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# HRM: Prescription, Description and Concept

Prescription,  
Description and  
Concept

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## Personnel and HRM: The Differences

Guest[1] identifies three approaches to defining HRM:

- (1) At the most general and imprecise level HRM is personnel management retitled.
- (2) At the most precise level of analysis, HRM is distinctive and therefore must have theory behind it. Guest suggests that such a theory could be developed by borrowing from the social sciences. Here, any overall theory, presumably, will be a distillation of prescriptive and critical contributions from a variety of writers. Alternatively, a theory of HRM could centre on the practices of firms following HRM; thus such a theory would be prescriptively described best practice.
- (3) Between the precise theory and the imprecise relabelling, a third approach is identified which highlights *strategic* HRM. Strategic HRM is conceptual in approach and is concerned with how human resources are acquired, deployed and managed alongside other factors of production.

Guest goes on to develop an implicit input-output theory of HRM based around a coherent and integrated use of traditional personnel tools such as recruitment, selection and job design. These traditional tools operate in tandem with more innovative aspects of personnel activity such as appraisal and the management of change. The various components of personnel activity must be integrated coherently to deliver perceived HR outcomes of improved quality, flexibility and employee commitment. These HR outcomes, in turn, are perceived to integrate with elements of business policy in order to improve organizational performance through better job design and performance, and more effective problem solving, which together lead to improved cost-effectiveness and lower labour turnover.

In conclusion Guest argues that for HRM to be operationally established on the theoretical basis he describes, it requires a level of strategic vision and influence beyond the personnel department, that is, from line and senior managers. The main elements of Guest's definitions of HRM and his specific approach can be summarized as prescription, description and concept. All three are now reviewed in terms of subsequent contributions to the literature.

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### Approaches and Definitions: HRM in 1993

It is clearly impossible to review even a substantial minority of the literature on HRM and personnel which is now available. An effort has been made to highlight contributions which are of prescriptive and critical use to practitioners, students, teachers and researchers. Inclusions are not authoritative but may be significant in delineating the variety of approaches and furthering the debate on what HRM constitutes in its various guises.

#### *HRM as Personnel Retitled*

The central question at issue here concerns the operational activity of personnel within the organization. The premiss behind the question centres on whether or not the activities of personnel practitioners are different if they operate under the title of HRM. The premiss and question are the subject of intense debate. Torrington and Hall[2] argue that personnel management is *workforce centred* and therefore directs itself to employees, whereas HRM is resource centred and concerns itself with the overall human resource needs of an organization. The delineating factor between the two is that although personnel activity is a management function, it is not totally identified with management interests. In contrast, HRM is a central management concern at a level above that of function because it is resource driven.

Personnel management and HRM are also distinguished at the operational level because of the frameworks within which they operate. Keenoy[3] suggests that personnel is plural and pragmatic in approach, whereas HRM is unitary and strategic. Guest[4] cuts through the alleged differences in frames of reference by suggesting that HRM is the new orthodoxy in the regulation and management of employees. Here, Guest follows the line of Walton and Lawrence[5] in suggesting that HRM, as a frame of reference for employees, is designed to stimulate commitment, something which personnel managers cannot do successfully because they are concerned essentially with the implementation of decisions made elsewhere in the organization. In this respect personnel activity, within the wider HRM rubric, services line areas. The HRM rubric is designed to change the frame of reference of personnel practice in order to make it integral "to business" and the market. Keenoy and Anthony[6] argue that HRM has been effective in this respect, but only in terms of its rhetoric, which has emphasized the primacy of the exchange between customer and organization. For Guest[4] the performance of the organization is the measure by which the effectiveness of personnel should be judged, not how successfully personnel performs the practice of predefined policy. Thus, there is some congruence between the position of Guest and that of Keenoy and Anthony. However, they approach the concept from different positions. Guest[1,4] attempts to develop HRM as a concept, whereas Keenoy and Anthony[6] argue that it contains no conceptual side or policy, but is merely a mission statement in itself.

In summary, three points can be made under the heading of "HRM as Personnel Retitled". First, there is a philosophical difference between the two which makes them incompatible. This is the line of Torrington and Hall[2].

Second, the personnel *function* is being refashioned within the frame of reference of HRM. This appears to be the line of Keenoy[3]. Third, HRM is the new orthodoxy for personnel management. Here, the practice of personnel is integrated within managerially defined values and frames of reference which centre on resource deployment, employment and organizational performance. This is the line followed by Guest[4].

These three lines of argument can be evaluated further once the presence of theory in the orthodoxy of HRM is examined.

### *Theory in HRM*

Guest's[1] "bare bones" theory contains three elements: HRM policies; human resource outcomes; and organizational outcomes. HRM policies centre on a coherent use of traditional components of personnel activity which are assumed to stimulate human resource outcomes of improved commitment, flexibility, quality and organizational performance. This implicit input-output theory is derived from the work of Beer *et al.*[7] and was detailed previously in Guest[8]. Noon[9] has suggested that Guest[1,4] has generalized Beer *et al.*[7] into a theory which ascribes the original work into something which its authors never claimed it could be. Noon[9] argues that the Harvard model of HRM, as formulated by Beer *et al.*[7], sought to "develop a framework for thinking and managing human resources which general managers might find useful"; nothing more.

The position and standing of theory in relation to the study of job regulation in the UK has always been precarious. The orthodox empirical approach is to study, visualize and comment on observed findings. It is at this stage that conceptual analysis is brought in to play to visualize further any descriptive findings in terms of wider frames of reference. So, why is there so much concern with theory in relation to HRM and, relatedly, what role does any theory have?

In relation to the first question, it appears to be motivated by an almost omnipresent need to understand HRM and be able to distinguish it from personnel management. The second question remained largely unanswered until Storey[10]. Storey suggests that theoretical models of HRM can be used in three ways:

- (1) prescriptively;
- (2) descriptively; or
- (3) conceptually.

Prescriptive models suggest what practitioners *should* be doing, whereas descriptive models comment on what *is* happening. In contrast, conceptual models contain no suggestion or description but might relate the theoretical inferences behind the definition of HRM to the wider processes of job regulation, organization restructuring and the management of change. Storey[10] goes on to define HRM by distinguishing its features from those of personnel management, under four headings:

- (1) beliefs and assumptions, summarized as ‘‘can do’’, and ‘‘need to go the extra mile’’;
- (2) strategic aspects which are market-oriented;
- (3) the role of line managers which is central to the facilitation of HRM goals; and
- (4) ‘‘key levers’’, such as fewer job descriptions, greater teamwork and improved communication, which are designed to break up the bureaucracy of traditional personnel management.

It would appear that Storey’s model versions of HRM are in fact derived from the theoretical prescription of Guest[1,8]; alternatively, a series of theoretical inferences can be drawn from a prescribed definition of HRM.

Sisson[11] defines HRM as being:

Primarily concerned with the deployment and provision of human resources, thus, it concerns the policies, procedures and processes in the management of work organizations.

Two theoretical inferences can be drawn immediately from this definition. First, the central concern of HRM is management oriented. The management process is concerned essentially with the controlled and efficient use of resources. Second, and relatedly, there is an inference that HRM can improve the deployment and provision of human resources.

In summary, the use of theory in HRM is partial. ‘‘Models’’ of HRM, whether they are used in prescriptive, descriptive or conceptual modes, are not always clearly defined or related to theory which, in the case of Guest[1], is designed to stimulate improved organizational performance. Noon[9] suggests that *improved organizational performance through the application of HRM*, is an ascribed benefit rather than something which is derived in theory and empirically proven. The application and use of theory has had more success in relation to the concept of strategic HRM: it is this area which is reviewed now.

### *Strategic HRM*

An organization’s strategy and the strategy of any functional area within it, is a market oriented concept. Thus, strategy is concerned primarily with competitive advantage in the product or service market where the organization competes. Therefore, strategic HRM implies that HRM policies have a defined end; the prescribed result of which has been considered and conceptualized. If this is the case, strategic HRM is concerned with the promotion of efficiency and profitability.

Theory in HRM, as described in the previous section, appears to suggest that models of strategic HRM can be evaluated prescriptively, descriptively and conceptually. The two main models, of strategic HRM have been delineated in an extremely useful piece by Boxall[12]. The major utility of Boxall is not only his delineation of the models, but his attempt to locate the debate on HRM in the UK within them.

Boxall[12] distinguishes between the “Matching” and “Harvard” schools of HRM. The former, centres on the work of Fombrun[13]. This version highlights the importance of determining a tight fit between HRM and the organization’s business strategy, with the latter acting as an independent variable. Thus, in this model HRM is reactive. The various components of personnel activity are locked into the organization’s market needs so as to determine strategic HRM. Thus, at the workplace, the objective is to generate consistent behaviour *vis-à-vis* preselected business objectives. This becomes the basis for integrating HRM activities, therefore *making* them strategic. The Matching model is unitarist in framework, where HRM is visualized as something which is done to labour. This rationale can be contrasted with that of the Harvard model[7]. The central theme in this model of strategic HRM, concerns the crucial significance of getting general or line managers involved in the dissemination of the organization’s central mission, or philosophy on its use and deployment of human resources. Without this, HRM cannot be strategic and will remain as a set of independent activities. Thus, in this model, HRM is proactive. Boxall identifies two Harvard camp followers in the UK. First, the Guest[1,4,8] line, which evaluates strategic HRM prescriptively. This interpretation of Guest contrasts with that of Keenoy[14], which argues that what Guest is suggesting is a form of universalistic practice.

The second group of Harvard followers in the UK is Hendry and Pettigrew[15,16]. The approach of Hendry and Pettigrew is to concentrate on the analytical side of the Harvard model. The assertion behind their research is that a more comprehensive understanding of strategy within complex structures will provide a better framework in which to analyse HRM. Thus, Hendy and Pettigrew seek to evaluate the decision-making process within organizations in order to examine how strategy is determined. From this they evaluate the prescription behind HRM in two ways; first, descriptively, that is, “what is happening”; second, conceptually, how the practice of HRM “measures up” to its conception.

### **Differences in Approach: HRM Distinguished**

This section examines the distinctive character of HRM, prescriptively, descriptively and conceptually in relation to the three themes laid down by Guest[1].

#### *HRM as Personnel Retitled*

Many organizations have changed their functional labels from personnel to human resource managers/specialists, without there being any discernible difference in activities undertaken. In others there may have been a devolution of some personnel activities to line areas, for example, recruitment, selection, appraisals and remuneration decisions. In some organizations the latter may have always been the case, with the personnel department servicing such activity.

With the renewed onset of recession and redundancy, personnel activity is likely to involve less palatable activities such as organizational downsizing, peripheralization and casualization of employment. So, at the general level of

discussion, HRM may have become the politically or professionally correct term to use when describing current components of personnel activity, without such activity being centrally located in a theory of HRM or being strategic in nature. Beaumont[17] makes two useful observations in this respect. First, HRM is just a generic term for handling employee relations at individual workplaces. Second, the standards being set to test and evaluate the theories of HRM at strategic and operational levels are unrealistically stringent. This latter point is not without significance. There is general acceptance of the view that the prescriptive model of personnel management does not always measure up to the reality of personnel management. Indeed, this position is central to Sisson[18] where it is highlighted that the professional aspirations of personnel practitioners may lead them to exaggerate their executive standing and effectiveness within an organization. Why should the executive standing and effectiveness of human resource managers, generically defined, be any different? This appears to be the position of Guest[4], where it is simultaneously argued that HRM has become the new orthodoxy in the management of industrial relations, while at the same time the assertion is put forward that HRM is not happening because human resource activities are not integrated into business strategy, thereby remaining a set of independent activities.

At the operational level there may be no difference between what constitutes HRM and personnel. HRM may have become the new orthodoxy in the management of industrial relations but only at the level of rhetoric. The position of theory in HRM can now be viewed in this light.

### *Theory in HRM*

In the section 'Approaches and Definitions: HRM in 1993', it was established that theory in HRM is prescriptive, whereas the models of HRM derived from any prescriptive theory can be used prescriptively, descriptively or conceptually. This line of analysis is applicable equally to theory in personnel management. The central difference between prescriptive theory in HRM and personnel management concerns the aims and objectives of prescription. Within HRM the aims, objectives and values are defined managerially and concern the deployment and utilization of human resources in an effort to maintain or improve competitive performance. This is in contrast to the prescription behind theory in personnel management, which for Torrington and Hall[2] takes a more philosophical position. Personnel management is defined as a series of activities which enable working people and their employer to agree about the nature and objectives of their working relationship. In terms of Guest[4] this definition implies that personnel management is more concerned with the performance of predefined professional practices, rather than the performance of the organization. So, at the level of prescriptive theory there is some difference.

The models of HRM derived from prescriptive theory also can be used to consider orthodox practice in the management of personnel or human resources. Storey[10] uses prescriptive theory and a descriptive model to examine the part played by personnel and non-personnel specialists in the management of change at the workplace in two ways. First, to discuss the HRM phenomenon descriptively and conceptually and, second, to describe the management of change in 15 named organizations.

Storey made several significant observations. First, the considerable changes in the methods used to manage labour over the past ten years are varied in scope, sustainability and organizational source. In short, the management of change is not necessarily related to any prescribed theory in HRM. Second, the change process has been most active in the organizational areas of devolution and downsizing referred to above. These are responses to more competitive economic conditions in relation to the deteriorating economic performance of the UK.

While Storey puts forward a model and theory of HRM based on its distinctive qualities, the prescription behind this ideal type does not measure up to his empirical findings. The title of the book, *New Developments in the Management of Human Resources*[10], indicates the likelihood of a descriptive approach as distinct from that of prescription and, therefore, downplays the central significance of theory. Is Storey illustrating descriptively the assertion of Beaumont[17] referred to above?

In summary, theory in HRM and personnel management, while not being insignificant, is not central to descriptive models of HRM. We can now turn to the area of strategic HRM where theory might be more significant.

### *Strategic HRM*

Strategic HRM centres on how organizations can improve their competitive performance by considering and utilizing their human resources more effectively. Boxall[12] argues that this consideration and utilization can centre on one of two approaches. In either case, strategic HRM represents a prescription by which labour can be used in a more market-oriented fashion.

The theory behind strategic HRM is prescriptive but can be evaluated in terms of the three models outlined by Storey[10]. Therefore, it can signal improved competitive performance, with the prescription being evaluated against what is happening which represents a descriptive evaluation. Lastly, the prescription can be looked at conceptually in order to investigate its effects on the wider processes of job regulation, the management of change and organizational restructuring.

### **Conclusion**

At the level of rhetoric and vogue, HRM as a phenomenon or catch-all term has become the new orthodoxy in the management and regulation of industrial relations at the workplace. However, the orthodoxy of HRM is equally as vague as that of personnel management. It is helpful to evaluate the notion of orthodoxy prescriptively, descriptively and conceptually. These evaluations can then be related to the three themes on HRM presented by Guest[1] to see how our appreciation of HRM has developed.

The prescription behind the theory of HRM has become the orthodoxy because it appears to focus on elements of currently required personnel activity. This requirement is considered essential for organizational survival, making the consideration strategic!

At the conceptual level the components of human resource activity can be examined in terms of their wider impact on industrial relations, however, a



preoccupation with the prescription and description of the new orthodoxy has resulted in this area being underexamined.

At practitioner level, HRM appears to describe a general process of change and restructuring at the workplace. This process is unlikely to be related to any specific theory of HRM. The prescription and premiss behind HRM, centres on what practitioners should be concerned with. Although HRM might be the new orthodoxy, outside the consultancy and academic community a concern with the prescription and premiss behind it does not appear to be the general case. Descriptions of personnel/human resource activity at the operational level do not measure up to the defined prescription. As Beaumont[16] asks, why should this be the case?

Guest[4] suggests that the strategic side of HRM centres on the dissemination and pick-up of ideas. Guest clearly follows the Harvard version as delineated in Boxall[12] and deconstructed by Noon[9]. However, Guest[4] argues that dissemination and pick-up are not happening in the UK. This leads the discussion to three broad conclusions.

First, HRM is a theoretically defined style of managing employee relations. However, the prescription behind it is not effectively being disseminated throughout those organizations which purport to utilize it. Therefore, HRM remains a set of independent activities co-ordinated through, and serviced by, human resource practitioners. Thus, it is unlikely that the prescription behind HRM, both operationally and strategically, will equate to the description of what human resource practitioners are doing. So at the operational level there may be little difference in what constitutes HRM and personnel management practice.

Second, theory in HRM analysis is present but not of central relevance, whereas the premiss behind the theory, that of improved organizational performance might be significant, but only as a point of reference. Relatedly, prescriptive models of HRM do not measure up to descriptions of what is happening under the HRM logo. This is likely to be the case because of the insignificant difference between what constitutes HRM and personnel practice.

Third, the theory of strategic HRM is well developed and is a central component of HRM research and teaching. However, if, as Guest argues, HRM is not being practised in the UK, it cannot describe what is happening. Therefore, the prescription of HRM must be failing. This leaves strategic HRM at the level of concept. If this is combined with prescription, the result is an ideal type of behaviour similar to the notion of perfect competition in the theory of the firm. Few economists accept that markets are perfectly competitive, and as a consequence perfect competition is used as a measure of practical deviation from the ideal type. It might be useful to visualize strategic HRM in a similar way. Keenoy and Anthony[6] allude to this when they describe HRM as "a fantasy of the real world".

Conceptual and critical evaluation of HRM in terms of its actual efficiency claims of improved organizational performance have not been explored. The reason why the work of HRM/personnel practitioners is not traceable to strategic HRM is because theory in HRM, even if prescriptive, cannot be universal.

In terms of the three themes outlined by Guest[1] the prescription behind HRM does not measure up to the description of what constitutes HRM in practice. This leaves the conceptual side of HRM as an academic residual. HRM may be the new orthodoxy, but description of its practice deviates widely from its conceptual prescription. The difference between HRM and personnel lies not in practice but in aims and objectives which, as this article has attempted to illustrate, are of more use to practitioners, students and researchers, if they are used as measures of deviation between concept and practice, which descriptive studies[10,14,15] and critical evaluations[6,9] indicate to be the case.

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