Strategic human resource management: a power based critique

Roshni Das

OB&HR, Indian Institute of Management Indore, Indore, India, and

Amitabh Deo Kodwani

OB&HR, Institute of Management Technology, Ghaziabad, India and
OB&HR, IIM Indore, Indore, India

Abstract

Purpose – By undertaking a detailed review of the Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) discourse, the purpose of this paper is to uncover and explicate the power differentials embedded in the social structure of organizations and suggests ways to reconcile them.

Design/methodology/approach – Methods used are thematic review, content analysis, and inductive theorizing, with Foucault's archaeological and genealogical analysis style as the overarching framework.

Findings – At the methodological level, the authors demonstrate the application of Foucault's twin methods: archaeological and genealogical analysis. At the substantive level, the authors have two contributions. First, the authors critique and analyze the various themes of power that emerge from the SHRM discourse as well as the hybridized overlaps of SHRM with other organization studies topics of interest such as organizational learning, network studies, control and postmodernism. Second, the authors propose a "Power" theory based nomothetic, typological synthesis for crafting the business-facing human resource (HR) function. The power lens manifests as the meta-theory to guide a much required streamlining of constructs and "value laden" synthesis of the literature.

Research limitations/implications – The potential of critical theory in crafting situated and context-sensitive research propositions is demonstrated.

Practical implications – Organizational strategists and HR managers can utilize the proposed typology to better understand their current ideological positions and decide future aspired images.

Originality/value – This is a conversation between two paradigms, SHRM and power theory, that are epistemologically at two opposite poles.

Keywords Performance, Power, Organizational performance, Human resource management, Industrial relations

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

The Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) literature has sought to characterize the employment relationship, in as objective a way as possible in order to come up with prescriptive typologies of courses of action that the human resource (HR) department must take in order to link up to firm level strategy on the one hand and link down to desired employee behavior on the other. Yet, time and again, fitment issues have plagued empirical attempts at modeling these complex relationships. Empirical contexts in turn such as implications for and by multiple stakeholders, ethical issues for society at large and outcomes for specific varieties of work, careers, psychological contracts and employment relationships have remained unaccounted for. Chadwick and Cappelli (1999) note that "neat models" that encapsulate strategy typologies into SHRM body of knowledge have been the order of the day with little regard to contextual details. The absence of context awareness in turn makes difficult the operationalization of SHRM theory into HRM practice and performance outcomes.

This paper thus reviews the relevant literature that lies in these fitment issues and offers to bridge this conceptual gap by proposing a "Power" theory based nomothetic, typological

synthesis for crafting the business-facing HR function. The method used is that of thematic review, content analysis, and inductive theorizing. We argue that the power perspective as articulated by Townley (1993) and as originally conceived by Foucault, manifests as the meta-theory that can serve to subsume the closely aligned and yet multitude of theorizations, thus enabling a much required streamlining of constructs and "value laden" synthesis of the literature.

2. Method

We have followed a four step method in this paper. In the first step, we have undertaken an extensive thematic review of the articles to decipher the trends in SHRM discourse. To retrieve relevant papers, I searched the EBSCO database with the terms: "SHRM," "HR Architecture," "Organizational Performance," "HR function," "HR typology," "Fit," "Contingency Theory," "Psychological Contract," "Strategic HR," etc., singly and in combinations. As we analyzed the papers retrieved, we identified more search terms along the way, thus following a snowballing strategy of retrieval (cf. "snowball sampling"). Based on content analysis of the relevant articles, we refine our analysis in two parts, bearing fidelity to Foucault's twin methods of archaeological and genealogical analysis; these constitute our second and third steps.

Foucault's (1972) archeological "method" which was explicitly positioned as such only in one of his later works, the "Archeology of Knowledge" is not so much a technique with numbered steps as a style of dialectical analysis. Same goes for the genealogical method. There are however, important philosophical differences between the two. Although archeology does owe its origin to history as a method, Kendall and Wickham (1998) explain that:

> Foucault is linking his work to an existing tradition of French historiography (the Annales School as well as the historical analyses of the sciences put together by Bachelard and Canguilhem). Foucault emphasises the general history; the approach to which this is opposed is the total history. The total history looks for over arching principles which govern the development of an epoch; by contrast, the general history eschews the "totalising" theme, concentrating instead on describing differences, trans formations, continuities, mutations, and so forth (Foucault, 1972, pp. 9-10).

Note that in differentiating threadbare the two strands of historiography, Foucault has implicitly already started developing the theme of "power" as a methodological input. What genealogy does is, take this forward by explicitly analyzing the focal as well as adjoining discourses with power as the prism (Prasad, 2009). Again, the intentions of this method are made clearer with this statement: "It [Genealogy] does not judge as it rudely flushes out assumptions; claims about what is right and what is wrong have no place here; Foucault (1988, p. 155) wants to make "facile gestures difficult" (Kendall and Wickham, 1998). Naturally, Foucault perceived both methods as complimentary rather than independent of each other. Thus while archaeological analysis exposes the raw nerves in the discourse, the fissures and the disjunctures; genealogical exposition cements these falsities with a firm critique using the power lens. The purpose of both together, for Foucault, was to expose truth while in the service of social justice, which should, according to him, be the driver for all human endeavors, in the first place (O'Farrell, 2005, p. 54).

The fourth and final step in our paper, pertains to the conceptual synthesis. Using Townley's (1993) power based theorization as support, we have inductively developed and proposed a critical typology of the range of orientations and possible configurations of the Strategic HR function. Thereafter, corresponding old or conventional theoretical discourse are mapped to each of the four types in the typology and propositions presented.

3. The strategic HR function: an alternative exposition and archaeological analysis

The SHRM discourse derives its theoretical roots from organizational strategy literature (Barney and Wright, 1998) and in so doing, seeks to elevate the level of analysis of HR outcomes from the employee's level to the organization's level (Prowse and Prowse, 2010). The micro-perspective of development in individual functions of HR; for example studying performance appraisal of employees at the exclusion of selection systems, i.e. ignoring the larger picture of the department's performance as a whole was what triggered an entire stream of research in the form of SHRM. The latter's objective was to bring a macro theorizing in research and practice in this domain so that business outcomes of the function may be better visible and gain legitimacy (cf. legitimacy theory and institutional theory). However, HR practices or "routines" need to be clearly articulated along with all their manifestations in order to really make that possible (Aghazadeh, 2003; Adhikari, 2010).

3.1 Classical theories in perspective

Over the years, many broad-based theories from own, allied and proximate disciplines have been adopted by SHRM theorists to articulate HR's macro-framework. Table I summarizes the main linkages established by these theories as cited in Wright and Mcmahan (1992).

As is obvious from the above table, the SHRM discourse is full of discontinuities and self-contradicting assumptions. The critical point to note is that, except the "Resource Dependence" model, none other recognizes that there is less than a rational distribution of resources, facilities and power at play. However, on careful examination it is possible to uncover each of such weaknesses within their underlying set of assumptions. For instance, in the behavioral perspective, it is quite possible that a "powerful" or influential employee's role and assignments will be defined in a way that is much more flattering to his/her current station and capabilities thus ensuring that the resources at his/her disposal are considerably more than peers. The resource-based view envisages a "human capital pool" that must be a valuable shield against external threats. However, which parts of the pool are more valuable and which less so, i.e. how "value" is defined by the powers that be at a given point in time, is open to interpretation. The agency/transaction cost perspective, without quiet saying so, implicitly factors in the "power" aspect through the concept of "costs." The same "costs" manifest as "inbuilt friction" in the cybernetic theory thus reconciling it to present our pre-occupation. We will eventually revisit the Institutionalism theory at a more appropriate juncture, hence we leave it pending here.

3.2 The concept of "fit"

The most persistent issues when linking constructs across the micro (read functional HRM)-macro (read strategic HRM) divide such as in the case of HR behavior and SHRM in this case, are that of fit. The "Fit" between the micro and macro HRMs is labeled "external" fit as also "vertical fit" by scholars (Wright and Snell, 1998), therefore implying that there is a further "internal fit" or "horizontal fit" as well which is more to do with how multiple HRM practices may fit with each other inside the ambit of micro-HRM itself.

The three fits that recurrently appear in the literature and that can be subsumed under are: Person-Environment (P-E) fit, Person-Organization (P-O) fit and Person-Job (P-J) fit. There is a comprehensive body of empirical work that have tested these issues as evidenced by two studies, one meta-analytic and the other longitudinal (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Tak, 2011). A more comprehensive, although narrative, survey of research is provided by Wright and Boswell (2002). They clarify that the essential difference between the two being in terms of the unit of analysis, i.e. the firm for macro-HRM and the individual or small group for micro-HRM; the next level of granularity pertains to whether single or multiple HR

Over-arching Theoretical Framework	Philosophical roots	Salience
Decision-based models		
Cybernetic theory	Has roots in the open system perspective of Katz and Kahn (1978) rather than the closed system of Thompson (1967)	Rests on the assumption that the entire organization, along with all its functions is an open system. The environmental inputs of people, capital and technology pass through the throughput of HR behaviors and manifests as organizational performance outcomes with strategy as the feedback loop. In practice, however, the open system and throughput perspectives are not as efficient and has too much inbuilt friction
Behavioral perspective	Derives from contingency theory and role theory (Schuler and Jackson, 1987)	Negotiates the effect of HR practices to elicit particular employee behaviors so that desired performance outcomes may be achieved. HR practices are thus a function of employee roles that are specified for execution by the firm's strategists
Agency/transaction cost theory	Originally borrowed from economics and finance. Identifies Bounded rationality (Simon, 1991) and Opportunism as two tools that influence the cost of human exchanges or transactions and thus control them (Williamson, 1989)	It attempts to measure the differential costs of employing different kinds of employee control mechanisms such as compensation, disciplining, reporting protocols, accountability, etc. and strives to recommend the least cost approach. The assumption is that employees themselves will engage in least cost and maximum profit transactions where feasible such as driving commission based products over non-commission ones even if ethical issues are involved in the former
Resource based view of the firm	Has its roots in Barney's (1991) theorization of a sustainable competitive advantage being rare, valuable, insubstitutable and unique to the firm	Currently the most influential theory in SHRM. Visualizes the link between strategy to HR practice to creation of a HR capital pool which is a highly competent and sustainable advantage to the company *vis-à-vis* the external environment
Non-decision based models		
Resource dependence/power models	Interpretation of power by Pfeffer and Salancik (2003)	Many a times organizational decisions may be driven not by the performance criterion but by the underlying politics and power matrix or networks
Institutionalism (Meyer and Rowan, 1977)	Developed originally from Selznick's (1949, 1996) theory of co-optation and subsequently branched out into neo-institutionalism (Dimaggio and Powell, 1983)	Seeks to explain what extra-organizational factors may drive organizations over time toward unintended isomorphism

Table I.
Classical theories
in SHRM

practices have been examined at the individual or organizational levels. Understandably, while the most voluminous amount of work exists in the "single practice-individual level" studies both of empirical and theoretical nature; on the other hand, complications of measurement and consequently, reliability progressively increase and number of rigorously conducted empirical papers decrease when we approach the other extreme of the research continuum which is the "multiple practices at organization level" examinations.

Elsewhere, scholars (Wright and Snell, 1998) have pointed out that the coupling between levels has implications for flexibility of the different components as well. These may be manifested in two forms. Thus they clarify that "Resource flexibility refers to the extent to which a resource can be applied to a larger range of alternative uses, the costs and difficulty of switching the use of a resource from one alternative use to another, and the time required to switch from one use to another. Coordination flexibility consists of the extent to which the firm can resynthesize the strategy, reconfigure the chain of resources, and redeploy the resources."

One notable contribution that takes a dynamic rather than static approach to negotiating the multilevel fit issues within the organization effectively is the "Human Resource Strategic Mix" (Baird and Meshoulam, 1988). It aims to synchronize the growth phase of the organization and awareness level of managers with the evolving sophistication in HR practices being followed via five stages (Initiation, Functional Growth, Controlled Growth, Functional Integration and Strategic Integration) and in the process creates a usable analytic instrument for the strategic HR practitioner.

3.3 The employee's career and psychological contract

The employee's Career (Jalland and Gunz, 2015) and Psychological Contract (Rousseau and Wade-benzoni, 1994; Sturges *et al.*, 2005) are two micro-level HR variables which are yet to be integrated holistically in the firm's consideration set when formulating strategies. We have already explored the continuum of psychological contracts from the employer's point of view. What it means from the employee's perspective is what we are concerned with here. The slide of the relational original employment relationship toward the transactional NER (Tsui and Wu, 2005) has meant that employees have undergone an affect-led change toward more and more of a transactional orientation, in turn causing concern among employers as regards commitment (Singh and Gupta, 2015) and citizenship behaviors (Coyle-Shapiro, 2002). Availability of more options due to opening up of indigenous economies has meant that more and more employees are now inclined to be mobile and pursue "borderless careers" (Morris and Wu, 2009; Steven White *et al.*, 2014). As can be inferred, a borderless career encompasses not just physical but also psychological mobility. Specific micro-level career system attributes such as mobility dynamics of professionals (Malos and Campion, 1995) and firm level policies such as staffing or selection processes (Sonnenfeld and Peiperl, 1988) have been sought to be modeled into the strategic responses by firms to dynamic HR environments. At a broader level, entire HRM systems keeping in mind the employee's career or rather "career oriented HRM systems" have also been explicated (Von Glinow *et al.*, 1983). The career system typology as a function of a particular firm level strategy (corresponding to Miles and Snow typology) is visualized as 4 configurations in a 2 by 2 matrix of supply flow (internal vs external) *vis-à-vis* assignment flow (individual vs group contribution). The four archetypes are: academies (analyzer strategy): providing the most traditional form of career system with entry at early career to exit at retirement thus "developing" firm-specific functional specialists; clubs (defender strategy): aimed at "retaining" firm-specific generalists; baseball teams (prospector strategy): aimed at "recruiting" expertise specialists; and finally fortresses (reactor strategy): aimed at retrenchment of extant HR pool with help from flexible generalists and being positioned at the furthest end of the spectrum in terms of non-conventional career systems.

Many scholars have time and again decried that HR research generally and SHRM research especially tends to be extremely unitarist and managerial in character. The "human" (as opposed to the "human being" as agent) is considered an "object" (and not a subject) that has to be "optimized" for functioning at the "manager's" (as opposed to multiple stakeholders) behest so that the profits of the organization (as opposed to value generated) can be maximized. Expectedly the career path of the employee, his/her aspirations from the job and the value addition to his/her life-course is not a prime undertaking of consideration. The construct of the psychological contract (Rousseau *et al.*, 1998; Rousseau and Wade-benzoni, 1994) is slightly different and more fine-grained than the Employment relationship. It includes a set of unwritten expectations on the part of the employee and unsaid obligations on the part of the employer. Scholars (Elangovan and Shapiro, 1998) have noted how exiting employees report feeling "betrayed" and loss of trust, indicating that some undocumented covenants may have been breached by the organization.

Malos and Campion's (1995) theoretical exposition of career mobility among associates in professional service firms conceptualizes the former as the possession and exercise of "Options" instruments, akin to that in the securities markets, even though there may be no explicit written contracts. They explain that the career of a HR in such a setting would be evaluated in terms of not just the value of the project that he/she is hired for but also the option value of retaining, promoting or firing the said resource. This model therefore can serve as a useful guide for career planning by an array of high-value resources and senior personnel in their career planning processes as well as being applicable to their analogy in the academic domain, which is the "non-tenured" faculty. The options theory (Bhattacharya and Wright, 2005) is therefore a lens that has been useful in again quantizing "human capital" and in so doing, depersonalizing and disempowering the employee in the SHRM discourse.

Multi-level theories such as the one by Von Glinow *et al.* (1983) has conceived of "Parameters" of the HRM system which can be linked to the "Career Orientations" of the employees and also have a feedback loop built in to make it a self-sustaining system under the ambit of the general systems theory along with the essential underlying assumption being that employees are long run assets and as such their careers should have a long-term orientation to effectively impact productivity. The parameters in question would span four categories: structural parameters: consisting of integrative (such as connectivity among employee clusters) and differentiating (such as diversity in employee profiles) structures; process parameters (whether the HRM function is reflexive, innovative and developmental-oriented); boundary parameters (whether it is connected to internal firm strategy and sensitive to external labor market environment); and human analysis parameters (whether it is objective, uses behavioral tests, has focus on non-work aspects of employees' lives and is person or organization-centered).

3.4 HR's role and functions: which direction?

The present HR function in modern business organizations is a far cry from what was originally conceived of as an employee-facing department (Kaufman, 2008; Kaufman, 2014). The pioneering thinker and practitioner of the human relations ideology, Robert Rockefeller's intention behind setting up the first personnel department in the history of business, was to give employees a forum to "voice" (Morrison, 2014) their concerns. They could make themselves heard in all matters pertaining to professional work conditions and personal benefits via institutionalized negotiation and bargaining mechanisms. Instead what we have today is an HR function that is sold out on the idea of "agility," "adaptability" and "professionalism" at the expense of "sustainability," "stability" and "trust." The loss of the last term, i.e. "trust" (Zand, 2016) means that rather

than voice his/her concerns, the neglected employee typically abandons loyalty and exits. This sets up a vicious cycle of unsustainability in the organization in the form of uncommitted performance, counter-productive work-behavior, high rate of turnover and loss of human capital and investments made in the form of onboarding, training and development.

Scholars have stressed that even given similar HR architecture (Lepak and Snell, 1999), the best practices requirements in terms of HR system, structure and effects may be quiet different in different organizations (Becker and Gerhart, 1996). In the words of Bowen and Ostroff (2004), the "strength of the HRM system" needs to be articulated in the form of desirable metafeatures of an HRM system that will cause strong organizational climate or "strong situation," (Mischel *et al.*, 2004) to develop; which will in turn elicit appropriate behaviors. This "strength" thus aggregates attributes of individual employees to lead to organizational effectiveness. In so doing, a vital gap in terms of theory building, between the HR function's performance and organizational outcomes has been sought to be addressed. Hence a company that wants to signal its philosophy of valuing employee performance should look at a mix of policy alternatives such as variable pay, promotions and appraisal and may want to enforce the aforesaid by way of team-based pay, 360 degree appraisal, etc. The HR department needs to make a conscious choice whether it would be a lethargic and incompetence promoting "Bureaucratic HR" or an innovative, internal-labor-market sensitive "High performance Work Practice oriented HR" (Boxall and Macky, 2007).

3.5 Idiographic vs nomothetic debates in SHRM
Many critical theorists have argued that HRM generally (Greenwood, 2013; Greenwood and Van Buren, 2017), and SHRM more so, is a uniquely and exclusively unitarist and managerialist agenda (Moore and Gardner, 2004). The major theoretical framework which gave the impetus for surge in SHRM research, the resource-based view (Barney and Wright, 1998) promotes the assumption that human beings might be better conceptualized as "HRs" or "human capital" if they have to be effectively operationalised for the most efficient organizational outcomes. The concern for the psychologies of HR extends only uptil the point that the requisite outcomes are met. Acknowledgment and recognition of concepts such as "work-life balance," "quality of life" or "rejuvenating and sustaining capacity of labour" is detrimental to the bottom line (Gokhan Kocer, 2014). In other words, the nomothetic tensions in mainstream research have been ably highlighted and severely criticized with strong idiographic justifications by scholars in the critical management studies (CMS), Critical HR (Greenwood, 2013) and Industrial Relations (IR) research programs (Keegan and Boselie, 2006).

4. Genealogical analysis and unresolved dichotomies
In this section, we look at some adjoining literatures and/or perspectives in organization studies and examine how they have served to highlight tropes of power and disempowerment in the SHRM discourse. The literatures that we take as our points of departure, are, respectively: epistemological thoughts of Burrell and Morgan (1979); organizational learning; professions; and social network theory. How the SHR function will choose to orient itself and the climate of the organization, is what we are interested in problematizing here.

4.1 Normal (modernist) vs contra (postmodernist) organization science
Burrell and Morgan (1979) were the first social scientists to comprehensively map almost the entirety of organizational paradigms onto a matrix of ontological and epistemological positions. From this mapping, emerged the configuration of an "Anti" or Contra organization theory which has been the mainstay of many a critical theorist

(Hassard and Wolfram Cox, 2013; Granter, 2014; Sørensen and Villadsen, 2015) when analyzing the problems emerging from the dominant schools. Perhaps Clegg *et al.* (2006, p. 230) articulate the tension between the pro and anti-traditions better with these words:

> […] many foundations of organizations and management, and organization and management thinking, not only are bizarre and strange by contemporary views […] but have helped to translate […], selectively discard […] and prepare the foundations for today's normal science […]. In the past, we would insist, the main function of "normal" organization and management theory was the design of mechanisms to exercise power, coupled with a simultaneous way of constituting them, discursively, that negated their reality as power; instead it constituted them as social problems, industrial problems, human problems, and so on, in ever more technically specialized forms and concepts.

Extending the arguments put forth, we assume that the traditional, classical, modernist and normal SHR function is a power-oriented one, i.e. it cultivates power differentials in order to wield control. On the other hand, the newer, ideal SHR function that we envisage is a power-agnostic and egalitarian one. From this assumption, our epistemological propositions, that follow, are as below:

P1a. A power oriented SHR function will conform to modernist prescriptions of HRM recommendations.

P1b. A power-agnostic or egalitarian SHR function will be forthcoming in experimenting with postmodernist ideas in people management.

4.2 Exploration plus exploitation and the knowledge void

The seminal piece by March (1991) problematized the manifestation of knowledge as power wielding tools by individuals and organizations in two forms: Exploration, i.e. discovering new knowledge to secure future prosperity; and exploitation, or harvesting present knowledge to ensure present survival. The strategy literature is replete with studies on comparative merits between the two (Fourné *et al.*, 2016) and the SHRM discourse has, in tandem, sought to evaluate, who within the organization is consequently, more powerful and important of the two, the exploiter or the explorer. Who should be bestowed with more organizational favors between the two? And who should be compensated more for their contribution? Curiously, however, the same discourse is silent on the knowledge voids that exist between the silos of the organization and between different echelons. Thus while assessing the relative power base of the aforementioned two groups is a constant pre-occupation, empowering the knowledge-less, not so much. The knowledge management (McIver *et al.*, 2012; Akhavan *et al.*, 2016) discourse has sought to prescribe some remedies in the form of digitized knowledge sharing installations (King, 2007) and so on, but they have reported mixed and limited success. We propose that based on its orientation, the SHR function of a given organization may thus take one of two courses as follows:

P2a. A power oriented SHR function will cultivate a siloed or contained organizational structure to conserve knowledge spillover.

P2b. A power-agnostic or egalitarian SHR function will pro-actively try to bridge the gap with robust mechanisms for knowledge sharing and transfer along and across hierarchical levels in the organization.

4.3 Legitimacy vs obedience

Obedience, discipline, control are all the same sides of a single coin (Flamholtz *et al.*, 1985). What this implies is that those on the other side are ones who enjoy or project equal

(or maybe more) value are beyond the scope of disciplining, control or being expected to obey. This dichotomy is probably best exemplified by the tensions between the professions and the occupational classes. Note the recurring requirement of the word "discretion" in the job description for professionals (Dingwall, 2008, p. 103; Ottesen and Møller, 2016; Ponnert and Svensson, 2016). At the very beginning of the argument, it thus sets them separate from traditional formulations of control within an organization. They have a high ceiling (Dingwall, 2008) or threshold for making decisions, are affiliated with extra-organizational "professional associations" that lend legitimacy to these decisions thus adding onto their authority and finally they have systems in place within the organization to valuate these specific competencies. On the other hand, the occupations as well as some lesser professions tend to have a "low ceiling" for deviations meaning they are expected to obey more than to be authoritative. To take the example of a hospital, professional authority (Woods, 2016) and power may be said to be the conserve of doctors, while most of the nurses (except a handful of very senior ones), orderlies, technicians, administrators, etc. would be subject to the obedience mandate. We think that the SHRM discourse thus permeates the supremacy of the professions over the non-professions through most theories, most prominently by the "Architectural" perspective. Thus our next two propositions follow:

P3a. A power oriented SHR function will favor a differentialised protocol of professionals' freedom and obedience by other occupations.

P3b. A power-agnostic or egalitarian SHR function will seek to enforce a uniform and equitable code of conduct and accountability throughout the organization.

4.4 Network studies and power

Foucault says: "Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain […] Power is employed and exercised through a netlike organisation […] Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application" (Foucaut, 1980, p. 98; q.v. Mills, 2003). The concept of the "sociological elite" (Mills, 1963) is a very old one; however, only with the emergence of social network mapping tools, has it been possible to test its premises. Studies of director interlocks between boards of different companies (Staples, 2015; Heemskerk and Takes, 2016) are an illustration of this research paradigm. Again, if we combine this concept with the core premise of the leader-member exchange theory and ingroup and outgroup networks within organizations (Burns and Otte, 1999; Srivastava and Dhar, 2016; Almatrooshi *et al.*, 2016); it is an opportunity for the strategic HR function to identify which of such groups or clusters are functioning as highly productive and efficient assets within the organization. At the same time, however, it is also a challenge to oversee that not all rewards and scarce resources get cornered by these groups, rendering less powerful groups even less effective. The literature on social networks (Lin, 1999; Oh *et al.*, 2006) and institutional theory (Dimaggio and Powell, 1983) both lend credence to this line of reasoning; which brings us to our next set of propositions:

P4a. A power oriented SHR function will tend to consolidate resources within powerful groups and networks in the organization.

P4b. A power-agnostic or egalitarian SHR function will strive to divide power (and resources) over the entire organization in an equitable manner.

5. Navigating power and the nature of negotiations: a synthetic model

The question that emerges for us then is that what is the posture or ideology that the SHR function should assume, to redress this imbalance? Some corollary questions that follow

from it are: Is a prescriptive, unitary position even possible? If not, then what might the different contingent configurations be and what conditions will they be contingent upon? We attempt to address some of these in the ensuing paragraphs.

The theoretical premise of this part of the paper, generally and of the above questions specifically, rests on the Power discourse of Foucault as re-interpreted by Barbara Townley (1993) in her seminal paper, in the context of managing the organization's HRs. Townley begins by problematizing the basic building block of the HRM discipline, i.e. the "employment relationship" in these terms:

> The employment relationship is an analytical, conceptual space, which has geographic (at work) and temporal (time at work) dimensions. It also involves a subject, the worker. All these dimensions or spaces must be rendered known and articulated before they can be managed. From the employer's point of view […] there is the need for knowledge of two dimensions: the nature of work and the nature of its operator.

In so doing, she uses Foucauldian analysis as a heuristic device (Gigerenzer and Gaissmaier, 2011) to flesh out the power-knowledge nexus embedded within the transaction in question (here the "ER"), something which we will put to good use going further. Meanwhile, having identified the unknown variables or information gap in the concept of our interest, Townley explicates that it is the HRM system, as a particular form of "Governmentality" (Baumgarten and Ullrich, 2012), which renders the former, knowable. While Governmentality may be understood as the process of Bureaucratization with the aim of achieving rationality or "objectivity" as the end product; it brings in an element of "power differentiation" along the way thus introducing contradictory interpretations. Essentially what this means is the bureaucracy, in this case, the HR function, in unilaterally deciding upon the "object" and constituting systems of measuring "labor" or "human capital" inevitably introduces bias in favor of the organization, in the process. The action of "objectification" itself subsumes three sub-processes (Foucault, 1977/1979, Q.V. Townley, 1993) in itself, namely: enclosure: implying the geographical/spatial (and also temporal) delineation of a boundary, exemplified in the divisioning of work from non-work and most recently in terms of "within borders" *vis-à-vis* "borderless" careers; relevant HR tools being HR planning and forecasting; partitioning: or the creation of horizontal and vertical divisions, such as those between manual/nonmanual, blue collar/white collar, productive/nonproductive, core/periphery, etc., aided by HR practices such as job classifications, competency mapping, etc.; and finally ranking: implying a process of evaluating relative distribution and creating a serial, or hierarchical, ordering among employees, an example would be ordered pay-brackets, promotion systems and core/non-core employment contracts and facilitated by the HR practices of performance appraisals and feedback mechanisms.

As can be deduced from the preceding exposition, each and every combination or "mix" of HRM practices that an organization uses has a "power" and an "information/knowledge" element embedded within it. This creates a differential in negotiation status between the organization and individual employee which is indeed a sticky political wicket if there ever was one and the realization of this very premise forms the basis of our argument here that the employment relationship, must, above all else, be seen and reconceptualised as a "power relationship" with value-judgments inherent in it. The figure below articulates succinctly our argument in a 2 by 2 matrix of 4 such power relationships as follows Figure 1.

In our formulation of the quadrants, we survey the key tenets of what the extant theories corresponding to each respective type have to say and then re-craft the argument by using the "power" lens. The idea behind this is to develop a unified theoretical structure that subsumes the arguments put forward by previous theorizations. The method used is that of thematic analysis and logical hypothetico-deduction Table II.
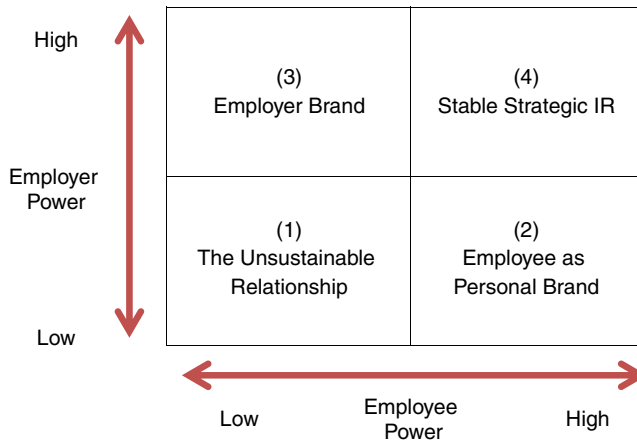
Figure 1.
The power
parity matrix

Quadrant No.	(New) Power theme in the employment relationship	Corresponding (Old/Conventional) theoretical discourse
1	The unsustainable relationship	Militant IR and Inflexible Management (Taylorian era; Scientific Management; NIR paradigm)
2	Employee as personal brand	"Empowered employee" thesis (Human Relations School, Career Development discourses). Talent Management
3	Employer brand	SHRM (Unitarist, Managerialist agenda guided by RBV, Shareholder Profit maximization principle), Employer Branding
4	Stable strategic IR	IR and collective bargaining and HRM functions that facilitate the former (i.e. The Original IR (OIR: Kaufmann) paradigm; Stakeholder value maximization principle)

Table II.
Modes of theorizing
corresponding to each
power quadrant

5.1 Quadrant 1: the unsustainable relationship

Organizational environments, wherein employer power and employee power both are strong and both resort to hard tactics of expressing power, would be inherently unstable and inconducive to industrial productivity. If the recent spate of industrial conflicts in several companies in the automobile sector in India, including Maruti Suzuki (Galib *et al.*, 2011) are any indication, then this conjecture holds its ground.

In both the above cases, the said companies taking advantage of lax enforcement of the Contract Labour Act (Shyam Sundar, 2012), refused to give permanency to contract workers who formed as high as 50-60 percent of the blue-collar labor force. Workers decided not to take this lying down and violent strikes were organized by union members culminating in the death of a top management team (TMT) member. The Jet Airways Pilot strike over salary parity and demonstrations by Infosys engineers recently sacked owing to corporate restructuring efforts, prove that even white collar workers, in the face of corporate high-handedness are rejecting the managerialist work culture of carefully fostered individualism and segregation in organizations and realizing the significance of counter-power in the unified action mode. In Jet Airways' case, the management first sought to derecognize the union and reject its requests for negotiation and then going further, branded the dissenting officers as "terrorists" in a formal press release (Mehra, 2011). These would thus probably qualify as Militant IR (Dundon and Dobbins, 2015; Kraemer *et al.*, 2013; Sen and Lee, 2015) vs Inflexible and authoritative Managerialism (Taylor, 1919; Taylor, 1939, pp. 57-60;

Clegg, 2014). As can be deduced, the justice perception of employees in these cases would have hit rock bottom and so has the reciprocal commitment of the organization as embodied in the attitude of the TMT. A retrospective examination, if it were feasible, we believe would reveal probably some or all of the following shortcomings in the employment relationship:

P5a. Organizations which foster inflexible management practices and in turn give rise to militant trade unionism because both parties have actual or potential hard power will eventually fall into an unhealthy and unsustainable relationship with their employees.

5.2 Quadrant 2: employee as personal brand
This power (in)equation corresponds exclusively to the comparatively elite employee with a niche skill-set which is very valuable to the operation of the organization and comparatively rare in the external labor market. This value proposition description would also apply to a member of the TMT who is a strategic asset because of his/her knowledge of internal organizational dynamics and/or inter-organizational networking strengths. In other words they are the employees valued by organizations under an exclusive talent management (Mensah, 2015) purview and as such are a brand in their own right. Such employees may have a high P-J fit, however their P-O and P-E fits may or may not be low (Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2005). If the latter two fits are low, they may resort to hardball tactics such as demanding high benefits premium over the external labor market. This may lead to a skewing of not only compensation equity within the internal labor market but also cause cost overruns at the overall organizational level. Recent CEO pay controversies may be considered as an extreme case of this kind of phenomenon.

The personal branding (Khedher, 2015) literature has had some traction in the popular psychology market in the form of quick anecdotes of how successful people have "branded themselves" or developed their "Unique Selling Proposition," however it is relatively silent in academic works. It does not warrant being consigned to the "fads and fashion" variant of management literature just yet, because the recently emergent Talent management track has reframed the debate in terms of the "inclusiveness vs exclusiveness criterion":

P5b. Organizations that have disproportionately less power than their employees due to demand/supply mismatch or other reasons will/might have to comply with hard tactics of employees such as pay premium demands, etc. thus leading to an increase in costs (in the short run).

5.3 Quadrant 3: employer brand
Before delineating this particular power quadrant of how an employer becomes and projects itself as a brand, it is pertinent to understand the concept of "Employer Branding" (Lievens and Slaughter, 2016; Biswas and Suar, 2016) and distinguish it from its close nomological cousin, "Employee Branding." Employer branding refers to the array of innovative and promotional activities that the HRM department may undertake to sell the organization's brand to internal stakeholders such as employees to elicit citizenship behaviors or to external stakeholders such as shareholders and suppliers to inspire confidence. Employee branding (Wallace *et al.*, 2014) on the other hands refers specifically to those practices aimed at projecting an employee(s) as the mascot of the organization. Technically, thus, employee branding is a subset of employer branding.

HR departments of innovative companies, which have a strong focus toward the growth and nurturance of human capital have invested big budgets in branding themselves as "most desired companies" or "best places to work" and promoted and publicized their internal branding exercises widely in the external labor market. The www.coolestinterviewever.com

on Twitter, initiative by HCL is one such example. The campaign, as did the website, highlighted the fact that the chosen candidate would be directly mentored by a certain person (each of whom was named corresponding to the various departments recruiting) from the TMT, would shadow him/her for a year and as a result have the opportunity to "learn from the best." The campaign was one of the most talked about recruitment events of the year and won several social media prizes as well along the way. Alternatively, companies may choose to promote themselves in recruitment hotspots such as premier colleges with brand defining events such as "Auto Quotient," India's first auto-centric quiz by Mahindra or "Farmkshetra" a design challenge for technology undergraduate students to come up with innovative solutions for farm mechanization, by the same company. What these exercises do is bestow a form of "Soft Power" on the organization in the labor market. This Soft Power (Roselle *et al.*, 2014) manifests in the form of employee pride in the organization's culture, greater commitment, greater citizenship behaviors and consequently the organization may be able in a position to command a premia in the marketplace for human capital by way of better talent pool in the same or reduced salary bracket *vis-à-vis* other organizations. Hence we propose:

P5c. Organizations with disproportionately more power than their employees will/might adopt soft HR practices such as "Employer Branding" which will in turn raise the premia they command in labor markets and give hard returns in terms of manpower cost reductions (in the short run).

5.4 Quadrant 4: stable strategic IR

As indicated by the review of extant idiographic vs nomothetic tensions in SHRM research, there was evidently a lacuna in the conceptualization of strategy as a more grounded approach to handling the most crucial and volatile resource an organization can have: its people (Gokhan Kocer, 2014). The answer probably lies with the "Strategic IR" thesis. Miller (1987) in spelling out this thesis, captures aptly, the characterization of IR which has led to it being relegated to a "non-strategic" status. Thus these characteristics are: It (IR) is: separate from the business: as it pertains to "operational issues" like a "machine breakdown"; reactive: as in comes into the picture only when there is an industrial conflict; short term; of no interest to the board of directors: as it is concerned with low-level employees (compare with non-core low-value human capital in HR architecture); and defined by legal and institutional structures of trade-unionism and collective bargaining (Marginson *et al.*, 2014; Sisson, 2015) which again in turn makes it a concern primarily associated with lower-level employees and consequently rendered un-plannable and un-interesting again. Much work has demonstrated that this is a fallacious approach owing to the clearly observed and measured linkages between product market variables and employee behaviors at both low and high levels (Kochan *et al.*, 1983). A sorely needed correction in corporate practice, according to Miller is thus to stop viewing labor/HR as a "contingency," and re-integrate it back into strategic decision-making as an indispensable component for business continuity. Taken from the talent management angle, this sentiment would be echoed in terms of taking an inclusivist approach to all HR. This argument in a way also harkens back to the original thesis of HR as it was conceived, i.e. in the form of the OIR or Original IR Paradigm (Kaufman, 2008; Kaufman, 2014).

The principles posited by these varied frameworks when taken in a unified form convey a recipe for equitable re-distribution of power between all the stakeholders of an organization, thus leading to the following proposition:

P5d. Organizations which encourage and practice a power parity and equity based relationship between the top management and their HRs will eventually be able to develop a sustainable and stable IR climate.

6. Discussion

The over-riding concern of the power discourse in this paper, is composed of two facets. As opposed to the HR architecture and other typologies discussed in our thematic review in the first half of the paper, we show how the power orientation attempts to dissect the employee pool and the corresponding HR functions into carefully engineered silos to optimize the savings to the bottom line and over time breeds and conflates the problems of inequity among different power factions that develop within the organization. In the second half of the paper, we strive to address this very problem by first identifying the course that such power differentials may take, conceptualizing their extant shape and quantum and thence pre-emptively suggesting the less and the more viable alternatives that may be possible to adopt in each such scenarios. In enabling organizations and their current and prospective employees to craft this discourse, the "power lens" gives a more forward-looking tool and in the process, facilitates "empowerment" (Conger and Kanungo, 1988; Humborstad, 2014) of both sets of parties. We believe that as social inequities between big corporations and other societal stakeholders become more acute, adoption of this lens will be an increasingly inevitable policy circumstance.

7. Future research directions

The grand or meta theories of sociology (Ritzer, 2011, pp. A1-A5) have a special role to play in the theory building effort in social sciences. While grand theories are not testable and this makes it imperative that they be broken down into mid-range theories in order to validate observable phenomenon; the fact remains that they may cause tectonic shifts in the way a discipline is pursued and promoted. Foucault's Power discourse, Marx's dialectic Materialism and Husserl's Phenomenology are but some theories which have ushered in a whole new disciplinary branch of CMS within the management domain (Alvesson and Deetz, 1999, p. 193).We have strived to demonstrate just one such possible thought re-alignment by the above power discourse. One more theoretical lens which is yet to reach "grand" status but may be fruitfully pursued by management scholars to craft theory is the Structuration Theory by Anthony Giddens (1984). While the said agency-structure dichotomy concept has been quiet exhaustively explored in Economics and Finance with the development of the twin models of shareholder profit maximization and stakeholder value-maximization; it is yet to penetrate other areas of organizational research. Future research may look at similar theory building or re-creating exercises and serve to enrich the "sociality" and "constructivist" aspects of management studies.

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Corresponding author
Roshni Das can be contacted at: f14roshnid@iimidr.ac.in