

Human Resource Management as a Field of Research*

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Drawing on Snow and Thomas's (*Journal of Management Studies*, 31 (1994), pp. 457–480) matrix, we empirically explore the state of the art in human resource management (HRM) research. The data were obtained through a questionnaire directed to HRM scholars all over the world, in which they were asked about their particular theoretical and methodological approaches. The evidence obtained shows clearly that HRM scholars are progressively abandoning the universalistic perspective and completing their models with contingent and contextual variables. Trying to classify the different contributions proposed and discuss their integration, HRM is described as a field of research with three dimensions: *subfunctional*, *strategic* and *international*. The paper concludes that to provide reliable explanations and valid responses to professional problems, HRM research must advance simultaneously in these three dimensions. As follows from our analysis, there are certain HR issues that still need to be addressed: (1) the strategic use of HR practices, (2) their international applicability, (3) global HR strategies and (4) the synergic integration of HR activities. Nevertheless, to advance our knowledge in these issues, it seems necessary to integrate previous research in *subfunctional*, *strategic* and *international* aspects of HRM.

Introduction

Over the last two decades, scholars have explored how firms cope with globalization, competitive uncertainty, and the threats from a changing environment. Recent strategic models have focused mainly on inner determinants of competitiveness, moving from an external to an internal orientation (Hoskisson *et al.*, 1999; Stopford and Baden-Fuller, 1994). This change has produced a shift from the traditional perspective of personnel management, focused on administrative and

bureaucratic issues, to a more strategic orientation. In this sense, human resource management (HRM) has started to be considered as a broad function covering personnel management strategies, policies, practices and overarching philosophies (Schuler and Jackson, 1987a, 1987b). Although HRM models originally were virtually disconnected from strategic thinking, the increasing importance of intangible resources has highlighted firms' workforce and social issues as a central element of strategy (Aragón Sánchez *et al.*, 2003; Boxall, 1996; Boxall and Purcell, 2003; Budhwar, 2000; Buller and Napier, 1993; Carmona Moreno, Céspedes Lorente and Jérez Gómez, 2000; Hendry and Pettigrew, 1992). Globalization has added new questions to the HRM debate. As the literature at the beginning of the 1990s pointed out, the increasing international activity of firms and the new organizational forms

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that appeared because of it made it necessary to reconsider the influence of environmental variables (Brewster, 1993; Schuler, Dowling and De Cieri, 1993; Sundaram and Black, 1992).

The HRM discipline has grown quickly from the first models proposed to explore it from a global and strategic perspective (Galbraith and Nathanson, 1978; Lindtrod, 1982; Niniger, 1980; Schuler, 1981; Sweet, 1982). In this process, we must highlight the importance of some crucial theoretical revisions (Brewster, 1999; Jackson and Schuler, 1995; Wright and McMahan, 1992) as well as special issues of dedicated journals such as the *International Journal of Human Resource Management* (1997) and the *Human Resource Management Review* (1998). HRM has also incorporated inputs from different psychological, organizational, sociological and economic theories, as Jackson and Schuler (1995) and McMahan, Virick and Wright (1999) have pointed out. These inputs, together with a variety of articles, journals and groups focused on the topic, describe a state of the art characterized by a multiplicity of theoretical approaches, methodologies and research interests. The amount of knowledge accumulated in the last few years draws a complex state of the art in HRM. Therefore, it is necessary to stop and think about research in this field in order to state what we know, and point out the issues that still need addressing.

In this sense, our paper contributes to the HRM debate by clarifying the present landscape in the discipline, describing covered and uncovered topics, as well as the research approaches and methodologies adopted by scholars. To do so, we draw on data directly obtained from HR academics from all over the world. As explained later, this empirical analysis is based on Snow and Thomas's (1994) framework, which provides an interesting description of the management research process.

Review of the literature

Concept of HRM

A number of authors have pointed out that there is confusion over the meaning of HRM, which has restrained its theoretical development (Ferris *et al.*, 2004; Wright and Boswell, 2002). Scholars have even found it difficult to distinguish it from other related concepts, such as strategic HRM

(SHRM) (Delery and Shaw, 2001; Wright and McMahan, 1992) or international HRM (Ozbilgin, 2004). Difficulty in defining the concept arises from the broad domain of the field, which covers several research areas and levels of analysis (Delery and Shaw, 2001), and from its relative youth (Wright and McMahan, 1992). Authors such as Wright and McMahan (1992), Boxall (1993, 1996), Truss and Gratton (1994), Snell, Youndt and Wright (1996) and Ulrich (1997) have tried to offer comprehensive definitions able to integrate the different dimensions that modern HRM involves.

In trying to shed some light on this complex landscape, Boxall (1993, 1996) identified, using an in-depth review of the literature, two different ways of defining HRM. The first considers it as a specific approach to manage employment relationships that is oriented to commitment, as proposed by Walton (1985), Guest (1987) and Storey (1995). The second definition considers HRM in a more comprehensive manner, defining it not as a particular orientation to personnel management, but as a broader function directly linked to a firm's strategy. Boxall (1996, p. 59) argued that, as a consequence of this approach, HRM is not necessarily oriented to improving employee commitment, and that none of the possible personnel management orientations is excluded. Wright and McMahan (1992), Jackson and Schuler (1995) and Wright, Dunford and Snell (2001) explained that different HRM policies and practices can be designed depending on a firm's strategic orientation. Therefore, the second approach, which several authors refer to as SHRM, can be considered a broader way of understanding HRM (Schuler and Jackson, 1987a; Wright and McMahan, 1992). The resource-based view of the firm played a crucial role in providing solid theoretical arguments to explain how a firm's human capital, as an idiosyncratic resource that is difficult to analyse and imitate, can be a source of competitive advantage (Wright, Dunford and Snell, 2001).

Regarding the level of analysis, HRM can be conceptualized in two ways: (1) a *micro* orientation focused on functional issues; and (2) a *macro* perspective that analyses it from a strategic viewpoint (Fisher, 1989; Mahoney and Deckop, 1986; Wright and Boswell, 2002). For example, Fisher (1989) differentiated between two types of HRM activities: (1) one set related to the role of

HRM managers in strategy formulation and strategic decision making; and (2) another set of operational activities, such as recruitment, training and selection, developed mainly by line managers and HRM staff.

Similarly, Wright and Boswell (2002) proposed a typology of definitions based on two dimensions: (1) level of analysis, and (2) number of practices considered. They tried to avoid the ambiguity of the adjective *strategic* in the field of HRM, distinguishing between a functional perspective (individual orientation and single practice approach) and a strategic orientation (business unit/organizational level orientation and multi-practice approach). Delery and Shaw (2001) also argued that SHRM could be considered as a particular approach to HRM characterized by a higher level of analysis and a broader domain. Following Wright and McMahan (1992), Ferris *et al.* (1999), Delery and Shaw (2001) and Wright and Boswell (2002), we can say that recent research on HRM has included a strategic approach directly linked to organizational competitiveness.

Moreover, authors such as Sundaram and Black (1992), Schuler, Dowling and De Cieri (1993) and Sparrow, Schuler and Jackson (1994) have added a necessary point of complexity to HRM definitions, introducing the international dimension. As pointed out earlier, globalization and the internationalization of firms' activities introduced new research questions to the HRM debate, such as the expatriation process (Anderson, 2005; Hebert, Very and Beamish, 2005), diversity management (Jackson, Joshi and Erhardt, 2003; Lorbiecki and Jack, 2000) and differences between global, regional and local HRM strategies (Jackson, 2002; Schuler and Tarique, 2007). Attempting to incorporate these policies in previous definitions, Ferris *et al.* (1999) conceptualized HRM as a function with three dimensions: *functional*, *strategic* and *international*. In this sense, they added international personnel management issues to the two previous approaches identified by Mahoney and Deckop (1986), defining the function in a broader sense to cover the new questions appearing because of globalization.

Theoretical and methodological development

Application of many different theoretical approaches from several disciplines (Jackson and

Schuler, 1995; McMahan, Virick and Wright, 1999) is required because of the introduction of the strategic and international dimensions. More recently, economic and sociological arguments have been incorporated through agency and transaction cost theory (Barringer and Milkovich, 1998; Gómez Mejía, Tosi and Hinkin, 1987; Lepak and Snell, 1999; Romero and Valle Cabrera, 2001), a resource dependence perspective (Balkin and Bannister, 1993; Harrel-Cook and Ferris, 1997) and institutional theory (Eisenhardt, 1988; Gooderham, Nordhaug and Ringdal, 1999; Paauwe and Boselie, 2003; Scott and Meyer, 1994), amongst others. Strategic thinking has contributed to HRM by providing the criteria to evaluate its capability to be a source of competitive advantage through a resource-based view of the firm (Barney and Wright, 1998; Boxall, 1996; De Saa Pérez and García Falcón, 2002; Kamoche, 1996; Lado and Wilson, 1994; Richard and Johnson, 2001; Wright, Dunford and Snell, 2001). Finally, there are inputs from other organizational theories, such as the behavioural perspective (Huang, 2001; Jackson, Schuler and Rivero, 1989; Schuler, 1987; Schuler and Jackson, 1987a, 1987b; Sparrow, Schuler and Jackson, 1994; Tubre and Collins, 2000), open systems theory (Snell, 1992; Wright and Snell, 1991; Zedeck and Cascio, 1984) and more recent approaches such as human capital (Cascio, 1991; Lepak and Snell, 1999; Snell and Dean, 1992; Wallace and Fay, 1988) and social capital (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Leana and Van Buren, 1999; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998).

It is possible to reorganize this multiplicity of approaches into four research perspectives according to the specific emphasis on HRM (Brewster, 1999; Chadwick and Cappelli, 1999; Delery and Doty, 1996). The *universalistic* perspective focuses on the strategic importance of human capital, as well as the set of best practices through which it is created and managed. Direct empirical relationships are sought between HR and performance (Duncan and Hoffman, 1981; Gerhart and Milkovich, 1990; Rumberger, 1987; Russell, Terborg and Powers, 1985; Terpstra and Rozell, 1993; Tsang, 1987). The *contingent* perspective completes the universalistic perspective by adding a third intervening variable, such as strategy (Chang and Huang, 2005; Lado and Wilson, 1994; Lengnick-Hall and

Lengnick-Hall, 1988; Richard and Johnson, 2001; Wright, Dunford and Snell, 2001; Wright, McMahan and McWilliams, 1994), the organizational context (Aycan, 2005; Balkin and Bannister, 1993; Jackson and Schuler, 1995; Jones, 1984; Pfeffer, 1987) or the external environment (Becker and Gerhart, 1996; Boxall, 1996; Burgess and Connell, 2006; Osland and Osland, 2005; Schuler and Walker, 1990). The *configurational* perspective explores the internal dynamics of the HRM system, and analyses how the different elements can be combined synergistically in different management patterns that represent diverse orientations to HRM (Arthur, 1992; Delery, 1998; Delery and Shaw, 2001; Lepak and Snell, 1999; MacDuffie, 1995; Miles and Snow, 1984; Snell and Dean, 1992; Wright and Snell, 1998). Finally, the *contextual* perspective reconsiders the importance of the context, not only as a contingent variable, but also as a framework for HRM decisions that are influenced by and influence the environment in which they are embedded (Brewster, 1993, 1995, 1999; Brewster and Bournois, 1991; Brewster and Lockhart, 1992; Hendry and Pettigrew, 1986, 1992; Muller, 1999; Paauwe, 1991; Poole, 1990; Sparrow and Hiltrop, 1994). This fourth way of theorizing has provided interesting arguments to explain the international dimension of HRM, especially about how cultural, social and political influences vary across the different contexts in which international firms operate (Brewster *et al.*, 1999).

There is divergence in the literature over the empirical methodologies applied. Strongly deductive tools allow universalists to better achieve statistical strength in hypothesis testing. The contextual perspective uses inductive logic (Brewster, 1999). Depending on their research objectives (Chadwick and Cappelli, 1999; Ferris *et al.*, 1999), authors choose specific tools to test dependence between variables and relationships (χ^2 , Kendall's tau or analysis of variance (ANOVA)), normally through regression (Huselid, Jackson and Schuler, 1997; Keng-Howe Chew and Chong, 1999; Wood and Albanese, 1995; Youndt *et al.*, 1996) that allows scholars to introduce moderating and mediating variables (Miller and Lee, 2001; Way-Kwong, Priem and Cychota, 2001). Techniques such as cluster or factorial analysis are also applied to identify HRM configurations, and to analyse their

internal consistency (De Saa Pérez and García Falcón, 2002; MacDuffie, 1995; Romero and Valle Cabrera, 2001). Scholars such as Fields, Chan and Akhtar (2000) or Ding and Akhtar (2001) are introducing structural equation modelling as a powerful tool to simultaneously analyse the existence of latent constructs, such as synergic systems of HR, and their relationship to other multidimensional concepts such as performance, firm strategy or group dynamics.

In conclusion, a review of the literature shows that present HRM research is characterized by a multiplicity of objectives, levels of analysis, theoretical approaches and empirical methodologies. The increasing interest in strategic and international issues has fostered the development of more comprehensive models and extended the domain of the field. Thus, it appears necessary at this time to review the state of the art and to analyse and reorganize the different contributions that scholars have made (Schuler and Jackson, 2005).

Snow and Thomas's (1994) work offers a tool to systematically analyse the state of management research based on a matrix defined by two dimensions: (1) *stage of theory development* (building or testing), and (2) *purpose of theory* (description, explanation or prediction). By analysing how the different contributions are distributed throughout the six cells of the matrix (Figure 1), it is possible to describe how academia is developing knowledge, as well as research purposes and modes of theorizing.

	Description	Explanation	Prediction
Theory building	1 Identify key constructs and variables (What)	2 Establish relationships among constructs and provide theoretical rationales for observed relationships (How and Why)	3 Examine boundary conditions of a theory (Who, Where and Why)
Theory testing	4 Developing and validating measure of key constructs	5 Documenting relationships among variables through hypothesis testing	6 Testing competing theories of the same phenomenon through critical experiments

Figure 1. Snow and Thomas's (1994) matrix

Source: adapted from Snow and Thomas (1994).

The study

As pointed out earlier, we use the Snow and Thomas (1994) framework to study the particular situation of HRM research in each of the cells, in order to describe how scholars build and test theory from a descriptive, explanatory or pre-emptive point of view.

Sample

An online questionnaire was sent to an international sample of 1656 HRM scholars identified through the membership database of the HRM division of the Academy of Management, and through lists of attendees at specialized research meetings such as the EIASM conferences and workshops, CRANET meetings, Cádiz and Pablo de Olavide University HRM workshops and IJHRM conferences. Questionnaires were sent in several rounds of emails between June and October 2004. The online method used (the questionnaire was designed as a .php form) made a larger sample possible through reduced survey costs and response time. We received 223 satisfactory responses after three rounds of emails asking scholars to complete the online survey and after rejection of invalid cases (mainly because scholars declared they were not primarily focused in HRM). The response represented 13.5% of the sample, with the majority of respondents coming from European (56.2%) and North American (35.4%) universities. Comparatively fewer responses were received from Asia (6.7%) and South America (1.7%). Nevertheless, through a χ^2 test we confirmed that these percentages were proportional to the geographical distribution of the population of HR scholars. Therefore, we can consider that our sample was representative enough, given that no significant differences were found between our 223 cases and the entire population with respect to scholars' *country of origin* (the only demographic variable available in the databases used to identify HR academics). Table 1 shows sample and population proportions.

Measures

Snow and Thomas's (1994) work points out some of the issues that need to be measured to identify the research approaches followed by manage-

Table 1. Sample and population delineation

	Population	Sample
Europe	65.5%	56.2%
North America	25.2%	35.4%
Asia and Africa	7.1%	6.7%
South America	2.2%	1.7%

ment scholars. In this sense, they provide us reliable items to describe (1) the objectives pursued in each of the six stages of theory development and (2) the different field research methods used to build and test theory. Nevertheless, as Snow and Thomas's (1994) framework was not specifically designed for the HRM field, it was necessary to include other variables in order to describe scholars' approaches to HRM research. Thus, the original items provided by Snow and Thomas (1994) were completed with six other questions. The final questionnaire comprised the following sets of variables, all of them defined as 0–5 Likert scales.

(a) *Scholars' objectives.* We extracted information about scholars' research purposes: (1) identification of key concepts, (2) establishment of how and why these key concepts are related, (3) prediction of the future behaviour of variables, (4) measurement of key concepts, (5) measurement of the relationships among variables and (6) testing competing theories explaining the same phenomenon. This first set of factors was defined drawing on the variables used by Snow and Thomas (1994) to define their matrix, so it was useful for us to identify scholars' *research purposes* and the *stages of theory development* to which they contribute.

(b) *Theories.* Scholars were questioned about the theories and perspectives they used to support their propositions. The list of approaches drew on previous reviews of the literature (Jackson and Schuler, 1995; Wright and McMahan, 1992). An open option was provided to capture options not included in the list. Scholars were requested to choose between the following options: (1) the resources and capabilities view, (2) the behavioural perspective, (3) open systems theory, (4) agency and transaction cost theories, (5) human capital theory, (6) social capital theory, (7) resource dependence theory and (8) institutional theory.

(c) *Research approach.* Delery and Doty's (1996) distinction between universalistic, contingent and configuration perspectives was used to extract information on assumptions about the relationship between variables. Following Brewster (1995, 1999) we added a fourth alternative to capture the adoption of an inductive contextual approach.

(d) *Data-obtaining methods.* Also taking Snow and Thomas's (1994) list of field research methods into account, a second section of the questionnaire was designed to describe the methods used by scholars to obtain information: (1) direct and participant observation, (2) interviews, (3) questionnaires, (4) computer databases, (5) simulations, (6) laboratory experiments or (7) computer simulations.

(e) *Data analysis methods.* The questionnaire differentiated between qualitative (i.e. case studies, Delphi, repertory grid) and quantitative (i.e. ANOVA, regressions, cluster analysis, factorial analysis) methods.

(f) *Research interests.* Scholars were asked about their interest in particular HR practices (staffing, recruitment and selection, compensation, training, socialization, and motivation) and in the broader topic of SHRM (Delery and Shaw, 2001; Schuler, 1992; Schuler and McMillan, 1984; Wright and McMahan, 1992; Wright, Dunford and Snell, 2001). As can be observed, we introduced items regarding just two of the three traditional HR levels. Because of the diversity of HR-related policies, the middle operational level was not considered. Nevertheless, an open response in this question was allowed to identify relevant managerial policies not covered by the options provided.

Data analysis

To describe the particular conditions of the state of the art in each of the six cells, we analysed significant mean differences using ANOVA. Table 2 shows the results obtained from an ANOVA where *theoretical frameworks, research approaches, methodologies* and *specific research interests* were considered as independent variables. To analyse separately the mean differences

in each of the six cells of Snow and Thomas's (1994) matrix, six dependent variables were introduced, measuring the importance given to the different research objectives identified:

CELL 1: identify key constructs and variables
CELL 2: establish relationships among constructs and provide theoretical rationale for observed relationships

CELL 3: examine boundary conditions of a theory

CELL 4: developing and validating measures of key constructs

CELL 5: documenting relationships among variables through hypothesis testing

CELL 6: testing competing theories of the same phenomenon through crucial experiments

ANOVA outputs provided us not only means for each item (in a 0–5 scale) but also the F values, so we could assess the statistical significance of mean differences. Drawing on these results, we could describe the particular research approaches followed by scholars in the different stages of theory development. In this sense, Table 2 presents mean values obtained for each item in each of the cells of Snow and Thomas's (1994) matrix. The F statistic allowed us to decide if the importance given to the different methods, theories, topics or approaches was particular to each stage or, on the contrary, represented a common pattern in HRM research.

Results

Cell 1: Theory building/description

The first cell represents a basic stage in theory development. Description contributes to the comprehension of reality through identification of key concepts and constructs, i.e. pointing out 'what' should be studied (Dubin, 1978). Because scholars base their propositions and hypotheses on these elements, a correct specification is important for generating solid theory. The F values for the majority of variables were satisfactory ($p < 0.01$). Therefore, scholars who responded that their main objective was the identification of key concepts showed significantly different behaviour (Table 2).

Table 2 shows that when research was oriented to the identification of constructs and variables, models relied basically on behavioural theory and

Table 2. Results of ANOVA (means, F statistics and levels of significance)

	CELL 1: Identification of key constructs		CELL 2: Description of relationships		CELL 3: Examination of the boundaries of theories		CELL 4: Measures development		CELL 5: Relationship testing		CELL 6: Test of competitive theories	
	Mean	F	Mean	F	Mean	F	Mean	F	Mean	F	Mean	F
Theories												
Resource-based view	2.92	5.199***	2.89	4.536***	–	0.706	3.00	3.635**	–	1.156	–	0.676
Behavioural perspective	3.18	2.940*	3.12	3.240**	3.45	4.173**	3.32	4.032**	3.21	3.783**	3.14	3.520**
Open system	2.13	3.361**	2.23	8.772***	1.80	3.735**	1.79	4.405**	–	1.868	1.89	6.605***
Agency/transaction costs	–	0.661	–	0.843	–	2.145	–	0.798	–	1.713	1.89	7.840***
Human capital	2.31	2.932*	2.31	2.555*	2.27	3.257**	–	1.905	–	2.223	2.61	5.285***
Social capital	1.59	3.691**	1.67	5.559***	1.43	3.797**	–	2.027	1.48	4.087**	2.05	7.549***
Resource dependence	1.48	2.915*	1.63	4.436**	–	1.449	–	1.077	–	0.807	1.86	4.766***
Institutional theory	2.01	2.445*	2.06	4.058**	1.45	2.532*	–	1.796	–	0.239	2.65	7.995***
Universalsitic	1.37	2.592*	–	1.348	1.42	2.570*	1.55	3.070**	1.51	3.393**	1.53	2.881*
Contingent	–	1.474	3.15	6.324***	3.22	3.994**	3.38	7.395***	3.04	5.833***	3.22	4.640***
Configuration	–	1.999	1.52	2.903*	1.09	4.297**	–	1.54	4.029**	1.64	1.74	5.040***
Contextual	2.93	3.315**	2.95	3.683**	–	1.764	–	0.929	–	0.657	3.41	3.836**
Direct participation	2.16	8.759***	2.05	6.197***	–	0.459	–	1.140	–	2.032	–	2.012
Interviewing	3.54	9.319***	3.36	6.008***	2.97	3.380**	1.43	2.600*	1.23	3.578**	–	2.216
Questionnaire survey	–	0.780	–	1.167	4.24	8.520***	–	2.117	2.14	4.545**	2.81	4.493**
Archival analysis	1.67	4.022**	1.91	4.555**	–	1.935	–	0.426	–	0.991	–	1.576
Databases	1.57	2.848*	1.54	3.746**	1.65	4.481***	–	0.028	–	0.465	–	0.494
Experimental simulations	–	1.610	–	2.124	1.04	5.760***	4.25	9.259***	4.34	14.553***	4.36	3.010*
Laboratory experiments	0.34	2.561*	0.48	2.710*	0.81	5.379***	–	1.501	–	1.519	2.02	4.120**
Computer simulations	–	1.085	0.48	2.304*	0.71	5.006***	1.38	4.270**	1.56	3.452**	1.90	6.234***
Qualitative analysis	2.70	5.333***	–	1.905	–	1.784	0.73	2.689**	–	2.009	0.84	4.214**
Univariate analysis	1.04	5.896***	1.06	2.735*	1.21	2.695*	0.60	3.513**	–	1.372	0.57	3.407**
Multivariate analysis	–	1.537	–	0.975	2.66	3.485**	0.43	2.967*	–	1.876	0.48	3.886**
Staffing/recruitment/selection	1.58	3.266***	–	1.473	2.12	2.960*	1.66	2.703*	2.02	3.114**	2.49	6.087***
Compensation	1.49	3.113***	–	0.324	2.06	3.141**	–	1.052	–	1.388	–	1.787
Training	1.83	2.331*	–	1.623	–	0.868	–	1.520	–	0.658	–	3.237**
Socialization	1.42	2.877*	1.43	3.126***	–	1.321	–	1.430	1.44	2.628*	1.77	5.215***
Motivation	2.11	6.192***	–	2.021	2.74	4.437**	–	1.799	2.39	3.573**	–	2.002
Human resource strategies	3.07	2.898*	–	1.592	–	2.104	–	1.834	–	0.374	3.72	7.936***

Significance levels: *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.

the resource-based view, while the contextual approach was perceived as being the most suitable research approach. Resource dependence and social capital theories received the lowest valuations. Results for the universalistic approach seemed to confirm the assumption that present research gives lower importance to the identification of best practices, and that third contextual factors are starting to be considered, as pointed out by Jackson and Schuler (1995) and Brewster (1999).

As can also be observed, the evidence used by HR scholars to identify key research questions was normally extracted from interviews. Qualitative methods were used more than quantitative methods because of the nature of data obtained from interviews. Therefore, the data showed that the descriptive stage of theory building followed an inductive logic of analysis. Surprisingly, laboratory experiments and secondary data analysis (archives and databases) received the lowest valuation, although these methods are traditionally used to obtain conclusions from evidence (Snow and Thomas, 1994).

Data for particular research interests confirmed that, in order to describe and build theory, scholars focus their attention on multi-functional constructs more than on isolated policies. In their attempt to identify key concepts, they paid attention to HR strategies as a comprehensive topic that integrates different HR practices.

Cell 2: Theory building/explanation

Research oriented to build theory from an explanatory point of view contributes to HRM research in three ways (Snow and Thomas, 1994, p. 467): (1) analysing the sense and the strength of the relationships between the key concepts and constructs, (2) identifying additional variables that can help to describe the phenomena more precisely, and (3) theoretically explaining these relationships.

Table 2 shows the variables that could be considered as significant descriptors of the state of the art in this cell. The profiles for Cells 1 and 2 were similar for the theoretical perspectives. The F statistic was significant for the same theories, and the means for the behavioural perspective and the resource-based view were comparatively higher (Table 2). Data on research approaches led to an interesting conclusion: the result for the contingent approach was significant and its mean was the highest. This showed that models

designed to explain links between HR concepts included additional third variables as potential mediators and moderators of the relationships.

The data also show that data obtained to identify relationships were normally extracted through interviews and direct participation methods. However, in this case, we cannot say much about data analysis methodologies. The results were only significant in the univariate analysis (showing a low valuation). Hence, scholars who looked for relationships between key concepts did not differ from others in terms of their data analysis methodologies. A similar result was obtained for research interests. In this case, the only particular characteristic highlighted by the data was the low interest of this group of scholars in socialization.

Cell 3: Theory building/prediction

The third cell represents research oriented to establish the conditions under which the theory holds true, explaining what or who produces certain effects, and where and how. Thus, prediction draws on research in the previous cells, but incorporates variables and hypotheses in a theoretical model with clearly defined boundaries (Snow and Thomas, 1994, p. 467).

ANOVA identified the variables that significantly describe the research profile of those authors interested in the prediction of the future behaviour of variables (Table 2). The means of the theoretical perspectives showed that behavioural theory was the most valued, followed by the human capital approach. In this case, the resource-based view was not significantly related to prediction. As expected, the conditions under which relationships were predicted to happen were specified through the introduction of third intervening variables in models. This result could explain the relatively higher valuation received for the contingent approach.

In this case, significant differences were found for research perspectives. Scholars preferred to use quantitative methods for data obtained from questionnaires. The importance given to multivariate tools showed that data analysis techniques seemed to be more sophisticated. As in the previous cell, the data for some topics did not show a trend. The F statistic was significant for only three items, and only motivation had a mean exceeding 2.5.

Cell 4: Theory testing/description

Description contributes to the theory testing stage through the measurement of key constructs, a task that can be carried out from two alternative viewpoints (Snow and Thomas, 1994): analysis of how the definition and measurement of variables can be improved, or empirical research to study construct validity and compare results obtained from different conceptualizations.

The number of theoretical perspectives that significantly describe the research by scholars interested in key concepts measurement was found to be lower. Results for the F statistic were similar for the remainder of the variables (Table 2). The data show that scholars highlighted the importance of the resource-based view and behavioural theory: results that appear to build the theoretical foundations of the discipline, not only in terms of what theory building means, but also in terms of construct measurement. However, the data also show that this task was carried out from a contingent point of view, considering not only isolated variables but also their connections to other conditional influences.

Research to measure key concepts appeared to be carried out from a quantitative point of view, drawing on data from questionnaires. However, this conclusion needs to be interpreted cautiously, because ANOVA's F is only significant for univariate analysis. A similar result was found for what research interests mean. The only characteristic that differentiated scholars interested in construct measurement was the relatively lower importance given to staffing, recruitment and selection.

Cell 5: Theory testing/explanation

When exploring in the testing stage of theory development, scholars based their work on links between variables and constructs specified by previous research (Cell 2). Therefore, the objective is to support relationships with empirical evidence. Although theoretical models normally identify relevant associations, empirical research must tackle many conflicting issues about their sense, shape or intensity (Snow and Thomas, 1994).

Studies focused on the test of relationships did not seem to have a particularly different research approach. The number of significant variables in the ANOVA was reduced (Table 2), and, for those with valid F statistics and means, was

similar to those obtained for previous cells. The behavioural perspective was the most valued theoretical framework, although in this case arguments arising from the resource-based view were not emphasized as valid tools to measure links. As was noted previously, models designed to test relationships were developed mainly from a contingent perspective. This result seems logical if we consider that these links have been specified through contingent models, as results for this approach in Cell 2 show.

Analysis showed that data used to test relationships were extracted mainly from questionnaires and analysed using quantitative methods. The data confirmed a light trend towards multivariate analysis, although means obtained were relatively low. Staffing, recruitment and selection, socialization, and motivation were the three topics that presented significant differences. However, none reached a particularly high mean value.

Cell 6: Theory testing/prediction

Different theories explaining the same phenomenon must be confronted to test the degree each adds to the understanding of variables and prediction of their future behaviour. Inputs from previous stages are required. Hence, cells should be interpreted as stages of an accumulative process (Snow and Thomas, 1994).

The number of variables with significant results led to the conclusion that scholars followed a particular approach when they compared different theories explaining the same reality. As in the previous cell, the adoption of the resource-based view was not significantly related to prediction, and the behavioural perspective received the highest valuation. However, in this case, the number of significant theoretical frameworks was much higher. It was interesting to observe how (as in Cell 3, which was also oriented to prediction) human capital theory was highlighted as one of the most frequently used frameworks, together with other new theories such as social capital and institutional theories.

Although the mean for contingent analysis remained high in this cell, contextual analysis received the highest valuation. Therefore, we concluded that scholars paid attention to the framework in which theories were applied. The importance given by scholars to questionnaire surveys and multivariate analysis confirmed that

research in this cell was characterized by a quantitative focus, following the common approach to all predictive research, as the results for Cell 3 showed. Methods such as experimental simulations, laboratory experiments and computer simulations presented very low means. Means obtained for research interests confirmed that respondents normally compared theories to explain the HRM function considered as a whole from a strategic point of view rather than as isolated items.

Conclusions

Outline of present research in HRM

This study presents an analysis of the state of the art in the field of HRM, based on a review of the literature and data obtained from 223 scholars in the field. Snow and Thomas's (1994) framework was applied to explore how the discipline is building and testing knowledge. The diversity of approaches in this field and the expansion of the domain of HRM made this analysis necessary. By exploring the results obtained from the empirical study (Table 2), it was possible to identify general trends in HRM research and the extent to which scholars followed particular approaches when they focused on each stage of the theory development process.

The data showed a clear preference towards the behavioural perspective as the theoretical foundation of the field (a mean value of over 3 in all cells). This result confirmed its importance not only for theory building but also for testing. The result demonstrated that the behavioural perspective is useful not only to provide descriptions but also to explain and predict HRM variables. Therefore, it can be concluded that much of HRM research draws on the basic assumption of behavioural theory that employees' behaviour is the key element of HRM strategies as well as a potential moderator of its effects on performance (Jackson, Schuler and Rivero, 1989; Wright and McMahan, 1992). Scholars also highlighted the importance of the resource-based view of the firm in identifying and measuring key concepts (Cells 1 and 4). This view provides solid arguments to analyse the degree to which a resource can be considered as a source of competitive advantage. The ANOVA results confirmed that scholars relied heavily on this framework to justify the

strategic importance of human resources, and to identify which particular characteristics supported this role (value, rareness, inimitability). Furthermore, data obtained for Cell 2 showed that the resource-based view also contributed to theory explanation, clarifying links between HRM and a firm's competitiveness and performance. The data were not so conclusive for the remainder of the frameworks considered, although it was interesting to observe the importance given to human capital theory in prediction (Cells 3 and 6).

We also found support for the assumption that HRM models have been defined through contingent and contextual models (Martín Alcázar, Romero Fernández and Sánchez Gardey, 2005a, 2005b). Results for this approach were significant in almost all cells, showing high levels of use. Therefore, we could conclude that present HRM research rejects the possibility of finding best practices, and acknowledges the influence of third variables that condition relationships.

It was possible to find significant differences between research done to *build* and to *test* theory, which were consistent with the Snow and Thomas (1994, p. 466) arguments. The data showed that scholars who focused on the identification of key concepts and relationship measurement adopted an inductive logic in analysis, extracting evidence from interviews or direct participation and analysing data through qualitative methods. However, when the objective was to *test* theory or to *predict* future behaviour of variables, the methodologies changed and scholars showed a clear preference for quantitative tools based on data obtained from questionnaire surveys.

Although HRM is a broad area covering many subtopics, our data did not confirm the existence of any pattern of particular interests throughout the different stages of theory development. A deeper analysis seems to be necessary to explore how the field is creating and testing knowledge about specific HRM dimensions, such as staffing, recruitment and selection, compensation, performance assessment, and socialization policies. Nevertheless, it was interesting to observe how SHRM was the only topic with means of over 3 in the theory building/description phase. This seemed to confirm that scholars have identified HR strategy as a key construct in models (Wright and McMahan, 1992). However, lack

of significance in the other cells pointed to research into the connection of strategy to third variables as comparatively less developed.

In conclusion, we can describe HRM research as a collective process of development. Key concepts and relationships are identified from an inductive point of view, extracting relevant issues from data obtained through interviews and direct participation methods. We can conclude that HRM scholars recognize the central role played by employee behaviour, which moderates the effect of personnel management policies on performance. We can also conclude that HRM models are specified from a strategic point of view, considering a firm's workforce as a source of competitive advantage, as supported by the resource-based view of the firm. Moreover, results for the 'research approaches' item confirm that these models acknowledge the influence of third contingent variables that mediate relationships, suggesting that the best practice approach seems to be superseded in HRM research. When the objective is to test theory or predict the future behaviour of variables, scholars prefer deductive and quantitative analysis based on data extracted through questionnaire surveys.

Academic and professional implications

It follows from the above that HRM is no longer the non-theoretical field described at the close of the 1980s (Bacharach, 1989; Dyer, 1985; Paauwe and Boselie, 2005). Nevertheless, further research is required to define and measure more precisely core concepts (e.g. HRM strategies) and to establish the conditions under which certain relationships take place. Recommendations for future scholars in the field of HRM flow from some of the conclusions pointed out. For example, ANOVA has helped us to identify the theoretical frameworks in which scholars can find the rationale to support their propositions about the strategic importance of HRM (i.e. *resource-based view of the firm*) as well as about internal dynamics within the workforce (i.e. *behavioural perspective*). Similarly, data also seem to point out the increasing importance of certain theories that provide strong arguments to explore concrete dimensions of HRM, such as the human capital or institutional theories. Finally, results could also help us to identify which research approach and methodology could be more useful

depending on the step of the theory development process in which each scholar places his/her work. In this sense, we have observed how a *contextual-qualitative* point of view provides solid arguments to build theory from a comprehensive point of view. The *contingent-quantitative* approach, on the other hand, helps us to identify moderating variables in empirical models oriented to test relationships.

In spite of the academic focus of this paper, some recommendations for HR practitioners may also be derived from the results. In our opinion, the analyses confirm the need to reject the universalistic approach to manage personnel issues. In fact, scholars in this field have reached a consensus about the need to consider third intervening variables that make HR much more complex than expected by the first professional models. It seems clear that the adequacy of HRM practices depends on strategic and environmental conditions.

Future research in HRM

As pointed out in our review of the literature, and as confirmed by our data, modern HRM could be described as a three-dimensional field of research. To provide reliable explanations of the function and valid responses to professional problems, it must advance simultaneously in the three dimensions identified by Mahoney and Deckop (1986), Ferris *et al.* (1999) and Wright and Boswell (2002): *subfunctional*, *strategic* and *international*.

The data obtained from the survey showed clearly how scholars are abandoning the pure subfunctional approach, in which HR practices are analysed in isolation, without considering their international implications or their connections to HR strategies. From its origins as a field of research, HRM has described staffing, assessment, compensation, planning or motivation policies as management instruments to reduce problems of conflict, turnover and absenteeism or to improve staff productivity (Martín Alcázar, Romero Fernández and Sánchez Gardey, 2005a). However, when one adds the strategic and international dimensions to the HR domains, several questions that still need to be addressed arise. For example, more research is needed in zone a of Figure 2. It seems necessary to explain how HR activities can be used strategically (Lam and Ho, 2006; Millmore, 2003), or how they can

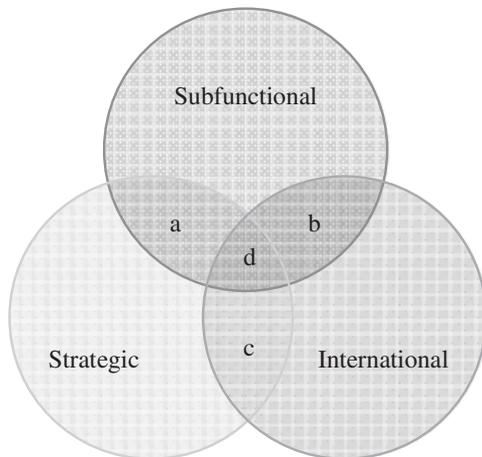


Figure 2. Dimensions of HRM research

Source: Authors' elaboration from Mahoney and Deckop (1986), Ferris *et al.* (1999) and Wright and Boswell (2002).

be combined to form synergic systems of practices (Delery, 1998; Wright and Snell, 1998). Something similar happens when we analyse the intersection between the subfunctional and the international dimensions (zone b). As Schuler and Tarique (2007) pointed out, in their recent review of the literature on international HRM, multinational enterprises and firms involved in cross-border alliances need to rethink many of their traditional HR practices. To help organizations manage and control a global workforce, across a wide variety of social and cultural contexts, research must explore in more depth global career systems (Suutari and Taka, 2004), appraisal practices (Harvey, 1997), international labour relationships (Gunnigle, Collings and Morley, 2005) and compensation mechanisms (Engle and Mendenhall, 2004). Furthermore, internationalization has highlighted the importance of a new set of activities not considered by previous research but that will drive future discussions about HRM. For example, more knowledge would be very helpful about what expatriation and repatriation processes mean, as well as about transnational teams, diversity management or cross-cultural competences development (Schuler and Tarique, 2007).

Another area of HRM that still seems to be under-researched is the interlink between the *strategic* and *international* dimensions (zone c). Global firms require global HRM strategies to cope with the complexity of the international

environment. As Schuler, Dowling and De Cieri (1993) explained, models at the global level must consider a broader set of external variables to explain the role that SHRM plays in developing and sustaining competitive advantages. The contextual approach, which, as we have seen, is one of the main pillars of HRM research, can help scholars to explain this international dimension of HR strategies. Brewster and Hegewisch (1993) or Brewster *et al.* (1999), for example, provided interesting comparative studies that identify differences between countries in social, organizational or cultural variables. Contextual research could also be helpful to introduce a multiple stakeholders' perspective in HRM models, as Schuler and Tarique (2007) suggested. The reconsideration of the effects of HRM activities proposed by this approach might facilitate the development of more sophisticated models, considering not only financial outcomes but also social consequences, as well as the effects of HRM on third interested agents.

Finally, zone d in Figure 2 represents an issue of investigation that is particularly underdeveloped: the definition of international HR systems of practices. Different HR configurations have been proposed (Delery, 1998; Delery and Shaw, 2001; Lepak and Snell, 1999; MacDuffie, 1995; Miles and Snow, 1984; Snell and Dean, 1992; Wright and Snell, 1998) but little has been said about the international applicability of these systems. As Schuler and Tarique (2007) pointed out, future research needs to address how HRM can simultaneously maintain the coherence of the synergic HR system and adapt it to the particular conditions of each regional and local context in which the firm operates.

Our paper attempts to present a broad picture of theory development in the field of HRM. However, we find it necessary to complete this exploratory analysis with more revisions that could help us to identify remaining questions and unmeasured concepts. As HRM is a broad topic, it would also be interesting to replicate the study within more concrete dimensions of this research area, such as *international* or *strategic HRM*, which are nowadays attracting the attention of an increasing number of scholars. In this sense, meta-analyses, such as those of Boselie, Dietz and Boon (2005), could be especially useful to systematically reorganize the previous literature. These kinds of studies could help us to compare

conclusions obtained from different perspectives and integrate conflicting empirical results.

Although a diversity of approaches is required on such a broad topic, in the present state of the art of HRM we find it necessary to look for complementarities. Research carried out in the three dimensions of HRM must be consistent across the different stages of the research process (Snow and Thomas, 1994). This seems to be a necessary condition for HRM to provide relevant explanations, accurate tests of the models, and reliable predictions in today's environment, characterized by globalization and complexity.

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