



The “HRM project” and managerialism

Or why some discourses are more equal than others

The “HRM project” and managerialism

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to present a detailed examination of the relationship and debate between realist understandings of HRM, on the one hand, and discourse-based notions of HRM, on the other. The objective is to provide a basis for a possible debate between these, seemingly contradictory, perspectives.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper argues that these perspectives can be integrated if one adopts a perspective that overcomes this dualism by thinking of HRM as a “project” where speech acts and non-linguistic forms of action are seen as interdependent. The paper uses interview extracts in order to illustrate how the HRM Project gets constituted but also resisted in the context of a post-privatisation electricity company.

Findings – This paper is predicated on the notion that the discourse of HRM is closely intertwined with the shift in power relations between employers, managers, employees and trade unions from the early 1980s onwards. In order to capture the broader context of the discourse it is suggested that the notion of an “HRM Project” includes not only language but also practices, boundary-spanning linkages, and external agents such as regulators and financial institutions.

Originality/value – Builds on the notion of discourse as a strategic resource.

Keywords Human resource management, Conversation, Management power

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

That human resource management (HRM) emerged in the 1980s as it did (Guest, 1990) can hardly be regarded as chance. Rather, what is clear is that its genesis came at a time when a seismic shift was taking place between labour and capital – a contest in which most would probably agree the relations of power shifted in managements’ and shareholders’ favour. The business agenda was articulated in the name of the customer, the nation, the market and the spirit of the enterprise. This agenda constructed a particular affinity between the free market and the free manager as the “real” embodiments of capital within the enterprise: “The new managerialism has been both a source and beneficiary of these wider economic and political transformations” (Clarke and Newman, 1997, p. 58). These wider transformations were the backdrop which provided the “surface of emergence” (Foucault, 1972) to open up the ontological space for HRM. The corollary of this is that it is meaningful to regard HRM initiatives and HRM language, that is, the discourse of HRM, as being closely intertwined with the



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shift in power relations among employers, managers, employees and trade unions (Guest, 1990).

Indeed, the close interrelation between power and knowledge is a central point made in Townley's seminal Foucauldian analysis of HRM. Following MacIntyre (1984), Townley (2002) more recently makes the point that "the manager is the character of modernity, furnishing society with a cultural and moral ideal". The discourse of HRM ushered into being new subjects (HRM managers, anachronistic trade unions, etc.) and objects (assessment centres, job design models, psychometric tests, etc.).

There is little doubt that the discourse of HRM belongs to a specific historic period. Equally, there is an elective affinity between it and a number of other discourses of which "globalization" and "managerialism" are examples. Indeed, "the Market Rules" can be seen as a, from 1979 gradually unfolding, global narrative. The symbolic origin of this narrative can be traced to Margaret Thatcher's election triumph in May 1979 and the inauguration of Ronald Reagan in January 1980. The central themes underpinning this narrative were privatisation, deregulation, and shareholder predominance and trade liberalisation. Owing to the symbolic and financial power of the USA, and much less so the UK, this Anglo-American narrative gradually transformed itself into a discourse of "global neo-liberal capitalism" (Fairclough, 2000). Veera and Tienari suggest that a major challenge for future research is to investigate how different discourses fare in the face of the discursive challenge of global capitalism. Indeed, the managerialisation of processes and activities has happened across a large range of both private and public sector contexts (Clarke and Newman, 1997; Thomas, 2003). Consultancies with cross-border operations have played a central role in supporting the managerialist project and its standards of rationality during the last 25 years (Sturdy, 1997). However, a central point in all of this is the intricate interconnection between new discourses and significant changes of practices and strategies. We suggest the notion of "project" in order to get an analytical handle on this issue.

HRM can be seen as a professional project (Abbott, 1988; Tyson, 1995) that requires institutionalised agents, organisations, new buildings, etc. In actor-network terms, a range of actors – government, consultants, academics, line managers, personnel managers – will have different interests in supporting the HR "project" (Legge, 1995, p. 318). This suggests that a promising analysis of the HRM project requires us to abandon a simplistic realist point of view, where language is seen as simply representational, and practices/outcomes as "objective". Instead, we suggest a research agenda where we study the different pillars of the HRM project: this notion includes a variety of dimensions including the rhetoric that energises the HRM project and drives it forward; HR practices that get instantiated in a specific organisational context; HR "institutions", like an assessment centre, which display concrete and tangible materiality; linkages to agents, such as HR consultants, who were external to the organisation, but provided significant input, both in terms of rhetoric, and in terms of designing specific practices; and finally, rhetoric and counter practices that challenge aspects of the HR project. In our view, not only should HRM be seen as a "project" – but also it is itself part of a larger, more encompassing project which can be described as (global) "managerialism".

The new managerialism advocated relinquishing traditional modes of attachment and bridging the resulting motivation gap by combining culture management with

performance management, the latter referring to measuring what “really matters” (Clarke and Newman, 1997, p. 62). Thus, the apparent appeal of a “realist” understanding of HRM is through the claim that it has the capacity to improve performance through the adoption of the so-called “leading edge practices” (Pfeffer, 1994). The emphasis is on the practices, not our language of practices. Indeed, rhetoric is dismissed as “only talk” and talk is seen as epiphenomenal. There have been a relatively large number of publications that have sought to assess the “objective” relationship between HR practices, HR strategy and business performance (Lengnick-Hall and Lengnick-Hall, 1988; Arthur, 1994; Guest and Peccei, 1994; Huselid, 1995; Koch and McGrath, 1996; Bamberger and Feigenbaum, 1996; Wright and Snell, 1998). In way of critique, one can point to the fact that relationships are asserted within language and, therefore, dependent upon both observer and participant definitions. The assessment whether performance has increased will be partially dependent on how we define the variables. Not surprisingly, there is a critical version of realism, which focuses on work intensification and management surveillance as (intended) by-products of HRM initiatives. Critical perspectives see references to competitive advantage, “empowerment’ and trust as rhetoric and the centralization of power and control as the reality” behind HRM (Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992, p. 102). This view is broadly rooted in labour process analysis or Marxist political views, which were refocused and re-ignited by Braverman’s (1974) seminal contribution. It is a different take on a realist understanding of HRM: work intensification, non-transferability of plant-specific skills and job fragmentation are core themes, and HRM is seen as a convenient label for management’s essentially political purposes (Delbridge and Turnbull, 1992; Garrahan and Stewart, 1992). It is “realist” in that it emphasizes power, work processes and control, and it downplays the importance of language and rhetoric in that it views the latter as instruments of obfuscation. Let us now take a look at the other, discursive end of the spectrum.

In recent years, there has been a growing body of work that seeks to make sense of HRM as a discourse. One theorist who has made a central contribution to bridging discourse and HRM is Tom Keenoy. For Keenoy, the rhetorical and language dimension of the HRM project has been of particular importance to the HRM debate: HRM as a language “project” is meant to shift perceptions of reality – ambiguity, rather than being a problem, can in fact be a useful feature for this purpose (Keenoy 1990a, b). In a later paper, Keenoy developed this theme by arguing that HRM should be regarded as “a fluid, multi-faceted and intrinsically ambiguous phenomenon” (Keenoy, 1999, p. 1) akin to a hologram. Furthermore, Keenoy suggested: “So, it appears that HRMism does not even encompass a set of coherent managerial practices; it is merely a map of what has turned out to be an ever-expanding territory” (Keenoy, 1999, p. 3). Keenoy’s contributions are very important in pioneering the link between HRM and discourse debates and emphasizing that HRM is the map rather than the practices “out there”. The argument is that the map is at least as important for our understanding of the world as the territory itself. Thus, Keenoy has laid the foundations for a discourse approach to HRM.

This paper is concerned with a detailed examination of the relationship and debate among “realist” understandings of HRM on the one hand, discourse-based notions of HRM on the other hand. Our objective is to provide a basis for a possible debate between these, seemingly contradictory, perspectives. We argue that these

perspectives can be integrated if one adopts a perspective that overcomes this dualism by thinking of HRM as a “project” where speech acts and non-linguistic forms of action are seen as interdependent.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. We commence with an outline of what we take to be relevant themes in the academic HRM debate – the main purpose here is to distil the contrast between realist and discursive notions of HRM. This is followed by a discussion of our methodology that underpins the empirics introduced in the study. We then analyse the framing and contestation of the HRM themes identified earlier. This is followed by conclusions and a discussion of the implications for future research.

Literature: HRM, discourse and managerialism

The linguistic turn within management studies (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000a, b; Barry and Elmes, 1997; Brown and Jones, 2000; Czarniawska, 1997; Ford and Ford, 1995; Heracleous and Hendry, 2000; Oswick *et al.*, 2000, 2002; Phillips and Hardy, 2002) emphasises the importance of language: it is predicated on the notion that organizations are grammatocentric in that they are dominated by words, written texts and conversations. In contrast, the realist argument asserts that the current attention given to language is unjustified as it detracts us from actually analysing structures and practices (Reed, 1998) and it conveniently forgets about the often-ethereal nature of organisational discourse.

The problem with a realist description of (some) discourses as “ethereal” is that even such ethereal discourses will be a “real” force in the organisation in that they will, for example, create a target for criticism or a point of departure for a future change effort. We hold that all language can be seen and analysed as a form of practice – but we also hold that there are important material aspects of practices that are outside language. This is not to deny that practices are partially or mainly constituted by language: we agree that there are scenarios where “just talking about the culture . . . had the effect of maintaining and solidifying it” (Sturdy and Fleming, 2003, p. 765). Sturdy and Fleming (2003, p. 768) conclude that the distinction between talk and action is “overdrawn . . . talking about the culture, as if it actually existed, to some extent produces it”. One can account for their findings partially in terms of language, especially in the sense of management rhetoric, having become hugely more important in today’s image-conscious landscape. We argue that such a view is fully compatible with Fairclough’s (1995) position: in his fascinating discussion of the usage of “enterprise” in Lord Young’s speeches, Fairclough (1995, p. 127) argued that “enterprise discourse cannot be located in any text. The focus needs to be rather on processes across time and social space of text production, and the wider strategies that text production enters into”. This means that language needs to be analysed in its social, economic and political context. HRM language, for example, would be used by managers in the context of specific projects that they have embarked upon: for example, to find support, criticize laggards, or sell the inevitability of change.

Projects like HRM get constituted not only by their proponents, but also via resistance and scepticism. Practices of resistance prove the reality of the one that is resisted. Resistance of course comes in many shapes ranging from the cynic “we’ve heard it all before” (Tyson, 1995, p. 142) to the bewildered response analysed by Knights and McCabe (2000) or the pilfering discussed by Mars (1974). HRM gets

constituted not only by practices of resistance, but also by practices that claim the reality of its performance-enhancing effects. There is a well-established normative position according to which HRM gets popularised and adopted by management due to its performance-enhancing effects (Pfeffer, 1994). Wright and Snell (1998, p. 769) refer to “the increasing importance of strategic HRM in creating firm competitive advantage”. Martell *et al.* (1992, p. 19) claim to have shown that certain practices “pay off in the general business population by outperforming alternative policies”. Studies of high performance work practices have emphasized the advantage to be derived from bundling different employment practices (Ichniowski *et al.*, 1996; Dyer and Reeves, 1995, p. 668). Where this debate becomes problematic is when a single causality is assumed between performance enhancing practices, and performance as an objective outcome: this treats a socio-linguistic category like performance in the same way as a material product.

In conclusion, we argue that HRM can be seen as an essential part of managerialism – a project that in turn can be seen to consist of a new and changing rhetoric, techniques, practices and structures. HRM is also a discourse and an influential one at that. But it is a particular type of discourse, which is why we suggest to study it as a “project”.

Methodology, research methods and case study

The empirical data for this paper were derived from in-depth case study research conducted by one of the authors at a regional electricity utility in England during the early mid-1990s. The research was longitudinal and featured in-depth interviews, observation of company meetings and the use of company documents. One advantage of in-depth qualitative over quantitative research is that the latter typically measures “only the outcome while assuming the process” (Mizruchi and Fein, 1999, p. 664), while qualitative research typically focuses in depth on processes. A feature of the research was that the access was both formal and informal, and involved talking to a range of staff from the chief executive through to a cadre of meter readers. For the purposes of this paper, use was made of 75 interviews with senior management, personnel professionals and professional engineers; the interviews were unstructured. The high quality of access that was granted for this research was predicated on the preservation of the confidentiality of both the organization and the actors within it. For this reason, the pseudonym Coast Electric was employed, and all interviewee names are fictitious.

We treat interviews as micro discourses in the way that text gets analysed in established discourse theory (Fairclough, 2003). The role of our quotes is, therefore, to show the interdependencies of micro, meso and macro discourses – it is not to provide a “real” or “realistic” case study.

Establishing the HRM project at Coast Electric: introducing transformation processes

In the narrative that follows, we want to analyse the HRM project as both a practical and rhetorical one. In order to analyse the interconnections between change and language of change, we analyse how HRM becomes constituted as a “project”.

After the privatisation of Coast Electric in 1990, in the context of what was now perceived as a “fast changing environment”, senior management encouraged people to “roam the markets” with a view to imitating specific best practices from other

companies. Two senior engineers put forward proposals which were summarised as the “Job Rethink” initiative: this initiative included autonomous teamworking; “rule based engineering” (a proto-typical knowledge management programme that decomposed high skill occupations into simpler tasks); and “delaying”.

The Job Rethink plans amounted to a comprehensive rethinking of the organisation, which it was claimed would result in large cost-savings and improve organisational performance. Specifically, Job Rethink was to consist of: a shift to autonomous team working; the adoption of rule based engineering; and delaying. Flattening the organisational structure was proposed in order to reduce the organisational hierarchy to five tiers (directors, senior manager, distribution manager, team manager, and team member) from the existing seven. The flattening of the organisational structure was expected to deliver considerable cost savings; these savings were viewed as being essential to the survival of the organisation. In the literature sent out to delegates for the workshop a senior manager wrote:

We hope what Job Rethink is doing is allowing staff to at least have a say in the way the business changes. One of the changes envisaged within Job Rethink has been the removal of unnecessary demarcations within the business. Instead of restricting people we want to make their jobs more satisfying and open up more avenues. This should allow teams to operate in a more cost effective and efficient manner, instead of being constrained to old jobs and roles.

The removal of demarcations is given a positive gloss: they are described as “unnecessary” and “restricting” and removing them opens up new “avenues”. The fact that since the 1980s a national “discourse” had demonised demarcations (Mueller, 1992) played the role of a legitimating background. Teams, on the other hand, had become a mantra (Mueller *et al.*, 2000) that held promises for everybody:

The engineering business is moving to a team based structure because it is cost effective, because of the competitive environment, it will deliver greater job satisfaction, improved communication, and will be customer friendly.

An important part, therefore, of the HRM project was the rhetorical establishment of the need to achieve greater cost effectiveness, the categorisation of certain practices (demarcations) as bad, others (teamworking) as good. These were all elements of the HRM debate that had been rampant in the UK since the late 1980s (Legge, 1995). As such, these themes were derived from, but in turn contributed to, this broader debate. The broader context gave, mediated partly by consultancies, a certain plausibility to managerial exhortations. To refer to “unnecessary demarcations” in a public sector engineering business in the 1970s would have invited ridicule and laughter – not so in the early 1990s. A certain language had become more plausible and could no longer be simply dismissed and, ultimately, one needs to look to the broader context in order to understand the “why”.

The mimetic dimension in the HRM project: the role of consultants

HRM projects will often be driven forward with the help of the prestige, status and confidence possessed by consulting companies and consultants. Indeed, Fairclough (1996) refers to “technologization” to describe the role of experts who can achieve a mimetic standardisation of practices. These agents often possess a form of, even if superficially grounded, legitimacy that makes them appear as experts in the field, whose advice needs to be followed. A member of staff attending the “special

workshops” expressed dissatisfaction as to the extent to which internal consultation was replaced by external consultancy; indeed, external consultants were portrayed as knowing more, rather than less, because of their experience of working with competitive private sector companies. Most of the focus group meetings were presided over by Humana Consulting. Consultants and management communication events had become the mechanisms for creating conditions for mimetic learning, i.e. the adoption of private sector templates. Indeed, a senior manager stated to a focus group that:

After each focus group meeting, the steering group have a discussion with Humana Consulting who bring us up to date with what took place, and tell of any issues that arose as a result of your deliberations.

The new rhetoric emphasized that the team based structure was not only more “customer friendly”, but could also improve job satisfaction. Furthermore, expectations were created that “unnecessary demarcations” could be removed and “more avenues” opened up. Annual reductions in operating costs were part of this new rhetoric. Consultants were the carriers that could provide legitimacy: they could sell themselves as “experts” on corporate turnaround (Mueller and Dyerson, 1999).

New roles and techniques: the assessment centre

As a state-owned entity, engineers had been the dominant profession and personnel (training and development, employee relations and recruitment) had held a rather low profile. After privatisation, employee relations, through its negotiations with trade unions, were the most influential, whilst the role of the other parts changed only slowly. For example, when Coast Electric needed a large training programme to be run in the context of introducing TQM, a new group of “quality champions” were appointed. It is significant that no use was made of internal HR professionals.

When Annabel Smith, who had joined a few years earlier from the private sector, became head of training and development, there were expectations that things might change and that HR would be upgraded. Annabel Smith sat on the editorial board of *People Magazine*, as well as numerous DTI and CBI committees. She was an ardent proponent of “modernisation”: as such she devised a “job competency model” in conjunction with Humana Consulting. For the first time, an assessment centre was to be used in order to bring Coast Electric “up to date” and make “scientific selection decisions”. Existing selection techniques were to be revamped, partly with the help of external occupational psychologists. Assessors came from within the training and development department and had received prior instruction in how to observe and then assess candidates. We see this as a critical episode in that the managerialism discourse and personnel/HR discourses started to overlap: the latter was being allocated a specific role in support of the managerialist project. Let us, therefore, analyse the episode in more detail.

For each exercise, assessors were given details of competencies, derived from the job competency model, that were being focused on. The assessors were instructed to give an overall rating of one to five for each exercise. For instance, the customer service exercise focused on the following competencies: integrity and self-belief; taking responsibility; problem solving and decision-making; planning and organising; and customer service. Assessors for the exercises came from within the training and development department, and received prior instruction in how to observe and assess

candidates. The assessment centre provided an overall score and brief comments, which were used for debriefing purposes, on each candidate. A participant's score, which was based on the job competency model, predicted whether the candidate would make a good manager. The scores were then passed to Coast Electric's three network services managers (previously titled regional engineering managers) to select both the designate distribution and designate team managers for their respective regions. One of the network service managers selected his designate distribution and designate Team managers solely on the basis of the scores from the assessment centre. For some, the assessment centre attracted significant respect: the aura of science enveloped its results. This led to some appointments that were met with surprise throughout the organisation, especially among those that still thought in categories that valued professionalism and experience, such as a 22-year-old recent graduate being appointed designate team manager, and a 26-year-old being made a designate distribution manager. It should not be seen as unusual though that the modernisation project should have its beneficiaries and that these would be young, ambitious, "open-minded" employees. Those on the losing side seemed to be almost resigned to this historical reckoning, as is exemplified in the comments of a long serving engineer:

Some of my colleagues have got Team manager jobs, I am really pleased for them, they are all experienced and will do very good jobs, however, there have been a few surprises. They had real difficulty in getting people to be Team managers, so they've appointed some young guys. One is 22, he will be responsible for a team of experienced employees, doing the planning, budgeting etc. Do you remember Paul? He has got one of the Distribution Manager jobs, he is barely trained as an engineer. He knows very little, I wish him well but it will be tough.

This suggests that appointments were made on the basis of assessment centre results even if these outcomes violated common sense or, to be more precise, the common sense of the engineering profession. In the above quote, we can discern some questioning of the way the new personnel practices are applied ("he is barely trained as an engineer ... it will be tough"). It was ultimately the broader discourse of "modernisation" that provided legitimation for radically changed practices – again, the plausibility of micro discourses is derived from broader discourses, which make up the economic, political and cultural context. Indeed, the network services manager north explained his use of the assessment centre:

In the first time in the 30 years I've been here we have a scientific way of selecting managers. That's the point now we want managers not engineers. I made some decisions that shocked people but they will work out! It was useful in a number of ways, it confirmed some of my thinking about managers. Some of the Behavioural Personal Inventories gave me a better insight into what makes them tick. The Assessment Centre also opened up potential for some people. It also gave a benchmark, those that have performed well in the past, it gave a template of the kind of person we were looking for.

In this quote, the HRM project is embraced with optimism ("they will work out"); HRM is seen as part of a positivistic, prestigious science; the new practices' functionality is emphasized ("gave me a better insight"); finally, new opportunities are emphasized ("opened up potential"). Most importantly, this quote can help us understand the HRM project as part of a more broadly based agenda encapsulated in "we want managers not engineers". Indeed, as Clarke and Newman (1997, pp. 92-4) have shown, managerial discourses such as HRM or TQM legitimate the reordering of roles and relationships

within organisations. Townley (1994) argued that HRM should be seen as a range of techniques and strategies through which new managerial subjects are constituted. HRM practices constitute individuals whose attitudes and values can be defined and measured. As we shall see in the section that follows, this attempt to define and measure people can easily provoke resistance.

The dialectic of HRM: imposition, resistance, suppression?

The HRM project was partly “constituted” through its critics and through the resistance it engendered. The engineering union, the EMA, was very concerned about the status of engineers, especially how engineers would be affected by rule based engineering and the new team manager positions, given that the latter were also open to non-engineers. However, removal of demarcations opened new opportunities for members of industrial unions, who gained new opportunities to climb the management structure. Engineers, however, were concerned about the implications for safety standards, and the potential for accidents, contained in the new proposals.

Another episode where resistance can be evidenced is with the selection of team and distribution managers. Posts for these positions were advertised, and were open to applications from all staff irrespective of their occupational background. In stark contrast to the other network service managers, Richard Preston, the newly appointed network services manager west, made little use of the scores from the assessment centre; a training manager described Preston’s actions thus:

He paid little attention to the Assessment Centre he just told us this is who I am going to appoint. I replied that some of them had performed badly at the assessment centre, he shrugged and said I know them they’re just right for the job.

Richard Preston himself put his criticism of personnel professionals’ claim to a territory even more strongly:

I know my staff, I know who will get things done and who is right for the challenges ahead. All this psychological stuff is very well, but the reality is when it’s the middle of the night, a storm has just taken out supply over half my area... that’s when I need people to perform . . . I said to Annabel “you tell me on a single piece of paper who is good, who is not”. They spent £80 grand on the Centre and it’s crap. Annabel has made a fool of herself over this, she is a joke. The next report I get from her will go right in the bin.

The credibility of Preston’s critique of the HRM department was, therefore, predicated on having an audience: presiding over the western region, Preston possessed an “authority to speak”, and he articulated his views both in senior management meetings, as well as more generally with his staff – many of whom reproduced his critique of assessment centres. Whilst in some respects Preston will be subjected to the HRM discourse, i.e. will in some respects be regulated by it, he is clearly not subjected by it and has not become a “new subject” (Clarke and Newman, 1997, p. 54). This also explains the liberty with which he criticises colleagues to an outside researcher (Coupland, 2001). Thus, the HRM project by becoming embodied in materiality and practices created resistance, surely an unintended consequence of the HRM project. Somewhat paradoxically, if proof was needed that HRM was *not* an ethereal discourse, it is the act of resistance that provided it: HRM cannot simply be ignored, it requires an active act of resistance (i.e. binning a report and discussing it with both colleagues and an outsider). Clarke and Newman (1997, pp. 65-7) argued that the scientific knowledge

that they deploy is used to position managers as neutral and impersonal, i.e. they are not part of the war between different political and occupational interests – however, this neutrality claim gets unmasked here and shown to be ideological. Equally important, we want to emphasize the interdependence of discourses. It was a building and specific practices plus the financial outlay associated with it that created a counter discourse of practicality and action (“the reality is...”; “middle of the night”; “need people to perform”). We are now in a position to summarise the different strands of the HRM project.

Analysis and summary

Our starting point was an assessment of (a naïve version of) “realism” in the HRM context. We illustrated this realist perspective by discussing the stated “objective” relationship between certain (bundles of) HR practices on the one hand, certain performance outcomes on the other hand. Underlying this is the notion that what is “only” rhetoric will not tell us anything about what “really happens” in the workplace. Indeed, the established “mainstream” HRM literature refers to best practices as if they were disembodied products (Arthur, 1994; Huselid, 1995; Ichniowski *et al.*, 1996; Koch and McGrath, 1996); techniques as if they consist of the literal application of a manual; HR strategies/practices as if they stood in a “real” (rather than discursively achieved) relationship to performance outcomes (Guest and Peccei, 1994; Dyer and Reeves, 1995). Most disconcerting of all, in the prescriptive literature (Ulrich, 1997, p. 17) HR professionals need to prove that they can “deliver value” – if they fail they need to expect the outsourcing of their role. This intentionally ignores that defining the parameters for delivering value is a, more or less arbitrary, political and discursive process. Indeed, this type of approach is unable to deal with evidence that suggests that “performance” is a social and discursive achievement, that performance is always derived from pre-existing social conventions and these are always open to conflicting interpretations.

In line with such considerations, we have attempted to outline an approach that relies on the notion of an HRM project which needs to be analysed in its various dimensions; which needs to be located in a spacio-temporal context; which involves rhetoric and counter rhetoric; which engenders practices of advocacy and resistance; which relies on HR “institutions”, like an assessment centre; which involves agents outside the organisation whose financial and image interests are relevant for their role in designing suitable rhetoric and practices. Indeed, we found that the HRM project was structured partly through language, partly through practices. It resulted from shifts in power (new managers being appointed to senior positions), but it also helped in expressing ambitions for power: the new training and development manager, for example, expressed hope that the new assessment centre would herald a new way of doing things in the personnel field and, implicitly, would be a stepping stone for her own career development. These ambitions also found expression in the uncompromising critique of the assessment centre by a senior network manager, who thus formulated an alternative discourse of management.

It has also become clear that some discourses will be more equal than others: the modernisation discourse is far from ethereal as it is connected to expenditure decisions, new practices and new buildings. The resistance discourse was very much on the

sidelines to start with even though its protagonists seemed to enjoy the actual power of binning and ignoring the training and development director's reports[1].

Implications: contribution to the literature

Points of departure

Keenoy's (1999) argument focuses on a specific management innovation (HRM) and he demonstrates the ambivalence in that innovation. Indeed, HRM is so multi-faceted that it can be seen as a hologram: the holographic immaterial reality of HRM if anything increases its ideological purchase and its presence. This is a useful point, especially *vis-à-vis* certain naively realist positions. However, it is ultimately rooted in subjectivist ontology, where one perspective tells one story and another perspective tells another story. Ultimately, there is no basis for adjudicating between these different stories, as materiality barely enters the equation. It is via material institutions like an assessment centre that responses are created in practice, including those of resistance. Thus, Keenoy's position leaves us ultimately in the grip of subjectivity and unable to understand why some discourses are more powerful than others in accompanying or even driving change. We suggest the notion of a "project" in order to get a grip on the analytical conundrum why some discourses are much more influential in driving change and strategies than others and in order to understand the interdependence between the immaterial and the material.

Prospects and outlook

We argue that our notion of HRM as a project builds on the notion of discourse as a strategic resource, which is a central theme that underpins the empirical work of Hardy and Phillips (Hardy *et al.*, 2000; Maguire *et al.*, 2001; Phillips and Brown, 1993; Phillips and Hardy, 1997, 2002). We found that language is an essential part of the HRM project, but that both causes and consequences of the HRM project also have to be looked for outside the linguistic realm. Our suggestion is compatible with Knights and Morgan (1991) and Fairclough (1995) who suggested that discourses need to be analysed as part of a complex assemblage of techniques, practices and strategies. It is the nature and condition of this assemblage that further research needs to look into.

Note

1. However, over time this particular manager gained a powerful position in the organisation. However, it would go beyond the brief of this paper to deal with the causes or consequences of this rise.

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