Chapter 30

PUBLISHING HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT RESEARCH IN DIFFERENT KINDS OF JOURNALS

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INTRODUCTION

A number of authors, myself included, have suggested that Human Resource Management (HRM) research – and certainly that published in ‘top’ journals – appears to be dominated by a particular approach which emphasises positivist methodology, a managerialist frame of reference and reliance on theory drawn from social psychology (Harley and Hardy 2004; Kaufman 2012; Godard 2014). Nonetheless, academic HRM is a broad church, with scholars from a range of disciplinary backgrounds publishing quantitative and qualitative research informed by a range of theoretical traditions. This diversity may reflect the changing nature of universities, with many scholars who would previously have worked in discipline-based departments finding themselves in business schools as the former shrink and the latter grow. Particularly in the UK, Australia and Europe, there is a strong tradition of critique from scholars who work in business schools but who question much of the theoretical and practical foundation of contemporary HRM.

Reflecting the nature of the field, work on HRM is published in a wide range of journals. First, there are the general management journals such as *Academy of Management Journal*, *Journal of Management* and *Journal of Management Studies*, which publish papers on HRM alongside papers from the other major management areas. Second, there are discipline-based journals in psychology (eg. *Journal of Applied Psychology* and *Personnel Psychology*), sociology (eg. *Work Employment and Society*) and economics (eg. *Labor Economics*) which publish work on HRM. Third, there are subject-based journals, including some dedicated to HRM such as *Human Resource Management* and *Human Resource Management Journal* and journals such as *Industrial Relations* and *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, which publish a good deal of HRM material as well as more traditional industrial relations papers. There are other dimensions on which the relevant journals vary, notably the extent to which they emphasise practice vs research, the extent to which they tend to favour either ‘US’ or ‘European’ style research (see Usdiken 2014), their openness to overtly critical research and the prestige they hold within different scholarly communities. There are, therefore, many potential outlets for research on HRM and a potentially confusing set of choices, particularly for early-career scholars. My aim in this chapter is to reflect on my own experiences and approach in a way which I hope will be useful to others, while noting that there is no single recipe for success in HRM publishing.

MY BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVE

Before turning to specific examples of publications in different kinds of journals, it may be useful to outline my own disciplinary background, career and general approach to publishing. Our backgrounds and career trajectories both shape and reflect our approach to research and

publication. Thus, the material which I present about publishing in different kinds of journals is likely to make more sense if it is placed in context.

I completed a PhD in 1994 in a Political Science department, supervised by an academic with a background in economics and sociology. My topic linked macro-level changes in industrial relations policy in Australia to micro-level changes in workplace practices and outcomes. My particular concern was with how national level policy changes had an impact on employees and their experiences of work. My research drew on theoretical resources from political science, sociology and industrial relations literatures and was informed by a critical sensibility. It was primarily based on secondary analysis of large-scale national survey data, augmented with qualitative studies of two industry sectors. While my doctoral research was clearly relevant to the field of HRM, it was not framed with reference to mainstream HRM work.

At the time that I graduated, there was massive growth of job opportunities in business schools and a corresponding decline in job opportunities in traditional social science departments. My first job as a lecturer was in a business school, teaching some industrial relations, but predominantly HRM and my appointments since that time have all been in business schools. My publishing, however, reflecting my background and interests has not been primarily in ‘mainstream’ HRM journals. My approach has always been to target the journals which I find interesting and stimulating and in which I have judged my work most likely to have an impact. I have not pursued a strategy of choosing journals on the basis of their rankings alone and then framing my work to fit in. Indeed, I feel a certain discomfort with the emphasis that is currently placed on targeting ‘big hits’ at all costs. My approach has led me to target different journals with different kinds of papers at different times, although I cannot say that the ‘quality’ of journals as captured by impact factor has not been among my considerations. In the next part of the chapter, I will reflect on a few of these publications and

what they might tell others about positioning HRM research for different kinds of journals.

My reflections are informed not only by my experience as an author, but also as an editor of *Journal of Management Studies* from 2010 to 2015 and a reviewer for numerous general management, discipline-based and subject-based journals.

GENERAL MANAGEMENT JOURNALS

By definition, general management journals publish across a range of different management-related topics and disciplines and hope to attract a broad readership, although the extent to which they are open to ‘critical’ work varies considerably. The challenge for authors publishing in such journals is that they must submit papers which seek to meet two, possibly competing, aims. First, they must have something to say which has implications beyond their own field and which appeals to readers from a range of fields within management. Second, at the same time they must seek to make a serious contribution to their own discipline and retain credibility within it. While this can be a challenge, there is some comfort in the fact that virtually all management scholars work within a sub-discipline of management, so we are all in the same boat when it comes to submitting to general management outlets.

My experience of publishing in general management journals is limited, simply because I have made a choice to focus on discipline- and subject-based journals, but I have published some papers in such outlets. An example which illustrates the points above is Harley and Hardy (2004). This paper was published in a special issue of *Journal of Management Studies* which celebrated the career of a long-time Editor, Karen Legge, who was herself a scholar of HRM. Our aim in this paper was threefold – to reflect on Legge’s work, to make a contribution to the field of HRM and also to contribute to broader methodological debates

within management. In an attempt to balance these aims, we wrote a paper which used discourse analysis in an attempt to make sense of why Legge's work had been less apparently 'impactful' than that of David Guest, as measured by citations. This allowed us to engage with a methodological debate within HRM, which could be summarized as 'positivism vs social constructionism' and in which Legge was a key participant, at the same time as contributing to broader methodological debates in management studies.

A paragraph from the introduction of this paper summarizes the way in which we sought to achieve our aims:

'This paper makes a number of contributions. First, by using discourse analysis to examine a selection of texts that is indicative of a larger corpus of texts on HRM, we are better placed to understand how academic HRM discourse has developed and how academic knowledge is produced. Second, we provide an understanding of some of the challenges confronting critical researchers as a result of the discursive context in which they work. A third contribution is the identification of some of the ways that critical researchers might engage in discursive work to meet these challenges. Finally, we make a methodological contribution by developing a systematic approach to discourse analysis' (Harley and Hardy, 2004: 378).

So, while the paper was squarely focused on research on HRM, at the same time it sought to make a contribution to broader debates about methodology and about academic practice within the management field.

DISCIPLINE-BASED JOURNALS

Here there is a similar challenge to that faced by HRM scholars publishing in general management journals, in the sense that authors must say something relevant to those working within the core discipline of the journal – sociology, psychology, economics, etc. – while simultaneously making a contribution to HRM scholarship. Of course, the extent to which those twin aims present a challenge depends in part on how broad or narrow the disciplinary focus of the journal is.

Some of the issues can be illustrated by considering my experience with one discipline-based journal. I have published a number of papers in *Work, Employment and Society* (WES), which is the British Sociological Association's journal dedicated to the sociology of work and employment. Because the journal focuses on work and employment, it is a more natural home for HRM research than a broad sociology journal would be, but at the same time the types of HRM papers published reflect the preferences of the readership (and editors and reviewers). These are typically characterized by some foundation in sociological theory, but also by an orientation which is explicitly critical of mainstream HRM research and which commonly focuses on issues of power, domination and exploitation in the labour market and the labour process. Given my own disciplinary background and interests, WES might be seen as a natural home for my research, but positioning papers appropriately nonetheless presents challenges.

This can be illustrated by the example of Harley, Sargent and Allen (2010). This paper addresses a staple of mainstream HRM research – the apparent links between 'high performance work systems' practices (hereafter HPWS) and employee attitudes to work – and seeks to explain why such practices appear to be received positively by employees. The

notion that HRM is universally ‘good’ for employees and that ‘good HRM’ can generate gains for both employees and organizational performance has been challenged vigorously by critical sociologists. The challenge for this paper was to try to explain how such practices might generate gains for employees, but by using critical sociological theory, and simultaneously offer an alternative explanation to mainstream unitarist approaches and some of the more simplistic critical approaches.

How did we do this? The paper started with a review of the empirical research on employee responses to HPWS to establish the lack of consistency in findings and to suggest that the prior debates had reached an impasse because they were couched in terms of HPWS being universally ‘good’ or ‘bad’. This provided the motivation for an alternative approach. The paper then suggested that the failure to bring sociological theory to bear on understanding HPWS and employee responses had limited our understanding.

‘This article seeks to develop a research agenda which draws on social and political understandings of the workplace and explicitly considers the role of interests in shaping outcomes. The agenda is informed by labour process theory (LPT), which underlies many of the critical analyses of HPWS (see Ramsay et al., 2000). While there are divergent views within LPT, at its heart is an understanding of workplace relations as shaped by the structure of capitalism and involving relations between capital and labour, rather than simply between human actors’ (Harley et al 2010: 742-3).

The paper then utilized Edwards, Collinson and Rees’ (1998) ‘disciplined worker thesis’ to propose that HPWS were favourably received by employees when they enhanced order and predictability in work processes. Statistical analysis of survey data was then used to assess

the extent to which a scale capturing order and predictability mediated associations between HPWS and positive employee outcomes. This provided an empirical basis to argue for the value of sociological theory for explaining outcomes which had previously been explained almost exclusively by psychological theory.

To summarize how we positioned this paper, we took a well-recognized finding – that HPWS are in at least some cases associated with positive employee outcomes – then problematized both the universality of this finding and the dominant explanations, thereby providing a critique of prevailing understandings. We then demonstrated, bolstered by statistical analysis, that positive outcomes could be explained by critical sociological theory, thereby producing knowledge with a strong empirical basis and a critical sociological orientation which fitted with the orientation of the journal.

SUBJECT-BASED JOURNALS

By subject-based journals, I mean those that focus on HRM, but which are cross-disciplinary in the sense that they do not publish papers exclusively within a particular base discipline. For example, the *British Journal of Industrial Relations (BJIR)*, which I will discuss below, focuses on industrial relations and HRM, but publishes papers informed by a number of base disciplines notably sociology and economics. Researchers working on the subject which is the concern of subject-based journals have the luxury of being able to write for an audience which is likely to be quite familiar with the specialist knowledge and language within that subject area and prospective authors do not have to write for as broad an audience as they would if they were targeting a general management or a discipline-based journal. Subject-based journals in HRM tend to publish relatively high proportions of quantitative work,

reflecting the disciplinary foundations of HRM scholarship in economics and organizational behaviour.

While some subject-based journals are quite broad and inclusive, it would be fair to say that others are quite narrow in their focus, both in terms of the topics covered and the range of perspectives which are welcomed. I have not often targeted ‘mainstream’ HRM journals, because of the orientation of my research towards critical perspectives. I have, however, published papers in the aforementioned *BJIR*, and consideration of this experience provides some potentially useful insights for HRM scholars targeting subject-based journals. In Harley, Allen and Sargent (2007), my co-authors and I presented research on associations between HPWS and employee experiences of work, which sought to explore the moderating effect of occupation on the outcomes for employees. The aim was to examine the extent to which the structure of labour markets within the service sector appeared to shape the outcomes of HPWS, by asking whether lower-skilled workers were denied the apparent benefits of such practices. In this way, we engaged squarely with debates within the HRM literature, while at the same time bringing in concerns likely to be relevant to industrial relations scholars informed by sociology and economics.

Because we were writing for an audience which was familiar with the HPWS literature, we could deal quickly with this and then turn very quickly to debates about working arrangements in the service sector and the role of employee skills – both staples of HRM and industrial relations literature. We thereby positioned the paper around streams of literature current in the subject area. In doing so, we were able to use language specific to the subject area, for example:

‘The theoretical arguments made against the general applicability of HPWS in the service sector are based on the segmentation of employment in services. The logic of the argument is that markets for services are very clearly divided into low-value and

high-value segments with the result that employment in service organizations is correspondingly segmented. According to this argument, in the low-value/low-skill segments of the sector, where work can be standardized to deliver a standard product, work will be characterized by Taylorist or neo-Taylorist practices, while in the high-value/high-skill segments, workers may enjoy more humanistic HR practices' (Harley et al. 2007: 610).

We could safely assume that readers were familiar with these debates and this language, in a way which we could not have if we had been targeting a general management or discipline-based journal.

Since *BJIR* is read by many scholars with backgrounds in economics and typically publishes a good number of statistical papers, we presented numerous figures and tables summarizing statistical analysis and assumed knowledge about technical terminology. In common with some general management journals but generally not discipline-based journals, the subject-based HRM journals tend to emphasize practical implications. Thus, we concluded the paper, *inter alia*, with some consideration of practice:

'In practical terms, [the findings] suggest that workers can benefit from HPWS in the service sector. This is not to say that workers and unions should rush forth and embrace HPWS. Rather, it is to caution against the assumption that they should necessarily resist such practices. The challenge for researchers who wish to inform practice is to build on existing research and to identify the conditions under which HPWS is beneficial for workers' (Harley et al. 2007: 623-4).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In the final part of this discussion, I will briefly recap what seem to me the important lessons I have learnt from over twenty years as an author, reviewer and more recently as an editor. Most importantly, while it is crucial in terms of credibility and professional satisfaction to publish in journals which one finds interesting and credible, there is a range of such journals available to HRM scholars. This dictates that thought be given to how best to position papers when submitting to different kinds of journals. In general management journals, the key success factors appear to be appealing to a broad audience, while also speaking to HRM scholars, and to make a contribution to broader debates. In discipline-based journals, one needs to say something relevant to scholars working in that discipline – notably by framing one's work in theory drawn from that discipline – as well as to HRM specialists. When seeking to publish in subject-based journals, one has the luxury of 'preaching to the converted', but there is often an emphasis on practice. I do not pretend that this brief essay covers everything which might be considered by HRM scholars when developing their publishing careers, but I hope that some of these insights are valuable.

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Title:

Publishing human resource management research in different kinds of journals

Date:

2016-01-01

Citation:

Harley, B. (2016). Publishing human resource management research in different kinds of journals. Clark, T (Ed.). Wright, M (Ed.). Ketchen, DJ (Ed.). How to get Published in the Best Management Journals, (1), pp.253-261. Edward Elgar Publishing.

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