STRATEGIC HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND THE WORKER'S EXPERIENCE

BRAD S. LONG
St. Francis Xavier University, Canada

ABSTRACT

The relationship between strategic human resource management and various organizational outcomes has been the subject of much recent scholarly research. The literature was examined to uncover the various perspectives from which they are written. The argument presented is that a managerialist perspective dominates much of the existing research, which is consistent with its historical evolution. As a result, however, an understanding of how workers experience strategic human resource management is inherently limited by such approaches. Interpretive and critical perspectives in organizational analysis offer a richer appreciation of how workers may experience new work practices. Some implications from these insights for human resource researchers are presented.

MANAGERIALISM VS. THE ALTERNATIVES

The argument promoted in this article is that managerial approaches to organizational analysis predominate in the field of strategic human resource management (SHRM). As a result, our understanding of this discipline and, in particular, its effects on workers, may be enhanced through the use of alternative perspectives. This shift is challenging because paradigms of thought contain assumptions that become entrenched by their proponents, to the extent that alternative perspectives are either ignored or seen simply as deviant from the norm [1]. Nevertheless,

interpretive and critical perspectives offer compelling views that contribute toward a richer appreciation of SHRM.

The managerialist perspective falls within a functionalist paradigm that seeks rational explanations for, and effective control of, social affairs. Reality is not a subjective notion; rather, social institutions exist independently of our mental cognition of them. Knowledge is objective, neutral, and tangible, and can be acquired using methodologies borrowed from the natural sciences seeking causality and prediction to help explain social structures [1]. Organizational theories that developed within this perspective are sympathetic to the managerialist problem of how to control the factors of production and maximize wealth [2]. The capitalist enterprise and organizational structures are not viewed as problematic, and change is not sought.

The interpretive perspective falls within a paradigm that, in contrast to functionalism, posits an ontologically subjective notion of reality and an epistemology of knowledge that is not independent of the subject being studied. Organizations exist only in a conceptual sense and, thus, can be understood only through the perspective of the participants [1]. Furthermore, one's identity as an "employee" within an organization is socially constructed through meanings attributed to such an identity, and the continuous reaffirmation or modification of such meanings by the individual [3]. Whereas a managerialist can objectively and impartially study employees as a homogenous unit, no objectivity and impartiality exists for interpretive researchers. To understand the experience of workers, one must use a methodology that exposes their unique experiences and examines the meanings that workers attach to their participation in an organization [4]. The focus of an interpretive perspective is not to seek change but to provide a deeper subjective understanding of existing social relationships [1].

The radical or critical approach to organizational analysis operates within a paradigm that is fundamentally interested in achieving change and the release of humans' minds and bodies from the various structures of the social world within which we exist [1]. This emancipatory mission is grounded in the notion that humans have limitations imposed on their freedoms due to social relations of power and the domination over some by others [5]. A critical perspective toward organizational analysis rejects the managerial emphasis on organizational or shareholder gain, and instead seeks a transformation of workplaces and human resource practices to promote human-level interests of justice and equity [6]. Methodologically, critical organizational analysis would question how knowledge is constructed and how economic ideology, power relations, and control mechanisms contribute to unequal organizational structures and practices.

DEFINING HPWPs AND SHRM

A review of the SHRM literature requires some introductory operational definitions. In particular, the literature frequently refers to the implementation of

high-performance work practices (HPWPs) as the means of achieving the SHRM mandate. For Huselid, the HPWP construct consists of thirteen work practices that, upon factor analysis, resulted in two indexes linking work practices to firm performance [7]. Huselid's first index of human resource activities is "employee skills and organizational structures," which includes formal job design, greater selectivity when making hiring decisions, structured training opportunities, quality circles, participatory decision making, and gain-sharing compensation schemes. Huselid's second index is "employee motivation," which serves to reinforce the set of practices in the first index through such added activities as formal performance appraisals linked to rewards and a focus on merit in promotion decisions. Huselid's set of HPWPs has been reproduced relatively intact in subsequent research [8] and with only slight variation [9], lending credence to his operational definition [7]. Nevertheless, numerous other definitions exist and may be equally useful. For example, Way concluded that most of the HRM practices included in the literature on HPWPs could be grouped into six more narrowly defined categories [10], and Pfeffer suggested that seven specific HRM practices were essential to achieving higher levels of performance through people [11]. At the center of most of these definitions are practices that lead to the twofold ends of higher employee involvement in, and commitment to, their work.

One theme that has gained support in the literature is the need to focus more on standardization of an operational definition of HPWPs that may be replicated in subsequent research to add cumulatively to a body of knowledge [12]. One means of achieving this is to create a single and somewhat flexible index to represent the numerous HPWPs [10, 13, 14]. Such an index would measure the combined contribution of multiple HR practices that individually could be manipulated in various ways. Furthermore, "a single index reflects the notion of a single HRM system as a strategic asset" [13, p. 64]. The concept of SHRM, therefore, arises from a linkage between these systems of HPWPs, organizational performance and competitive advantage.

Numerous theories have been utilized to justify a strategic mandate for HRM [15]. The resource scarcity argument states that, whereas traditional sources of competitive advantage are increasingly easy to imitate, human resources are much less so, providing an organization with a source of competitive advantage [11, 12, 15]. This idea drew upon Barney's resource based theory of the firm, where sources of sustained competitive advantage are firm-specific resources that are imperfectly imitable and non substitutable [16]. People, it is argued, better fit this description than capital, raw materials, and technological resources. In addition, Tichy [17] and Ulrich [18] suggested that HRM is central to successfully implementing changes in an era of constant organizational transformation. Whereas modifications to technical processes may be everyone's business, changes to cultural and political systems within organizations are fundamentally HRM matters.

EVOLUTION OF THE MANAGERIALIST
TRADITION OF SHRM

A re-examination of the managerialist roots of SHRM will aid in our under-standing of how they are reinforced in the current literature. Although the business function of HRM was largely undeveloped until the mid-1960s, the idea that improving competitive advantage could be achieved through the management of human assets can be traced to the decade spanning 1915 to 1925 [19]. It was during this time that the concept of the "labor problem" was the theme around which all discussions of labor and employment issues were centered [19]. Specifically, the labor problem referred to the struggle between workers and managers/owners for control over the processes of production and the distribution of income, with such side effects as turnover, strikes, and unsafe working conditions [19]. Con-ceptually distinct points of view on resolving the labor problem emerged by the late 1920s: The employers' solution promoted the science and practice of per-sonnel management, whereas the workers' solution advocated for trade unionism and collective bargaining [19]. From the former point of view, the labor problem was seen as something that need not exist, and conflict was considered an issue that could be managed away with appropriate management practices. From the latter point of view, conflict was inherent in the employment relationship [19].

In the early twentieth century, research in these two streams was contained within two subdivisions of a broader field known as industrial relations (IR) [20]. Personnel management approached the study of work and employment from the employer's point of view, and labor relations represented the worker's point of view [20]. Although much theoretical development and research occurred from both the employers' and the employees' points of view, it was not until the mid-twentieth century that the two split into independent schools of thought. Personnel management eventually emerged as human resource management and ultimately strategic HRM; industrial relations assumed the more narrow focus of labor relations [20].

The employer's solution to labor conflict developed in a context where scien-tific management work principles, including close supervision, de-skilling of jobs, and routinized production processes predominated as a means of controlling labor in industrial work processes. Scientific management work principles were eventually complemented by an emerging recognition of the importance of informal relationships within organizations and the rise of the human relations movement. New practices, such as training, leadership, communications, and motivation were added to the manager's toolkit and were widely researched in the field of personnel management. Learning how to control the behavior of individuals became as important to management as the control over the formal production processes. According to Kaufman, the terms personnel and human resources began to be used interchangeably, and by the latter half of the twentieth century, HR had emerged as the preferred choice [19], with its more strategic

incarnation growing in popularity and prominence in the past three decades. An analysis of the historical evolution of SHRM illustrates a field of study that, from its inception, has "reflected a management agenda to the neglect of workers' concerns" [21, p. 5].

While the employer's point of view was being developed, IR scholars assumed the worker's point of view on work and employment, and HR and IR engaged in a discourse about work and the inherent tension between human and organizational goals [22]. According to Mitchell, however, this period was marked by a precipitous decline in the focus on unions and collective bargaining as the route for the expression of employee voice [23]. Thompson and Ackroyd suggested that resistance must no longer have been a significant presence in the workforce, and that management had become the new agent of change and innovation [24]. Agreeing with them are Godard and Delaney, who stated, "HRM practices have replaced unions and collective bargaining as the core innovative force in IR" [25, p. 482].

The declining representation of workers' concerns in the IR literature may partially be attributed to an attack on collectivism in industrialized societies through such measures as public policies (i.e., deregulation), the shifting nature of work from manufacturing to services, greater reliance on temporary forms of labor, and individualized management practices such as performance-related compensation [24]. Thompson and Ackroyd concluded rather dramatically that labor as a subject of industrial and political action has vanished, and that the remnants of industrial sociological inquiry can now be incorporated in HRM [24].

An interesting convergence of focus is, therefore, occurring in the SHRM construct, and it would be erroneous to continue to represent these theories as a dualism. At the same time that HR is expanding its focus externally by considering relevant such topics as markets, microeconomics, and competitive strategy, so too is IR narrowing its "grand vision" from public policy, macroeconomics, and societal phenomena to consider the same topics [23]. It may be that HR and IR should be seen as offering complementary solutions to workplace problems and hence should be treated as joined in a broader exercise [20, 26]. Upon closer reading, however, SHRM seems to have subsumed the earlier HR and IR schools into one scholarly discipline; yet it is one in which new work practices are seen as "best practices" and collective bargaining is seen as inferior [25]. Moreover, this convergence is occurring in the context of increasing marginalization of unions and a precipitous decline in membership from its peak in the mid-twentieth century [23, 25]. Although much of the current literature discusses the need for unions to be partners in the strategic transformation of HRM, these trends raise the question of whether this is a partnership of equals.

Beyond this converging focus, shared paradigmatic assumptions also underlie research from both the HR and IR traditions, for they share "essential positive and normative premises" [20, p. 340]. This comment suggests that both disciplines assume that the social world of the workplace exists independent of individual

cognition and that, therefore, objective research protocols can adequately capture the interests of employees. More specifically, IR can be seen to share with HR functionalist assumptions that knowledge about workers can be gained by searching for patterns of behavior and causal relationships that can be used to explain and predict how various HPWPs will objectively affect workers in their workplace. As a result, IR literature has not been able to perceive how employees construct their own reality and to hear their subjective voice. Mitchell considered how the journal review and academic tenure processes tend to reinforce functionalist approaches to IR literature that lead to its uniformity with, and credibility among, other social inquiries [23]. One can conclude, based on the foregoing, that the analysis of the "labor problem" has largely evolved under a managerialist perspective that seeks primarily to improve the capitalist enterprise through the most appropriate use of HPWPs in the emerging field of SHRM.

EVIDENCE OF THE MANAGERIAL PERSPECTIVE WITHIN CURRENT SHRM RESEARCH

Demonstrating the contribution that SHRM makes to organizational performance, with the intent of improving upon this goal, has become the dominant focus of research in the last decade [27]. This article argues that such studies of SHRM are of limited utility because they tend to overlook the important perspective of the workers who are affected by all of these practices. While the implementation of HPWPs in organizations may meet the employers' objectives, the interests of workers and their experiences with SHRM are rarely considered at an anti-positivist level using subjective methodologies. The following paragraphs present a literature sampling to illustrate the predominant managerialist bias of SHRM research.

Guest et al. found that senior executives responsible for Human Resources believed that a positive relationship exists between HPWPs and firm financial performance and productivity [28]. The subjectivity of such results is balanced by Wall et al., who found a positive relationship between subjective and objective measures of company performance [29]. Likewise, Ichniowski et al. found that production lines using a particular system of HPWPs (including incentive pay, teams, flexible work assignments, and training) achieve higher levels of productivity than production lines not using such HRM practices [30]. Earlier, Ichniowski et al. reached the conclusion that "new systems of participatory work practices have large, economically important effects on the performance of the businesses that adopt the new practices" [31, p. 320]. Huselid found that HPWPs positively contributed to financial performance, mediated in part by the influence of these practices on employee turnover and productivity [7]. Finally, Guthrie found that HPWPs were positively correlated with firm productivity, calculated as sales per employee [14]. The desire to find superior economic performance resulting from HPWPs was made explicit by Tomer, who approached this task

through only a cursory review of the favorable literature [32]. Nordhaug likewise theorized that it is economically rational for firms to use specific HPWPs, such as contingent compensation, as this is consistent with a strategy of wealth maximization [33]. Rogg et al. introduced the moderating variable of organizational climate, suggesting that HR practices that increase cooperation, competence and commitment will have a positive impact on customer satisfaction [34]; the implication was that this in turn would create a positive financial impact. Guthrie et al. provided a connection between HPWPs and a business strategy of differentiation, thereby supporting the notion of external fit between HPWPs and strategy [8].

Much of the criticism of SHRM is based on the failure of HPWPs to live up to their promise. For example, Way focused on the small-business sector and found that, although HPWPs made some impact on lowering turnover, there was not a similar association with higher productivity [10]. Way concluded, therefore, that efforts to make the implementation of HPWPs more economical should be a priority [10]. In contrast, Godard et al. highlighted methodological limitations and contradictions in the literature that focus on the relationship between HPWPs and financial performance [9, 25]. As a result, "claims that these systems yield superior performance outcomes may be unwarranted" [9, p. 349]. Marchington was concerned with the tendency of researchers to make abstract generalizations about the impact of HPWPs (particularly employee involvement schemes) without considering how HPWPs are as much affected by organizational contexts, including organizational performance, as they are drivers of specific outcomes [35].

Common to this body of research is the fact that workers were considered only as recipients of a set of stimuli that encouraged them to work more or less productively. Workers were not subjects of the research; rather, their levels of motivation (for example) were inferred from the presence or absence of such HRM practices as formal performance appraisals linked to rewards and a focus on merit in promotion decisions [7]. Furthermore, such inferences tend to be drawn from data provided by senior HR managers or general managers, to whom surveys are commonly directed [14]. This neglect is pronounced in the trade-oriented literature. For example, Gephart and Van Buren's presentation of best practices for the structuring and implementation of HPWPs suggested that only managers need to demonstrate commitment to these practices; workers are irrelevant in this conversation [36].

CURRENT SHRM RESEARCH FROM THE WORKER'S POINT OF VIEW

Whereas the literature on SHRM and firm outcomes demonstrates a largely positive relationship, the opposite is commonly discovered when workers' points of view are treated as the subject of investigation. In Bacon's review of

Experiencing Human Resource Management, a common theme throughout the chapters was identified: Employees have negative attitudes toward HPWPs due to the inconsistency of their application, poor design, and conflicting management priorities [37]. Employees reported a deteriorating work environment during the same past two decades that SHRM has flourished, despite the SHRM rhetoric of improved training, influence, health and rewards [37].

Empirical research largely, but not exclusively, validates the suggestion about negative employee impacts, with frequent reference to job security. Bacon and Blyton researched the relationship between HPWPs and job security by surveying employee representatives from within the union structure of national affiliates of the International Metalworkers' Federation [38]. Contrary to the dominant themes in the literature, the adoption of HPWPs was linked to an increase in employee insecurity resulting from such practices as shorter-term contracts and broadening job descriptions, employed in an effort to increase employer flexibility [38]. Rather than providing workers with security and advancement prospects in return for their involvement in high-performance practices, the survey found that new work practices contributed to an environment of heightened job insecurity [38]. Osterman demonstrated higher associations between HPWPs and negative worker outcomes, including layoffs and frozen levels of compensation, using a longitudinal study of HPWPs [39]. Not all of the employee-centered research had such negative findings, as Appelbaum et al. [cited in 38] found that HPWPs increased the earnings and working conditions enjoyed by employees. Bacon and Blyton, however, suggested that such positive outcomes had more to do with the ability of particular unions to secure strengthened employment contracts than with the HPWPs themselves [38].

Several studies investigated workers' experiences from the standpoint of a specific outcome, in particular, quantitative mental and physical health indices. Despite finding some evidence of positive employee implications in the literature, Godard found that none of the proposed employee benefits of flexible work practices, including belongingness, esteem, and job satisfaction, were realized when such practices were heavily adopted because workers were overwhelmed by higher levels of stress [40]. Kaminski investigated the relationship between discrete HPWPs and reported employee injury rates and found mixed results: The use of teams and increased training were both associated with fewer injuries, while the application of performance-based pay was coincident with a higher injury rate [41]. Also studying occupational injury, Barling, Kelloway, and Iverson found a negative association between instances of employee injury and the specific work practices of training, task variety, and autonomy [42]. This result is due in part, perhaps, to higher job satisfaction reported by individuals using these HR practices.

Additional studies investigated workers' experiences with a particular HRM practice, such as teamwork. Parker and Slaughter discovered that teams have had a dramatically negative impact on employees by equating "management-by-stress"

with the "team concept" [43]. Bacon and Blyton investigated the job satisfaction that resulted from working in teams and found considerable variation in experience among employees of the same organization, due largely to their prior work experience and their position within the organizational hierarchy [44].

These variants of SHRM research that consider the worker's point of view are important insofar as they provide a more complete account of how managers can achieve a balance between organizational and human goals through SHRM. Although this body of research reflects a sympathy for the worker's viewpoint, it is rarely able to capture the experience of work in a deep sense [21, 37]. The focus of much of this research continues to be on spotlighting certain deficiencies in the application of HPWPs rather than on their inherent limitations or contradictions. In so doing, these researchers tacitly recognize and reinforce the dominant representation of HPWPs as having the potential of being both important tools for managers and positively received by workers when used properly. Empirical research continues to be largely based on functionalist quantitative methodologies, such as aggregated data and survey responses [39]. Moreover, most researchers do not consider that the reality in which each employee finds himself or herself may be different from the reality researchers construct for them as homogenous employees of a SHRM enterprise who exist to complete the work specified for them. For example, the research on occupational injuries cited earlier did not ask employees such questions as whether they feel safer on the job, whether there is any pressure to not report injury rates, whether they feel that their employer truly cares about their health and well-being, and whether they have any power to promote their own interests. What remains important in this body of research, however, is that employees were considered as meaningful research subjects and were treated as the prime arbiters of SHRM [37], regardless of the recommendations that may result from such research. To more fully understand how workers might experience high involvement and high commitment work practices, however, we must continue in our application of alternative perspectives to the study of SHRM. Surely "any concern for the impact of HRM should be as much with outcomes of relevance to workers as to business" [21, p. 5].

RESEARCHING SHRM FROM ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Problems inherent in specific HRM practices, management failures at implementation, and contextual factors have all been advanced by proponents of the managerialist paradigm as reasons why SHRM has not lived up to its theoretical promise [9]. It is important to consider, however, that the promise of SHRM "is a false one, and that . . . these explanations simply do not go far enough" [9, p. 365]. The argument offered in this article is that alternative approaches to the analysis of SHRM from both interpretive and critical perspectives may provide

a deeper understanding of how workers experience new work practices in organizations. Non-managerial research perspectives that allow for "issues of subjectivity are entirely legitimate and central for anyone interested in how social relations in the contemporary workplace are constituted and reproduced" [24, p. 628]. A sampling of literature from two alternative perspectives is provided below, and an important counterpoint is noted. Furthermore, I address the fact that much of this research is theoretical, not empirical.

The Interpretive Perspective

Kamoche applied an interpretive approach by seeking to understand how employees make sense of HRM practices, specifically the notion of teamwork [4]. In Kamoche's study, managers were found to attach symbols of unity and solidarity to the team concept and hence could manipulate behavior through the rhetoric in their language [4]. The repetition of the concept "team" in daily language that was emotive and inspirational was used to persuade workers that success against hostile forces could only be achieved through the unity of all interests. The notion of teamwork can be seen as a tool for managers to impose order and shape the pattern of social relations in the workplace [4]. This idea is akin to Thompson and Ackroyd's assertion that HPWPs are simply management techniques used to develop and manipulate an inclusive culture under the guise of employee involvement [24]. From a more critical perspective, this management of meaning serves to oppress the subject. Through Kamoche's interpretive lens [4], however, one sees how initiatives to define and propagate a particular conception of reality may affect how organizational members perceive the reality of the team and attach to it a particular meaning of their membership. Achieving this level of understanding is a worthy research goal.

Boyd and Kyle discussed the concept of social justice as it can be applied to the specific HPWP of performance appraisals [5]. They took exception to the dominant HRM position that "one's personal life and work life can and should be separated, and the belief that one can be evaluated as an abstract individual fairly, independent of one's race, gender, [and] family responsibilities" [5, p. 256]. Performance appraisals, insofar as they are linked with contingent and individualized rewards, are included in most definitions of HPWPs [7, 9], and they reinforce a belief in meritocracy, hierarchy, and power by some over others. The process of conducting a performance review also weights heavily the idea of impartiality. For Boyd and Kyle, this practice promotes injustice by not accommodating how employees experience reality as both members of broad social groups and as heterogeneous individuals, each with their own "inside stories" [5]. Organizational development can truly occur when managers themselves play the role of interpretive researchers. This shift can be achieved by helping workers take ownership of the performance appraisal process by reporting

on their performance to other members of the organization, rather than being reported on by management [5].

Kindred examined worker resistance to change and argued that it should not be viewed with animosity but rather as a constructive process in which workers exercise their prior experience and expertise [45]. Thompson and Ackroyd invoked Foucauldian concepts of how disciplinary power is replicated by management in a variety of manners, both formal and informal, physical and virtual [24]. Resistance is merely the product of power; it represents the individual worker's struggle for identity against a backdrop where the discourses of power, knowledge, and teamwork are controlled by management [24]. By resisting, workers can challenge their socially constructed identity as having an inferior perspective on organizational change. Resistance is thus "an engagement in change, a production of voice, and entry into a developmentally critical dialogic process of meaning construction" [45, p. 213]. Ironically, resistance may have more of an empowering effect and positive contribution than any HPWP that management may be attempting to implement. Research should therefore focus on the conditions under which people refuse to comply, rather than on the promotion of similarity and continuity [46].

The Critical Perspective

When Godard suggested a "political economy" approach to understanding the limitations of HPWPs, his analysis extended to a critique from a radical structural perspective [9]. Godard proposed that HPWPs have a detrimental organizational impact because distrust and commitment problems are inherent in the structure of the employment relationship [9]. The problem is shifted to an institutional failure resulting from the necessary subordination of an individual's interests to those of the employers/owners in all liberal market economies. Under the tenets of capitalism, employers will at times favor intensification over empowerment, adopt only modest levels of HPWPs according to cost-benefit analysis, and violate the ideals of cooperation in favor of coercion [9].

Furthermore, by making the field of HR more strategic, the flexibility required to match HPWPs to varying external strategic imperatives runs counter to the themes explicit in the SHRM construct that work practices should develop employee skills and motivation [47]. The policies required to support business strategy require the treatment of labor as a variable input whose costs need be minimized, rather than treating employees as a resource whose value may be enhanced [47, 48]. This point is underscored by the broader contradiction that stems from the purchasing of free and rational people's capacity to work. Since coercive control is impractical, HR managers have attempted to obscure the commodity status of labor by adopting strategies of involvement and commitment aimed at manufacturing consent [47]. Kamoche offered a similar critique of SHRM as merely a legitimatory device created to institutionalize managerial

prerogative [49]. These researchers all voice the same concern as Godard [9], namely, the contradiction inherent in SHRM that prevents the interests of employers and employees from coinciding. From the critical perspective, the HR manager cannot possibly reconcile the strategic and human themes; the former always trumps the latter.

For Fenwick, there are yet further contradictions inherent to SHRM, in particular, the idea that HR practices should contribute to human development [6]. "Development signifies a hierarchical rather than cooperative relation where the other is constituted in the developer's gaze as progressing from incompleteness to wholeness" [6, p. 199]. The critical perspective questions the legitimacy of developing humans for the singular purpose of increasing their exchange value, and seeks instead to free humans from exchange relationships [6]. A more appropriate role for SHRM, therefore, is to facilitate, develop, and nurture employee-centered notions of meaningful work and growth [6].

Finally, the "masculinist discourse inherent in team theorizing and empirical research" becomes apparent when research is evaluated from alternative paradigms [50, p. 94]. For example, constructs such as flexibility, involvement, and commitment in organizations influence men and women differently [50]. Bacon and Blyton's previously cited finding of the variation in team experience among employees [44], for example, could be improved upon though the consideration of critical feminist perspectives in their analysis. A radical structural analysis of teamwork would further focus on the societal relationships of power and their impacts on women who work in team environments. In spite of the fact that team attributes of cooperation and mutual support tend to be foremost feminine, much of the literature on teamwork tends to underplay, ignore, or construct feminine qualities in relation to the masculine [50]. More specifically, texts and practices reproduce gendered team theorizing in a context of masculine organizing arrangements, give preference to male attributes, and define women as different; as a result, the new forms of work organization that HPWPs represent may not be equally beneficial for all employees [50].

Counterpoint to the Alternative Perspectives

The value of adopting alternative perspectives is to shift the research focus back to workers to obtain a richer understanding of their experiences with HPWPs. Nevertheless, as noted earlier, some positive correlates are cited in the managerial literature between the new work practices and certain employee-centered outcomes, including increasing earnings [38], reduced turnover [7, 10], and improved occupational safety [42]. The impact of SHRM on workers cannot be written off as wholly negative, regardless of whether the practices themselves may subordinate workers' interests to their possible detriment. Guest further reminded us that empirical evidence from the worker's point of view is necessary before one can conclude that SHRM fails to accommodate the interests of workers

[21]. The critique should not simply be conceptual. Guest's own research suggested to him that employees rather like the types of HPWPs usually found in a strategic, systematic HRM [21]. Critical scholars often label workers who respond favorably to certain HRM practices as possessing a manufactured or false consciousness, and the HRM practices are assumed to subsume workers in a management-determined process of behavior control [21]. Yet to dismiss this positive feedback as socially constructed discourse defeats one of the central points of the interpretive perspective, that is, workers' views should be taken seriously [21]. "There needs to be some scope in the analysis for acknowledging that workers might welcome HRM and not simply because they have been duped" [21, p. 9].

There are some sparse examples in the empirical HR literature of how one can develop an understanding of workers' experiences with HPWPs that does not produce an indictment against these practices. Although not highly interpretive in her methodology, Sigler showed concern for how workers experienced the particular work practices of involvement, training, contingent rewards, and information disclosure [51]. As a result, Sigler was able to discover that these HPWPs related to workers' perceptions of empowerment. More specifically, workers attached more meaning to their work, felt more personally competent, and experienced greater control and ability to influence their work [51]. Moreover, these positive feelings increased their commitment to the job and positively spilled over into relationships they had outside of the workplace [51]. In a similar vein, May et al. examined the connection between specific work practices and engagement—the integration of one's cognitive, emotional, and physical self into one's job to achieve a personal sense of self-fulfilment [52]. The HR practices that contribute to job enrichment, such as skill variety, task identity, autonomy and feedback, relate positively to the construct of psychological meaningfulness, which in turn produces higher feelings of engagement. One can debate whether these job-enrichment practices properly fall within the SHRM umbrella. Nevertheless, the importance of this research is that the worker was given a voice, since meaningfulness was defined as "the value of a work goal or purpose, judged in relation to an individual's own ideals or standards" [52, p. 14].

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The implications for SHRM research that derive from the preceding analysis are numerous and depend on the perspective favored by the researcher. A managerialist would contend that the links between HRM, organizational performance, and competitive advantage continue to require clarification. Furthermore, vestiges of conflict that remain in the labor relationship are important to recognize so that they can be mitigated through continuous improvement in the implementation of HPWPs. Such advancements require further empirical research into the processes by which HPWPs are implemented and into their outcomes. Ultimately,

as illustrated in this article, this course of action represents the continuation of the status quo. The implications of adopting interpretive and critical perspectives within mainstream SHRM research are discussed below.

Greater interpretive research should, as noted, seek "to know more about the 'life-worlds' of employees in a manner that does not reduce their experiences to management targets" [37, p. 1184]. Researchers must strive to access individuals at lower levels of the organization and give voice to their experiences, emotions, reactions, and sense of justice or injustice [21, 37]. Future research, therefore, should move beyond functional methodologies in assessing workers' experiences and be based instead on qualitative, ideographic methodologies. Additionally, more radical research might investigate how structural responses through public policies and laws, stakeholder-oriented institutions, and centralized planning of the market could overcome the inherent power imbalance and subordination of employees' interests [9]. On this note, Lucio and Stewart offered a cautionary word against a methodological overemphasis on the individual employee that is done at the expense of collective labor [53]. Rediscovering the worker in organizations makes an accounting of the complexities of employee collectivism, whose origins lie in the social relations of the capitalist labor process, very difficult [53]. Finally, Fenwick advocated a broad approach to critical HRM studies that encourages wide-ranging conceptual developments in the materialist, gendered, discursive, and other aspects of this field [6].

An additional research implication that transcends any particular paradigmatic perspective is the need to articulate the ethical implications of labor research. The Kantian theory of ethics in the deontological tradition, for example, requires a respect for individual autonomy, such that employees cannot be used as a means to an end without regard to their interests, needs, and conscientious concerns [54]. Accordingly, research should be encouraged that develops a moral view of the impact of HRM on employees. For Bacon, the notion of justice may require granting employees a voice in defining the attributes that they value in jobs [37].

One final implication of the preceding analysis is that it may be useful to divide the two strands of research now assumed under SHRM. Godard and Delaney called for the re-establishment of IR research as distinct from the management-centered research of SHRM [25, 55]. This separation would allow IR to "devote more attention to underlying conflicts at work, to focus more explicitly on the implications of new forms of work for workers (without assuming a harmony of interests), and to pay greater attention to the role that institutions and the state do and should play in shaping the twenty-first century workplace" [25, p. 497].

CONCLUSION

A review of the body of literature pertaining to HPWPs and the broader construct of SHRM within which these practices are employed was presented in this article. The field of human resources has emphasized the employer's

perspective on employment throughout its evolution. This managerialist bias is maintained in current empirical literature that is predominantly focused on the improvement of organizational performance through SHRM. There is an important body of literature that considers the employee, but largely as a recipient of HPWPs who is made better or worse off in an objective sense. Little empirical research has extended this inquiry to consider the subjective experience of the employee, or how the employment relationship may be structured to the exclusion of employee interests. The argument presented in this article advocates on behalf of interpretive and critical approaches to research that would complement the existing empirical research from the employee's point of view. To accomplish this would require the creation of new avenues of IR research that were no longer subsumed within the managerialist perspective characteristic of SHRM research.

These new avenues for IR research would help restore a plurality of perspectives on the employment relationship in research, and would arguably result in more "theories that matter" [56]. The contribution that this new stream of research offers is that employees become recognized as heterogeneous individuals, each with his or her own stories, interests, and desire for voice that compete against the definitions attributed to them. Theorists are more likely to generate work that is judged to be moving when feeling is included in the theory, and when that inclusion helps to narrow the gap between what is available retrospectively to the detached observer and available prospectively to the engaged agent [56]. As Weick advised, "listen to the people who keep showing up everyday. . . . Remember that their engaged world feels different than your detached rendering of that world" [56, pp. 140-141].

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ENDNOTES

1. G. Burrell and G. Morgan, *Sociological paradigms and organisational analysis*, London: Heinemann, 1979.
2. S. Clegg and D. Dunkerly, *Organization, class and control,* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980.
3. P. L. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge,* Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1966.
4. K. Kamoche, Rhetoric, ritualism and totemism in human resource management, *Human Relations,* 48, 4, pp. 367-385, 1995.
5. N. M. Boyd and K. Kyle, Expanding the view of perf*ormance appraisal by introducing social justice concerns, Administrative Theory and Praxis,* 26, 3, pp. 249-278, 2004.

6. T. J. Fenwick, Toward a critical HRD in theory and practice, *Adult Education Quarterly,* 54, 3, pp. 193-209, 2004.

7. M. A. Huselid, The impact of human resource management practices on turnover, productivity, and corporate financial performance, *Academy of Management Journal,* 38, 3, pp. 635-672, 1995.

8. J. P. Guthrie, C. S. Spell, and R. O. Nyamori, Correlates and consequences of high involvement work practices: The role of competitive strategy, *International Journal of Human Resource Management,* 13, 1, pp. 183-197, 2002.

9. J. Godard, A critical assessment of the high-performance paradigm, *British Journal of Industrial Relations,* 42, 2, pp. 349-378, 2004.

10. S. A. Way, High performance work systems and intermediate indicators of firm performance within the U.S. small business sector, *Journal of Management,* 28, 6, pp. 765-785, 2002.

11. J. Pfeffer, Seven practices of successful organizations, *California Management Review,* 40, 2, pp. 96-124, 1998.

12. B. Becker and B. Gerhart, The impact of human resource management on organizational performance: Progress and prospects, *Academy of Management Journal,* 39, 4, pp. 779-801, 1996.

13. B. Becker and M. Huselid, High performance work systems and firm performance: A synthesis of research and managerial implications. In G. R. Ferris (ed.), *Research in personnel and human resource management: Volume 16,* pp. 53-101, Stamford, CT.: JAI Press, 1998.

14. J. P. Guthrie, High-involvement work practices, turnover, and productivity: Evidence from New Zealand, *Academy of Management Journal,* 44, 1, pp. 180-192, 2001.

15. P. Wright and G. McMahan, Theoretical perspectives for strategic human resource management, *Journal of Management,* 18, 2, pp. 295-320, 1992.

16. J. Barney, Firm resources and sustained competitive advantage, *Journal of Management,* 17, 1, pp. 99-120, 1991.

17. N. Tichy, Managing organizational transformations, *Human Resource Management,* 22, 1\2, pp. 45-60, 1983.

18. D. Ulrich, A new mandate for human resources, *Harvard Business Review,* 76, 1, pp. 124-134, 1998.

19. B. E. Kaufman, The theory and practice of strategic HRM and participative management: Antecedents in early industrial relations, *Human Resource Management Review,* 11, pp. 505-533, 2001.

20. B. E. Kaufman, Human resources and industrial relations: Commonalities and differences, *Human Resource Management Review,* 11, pp. 339-374, 2001.

21. D. E. Guest, Human resource management—The workers' verdict, *Human Resource Management Journal,* 9, 3, pp. 5-25, 1999.

22. D. Lewin, IR and HR perspectives on workplace conflict: What can each learn from the other? *Human Resource Management Review,* 11, pp. 453-485, 2001.

23. D. J. B. Mitchell, IR journal and conference literature from the 1960s to the 1990s: What can HR learn from it? Where is it headed? *Human Resource Management Review,* 11, pp. 375-393, 2001.

24. P. Thompson and S. Ackroyd, All quiet on the workplace front? A critique of recent trends in British industrial sociology, *Sociology,* 29, 4, pp. 615-633, 1995.

25. J. Godard and J. T. Delaney, Reflections on the "high performance" paradigm's implications for industrial relations as a field, *Industrial and Labor Relations Review,* 53, 3, pp. 482-502, 2000.

26. P. Voos, An IR perspective on collective bargaining, *Human Resource Management Review,* 11, pp. 487-503, 2001.

27. J. Bratton and J. Gold, *Human resource management: Theory and practice,* Third Edition*,* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

28. D. E. Guest, J. Michie, N. Conway, and M. Sheehan, Human resource management and corporate performance in the UK, *British Journal of Industrial Relations,* 41, 2, pp. 291-314, 2003.

29. T. Wall, J. Michie, M. Patterson, and S. Wood, On the validity of subjective measures of company performance, *Personnel Psychology,* 57, 1, pp. 95-118, 2004.

30. C. Ichniowski, K. Shaw, and G. Prennushi, The effects of human resource management practices on productivity: A study of steel finishing lines, *The American Economic Review,* 87, 3, pp. 291-313, 1997.

31. C. Ichniowski, T. A. Kochan, D. Levine, C. Olson, and G. Strauss, What works at work: Overview and assessment, *Industrial Relations,* 35, 3, pp. 299-334, 1996.

32. J. Tomer, Understanding high-performance work systems: The joint contribution of economics and human resource management, *Journal of Socio-Economics,* 30, pp. 63-73, 2001.

33. O. Nordhaug, Contributions to an economic theory of human resource management, *Human Resource Management Review,* 14, pp. 383-393, 2004.

34. K. Rogg, D. Schmidt, C. Shull, and N. Schmitt, Human resource practices, organizational climate, and customer satisfaction, *Journal of Management,* 27, 4, pp. 431-449, 2001.

35. M. Marchington, A. Wilkinson, P. Ackers, and J. Goodman, Understanding the meaning of participation: Views from the workplace, *Human Relations,* 47, 8, pp. 867-895, 1994.

36. M. A. Gephart and M. E. Van Buren, Building synergy: The power of high performance work systems, *Training and Development,* 50, 10, pp. 21-36, 1996.

37. N. Bacon, The realities of human resource management? *Human Relations,* 52, 9, pp. 1179-1187, 1999.

38. N. Bacon and P. Blyton, High involvement work systems and job insecurity in the international iron and steel industry, *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences,* 18, 1, pp. 5-16, 2001.

39. P. Osterman, Work reorganization in an era of restructuring: Trends in diffusion and effects on employee welfare, *Industrial and Labor Relations Review,* 53, 2, pp. 179-196, 2000.

40. J. Godard, High performance and the transformation of work? The implications of alternative work practices for the experience and outcomes of work, *Industrial and Labor Relations Review,* 54, 4, pp. 776-805, 2001.

41. M. Kaminski, Unintended consequences: Organizational practices and their impact on workplace safety and productivity, *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology,* 6, 2, pp. 127-138, 2001.

42. J. Barling, E. K. Kelloway, and R. D. Iverson, High-quality work, job satisfaction, and occupational injuries, *Journal of Applied Psychology,* 88, 2, pp. 276-283, 2003.

43. M. Parker and J. Slaughter, *Choosing sides: Unions and the team concept*, Boston: Labor Education and Research Project, 1988.

44. N. Bacon and P. Blyton, The impact of teamwork on skills: Employee perceptions of who gains and who lose, *Human Resource Management Journal,* 13, 2, pp. 13-29, 2003.

45. J. Kindred, "8/18/97 Bite Me": Resistance in learning and work, *Mind, Culture, and Activity,* 6, 3, pp. 196-221, 1999.

46. K. Weick, Book review symposium, *Administrative Science Quarterly,* 42, 2, pp. 395-401, 1997.

47. K. Legge, Human resource management: A critical analysis. J. Storey (ed.), *New perspectives on human resource management*, New York: Routledge, pp. 19-40, 1991.

48. T. Keenoy, HRM: A case of the wolf in sheep's clothing? *Personnel Review,* 19, 2, pp. 3-9, 1990.

49. K. Kamoche, A critique and a proposed reformulation of strategic human resource management. In C. Mabey, G. Salaman, and J. Storey (eds.), *Strategic human resource management: A reader*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc., pp. 283-296, 1998.

50. B. Metcalfe and A. Linstead, Gendering teamwork: Re-writing the feminine, *Gender, Work and Organization,* 10, 1, pp. 94-119, 2003.

51. T. H. Sigler, *The empowerment experience: A study of front line employees* (Doctoral Dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Microform 9818424, 1998.

52. D. R. May, R. L. Gilson, and L. M. Harter, The psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety and availability and the engagement of the human spirit at work, *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology,* 77, pp. 11-37, 2004.

53. M. M. Lucio and P. Stewart, The paradox of contemporary labor process theory: The rediscovery of labor and the disappearance of collectivism, *Capital and Class,* 62, pp. 49-77, 1997.

54. K. Legge, The morality of HRM. In C. Mabey, G. Salaman, and J. Storey (eds.), *Strategic human resource management: A reader,* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc., pp. 18-29, 1998.

55. J. T. Delaney and J. Godard, An industrial relations perspective on the high-performance paradigm, *Human Resource Management Review,* 11, pp. 395-429, 2001.

56. K. Weick, That's moving: Theories that matter, *Journal of Management Inquiry,* 8, 2, pp. 134-142, 1999.