Frontiers, Intersections and Engagements of Ethics and HRM

Gavin Jack · Michelle Greenwood ·
Jan Schapper

Abstract This essay, and the special issue it introduces, sets out to reignite ethical interrogations of the theory and practice of Human Resource Management (HRM). To cultivate greater levels of boundary-spanning debate about the ethics of HRM, we develop a framework of four tenors for scholarly work: the ethical-declarative, the ethical-subjunctive, the ethical-ethnographic, the ethical-systemic. Each of these tenors denotes particular grounds for ethical critique and encourages scholars to consider the subjects and objects of their enquiry, the disciplinary scope of their work and the limits to subsequent claims about ethics and HRM. We provisionally locate each of the papers comprising the special issue with regard to one, or more, of these tenors.

G. Jack · J. Schapper
La Trobe University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia
e-mail: G.Jack@latrobe.edu.au

J. Schapper
e-mail: J.Schapper@latrobe.edu.au

M. Greenwood (✉)
Monash University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia
e-mail: michelle.greenwood@monash.edu

Introduction

Human Resource Management (HRM), whether as a discipline, practice or profession, is implicated in the management of human labour exchanges and, ipso facto, the lives of human beings. At the heart of these exchanges are ethical tensions involving the commodification of labour, concerns central to several philosophical traditions. Marx (1954), for instance, was concerned that the labour process necessitates, amongst other forms, an alienation from our (according to Marx) innate creativity as humans, a commodification that stymies human flourishing and denies us our essential humanness. Kant (1956) was concerned that to place a price on a person was to conceive them as a substitutable 'thing' and to treat them as valuable only in their use to achieve a particular ends, not as an end in themselves.

The conditions and management of such exchanges contain further potential threats to human rights and personal liberty. Many workers have no choice but to consent to 'take it or leave it' contracts of adhesion, the conditions of which they have no capacity to vary (Van Buren III et al. 2011), or non-contractual management practices that may impinge on individual rights and are often justified as being for the 'good of the many'. The utilitarian 'sleight of hand' (Freeman 1994) is often evoked to explain any number of HR concepts or practices that involve transferring risk from the organisation to the employee such as employability, drug testing or wage freezes (Sennett 1998; Hesketh 2003).

The virtue, autonomy and moral well-being of those managing, called as they are to instrumentally direct people's very humanity, are also at risk. At a minimum, as managerial agents with circumscribed roles and responsibilities, HR managers suffer the same fate as other organisational minions in any bid to exercise moral

autonomy against institutional systems and processes that may, by their nature, suppress such instincts (Bauman 1993; MacIntyre 1999). However, in their perceived guise as 'keeper of the ethics' HR managers (and other managers imbued with the HRM task) are more often held as paragons (or not) of virtue, receiving much instruction on the task (Foote and Robinson 1999; Macklin 2007).

In light of the above, and despite it being more than 15 years since Legge (1996, 1998) posed the question 'Is HRM ethical?', fundamental questions remain regarding whether HRM is, can be or should be ethical. Indeed, what does HRM being ethical even mean? How, if at all, and to whom, would the posing of such a question make a difference? Theoretical and conceptual analyses of ethical issues in HRM have advanced negligibly since the heady days of dedicated conferences and edited books that initially addressed such questions (Winstanley and Woodall 2000b; Deckop et al. 2006; Pinnington et al. 2007).[1] At this time, there was a burgeoning interest within the critical school of HRM in ethical issues (Legge 1996) and interest within business ethics scholarship in HRM (Greenwood 2002) with a number of common themes arising. First, that extant micro-level analyses (e.g. specific HR practices such as recruitment, firing, etc.) using justice-inspired principles of fairness and equity common in mainstream HR literature were inadequate and that a more macro level of analyses that considered the role of HRM within the organisation and even society was necessary (Winstanley and Woodall 2000a; Greenwood 2002).

Second, that the value of traditional absolutist ethical theories, in particular deontological and consequentialist theories, was severely limited, notably in its application to the situated social action of HR managers and experiences of employees. Third, there was developing interest in the 'ethical' role of HRM including influences on HR practitioners' values and decision-making and their potentially conflicting roles as moral bastions, compliance officers or strategists (Foote and Robinson 1999; Lowry 2006). Finally, some forward-thinking questions were raised about the (ethically) problematic nature of unitarist ideology and value appropriation inherent in the strategic shift in HRM (Wilcox and Lowry 2000; Kamoche 2001; Kamoche 2007). Despite this promising start, a quick survey of high-ranked HRM journals reveals a dearth of recently published articles on the on the topic (Greenwood 2012).

This current low level of interest is perhaps surprising given that the practice of HRM and its strategic function in organisations is thought to be in crisis (Kochan 2007; Delbridge 2010; Thompson 2011). The crisis seems to have multiple elements: a crisis of confidence in the competence and experience of HR practitioners; a crisis of legitimacy since HRM cannot seem to demonstrate a positive correlation with high performance; a crisis in HRM's position in the organisation—from steward of the employment relations to 'handmaiden of the corporate elite' (Thompson 2011, p. 364); and a crisis in academic HRM rooted in the adoption of managerialist assumptions which have de-politicised the employment relationship. The legitimacy, relevance and morality of HRM—as a discipline, practice and profession—are under scrutiny from multiple sources.

This special issue aims to reignite interest in important questions about the relationship between ethics and HRM (or, ethics-HRM, a term we use through the remainder of the paper). In our call for papers, we stated a desire to provoke ideas 'that provide ethical interrogations of the theory and practice of HRM with specific attention to developing a theoretical base on which HRM might be both critiqued and re-envisioned'. The eleven papers constituting this special issue (see Table 1 for an overview of the content of each paper) offer distinctive, exciting and thought-provoking responses. The contribution of this essay to the special issue project lies in the development of a framework of four 'tenors' (the ethical-declarative, ethical-subjunctive, ethical-ethnographic, ethical-systemic) for conceiving an ethical critique of HRM. We position provisionally each of the papers within this framework of tenors, thus animating the framework in terms of the papers and vice versa.

The Grounds for a Meeting of HRM and Ethics

It is tempting to rush to a position on ethics and HRM and to denigrate the latter in terms of the former. Academics, media commentators, CEOs, HR managers, trade union officials and employees do it all the time. It is easy to point to some things as unethical about HRM, to discover unethical practices, to turn to codes of ethics as modes of response or to re-envision HRM beyond the utilitarian ethos of the business case. However, such an approach merely scratches the surface of an ethical interrogation of HRM and leaves unexamined, assumptions made about the nature of ethics.

For scholars wishing to work in the space(s) that traverses ethics and HRM, we suggest that it is important to consider the boundary-work involved in bringing the two together. To deploy a boundary is to order and bring into being particular concepts and conceptions of organisational life (as noted by Cooper 1990), be it the idea that there are organisations operating in an environment or that there are human resource management policies and practices that correlate with (ethical or otherwise) workplace performance. Boundary-work is the very condition of possibility for ethics-HRM, with ethics, HRM and their intersection

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[1] We pay tribute to Diana Winstanley (1960–2006).

Table 1 Special issue essays

Authors	Ethics focus	HRM focus	Intersection and contribution
Dale	The ethical framing of employment and the aesthetics of commodification (Levinas and Bauman)	Employee relations (incl. employee rewards and development)	The employee is a consuming/consumed subject of contemporary HR practices. Such commodification undermines the possibilities for ethical being (understood in a Levinasian sense) within organisations
Costea, Amiridis & Crump	Simmel and the concept of the 'tragedy of culture'	HRM's ethos of ideal future employees and their employability (the 'principle of potentiality'), and the dangers these pose, are explored through the case of university students/graduates in the UK	HRM's attempt to shape the character of future workers as de-recognising human limits and making a false promise of absolute freedom. The extension of HRM via recruitment into higher education brings false closure to the most important questions of education and self-formation (such as 'who am I?')
Islam	The ethical framing of employment. Juxtaposes conceptions of recognition (Honneth) and reification (Lukacs) as ethical standpoints on work	The employment relationship; employee dignity and HR practices	Recognition (in a Honnethan sense) is possible and desirable in economic exchanges like HRM. HR practices should serve to cultivate recognition and affirm the dignity of the employee
Rhodes & Harvey	The ethical framing of employment. Agonism, democracy and dissensus as ethical forms (Mouffe)	The HRM function as a guardian of organisational ethics	The ethics of the employment relations is currently subordinated to managerial prerogative via the HRM function. Offers an alternative model for ethics-HRM based on agonism, a particular type of antagonism based on respect for the different amongst legitimate opponents
Janssens & Steyaert	Cosmopolitan theory and self-other relations understood from political, cultural and social perspectives	Research in International HRM; research on MNC global labour practices and 'the race to the bottom'	International HRM research requires a more explicit ethical stance and ethical research agenda. Cosmopolitan theory provides one possible answer, illustrated with regard to research on MNC labour practices
Van Dijk, Van Engen & Paauwe	Critical engagements with utilitarianism, deontology and virtue ethics	Diversity management (in teams and organisations)	Equality and business case approaches to managing diversity represent irreconcilable ethical perspectives. Virtue ethics offers an alternative framework to address prejudice and enhance organisational performance
Wilcox	MacIntyre and the concept of moral agency	Empirical study on the interactions between structural positioning and HR agency explored through a theorised ethnographic account	Despite institutional system constraints, HRM is not inherently unethical as HR managers may have the capacity to exercise moral agency (depending on specific context)
de Gama, McKenna & Peticca-Harris	Bauman, Levinas and the concept of moral impulse	Empirical study on the discourse, activities and lived experiences of HR professionals	HRM as it is practiced is concerned with distancing, depersonalising and dissembling, and thus acts against moral impulse and in support of the 'moral' requirements of business, not of people
Guest & Woodrow	Legge's (1978) conception of personnel managers as either conformist or deviant innovators and Kant	The role and capacity of HR professionals to represent the interests of both management and workers are explored through the case of bullying in a large UK organisation	Neither of the current foci on the HR role or the HR-performance link allows for the ethical responsibilities of HR professionals (understood as a Kantian imperative to treat workers well). Constraints on, and boundaries of, the HR role confirm that HR managers cannot ensure an ethical HRM. Kantian ethics, at best, offer a challenge and aspiration for HR professionals

Table 1 continued

Authors	Ethics focus	HRM focus	Intersection and contribution
Bolton, Houlihan & Laaser	The concept of moral economy (notably connected with Sayer)	Contingent work and various forms of 'non-standard' employment	The employment relationship is embedded in a web of social dependencies. A moral economy framework acknowledges this and provides a more holistic notion for appraising the opportunities and costs of contingent work
Morand & Merriman	Equality principles from Enlightenment philosophy (Rawls, Locke, Sen and others)	Equality as a preferred basis (rather than equity) for distributive justice in organisations	A philosophical and practical shift from distribution based on equity to distributive based on equality (enacted through aspects of HRM such as allocated space, job titles, even monetary rewards) may reduce inequities in organisations and society

conceptual and material outcomes of that work. Boundary-work might involve, for instance, the labelling but, also potentially, the discursive or deconstructive critique by researchers of the subjects, objects, disciplinary scope and philosophical underpinnings of their (or others') studies or the contextual specificities of empirical phenomena under investigation.

We suggest that the concept of a 'tenor' is potentially useful for organising thinking about boundary-work, and offer four differently inflected tenors for work on ethics-HRM. According to the Collins Dictionary, a tenor is a 'general drift of thought, purpose', or a 'general tendency'; from another dictionary, we are offered 'the general nature of something'. From these definitions, we understand the concept of a tenor to denote a general type of thought and purpose that animates a particular kind of action; in this case, the development of an ethical critique and re-envisioning of HRM. The particular inflections that characterise the four tenors in our framework are based on our views about what would constitute important general (philosophical, empirical, systemic) directions for present and future critical and ethical work on HRM. The general nature of these tenors means they are artificial and provisional boundaries, not fixed categorisations. And, they are certainly not akin to paradigm positions (see Burrell and Morgan 1979) or any ordered set of axiomatic positions. Indeed, researchers could easily adopt multiple paradigmatic positions within the same general drift of thought of each tenor or more than one tenor for an ethical critique of HRM. Nor are they offered in any particular hierarchy, though we have our own biases of course which will likely show through the remainder of the paper. We now turn to sketch these general drifts of thought.

The *ethical-declarative* tenor can best be described in relation to already existing organisational phenomena. This is the empirical world of HRM systems, policies, procedures and practices; of HR managers, their function and roles; of multinational corporations exporting HR systems into new national and organisational contexts; and of supply chains and contract work. One ground of possibility is to judge certain actions, attitudes and approaches as 'unethical' HRM and others as 'ethical' HRM. Such an approach makes a number of problematic and certainly contestable assumptions, and raises questions, about ethics-HRM. On what basis is such a judgment to be made and in what context? Who gets to decide? If something is not 'ethical', then it becomes possible and desirable to make them 'more ethical'. Again, what does that mean? Who has the authority to do this? And how do we go about such a task?

Apart from the question of 'who gets to decide and on what basis?', the key difficulty with the approach above is that it presupposes an ethical judgment, and thus attributes

to ethics a purely adjectival function. That is to say, ethics is denoted as an adjective to be assigned and meted out, attributing a descriptive reality and one ready-made for future judgments. As a consequence, an understanding of ethics as a process of moral reasoning—a verb that relates to human decision-making and situated social action—is overlooked. We might say that this meeting of ethics and HRM is based on an ethical declarative in which enunciation and judgment are its a priori conditions, and the construction of ethics a domain of manageable human action its outcome.

A specific example of this ethical declarative would be the concept of 'business ethics management' as presented, for instance, in Crane and Matten's well-known textbook (2010). The guiding assumption of this discourse is that managers and organisations can make policies, procedures, practices, structures and organisational culture 'more ethical' through the deployment of a wider variety of activities. According to 'business ethics management', these activities might include setting up an ethical complaints hotline, conducting ethics education and training, developing mission and values statements or undertaking social or sustainability accounting and reporting. Within such a framework, it thus becomes possible and desirable to 'inject' more ethics into organisations and managerial practices. All we have to do is find the right kind of ethics! We need to consider critically who is doing the 'injecting' and what is being dispensed to cure the ethical ills of the individual, group or organisation.

This kind of declarative framing certainly lends itself to prescriptive ethics, and to the codification and systematisation of desired ethical behaviours, usually with respect to one or the other dominant moral philosophy of the holy trinity (of deontological, consequentialist, rights/justice approaches). Issues such as privacy and loyalty, and practices such as affirmative action and surveillance, for instance, attract attention from those who would advocate one absolutist moral philosophy or another. As an example, drug testing has long been pitched as an argument between those who would advocate the rights to privacy of the individual and those who would promote the benefits and protection from harm of the many. Such viewpoints are largely incommensurable, and thus an inevitable stalemate ensues (Greenwood et al. 2006).

But, what about the 'ethics', or 'ethos', of the already existing situated moral agencies of organisational members? Ethics does not 'need' to be 'injected' into the organisation; it is already there if we care to look and listen. The declarative grounds for exploring ethics-HRM can thus be said to eschew more complex questions of descriptive ethics and the challenges of understanding how humans in organisations relate to each other as ethical subjects. To assign ethics to the written code, the

performance appraisal, the HR trainer and training or some other external object for ethical declaration is to ignore the pervasive nature of ethical action in organisational life and to place boundaries around it for the purpose of inspection, critique, transformation or general prodding.

There is another element to this kind of ethical declarative, an assured goodness to the ethical imperative, a kind of 'ethical righteousness'. That is to say, there seems to be an assumption that it is not only possible to make organisations, and their members, more ethical, but also that it is indeed desirable to do so. In other words, a more 'ethical' organisation is necessarily a 'better' organisation in moral terms since 'more ethics assures more goodness'. Moral philosopher Hans-Georg Moeller is sceptical about such an assumption. Not an organisational scholar, Moeller's target of critique is the 'ethical fanaticism' of the holy trinity of moral philosophers and theorists of individual moral development (i.e. Kohlberg). In his book *The Moral Fool* (2009), Moeller makes his case for amorality based around the figure of the 'moral fool', who 'isn't convinced that the moral perspective is always possible' since 'we cannot ultimately know if ethics are good or bad' (p. 4). Moeller asks us to move away from using moral language and assigning goodness/badness to actions. Whether or not we subscribe to Moeller's position, it at least impels us to reconsider a singular and singularly positive reading of the 'goodness' of the ethical declarative and to be prepared to see the downside of 'more ethics' in organisational life. In short, 'is it good to be good?' (Moeller 2009, p. 1).
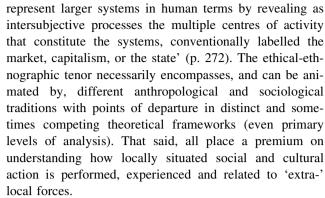
In light of some of the questions raised above, it seems foolhardy to rush into the ethical declarative and its sometimes corollary 'ethical righteousness'. The limitations of a 'restricted menu of theories' alluded to above were noted early on by Winstanley and Woodall (2000a, p. 9). But, what alternatives do we have? Rather than assume the ethical declarative as grounds of possibility for an ethical critique of HRM, we might step back from this impulsive speaking position and consider other modes of engagement, perhaps akin to Moeller's moral fool. We might, for instance, look towards an *ethical-subjunctive*. According to the Collins Dictionary, the subjunctive denotes 'a mood of verbs used when the content of the clause is being doubted, supposed, feared true, etc., rather than being asserted'. The ethical subjunctive invokes a more speculative tenor, often paradoxical or ironical in tone, a constant questioning of ethical statements (in and about organisations) that assume or assert their own, and singular, goodness. For us, this tenor is primarily philosophical in nature (though it could also be grounded in ethnographic realities; see next tenor) and encourages greater use of more diverse philosophical sources to break the 'foreclosing' impulses of mainstream business ethics noted by Jones et al. (2005, p. 3). These authors critique

mainstream business ethics scholars' overreliance (and misinterpretation) of a limited selection of classical philosophy at the expense of engagement with contemporary philosophers. A more contemporary philosophical discourse would pay attention to more recent ways for knowing ethics (e.g. postmodern, feminist, postcolonial or indigenous perspectives inter alia) and of conceiving a postfoundational ethical subject (or perhaps other-cultural or indigenous alternatives). Approaches that challenge and go beyond the holy trinity and the seemingly irresolvable tensions between utilitarian, Kantian and fairness perspectives might help to create a subjunctive 'mood of verbs'.

Alternatively, we might take up descriptive ethics with greater enthusiasm, paying attention to naturally occurring ethical action in workplace contexts. These grounds move from purely philosophical speculation to the empirical and the observable as grounds for considering ethics and more particularly an ethical critique of HRM. Compared to the dominant positivism and quantitative predilections of mainstream HR and business ethics, there are relatively few descriptive accounts of ethics, and certainly few that use qualitative, ethnographic approaches, and observational methods. Yet, to occupy the terrain of what we might call the *ethical ethnographic* is to provide thick descriptions of actually occurring ethical processes and, the philosophical and practical challenges notwithstanding (which do provide a shared ground traversing the subjunctive and ethnographic tenors), to place the ethical agency of the organisational member, rather than the academic, at the centre for analysis.

Ethnographers place a premium on understanding human action in context, notably cultural context, and the various and interconnected webs of signification (Geertz 1973) that make possible and are reproduced by human action. In recent years, ethnographic approaches and ethnographers' (especially realist ones) cultural representations have been subject to substantial critique under the aegis of the crisis of representation. This crisis is in part about the ethical challenges involved in producing faithful/persuasive representations of in situ cultural action (Fabian 1983). Moving from the concerns of cultural anthropology, some ethnographers also pay attention to material structures and systems, especially those associated with varieties of capitalism in a transnational context. The so-called 'extra field forces' of history, politics or 'the market'—'extra' in the sense of being (or, perceived to be) outside, yet impinging upon the traditional (functionalist) ethnographic purview of hermetically sealed cultural systems—present other questions and challenges (Burawoy 1998). Marcus (1998), for instance, describes the central challenge as one of studying 'a whole local world and simultaneously a world system, by attempts either to represent an intensively studied locale penetrated by larger systems, or to

represent larger systems in human terms by revealing as intersubjective processes the multiple centres of activity that constitute the systems, conventionally labelled the market, capitalism, or the state' (p. 272). The ethical-ethnographic tenor necessarily encompasses, and can be animated by, different anthropological and sociological traditions with points of departure in distinct and sometimes competing theoretical frameworks (even primary levels of analysis). That said, all place a premium on understanding how locally situated social and cultural action is performed, experienced and related to 'extra-' local forces.

The works of Marcus (1998) and Burawoy (1998) open up grounds for a further tenor. For ethics-HRM, resultant questions from a global ethnography perspective might include the following: How do the systemic, extra-individual issues associated with changing regimes of capital accumulation, state regulation, migration, environmental change, etc. relate to the intersection of ethics and HRM? How do (perceived) levels of analysis and experience (individual-group-state-system) work together, and against each other, to enable and constrain particular types of ethical actions? This final fourth tenor prioritises a point of departure for ethics-HRM scholarship in a systemic level of analysis, and as such we might label it as the *ethical-systemic*. To draw attention to this starting point is to respond to Greenwood's (2002) and others' (for instance, Winstanley and Woodall 2000a) calls for more macro-level analyses of the role of HRM within society. In recent (but, certainly different) visions for a more critical future for HRM scholarship, both Delbridge (2010) and Thompson (2011) emphasise the need for scholars to embed research systemically (e.g. within the political economy of financialized capitalism, according to Thompson).

As observed earlier, the tenors are flexible ways for organising thinking about the boundary-work implied in bringing together ethics and HRM in scholarly work. We noted that boundary-work might involve, for instance, the labelling and critical reflections by researchers on the subjects, objects, disciplinary scope and philosophical underpinnings of their (or others') studies or the contextual specificities of empirical phenomena under investigation. We address these aspects in the next three sections.

Subjects and Objects of Critique

When adopting a particular tenor, it is vital to specify the subject(s) and object(s) of one's critique, especially so in the context of a special issue on such complex and contested terms as HRM and ethics. If we turn to HRM first, our call for papers positioned HRM, in multiple manifestations, as the object of critique: the academic discipline, or

any sub-field, of HRM, and putatively distinct descriptive, normative and critical forms of scholarship; the policies, practices, procedures and systems for HRM within an organisation (either the organisational discourse or rhetorical claims surrounding them, actual organisational practices and outcomes or both); the strategic role of HRM within the firm/organisation; HR practitioners themselves, their experiences and professional practices. We find each of the papers comprising this special issue to be specifically positioned with regard to their understanding and critique of HRM across this range of possibilities. For ethics-HRM scholars, it is helpful to be clear about the HRM focus of investigation. So too with ethics: Are we pursuing a normative or a descriptive ethical project? Should we subscribe to such a distinction? Is our object of critique ethical theory or ethical practices? Whose theory or practices in what context? How do we define ethics and morality, and what are the theoretical assumptions we are making? Are we talking about individual ethics, some notion of corporate or organisational ethics (and again, is it ethical rhetoric or reality) or something else?

A note of caution, or perhaps an invitation to conduct some ethical-subjunctive work, is needed with regards to the separation of categories like descriptive/normative (ethics or HRM) or mainstream/critical (HRM). Our aim in encouraging scholars to make such distinctions is to raise awareness of what we are privileging by way of theoretical assumptions and values in our research and what, as a result, we are not doing or neglecting. That said, these kinds of categorisations are, of course, open to discursive and/or deconstructive critique. A deconstructive critique, for instance, might point to ways in which traces of the one act as necessary conditions of possibility for the other. For instance, the idea of separating a descriptive from a normative perspective on ethics is not unproblematic. Descriptive ethics will inevitably have normative dimensions connected to the subject of the research, object of the research and researchers themselves. So too, the idea of a critical perspective that is explicitly normative (in some sense), as opposed to a non-normative mainstream perspective on HRM, requires some deconstruction in terms of the latter's obfuscation of its own underpinning values and positions.

Further important boundary-work involves contextualising our investigations, especially so if we are sceptical about universal and universalising positions on ethics. Boundaries we might place around our concepts include (national) culture and ethnicity, asking about the extent to which shared meaning exists about our objects of analysis amongst research participants or co-authors across cultural and ethnic boundaries in a global context. We might also consider economic ownership and industrial context. Is our study of HRM within the public or private sector of a particular economy and society? Within a liberal market economy or a coordinated market economy? Analyses of HR rhetoric/ discourse and practices within organisations located in developed, liberal market economies are certainly in the vast majority within this special issue. What is the balance between the performance-orientation and the welfare-orientation of the HRM function and HR managers within these contexts? How does this orientation impact upon the nature of HR practice and outcomes for employees?

The notion of 'levels' of analysis might also be important in setting boundaries for work on ethics-HRM. Are we focused (like much business ethics scholarship) on micro-level individual behaviour? Looking at a more macro level, is our key interest in the firm, and its role in society? How might we theorise the relationship between the micro and the macro? Will structurational theory suffice? What about the wider context of the industry and the national business system? Which industries, with what kinds of employment relations, bargaining structures, levels of unionism, government involvement, and national legislative arrangements, are in play? This clarification is important since varieties of capitalism (Hall and Soskice 2001) have different implications for national structures and practices of industrial relations, organisational systems for HRM (Delbridge 2010) and normative conceptions of how to treat workers.

The questions of what is our object of analysis, and what are the levels of analysis in which we are interested, very quickly lead to some questions about the nature of the ethical subject. That is to say, the question of how members of organisations come to construct, know, recognise and experience themselves as ethical subjects. Is the ethical subject, or individual, already formed? Can we assume that there is someone called 'the ethical subject' from whom ethical action (and the various calculations and judgments about the morality of human action) springs forth? This foundational and humanist understanding of the human ethical subject is at the core of mainstream business ethics, yet is the source of much critique from critical management studies (CMS) scholars (Parker 1998; Willmott 1998) and broader poststructuralist thinking within the humanities and social sciences. Or, is it the case, following a postfoundational or posthumanist position, that the ethical subject is dependent on others for self-recognition and is the outcome (rather than the starting point) of ethical action (Willmott 1998)? How would we theorise this kind of ethical condition of possibility of the self and with regard to which philosophical writings? This latter point underscores the need for researchers to clearly identify the theoretical underpinnings and the disciplinary scope of their arguments about ethics-HRM. As noted earlier, the tenors are not paradigmatic positions; there is the possibility of adopting different paradigmatic, or theoretical, positions from each tenor.
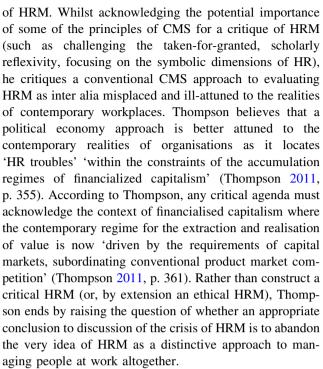
Disciplinary boundary spanning is not only a facet of the papers that comprise the special issue, but also a necessary part of a broader project like this one which attempts to address the possibilities and nature of an ethical framework for HRM. In the next section, we begin by highlighting two recent, pertinent and highly provocative calls for more critical study of HRM. Each of these calls emphasises the need for disciplinary boundary spanning, and animates the four tenors above. Whilst providing important critical perspectives on HRM, and thus of relevance to the goals of this special issue, they are quiet on ethical issues. We provide commentary on the papers comprising this special issue as a way of introducing each paper further with regard to these two important provocations and also for rendering more explicit an ethical agenda in regard to those provocations.

Disciplinary Boundary Spanning: Extending Two Provocations

Delbridge (2010) and Thompson (2011) offer highly compelling and competing provocations regarding the future of HR research. Though distinctive, each shares concerns about the current state of mainstream HR research and the HR function in organisations, and each, in its own way, illustrates boundary spanning. To us, these viewpoints would seem a potentially productive point of departure as they engage with concerns and employ epistemologies foundational to scholars of ethics-HRM, yet neither engages explicitly with the domains of ethics and morality.

Delbridge (2010) critiques mainstream (qua positivist, prescriptive, functionalist, strategic, managerialist) HRM research as conservative and irrelevant, comprising quantitative and qualitative approaches and datasets that are typically underanalysed and poorly theorised. He provides a vision for a more critical research agenda, or a critical HRM (CHRM), in which the employment relationship is the central object of enquiry and discussion, and where disciplinary boundary spanning to scholarly colleagues in critical management studies and parallel social science disciplines (notably industrial relations and political science) is necessary. The CMS underpinnings of Delbridge's CHRM are based on the characteristics of CMS outlined by Fournier and Grey (2000) and Adler et al. (2007) (see also Prasad and Mills 2010). Delbridge's critical HR is an optimistic call for a re-envisioning of HR scholarship as both intellectual and practical, and for more dialogue with more actors across many disciplinary, professional and political frontiers, requiring new ways for academics to engage across academic debates.

Thompson (2011) is also concerned with the current state of HR research and more broadly with the legitimacy of HRM. Whilst acknowledging the potential importance of some of the principles of CMS for a critique of HRM (such as challenging the taken-for-granted, scholarly reflexivity, focusing on the symbolic dimensions of HR), he critiques a conventional CMS approach to evaluating HRM as inter alia misplaced and ill-attuned to the realities of contemporary workplaces. Thompson believes that a political economy approach is better attuned to the contemporary realities of organisations as it locates 'HR troubles' 'within the constraints of the accumulation regimes of financialized capitalism' (Thompson 2011, p. 355). According to Thompson, any critical agenda must acknowledge the context of financialised capitalism where the contemporary regime for the extraction and realisation of value is now 'driven by the requirements of capital markets, subordinating conventional product market competition' (Thompson 2011, p. 361). Rather than construct a critical HRM (or, by extension an ethical HRM), Thompson ends by raising the question of whether an appropriate conclusion to discussion of the crisis of HRM is to abandon the very idea of HRM as a distinctive approach to managing people at work altogether.

These two important contributions to critical discussions of HRM represent disciplinary and other forms of boundary sharing. We infer a number of shared concerns: acknowledgement of a crisis of the legitimacy of HRM and limitations of mainstream academic HR research; a call for more critical approaches to HR research (though they diverge on the preferred future approach); placing the employment relationship at the centre of future research; paying attention to context (social, political, historical), especially as it pertains to capitalism and regimes of capital accumulation; paying attention to organisational realities and actual managerial practices to understand the nature and outcomes and actually employed HR; and an emphasis on greater dialogue between a greater number of stakeholders in HR research.

However, these authors are almost silent on the ethical dimensions of their arguments. To be clear, their respective foci were not on ethics, nor are we suggesting that just because we are focused on ethics so should they. That said, we subject Delbridge's and Thompson's standpoints to an ethical lens, partly to surface the ethical issues that are implicit in some of their positions and partly to render their approaches in an analysis of key future issues in ethics-HRM. We do this by connecting the papers from the special issue with Delbridge and Thompson, under the organising frames of the four tenors.

Ethical-Declarative

Delbridge, Thompson and all the papers comprising this special issue sit in critical relation to the ethical declarative, but in different ways. A CHRM perspective may

subject ethical declarations to cultural critique (amongst other things), by denaturalising foundational concepts, critiquing the performative consequences of ethical statements and unpicking the specific interests they serve. A political economy approach may interpret the ethical declarative in terms of any compliance and other market-related disciplinary activities associated with it. It might also investigate any empirically existing forms of disconnection in the labour process and employment relations between employers and employees and between corporate and managerial agents.

To start with ethical declaratives—their nature and outcomes—is to ensure that CHRM and political economy approaches explicitly connect their core commitments with ethics. In this special issue, Guest and Woodrow's paper and Morand and Merriman's paper are examples of provocative and reflective ethical declaratives, the bases of which share some territory with the ethical-subjunctive and ethical-ethnographic terrains below. Guest and Woodrow, for instance, critically appraise the role and capacity of HR professionals to represent the interests of both management and workers. In concluding that HR managers cannot fulfil a Kantian notion of ethical responsibility (and thus 'declare' the impossibility of their role), they challenge us to consider whether it is reasonable for us, and for organisations, to expect HR managers to act as a 'keeper of ethics' (a position also developed in Rhodes & Harvey). As for Morand & Merriman, they argue for the concept of equality rather than equity as a basis for distributive justice within organisations. Despite committing to judgments about the ethical implications and moral value of both concepts, they are careful to specify the nature and provisionality of the theoretical position for their argument.

Two further papers also illustrate reflective ethical declaratives. Bolton, Houlihan & Laaser's argument for the use of moral economy as a framework for assessing the ethical outcomes of HRM practices is attuned to the wider social contexts and embeddedness of labour practices (and thus foreshadows the ethical-systemic tenor; see later). They argue that a more holistic approach to understanding the opportunities and costs for workers, organisations and their communities of contingent work is made possible by a moral economy frame. Enhancing the 'thick' relations associated with a socially embedded organisation could produce ethical surpluses for that organisation. Van Dijk, van Engen and Paauwe critique the current state of debate about diversity management and the irreconcilable ethical positions of equality and business case scholars, rooted in deontological and utilitarian frameworks, respectively. They make a speculative argument for the possibility of a virtue ethics perspective to overcome the theoretical tensions of current debates to address actually existing prejudice in organisations and to enhance organisational performance.

Ethical-Subjunctive

Delbridge's and Thompson's frameworks are both attuned to an ethical subjunctive in so far as they are committed to the constant questioning of assertions about the status quo and of ethical declaratives. The similarities end there. Delbridge's CMS ethos would easily encompass the speculative tenor of philosophical discourse, given CMS scholars' attention to poststructuralism and posthumanism, though he does not engage in depth with the implications of these philosophical discourses for ethical subjectivity. Thompson's materialist stance is less sympathetic to postfoundational theorising, especially Foucauldian strands, and apparently assumptive of a foundational position on ethical subjectivity.

Several of the papers in this special issue are conceptual in nature and illustrate a subjunctive tenor. These papers deal explicitly with the ethical framing of the capitalist employment relationship and advance conceptual analyses of the outcomes of such framings for the ethical subjectivity of employees. Dale's paper examines the ethical outcomes of the consumer relations that are increasingly part of HR practices (notably, rewards and development opportunities). The employee is positioned as both a consumer of these practices and consumed by them, an ethos that creates a self-absorbed consuming subjectivity. Using the work of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, Dale speculates that the narrowing of autonomy and choice in the employment relationship associated with these practices undermines the possibilities for ethical being in the workplace.

University students and graduates are also consumers of such HR practices. In Costea, Amiridis and Crump's paper, they are critical of HRM's attempt to shape an ethos of work through a construction of the ideal employee and employability that knows no limits, thereby setting an impossible goal and a false promise of absolute freedom. Deploying Simmel and the notion of the 'tragedy of culture' to examine discourses of graduate employability, the authors build an argument that the extension of HR practices into higher education undermines students' own exploration into their identity, their education and their morality, specifically the question of 'who am I?' In so doing, a particular ethical relation to the self is foreclosed and replaced with a commodified view of a future self.

Islam's engagement with the critical theoretical concepts of recognition and reification also speculates on the ethical outcomes of the reification practices associated with the labour process (a disembedding of work from its emotive and social particularity; the equation of workers with resources). His conceptual argument takes the position that recognition is still possible in economic exchanges and that an ethical HRM agenda should work with it in order to

strengthen dignity at work. Rhodes and Harvey's paper, like Dale's and Islam's, focuses on current ethical framings of employment relations and more particularly on the role played by the HRM function and HRM managers as the guardian and arbiter of ethics in organisations. They argue that the outcome of this guardianship role is that ethics are constantly subjected to managerial prerogative as a fourth-order business strategy. The paper attempts to decentre this ethical prerogative and to explore an alternative possibility for ethics to be found in actually existing resistance and contestation of the moral normalisation of organisational life. Borrowing the concept of agonism from political philosopher Chantal Mouffe, they assert the possible positive ethical outcomes of agonism—the respect for difference amongst legitimate opponents—as an instance of workplace democracy.

Janssens and Steyaert's work focuses on academic research on international HRM (IHRM). They deploy cosmopolitan theory to make an argument that IHRM needs a more explicit ethical stance that can be embedded in future research questions and methodologies. Distinguishing political, cultural and social perspectives on cosmopolitanism, Janssens and Steyaert apply these lenses to the study of the role and practices of multinational corporations in the global economy. They outline different research foci, questions and methodological approaches associated with each cosmopolitan perspective.

Ethical-Ethnographic

Both Delbridge and Thompson place a strong emphasis on paying attention to, and understanding, the naturally occurring nature of HR practices and their effects. Such attention to empirical detail is vital for knowing exactly what an object for critique and transformation might be, and in so doing, for making HRM and CHRM more relevant. For Thompson in particular, CMS scholars should take more care to empirically verify assumptions "rainchecks" about the existence and outcomes of discourses of HRM. Close attention to the realities of HR professionals and practice is paid in the papers by Wilcox, and de Gama, McKenna & Pettica-Harris and in Guest and Woodrow (already introduced). Wilcox in her paper, presents ethnographic materials on structure-agency issues in the moral lives of a set of HR managers from a chosen multinational company. Rather than taking a declarative position on whether HRM is ethical or not, she uses ethnographic insights (theorised within a MacIntyrean framework) to show that HRM is not inherently unethical as HR managers may exercise moral agency through the development of context-specific capacities. Less optimistic empirical findings are reported by de Gama et al. Using the work of Bauman and Levinas, they argue that HRM is both a

product and perpetuator of moral neutralisation in organisations. Their study of the lived experiences of HR professionals suggests that HRM acts against our moral impulse as humans, as these professionals engage in distancing, depersonalising and dissembling activities that support the business over other humans.

Ethical-Systemic

Whilst both Delbridge and Thompson place the employment relationship at the heart of future analysis, Delbridge is sensitive to systemic issues through his call for attention to context and capitalism, but Thompson's political economy approach is indeed a narrative framework through which critique might be animated. That said, Thompson has little to say about ethics other than that he is not 'holding his breath' about the possibilities of a future, more ethical HRM. In this special issue, we have at several papers that specifically concern themselves with systemic issues (we also refer to Bolton et al.'s paper noted earlier). Wilcox's paper, for instance, looks at the interactions between the structural positioning and agency of HR managers, thus constructing the ethical dilemmas associated with capitalist structures and practices as simultaneously embodied personal issues. Similarly, Rhodes and Harvey's paper not only looks to micro strategies of resistance within organisations as sources of dissensus, but also to national systems of industrial relations and trade unions.

We have engaged with these provocative calls for more critical HR in order to further our provocation for more ethics (in) HR. The two approaches offer distinctive perspectives ripe for debate, that span boundaries and share a number of commitments, yet underplay the ethical. This lacuna offers an avenue to identify a distinctive contribution for scholars of ethics-HRM to develop more critical research on HRM in the future.

Reaching the Limits

The papers comprising this special issue represent a pluralism of a sort, offering different theoretical, conceptual and empirical ways of addressing ethics-HRM. As with any special issue, this pluralism is selective—contingent upon the interests and intentions of those who submitted, the views of the referees and our final editorial decisions regarding the best quality provocations to advance ethics-HRM scholarship. As a consequence of such selective frames, the collection as a whole inevitably fails to transgress certain intellectual and professional boundaries. We do not wish to enumerate these 'missing' other issues and perspectives (e.g. positive psychology, indigenous knowledge, unionism, etc.), preferring instead to leave such

judgment to others about intersections worthy of future scholarly attention. However, before coming to the end of this essay, we wish to draw attention to two issues regarding the pool of submissions we received (not the final line-up per se).

First, we were disappointed with limited sustained engagement with feminist ethics in the response to the call for papers. We think it might be fair to suggest that business ethics scholarship remains tightly bound—overly so—to Carol Gilligan's ethics of care. Whilst an important development in feminist ethics, it is, but one of a number of different, sometimes competing, feminist perspectives on ethics and morality well understood and debated in the humanities and social sciences more broadly. This narrow feminist purview has been noted by Borgerson (2007) in her insightful critique of business ethics scholarship. The reasons for this scenario are likely many and complex: perhaps the domination of the white, male holy trinity in business ethics and the abstracted, disembodied, putatively rational moral agent that it foregrounds; the lack of inter-action between business ethics and CMS; the demographics of business ethics scholars; and a lack of attention to sociology and anthropology, and thus of intellectual boundary spanning, in business ethics. Whatever the reasons, we believe that feminist ethics are vital for pluralis-ing, personalising and politicising the grounds on which an analysis of ethics-HRM might be conceived.

Second, we were reminded through the reviewing and editing process of the difficulties of doing intersectional work—understood here as the bringing together of two complex and contested bodies of knowledge (ethics and HRM). One of the challenges of such 'intersectional' work is representing both sides of the putative boundary ade-quately. Typically, there is one term in the dualism/binary that is privileged and better specified than the other. The 'other' term is the object of critique, often essentialised, reified and decontextualised, often posited as if its meaning spoke for itself. That other term often assumes the rhe-torical guise of the 'strawman' (sic) amenable to easy (and sometimes predictable) critique. In undertaking this pro-ject, we received a number of submissions to the special issue that struggled to find the right balance between the HRM and ethics components of their arguments and that portrayed an unclear and unnuanced view of their object of critique. Most commonly, HRM was 'anthropomorphised', ascribed the status of a social subject capable of autono-mous action in an organisational context. It is vital that an ethics-HRM project avoids these reifying and anthropo-morphising tendencies, not only to avoid a philosophical error, but also to politicise ethical action by tying it to particular actors and actions, in particular times and spaces, under particular conditions and contexts. To do so is to acknowledge the boundary conditions and limits of social and ethical action and their analysis.

Conclusion

In this essay, we have attempted to set the scene for this special issue by contextualising our desire to advance theoretical and conceptual analyses of ethical issues in HRM, in terms of the academic discipline, HR practices or HR professionals. We have argued that the current aca-demic response to ethical questions is fragmented with limited conversation between intellectual camps and little intellectual animation since the early 2000s. With the ele-ven papers comprising this special issue, we hope to reanimate debate, especially across intellectual and disci-plinary lines, and to offer exemplars of different and highly engaging ways of exploring ethics-HRM.

We have developed a framework of four tenors for ethics-HRM enquiry. The ethical declarative, subjunctive, ethnographic and systemic each offer distinctive and potentially interrelated grounds for the ethical critique of HRM. In different ways, they also centre ethical relations as the core concept for rethinking and potentially re-envi-sioning HRM. To place ethics at the heart of a critical endeavour is to recognise the distinctive contribution that an ethical lens brings to such an endeavour.

At this point, we need to return to our opening premise in this essay—that HRM is ethically fraught, its precarious nature tied to the very humanness of the humans being managed and managing. The distinctive character of an ethical lens is its very insistence on starting our analyses from the very humanness of the human, from our embodied and fleshy interdependencies on one another, often masked by the commodifying outcomes of the labour process, or the discourses of one or another institution or cultural system. Such interdependencies are ultimately vulnerabil-ities to the other and, as such, the very conditions of pos-sibility for being human.

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