

The real problem: The deadly combination of psychologisation, scientism, and normative promotionalism takes strategic human resource management down a 30-year dead end

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Abstract

This paper engages with Troth and Guest (2019) on psychology in HRM. I argue they misframe the central issue in debate. The *real* problem is not psychology per se but *psychologisation*—the drive to reduce explanation of macro-level HRM outcomes to individual-level psychological-behavioural factors and individual differences. Accordingly, the most visible and harmful effects of psychologisation are in strategic HRM and the HRM-performance literature but Troth and Guest's defence of psychology does not cover them. I use this response to re-establish that it is psychologisation, not psychology per se, that is the critics' focal concern and describe how the three-decade advance of psychologisation, along with scholastic scientism and normative promotionalism, have created severe theoretical and empirical problems in the high-performance research programme and taken the strategic HRM field down a 30-year dead-end. Suggestions for a turn-around are provided.

KEYWORDS

AMO model, high-performance work system, industrial relations, strategic HRM

1 | INTRODUCTION

I appreciate the opportunity to provide comment and perspective on Ashlea Troth's and David Guest's provocation paper, "The Case for Psychology in HRM Research" (2019). Their four-part purpose is to rebut criticisms of

psychology in HRM, outline its positive contributions, propose a broader multidisciplinary/multimethod research framework for HRM, and call on researchers from other disciplines and fields to shift from criticism to constructive contribution. The HRM/psychology critics, Troth and Guest say, harm the field's progress with exaggerated, misdirected, and partisan attacks. In the introduction (p. 1), they cite five papers guilty of "gross generalisations," starting with Godard (2014) and followed by Harley (2015), Siebert, Martin, & Bozic (2015), and two papers by Kaufman (2012, 2015a).

My evaluation is that Troth and Guest (2019) accomplish none of their four purposes, make their own over-generalisations and partisan digs, and steer the debate in an unproductive direction. The *real* problem in the HRM field is not with psychology but the process of *psychologisation*—the drive to reduce explanation of macro-level HRM outcomes to within-person psychological/behavioural constructs, processes, and states and their cross-person differences. The most visible and harmful effects of psychologisation are in strategic HRM and its HRM-performance research programme, but Troth and Guest scarcely mention them. Accordingly, I use this response to put the macro-level part of the psychology–HRM debate back on the table, articulate the most troublesome issues, and in the process endeavour to strengthen strategic HRM's theoretical foundation.

The conclusions are threefold. First, psychologisation has progressively worsened in strategic HRM; second, the three complementary forces of psychologisation, normative promotionalism, and scholastic scientism have seriously deteriorated the HRM-performance research programme; and third, the 30 years of strategic HRM research investment have yielded little new knowledge contribution of scientific or managerial value. The paper ends with several suggestions for resuscitating the strategic HRM research programme.

2 | TROTH AND GUEST: A READER'S GUIDE AND CAVEAT EMPTOR

Troth and Guest title their paper "The Case for Psychology in HRM Research" and say they are responding to criticisms that a "psychological perspective either threatens progress in HRM research or sends it in the wrong direction." This way of framing the debate sets up a non-issue and straw-man distraction. The title phrase "case for psychology" implies one or more critics have argued the "case against," but Troth and Guest provide no examples or evidence.

This surmise is reinforced by letting the critics speak for themselves. None are broad-brush psychology rejectionists. Godard (2014, p. 2), the most trenchant psychology critic, allows that "psychology has always played an important role in some areas of HRM (e.g., selection and testing)," Siebert, Martin, and Bozic (2016, p. 278) state, "Psychology and OB have their place, and so does functionalism, which we have been at pains to emphasize throughout this article," and Kaufman (2012:26) argues, "Strategic HRM suffers from too much psychologizing and not enough economizing."

The central issue for critics (Godard, 2014; also Shields & Grant, 2010; Kasyanenko, Nevado, Rimmer, & Soares, 2014) is not psychology per se but the expanding *psychologisation* of HRM at ascending meso (group), macro (organisation), and national, international, and comparative levels. Psychologisation connotes, first, a *trend over time* and second, an increase in the *relative importance* of psychology and, specifically, micro-individualist industrial-organisational psychology (IOP) and its close business school offshoot organisational behaviour (OB).

Critics believe HRM by its nature spans a number of causal forces, institutions, disciplinary knowledge areas, and normative interests and therefore needs to be researched and taught as a pluralist multidisciplinary field (Budd, 2019). Thus, when Troth and Guest (2019) advocate at the end of their paper an expanded multidisciplinary, multi-method, multilevel, stakeholder framework for HRM research, they are preaching to the industrial relations/social science choir who have long advocated and practiced this approach (e.g., Batt & Banerjee, 2012; Budd, 2004; Kochan, 1998) and should instead focus on persuading their behavioural science colleagues who have a much thinner record in cross-disciplinary/cross-level HRM research (e.g., employee voice, per Morrison, 2014; Chamberlin, Newton, & LePine, 2018).

An important part of Godard's (2014) critique of psychology is not sufficiently brought out by Troth and Guest. His central point of criticism is not psychology per se but its symbiotic role in the ascendancy of a scholastic, arid *scientism* in HRM. Scientism is associated with the positivist, hypothetico-deductive research method now transcendent in the social sciences, business schools, and management (Ghoshal, 2005; Fleetwood & Hesketh, 2008; Harley, 2015). Scientism displaces other methods, such as action/field research and inductive theory construction, and seeks to make management and HRM in the mould of a natural science with deductively derived theories, models, and hypotheses analysed and tested with advanced statistical/quantitative methods. The faculty performance criterion with scientism is publication of rigorous, leading-edge research in top-tier general management and HRM field journals, with formalist science-building replacing applied problem-solving (Beer, Boselie, & Brewster, 2015).

For these tasks, a basic discipline, such as psychology or economics, provides the strongest theory base and methods toolkit. Accordingly, theory and empirical research on HRM/employment issues have separated over the last three decades into two "ships in the night" research streams, one centred in economics (Grund et al., 2017; Gunderson, 2001; Lazear & Oyer, 2013), the other in the behavioural/organisational science part of management (e.g., Jiang & Messersmith, 2018; Wright & Ulrich, 2017), with multidisciplinary/multilevel industrial relations a fading integrator-connector (Boxall, 2014; Townsend & Wilkinson, 2014) and critical management/labour process ignored (Edwards, 2008; Thompson, 2011; Harley, 2015).¹ Godard's critique of psychologising is thus better understood as Exhibit A in his case against positivism in business school research, and similarly, this author (Kaufman, 1999, 2020) has critiqued mainstream labour economics for neglect of management and behavioural-psychological factors.

An apples-oranges incongruity is that psychology critics (e.g., Godard, 2014) expressly focus their critique on *American-based* IOP/OB, but Troth and Guest defend with counter-examples mostly drawn from dissimilar *European-based* work-organisational psychology (Koppes, 2007). The American-based high-performance paradigm is also the main focal point of critique by strategic HRM critics (e.g., Dundon & Rafferty, 2018; Kaufman, 2012), although with recognition of a growing number of participants and broadening of perspectives from outside North America (e.g., see the edited volume *HRM & Performance* by Paauwe, Guest, & Wright, 2013).

Lastly, because Troth and Guest's main argument is that criticisms of psychology are overgeneralised and over-negative, their rebuttal strategy centres on citing/discussing counter examples and qualifications. A shortcoming of this approach is it leaves largely unexamined and unchallenged the substantive merits of the critics' case against psychology in HRM, and consequently, their paper becomes more a rounding out and correction of the record.

3 | PSYCHOLOGISATION OF STRATEGIC HRM: ADDITIONAL EVIDENCE

A first step is to establish that psychologisation is a real phenomenon. Troth and Guest (2019: 1) affirmatively note "the growing influence of a psychological perspective" with citation to Godard (2014). Godard establishes a case for psychologisation in Canadian business schools from data on changes in the disciplinary composition of HRM faculties and courses.

A different kind of evidence, with helpful high-performance tie-in, comes from comparison of the original 1992 strategic HRM model by Wright and McMahan (1992) and updated 2019 version by Jiang and Li (2019). Wright and McMahan demarcate with boxes and arrows the structure of the model and insert names of seven contributing theoretical perspectives. They are resource dependence, institutional, resource-based view of the firm (RBV), cybernetic, agency, transaction cost, and behavioural. Only the behavioural perspective has psychological content.

Jiang and Li's (2019) updated version, shown in Figure 1, is broadly similar in box-arrow structure but splits the causal pathway into micro-individual and macro-organisational levels. The important evidence bearing on psychologisation is their expanded list of 16 contributing theoretical perspectives. Whereas only one perspective is psychological/behavioural in the original model, the list expands to seven in the updated version. The psychologisation trend is significantly understated; however, because most of the nonpsychological contributors (e.g., general systems theory, cybernetic, and transaction cost) are rarely used in the strategic HRM literature, and in addition, other

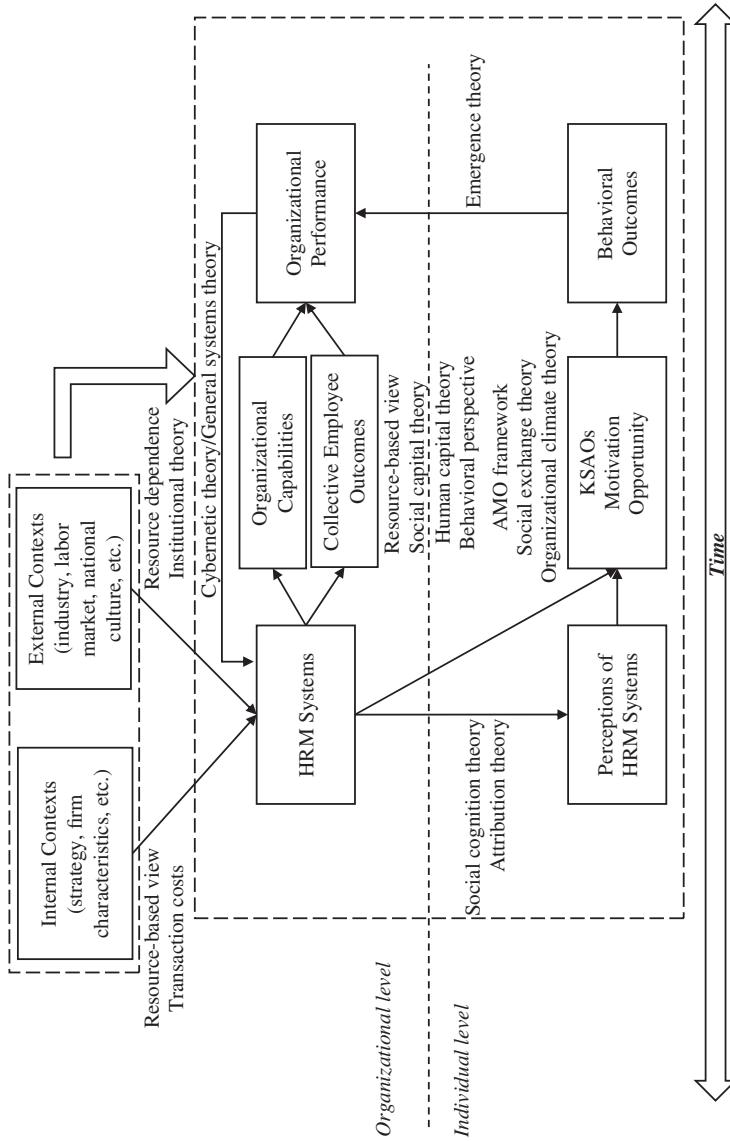


FIGURE 1 An integrated model of strategic human resource management (Jiang & Li, 2019). AMO: ability, motivation, opportunity; KSAO: knowledge, skills, abilities, and other

nonpsychological perspectives, such as economics (Kaufman, 2015a), employment relations (Budd, 2019), labour process (Thompson and Harley, 2008), critical/radical (Delbridge & Keenoy, 2010), and business systems/varieties of capitalism (Lane & Wood, 2014), are not listed. Similarly, whereas Figure 1 includes contextual and institutional perspectives (Cooke, 2018; Gooderham, Mayrhofer, & Brewster, 2019; Paauwe & Farndale, 2017), an argument can be made their importance remains understated. Whatever the particulars, the evidence points to increasing psychologisation of strategic HRM and mainstream HRM-performance model.

4 | THE HIGH-PERFORMANCE PARADIGM: FRAMING THE ANALYTICAL ISSUES

A second reason for featuring Jiang and Li's (2019) composite representation of the HRM-performance model is it provides a tangible benchmark for the discussion and critique in the remainder of the paper. The critique part is not in any way aimed at these authors but at generic features of the mainstream model which they accurately and ably synthesise from a large number of earlier studies (and generously invited the author's comment).

Today's high-performance work system (HPWS) model began to form in the early 1990s but only took definite shape with Huselid's (1995) seminal paper (Paauwe et al., 2013:2). He frames the central hypothesis (p. 644) as, "All else being equal, the use of High Performance Work Practices [HPWPs] and good internal fit should lead to positive outcomes for all types of firms." Huselid tested it with a cross-section regression model of the form (heuristically represented): $PERF = \beta_0 + \beta_1 HRM + \beta_2 Y + \varepsilon$, where HRM is an index measure of advanced HPWPs, Y is a vector of moderator/control variables, PERF is the firm performance outcome measure, and ε is a random error term (interaction terms ignored). The regression coefficient β_1 measures the HRM effect on performance ($\beta_1 = \Delta PERF / \Delta HRM$) and thus is the focal finding. By hypothesis, $\beta_1 > 0$. Huselid found a quantitatively large positive main effect and generally small and weak contingencies.

Hundreds of follow-up empirical studies have improved on Huselid's empirical analysis (Wood, 2018) but the universal main effect, $\beta_1 > 0$, remains well supported, per a series of meta-analyses (reviewed in Jiang & Messersmith, 2018). Most contingency effects also remain relatively modest. On the basis of this evidence, Paauwe et al., (2013: 198) conclude, "irrespective of business strategy and context, there is a positive association between the adoption of more 'progressive', 'high-performance,' or 'high-commitment' HR practices and organisational outcomes." The word "association" is an important qualifier because the theory, per the directional arrows in Figure 1, postulates β_1 is a causal relation but cross-section regression only establishes bi-directional correlation.

The other prong of the high-performance research programme is development of a theoretical framework with cause-effect mediating mechanism (MM) that connects independent variable HRM to dependent variable PERF; that is, $HRM \rightarrow MM \rightarrow PERF$ (Wood, 2018; Delery & Roumpi, 2017). Most of the basics are in Huselid's (1995) paper but have been considerably elaborated and refined, such as multilevel analysis in Figure 1 and additional boxes for perceptions of HRM systems, organisational capabilities, and collective employee outcomes.

The key mediating construct at the beginning of the HPWS research programme was fit between the firm's business strategy and HRM system (Fombrun, Tichy, & Devanna, 1984). The advent of the psychologisation/scientism process in the early-mid 1990s gradually shifted the theoretical locus to the micro-individual level and two new concepts: ability, motivation, opportunity (AMO) and RBV, along with supplementary constructs of human capital, social exchange, social capital, attribution theory, and others (collectively denoted as the mediating vector Z). Schematically, the HRM-performance model evolved into $HRM \rightarrow [AMO, RBV, Z] \rightarrow B \rightarrow PERF$, where B represents performance-enhancing employee work behaviours and the individual HPWPs (in HRM) sort into ability-, motivation-, and opportunity-enhancing system components (Delery & Roumpi, 2017).

Mainstream HPWS proponents look at the strategic HRM research programme and conclude it has "advanced rapidly over the last 25 years" and rests on a "solid research base" (Paauwe et al., 2013: 205), is a "story of success" (Wright, Guest, and Paauwe, 2015:413), and represents a "road well-travelled" (Wright & Ulrich, 2017). Accordingly,

these researchers grow exasperated with articles from strategic HRM outsiders laden with criticism, advancing arguments that seem over-harsh, one-sided, unfair or partisan-motivated, and lacking constructive suggestions for improvement. It is difficult to read Troth and Guest's (2019) paper and not feel they fall in this camp.

As in all human affairs, there are two sides to every controversy. Having acknowledged the way it looks to the mainstream side, and that sometimes their complaints have a valid component (e.g., I agree with Godard's (2014) main line of argument but also think his critique at places is overgeneralised/over-harsh), the remainder of this paper presents the other side as seen by a critic. As indicated earlier, because the negative side of psychologisation worsens at successively higher levels of analysis, I shift attention to macro-level strategic HRM and its core HRM-performance research programme (omitted by Troth and Guest) with particular focus on the paradigmatic HPWS model (Figure 1). Also emphasised is what Boxall, Purcell, and Wright (2008:4) call an *analytical* approach to HRM.

Two additional points need emphasis. First, my critique of strategic HRM is specifically focused on the analytical/theoretical structure and logic of the HRM-performance model, such as Figure 1 and the "standard causal model" depicted by Boselie, Dietz, and Boon (2005) and De Winne and Sels (2013) and does not apply to the extremely broad and heterogeneous strategic HRM/HPWS literature writ large—estimated by Jiang and Messersmith (2018) to include 8,000+ articles—where all manner of exceptions, qualifications, and counter-examples can be found.

Second, an important dimension of literature heterogeneity is varying degrees of divergence between the American HRM-performance paradigm frame and the frame advanced by a number of researchers from Europe, Australia, and Asia (e.g., Boxall & Purcell, 2016; Cooke, 2018; Gooderham et al., 2019; Paauwe & Farndale, 2017) and also researchers in industrial relations and other fields outside business schools (e.g., Batt & Banerjee, 2012; Jones, Kalmi, & Kauhanen, 2010). People in these groups believe the baseline HPWS model needs to incorporate a richer/deeper set of pluralist, contextual, configurational, stakeholder, and social/institutional factors, as I similarly advocate. What seems the majority, however, do not on this account reject the HPWS per se (as I do) but only the decontextualised, quasi-universalist, shareholder American version which seems a poor fit for other nations and world regions.

5 | NORMATIVE PROMOTIONALISM: HRM "ADDS VALUE AND DESERVES RESPECT"

This critic's summary evaluation of the HRM-performance stream was earlier phrased as a *failing grade* (Kaufman, 2012). A contributing factor cited in the article, which needs re-emphasis is that (mainstream) strategic HRM research suffers from substantial normative bias because the motivation of researchers (collectively) is strongly shaped, consciously or unconsciously, by values and incentives to produce a predetermined, collectively-desired research outcome, denoted in both theoretical and empirical realms as $\beta_1 > 0$. This normative motivation turns *scientific* HRM into *promotional* HRM (March and Sutton, 1997).

Paauwe et al. (2013) clearly describe the promotional motive behind the HPWS research programme. They state (p. 1, emphasis added), "Practitioners interested in human resource management (HRM) have long sought to *convince others of its value*," and "In response to this longstanding and often repeated criticism that HR does not add value to organisations, academic research has exploded over the past 20 years, *seeking to show* that HRM practices are related to firm performance." It is not just HR practitioners, however, who benefit from demonstrating $\beta_1 > 0$ but also HR academics as it helps "HRM become *more firmly established* both as an *academic discipline* and a valuable business function" (p. 13). Boselie et al. (2005), p. 67, emphasis added) earlier observed, "The nature of the interaction between HRM and performance, and particularly the search for conclusive evidence of the decisive positive impact of the former on the latter, is for many the whole subject area's *Holy Grail*."

These quotations, and numerous others readily available (Kaufman, 2012; Stark & Poppler, 2017), clearly indicate an animating purpose of the HPWS research programme is a normative quest to convince CEOs and the business community, business school deans and fellow academics, and the public at large that *HR adds value, HR matters*,

HR deserves a seat at the table, HR deserves respect, and more investment in HR is good for everyone (Pauwe et al., 2013:204).

The normative value system is reinforced by the academic incentive structure. Publish or perish pressures are rising, whereas journal paper acceptance rates, particularly in coveted American journals, are low and falling. The resulting incentive is to craft narrowly technocratic, noncontroversial, extend/develop-the-accepted-paradigm type of papers that editors/reviewers have less reason to criticise, oppose, and reject. For mainstream strategic HRM researchers, this incentive means developing theories, reporting empirical results, and framing criticisms in ways that broadly build/strengthen the field's central HPWS paradigm and associated $\beta_1 > 0$ prediction (Krscynski and Ulrich, 2015: 363), thus qualifying as "thoughtful analyses" and not "an overly critical perspective" which is "ultimately damaging" to the field (Troth & Guest, 2019:11). A predictable outcome is a research stream with significant selective theorizing, confirmation bias, data mining, Type I errors, and publication bias (Murphy & Aguinis, 2019).

These problems are common to all academic orthodoxies and across the social-behavioural sciences (described for labour economics and industrial relations by Kaufman, 2012, p. 22), but another dimension of spin is specific to strategic HRM. Studies in the 1990s seemed to solidly establish $\beta_1 > 0$, and hence, Pauwe et al., (2013: 198, emphasis added) observe, "the challenge, as successive chapters have indicated, lies in providing a *convincing explanation* of this association". The implication is theory has been systematically shaped and developed to provide a $\beta_1 > 0$ conclusion.

6 | HPWS ANALYTICAL FLAWS: THE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT SIDE

The distinction between person (P) and environment (E), also known as agent-structure and individual-situation, is a well-known dualism in the social/behavioural sciences and is expressed by social psychologist Lewin (1936) as the equation $B = f(B, P)$, where B is a behavioural action. In a nutshell, the psychologisation critique is that internal person-level psychological P theories and factors—very relevant and important for micro-level HRM and individual practices—are inappropriately extended into macro HRM analysis and given excessive explanatory role and weight relative to external E theories and factors. The remainder of the paper fleshes-out this argument, beginning with highlight on seven problem areas on the external environment (E) side of the HRM-performance model and followed by six problem areas on the individual psychology (P) side, with connections and implications drawn to relevant parts of Troth and Guest's (2019) paper. All arguments and examples are with *specific reference* to formal representations (e.g., Figure 1) of the field's backbone theoretical construct, the mainstream HRM-performance model, with due recognition of many verbal qualifications across studies.

6.1 | Missing environment external to the firm

The strategic HRM models of the 1980s, such as Fombrun et al. (1984) and Beer, Spector, Lawrence, Mills, and Walton (1984), give considerable prominence and importance to the environmental complex of economic, legal, political, and social-cultural forces and factors located external to the firm/organisation (model diagrams reproduced in Kaufman, 2015c). The strategic HRM field was still in its first decade when the psychologisation/scientism processes began, per the Wright and McMahan (1992) model earlier described. The model omits *all* aspects of the firm's external environment with strategy (RBV) and political-institutional factors located inside the firm. Subsequent HPWS model diagrams (e.g., De Winne & Sels, 2013; Delery & Roumpi, 2017) also omit all features of the external environment and instead focus on the individual-level behavioural channel from HRM to PERF (with exceptions, such as Boxall & Purcell, 2016, and Pauwe & Farndale, 2017, who add greater industrial relations (IR), contextual, and institutional content). The composite strategic HRM model by Jiang and Li (2019) includes a box for external context but its peripheral importance relative to psychology is signalled when they mention it in four scattered places without

textual discussion but devote more than a page to the individual worker's perceptions/evaluation of the strength of HRM practices.

6.2 | HPWS: Open → closed system

Is omission of an external environment from the HPWS model a justifiable abstraction or critical flaw? Paradoxically, Wright and McMahan (1992, p. 296) suggest the latter. They quote from an earlier study "HRM issues are part of an open system" and "the research is theoretically bankrupt" if done in a closed system framework but then proceed to build a closed system model.

An open system acquires inputs from its environment, transforms them into higher-valued outputs, exports the outputs back to the environment to acquire the next round of inputs, and adapts to changes in the environment. The HPWS is a closed system (Figure 1) because the firm is not connected to a labour market to obtain employee inputs (it is listed as an external context factor), has no product market to sell outputs and obtain revenue, and the organisational performance box is located *inside* the firm.

A closed-system HPWS model creates a host of overlooked analytical/logical problems. *First*, the firm's workforce is a fixed stock with no inflow-outflow. *Second*, the employee recruitment/selection practice is redundant. *Third*, all training is effectively firm-specific. *Fourth*, pay level, structure, and performance contingency are internal-determined with no connection to demand/supply conditions, pay levels at other firms or market-related performance outcomes. *Fifth*, employee turnover is largely a moot issue with no external exit to other firms or labour market. *Sixth*, changing workforce demographics and social values are relegated to background context factors. *Seventh*, firms and HRM are unaffected by price, quality, and innovation competition from domestic/global rivals. *Eighth*, production and employment are stable and predictable (e.g., no business cycles, trade wars, Brexit). *Ninth*, a closed system does not have employer associations, labour unions, or social movement groups. *Tenth*, cross-national differences in economic, business, legal, and social-cultural environments enter only as background context factors. *Eleventh*, HRM is insulated from financialisation, downsizing/reengineering, and erosion of internal labour markets. *Twelfth*, there are no financial performance measures for an HPWS dependent variable without an external environment. *Thirteenth*, the RBV is redundant without external labour markets. *Fourteenth*, it is a non sequitur for researchers to cite intense market competition as a reason for adopting HPWPs. And, *fifteenth* (last but not least), by omitting an external environment, strategic HRM theorists have emptied nearly all of the genuinely strategic content out of the subject.²

6.3 | Missing internal environmental structure

Next on psychologisation's agenda is stripping away organisational structures and situational factors inside the firm.

The HPWS model, besides excluding the external environment as an active explanatory force, does much the same to six important internal features (Jackson, Schuler, and Jiang, 2014). They include (a) organisational structure, (b) production technology, (c) production/work system structure, (d) vertical/horizontal job structure, (e) corporate/workforce governance, and (f) other functional parts of the firm's business system, such as marketing, finance, and risk management.

A model is a severe abstraction of a complex reality, many seemingly-relevant factors have to be omitted, and only those kept that have clear first-order explanatory importance. Therefore, even though the HPWS model omits these things (Figure 1), the key analytical consideration is whether they are important moderators/mediators of HRM → PERF or only supplemental control/context variables.

Consider representative firms in six business lines: *airlines, construction, fast-food restaurants, hospitals, steel mills, and universities*. Question one: Can a theory or empirical model with AMO, RBV, and Z variables but none of the six

internal structure variables adequately explain the main patterns and features of the HRM systems across the six types of businesses? Question two: Is it likely the HRM systems that form around these six internal factors, in terms of structure, breadth/depth, and types of HR practices, are uniquely different system configurations (hence, with equifinality, a multiplicity of “high-performance systems” because each system allows firms in its ecological domain to attain highest-possible PERF) or, alternatively, contingently modified versions of a universal HRM system? Question three: How likely is it a bundle of HPWPs (e.g., rigorous selection, extensive training, and self-managed teams) is a good performance fit for each of these six business types, and how likely is it that performance in each keeps rising with more investment in HPWPs? Question four: fundamental features of a high-commitment/high-involvement (HC/HI) system are downward movement of *power, knowledge, information and rewards* made effective with a *multi-level employee voice and influence system* (Beer et al., 1984; Lawler, 1986), but without internal structure can the HPWS include them and in the six lines of business are they feasible and performance-enhancing practices?

6.4 | Missing management

Scientism's priority on quantitative analysis puts a premium on measurable constructs. Thus, even though the last word in HRM is *management* and its researchers are in *management departments*, practices are the centrepiece (HRM system box in Figure 1) and management as function or actor is conspicuously missing. Management is instead the invisible hand that notches up (never down) the HRM practice levers (Boada-Cuerva, Trullun, & Valverde, 2019; Steffensen, Ellen, Wang, & Ferris, 2019).

It seems beyond argument that the quality and capability of the executive team and cadre of line and functional managers are a strategic influence on firm performance, implying leaving the management factor out of the HPWS is a serious source of bias (e.g., HPWS implementation/sustainability are likely positively correlated with management capability, creating upward bias in β_1). Also, omitting management truncates the firm's workforce, human resources, human capital, productive labour input, and source of competitive advantage (i.e., CEO to supervisor are hired from labour markets on terminable employment contracts, without their input firm performance plummets, and differential capability in scarce leadership/management talent is likely a far larger and enduring source of above-competitive profits and rents than an HRM practice system).

Also a problem, first-generation strategic HRM researchers (e.g., Beer et al., 1984) model HRM as a *general executive/management* activity, whereas second-generation researchers, with their focus on practices and “HRM matters,” shift emphasis toward HRM as a *functional/department* activity (Huselid, 1995; Wright & McMahan, 1992). A downside of the functional perspective is it restricts HRM's strategic role—thus precipitating an over-wrought academic campaign to transform the HR staff/support function into a strategic business partner—and, perhaps more serious for strategic HRM, implies *work system practices* (e.g., teams and job design) *do not belong* in the HRM independent variable for they are not part of the HR function's typical decision domain and, therefore, logically do not count as HR practice levers. Without work practices, HPWPs \approx advanced personnel practices, as described from Tead and Metcalf (1920, first U.S. university personnel textbook) to Foulkes (1980).

Lastly, omitting management removes attention from general HR management *activities* of planning, organizing, coordinating, and controlling the human part of organisations to functional HR management *practices* of a substantial technical, administrative, rule-based nature (Kehoe and Han, 2019).

6.5 | Missing employees and employment relationship

HRM's reason for being is to manage the firm's employees, but paradoxically, employees are invisible in the HPWS model (Figure 1). Shown instead are two desiccated parts of a human being in the mediating mechanism, knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics, and motivation. Similarly, because the HPWS is a closed system functionally

disconnected from labour markets, it is missing an employment relationship (ER). A model of an ER has to have two behavioural equations (Simon, 1951), one explaining employer goals/actions and the other employee goals/actions, and their simultaneous solution yields the ER's outcomes—including the *endogenously-determined HRM bundle* (Marsden, 1999; Kaufman, 2015b for employee voice).

The HPWS model, by contrast, boils down to a one-equation input-output function (Wright & McMahan, 1992: Figure 3) operated by managers who optimise its throughput by adjusting HPWPs in an exogenously-given and theoretically unexplained HRM system box (per its independent variable status) in order to optimise the end-goal profit/rate of return (ROI) interests of the firm's owners/investors (with hierarchical principal-agent problems from economics rarely mentioned). Employees' goals, interests, and well-being, and their behaviours/strategies to achieve them, are omitted (no employee equation; interests not specified beyond an "economic man" desire for more money in the expectancy model of motivation in AMO) so employees in the HPWS model, logically viewed, are instrumental (human) resource *means* that managers and the business-partner HR function are charged with efficiently utilizing (i.e., "exploiting") to get the most value for least cost for the firm's maximum profit/performance *end*.

Accordingly, employee's well-being in a shareholder HPWS firm, logically viewed, is not a concern/interest of the managers and business-partner HRM function except to the extent it affects the performance bottom line. On the other hand, employee's well-being is a direct concern if owners/executives make advancing employees' interests a stakeholder component of PERF. However, without a corporate/workforce governance decision box in the model (Figure 1), a separate employee goal/behaviour equation with delineated well-being interests, and explicitly differentiated shareholder versus stakeholder PERF measures, the HPWS remains at heart an HRM-driven input/output function managed with owners' interests solely in mind—that is, a form of unilateral *faux unitarism*.

6.6 | Missing profit and economic criteria for HRM decision-making

Making a profit is the *raison d'être* of business firms, the driving force of free-enterprise capitalism, and the focal subject of business schools. A person reading the strategic HRM/HPWS literature would never guess this, however, for psychologisation has stripped the profit word out of HRM discourse (apart from a PERF measure) and close-to-zero mainstream journal articles ground explanation of HRM on the profit concept, profit motive, profit-making process, and weighing of benefits/costs (more generally, advantages/disadvantages).

As noted above, the HPWS is not a model of a business but an input-output function with a financial PERF variable appended. The causal logic is that notching up the HRM practice levers in Figure 1 feeds more inputs of AMO and desired employee behaviours into the production system and, with appropriate fit, implementation, and RBV-augmented organisational capabilities, comes higher output and sales and financial performance. Profit, however, is the difference between revenue and cost and neither can be determined in the model because it does not identify input and output *quantities* (e.g., total employee hours and units of output) nor their *prices* (e.g., average hourly wage and product price). Increasing the HRM practice levers, therefore, could lower performance ($\Delta\text{PERF}/\Delta\text{HRM} < 0$) if the cost goes up more than the revenue (sometimes mentioned but not analytically incorporated; for empirical evidence, see Cappelli & Neumark, 2001).

The HPWS model also lacks a managerial decision model for determining an organisation's means → end strategy at company and HR levels and the performance-optimizing low-to-high *level* of practices in a bundle and the bundle's best-fit *mix*. Its decision guide for managers consists of $\beta_1 > 0$ (more HRM is better), selective tautologies (e.g., invest in valuable resources and adopt HRM practices that are performance-enhancing), and non-operational maxims (fit HRM practices to strategy and align HRM practices to exploit synergies).³ However, HPWS articles increasingly feature the term *optimise* so, as one improvement option, strategic HRM could follow economics and model managerial choice as a problem of constrained optimisation and use marginal decision rules and incremental comparison of benefits/costs to determine best-practice amount and best-fit mix of HRM (Kaufman & Miller, 2011; also Boudreau & Ramstad, 2007).

A common objection is that managers do not or cannot use marginal-type decision rules, which I have also found partly true (Kaufman, 2020) in field study (contingent on complexity, type, and time horizon of the decision problem). This objection is, nonetheless, logically beside the point when the application is not practice but scientific research and optimisation of an analytical model. An alternative approach, if following economics is a bridge too far, is a human decision model from psychology/OB (along with dropping reference to optimisation). Whatever the case, without logical criteria for making choices in level/mix of HRM practice, the HPWS model—except in strict universal form where substantive decisions are obviated by construction—devolves from a theory to an academic and often ad-hoc, incorrect conjecture. A prime illustration is that without use of marginal decision rules to determine optimal stopping points on continuous functions (e.g., amount of HPWPs that optimise PERF), the HPWS model—and HRM/OB models in general (e.g., OB models of employee voice)—yield economically irrational and financially ruinous predictions of the open-ended “more is better” type.

6.7 | Dependent and independent variables reversed

The HPWS model (Figure 1) makes HRM the independent driver variable and organisational performance PERF the dependent outcome variable. An independent variable, by definition, is determined outside the system, putting the HRM field in the awkward dead-end position of 30 years on not having a theoretical explanation—or even agreed-upon definition—for its central object of study, the HRM system (Gooderham et al., 2019; Boon, Den Hartog, & Lepak, 2019).

One source of the problem is that the normative quest to demonstrate HRM matters and $\beta_1 > 0$ has led strategic HRM researchers to reverse independent and dependent variables. Companies' top-level executives determine the organisation's next-period PERF goal (PERF*) and management's job task, mediated by their AMO, agentic well-being equation, and business decision-making process (all omitted variables in Figure 1), is to decide *what kind*, *how much*, and *what mix* of HRM staff, activities, and practices (HRM*) to invest in to achieve PERF*, given the predetermined/exogenous factors of the situation (e.g., expected sales, production technology, wage level). If perfectly done, in the next period HRM = HRM* and PERF = PERF* and, by definition, HRM* is the highest-performance HR system.⁴ On the other hand, if realised PERF falls short of target PERF*, executives recalibrate the performance/HRM equation and do a re-optimisation to get the HRM* that intendedly achieves PERF*. The process is further challenging because some of the exogenous variables change from period to period (e.g., economic cycles, new information technology, rising benefits cost) which also change optimal HRM*. Irrespective of details, the central point is that from a business decision-making perspective the HRM system is an *endogenous* choice variable (Kaufman & Miller, 2011) and therefore fundamentally wrongly specified in the HPWS model (deeper than the empirical reverse causality problem and lack of longitudinal data).

7 | HPWS ANALYTICAL FLAWS: THE PERSON-PSYCHOLOGICAL SIDE

The serious flaws on the external environment (E) side of the high-performance paradigm have counterparts on the psychological-person (P) side, highlighted by six examples in this section.

7.1 | AMO: Not so universal

The core of the HRM-performance model is the mediating mechanism that connects HRM to PERF, and its most important components are AMO and RBV. In recent years, AMO has surpassed RBV in explanatory importance, in part because it has more psychological content, operates at the individual level, and generates more hypotheses. Paauwe et al., (2013: 5) call AMO the, “most well-accepted framework”, and Boxall (2013: 55) observes, “The ‘AMO’

model of individual performance... has been at the heart of HPWS thinking from the outset". Troth and Guest (2019), however, do not examine AMO.

The theoretical idea is that employees with higher ability (can do), motivation (will do), and opportunity (enabled to do) will provide the in-role and extra-role work behaviours (B) that create competitive advantage and high performance. HR practices, in turn, provide firms with the levers to increase employee AMO, such as selection and training (higher A), performance pay and broadened jobs (higher M), and shop floor participation and self-managed teams (higher O).

The AMO explanation for $\Delta\text{PERF}/\Delta\text{HRM} > 0$ seems convincing and universal but is neither. It appears self-evident that more AMO is universally good for performance because firms have a more skilled, motivated, and empowered workforce. However, every AMO-boosting HPWP costs money to implement so they may increase AMO yet lower bottom-line PERF (Cappelli & Neumark, 2001; Kaufman, 2012). Also, more HRM \rightarrow AMO may reduce PERF if it includes employee's well-being as a stakeholder component and higher output/profit for the firm entails greater work intensification, mental/physical stress, and wear-out for employees.

Embedded in AMO is another "more HRM" bias. The component parts of AMO are selectively theorised to get a universally positive $\Delta\text{HPWP} \rightarrow \Delta\text{AMO}$ relation. The positive motivational (M) effect of contingent pay, for example, is explained with expectancy theory (a stronger connection between effort and reward). However, a need-based motivation theory (e.g., Herzberg's two-factor theory) predicts extra pay ceases to motivate once pay-related needs are fulfilled and, similarly, an equity theory predicts employees reduce work effort if the contingent pay process, rules, or outcomes are thought unfair. With regard to the opportunity (O) variable, practices such as teams and expanded self-management empower and intrinsically motivate but also provide more opportunity to hide and work less (a reason Frederick Taylor individualised work tasks).

7.2 | AMO: Psychologizing environment into opportunity

The AMO construct used in HRM is generally attributed to Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg, and Kalleberg (2000) from the IR field but actually originates in IOP (e.g., Maier, 1946) and is fully developed by Blumberg and Pringle (1982). The ability A and motivation M parts have remained much the same but opportunity O has been greatly psychologised in strategic HRM to promote the HPWS/high-commitment story. In the original version, the A and M parts represent the person (P) and O represents all aspects of the environment (E) external to the individual. Blumberg and Pringle (p. 565) state, for example, "Opportunity consists of the particular configuration of the field of forces surrounding a person and his or her task that enables or constrains that person's task performance and that are beyond that person's direct control".

The term *opportunity* puts a normative spin on what should be an analytically neutral concept for it emphasises the positive *enable* side of the work environment and de-emphasises the limiting/controlling *constrain* part. More seriously, strategic HRM researchers have truncated and psychologised the O concept from its original broad conception of all external aspects of a person's work situation to narrow commitment-promoting aspects, such as empowerment, participation, enriched jobs, and teams (e.g., Delery & Roumpi, 2017; Boon et al., 2019).

Thus, if $B = f(P, E)$, environment E is redefined as opportunity O, and O is narrowed to commitment-promoting work practices (part of HRM), the core of the strategic HRM model reduces to $\text{HRM} \rightarrow [\text{AM}] \rightarrow B \rightarrow \text{PERF}$. An insight from this abstraction is that, analytically, the (assumed) independent HRM variable is an element of a much larger situational opportunity construct (i.e., $\text{HRM} = O_i$), and thus, the more accurate way to write the model is $O_i \rightarrow [\text{AM}] \rightarrow B \rightarrow \text{PERF}$. An insight of this version is it reveals 100% psychologisation (RBV, Z omitted to clearly make the point).

Strategic HRM's use of AMO in the high-performance model also creates a severe mismatch between micro and macro levels of explanation. The AMO model originates in industrial-organisational psychology as a framework for explaining job task performance, originally conceptualised as the multiplicative product $B = A \times M$ (Maier, 1946).

Strategic HRM researchers have taken this micro-level framework, intended to explain *individual worker job performance* (e.g., in jobs such as machinist, baggage handler, and hotel housekeeping), and elevated it to explain *company financial performance* (e.g., at Ford, British Air, and Marriott).

Analytically, the idea is that firm-level output (Q) is the sum of individual employee outputs (q_i); that is, an additive function of the form $Q = \sum q_i$ (similar to the additive measure of the HRM bundle). This symmetry only holds, however, if the construct is *homologous*, meaning an invariant (universal) cause-effect structure across levels of analysis. It is impossible, however, for AMO to be homologous at the job level and organisation/company level because the performance-impacting O elements at the company level are far larger and different than at the job level, as are interactional production complementarities and coordination interdependencies.

7.3 | Missing mutuality

The HPWS model is often portrayed (e.g., Wright & Ulrich, 2017) as a second-generation version of the HC/HI models from the 1980s (Beer et al., 1984; Lawler, 1986). Gaining employee commitment is critical in both HPWS and HC/HI, but they considerably differ in the way it is done.

The key to high commitment, according to Walton (1985), is *management commitment* to a *high-mutuality* employment relationship. He says (p. 36, 49, emphasis added):

The common theme in revision of these policies [from control to commitment] is increased *mutuality* between workers and managers and employees and employers. Thus, the new management strategy involves policies that promote mutuality in order to elicit employee commitment, which in turn can generate increased economic effectiveness and human development... An important element of the new model... is fostering a spirit of *mutual commitment*, [recognizing] the legitimate claims of multiple *stakeholders*,... [and] fulfillment of many *employee needs* is taken as a *goal* rather than merely as a *means to an end*.

Mutuality in the Walton sense is an embedded organisational culture and consistently-honoured practice of joint stakeholder sharing and caring. It requires that the employer make a strategic governance/HRM decision to shift in word and deed from a unilateralist, shareholder, hired-hand, rent maximisation model to a mutualist, stakeholder, partner, rent-sharing model that creates in the organisation an enthusiastic, mobilised “one big team” sense of common purpose, dedication, and reciprocal commitment (genuine unitarism).

Thus, the 1980s HC/HI model involved a socio-technical transformation in organisational structure, management, production/work flow, employment practices, and culture, including downward shift and stakeholder sharing in power, information, rewards, knowledge, decision-making, employment security, voice, and responsibility (Beer et al., 1984; Lawler, 1986; Jewell, Jewell, & Kaufman, 2020). The employees became more committed to the organisation and worked harder to make it successful because the company committed to them a new mutualist, stakeholder, and positive-sum relationship.

In the standard HPWS nearly all of these transformational features have disappeared, hollowed out, or become rhetorical totems and “more HRM” has become the driver of employee commitment and hard work. The HC/HI stakeholder firm that shares rents with employees is now the HPWS maximum-shareholder PERF firm that uses RBV immobilizing tactics to capture rents from employees (Delery & Roumpi, 2017). The transformed socio-technical organisational structure, management system, and production system have disappeared from Figure 1, with some work process remnants (e.g., broadened jobs, participation, and teams) reduced to proto-HRM practices for the independent variable. The downward redistribution of power, rewards, and influence in the HC/HI model has hollowed out in the HPWS to a few circumscribed shop floor HRM/work practices (e.g., involvement groups), and the HC/HI principle that *management first commit* to employees before expecting commitment back has changed to

management commits to using the firm's resources to achieve competitive advantage and employees also commit to this goal because they are "prosocially" motivated by HRM practices.

More fundamentally, it seems a contradiction in terms for mutuality and affective commitment to exist in an organisational relationship where the interests of the company/owners have 100% weight in the mission and PERF goal and employees' interests 0% (Figure 1). The natural outcome, per prisoner-dilemma and tit-for-tat models in game theory (Dobbins, Dundon, Cullinane, Hickland, & Donaghey, 2017; Miller, 1992), is if the company single-mindedly focuses on advancing its PERF interests then employees respond in kind and single-mindedly focus on advancing their interests, with deterioration of trust, cooperation, discretionary effort, and joint surplus—a dynamic rife in organisations (Siebert, Martin, and Bozic, 2015) but incapable of capture in a one-equation HPWS model.

To circumvent this problem, strategic HRM writers (e.g., Peccei, Van de Voorde, & Van Veldhoven, 2013) have shifted terms and redefined concepts to *mutual gains* and *conflicting outcomes* in organisational relationships. Mutuality and mutual gain, however, are different things. Every exchange creates mutual gain, or they would not happen but only a subset, characterised by joint purpose, reciprocity, and warm affect, display mutuality. Thus, a company may decide a new flexible manufacturing system and accompanying HPWPs (e.g., skills training and performance pay) are a good investment and implement them. The HPWPs are valued by employees and create more profit for the company, yielding a mutual gain. However, the company's motive is not to benefit workers but the owners/shareholders, and it provides the HPWPs as a transactional money-making business decision, so without common purpose and sharing/caring, psychological-affective mutuality cannot develop.

7.4 | Workers as horses: Missing human agency

The narrow, mechanical model of human behaviour in the HPWS eliminates most of what defines a human being—*human agency*. Agency is a living thing's capability to initiate behaviours and exert power to achieve its interests, as constrained and empowered by its environmental situation. Both human and non-human animals display agentic behaviour, but human agency is unique because people have higher-order consciousness of themselves and their existential situation, a much-expanded and social-ethical set of motivating needs, wants and interests, and a human-crafted legal/moral code that gives them the protected status of free, autonomous agents with rights to own, and use other animals as private property resources but not fellow humans.

Situationally and behaviourally viewed, employees in the HPWS model (Figure 1) are called human resources but more resemble horse resources (or wage slaves; Rosenthal, 2018), which employer-masters select, train, compensate, form into teams, strategise how to get the most value from, direct with orders and commands, motivate and align with carrot/stick inducements to get the most acres ploughed and crops delivered to market, care about their lives and well-being to the degree it is financially profitable (with individual differences in kindness/harshness), and immobilise to limit opportunities to leave the farm.⁵ The horse is an input, the farm is an HPWS one-equation input-output function, the farmer (invisible in Figure 1) manages it to get maximum farm PERF, and in real life (but not the model), the farmer makes business and horse management decisions taking into account input costs, crop prices, quantity of complementary capital/land inputs, and relative benefits/costs. To change the horse worker to an autonomous, purposefully self-directed, free-will human worker, the HPWS model has to add an employment relationship, labour market, goal/behaviour equation for employees, and enriched mediating model of behaviour that goes *beyond the obvious* of people (or horses) willing and able.

7.5 | Missing social relations

A workplace, as long as it has two or more people, is a social group involved in a cooperative team activity taking place within a web of formal and informal relations, norms, and interpersonal interactions. Boundary lines between fields are fuzzy, but as a generalisation, industrial-organisational psychology takes the autonomous individual as the

level of analysis, social psychology expands the level to include people in groups, relationships, and structured social settings, and sociology expands it further to macro-level institutions, classes, and societies (Koppes, 2007).

The HPWS model is clearly grounded in IOP's individualist psychology because its core mediating construct is individualist AMO in which social/relational influences are excluded in order to isolate the effect of differences in individual ability (A) and motivation (M) on task performance (Maier, 1946). As Blumberg and Pringle (1982) recount, the results were disappointing because three decades of empirical work found that ΔA and ΔM explain only a small portion of cross-worker performance variation, which led them to recommend a shift in focus to the effect of ΔO situational factors. These factors include not only physical, technological, and economic influences but also interpersonal, group, and company factors and their relational, social, and affect influences, such as supervisor-worker relations, group work norms, workplace morale, and harmony/conflict culture and climate.

Most earlier diagrams of the HPWS model did not include any box, construct, or variable of a social/relational nature (e.g., De Winne & Sels, 2013; Wright & McMahan, 1992). Jiang and Li's model (Figure 1), reflecting recent trends in the literature, starts to open up this space with boxes for social capital, social exchange, and organisational climate. Most influential and widely used is social exchange theory, typically as a complement to the expectancy theory of motivation in AMO and additional rationale for $\beta_1 > 0$. The argument rests on a universal norm of reciprocity and holds that if the company invests in HPWPs valued by employees, such as skill development and enriched/empowered jobs, they are motivated to reciprocate and provide work behaviours valued by the company, such as discretionary effort and citizenship behaviour (Delery & Roumpi, 2017). This argument, as for mutual gain, is critically flawed (aka *faux social exchange*) because it assumes employees feel gratitude and commitment for HR initiatives that make them more productive profit-producers for benefit of shareholders, bankers, and the stock price but which benefit them only as an unintended byproduct/spillover (aka, positive externality).

Last but not least, anyone who has ever held a job, or been a manager, knows that fair and respectful treatment are hugely important determinants of individual job performance and citizenship behaviour (Boxall & Purcell, 2016; Siebert, Martin, and Bozic, 2015). A large-size omission in the HPWS mediating mechanism (Figure 1), therefore, is a missing connection from fairness/treatment \rightarrow attitudes \rightarrow motivation. As earlier cautioned, this statement is made with respect to formal representations of the mainstream HPWS model (e.g., Delery & Roumpi, 2017: Fig. 1) and not the literature writ large that is so large and diverse no theoretical generalisation is possible (a problem for strategic HRM as science because domain/boundary restrictions on constructs and $X \rightarrow Y$ causal relations are required or hypotheses cannot be falsified).

7.6 | Missing conflict, resistance, and collective action

People do not like aversive experiences and the work world has many. The HPWS has almost nothing to say about the unpleasant/dark side of work (Edwards, 2009) since the bosses, work conditions, and relationships that cause them are not part of the O situation and the egos, attitudes, and emotions that connect them to behaviour are missing from the human agent (A, M). The only situational variable in Figure 1 with clear potential to dissatisfy employees is associated with HRM practices, either if HPWPs are cut back (the obverse effect of "more HRM") or used RBV style to immobilise and underpay (Kaufman, 2015d), which then feeds into a deteriorated organisational climate.

Also missing from the HPWS are channels for collective action potentially damaging to managerial interests and company PERF. The Hawthorn experiments of the early 1930s revealed the workplace is a social system of many cross-connected informal work groups which use norms and social sanctions to protect employees from excessive work speed, exploitative incentive systems, and unfair supervisors (Landsberger, 1958). However, the idea that employees might need protection from management is alien to the HPWS and whereas it is recognised that employers sometimes breach psychological contracts, doing so is constrained by management's desire to maintain commitment and win-win reciprocity.

Also missing are formal work groups and organised pushback, such as unions and strikes. Unions and strikes are much diminished in many countries, but if the HPWS model became a working reality they would likely rebound. Financialisation, market competition, and shareholder pressure force managers to create more profit in a shorter time. In the HPWS, this means adding HPWPs which increase job performance mostly by getting employees to work faster, harder, and longer. Because $\beta_1 > 0$ and in the model HR practices are free goods (no cost), the HPWS firm maximises PERF by maximizing use of HPWPs, which induce employees to work at their maximum-capable speed, effort, and endurance—similar to running a car engine at its red-line maximum. This outcome seems mutual-gain, because the company has higher PERF and employees have bigger paychecks, more training, and so on. The experiential reality, however, is a speed-up/stretch-out in which workers' bodies and human capital are prematurely worn out (unlike owned physical capital, labour is a rented resource with resulting incentive for companies to overuse/under-maintain it), the used-up workers are terminated and put on the social scrap heap, a new group of human-resource commodities brought in to take their place, and the cycle repeats (Thompson and Harley, 2008; Delbridge & Keenoy, 2010).

Organisational behaviour theorists (e.g., Morrison, 2014) encourage employees to use prosocial voice with managers to constructively find win-win solutions to problems. The defect in the logic is that managers do not see requests to work less as a constructive, procompany suggestion, in part because their evaluations and bonuses are tied to getting employees to work more. Workers, therefore, have to self-protect their interests, and one option is collective voice and *muscle* through unions, bargaining, and strikes. Viewed this way, one can see the HPWS becoming a mainstay model in industrial relations, labour process, and critical management studies and a source of fruitful hypotheses, such as Hypothesis 1: more HPWS → more unions and strikes.

8 | THE STRATEGIC HRM RESEARCH BOTTOM LINE: SUBSTANTIVE KNOWLEDGE CONTRIBUTIONS

Troth and Guest (2019: 11) see a thriving field and conclude “this reflects considerable credit on psychological HRM research” and Wright and Ulrich (2017) conclude the last 30 years of strategic HRM research is a “road well-travelled.” This author, on the other hand, sees a fatally flawed research programme headed toward a dead end due to the harmful influence of psychologisation, scientism, and normative promotionalism. A performance appraisal can help resolve the dispute.

The evaluation criterion adopted for this assessment is the number and strength (oomph) of knowledge contributions from the HRM-performance journal literature that advance either scientific explanation or management practice. To compile a list, I started with the summary chapter of *HRM & Performance* by Paauwe et al. (2013) and found two items. Paraphrased, number one (p. 198) is an empirically-established universal positive association between more HRM practices and firm performance outcomes ($\beta_1 > 0$), and number two (p. 204) is full use of HRM practices benefits not only organisations but also their employees and customers (“more HRM is better”). The rest of the chapter, and nearly all of the book, is concerned with research *input* having to do with different theoretical constructs and perspectives, classifications and measurement, empirical estimation, causality, and so on.

I also consulted three recent strategic HRM review articles by Delery and Roumpi (2017); Jiang and Messersmith (2018), and Wright and Ulrich (2017). The first two articles are entirely research-input focused and do not cite specific knowledge outputs; the third claims in the conclusion (p. 61), “tremendous theoretical and empirical advance” but all is research-input type discussed in the body of the article except for this one item “Several consistent findings, such as the positive relationship between HRM practices and performance” (i.e., $\beta_1 > 0$).

Another data byte comes from Troth and Guest (2019). They list four contributions of psychological research to HRM. All four are micro/meso level and thus not applicable. Relevant, however, is Guest's (2011) observation from a strategic HRM review that (p. 3), “after 20 years of extensive research we are more knowledgeable but not much

wiser” and “after hundreds of research studies we are still in no position to assert with any confidence that good HRM has an impact on organisational performance” (p. 11).

A final piece of evidence is from Rynes, Giluk, and Brown (2007) who asked 200+ HRM-related journal editorial board members to list the “five most fundamental findings from human resources research that all practicing managers should know” (p. 989). The six most frequently cited items (from 85 responses) include five micro-level OB/personnel psychology findings (e.g., “personality is related to performance”) and only one macro-HRM finding—“HR practices are important to organisational outcomes.”

Based on the above, my strategic HRM contributions scorecard stops with the original two items: $\beta_1 > 0$ and “more HRM.” However, the preceding part of this paper argues both items are incorrect on analytical/logic grounds, implying the list of strategic HRM's 30-year knowledge outputs, at least with a high-oomph factor (and not a rediscovery/repackaging of earlier-known ideas, such as strategic HRM, high-commitment model, and participative management; Kaufman, 2008, 2012), effectively drops to zero.

This gloomy assessment darkens further on two additional counts. The first is that the 30 years of strategic HRM research required a sizable social investment of human capital, university resources, and public/private support costing many tens of millions of dollars (Kaufman, 2012). The professors producing these articles likely earned an attractive return on investment in terms of academic salary/benefits, promotion/tenure, and job satisfaction, but the social community ended up with a negative investment return from sizable research outlay but small-to-negligible knowledge/practice value-added.

A second contributions deficit item is that after 30 years of research, we still have, particularly in the U.S. case, almost no idea of how many firms have implemented a partial or full HPWS (5%, 40%, or 70%?), whether the trend is increasing, decreasing or flat, the HPWS success/failure rate, what other types/configurations of HRM systems populate the economy, and whether the HPWS (now 40 years old) is still a relevant model or has evolved into something distinctly different. (The HPWS seems to have become a near-exclusive academic topic/obsession, mostly concentrated in HRM, for an internet search turns up hardly any references to it in practitioner/periodical publications.) Adding to the disembodied, scholastic persona of the HPWS is a dearth of case studies and field research—approaching near-zero in U.S. management and HR journals—of the system's structure, practices, and operation in real-world companies (exceptions, for the record, are Kaufman, 2003, 2013a, and Jewell, Jewell, & Kaufman, 2020) or meaningful consideration of business/organisational trends, such as widespread erosion of internal labour markets, financialisation's bias against longer term HPWS-type investments, effect of business cycles/crises and growth rates, and decline of union threat effect. Much of the strategic HRM/HPWS research programme, therefore, floats in the academic air untethered to real companies, real HR, real managers/employees, and real business problems.

9 | CONSTRUCTIVE SUGGESTIONS FOR STRATEGIC HRM IMPROVEMENT

Troth and Guest (2019) implore HRM critics to not only point to problems but also suggest constructive solutions. Here are four for consideration.

The most effective antidote to the three problems of reductionist psychologisation, arid scientism, and normative promotionalism in modern-day strategic HRM research is for academics to get out of the ivory tower and into the field, say for 25–50% of their research time, and experientially observe, learn, and stay up-to-date by engaging in inductive, action, participant-observer, case study, and problem-solving types of research—as done with marked effectiveness and impact by the first generation of HC/HI scholars (Beer, Lawler, and Walton all served as design/implementation consultants in early HC/HI projects). One wonders, for example, what per cent of academic authors of strategic HRM articles, particularly under the age of 45 and in A-level journals, have ever stepped foot in a bona fide HPWS and, of these, what per cent have studied it from the inside?⁶ It is difficult to believe the knowledge

contribution of HPWS research would not go up with more first-hand observational knowledge and pracademic-type research (e.g., in the Harvard/Stanford B school tradition) and less formalistic model building, armchair deductive psychologizing, and mind-numbing parade of regression results and hypothesis tests (what Ghoshal, 2005:77, refers to as the “pretense of knowledge”).

A second helpful methods antidote is for strategic HRM academics (and those in other fields) to spend some hours each week exploring academic/nonacademic literatures outside their home discipline and research field (e.g., behavioural, organisational and personnel economics, labour process, *German Journal of Human Resource Management*, *Human Resource Executive*). The different academic enclaves speaking different research languages with their different parochial interests and perspectives would coalesce into a more integrated and a stronger knowledge producer. This recommendation (also made by Troth and Guest) for greater cross-disciplinary perspective, like more field work, requires system-level change in research expectations, incentives, and hiring/promotion standards (situational elements in O).

A third constructive suggestion, aimed at strengthening strategic HRM theory, is for researchers to distill from the psychology, OB and related literatures a formalised representation of the key components of the field's model of the human agent (P)—call it *homo-HRMicus*. It would ideally be an analytic representation for use in formal theory, but a still-helpful next step is a taxonomy or framework, such as tree diagram (e.g., starting with agent = [mind, body, spirit] at top and descending through levels of sub-functions, such as mind = [cognition, volition, and affect]), matrix (e.g., the 68 cells in Schutz's, 1994, “periodic table” of human behaviour in organisations), or a systems model of human psychology/behaviour (e.g., in the tradition of Katz and Kahn, 1978).

Whatever the case, it seems a huge anomaly and barrier to progress that HRM is so psychologised yet, as far as I am aware, lacks any semblance of an organised, integrated model or framework of human psychology/behaviour to guide, structure, and discipline theorizing. Herbert Simon (1985: 293) observes on this matter, “Nothing is more fundamental in setting our research agenda and informing our research methods than our view of the nature of human beings whose behaviors we are studying”. Ironically, Troth and Guest (2019) claim to make the case for psychology in HRM, which provides a natural opportunity to start to outline the essential elements of the nature of human beings (*homo-HRMicus*) for research in the field, but actually say almost nothing on the subject. Their section 2, “The Psychological Approach”, is one short paragraph and, aside from a representative definition of work/organisational psychology, gives no account of the content or analytical structure of the human agent or psychological approach. Without such a model, the inevitable tendency is to pick off the shelf certain psycho-social bits and pieces, as suits the researcher's purpose, and mix and match across topics and articles with little consistency or integration and evident danger that strategic HRM research turns into an ever-expanding set of psychological model permutations, plethora of pseudo-science/nonfalsifiable hypotheses, and quantitative parade of moderator/interaction effects.

A fourth constructive suggestion is for mainstream researchers to let go their quest to theoretically and empirically demonstrate $\beta_1 > 0$ and “HRM matters” for firm performance and shift strategic HRM's research focus to a better aligned, more productive set of issues. The HPWS model and research frame coming out of the 1990s (e.g., Delery & Doty, 1996; Guest, 1997; Huselid, 1995; Wright & McMahan, 1992) has shoehorned the field into an unproductive quasi-universalist, quantitative method-driven paradigm having little genuine strategic content, an ill-conceptualised and measured HRM system construct, questionable relevance beyond medium-large firms, an ethnocentric slant toward American/English-heritage business and cultural assumptions, and threadbare set of practical implications and results. This model is also hobbled by a massive omitted variables problem—essentially all the external/internal E determinants of firm performance described earlier—and an equally massive incorrect specification of functional forms used to theorise and estimate the HRM \rightarrow [MM] \rightarrow PERF relation (e.g., functional forms for production, cost, work effort, profit, cybernetic feedback, HR/human capital investment, and logarithmic/linear/curvilinear PERF).

The more productive, insightful, and normative-free approach for the field is to return to the original paradigm conception of strategic HRM developed by the first-generation founders (Beer et al., 1984; Fombrun et al., 1984; Lawler, 1986; see also Kaufman, 2015c; Beer et al., 2015)—but with long roots back to the 1910s and the founders

of the North American HR/IR fields (Kaufman, Barry, Gomez, and Wilkinson, 2018; Kaufman, Barry, Wilkinson, and Gomez, 2020). It is an expressly open system, general management, situational-configurational, stakeholder/plural interests, social-relational psychology, dynamic/organisational change, integrated production-work design-HRM system, employer-employee relationship, and systems equifinality paradigm. Primary focus is on relatively proximal system inputs, outputs, and performance measures (e.g., morale, work engagement, absenteeism/turnover, productivity, quality/customer satisfaction, and grievances/strikes) with firm-level financial/business PERF measures moved downward to more distal/lower-order outcomes (being affected by a larger set of non-HR/employment factors).

More concretely, strategic HRM's research focus needs to be recast so it embodies the four centrepiece subjects contained in the *name* of the field—first, people as organisational *human resources* that are both means and ends of production and profit-making; second, organisational coordination-control of the workforce (i.e., top-level executives to bottom-level labourers) through structured-configurational-equifinality employment/human resource *systems* of activities, policies and practices; third, effective general-functional *management* of the systems and people to accomplish organisational-stakeholder goals; and, fourth, a *strategic* business perspective on choice, design, operation, and challenges-pitfalls-payoffs of alternative HRM systems.

As a result, the major research questions in strategic HRM change and expand. A start point is to shift focus from firm performance as the central dependent variable driven by an exogenous, quasi-universal, difficult-to-define and measure HPWS to a set of alternatively configured, endogenously formed, empirically differentiated HRM systems and practice bundles (see Barton, Burton, & Hannan, 1999; Boxall & Purcell, 2016: 278–84; Toh, Morgeson, & Campion, 2008), such as the market, bureaucratic, and clan systems identified by Beer et al. (1984) and the shape of and firm's location in the HR practice frequency distributions shown in Kaufman and Miller (2011, 2015). A follow-on research question is to theorise and empirically identify the structural and organisational resource determinants of the different HRM systems and factors determining managerial strategic choices among/within them (Boyer, 2014; Kaufman, 2013b), thus endogenising and explaining what is now largely exogenous and unexplained (e.g., relationship between alternative production technologies and HRM system architectures and practice bundles, choice of externalised vs. internalised HRM systems, cross-system variation in pay level, form, and composition). A third follow-on research question now largely neglected is the effect of alternative management philosophies, strategies, capabilities, approaches, and opportunities/constraints on across/within HRM system variation in organisational structure, strategic influence, staffing/operation, policies/practices, and efficiency/cost (Begin, 1991; Marsden, 1999). A fourth group of research questions, largely hidden within the universal HPWS construct and psychologised mediating mechanism, concerns cross/within system variation in factors such as organisational morale, employer/employee relations, absenteeism/turnover, harmony-cooperation-trust versus antagonism-resistance-distrust, and level/disparity in pay, hours, security, and work conditions, and their effect on proximal HRM system outputs, such as operational productivity, customer satisfaction, and employee satisfaction and well-being.⁷

10 | CONCLUSION

This provocation debate over psychology in HRM confirms at least one thing—that as gestalt psychology maintains, people shown the same fact pattern, such as HRM journal publications, can perceive and interpret the meaning and implications in near-opposite terms. Thus, Troth and Guest (2019) see a thriving HRM research programme with much credit going to psychology, whereas I see a fatally flawed research programme headed toward a dead end, with considerable blame going to psychologisation.

We have each presented our case to the jury of our HRM colleagues, as has Budd (2019) in his companion paper, so perhaps enough has been said and we can let the jury members deliberate and decide a verdict. I personally care less about a win/lose and more that this exchange stimulates one or more mainstream people to venture out and substantively engage with critics on important strategic HRM issues and problems. Troth and Guest, as I see it, ventured out but did not substantively engage.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author has declared that there is no conflict of interest.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The electronic database *EconLit* returns over 4000 articles with the text term “personnel economics.” To gauge the extent to which SHRM/HPWS researchers cross over and explore this literature, I searched the data base *Business Source Complete* for articles containing the three text terms “strategic human resource management”, “personnel economics”, and “high-performance work system” and found six with three by this author and two from Asia – evidence of almost zero cross-over from management to economics. Cross-over by personnel economists to the strategic HRM literature is also near zero, per five returns in the *EconLit* data base using the text terms “personnel economics”, “strategic human resource management”, and “high-performance work system” (also see Lazear and Oyer, 2013, with 202 citations but only two to a management journal). However, behavioral, organizational, institutional, and industrial-relations economists exhibit significantly more cross-over (e.g., Tomer, 2001; Gunderson, 2001; Cappelli and Neumark, 2001; Osterman, 2011; Frick, Goetzen, and Simmons, 2013; Bloom, et al., 2019; also *The Handbook of Organizational Economics*, Gibbons and Roberts, 2013; *Handbook of Economic Organization*, Grandori, 2013; *Handbook of Economic Sociology*, Smelser and Swedberg, 2005). It seems a fair assessment, therefore, that the American-centric strategic HRM research program is near-completely shut-off from the other social sciences and employment/organizational literatures and, in turn, this raises the question whether economics and other disciplines have, as T&G (2019: 7) claim, “failed to offer relevant insights” or SHRM researchers have not ventured out to look and incorporate.
- ² Wright and Snell (1991: 204: emphasis added) argue that for HRM to transition to strategic HRM, “we must reframe human resource management to reflect the *competitive activity* of organizations.” By this standard, a closed system HRM model is inherently non-strategic (vertical fit is precluded, horizontal fit can’t be operationalized).
- ³ Delery and Roumpi (2017, p. 16) dispute the “more HRM is better” characterization and say (without demonstration) it holds only for universal best-practice but not contingency best-fit. They ignore, however, the distinction between *weak* and *strong* contingency (Kaufman, 2010) and, I argue, the “more is better” logic holds in weak contingency because, in this case, the dominant positive main effect outweighs any/all negative contingency effects on PERF and therefore $\Delta\text{PERF}/\Delta\text{HRM} > 0$ up to $\text{HRM} = 100\%$ (“maximum HRM is best”). As diagrammatically depicted in Kaufman (2016: Fig. 1), a number of European “contextual” models are actually weak-contingency versions of the standard HWPS. An additional “more HRM” impetus in the standard model (shown in Kaufman, 2015a: Fig. 2) is that HPWPs cost nothing to add.
- ⁴ If HRM^* optimizes PERF, logic implies $\beta_1 > 0$ up to HRM^* and $\beta_1 < 0$ after HRM^* (if HRM^* is less than 100%) and thus yields an inverse U-shaped HRM-performance relation (Kaufman & Miller, 2011), contra writers from Huselid (1995) to Wright and Ulrich (2017). The hypothesis $\beta_1 > 0$ is also contra the RBV’s “no rules for riches” principle and tendency of competition (said in HPWS studies to be strong and intensifying) to reduce $\beta_1 > 0$ to equilibrium break-even at $\beta_1 = 0$ (Kaufman, 2015a). All remains uncertain, however, until the political question “whose interests count?” is determined (an external/internal governance decision) which determines the content and measured value/size of the PERF variable (e.g., shareholder PERF with 100% weight to owners’ interests vs. stakeholder PERF with, say, 60%, 30%, and 10% weights to interests of owners, employees, and public) which, in turn, leads to different β_1 estimates.
- ⁵ Godard’s (2014) critique IOP/HRM as managerialist and latent totalitarian is a 60-year fast-forward of 1950s-era critiques of human relations (Landsberger, 1958). The animal metaphor, however, was different. One version was a take-off on a TV commercial in which more human relations practices (e.g., foreman sensitivity training) create more contented cows (employees) who give more milk (work). A second version has the employee as a rat in a Skinner box with a controller (employer) who manipulates the grain-pellet and electric-shock levers (HPWPs) to get the rat to run through the maze at top speed (PERF), moderated by physiological and situational (AMO) factors. A problem for the HPWS, however, is that in real life the HR practice levers in most organizations are largely stationary, indistinct background factors and thus not likely to have much stimulus-response effect.
- ⁶ Required for meaningful answers is a shared conception of what constitutes (and does not) a high-performance work system but Boon et al. (2019) conclude that 30 years on there remains a plethora of nonconverging labels, definitions, specifications, and measures. The ambiguity is so large the HPWS is arguably a meaningless research/practice concept. To concretely illustrate, how many HPWS companies/facilities can the reader name in the local area? Is any a non-manufacturing, service, or locally-owned business? Is it the HR practices component of the HPWS bundle used to distinguish HPWS from non-HPWS or, alternatively, the production/work design practices, or something else, like reputation as

a good place to work? Is the reader's university an HPWS? Can small firms (e.g., fast-food restaurants) with few or no formal HR practices be an HPWS, and how determined? If a local area has firms using a low-road HRM system, or sweatshop/forced labour employment system, are the top performers also HPWS?

⁷ An interesting comparison is with Roumpi and Delery (2019) who also provide four suggestions for progressing SHRM research but from a mainstream perspective that stays within the standard paradigm and methodology. They advocate focusing research efforts on advancing four parts of the model: the "black box" mediating mechanism, the HRM system construct, RBV and bridging the micro-macro divide, and important contextual factors. Their four improvements do not fix, however, the analytical/theoretical defects identified here and Kaufman (2012).

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