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INTRODUCTION

A vision of international HRM research

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ABSTRACT
This editorial was written as a vision of IHRM research, to be both thought-provoking and to start a conversation that can continue to move the field forward. Starting with a brief outline of the field, the editorial emphasizes distinct research route trajectories charting the landscape and anatomy of HRM in an international context, focusing on HRM in multinational corporations (MNCs) as well as Comparative HRM and the related, but distinct, cross-cultural management thread. Additionally, the editorial accentuates the importance of context in IHRM research, explaining the resultant debate on adopting a universalist vs. a contextual paradigm. The editorial presents a future agenda for IHRM research, focusing on challenges of research sampling, appropriate methodologies, social impact and interdisciplinary research. Finally, the editorial introduces four featured articles from the *2nd Global Conference on IHRM*. Each article represents an interesting take on comparative HRM and/or strategic IHRM in MNCs. The studies are clear examples of how context can be used to explain the phenomena being studied.

KEYWORDS
IHRM research; IHRM research sampling; IHRM methodologies; IHRM societal impact; interdisciplinary research in IHRM

Background

The IHRM field is a broad and expanding research discipline, incorporating many facets such as cross-cultural management, comparative IHRM and strategic IHRM in multinational corporations (MNCs) including expatriation/repatriation: 'the field of IHRM is about understanding, researching, applying and revising all HR activities in their internal and external contexts as they impact the processes of managing HRs in organizations throughout the global environment to enhance the experience of multiple stakeholders' (Schuler & Tarique, 2007, p. 718). The purpose of this field is consequently to create understanding that can be applied

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in organizations to enable successful operation in different national environments across the globe.

To date, the majority of research in this field has focused either on the country-level of analysis, explaining why certain HRM activities fit a given institutional and/or cultural context (Comparative HRM), or at the firm-level of analysis, exploring how an MNC balances its global and local priorities (Strategic IHRM). Increasingly, we are starting to see research emerging at the regional level of analysis, e.g. Asia-Pacific, North America, South America, Europe, Africa and the Middle East (see contributions in: Brewster & Mayrhofer, 2012; Brewster, Mayrhofer, & Morley, 2000; Rugman, 2003), or at a market economy level of analysis, e.g. liberal market economies vs. coordinated market economies (e.g. Farndale, Brewster, & Poutsma, 2008; Fenton-O'Creevy, Gooderham, & Nordhaug, 2008). Insights at the individual level of analysis stemming from the international organizational behaviour field of study, especially in cross-cultural psychology and expatriate adjustment, also complement the more macro observations of the practice of managing people globally (see, for example: Aycan et al., 2000; Caligiuri, Baytalskaya, & Lazarova, 2016; Zhong, Wayne, & Liden, 2016).

Building on this broad research base, the *2nd Global Conference on IHRM* was held on 14–15 May 2015 at The Pennsylvania State University (USA) with the aim of encouraging IHRM scholars to share current thinking in the field. In particular, the theme of the conference was to explore 'big picture' findings; in other words, placing an emphasis on *understanding* our observations beyond *describing* them, answering the 'why' questions and providing implications for theory development and practice. The conference attracted over 70 scholars from 17 countries carrying out research in the field of IHRM. Some 40 papers were presented during the two days, covering a broad range of topics, including: global talent management; global leadership development; expatriate management and global careers; corporate social responsibility and the globalization of work; diversity and aging in different national settings; HRM in emerging markets; cross-national perspectives on IHRM; and high-performance work systems in different country contexts.

In this Special Issue, we showcase some of the best papers presented at the *2nd Global Conference on IHRM*. Before doing so, in this Introductory Editorial we share some insights into IHRM as a field of research and potential avenues of research in the future. This special issue also includes a second Editorial that shares insights on publishing IHRM scholarly work, designed to help scholars publish rigorous, meaningful IHRM research that can continue to progress our field (Raghuram, Brewster, Chen, Farndale, Gully, Morley, 2017).

IHRM research

IHRM is a relatively nascent, though rapidly evolving field when considered in the context of related areas of enquiry in management and business administration. With this academic infancy (or adolescence) come contestations regarding how

the field might best be conceptualized, what its research priorities should be, who the salient stakeholders are, along with the manner and level at which meaning is best generated. While this can of course prove fruitful for generating potential lines of scholarly exploration, it can also prove challenging for the formulation of research questions that truly capture the central tenets of the field. Similarly, it can be challenging to design deliverable programmes of IHRM research. Furthermore, it can prove critical in having the work reviewed by knowledgeable, developmental reviewers, many of whom might occupy different places in the landscape of the field and who may adopt different positions on what matters to our collective futures as scholars working in such a broad 'church'.

Allied to this point, IHRM has distinct route trajectories from a research perspective encompassing diverse, not to say tangential, bodies of work sometimes of necessity positioned and pursued independently of each other because of the required level of analysis (Brewster, Mayrhofer, & Smale, 2016). For example, there is a core research tradition dedicated to charting the landscape and the anatomy of HRM in MNCs (Tarique, Briscoe & Schuler, 2015; Edwards & Rees, 2016). There is also a comparative tradition that shows a preference for exploring the context, systems, content and national patterns of HRM as a result of the distinctive developmental paths of different countries and territories. And, there is a related, but distinct, cross-cultural management thread dedicated to explicating tenets of national culture as the dominant paradigm for conditioning and explaining what is acceptable organizational practice in particular sociocultural contexts (Aycan, 2005; Brewster et al., 2016; De Cieri & Dowling, 2006; Delbridge, Hauptmeier, & Sengupta, 2011; Lazarova, Morley, & Tyson, 2008; Olivas-Luján et al., 2009). Opposing this paradigm is research showing that organizational practices that are antithetical to the local culture can themselves be agentic in shifting the value systems and cultures (Raghuram, 2013). Additionally, there is an emerging body of work focusing on the roles of non-governmental and non-corporate entities (Claus, Maletz, Casoinic, & Pierson, 2015).

Rigorous and relevant IHRM research is thus complex both to conduct and to publish. This is largely related to research in this field requiring access to international respondents, or at least data from organizations operating internationally. Because IHRM as a field encompasses themes of cross-cultural management, comparative IHRM, and strategic IHRM in MNCs, context that encompasses laws, trade unions, economic health, culture, social norms, market development and historical conditions is critical. In other words, it is not simply a question of describing a phenomenon or the relationships between variables, but also requires these to be explained in the light of the context in which they are being observed (Al Ariss & Sidani, 2016). For example, it is a conventional approach to study the generalizable relationship between a set of HRM practices and employee outcomes such as commitment, satisfaction or engagement, while downplaying the role of national settings and cultures. From an IHRM perspective, however, researchers recognize the need to develop more nuanced models to explore the specificity

and conditionality of contextual factors: Why is such a relationship found to exist in some but not all national settings?

To give an example: In Germany (as in some other Western European countries) there is legislation requiring employers to listen to the voice of employees through co-determination systems. In contrast, in the USA there is no such legislation, and therefore employee voice occurs more commonly through informal, direct communication between an employee and his or her line manager (Kaufman, 2015). Therefore, we might expect HRM practices that promote indirect employee voice to have differing outcomes in these two different contexts. We could argue that employees in Germany, who feel protected by the codetermination legislation, are grateful to have their voice heard through representation, whereas employees in the USA may have less trust in such a system due to the lack of legislative (and organizational) support. Alternatively, employees in the USA may have more trust in such systems because they are not mandated and thus may be used with a more sincere intent by employers. In brief, context has helped to address the 'why' question behind an observed relationship between HRM practices and employee outcomes. This is simply one hypothetical example, although there is substantial research evidence to suggest that context is highly relevant when exploring the impact of HRM practices (e.g. Björkman, Fey, & Park, 2007; Budhwar, Varma, & Patel, 2016; Geary & Aguzzoli, 2016).

There are current debates within the IHRM literature that are based on the relevance of context. First there is the contrast between adopting a universalist vs. a contextual paradigm. Originating in the strategic HRM literature (Brewster, 1999), the universalist paradigm posits one best way to conduct HRM in order to achieve strong organizational performance. If 'best practice' is adopted, desired outcomes will be achieved. This argument lies at the heart of the high-performance work systems literature (Kehoe & Wright, 2013). In contrast, the contextual paradigm (Dewettinck & Remue, 2011) argues that the outcomes of HRM practices are dependent on the context in which they are implemented, i.e. there is no single formula for best practice HRM.

These paradigms lead to a second major debate within the IHRM field around convergence and divergence (Kaufman, 2016): Is the relevance of context diminishing with the advent of the globalization of business activities? Some argue that globalization is leading to a transfer of standardized HRM practices across borders, as increasing numbers of organizations have global operations, and as technology develops to be able to facilitate this transfer (Hetrick, 2002; Liu, Van Jaarsveld, Batt, & Frost, 2014; Schneper & Von Glinow, 2014). Others argue, on the contrary, that the institutional and cultural contexts of nations (or market economies) are so tightly embedded in the way in which organizations operate, and hence adoption of 'best practices' from other parts of the world cannot easily be undertaken (Kaufman, 2016).

For example, outsourcing can be tied to the strategic position of HR units (Reichel & Lazarova, 2013) but the effectiveness of outsourcing of HR activities will

be highly dependent on global and local contexts so there is not a single best way to do things. These debates continue as new evidence emerges of both convergence (from the universalist paradigm) (Lawler, Chen, Wu, Bae, & Bai, 2011; Pudelko & Harzing, 2008) and divergence (from the contextual paradigm) (Björkman et al., 2007; Farndale et al., 2008; Gunnigle, Murphy, Cleveland, Heraty, & Morley, 2002; Huo, Huang, & Napier, 2002). Furthermore, the process of convergence and divergence necessarily ties to the transfer and management of knowledge between MNC and host country organizations and liaisons (Vance, Vaiman, & Andersen, 2009) as they are determining factors for whether practices can or will be implemented, adding to the complexity of the factors influencing global HRM practices.

Given this background of the development of the IHRM field and the debates that endure, we propose here that in order to heighten generalizability and explanatory power, the IHRM field needs to move towards a higher level of theorizing rather than being limited to country or firm-level descriptions. We need to understand our research observations beyond describing them. This will allow us to address the 'why' questions so that we are able to extrapolate ideas to apply to other relevant contexts. The second Editorial in this volume (Raghuram et al., 2017) explains more about how scholars in the IHRM field can make such contributions through publication. Here, we explore ways in which the field might be developed through points of focus for future research.

Future research

In 2013, we started a discussion based on a panel session during the *1st Global Conference on IHRM* (held at The Pennsylvania State University) to guide us as scholars in the IHRM field on future topics, methodologies and other issues we face. In 2015, this conversation continued during a further panel session during the *2nd Global Conference on IHRM*. Based on these conversations, we present here a future agenda for international HRM research focusing on ideas around research sampling, appropriate methodologies, social impact and interdisciplinary research.

Research sampling

Much of the extant IHRM research focuses on data collection from relatively few 'high performing' MNCs from developed economies. Although interesting research sites, they do not represent the context in which the majority of employees are working. What about less well-known (smaller, family-owned, indigenous) firms? What do we know about them as this is the environment in which most people are employed? HRM in smaller firms is characterized by greater informality (Mayson & Barrett, 2006), rather than the fine-tuned systems in place in large conglomerates. It would be interesting to explore how these more informal HRM practices compare across countries. Similarly, we still know little about HRM in

state-owned enterprises (SOEs) that are huge employers globally. Benson and Zhu (1999) carried out initial research to explore labour market reform effects on SOEs in China, however, barring a limited number of examples in which SOEs have been included in empirical studies (e.g. Cooke, Saini, & Wang, 2014; Ouyang, Liu, & Zhang, 2016), there has been little research on the detail of HRM practices and how they are implemented in this context in comparison with more Western MNC approaches.

Extant research also continues to focus on gathering data from managerial and professional grade samples, but what about other employee groups (e.g. administrative or manual) that make up the largest share of workforces worldwide? The Cranet comparative HRM studies (Parry, Stavrou-Costea, & Morley, 2011) and the global call centre project (Batt, Holman, & Holtgrewe, 2009) describe practices adopted for lower level occupational groups, but data on employee experiences of HRM practices are rarely gathered at this level across national borders, most likely due to the difficulty of conducting international research projects that tap into employees who are difficult for researchers to access. Employee type also extends to issues around HRM in the informal sector, which is a huge part of employment especially in emerging markets. This topic has only been discussed briefly in the IHRM literature to date (e.g. Cooke, 2006). We would potentially be able to learn much more about how national institutions and cultures affect employee experiences of HRM if we could reach broader samples of workers across nations.

There is also a strong focus in extant research on a few 'WEIRD' countries (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic) (Shen et al., 2015). Research taking place in emerging economies even falls into the trap of focusing predominantly on the 'BRICS' (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa). A few studies focus on economies such as in Central and Eastern Europe (Brewster, Morley, & Bučiūnienė, 2010), Africa (Kamoche, Chizema, Mellahi, & Newenham-Kahindi, 2013) or Latin America (Davila & Elvira, 2009) but receive much less attention than China or India, yet we can learn as much from them to understand how context affects HRM.

Another opportunity for IHRM research is the expansion of expatriate research to include international skilled migrants. Highly skilled immigrants arriving from developing countries as opposed to developed countries have been largely ignored in extant research, despite the valuable resources such talent pools offer in a competitive global talent environment (Al Ariss & Özbilgin, 2010; Phillips & Gully, 2017). Relatedly, there is a need for understanding the context and nature of migrant rights and their connection to the HRM systems in place.

By broadening our sampling horizons thus, we can start to explore fully the universalist vs. contextual paradigms. Building theory from local contexts rather than relying on the testing of existing theory from WEIRD countries can help us understand the factors that lead to dominant local HRM practices to help us theorize the field further. Furthermore, focusing on appropriate control variables or institutional/cultural factors across countries can help identify what is causing

the observed effects. Hence, we urge scholars to undertake research sampling that allows us to uncover real issues in real research sites.

Methodologies

Comparative IHRM studies involve collecting data from two or more different national contexts. As a first step, this requires the phenomenon and/ or variables to be explored in each country to be comparable across contexts. The need for construct equivalence and for accounting for cross-cultural response bias is emphasized in the publishing Editorial in this volume (Raghuram et al., 2017), but here we provide some examples of what this means for IHRM research.

The HRM field has already acknowledged the challenge that HRM practices are measured in many different ways, with a lack of agreement in terms of operationalization (Beijer, 2014). If we then apply an additional layer of complexity through a comparative study or a study embedded in an MNC spanning national borders, how can we know that the HRM practices being measured are equivalent across countries? This requires IHRM scholars to focus on construct clarity and the definition of terms (Klein & Delery, 2012). For example, there is a debate in the expatriation literature around the difference between 'expatriates' (i.e. a person sent on a temporary assignment from an MNC for the purpose of work) and migrants (i.e. a person living and working in another country), and how these constructs are changing in line with practice (Al Ariss & Sidani, 2016). The distinction between the two becomes blurred when expatriates decide not to return to their home country, or migrants choose to leave the host country after a temporary stay. Another example: How does 'talent' and its definition vary between cultures (e.g. are older people wiser, or are high performers more valuable)? Scholars have started to explore the implications of different definitions of talent for organizations (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & González-Cruz, 2013), however little attention has yet been paid to tying these differences to nations. Geocentric research terms (i.e. avoiding a dominant country way of thinking in defining the term) are needed for good quality IHRM studies to understand the nuances of different countries.

Nations are also known for their inclination to respond to surveys either by choosing extreme or non-extreme responses to Likert-style self-report measures (Smith, 2004). A response style is an individual's proclivity towards responding systematically to items regardless of their content (Harzing, 2006). Bias due to response styles is not dependent on the content of the item, but rather on a combination of the cultural values and personality of the respondent, as well as the item format (Harzing, Brown, Köster, & Zhao, 2012; Smith & Fischer, 2008). Typical response styles include: acquiescence (tendency to systematically indicate agreement rather than disagreement), extreme response (tendency to systematically respond decisively) and middle responding (tendency to select the middle of the rating scale, typically associated with a weak opinion or a lack of opinion)

(Harzing, 2006; Smith & Fischer, 2008). Without this awareness, differences in item scores across cultures can be considered real when in fact they may be an artefact of response styles.

The process of co-creation of research would help to avoid some of the potential blind spots identified here in our research. By this, we are emphasizing the benefits of working together with local researchers from each nation being studied. By having local research partners, interpretation of research terms as well as study findings takes place in context, rather than applying an ethnocentric lens from a researcher or researchers who are based in a single country that is different from the research site.

Societal impact

There is a drive for increasing emphasis to be placed on the societal impact of applied sciences such as the IHRM field through increased academic-practitioner engagement (Hughes, Bence, Grisoni, O'regan, & Wornham, 2011). This means considering not only the rigour of our IHRM research and publications, but also its relevance to society (such as practitioners and policy makers) and students. At one level, this is about presenting research results in a format and language easily accessible by all (e.g. two-minute highlights through social media; white-papers; publications in local language). At another level, this is about ensuring that we are doing research that can contribute to theory but also relate to challenges that organizations are facing today (Schuler & Tarique, 2007).

From a practice perspective, there are numerous emergent trends in leading-edge organizations that can be observed when reading IHRM practice or consultancy-focused journals and web pages. These include: changes in the employment relationship with workers becoming more like contractors than employees and being moved around within the firm; making organizations more agile, including offshoring arrangements; the importance of social media on a global scale affecting HRM processes such as recruitment; advancing technologies changing the way that performance is managed with more 'just-in-time' style apps for agile management, rather than attempting to use global ranking systems; training and development being re-engineered to focus on firm-specific materials applied globally through short interventions, again often using social media; and analytics speeding up reaction times, producing data-driven global mobility and IHRM. Many of these trends on a global scale focus on speed and being smarter with less in IHRM, yet many of the topics are scarcely covered through academic literature.

Another important societal issue that emerges from the intersections of global business and HRM practices is the impact on the local employees especially in emerging economies. With HRM practices most directly interfacing with the value systems of employees, there is a high likelihood that there are higher levels of misalignment and stress (Raghuram, 2013). Imposing Western style competitive

performance expectations or layoffs in places like India or Japan can in the long run create tensions in the societal structures. The use of efficiency-based sweatshops in third world countries can impact health and well-being of the workers. Most research to date searches for reasons for congruence or incongruence between HRM practices used by MNCs, but fails to go the extra step and examine the societal implications when indeed there is incongruence. This issue gains salience because with advent of technology, and easy access to geographically distant employees the flow of practices across countries can become all the more short-sighted.

The gap between practice and research is widening as the world of practice speeds up, potentially basing activities on research models that are outdated as they do not represent the temporal or short-term focus of emerging IHRM trends. At the same time we have to balance this trend with ensuring our research is rigorous, and does not jump between 'fads' as they emerge.

Interdisciplinary research

Interdisciplinary research implies working with scholars from different fields that can allow us to explore employment relationship research questions through different theoretical lenses. The reality of (international) business is that organizational challenges are rarely solved by only looking at the problem from one perspective. HRM is one piece of the puzzle, and in the global arena, it makes sense that research can benefit from understanding broader phenomena. Sources of inspiration might include disciplines such as economics (e.g. labour mobility), political science (e.g. regime changes, uprisings and violence), economic geography (e.g. migration, natural disasters) and sociology (e.g. culture, grounded theorizing, diversity) perspectives. To date differences between countries in the antecedents or outcomes of HRM practices are largely explained through dimensions of national culture or labour legislation. Little attention is paid to factors such as religion, corruption or power, which might potentially explain more variance than culture or institutions alone. For example, drawing upon insights from the literature on financial economics, Liu et al. (2014) suggest that although publicly traded firms in the USA and Canada share similarities in cultural and institutional environments, they are susceptible to different types and levels of pressures arising from investor activism. As a result, examining the increasing power of external stakeholders such as shareholders and creditors provides an alternative lens to understand why some firms have a constrained capability in enacting strategic visions and investing in HRM systems. Unless IHRM research can show cross-fertilization of theories and thoughts, the field will be slow to develop and is in danger of stagnation.

Summary of the papers constituting the special issue

Having reviewed some of the potential ways forward to develop the IHRM field, we now turn to introducing the four featured articles from the *2nd Global Conference on IHRM*. Each article represents an interesting take on either comparative HRM or strategic IHRM in MNCs, sometimes combining the two. The studies are clear examples of how context can be used to explain the phenomena being studied.

In the first article, 'Management compensation systems in Central and Eastern Europe: A comparative analysis', Berber, Morley, Slavic, and Poór present an example of comparative HRM research. Focusing on a comparison between Central and Eastern European (CEE) transition economies and more advanced Western economies, the authors both describe (what) and explain (why) differences in management compensation system between market economies. In so doing, they consider both cultural (power distance and individualism/ collectivism) and institutional dimensions of the different economies, the latter including a review of extant HRM practices and socialist labour market systems in the CEE countries in contrast to the Western free-market principles. Based on data from 2698 organizations from Western European countries and 1147 organizations from CEE countries, they conclude that both institutional (particularly labour relations) and cultural factors help explain the patterns of managerial compensation practices observed.

The second featured article by Brookes, Brewster, and Wood, is 'Are MNCs norm entrepreneurs or followers? The changing relationship between host country institutions and MNC HRM practices'. This paper is embedded in the comparative capitalisms literature, exploring the effect of the market economy of the home country of an MNC on HRM practice adoption. The study is embedded in the debate around the extent to which MNC activities are resulting in standardized HRM practices worldwide, comparing the effect of country-of-origin vs. host country institutions through the embeddedness of regulations and norms affecting institutional arrangements in the employment relationship. Exploring data from 16 countries, the authors find that particularly coordinated market economies exert strong influence over organizational adoption of HRM practices, due, they argue, to the substantial degree of regulation in place.

In the article, 'The relationships among participatory management practices for improving firm profitability: Evidence from the South Korean manufacturing industry', Kim, Han, and Kim present further insight into how national context influences the effectiveness of HRM practices. Focusing on participatory management practices in manufacturing organizations, the authors explain how the South Korean context with its strong hierarchies creates new challenges for participatory management. Using data from 333 large South Korean manufacturing firms, the findings question some established relationships between areas of participatory management and firm performance indicators that have previously only been explored in Western contexts.

The final featured article shifts our attention from a comparative or national-level analysis of HRM to exploring employee experiences in MNCs. 'The impact of foreign ownership and control on the organizational identification of host country managers working at MNC subsidiaries' by You, Lee, and Bae discusses issues around the identity of local managers when operating in a foreign-owned firm. Differences in nationality and the cultural gap between the home and host country managers influence the organizational identity of the host country managers, yet the authors argue that this gap can be narrowed by firms operating in a socially responsible manner. Drawing on social identity and self-categorization theories, host country managers are said to be in a disadvantaged position relative to parent country managers, particularly so when the MNC exerts strong control from the headquarters. Results from 428 Korean managers demonstrate that both centralization of decision-making and the use of parent-country expatriates in host country operations can have negative effects on the organizational identity of local managers, but that this can be mitigated by corporate social responsibility.

Concluding remarks

This editorial was written as a vision of IHRM research, to be both thought-provoking and to start a conversation that can continue to move the field forward. There are, of course, many other potentially interesting avenues for future IHRM research, but we hope to have highlighted a few that challenge our current ways of thinking. In the articles that follow, examples of research that are rising to this challenge are presented, and we hope that these inspire others to continue to push the boundaries of the IHRM field.

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