

Think Global, Act Local: From Naïve Comparison to Critical Participation in the Teaching of Strategic International Human Resource Management

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine the implications of ethnocentrism and paternalism in teaching approaches for the field of strategic international human resource management (SIHRM), as an example of management studies. We argue that the teaching of SIHRM has been approached in a colonizing fashion, joining and extending the territories of human resource management and organizational strategy through the definition and teaching of a new language and conceptual vocabulary. We explore philosophical approaches and processes involved in teaching SIHRM, and consider implications of pedagogical developments in this field of management education.

A major aspect of international management is based in the field of strategic international human resource management (SIHRM) (Schuler, Dowling & De Cieri, 1993; Taylor, Beechler & Napier, 1996), which is essentially focused on strategic human resource management in multinational enterprises (MNEs). In this paper, we argue that issues identified in critiques of the development and teaching of international management, and, in particular, SIHRM, raise issues and questions that are also important in the more general context of managing teaching internationally. Are we walking our theoretical talk? How might we guard against the oversimplifications of naïvete, the narrow exclusiveness of ethnocentrism or even the patronization of paternalism in teaching internationally? Rather than attempt to judge or to provide standards for evaluation, our purpose is to introduce questions and terminologies that may assist in encouraging reflexive discussion and debate. The aim of this paper is, therefore, two-

fold; first, to introduce the subject area of SIHRM and to articulate some of the theoretical and pedagogical critiques that are relevant to that subject area, and second, to draw on this analysis to reflect on our own teaching and to raise questions that may also be of interest to others.

The Development of SIHRM

The field of SIHRM (Milliman, Von Glinow & Nathan, 1991; Schuler et al., 1993; Taylor et al., 1996) emerged from the study of human resource management. An early extension of HRM was the inclusion of attention to cross-cultural issues (see, for example, Laurent, 1986). Since then, the broader consideration of HRM in multinational enterprises has been defined as international HRM (IHRM; Dowling, Welch & Schuler, 1999; Edwards, Ferner & Sisson, 1996; Teagarden & Von Glinow, 1997). While HRM is relevant within a single country, IHRM addresses added complexity due to diversity of national contexts of operation, the inclusion of different

national categories of workers (Tung, 1993), and co-ordination across national borders via the cross-national transfer of management and management practices (e.g., Gregersen, Hite & Black, 1996). A related area of research has developed in comparative HRM research (Brewster, Tregaskis, Hegewisch & Mayne, 1996). In parallel with (and not unrelated to) the internationalization of HRM has been the increasing recognition of the importance of linking HRM policies and practices with organizational strategy in a domestic (single-country) context (Becker & Gerhart, 1996; Wright & McMahan, 1992).

As researchers and practitioners have paid increasing attention to the strategic nature of IHRM and the implications for organizational performance (Caligiuri & Stroh, 1995), we have witnessed the emergence of SIHRM, which has been defined as “human resource management issues, functions, and policies and practices that result from the strategic activities of multinational enterprises and that impact the international concerns and goals of those enterprises” (Schuler et al., 1993, p. 422).

Schuler et al. (1993) presented an integrative framework of SIHRM, in which they acknowledged that a fundamental issue is the tension between the needs for global co-ordination (integration) and local responsiveness (differentiation) (Doz & Prahalad, 1991; Nohria & Ghoshal, 1994). In addition to the strategic MNE components, the framework showed factors exogenous and endogenous to an MNE that influence SIHRM issues, functions, policies and practices, thereby influencing the realization of MNE concerns and goals. Schuler et al. (1993) presented their framework as a conceptual model of exploratory analysis, and the framework has been noted in recent literature as a useful tool that brings together the strategic and international dimensions of HRM (Kamoche, 1996; Taylor et al., 1996).

We suggest that developments in theory and research since the publication of Schuler et al.’s framework in 1993, have brought the need

for revision of both the content of this framework and its integrative assumptions. For example, Taylor et al. (1996) draw upon this framework, but present a simplified version of SIHRM constituents, reducing Schuler et al.’s (1993) rather cumbersome ‘SIHRM issues, functions, policies and practices’ to ‘SIHRM orientation’ (analogous to HR function strategy) and ‘SIHRM functional focus’ (comprising all HR practices). While this development and simplification appear to be of value, we should consider the implications of such reductionism. If we simplify when we teach, do we dilute the quality and quantity of knowledge shared with students?

SIHRM and Colonization Considerations

With regard to the development of SIHRM, we suggest that revisiting and refining of theory, definitions and research should occur in the context of theoretical developments in related fields. As Willmott has stated, while HRM seems at first somewhat remote from organization theory, the design and operation of HRM activities is dependent on notions of “organizing and organization” (1995, p. 33). Thus the operation of such activities “has consequences for the maintenance and transformation of how work and employment are organized” (Willmott, 1995, p. 33). Therefore, we examine the teaching of SIHRM in the context of recent developments in critical organizational theory.

For example, if we consider the way(s) in which the field of management strategy is taught in business schools we can see that this field has been the subject of critical re-interpretation (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996; Knights & Morgan, 1991; Whipp, 1996). In particular, we note Alvesson and Willmott’s (1996) reference to the work of Habermas in describing management as a colonizing power. Alvesson and Willmott defined colonization as “the way that one set of practices and understandings, which are strongly associated with the instrumental reason that is dominant in the organization and management of complex systems, comes to dominate and exclude other practices and discourses” (1996, p. 105; see also Power & Laughlin, 1992). Kerfoot and Knights (1993) have commented on the

masculinist nature of management strategy discourse, and Alvesson and Willmott suggested that strategic management is a senior management activity that occurs "as a condition and consequence of wider, institutionalized forms of domination" (1996, p. 132). Indeed, access to strategic territory has become a contested source of power, "a number of occupational or functional groupings... competing to establish supremacy over the area of strategic discourse" (Knights & Morgan, 1991, p. 265). If they succeed, they engage in strategy talk, where:

The term 'strategic' is bandied around to add rhetorical weight, misleadingly one might say, to managerial activity and academic research projects....Like other discourses that have a colonizing impact, by weakening alternative ways of framing issues and assessing values, its effect is to close rather than open debate (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996, p. 133).

Further, we argue that the development of the field of SIHRM is itself a colonizing force, not only joining the intellectual territories of HRM and organizational strategy, but also extending those territories into international geographic domains and perhaps, in doing so, further privileging a senior strategic perspective to the exclusion of those more marginal to internationalization decisions.

Internationalization Strategies and the Teaching of SIHRM

Let us consider the particular case of the university, in which SIHRM is both taught within the management curriculum and practised in the internationalization of operations, for consideration of the internationalization of management education raises important issues about how and what and where we teach (and, indeed, who 'we' are).

The globalization of business has included the education industry, particularly tertiary education. Business schools and management educators have entered global markets following much the same 'foreign market entry' strategies

as the multinational corporations (Barkema, Bell & Pennings, 1996; Benito & Welch, 1994). Monash University, Australia's largest university, provides an excellent example of an institution engaged in many documented forms of internationalization in the education industry. These include:

1. establishment of wholly-owned foreign subsidiaries (foreign campuses and research centres). This essentially provides 'exporting' education to students outside the parent country. Malaysia, in addition to Singapore and Hong Kong, has provided strong markets for such developments (Celestino, 1999). For some universities, this is explicitly intended to provide 'American-style' university education abroad (Celestino, 1999). They attract international students seeking a 'Western' education approach without travelling outside their own home country;
2. formation of strategic alliances, partnerships and joint ventures with local firms and educational institutions, to offer cross-institutional credit for subjects and even joint degrees;
3. recruiting foreign students for the home campus (i.e., developing a global customer base, by recruiting in the host country student/customer market for 'in'patriation to the parent headquarters (home campus);
4. flexible learning, utilizing multi-media technology to enable students to complete programs at a distance. Wilson & Meadows (1998) examined the implications of information technology in education, particularly with respect to Australian education providers and their strategies in the emerging Asian markets;
5. expatriation via student and faculty exchange programs; and
6. short-term international assignments, such as study tours, international internships and intensive study experience. One example of this is the Asian Intensive School in Advanced Management conducted in Penang, Malaysia in July each year by the

Australian National Business School.

The last two strategies are perhaps those most explicitly aimed to provide parent-country students (and faculty) with some exposure to other cultures in order to better understand and manage international business.

Issues in (and from) the Pedagogy of SIHRM

Is each approach to the internationalization of management, and, in this case, management education, both sustainable and ethically defensible? In considering the relative merits of these various strategies, we suggest that two issues important in the development of pedagogy in SIHRM warrant particular consideration. First, we recognise the tendency for ethnocentrism in teaching SIHRM. Second, we suggest that it is important to avoid paternalism in SIHRM pedagogy.

Ethnocentrism and SIHRM teaching. A major challenge for development of SIHRM theory development and research is to overcome the ethnocentrism of one's own perspective and experience (Perlmutter, 1969). Theories, research methods, and practices may be applicable and effective in one cultural setting, but changes to suit local requirements are inevitable for transfer across cultural and national boundaries. This, of course, is particularly the case for teaching.

Ethnocentrism, or the assumption of the superiority of one's cultural approach, is perhaps most evident in the use of the 'parent country' language in teaching and curricula. One dominant feature of the forms of internationalization listed above is that English is most often the language of instruction. This is generally applicable for US, UK and Australian universities, although cannot be assumed. Exceptions include the University of Technology Sydney, Australia, which conducts MBA courses (including Strategic HRM) in Mandarin (S. Teo, personal communication, 1999). Also, numerous programs have utilized knowledge transfer from expatriates to

locals, with translation of materials and eventual handover of all teaching to locals (e.g., Yan Jiao China-Australia Management Centre, Beijing, China). Some business schools also encourage students to study in another language, and award specific certificates to acknowledge proficiency in the language.

As with many training and development strategies, we have seen a rush to develop new training programs, yet we suggest that more time could be spent in evaluation of such programs. For example, Hong (1999) reported that a survey of students in a U.S. university found that, after 3 semesters of Chinese business language learning, the students still lacked cultural knowledge in Chinese business contexts. Hong (1999) concluded that improvements remain necessary, such as integrating cultural knowledge into such teaching programs.

In addition, it is not only in the spoken/written language of instruction that ethnocentrism may be evident. For example, the content of SIHRM may limit its pedagogical possibilities. Due to colonization by senior, Western perspectives, the SIHRM classroom may well be foreign territory where the experiences discussed are those of the guest speaker who plays the role of the experienced traveler or adventurer, telling stories of the journey, of adventure and misadventure as a means of appeal to the (supposedly) naïve audience (cf. Jeffcutt, 1994). Or, maybe not. Perhaps we should allow for new possibilities, not only in the topics we cover but also in the way we cover them and in our forms of assessment (e.g., writing 'letters home', choosing gifts for those who have assisted our passage). We should not leave it to the guest speaker to present and represent something a little too presumptuous, too provocative, and too risky for the mainstream curriculum or class coordinator to cover.

One important mechanism for the colonization of SIHRM is provided by the definition and teaching of a new, and potentially exclusive, language and conceptual vocabulary (cf. Abrahamson, 1996; Czarniawska & Sevón,

1996). Like all others, the language of SIHRM has its own vocabulary. In this respect, the field of SIHRM has followed the example set by international business research in developing and utilizing jargon that ranges from aphorisms to abbreviations. For example, 'think global, act local' has been widely adopted as an aphorism reflecting a 'transnational mindset' (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1998). This is sometimes supported by the hybrid 'glocal', or 'glocalization' (Parker, 1996). While the terms 'global' and 'globalization' have been central to the development of SIHRM research and practice, there remains debate about definition and implications. For example, we note that many US-based researchers and practitioners (mis-)use 'global' when referring to 'transnational' issues (e.g., Pucik, 1997). While there is a need for 'knowledge transfer', or content-based delivery of SIHRM constructs, we raise concerns about the oversimplification of SIHRM subject matter in efforts to 'assist' students' and practitioners' comprehension.

Paternalism in the teaching of SIHRM.

Some of these examples of ethnocentrism might also be interpreted as examples of paternalism, a concept most commonly defined as "a system of management under which the employer creates a workforce dependent for more than just the wages exchanged for work" (Wray, 1996, p. 702). Padavic and Earnest (1994, p. 340) suggest, counter to Weber, that paternalism is one of many forms of managerial control. They differentiate two forms of paternalism: "(1) an exploitative power asymmetry, suffused at the social-psychological level with deference and loyalty grounded in a familial sentiment; and (2) the institutional forms within which this asymmetry is exercised, such as company-subsidized community projects or housing."

In a similar but more extensive classification, Wray (1996) discussed three forms. Traditional paternalism "transferred family or domestic 'authority' into the workplace as a basis for industrial organization" and is "authoritarianism tempered with generosity" (Wray, 1996, p. 702, with reference to Martin & Fryer, 1973). Welfare

paternalism took the form of routinized benefits such as long-term employment contracts, pension schemes, company-owned housing, and provision of medical benefits, education, parks and sports. Finally, sophisticated paternalism is where "(t)he personal indulgency patterns established by traditional paternalist employers are maintained through the institutionalisation of largesse through profit share systems and social and welfare benefits financed by the organisation" (Wray, 1996, p. 703).

If we apply this to teaching internationally, we can perhaps become sensitized to the politics of our actions. For example, do we make superficial alterations to curriculum and content in order to indulge local interests, perhaps still teaching American perspectives on international management? Students may 'feel free' to disagree, particularly with each other, but that freedom is always within the constraints of the standard, imported theory and assessment base. We suggest that such an approach is not dissimilar to a paternalistic employer allowing an employee some minor indulgence. What may be a well-intentioned technique that is successful in an 'Anglo-culture' classroom setting may violate local norms concerning discussion and debate when used in other cultural contexts.

From naïve comparison... In addition to teaching in the host country's language, oversimplifying terminology, and making only modest changes to host country curriculum and content, one of the most obvious forms of ethnocentrism (if not paternalism) in teaching internationally is probably adopting a naïve comparative approach. This approach "regards culture as the basic explanatory variable" (Cray & Mallory, 1998, p. 23). According to Cray and Mallory (1998), 'naïve' in this context involves the absence of theory to inform the comparative analysis. In particular, while culture is viewed as the motivating determinant for any differences noted, the way in which culture and behavior are linked is seldom explained or analyzed (Cavusgil & Das, 1997). More often, the comparison employs the teacher's own culture as the baseline for comparison, with the underlying assumption

that, once similarities and differences have been identified, only an adjustment to management style, in this case SIHRM, is required for success. Thus, cultural 'differences' may become cultural 'realities' resulting in culture-bound, explanation-poor representations. For example, the end result is often little more than a set of cultural stereotypes with minimal or no theoretical foundation for behavioral predictability. Yet, these stereotypes, which predispose 'us' to see collective 'others' as similar to or different from 'us' and to behave in certain 'culturally sensitive ways' towards 'them', may solidify 'our' views of 'them' (cf. Fine, 1994).

Alternatives have been dominated by culture-free and culture-bound approaches (Cray & Mallory, 1998). According to Cray & Mallory, (1998, p. 24) a culture-free, or 'etic' approach seeks "underlying regularities across national boundaries". For example, a culture-free approach to research attempts to use variables which are generalizable across cultures to study social phenomena in relatively culture-free (culture-common), universal terms (Bhagat & McQuaid, 1982). Supporters of this approach argue that the basic tasks in any organizations, but particularly in industrialized organizations, are the same worldwide. This argument reflects a convergence perspective (Hickson, Hinings, McMillan & Schwitter, 1974). In contrast, a culture-bound, or 'emic' approach emphasizes differences among cultures (Cray & Mallory, 1998), and has been aligned with a divergence perspective (McGaughey & De Cieri, 1999). An emic approach to research attempts to describe a particular culture by investigating culture-specific aspects of concepts or behaviors, based on historical and social developments that have influenced people. The stream of research influenced by Hofstede (1984) has been an influential example of the culture-bound approach.

Both etic and emic approaches may be legitimate in the research and teaching of SIHRM, but difficulties may be encountered if the distinction between the two approaches is ignored. Hence, a major issue for SIHRM researchers and teachers is to ensure that an etic approach is

not inappropriately assumed and imposed (De Cieri & Dowling, 1995; Dowling et al., 1999). This is an important point because a true etic is "one that emerges from the given phenomena" (Ronen, 1986, p. 48). The emic-etic issue has been one of the most frequently examined in cross-cultural research and various suggestions for overcoming the difficulties inherent in this area of research have been offered (Bhagat & McQuaid, 1982; Morey & Luthans, 1984; Teagarden & Von Glinow, 1997; Triandis & Martin, 1983).

Recognition of the differences among the naïve comparative/ culture-free/ culture-bound perspectives is important, not only in terms of raising awareness of the content of what is taught, but in providing a terminology to assist in raising awareness of process and epistemological issues. This recognition is necessary, as the naïve comparative/ culture-free/ culture-bound distinctions, which assume culture to be a measurable entity, apply just as much to teacher-student dynamics as to syllabus and task decisions. To move beyond these traditional approaches to the teaching of SIHRM, we might consider developing more participative, student-teacher critique.

...Towards critical participation. In this analysis, our intent is not only to criticize but also to raise awareness of possibilities for teaching of SIHRM. Can we go further than raising awareness of the differences among naïve comparative/ culture-free/ culture-bound approaches in international education? This question is in line with the suggestion that while the use of critical theory in the classroom is often met with 'institutional resistance', "critical theory has much to offer the management classroom and therefore may well be worth the effort. More than anything else, it encourages students and practicing managers not to take organizational "realities" at face value" (Prasad & Caproni, 1997, p. 289).

One means of doing this is suggested by Grey, Knights and Willmott (1996) in their discussion of an approach in which both teachers

and students reflect critically on management knowledge. In this way, teaching “becomes an activity that points to continuities and discontinuities between students’ experience and bodies of literature” (Grey et al., 1996, p. 101). However, we suggest that such reflection may be difficult where the subject matter is that of SIHRM and where the student group is not a group of experienced senior managers. In any other group, and including classes comprising students of differing nationalities, it may be difficult to move beyond the level of discussing cross-cultural stereotypes, communication norms, and the importance of ‘managing diversity’ (Hostager, Al-Khatib & Dwyer, 1995; Ramsey & Calvert, 1994). However, in the teaching of SIHRM, issues of distance not only relate to physical geography but also to the elevation of the content matter to international and strategic, and hence hierarchically remote matters.

‘Western’ knowledge and thinking about teaching and learning approaches has changed significantly in recent decades, with increasing emphasis on notions of ‘deep’ or ‘active learning’ and ‘independent learning’ (McLean, Reid & Scharf, 1998/99). This refers to students who search for deep conceptual understanding, take responsibility for their own learning, are concerned with skill development as well as knowledge, and seek to apply their learning to the broader context of career and social experience. This active learning approach has been extended to students’ involvement in the assessment process, through self and/or peer assessment system. Stefani (1994, cited in McLean et al., 1998/99) claimed that self and peer assessment increases student motivation and critical processing. While there is some empirical evidence of success with this approach with ‘Western’ students, the cross-cultural applicability remains to be investigated. If we, as Western writers, cannot escape the centrism and colonization of Western teaching styles, perhaps we can at least open up some discussion of the dilemmas involved.

Cross-cultural training as inoculation: A re-presentation. As one example, let us consider

an unconventional approach, or re-presentation, of cross-cultural training (CCT). Indeed, the major focus of training related to SIHRM has been CCT programs that are designed to educate employees, usually in the pre-expatriate phase, in the key cultural values and behaviors of the host country (Harrison, 1994).

As usually presented, CCT has been advocated as important in developing ‘effective interactions’ with host country nationals (HCNs) as strange people from strange lands. CCT is positively correlated with expatriate adjustment and performance: effective use of CCT, and the effectiveness of pre-departure preparations in all areas of staffing and maintenance, has implications for the success of the expatriation and repatriation process (Deshpande & Vishwesvaran, 1992). One example of the cross-cultural issues in training programs is provided by Farhang (1999). A study of Swedish firms in China was used to show that training success depends not only on the knowledge and teaching ability of those providing the teaching as well as the willingness to learn and knowledge of the students. The need for adequate identification and analysis of training needs is viewed as crucial.

With respect to cross-cultural learning experiences, it is important to recognise that the roles of teacher and student may apply both to expatriates and locals. Hence, the knowledge and willingness to teach and to learn are relevant to both groups. Porter and Tansky (1999) argued that a learning orientation is a determining factor of expatriate success; expatriates with stronger learning orientation are more likely to adapt to the new environment and continue in their expatriate assignment.

Models for CCT (e.g., Mendenhall & Oddou, 1986; Harrison, 1994), including methods of immersion versus passive learning, provide examples of the teaching technology of SIHRM. Empirical testing and evaluation of such CCT models is scarce in the literature (cf. Deshpande & Vishwesvaran, 1992), but the apparent reasoning behind CCT is that it raises sensitivity to

and tolerance of 'others', avoiding or reducing the chances of unpleasant encounters. In this sense, CCT can be viewed as a means of prophylaxis and, in particular, inoculation against 'host country nationals', invoking images of biological colonization in addition to the geographical and discursive senses of colonization discussed above.

Rather than train for or teach about CCT as (implied) inoculation, we can consider other models. If we move beyond the 'safari mode' of taking the uninitiated out of the classroom on a 'Cook's Tour' into SIHRM territory, we might shift attention from the expatriate to the HCN. For example, we could take heed of Linstead's (1996) comments that social anthropology proceeds by a methodology of 'ethnographic immersion', and of his suggestions for a pedagogy that seeks to develop the manager as anthropologist that includes "becoming receptive to others and otherness" (Linstead, 1996, p. 22). He gives the example of an exercise that involved briefing and discussion sessions to allow 'actors' to take on or feel 'inside the skin' of a particular employee role. Leaving biology aside, we suggest that it is also important to examine pedagogical implications of such suggestions for the teaching of SIHRM due to the predominance of Western educational techniques such as experiential learning and participative classes; techniques which may be much less effective for non-Western learners (Vance & Ring, 1994). Perhaps we can learn from Calas and Smircich (1996), who identify post (colonial) feminist deconstructions of colonial stories and testimonial writings from the points of view of those such as HCNs, non-managerial employees and/or expatriate partners and families whose voices are not otherwise heard.

Summary and Conclusion

In presenting these arguments in several academic fora, we have been struck by the polarisation of our reception. Our presentations have been met by a combination of positive and outraged reactions, the latter including concerns with our critical perspective, our feminism, and our tone of writing. Others again have suggested

we increase the strength of our argument, though this is not our intention as we realise that internationalised management education is in the early stages. However, our critique introduces the relevant and important concepts of ethnocentrism and paternalism and we raise these concepts so that we may open up further discussion and consideration.

The issues raised in this paper highlight the importance of reflexive contemplation, discussion, and strategy formulation and implementation in order to develop sustainable approaches to internationalised management education. This requires examination not only of what we teach or how we teach others, but how we act ourselves. We must question our actions as researchers and educators in the field of SIHRM, and develop awareness of our role as definers and disseminators of information. We hope that, by exploring the implications of SIHRM for research, practice and teaching, we may raise awareness of current deficiencies and unasked questions.

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