



'Managing the human' in 21st century organizations: developing a critical and performative research agenda for HRM-studies

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Introduction

In Alvin Gouldner's *Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy* (Gouldner, 1954) the interaction between workers and management in a gypsum mine is studied following what he saw as an attempt to introduce an efficiency and accountability oriented bureaucratic management. The reason why this classic study is relevant to frame a 21st century special issue on *managing the human* is the lucid way that Gouldner shows, inspired by Weber and Marx, how the relations between workers and managers develop in unpredictable ways. The workers on the surface react in one way, and the workers in the pit in another, and eventually the new management has to give in, facing the enduring resistance of workers, after extended periods of faltering productivity.

Hallett and Ventresca (2006) point out the subtlety and complexity of Gouldner's analysis: how the ideal type of bureaucratic management is modified and the authority of management subverted by the interaction among the actors in the mine (Hallett and Ventresca, 2006: 220). Gouldner identifies three different ways that bureaucracy appears in the mine:

These conflicts (in the mine) produced three different patterns of bureaucracy: (1) "mock-bureaucracy," where bureaucratic rules are in place but are largely ignored, (2) "representative bureaucracy" where there is voluntary consent based on mutual interests and (3) "punishment-centered bureaucracy" where the focus is on the enforcement of rules regardless of their utility. (Hallett and Ventresca, 2006: 220)

The purpose of reminding us of the Gouldner study is that it shows how complex the processes of ‘managing the human’ are, how local and institutional embeddedness, interests and social interaction modify structural influences coming from other places, as with the bureaucratization studied by Gouldner (Hallett and Ventresca, 2006). What Gouldner shows us and what we sometimes seem to forget is that when workers and managers interact in local contexts, we cannot take the outcome for granted.

One way to interpret the Gouldner study is to see how the ‘performativity’ of bureaucracy is contingent upon the social relations and context it is existing within. Performativity has famously been defined by Butler (1993: 2) as ‘... understood not as a singular or deliberate “act”, but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names’. For Butler (1993), therefore, performativity offers a framework through which one may explore and from which to challenge current conceptualizations of how humans are managed (or the attempts made to do so) in organizations, while remaining aware of the constraints and boundaries, which one’s own critique will necessarily incur. In some ways ‘Human resource management’ (HRM) constitutes itself (illocutionarily) but in most cases HRM as an actual practice is dependent on the collaboration of the involved actors (perlocutionarily) (Butler, 2010).

The main point of this special issue is to specifically analyze the performativity of HRM and investigate how it is possible to create a critical and engaged research agenda for studying the practices of managing the human. HRM has always been controversial as an object of scholarly research within the more critically inclined academic community (Legge, 2005; Storey, 1995). In fact, HRM has been seen as even more problematic as a research object than other management research programs and phenomena. We suggest that a very strong reason for this has been the ‘positive’ and management-oriented focus, which has dominated what we would call mainstream HRM thinking (Beer, 1984; Huselid, 1995; Ulrich, 1988; Walton, 1985). Mainstream HRM research has either been focused on the way HRM directly contributes to company profit and short-term organizational goal achievement (so-called Hard HRM), or on how HRM could contribute to creating long-term collaborative regimes (so-called Soft HRM) that develop the quality of working life and the long-term viability of the organization (Boxall and Purcell, 2011). In other words, this is a managerial perspective, which leaves out other stakeholder interests than the management or owners. As Karen Legge once quipped: ‘who is best practice (in HRM) actually best for?’ (Boxall and Purcell, 2011: 63).

Within Critical Management Studies (CMS) and in this journal, many observers have contributed to critical investigations of various HRM phenomena. HRM-

related debates have, for instance, been covered by *ephemera* special issues in recent years covering topics like *Self-management* (Lopdrup-Hjorth et al., 2011); *Employability* (Chertkovskaya et al., 2013); *Free Work* (Beverungen et al., 2013); and *Consumption and Work* (Chertkovskaya et al., 2016). True to the spirit of *ephemera* the chosen topics have focused on problematizing how management in organizations or government in society works in ways that are essentially oppressive and exploitative of the less powerful stakeholders in society: workers, unemployed, minority groups, etc. *Self-management* has for example been analyzed as a process of disciplining the self in the interest of organizations (Lopdrup-Hjorth et al., 2011). The dream of *freedom from work* has been seen as an instance of oppression in itself (Chertkovskaya et al., 2013) and *Employability* as a way of transferring the burden of the contingencies and precariousness of modern work from managements or politicians to employees (Beverungen et al., 2013), and finally *work has become fused with consumption* in the way consumers are enrolled as co-workers in the production and the ways workers use work (compulsively) as an object of consumption in the need for identity building (Chertkovskaya et al., 2016). All these voices, which can be regarded as belonging under the broad umbrella of CMS in some way or another, address ‘the management of the human’ in various ways. In this special issue, we will explore the performativity of HRM (‘what does HRM actually produce’) in organizations, and particularly inspired by the debate of critical performativity (Cabantous et al., 2016; Christensen, 2018; Just et al., 2017; Parker and Parker, 2017; Spicer et al., 2009; Spicer et al., 2016), argue for a critical and engaged agenda on managing the human and HRM.

In line with the mentioned *ephemera* debates above, there is a tendency within CMS to see HRM as oppressive in favor of management or the owner’s interests (Fournier and Grey, 2000; Grey, 2013). Mainstream HRM studies have in this way been criticized for taking a managerial perspective, single-mindedly supporting exploitative and financial aims of modern capitalism (Grey, 2010). Thus a frequently published – and understandable – stance has been that the purpose of critical studies of management and HRM should be to uncover and de-mask the ugly face of neoliberal capitalist logic in the way humans are managed in organizations. In this view, the more veiled and insidious the kinds of exploitation and control (see Hanlon, 2015; Mogensen, this issue), the more should we strive to bring it into the light of day. A long way along the road we concur with this as an important and honorable objective of critical studies of HRM as well. The problem, however, with this view is that it is at the peril of describing the phenomenon of HRM, as sketched in the first paragraph, in an overdetermined and mechanically selective way – given that the overall conclusion is already made in advance. As the performativity of bureaucracy changes when meeting the situation on the ground at the gypsum mine, HRM ideology is a far cry from the actual HRM practice in organizations. Furthermore, as proponents of a more

‘performative critique’, or rather ‘critical performativity’ (Spicer et al., 2009) point out, an ‘anti-performative’ argument risks ending up in a blind alley project. Such a position leaves us with no hope of finding cracks of creative resistance in the industrial concrete or even more importantly, no hope of contributing to making a better world of work in which people can actually live better lives, exploring and developing personal and professional opportunities. Spicer et al. (2009) define critical performativity as the ‘active and subversive intervention into managerial discourses and practices’ (538). And they further elaborate that:

CMS should seek to become *more* performative. This would require attempts to question, challenge and radically re-imagine management through practical and direct interventions into particular debates about management. Performativity is not bad in itself. The problem is to carefully decide what kind of performativity we want. (*Ibid.*: 554).

Critical performativity theory in this way argues *for* the transformative potential of CMS (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Spicer et al., 2009).

Reactions to this proposition have, however, been varied. Some argue that critical performativity theory gets the definition of performativity wrong, which has started a long debate about its basic definitions (Cabantous et al., 2016). Some even go as far as to claim that critical performativity is ‘the happy end of Critical Management Studies’ (Spoelstra and Svensson, 2016: 69). Importantly, however, the critique has cemented that a subject cannot freely ‘activate the performativity of language’, as Wickert and Schaefer (2015: 121) claimed, but it is constituted in and through this very performativity or as Butler (1993: 12) mused ‘subjected and subjectified within discourse’. CMS might then be in what Just et al. (2017: 205) call a ‘performativity crisis with notions of alterity and effectivity at the center of the debate’. Critique, therefore, as Just et al. (2017: 206) continue, ‘rests on the simultaneously enabling and constraining basic condition of “repetition with a difference”; perpetual articulations and enactments that test, bend, and expand the boundaries of the intelligible whilst inevitably producing and reproducing these very boundaries’.

With respect for the at times heated debate about critical performativity, we would argue that it should be possible for HRM scholars to stay critical *and* make an impact if we think of performativity as incremental and reflexive, undoing norms from within, rather than repeating a given set of (possibly new) norms. As Riach et al. (2016: 7) argue:

As such, a reflexive undoing must contrast with a more performative, organisational undoing in revealing lived experiences of being subject to the ‘rules and norms’ we are required to conform to ‘if we are to exist’ not simply in a physical sense, but as viable, social subjects, within and through organisational settings.

In a recent interview for a research project by one of the authors, a senior British HRM scholar, with a HR practitioner background, expressed a kindred sentiment:

I think that one of the things that distinguishes human resource management from other kinds of management – financial management, strategic management, marketing management and so on – is that we actually try to serve or should be trying to serve a number of different stakeholders including lower level managers, employees, the peripheral workers, the temporary part-time workers, people who're trying to get into organisations and are currently unemployed, the families of these people and the communities that they work in. (CB in Pernkopf et al., forthcoming)

Besides this 'idealistic' argument, it is also a problem that a polarized criticism, which looks for managerial exploitation as the motive (and consequence) of all organizational action, tends to overemphasize the rationality and agency of management and organizational behavior. After Gouldner, 30-50 years of organizational studies show that even if management have (which they probably often have) starkly exploitative intentions, their ability to carry these intentions out in practice is at best limited. Famously, Selznick (1957) showed that organizations swiftly move from 'the initial technical objective' to become 'infused with value' as institutions integrating much more complex aims and interests, which often run counter to the original goals. The significance here is that a point of view that just refers to the intentions of management as reality may miss the potential of emancipation in the fact that managerialism is not as totalitarian when carried out in practice as critical writers sometimes seem to believe, if only because of the boundedness of rationality. Taking a point from one of the earlier *ephemera* debates above, 'employability' can be seen as a way to leave responsibility of employment to the individual worker instead of 'the system'. It could alternatively, as is often the case in a Danish social setting, be seen as a way for workers to put demands on employers, as well as the state, for meaningful work, proper training and education. That an employer can offer to maintain the 'employability' of the staff becomes a way of attracting and retaining employees, etc. Thus, we don't see HRM as solely a tool for management control and exploitation, but a complex set of activities, which are always contested in the struggles, negotiations and sensemaking that go on between stakeholders within (and outside) organizations. Another example can be seen in Moon (this issue), who analyzes recruitment processes at universities, uncovering unethical aspects of this in the use of undisclosed, unlisted reference checks when hiring academics. The issue here is that this may be seen as yet another instance of managerialist pathology influencing university management, but less comfortably, it could also be seen as an unhealthy aspect of the collegial culture of academia.

While critical scholarship has succeeded in supplying the research of management and organization with a perfectly necessary and relevant antidote to exploitative

management ideology and practice, we now need to expand our view and in some ways regain a more open-minded research focus, which is sensitive to complex empirical realities as well as alternative theoretical explanations. Mogensen (this issue) for example takes issue with the claustrophobia of the more recent debates of 'self-exploitation' and 'neo-normativism' within Critical Management Studies:

When control becomes the primary focus, it diminishes the capacity of critical analyses to take into account other important aspects of organizational life. Indeed, the organization itself disappears from view. (Mogensen, this issue: 226)

How can critical HRM studies be inspired by the debate on critical performativity? How can we achieve a more engaged and pragmatic approach to studying HRM? And how can we achieve a kind of HRM that is more democratic and fulfills a broader range of social stakeholders' interests? With these questions in mind, we could study HRM practices critically by studying the kind of behavior and action that these practices produce among actors. Many HRM practices are based on technologies, for instance tests, interview protocols or surveys. The question for a critical approach would be to investigate what kind of action, meaning and subjectivities they produce, besides the intended outcomes. Thus, instead of criticizing idealized accounts of management omnipotence, assuming this is organizational reality, maybe we should study what actually happens 'on the ground' (and even under the ground, like Gouldner) when organizations work with HRM concepts and models?

We think that the various ways of using (critical) performativity is a good starting point for a critical and engaged turn in HRM studies and that contributions in this special issue aim at doing exactly that. Therefore, such studies could have a more radical deconstructionist aim, i.e. analyzing the actual performativity of HRM practices in organizations. This has a constructive critical performative potential, because it short-circuits the espoused purpose of HRM policies with their actual consequences, opening up for the improvement of practices measured by their intentions. Gouldner and associates were allegedly looking for ways that bureaucracy could come to work in emancipating ways (Hallett and Ventresca, 2006). Thus in our view, critical HRM studies should approach HRM practices with similar aims. That is basically taking a position of progressive pragmatism that supports the development of organizations, which work to a larger extent to the benefit the interest of their members and the broader civil society.

The contributions in this special issue begin such an endeavor by addressing HRM critically and engaged along five important characteristics:

- A commitment to taking the accounts of stakeholders seriously;

- Being explicit about the research interest of the author (or other stakeholder interests);
- An interest in challenging conventional wisdom in the field as well as in the debates on the topic;
- A common interest in finding ways to develop a performativity in HRM that serves all the stakeholders involved (as a minimum) and not just the privileged and powerful;
- An in-depth interest in how humans are managed in organizations; e.g. how do people get selected in a field dominated by aesthetic judgment (Stjerne, this issue)? How is (critical) HRM taught (Taipale and Lindström, this issue)? How is performance of humans measured and with what consequences (Taskin and Ndayambaje, this issue)? How are management programs used by participants (Mogensen, this issue)?

Introducing the papers

This special issue features four articles, four notes, as well as a four book reviews. Below, we give the reader a brief overview of the different contributions.

To start with, Mogensen takes a critical look at the authentic individual at work. It is, however, not authenticity as such which is at stake, she argues. Rather, the concept seems to distract the discussion from a more relevant and interesting discussion. Mogensen finds that the present critiques of HRM from critical management studies seem to shift the focus of authenticity to a matter of control and identity, that is, how the employee is not authentic but a victim of control and self-regulation that makes control (and authenticity) part of the individual's self-managed identity. Mogensen both identifies with – and distance herself from – critical management studies, as she argues that the focus on control and identity should be replaced by a focus on work tasks and work coordination. According to Mogensen, this would provide an opportunity for critical management studies to get closer to the everyday practices and challenges of the modern employee.

In the second paper, Stjerne distances herself from the rational perspectives that currently dominate analyses of selection processes in HRM literature and develops an aesthetic perspective on selection. Stjerne bases her analysis of aesthetic selection in a practice-based study of selection decisions in the Danish film industry. Although her analysis is built on empirical data from the film industry, it is argued that the findings go beyond the film industry and have more general

applications for both theory and practice. The paper argues that the rational selection theories are supplemented (or partly replaced by) an aesthetic element, which is a non-rational and non-measurable part of the selection process, and Stjerne argues with conviction that such an aesthetic experience is an immanent part of any selection decision. It does not imply that the aesthetic experience is and will be the same for all selection decisions. On the contrary, it will always be contextual, but aesthetic experiences necessarily influence any selection decision.

The third article, by Taskin and Ndayambaje, is based on a textual analysis of nine popular HRM textbooks (English- and French-language). The textual analysis has a particular focus on one specific HRM practice: Performance evaluation. The purpose is to analyze whether HRM is as amoral as most critics suggest. The authors suggest that HRM is the bearer of a univocal political project marked by objectification *and* subjectification. Objectification is about how humans are reduced to consumable objects, and subjectification is how the production of subjectivity is in line with the company strategy. In this way, the employee in the HRM textbooks become a normative foundation of the HRM theories and practices by being a resource that is and works to accomplish the strategy of the company. Taskin and Ndayambaje applies a phenomenological perspective to distance themselves from the most prevalent theories and critiques of management. The authors offer a different perspective to the normative foundation of HRM theories and practices, which both shows how humanity in HRM is currently constructed and develops the means to reflect upon it.

In the fourth and final paper of the issue, Taipale and Lindström depart from their own HRM teaching practice to show and discuss how their teaching has developed them as teachers, their HRM teaching and the students of the HRM teaching. The paper focuses on a teaching model in three steps: Telling, challenging and engaging, which also structures the analysis of the teaching practice and how it has developed. The teaching practices of the authors has in accordance with the ambitions of the teachers developed to be more critical and engaged, and simultaneously developed students to become more responsible professionals. The paper also discusses how the teaching practice might be developed further.

The note section is equally rich in contributions addressing the problematics around ways to manage the human. The section starts with Pedersen's note about the resilience of habit. Pedersen's note depart in the concept of resilience and how it has become a positive word in Danish HR, where employees are expected to be resilient and robust. Pedersen relates resilience to habits and highlights that resilience is not a character trait of the individual, but a complex dynamic process. Therefore, he finds that practitioners should focus on three features of habits that all stress the dynamic nature of habit (which at the same time counters our

commonsense view of habits as something stable). Pedersen uses the note to highlight the following features: Habits are dispositions, habits are plastic, and habits are social to underline the dynamic aspects of habits and how the three features of habit inform contemporary employee resilience. The main learning is that a theory of resilience has to take habits into account if it is to understand the complexity of what it means to create a resilient workforce, which seems to be a major purpose for HR and organizations at the moment.

In the second note, Moon focuses on undisclosed or off-reference-list reference checks. Moon explains that off-list references are individuals not included on a job applicant's CV list of references, but which are used by prospective employers as an instrument for background screening. Moon illustrates this briefly by examples from a university institution. Moon criticizes the HRM literature for not addressing this, as it is an immanent part of recruitment in many organizations (maybe even most organizations), and therefore ought not to be absent in the HRM literature. Moon also discusses the paradox that the information is suppressed or hidden in a process, which ought to be transparent in order to be considered ethical and legitimate. This might be more obvious in universities and public organizations than in private companies, but what it inflicts and means to the humans being 'victims' of this 'procedure' is the same.

In the next note, Gerard starts out by asking how we can 'develop a constructive and engaged critique of HRM' and Gerard proposes that psychoanalysis can help us with that, as it attributes the cause of inhumanity to internal forces, which ignores the 'unspeakable', 'abominable' and 'unfathomable'. Doing so, Gerard argues, risks ignoring a more reflective, more radical and 'truer and deeper' discussion of what it means to be human. Gerard finds that psychoanalysis is unique among the critical approaches to HRM, as it emphasizes experience, and the note is a rather convincing argument for this positive view on the critical potential of psychoanalysis.

The last note, written by Kirkegaard, makes an allegory between contemporary working life and elite sport. Kirkegaard does so by looking at the many and very explicit similarities between consultants and elite sport people. Kirkegaard has interviewed 25 consultants from the Danish department of an international consulting firm, where some of them has been within elite sports before they became consultants. The similarities are many, but Kirkegaard has a focus on the fact that both elite sports people and consultants are very focused on success, which means that performance management is essential in all aspects of their lives. The point with the comparison is that the consultants cannot distinguish between personal and professional norms as it is all about performance and success. The note illustrates this by providing two personal narratives from the

consultants and how performance management is an integrated part of their very being.

Finally, this issue features four book reviews: Husted discusses the relationship between political parties and crowds in his reading of Jodi Dean's *Crowds and Party*. Next, Barinaga takes us into a discussion of whether critical management scholars take responsibility for the performative consequences of their concepts and methods in her review of Jeanes and Huzzard's *Critical Management Research: Reflections from the Field*. Next, Osmann takes us into the scene of immigrants, workers unions and gay/lesbian scenes of the (supposed) sexual revolution. Finally, Butler gives his take on the publish or perish dilemma in his review of Clark, Wright and Ketchen's *How to get published in the best management journals*.

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