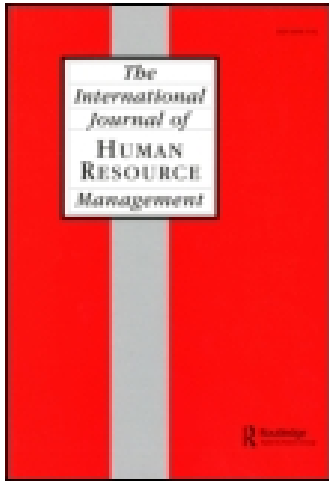


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Framing the field of international human resource management research

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Framing the field of international human resource management research

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This article presents an overarching framework of the international human resource management field. The framework has four different levels: Macro (encompassing countries, regions and industries), the Multinational Corporation, Unit (typically subsidiary) and Individual (including teams, employees and their family members). At each level, we make a distinction between Influencing Factors, the HRM Function (encompassing both the HR department and HR policies and practices), Proximal Outcomes and Distant Outcomes of HRM. The framework allows us to examine existing research and suggest avenues for future work.

Keywords: conceptual framework; international human resource management

Introduction

The increasing number of dedicated textbooks, research handbooks and specialist conferences attest to the maturing nature of international HRM (IHRM) as a field of scientific endeavour. It has moved from a concentration on managing staff transfers to consider broader organisational and contextual issues, such as the transfer of HR practices into subsidiary units, or the HRM activities in international mergers and acquisitions (M&As). While the need to broaden the scope and diversity of IHRM research has generally been regarded as essential to the continuing growth of the field, there has been some concern that such developments might come at the expense of cohesion and relevance (see for example Sparrow 2009; Björkman, Stahl and Morris 2012). This concern can partly be attributed to the fact that IHRM scholars have not clearly articulated the overarching key question that provides the unity of purpose necessary to advance the field (Buckley and Casson 2009). As Peng (2004, p. 101) emphasises, without cohesion of research purpose, a scientific field is likely to experience ‘tremendous or even excessive fragmentation’.

Another issue that may contribute to a sense of lack of cohesion and relevance is the ‘research boundary’: the overlap between what constitutes IHRM and related areas such as cross-cultural management and comparative employee relations. Without consensus, it is difficult to explain to other scholars in international business what IHRM really *is*. Thus, IHRM scholars face the same dilemma as those in the more mainstream HRM field. For example, based on their comprehensive review, Boselie, Dietz and Boon (2005, p. 81) conclude that ‘it remains the case that no consistent picture exists on what HRM is or even what it is supposed to do’, particularly as a contribution to productivity and hence to firm performance.

Looking back over the IHRM body of work, it is possible to identify and articulate the overarching key question in IHRM research. It has been and remains: ‘(i) how are people

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managed in multinational corporations and (ii) what are the outcomes?' (see for example Poole 1990; Schuler, Budhwar and Florkowski 2002; Morley and Scullion 2005; Peltonen 2012). The first part of the question refers to the body of work centred on explaining how and why MNCs manage people in the various units and affiliates differently. This includes the roles played by HR departments and other organisational actors in managing HRs globally. The second part of the question concerns outcomes: endeavouring to link HRM systems and activities to organisational performance; and incorporating the effects of HRM across different groups of participants and levels of analysis, ranging from individual employees and their families, through to societies within which multinational corporations (MNCs) operate. The research question we articulate is fairly broad, encompassing the considerable body of literature on the management of international assignments, as well as recognising the research addressing the multi-level (individual, subsidiary unit and parent) and contextual nature of IHRM. Articulating the key research question not only provides direction and unity of purpose, but also assists in the definition of what IHRM is.

Given the above, we use the key research question to build an overarching framework that sets out the existing research terrain. By so doing, we present the existing 'state of the art' in a way that allows us to assess the field but also identify areas where there has been only limited research to date. We conclude by discussing how the framework can be used to guide future research on people management issues in MNCs.

A framework of IHRM research

A number of efforts have been made to produce integrative frameworks of IHRM. A common thread is the distinction made between (1) MNC-external/exogenous factors, (2) MNC-internal/endogenous/organisational/strategic factors, (3) (I)HRM issues/functions and (4) MNC concerns/goals/effectiveness (see for example Schuler, Dowling and de Cieri 1993; Welch 1994; Taylor, Beechler and Napier 1996; Schuler et al. 2002; Kim and Gray 2005; Schuler and Tarique 2007; de Cieri and Dowling 2012). We build on these contributions but, as mentioned above, our aim has been to develop a framework that is sufficiently broad to encompass different strands of IHRM research. It should be noted that the framework we present is theoretically eclectic, not derived or influenced by any particular organisational theory. Of necessity, Figure 1 constitutes a somewhat simplified picture of what we recognise is a complex empirical reality. Also, the choice of elements is somewhat arbitrary and the supporting literature is used parsimoniously due to the constraints imposed by journal length requirements. However, the elements in Figure 1 are informed by extant IHRM literature, as well as by developments in related fields such as organisational and management studies, international business, economics and general HRM.

Our focus is on analyses conducted across different levels. We use level of analysis (left-hand side) as one of the dimensions of the framework. Figure 1 resembles a table in layout in that we have four 'rows' and four 'columns'. Moving down the figure, the four levels of analysis are: *Macro* (encompassing countries, regions and industries), *MNC* (global headquarters and the parent country), *Unit* (typically wholly owned subsidiary, but may also be a production unit, sales office, project, inter-organisational alliance or any other such entity that constitutes a relevant whole but not necessarily a separate legal entity or formal alliance partner) and *Individual* (including teams, employees and family members). Going across from left to right, the four 'columns' are: *Influencing Factors* (including antecedents and moderating factors), *HRM Function* (encompassing the structure, intellectual capital and roles played by the HR department as well as the HR

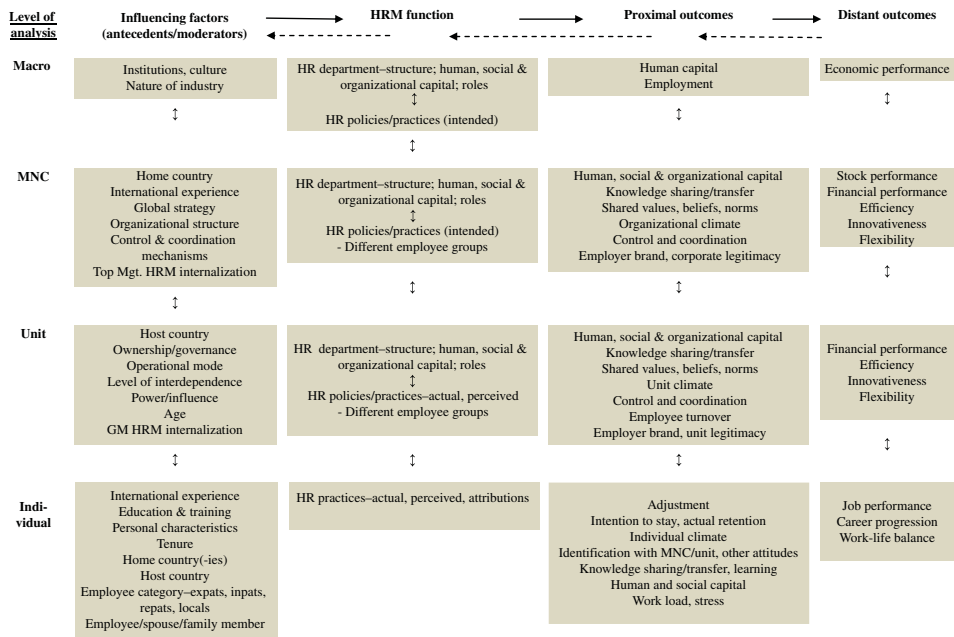


Figure 1. A proposed framework for IHRM research.

policies and practices found at different levels of analysis), *Proximal Outcomes* of HRM and *Distant Outcomes* of HRM – the latter likely to be mediated by Proximal Outcomes.

The framework consists of a range of interrelated factors, as indicated by the double-headed arrows between the four levels of analysis. For example, MNC-level policies and intended HR practices are likely to influence actual and perceived practices at the Unit and Individual levels of analysis. There may also be relationships across multiple levels, such as intellectual capital formation (Wright, Dunford and Snell 2001) in MNC subsidiaries, and human capital formation and employment at the host country level. Further, while we propose that the main effects flow from left to right in Figure 1, there are likely to be feedback loops and numerous examples of reverse causality. Additionally, the HRM function may sometimes be conceptualized as a moderator, rather than mediator, of a relationship established between influencing factors and outcomes. We now turn to explaining the various components and their potential interrelationships.

The Macro level of analysis

The challenge for IHRM scholars is to shed light on how national institutional/cultural factors interact with industry-level factors to produce IHRM outcomes. The Influencing Factors that we identify at the Macro level are based on previous research that examines the influence of institutional factors (such as political-legal and socio-economic systems) and cultural factors (typically conceptualised in terms of country-level differences in cultural values) on the characteristics of firms from a certain country in general (the MNC level in our framework) and the HRM Function in the focal country (the Macro level). The inclusion of the Macro level is necessary in order to understand how and why the HRM Function may vary across MNCs embedded in different countries (Aycaan 2005; Pudelko and Harzing 2007; Almond 2011). Here, we do recognise the empirical work that has

focused on how the institutional/cultural context relates to observed comparative differences across domestic HR practices (for a comprehensive overview of comparative HRM research see Brewster and Mayrhofer 2012).

Also to be noted at the Macro level is the interrelationship between the national and industry context. As pointed out by Ferner (2009), countries tend to have a concentration of firms in sectors where they have developed comparative advantage and this may influence workforce composition. Further, systemic differences are likely to be found across industries partly as an outcome of the human capital requirements of the sector in question, and partly as a result of isomorphic pressures (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). MNCs desirous of establishing or continuing operations may be affected in terms of available skills, wage levels and local recruitment – aspects that fall within the remit of the HRM Function (Evans, Pucik and Björkman 2011). Thus, Proximal Outcomes of the HRM Function include human capital formation and employment in the focal country, region and industry. A more distant relationship may also exist with the economic performance of a specific country, region and/or industry.

The MNC level of analysis

Reviewing the work on HRM in the multinational context reveals a multitude of MNC characteristics. In Figure 1, we identify six major Influencing Factors. First, and perhaps not surprising, MNCs from different home countries have been found to differ significantly in their global HR policies and practices (see for example, Rosenzweig and Nohria 1994; Peterson, Sargent, Napier and Shim 1996; Pudelko and Harzing 2007) and features of their HR departments (Sparrow, Brewster and Harris 2004; Brewster, Wood, Brooks and van Ommeren 2006; Sparrow 2012). Second, international experience is expected to influence how people are managed worldwide as firms go through a process of learning. For example, Scullion and Starkey (2000) consider how stage of internationalisation shapes the function of the HR department as the firm expands globally. Third, global strategy is likely to impact on HRM in MNCs as corporations adapt their people management to strategic goals, such as global integration of value chains and learning (Taylor et al. 1996). Fourth, the structure of the corporation has been suggested to influence HRM in MNCs (see Schuler et al. 1993; Wolf 1997). Fifth, the patterns of control mechanisms used by MNCs are associated with key staffing decisions, such as whether or not to staff foreign units with expatriates from MNC headquarters or from other countries (Edström and Galbraith 1977). Further, the MNC's global performance management and compensation systems, policies concerning recruitment and selection of local employees; and its training and development activities are interrelated with its overall control and coordination approach (Harzing 2001; Shay and Baack 2004; Tungli and Peiperl 2009). Sixth, top management's attitude towards HRM in terms of their degree of internalisation – that is, the extent to which they believe in and are committed to HRM – is likely to impact on aspects such as the resources allocated to the corporate HR department, and how corporate HR policies are enacted (Kostova 1999; Björkman and Lervik 2007).

We conceptualise the HRM Function at the MNC level as comprising the HR department as well as global HR policies and practices. Regarding the HR department, we include its structure, the roles it performs and its intellectual capital. First, the formal organisational structure and the accompanying accountability and responsibilities of the HR department is an important yet relatively little studied aspect (see for example, Farndale et al. 2010). Second, we include the roles played by HR department incumbents, though little work has been conducted into how firm internationalisation impacts upon

those employed to manage personnel (Novicevic and Harvey 2001; Stiles 2012). Lately, work has emerged considering the role of the corporate HR function in managing global talent (Farndale, Scullion and Sparrow 2010), while Welch and Welch (2012) extend the work of Ulrich (1997) and Caldwell (2008) on HR roles into the global arena. They explain how HR roles are enacted and why they vary across various international project settings, with emphasis on context as an important consideration.

The third component we include in this category is that of intellectual capital, a composite of three interdependent components – human, social and organisational capital (Wright et al. 2001) – that together form potential resources that HR professionals may utilise. The concept of intellectual capital has recently been employed within the IHRM context, an example of how the field imports concepts from other scientific disciplines to assist in providing answers to our key IHRM research question. *Human capital* refers to the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are acquired through education and experience. Some dimensions of human capital, such as business understanding, language fluency, general functional knowledge and a global mindset (Wright et al. 2001), are likely to be relevant for all HR professionals (Morris and Snell 2011). On the other hand, there may be specific knowledge and skills pertaining to performing a designated HR role, such as HRM process and content development, HR service delivery and business support (Evans et al. 2011).

The term *social capital* refers to the benefits that derive from the connections and interpersonal relationships between people within and external to an organisation (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998; Kostova and Roth 2003). HR professionals are considered to influence the knowledge and resources coming into the HR department; their social capital may enhance their ability to develop and implement corporate HR policies and processes (Gomez and Sanchez 2005; Sumelius, Björkman and Smale 2008).

Finally, *organisational capital* refers to the different HRM systems, processes and tools. This includes routines concerning HR strategy development and how HR policies, tools and processes are developed and implemented in the MNC. Further, databases containing ‘best practices’ and blueprints, as well as HRM concepts and frameworks shared by HR professionals in the corporation, are examples of the organisational capital of HR departments in MNCs (Zhong, Morris, Snell and Wright 2012).

The HR department obviously plays a key role in developing HR policies, tools, processes and intended practices. These include all aspects of people management – such as recruitment and selection (including the conduct of these activities and the actual pattern of staffing), training and development, performance management and compensation – that are intended to be implemented across the corporation’s worldwide operations. MNCs are likely to differ in terms of the alignment and integration across HR practices (horizontally) and with strategy (vertically) as well as in the extent to which similar HR practices are implemented in their overseas operations. A large number of IHRM scholars have used the global standardisation/integration and/or local adaptation/responsiveness frameworks to explain MNC differences in the transfer of HR practices to the subsidiary or Unit level. Indeed, pointing to the numerous studies based on these ‘ubiquitous’ frameworks, Rosenzweig (2006) questions whether we have reached the point of diminishing returns.

Working across Figure 1, we include six aspects at the MNC level that may be considered as Proximate Outcomes. First, corporate-wide intellectual capital enhancement is considered as one of the intended outcomes of HRM (Taylor 2007; Morris and Snell 2011), although there has been limited work to date that specifically addresses this linkage. Second, there is some suggestion that specific HR activities such as international

assignments, inter-unit skills training and the like may facilitate knowledge sharing and transfer across units in the MNC (see for example Minbaeva, Pedersen, Björkman, Fey and Park 2003). Third, the extent to which there are shared values, beliefs and norms can also be viewed and studied as an important outcome of HRM (Edström and Galbraith 1977; Chatman and Cha 2003). A fourth, and somewhat related outcome, is organisational climate: the degree to which employees have shared perceptions of what is important and what behaviours are expected and rewarded (Schneider 1990), the strength of which is likely to be influenced by features of the HRM of the corporation (Bowen and Ostroff 2004). Fifth, as already mentioned, the overall ability of the MNC to control and coordinate its international activities is generally treated as an objective of corporate HRM. Lastly, we include corporate legitimacy and employer branding (Sparrow et al. 2004; Stahl et al. 2012) as additional proximate outcomes of HR policies and practices.

Finally, there are potentially more Distant Outcomes of corporate HRM, including stock performance, financial performance (including accounting-based measures, ROI, etc.), worldwide efficiency, innovativeness and flexibility (see Schuler and Tarique 2007).

The Unit level of analysis

The host country (culture, economic and institutional) environment is a self-evident influencing factor at the Unit level of analysis. International business has long recognised the operational consequences of demands made by host governments in terms of ownership structure, corporate governance and employment. How the MNC manages host government constraints obviously has flow-on effects for HRM. Perlmutter's (1969) seminal concept of polycentric staffing policy reflects the degree to which MNCs may seek to accommodate host government requirements. Staffing wholly owned subsidiaries will differ from a minority joint venture arrangement (see for example, Björkman and Lu 2001) and acquired units from greenfield investments (Rosenzweig and Nohria 1994; Welch and Welch 1994; Morris, Wilkinson and Gamble 2009). For instance, acquired units tend to retain some of their original HR practices (Rosenzweig and Nohria 1994), optimal staffing levels may be difficult in cases of acquired firms due to host country employment regulations which inhibit job shedding and there may be an increased demand for training programmes which will directly impact on budgets and operational profitability.

The Unit's position within the global entity is a likely determinant of how people are managed in the focal unit. Factors such as interdependence, power and influence, and the affiliate's age, have been shown to moderate unit activities (Rosenzweig and Nohria 1994; Birkinshaw and Hood 1998). We also suggest that the degree to which individual general managers internalise HR practices is likely to influence how people are managed in the focal unit (Björkman, Ehrnrooth, Smale and John, 2011).

As can be seen in [Figure 1](#), a key difference between the MNC and the Unit levels of analysis relates to HR practices in the focal unit, whether these in reality are transferred and implemented in accordance with corporate intentions. In essence, HR practices can be conceptualised in terms of the degree of similarity with MNC headquarters/home country operations and/or the practices found in host country organisations (Rosenzweig and Nohria 1994), the intensity or extent of high performance/commitment HR practices (Ngo, Foley, Loi and Zhang 2011) or the signals that HR practices send to local employees through their features such as distinctiveness, consistency and consensus (Bowen and Ostroff 2004). Another consideration is how MNC-imposed HR practices are perceived by its employees (cf. Wright and Nishii 2007) while bearing in mind the differences that are

likely to exist across different employee groups (Zhu, Cooper, Fan and de Cieri 2013). In addition to studies on the transfer of HR practices to foreign units, there is also a body of research on the reverse diffusion of practices from overseas entities to MNC headquarters and other parts of the corporation (Edwards and Tempel 2010).

The roles played by the Unit HR department may also differ from those at the MNC level (as well as other MNC-internal units); for instance activities such as recruitment and selection, to a different extent, may be delegated to line, functional, regional and/or subsidiary managers, outsourced to external providers or handled by individual employees through electronic intranet programmes (Farndale and Brewster 2005; Lewis and Heckman 2006).

As indicated in Figure 1, while we include the same Proximal Outcomes, such as knowledge transfer, identified at the MNC level, we add employee turnover: a relevant and well-studied outcome of HR practices, particularly in expatriate management research. While poaching of locally trained staff in subsidiary units by other host country market players is a valid concern for foreign corporations, there has been limited investigation into employee turnover at the MNC Unit level (Reiche 2008). In relation to Distant Outcomes, we suggest those as at the MNC level of analysis, but omit stock performance.

The Individual level of analysis

Most of the IHRM research to date at the Individual level has been dominated by expatriate management issues. However, we take a broader perspective – the total composition of the MNC workforce. Thus, we include members of the top management team, international assignees (traditional expatriates and inpatriates, self-initiated, short-term, business travellers), those employed by the MNC in its home country, local affiliate employees, accompanying partners and those working in cross-border teams. Additionally, we include employees' family members.

As shown in Figure 1, in identifying Influencing Factors for this level of analysis, we followed the individual components used in reviews of research on expatriates (e.g. Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer and Luk 2005; Lazarova, Westman and Shaffer 2010; Takeuchi 2010). These include international experience, education and training, personal characteristics and tenure. But consistent with our broad approach, we add country of origin (MNC home country, host country and third country nationals) and employee category. Further, we include family factors. Recognition of the role of accompanying family members has been a consistent theme in the expatriate literature. For example, a growing body of research has shown the interrelationship between the adjustment and performance of international assignees and of their spouses (Shaffer and Harrison 2001; Takeuchi, Yun and Tesluk 2002). Spillover effects have also been proposed between the expatriate's work and family roles (Lazarova et al. 2010).

Research at the Individual level has addressed the interaction between the individual employee and HR practices but has so far largely neglected how employees make sense of the practices. For example, in a single-country study by Nishii, Lepak and Schneider (2008), individuals were shown to differ in terms of attributions of the same (or similar) HR practice. These attributions were found to be significantly related to individual attitudes and behaviours. Similar differences are reflected in some work on repatriation practices, where varying responses by individuals towards the sending organisation have been reported (see for example, Lazarova and Cerdin 2007). Therefore, we add employee attribution to the issues covered within the HRM Function at the Individual level.

The Proximal Outcomes we indicate in [Figure 1](#) commence with on-assignment adjustment (including accompanying spouse/partner/family), a subject of considerable research. Of specific interest at the Individual level of analysis has been the link between adjustment, intention to stay and performance (see for example, [Gregersen, Hite and Black 1996](#); [Welch 2003](#); [Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al. 2005](#)). Employee turnover is also a relevant outcome in relation to the non-expatriate workforce, whether home or host country employed. Building on [Bowen and Ostroff \(2004\)](#) we have included psychological climate, that is individual perceptions of what is important and what behaviours are expected and rewarded in a specific organisation. Identification with the focal unit as well as with the MNC is another set of potential proximate outcomes of HRM relevant for both expatriates ([Vora, Kostova and Roth 2007](#)) and local employees ([Reiche 2007](#)). Similar to the Unit level of analysis, we consider that individual human and social capital development, as well as inter-personal knowledge sharing/transfer involving expatriates ([Edström and Galbraith 1977](#); [Minbaeva and Michailova 2004](#); [Bonache and Zarraga-Oberty 2008](#)), repatriates ([Reiche, Harzing and Kraimer 2009](#)) and local employees are important and worthy of IHRM research attention. We also include individual learning as a proximate outcome, competence development on the part of international assignees being an important purpose of expatriation ([Pucik 1992](#)). Individual expatriates who are willing and in the position to combine knowledge from the local unit with that obtained in other parts of the MNC may also contribute to the innovativeness of the Unit, and upon repatriation may trigger new developments at Headquarters ([Welch, Steen and Tahvanainen 2009](#)), thus adding to the MNC's stock of intellectual capital. Though there has been limited IHRM research on the topic, we further argue that work load and stress deserve to be included as Individual-level outcomes in IHRM research, thus pointing to the potential negative effects of HR practices on individual employees and their families (cf. [Lazarova et al. 2010](#); [Takeuchi 2010](#)).

Finally, we suggest that individual job performance ([Carragher, Sullivan and Crocitto 2008](#)), work-life balance (see [Takeuchi 2010](#)) and career progression ([Cappellen and Janssens 2010](#); [Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen and Bolino 2012](#)) are important yet more distant outcomes of HRM for the individual employee. We classify these as distant outcomes as they to a large extent are mediated by the proximate outcomes and/or are more long-term effects (career progression in particular).

Conclusion and implications for future research

In this paper we have developed a composite, overarching framework that we hope assists our IHRM colleagues and those within the general international business community make sense of the field. As mentioned earlier, in developing the framework we drew on the work of several previous IHRM frameworks and models but added additional elements based on our reading of recent IHRM research as well as contributions in adjacent fields.

Our overview of existing IHRM research reveals a dynamic, growing, but somewhat fragmented field. However, it would seem that there is unity of purpose, centred on the research question we articulated in the introduction of this article. If one looks back to the early work of scholars such as [Perlmutter \(1969\)](#) and [Edström and Galbraith \(1977\)](#), the focus was at the MNC level linking staffing policies to firm internationalisation and control mechanisms. Attention, though, shifted to the management of staff transfers (see for example, [Tung 1981](#); [Black and Mendenhall 1990](#)). More recently, while research into expatriate management continues to add to our understanding of the consequences of staff transfers at the Individual level of analysis, there is a growing body of work at the Unit,

MNC and Macro levels. The fragmentation we observed may simply be signs of ‘growing pains’ in a scientific field that is developing rapidly.

Areas for future research

A comprehensive list of possible future research topics is beyond the scope of this paper, although our compilation and discussion of [Figure 1](#) allows us to draw out some key areas that may prove fruitful. An obvious area is that of the Macro level. Prior models included country and industry as contextual Macro factors (see Schuler et al. 1993; Welch 1994; Taylor et al. 1996). These models have the potential to guide further theoretical development that takes account of unexplored connections between HR activities and Macro factors. We consider that a task for IHRM scholars is to shed light on how national institutional/cultural factors interact with industry-level factors to produce the HRM Function that can be observed in different countries. The way in which MNCs from different countries manage people internationally (Ferner 1997) is therefore likely to be highly complex and country-of-origin effects are likely to vary across corporations and countries. However, as pointed out by Pudelko and Harzing (2007) there are also global dominance (institutionalisation) effects at play as notions of what constitute ‘best practices’ travel across countries, becoming forces for universal HR approaches. We suggest that scholars combine institutional theory with an analysis of the actors involved in decision-making about corporate policies and practices, including the extent to which decision-making on HRM issues is centralised (Ferner et al. 2004), and how headquarters attempt to control their foreign operations (Gomez and Sanchez 2005; Chung, Gibbons and Schoch 2006). This will allow IHRM researchers to examine the interaction of top-down institutionalisation processes at national and international levels and the bottom-up processes of actors who endeavour to make sense of, negotiate and influence their institutional environments (Kostova, Roth and Dacin 2008). In other words, corporate HR executives and professionals as well as other relevant MNC stakeholders may be viewed as active decision-makers who differ in how they deal with institutional pressures (Oliver 1991) – in part as an outcome of their individual identities (cf. Almond 2011), and their power and influence strategies (Geppert and Williams 2006; Ferner, Edwards and Tempel 2012).

Another area that has received only scant attention is that of global strategy which we identify as an Influencing Factor at the MNC level of analysis. Although it has been argued persuasively that strategy should influence HRM in corporations in general (Boxall and Purcell 2011) and MNCs in particular (Taylor et al. 1996), our reading of the literature suggests a need for additional empirical work within the context of multinationals. Research is needed to shed light on whether and how MNCs *attempt* to link their strategy and various aspects of HRM, and what is the *actual* extent to which strategy variables (dimensions) are found to be systematically related with HR policies and practices at different levels of analysis in MNCs. For instance, more empirical work is called for to understand how MNCs pursuing different international strategies approach global staffing (Colakoglu, Tarique, Caliguiri and Jacobs 2009) and expatriate management practices (Caliguiri and Colakoglu 2007). IHRM scholars could also adopt a knowledge-based perspective (Grant 1996) to examine how MNCs (attempt to) manage people to generate knowledge across their international units and to leverage that knowledge across global boundaries (Tsai and Ghoshal 1998; Almeida, Song and Grant 2002). Although the knowledge-based view of the firm has been applied to studying aspects of MNC operations (e.g. Almeida et al. 2002; Szulanski and Jensen 2006), more work on the relationship between MNC strategy, management of knowledge and HRM is called for. The effects of

the strategy-HRM interrelationship in generating different outcome variables are of obvious interest to scholars and practitioners alike.

We still only have relatively rudimentary knowledge about the HR department, the key corporate agent responsible for HRM in MNCs (Sparrow et al. 2004; Ferner 2009). Further, HR managers and professionals working within MNCs have received little attention outside of the managerially oriented HRM literature (Rupidara and McGraw 2011). In our view, a particularly fruitful avenue would be in-depth analyses of the agency and actions that HR managers take that ultimately determine how HR policies and processes are initiated and implemented. While human, social and intellectual capital (see Figure 1) are resources that the actors have at their disposal, the mere possessing of such resources does not necessarily determine organisational influence. It is rather how they are used, that is how an HR actor draws on and mobilises his/her intellectual capital in order to get things done. Indeed, similar to the emergence of research on strategy-as-practice in the strategy field (Vaara and Whittington 2012), there is a need to further our knowledge of what HR actors really do in MNCs. For example, do the purported roles of the HR Function involve more than the specific day-to-day activities that HR professionals engage in, and to what extent do these activities correspond with role expectations? (Tsui 1990; Truss, Gratton, Hope-Hailey, Stiles and Zaleska 2002). While the study by Welch and Welch (2012) is a starting point, there is a need to examine how HR managers perform their roles in different industry settings.

Considerable work remains also to be done on the outcomes 'side', in terms of proximal and more distant outcomes of HRM in MNCs. Calls have been made for a contingency perspective to be used to analyse the relationship between HRM and performance in MNCs (Pauwe and Farndale 2012). Such a perspective could examine, among others, the influence of moderating cultural and institutional contextual factors on the relationship between the use of 'best' global HRM practices (Pudelko and Harzing 2007) and HRM from the home country of the MNC (Rosenzweig and Nohria 1994) on outcome variables across units in MNCs.

Our framework covers a number of different levels, and it is therefore only natural for us to call for more multilevel research. As persuasively argued by Wright and van de Voorde (2009), such work is needed to establish the relative effect of potential influencing factors and higher level features of HRM (see Figure 1) both on the observed characteristics of the HRM Function at different levels of analysis and on proximal as well as distant outcomes. The data requirements for such studies pose a severe challenge for IHRM scholars, with large collaborate research efforts being a natural way to address this issue (see also Wall and Wood 2005; Cascio 2012).

In conclusion, IHRM scholars confront a challenging but exciting future. As our overview reveals, it is a growing research field. This provides us with the potential to consolidate prior knowledge through further theory building and testing, as well as with opportunities to explore paths yet to be travelled.

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