HRM project hinges, it would appear logical that it should be subject to further theoretical and empirical scrutiny. Indeed, early work in this field was quick to recognise that “the extent to which human resource management is feasible [in Britain] depends on the pervasiveness of the appropriate orientations” (Guest, 1987: 511).

## **BRINGING WORKERS BACK IN: EMPLOYMENT IDEOLOGIES**

The concept of ideology has a long pedigree in workplace studies (e.g. Bendix, 1956; Dunlop, 1958; Fox, 1966) although in recent time it has received much less attention (Notable exceptions include Barley and Kunda (1992), Edwards (1979) and Godard (1997)). Although ideology may be referred or discussed in the literature, it is very infrequently defined. A possible definition is that an ideology involves:

“a connected set of beliefs, attitudes and values held by an identifiable social group which refer to a specific aspect of social reality, which comprise normative, empirical and prescriptive elements and which may be at a general or particular level ...” (Geare et al., 2006).

While it must be assumed that writers acknowledge there can be different elements to a person’s values and beliefs, or ideology, this is rarely explicitly discussed. Thus a person will have *different* beliefs in a normative (ideal) sense, than in an empirical (current reality) sense, unless they believe that reality is ideal. Fox (1966) identified the two significant ideologies, or as he termed, frames of reference: the unitary (or unitarist as it was later termed) and pluralist. The unitarist ideology in the empirical sense, would be held by those who believe that “every organisation is an integrated and harmonious whole existing for a common purpose” (Farnham and Pilmott, 1986: 4), and hence the interests of managers and employees are congruent and any conflict would be an aberration. The pluralist ideology sees the organisation as comprising different groups (predominately senior managers and shop floor employees, but also supervisors, highly skilled employees, union delegates) with both “common and competing interests” (Horwitz, 1991: 4-5). Even with common interests there may be differing priorities, and intended outcomes. Hence, the potential for conflict is inevitable, (though it may be settled in a myriad of ways). The unitary – pluralist dichotomy is not without critics and extensions (e.g. Ackers (2002), Purcell (1993)). However, so long as this dichotomous classification approximates reality it has the clear benefits of simplicity.

The HRM literature, when it refers to ideology, either uses the unitary – pluralist dichotomy, (Delaney and Godard, 2001; Greenwood, 2002) or simply acknowledges like Keenoy (1999 :2) that the unitary view is a “taken for granted assumption” of HRM. Unfortunately, in the literature there is very rarely a differentiation between people’s values and beliefs in an empirical sense compared to their values and beliefs in a normative sense. The problem with HRM as a subject is that so much is written in the assumption that unitarism is an accurate portrayal of *reality*; “it is often said that HRM is the visual embodiment of the unitarist frame of reference” (Purcell, 1993 : 517), as opposed to reflecting an ideal situation which management can try to achieve. This is highly problematic as if in fact Fox was correct, unitary ideology is a false reflection of reality. It is problematic for HRM management practice because, given that mainstream US HRM texts have an approach which “is unitary rather than pluralist” (Strauss, 2001 : 892), they will be encouraging practitioners to employ practices in a manner which is

unlikely to work since they “largely ignore the possibility that workers, managers (and even vice-presidents) will resist managerial policies they do not like” (Strauss, 2001: 892). It is problematic for HRM academics because it encourages the approach discussed earlier of mainstream academics like Becker and Huselid who ignore the employee voice. As Marchington and Grugulis (2000: 1119) observe, under unitarism “employee opinions are either unnecessary or self-evident.” In contrast this paper presents managerial and employee data from the comparative contexts of New Zealand and Ireland which challenges such views and lends empirical weight to calls for revisionism.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper reports on the findings from an ongoing research collaboration between researchers in New Zealand and Ireland. Both teams of researchers conducted national studies of HRM practices (n=749 in New Zealand, n= 165 in Ireland) and used these to secure participants for the second phase of the study which involved administering a survey to a proportion of their workforces including supervisors and employees (n= 482 in New Zealand, n=316 in Ireland). The data explores the extent of conflation in orientation between management and workers (unitarist vs pluralist), and the extent of variation at different levels of abstraction (general societal vs organisation specific). The second phase of this study uses these data and groupings to explore the relationship between perceptions about HRM practice and attitudinal outcomes of job satisfaction and organizational commitment with the aim of examining if different ideological preferences appear to impact this relationship (i.e. the relationship between HRM practice and attitudinal outcomes).

## **FINDINGS**

Initially all respondent data for both the New Zealand and the Ireland samples were analysed in aggregate form. At the societal level, this analysis showed a significant association between ideological preference and country, with the Irish sample being more pluralist than the New Zealand sample. At the workplace level of abstraction, where respondents reported on their ideological views in relation to their own workplace, the preference for unitarism for both the New Zealand and the Irish samples appears to strengthen considerably. Disaggregating data with respect to managers and workers provides some useful insights. Here as Table 1 indicates (by way of summary), workers in both countries were seen to have pluralist orientation at both the societal and workplace level of abstraction, with this being more so the case for Irish workers. In contrast, while management respondents in both countries have a pluralist orientation at the societal level, when it comes to the representations of their own workplaces unitarist orientations come to the fore. For the workplace level this unitarist orientation is stronger among Irish managers. Thus in terms of workplace orientations a dichotomous split is evident in both countries, New Zealand managers have unitarist (weak) orientations compared to the pluralist (weak) orientations of employees. A similar scenario is evident in Ireland where management have unitarist (weak/moderate) representations of their own workplace compared to the pluralist (weak/ moderate) orientation of workers.

| <b>Table 1 Cross-Country Comparisons of Group Ideological Orientations using Aggregate Data</b> |                                 |                               |                                |                                 |
|---|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <b>Level of Abstraction</b>   | <b>Managers<br/>New Zealand</b> | <b>Managers<br/>Ireland</b>   | <b>Workers<br/>New Zealand</b> | <b>Workers<br/>Ireland</b>      |
| Society   | Pluralist<br>(moderate)         | Pluralist<br>(moderate)       | Pluralist<br>(moderate/strong) | Pluralist+<br>(moderate/strong) |
| Workplace   | Unitarist<br>(weak)             | Unitarist+<br>(weak/moderate) | Pluralist<br>(weak)            | Pluralist+<br>(weak/moderate)   |

+ Denotes ideological preference is stronger than that for the comparative group

Adding further weight to the import of the analysis the second phase of the study moved to explore the relationships between a particular ideological preference and work-related attitudes of organisational commitment, job satisfaction, along with views towards (a) the organisation's HRM policies and practices, and (b) employment relations both at a societal and workplace level. Here data was analysed at the workplace level only for both the manager and the worker group and for both the New Zealand and the Irish sample. At the workplace level it is found, nearly without exception, all ratings for those respondents who hold a unitary preference are more favourable than those ratings for those with a pluralist preference. The size of these differences is considerably large in some cases with a total of 19 of the 24 differences identified found to be statistically significant. These findings were consistent across both the New Zealand and the Irish sample This would suggest ideological preference is related to a range of attitudinal outcomes and views about HRM and the employment relationship. In sum- ideological preference is not what HRM theory presupposes, and secondly, this difference matters.

## **DISCUSSION**

Overall, the inherent pluralism in worker orientations across the two samples from Ireland and New Zealand empirically elucidates the flawed thinking that forms the heart of the HRM project. Reconsideration of the foundational assumptions appear justified given that management and the main recipient of HRM; the employee have been shown to have vast discrepancies in their perception of the employment relationship. This suggests that previous assertions that HRM or variations of the term provide a mechanism for the attainment of all the needs of relevant stakeholder is problematic, reflecting of something more of an American dream of what constitutes HRM (cf Guest, 1990) rather than an empirical reality. Further, consistent with earlier research (e.g. Ramsay, 1975) managerial respondents reported ideological differences between different levels of abstraction, holding pluralist views at societal level while maintaining a unitarist perception of their own workplace.

The implication of such findings in respect of HRM research are multiple. Firstly, this research adds weight to the numerous calls (Ramsey et al., 2000; Guest, 1999) for employee based research, reinforcing its logic by surfacing the differences between management and workers representations of their workplace. Second, if the ideological underpinning of HRM is flawed than the assumption that employees are beneficiaries of such practices may not hold, and so a redirection of focus is necessary to encompass the perceptions of the main customers of HRM. In respect of theory development, this paper suggest that alternative foundational assumptions are necessary if HRM is to

encompass organisational realities. This finds support from a recent plea for more reflexivity in HRM research;

“bringing the employee back’ into HRM studies will only produce ‘better’ research if HRM acknowledges the political nature of the employment relation, both at the micro and macro level, and develops concepts that can take issue with the inherent pluralism of work life” (Janssens and Steyaert, 2009: 146).

In respect of understanding ideological orientation, the comparative contexts of Ireland and New Zealand do exhibit similarities including their status as small open economies and similar population and workforce sizes. Nonetheless, *institutional equifinality* should be invoked in providing a rationale for the pluralist outlook of workers, and managerial discrepancies between the societal and workplace levels of abstraction found in both countries. In the early 1990s New Zealand was subject to a virulent neo-liberal reform agendas manifest in the Employment Contracts Act 1991, although the plight of de-regulation has since been softened by the labour led coalition. All the while, since 1980 Trade Union density has fallen some 46% (Hamann and Kelly, 2008) while New Zealand is now characterised by decentralised collective bargaining. In contrast, since 1987 Ireland has maintained a more corporatist orientation manifest in series of centralised social partnership agreements between the government, unions and employer bodies. However, at the same time union density has fallen some 19%. Consequently some claim a verbal genuflection towards social partnership at the societal level is twinned with a unitarist outlook at a firm level, in part fuelled by the non-unionism inherent to the US MNCs which dominate the industrial landscape in Ireland (Collings et al., 2008). The data from Ireland would seem to lend support to this idea.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has helped shine some much needed empirical light on the role of employee orientations in shaping workplace relations. The findings have significance for the strategic direction of HRM suggesting that the unitarist underpinnings of theoretical HRM are a false premise on which to ground understanding. In particular, because a disconnect in ideological orientations was found between managers and employees across both samples a call for revisionism in this area finds voice. This logic adds weight to recent commentary by Paauwe who argued that “bringing employees back into the equation...is a ‘conditio sine qua non’ for advancing the field as a respected discipline” (2009: 134).



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