Received: 27 October 2021 | Revised: 4 June 2023 | Accepted: 7 June 2023

DOI: 10.1111/1748-8583.12523

INVITED REVIEW

Human Resource Management Journal WILEY

Bridging human resource management theory and practice: Implications for industry-engaged academic research

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Abstract

The link between academic theory and the professional practice of human resource management (HRM) is often tenuous and disjointed. The "gap" between theory and practice is damaging to academics and practitioners. On the one hand, academic research is often highly theoretical and methodologically complex. On the other, HR professionals tend to oversimplify advice on "how to solve" HRM "problems" and they may conduct research lacking rigor and nuance. Insofar as a bridge can be built between HRM theory and practice, significant benefits exist for both parties. Mick Marchington exemplified this bridge. His commitment to pluralism wrought significant influence on the professional practice of HRM through highly readable and practically useful theory. We look to Marchington's work to draw lessons on how we can better bridge theory and practice for the enrichment of academics and practitioners. We develop a framework contrasting "academic esotericism" with "practitioner reductionism." We then propose a third way: "industry-engaged academic research."

Abbreviations: AHRI, Australian Human Resources Institute; CIPD, The Chartered Institute of Personell and Development; ECR, early career researcher; HR, human resources; HRM, human resource management.

KEYWORDS
employee voice, evidence-based HRM, frames of reference, impact, industry engagement, pluralism, professional associations, professional practice

Practitioner Notes

What is currently known about the subject matter?

- There is a much-lamented divide between human resource management (HRM) theory and practice.
- HR academics often research and write for each other and, in doing so, fail to identify issues of importance to practitioners.
- Similarly, practitioners rely on oversimplified concepts, data, and analysis, which are often neither rigorous, nor generalizable.

What this paper adds to this?

- Mick Marchington was an academic whose commitment to pluralism and applied theory set an example of how to bridge that divide.
- We articulate a novel framework for understanding, and better integrating, HRM theory and professional practice.

Implications of the study findings for practitioners

- Practitioners benefit from an understanding of Mick Marchington's legacy, in particular his demonstration of the practical value of good theory.
- Our framework explains how HRM academics can build better relationships with HR professionals.
- These relationships must be based on rigor, shared values, and a pragmatic approach to HRM theory and practice grounded in common insight.

1 | INTRODUCTION

That management research is largely detached from the needs of management practitioners is not a new argument (Rynes et al., 2001). Wood and Budhwar (2021) make the case, specifically in the context of human resource management (HRM), that we must leverage theory more meaningfully. In a similar vein, Aguinis and Cronin (2022, p. 2) argue that we should not be "clogging our science" with "theory for theory's sake." These critiques of theory are not confined to management and HRM research. In a wider evaluation of the social sciences, Alvesson et al. (2017, p. 5) point to "not merely a decline in the quality of social science research, but [to] the proliferation of meaningless research, of no value to society, and [of] modest value to its authors—apart from securing employment and promotion." The authors go on to argue that most social science research these days is "nonsense" (ibid; see also Tourish, 2020). Even if these claims are exaggerated in scale or effect, the disconnect between academic research and professional practice is a serious problem.

HRM academics and practitioners have valid concerns in this ongoing debate. Academics claim that HRM practitioners are too often reductionist, normative, and instrumental. For example, Keenoy (2014), Guest (2014), Purcell (2014), and Fletcher et al. (2020) have criticized practitioner work on employee engagement, pointing to what they perceive to be unrealistic and overly-simplified unitarist assumptions which tend to place managers at the center of all solutions. This kind of reductionist managerial research is often carried out by consulting firms under the auspices of helping clients, but with a concurrent goal of promoting the return services of the researching organization. The ever-expanding gray literature on the latest "solutions" to HR "problems," much of which is conducted with no recourse to peer- or expert-review, is viewed by some academics with skepticism (Adams et al., 2017). Equally, many practitioners are increasingly skeptical of academic organizational research given its use of highly technical quantitative methodologies and scientific jargon that, in concert, act to exclude "lay" HR professionals (Koskela, 2017). Indeed, even qualitative and theoretical HR academics are excluded from understanding this highly technical HRM literature given their lack of training (or interest) in econometrics (Godard, 2014).

Some HR academics have been more successful than others in bridging the gap between HR theory and practice. Mick Marchington was that rare scholar with the ability to traverse this divide and deliver positive outcomes for academia and the professional practice of HRM. Marchington is best known for his outstanding contributions to the literature on employee involvement and participation, or "voice" (Ackers et al., 1992; Dundon et al., 2004; Marchington & Armstrong, 1981a, 1981b; Marchington et al., 1993; Marchington et al., 1994, among many others). Later on in his career, Marchington turned his attention to the blurring of traditional employment boundaries in the light of new forms of inter-organizational relations (Marchington et al., 2005), for example, agency and contingent work. He argued that "core" employees often enjoy significantly greater opportunities for voice than "peripheral" workers such as those externally contracted to work in a host organization (Marchington & Timming, 2010). But beyond these contributions to academic theory, Marchington was also a practitioner-focused academic whose work was strongly grounded in the pluralist tradition. In addition to being a prolific scholar, he was Chief Examiner (1994–2002) and the Chief Moderator of Standards (2002–2006) at the UK's Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), and lead author of one of the most widely used HRM textbooks, *Human Resource Management at Work: The Definitive Guide* (Marchington et al., 2021). His research was impactful because he sought to transcend academic debates through dialog with industry partners and an accessible writing style that appealed to, and engaged with, HR professionals.

In short, Marchington provides a model for how we, as HR researchers, might bridge the gap between HR theory and practice. We draw on the tensions, contradictions, and potential for syntheses or complementarities between academics and practitioners. These tensions can manifest in several dimensions. We focus on four of them—concerns, methods, language, and audience—to explain how and why many HR academics are prone to esotericism and HR practitioners are prone to reductionism. We look to the example of Mick Marchington to better understand how he was successful in finding rigorous and relevant "common ground" between HR theory and practice, and we articulate a theory aimed at bringing HRM academics and practitioners together in a positive sum game.

2 | THE ESOTERICISM OF HRM THEORY

Journal editors are keenly aware of the apparent disconnect between what they publish and what practitioners want, with a number of recent editorials highlighting the urgent need for symbiosis. Bartunek and Rynes (2014), in a *Journal of Management* guest editorial, reject dichotomous thinking around the academic-practitioner debate and point to the value of conflicting logics, different styles of communication, and unique incentives between academics and practitioners. They propose that these divergences can, in themselves, serve as a platform for cooperation and debate between the two parties. Hideg et al. (2020), in a recent *Academy of Management Journal* editorial, lament the use of "shallow and insensitive characterization[s] of findings" (p. 1681) when academics report practical implications. They urge academics to commit to research that is not only important to industry, but also responsibly reported, as illustrated by Ghoshal (2005). In the field of organizational behavior, it was recently found that only 1.5% of articles discuss policy implications (Aguinis et al., 2022). Similarly, Kougiannou and Ridgway (2022) found that <2% of the text of HRM articles focuses on practical implications. The problem is that academics have been, in the past, more focused on abstract intellectual exercises that they find "interesting," rather than on knowledge that practitioners find "important" (Tihanyi, 2020). In doing so, academic work often fails to resonate with industry leaders—indeed, academic papers are frequently designed *not* to do so.

A number of scholars and researchers within the ambit of HRM, broadly construed, have taken up the gauntlet to extol the virtues of bridging the HR-practitioner gap. With a focus on HR-practitioner "bridge" journals (e.g., practitioner periodicals such as *HR Magazine* and *Harvard Business Review*), Rynes et al. (2007) found that HR academics are not researching topics that practitioners find important. They conclude that "practitioner and bridge journals provide little coverage of some of the research findings deemed most important by HR researchers" (p. 1004). In a critique of HRM as a discipline of research, Harley (2015) lambasted the "almost total dominance" (p. 399) of advanced econometrics and "correlational theorising" (ibid) in published HRM research. Such esoteric statistical methodologies are exceedingly difficult for most practitioners, and even for many (especially qualitative) academics, to understand and from which to draw meaningful conclusions.

Of course, not all HR scholars are equally prone to academic esotericism, nor is it appropriate to generalize that all HRM research amounts to nothing more than inaccessibly useless "nonsense" (Tourish, 2020). It could be argued, for example, that only certain types of HR research outputs at certain points in history are either designed intentionally to exclude "lay" people, or have that effect. The term "human resource management," coming into common usage in the 1980s to replace "personnel management" (Kaufman, 2001), brought a focus on the individual, in contrast to the more collective, multi-level, and contextualized scope of industrial relations (IR) (Dickens, 2009, pp. 61–61). As HRM transformed into "strategic" HRM from around the 1990s onward, the search for levers to improve individual performance intensified, and a stream of HRM research moved closer to organizational psychology (Godard, 2014; Heery, 2016; Kaufman, 2020). This historical trend is evident in the substantial and still rapidly growing body of published HR research that employs advanced statistical models using micro-level data. Not only is much of this research written inaccessibly, but it also fails to consider the importance of context and implementation (see Aguinis et al., 2022, on the lack of policy implications in OB/HRM research published in 10 highly regarded journals). A second stream of highly quantified HRM research, derived from labor economics and equally reliant on abstruse advanced statistical models, but specifically focused on pay and incentive structures and differentials (Heery, 2016, pp. 14–15), emerged around the early 2000s.

Going further back in time, another type of research not easily accessible to HR practitioners includes scholarly work relying on continental (particularly French) European philosophers. An example would be use of Foucault's work (1970 and onwards) on power, politics, and knowledge, explored mainly in the 1990s by HR scholars such as Townley (1993) and Barratt (2003), before merging into what we know as critical management studies today. Marchington (2015b, p. 760) saw this work as overtly hostile toward management.

The British School of pluralist IR research (Ackers, 2014)—of which Mick Marchington was a part—stands out as a body of work that is comparatively easy-to-read, accessible, impactful, and case-study driven (Thomas & Turnbull, 2022), as will be discussed further below. This work is frequently published in academic journals like *Human Resource Management Journal* that seek pro-actively to engage and even provoke the practitioner audience. This exception notwithstanding, the separation between HR theory and practice, at least at an international level, appears to be increasing, with the distance between the two parties perhaps now greater than ever.

Kaufman (2022) attributes the "'separate worlds' chasm" between academics and practitioners to the former's preference to "*talk at* and *talk down* to practitioners rather than *talk with* them" (p. 1). Putting his money where his mouth is, he collaborated with two practitioners to compare the academic literature on the high-performance work system (HPWS) with the practical implementation of said system (Jewell et al., 2022). The authors conclude, somewhat worryingly, that the academic and practitioner versions of the HPWS have little in common, underscoring the importance of continued dialog between the two stakeholders. Such conclusions are unsurprising, given the perverse incentives surrounding academic research that prioritize rankings and metrics (Timming et al., 2021).

From our reading of the academic-practitioner literature, we identified four dimensions on which HRM academic researchers might be prone to value the esoteric, or obscure, over the practical: (1) concerns, (2) methods, (3) language and (4) audience, as shown in Figure 1. These four themes emerged organically from a critical reading of

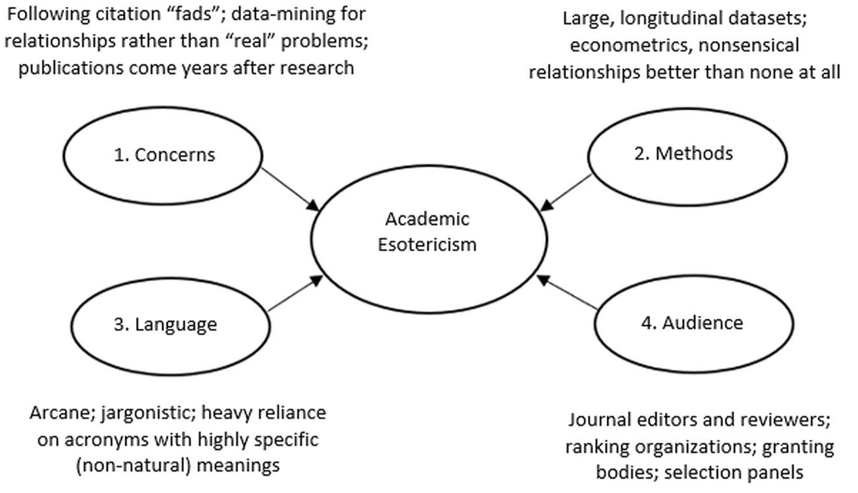

FIGURE 1 Academic esotericism.

the academic-practitioner literature. Concerns pertain to the topic of the research conducted (i.e., what is being explained or investigated). Methods pertain to the research design and epistemology (i.e., the methodology of data collection and analysis). Language pertains to the way the research is communicated, which is strongly tied to the medium of argumentation (i.e., accessible vs. obscure). Finally, the audience pertains to the stakeholders to whom the research is directed (i.e., the targeted readers). These four dimensions were deliberately selected because they answer key questions around *who* the beneficiaries of the research are, *what* the key topics of analysis are, and *how* the research is carried out.

Academic *concerns* typically center around theoretical contributions to the literature. At our most esoteric, we pursue an interest in particular issues, or topics, which come to dominate discussion in our academic journals. For various reasons, including how our work is acknowledged in universities (Darlington, 2009), the academic HRM researcher may be very focused on contributing to the further development of a popular theoretical concept or model, for example, the Ability, Motivation and Opportunity, or AMO, model (Bos-Nehles et al., 2023). This focus on theory, rather than practice—or perhaps even a theory of practice (Bourdieu, 2020)—risks deteriorating into an ever-tightening spiral of gap-spotting research (Alvesson & Karreman, 2011) at the expense of the second component of our model—*methods*. Academic methods have become more specialized and complex, and the explanation underlying them lengthier. The boundaries, or word limits, of academic journal articles thus leave increasingly less room for an in-depth discussion of either content or meaning. The technical knowledge required, especially for advanced econometrics, limits the reach of the research. Similarly, the *language* used to explain both concepts and methods is often arcane, with little currency in non-academic circles. Editors and reviewers (especially in U.S. journals) promote increasing complexity and exacerbate the level of "rigor" necessary to publish in highly ranked outlets. Practical and accessible research is often disincentivized in peer review because it is seen as being too simplistic. All of these factors play into the *audience*, which is often narrow and largely limited to those few academics who can understand, review, and replicate the research.

The benefit of the system depicted in Figure 1 is primarily to the careers of the researchers and the reputations of their universities, in an institutional setting where rankings and metrics are becoming overwhelmingly dominant (Parker, 2018; Pusser & Marginson, 2013). Although the model presented here is a generalization and there are, as described above in relation to the British School of IR pluralism, exceptions to the rule, on balance, practitioners still claim that they gain little or no value from the work we do (Tourish, 2019).

3 | THE REDUCTIONISM OF HRM PRACTICE

Academics are not alone in finding themselves on the receiving end of criticism. For various reasons, we have also been critical of HRM practitioners—and rightly so. For example, there has been long-standing criticism of how some HR practitioners—in particular consulting firms or organizations with consulting "arms"—have conducted and leveraged research on "employee engagement." Since the clients of these types of firms are almost invariably managers, perhaps it is unsurprising that the assumptions that underpin employee engagement services are frequently unitarist, focused only on management concerns and responses (Guest, 2014; Keenoy, 2014; Purcell, 2014). Fletcher et al. (2020) expressed similar concerns, also pointing to a lack of consideration for the role of context. Surveys and the consulting services that follow them are promoted as viable universal solutions for all organizations (for example, Gallup, 2022b and Gallup, 2022a). They often pay insufficient attention to organizational characteristics and context. These services are often characterized as a way to identify "bad apples" (who risk making the whole barrel go bad if they are not removed). This metaphor points to individual employees, or their association with "third parties" like unions, as the problem, rather than deficiencies in the policies and practices of the organizations in which they work. An example of the use of this metaphor in relation to employee engagement comes with the release of a research report by Atlassian (2022). The report itself fails to explain the survey—its design and administration are left to the imagination. Those who reported on it stated that the findings came from "2000 people surveyed across Australia and the US" (Boddy, 2022; Neilson, 2022). Many academics will reel at the lack of explanation of the research process, absence of peer review, and failure to report on context or nuance. Professional associations and journalists, wittingly or unwittingly, are often the medium through which reductionist research is promoted.

Another example of practitioner reductionism is the "how-to" version of HRM reflected in the consulting advice of many HR consultants. Many consulting firms employ a "one-size-fits-all" approach to the professional practice of HRM. Such firms are "replicators," imposing an overly simplified model of HRM on all organizations because it has worked successfully in the past in one organization. Their approach to HRM is not based on organizational and cultural nuance, but rather on the idea of one "best way" of managing people within organizations. Marchington and Grugulis (2000) leveled a devastating critique against this homogeneous form of thinking. They argue that universal "off-the-shelf" methods of HR fail to take into account the vital importance of both organizational and national context.

Reflecting on practitioner reductionism, we employ the same typology depicted in Figure 1 to understand the shortcomings associated with practitioner thought. The same four dimensions take center stage, including: (1) concerns, (2), methods, (3) language, and (4) audience. The *concerns* of the reductionist HR practitioner revolve primarily around profitability (in the case of the private sector) and efficiency. For them, the idea of a theoretical contribution, in and of itself, is superfluous. They tend to follow a set of "fads" that are popular among HR consultants and, as already noted, provide the same (or very similar) "solutions" to HR "problems." The *methods* employed by reductionist HR practitioners tend to be simplistic, and overly rely on descriptive statistics or narratives that are ill-suited to capturing and isolating complex cause-and-effect relations. The absence of methodological rigor means reliance on extrapolation and generalization of a set of findings that are not well supported by the limited data. Research methods are typically poorly described and therefore are difficult to replicate and confirm. In a similar vein, the *language* used by practitioners is often simplistic, lacking in nuance, and unable to capture context and historicity. Their communication is accessible, but at the expense of fine detail and systemic understanding. Finally, the *audience* of the reductionist HR practitioner consists primarily of clients, customers, employees, journalists, students, and, of course, other practitioners. Just as academics are oftentimes accused of writing for each other, practitioners are arguably guilty of the same behavior. Figure 2 depicts a framework for understanding practitioner reductionism.

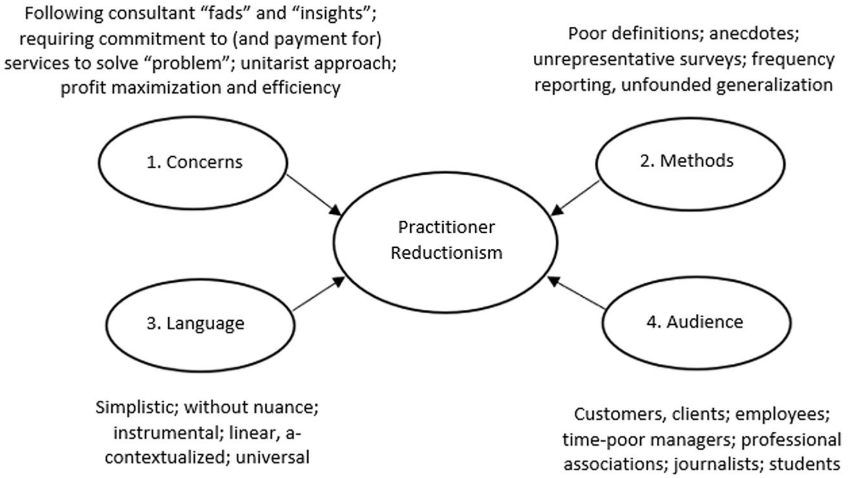

FIGURE 2 Practitioner reductionism.

4 | MICK MARCHINGTON: A PRACTITIONER-FOCUSED ACADEMIC

Though he began his career as an IR pluralist, Marchington's theoretical contributions to HRM were enormous. Taken together, Marchington's *oeuvre* across almost four decades is underpinned by a strong and consistent commitment to fairness at work, pluralist values, and mutual gains, and by a rejection of zero-sum approaches to the employment relationship, wherein one party can only benefit at the expense of the other. Marchington also demonstrated that research *about* management does not have to be for the benefit *of* management. But as profound as his theoretical contributions were, they are not the focus of the present study. Instead, we focus here on Mick as a model for bridging the academic-practitioner divide.

Marchington was a conduit between theory and practice and a model for applied HR research. This disposition may well be related to the fact that IR pluralism is a field of research that has a long tradition of engagement with employment practice and less interest in pure theorizing. Whatever the cause, he was that rare academic whose influence transcended academic theory and reverberated across the wider economy and society. Although he never wrote specifically on the academic-practitioner "gap," his career and working life were largely dedicated to closing it. That is to say, he actively "lived" the values of meaningful engagement with industry and society.

From 1994 to 2006, Marchington served the CIPD continuously, first as the Chief Examiner and later as the Chief Moderator of Standards. These roles placed him center stage in the CIPD's quality assurance efforts, meaning that he held overall responsibility for ensuring that the assessments and learning objectives as well as outcomes were fit for purpose, and that members' written work in the lead up to chartered membership was up to the appropriate standards. It is easy to underestimate the responsibility and power associated with these roles. Marchington was, for all practical purposes, a gatekeeper for prospective practitioners seeking membership into the CIPD. He was instrumental in establishing, and enforcing, benchmarks that all potential members of the CIPD must first meet prior to enjoying the benefits of chartered certification. In this way, he proactively shaped and molded the expectations of future members in terms of what it means to be an HR professional. Given that CIPD membership stands at approximately 160,000 individuals worldwide (CIPD, 2021c), it would be fair to say that Marchington's influence and impact extended far and wide into professional circles.

In both roles, Marchington also contributed to the development of the CIPD's Profession Map (CIPD, 2021b), particularly the section dealing with employee relations (CIPD, 2021a), which explicitly advocates using "employee voice insights from working groups and staff forums to change the way things work, and create a more positive working culture in organizations." The wider language used throughout the Profession Map is imbued with the same values that Marchington evidenced through his research, with strong emphases on terms like: employee voice (Dundon et al., 2004), engagement (Marchington, 2015a), fair and inclusive work (Marchington & Dundon, 2017), integrity and championing better work (Marchington et al., 2021), values-based decisions (Hebson et al., 2003), stakeholder concerns (Marchington, 2015b), and collective well-being (Holman et al., 2012). The professional standards and core values of the CIPD mirror Marchington's lifelong commitment to promoting employee voice in organizational decision-making.

With reference to the models depicted in Figures 1 and 2, Marchington rejected the flawed "poles" of esotericism and reductionism, and truly drew from the best of both worlds: academia informed by practice. He was able, through his research, to make important contributions not only to the key theoretical debates of interest to academics working in HRM, but also to ensure that his ideas, and—crucially—the way he expressed them, had a positive impact on individuals, organizations, and societies.

Marchington never aligned himself with esoteric approaches to HRM, exemplified by researchers whose work amounted to a set of exercises in "mental gymnastics." His *concerns* centered around issues and topics that mattered to both academics and practitioners. He was very keen to deliver insight that lends itself to greater organizational efficiency and effectiveness (e.g., Wilkinson et al., 2004), but he also engaged in shaping academic debates—such as the fruitful "waves" versus "cycles" discussion of the 1980s and 1990s (Ackers et al., 1992; Marchington et al., 1993; Ramsay, 1977).

His *methods* were largely, although not exclusively (e.g., Cox et al., 2006), qualitative. This chosen epistemology was in keeping with his firm commitment to enabling and promoting employee voice at work. Marchington was an outstanding listener. He wove together rich and compelling narratives that accentuated meaning and context (e.g., Marchington et al., 2005) and, in doing so, he resisted the psychologization of HRM (Godard, 2014; Kaufman, 2020). As a result, practitioners were able to read and appreciate his insights and, perhaps most importantly for them, to translate his ideas into managerial insight. For example, Marchington's aforementioned influence on the CIPD's Profession Map illustrates that his ideas were both well understood and taken seriously. Had his work been full of impenetrable econometric equations, it would not likely have had the same impact and appeal to the CIPD.

Marchington's *language*, much like his methods, eschewed excessive complexity, but never sacrificed understanding for simplicity. The first author of this paper, when he was an early career researcher and out to impress with "big" words and complex syntax, was fortunate enough to co-author with, and learn from, Marchington (Marchington & Timming, 2010). This young ECR was astounded by Mick's lack of pretension and use of colloquialisms (e.g., rather than using terminology such as "a compounded negative effect," Mick instead used the phrase "double whammy" [ibid, p. 457]). Marchington exuded confidence in his ideas and therefore never felt the need to disguise his writing through linguistic inaccessibility.

Finally, Marchington's *audience* was not confined to academics, though he was, and continues to be, widely read by HRM scholars. To be sure, he is among the highest cited HRM researchers in the world and has published numerous papers in the top academic HRM journals, including *Human Resource Management Journal*, where he served as Editor-in-Chief. But through his roles in the CIPD, Marchington kept his ear to the proverbial "practitioner grindstone." Mick Marchington's legacy at *Human Resource Management Journal* is clear in the subsequent requirement of all published articles to include "Practitioner Notes" to appeal to that audience.

5 | INDUSTRY-ENGAGED ACADEMIC RESEARCH—DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The academic-practitioner divide is in dire need of bridging. Unfortunately, we have reached a crisis point insofar as academics are now referring to our own research as "nonsense" (Tourish, 2020) and "meaningless" (Alvesson et al., 2017). If we recognize what we write as such, how much more so will the practitioner? So detached from the real world has much of our research become that it almost exists on another plane of existence to the day-to-day activities of the people manager. To achieve a mutually beneficial reconciliation, what is need, above all else, is *industry-engaged academic research*, defined broadly to include private, public, and non-profit organizations. This type of research "speaks" simultaneously to the needs of industry and of academia. It recognizes the value of deepening our theoretical understanding of the world of work, but also seeks to leverage those theoretical insights to add value to individuals, organizations, and societies. By "add value," we do not imply a parochial focus on just profit or efficiency, but rather a broader valorization of well-being, both individual and organizational—both of which naturally flow onto societal enrichment. Examples of industry-engaged academic research include, but are not limited to: academic co-authorship with practitioners (Jewell et al., 2022), academics jointly holding practitioner and consulting roles (Perkmann & Walsh, 2008), a colloquial and accessible writing style that pro-actively seeks to widen the audience (Clayton, 2015), and the effective translation of econometric methodologies and statistical results into understandable "lay" person's terms (Timming, 2022), among others.

We have argued that Marchington loosely embodies industry-engaged academic research. His work was neither esoteric, nor reductionist. As an academic, he was an "all-rounder," moving seamlessly across sectors and ensuring that his insights were communicated beyond academia, largely through his roles in the CIPD and through accessible language and methods. If anything, Marchington serves as a reminder to us that if our research starts and stops with obscure peer reviewed outputs, then perhaps we are not realizing our full potential—a lesson that is particularly important to early career researchers, many of whom are drawn toward the econometrics of the U.S. model of psychologization. There is any number of ways to promote the "impact" of our ideas, whether through the CIPD, the Australian Human Resources Institute (AHRI), the Society for Human Resource Management, or even through consulting, advising, or sitting on corporate boards. To make this happen, universities will need to re-examine incentives to incorporate accessible impact as a key performance indictor. But impact must go beyond the instrumental focus on profitability, to which many universities are beholden (Parker, 2018). From this point of view, Parker's critique of the Business School looks considerably weaker when we consider researchers like Marchington (2015b) who rejected unitarist assumptions and sought to embed social responsibility into his research (and teaching).

In general, industry-engaged academic research will lead us to good—or better—theory that also helps managers explain and predict the situations or problems that they face (Aguinis & Cronin, 2022). Moreover, it will encourage people managers to take perspectives not their own—to see those situations or problems from different, often conflicting, perspectives, and to use those perspectives to enrich their understanding and practice.

Another way in which academics and practitioners can bridge the divide is to actively engage with the "gray" literature on HRM topics. For academics, this represents an opportunity to identify trends in practice sooner and to incorporate them carefully into "academic" research, reviewing it for rigor and relevance as we would for any other output (Adams et al., 2017). Practitioners can and should take a more critical stance on this literature—questioning the method, source, and motive; seeking alternative confirmatory sources; and engaging in critical discussion with academics about the nuance or alternative explanations to the benefit of both.

5.1 | Theoretical contributions

Figure 3 proposes a theoretical framework for understanding what we have called industry-engaged academic research. This figure is broken down by the four dimensions we have examined throughout this paper: (1) concerns, (2) methods, (3) language, and (4) audience. In short, industry-engaged academic researchers: seek to build theory that will help practitioners predict, explain, and act on the organizational problems they routinely face; employ research methods that are clear, well-defined, rigorous, and simply explained; avoid both complex jargon and oversimplifications in their communications; and "speak" at the same time to academic colleagues as well as practitioners seeking useful insight on how to better manage people.

For the avoidance of doubt, we are not suggesting that academic research be "dumbed down" at the expense of understanding, nor are we suggesting that academics abandon econometrics and other advanced statistical tools. The social world is very complex, almost infinitely so, and it therefore demands complex methods of analysis. But

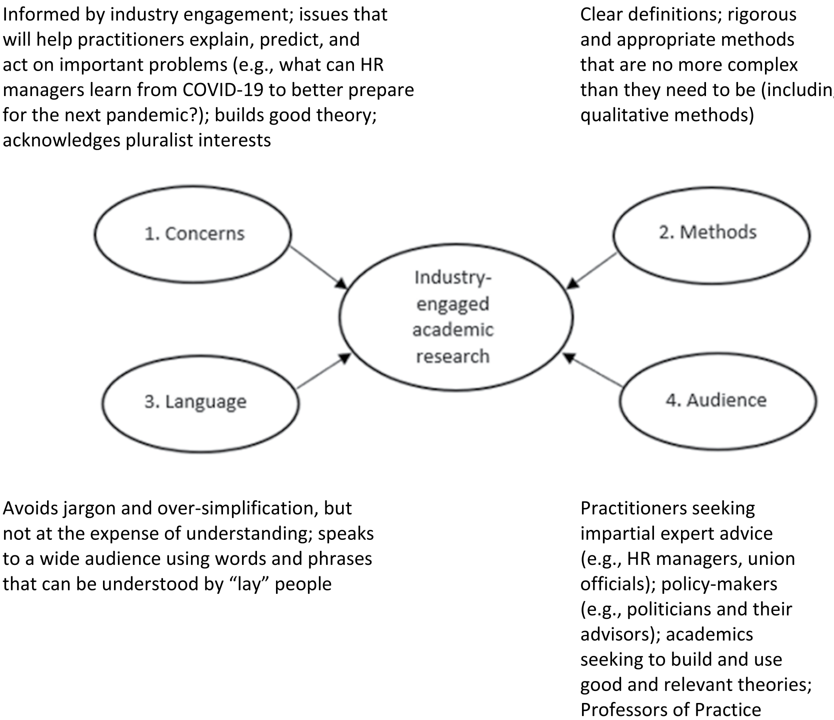

FIGURE 3 Industry-engaged academic research.

we are suggesting that complex analyses must be properly "translated" into a language that is understandable to the non-specialist (including other academics with different backgrounds). In doing so, we—as academics—will be taking important steps to remedy the problems associated with the well-established academic-practitioner divide (Alvesson et al., 2017; Bartunek & Rynes, 2014; Rynes et al., 2001, 2007; Tihanyi, 2020; Tourish, 2020). Effective collaboration between academics and practitioners requires a common language and a shared understanding.

5.2 | Implications for practitioners

From a certain point of view, this paper is entirely about implications for practitioners, making this section somewhat tautological. Perhaps the key message to take away for the practitioner is that what we have called reductionist research should be approached with caution. Clarity and simplicity are to be encouraged, but over-simplification masks the complex reality of work. When practitioners, particularly those employed in multinational consulting firms, carry out organizational research, they should be aware of the limitations of their approach. Going one step further, perhaps a key recommendation stemming from our analysis is that academics and practitioners should work more closely together on research projects of mutual interest. Jewell et al. (2022) is a good example. In this instance, two practitioners of organizational design teamed up with an established academic to research the implementation of the HPWS. According to the authors:

> a comparison is made of the HPWS as discussed and conceptualized in the academic literature and the HPWS designed and implemented in practice. The academic version has little resemblance to the real-world version, pointing to a quite large research-practice gap that appears to widen over time.
>
> (ibid, p. 1).

Thus, academic-practitioner collaboration not only shines an important light on the "research-practice gap," but, in doing so, it opens up new opportunities to close that gap in concert. Rather than speaking amongst ourselves, we should be speaking with each other.

5.3 | An agenda for future research

Where do we go from here? What can we learn from Mick Marchington about how to be an industry-engaged academic researcher? Several ideas come to mind. First, our academic research can benefit from the continuous inclusion of industry partners. This inclusion should not be thought of as a one-off consultation before a study begins, but rather an invitation to bring practitioners into the decision-making process, from formulating a research question, through to study design, and analysis and interpretation of the data. Many business schools have industry advisory boards that can facilitate relationships between academics and practitioners. Moreover, most professional associations, such as the CIPD and AHRI, regularly hold networking events that are infrequently attended by academics, and they also convene research committees that bring together both parties. Many publicly funded research councils increasingly recognize the vital importance of these collaborations and incentivize "impactful" research projects.

Second, academics can come together to help translate and make more accessible "big picture" changes in society, and the changes in government, industry, and organizational policy that follow them. As unions and collective bargaining have become less relevant to many organizations, pluralist scholars have deployed their skills in "bringing a *multi-disciplinary*, *multi-level* perspective that recognizes the unequal power at the center of the employment relationship between parties" (Darlington, 2009, p. 11, italics in original) to new topics. This has enabled the progressive development of pluralist research agendas on longstanding issues like gender inequality (e.g., Dickens, 1998), precarious work (Standing, 2011), and, most recently, psychosocial hazards in the workplace (Potter et al., 2019). Working across disciplinary boundaries—from HRM/IR into organizational psychology and labor economics, but also to health and safety, law, and social marketing—there is potential to generate multi-faceted solutions to complex, intractable problems, including those plaguing our own backyard: universities. Industry-engaged academic research is desperately needed on the effects of purely metrics- (i.e., impact factor, journal ranking) driven research, which appears to have strengthened the trend toward academic esotericism, as defined in this paper.

Third, there is scope for an extension of the extant literature on the academic-practitioner divide. Although several studies have examined the problem (e.g., Kaufman, 2022; Kougiannou & Ridgway, 2022; Rynes et al., 2001; Tourish, 2020), much of that work is written as a commentary of sorts. Rarely have researchers collected empirical data on this divide, pointing to a lacuna that desperately needs to be addressed. What might such an empirical study look like? To begin with, a qualitative, exploratory study on this divide would be useful, perhaps even including focus groups bringing academics and practitioners together for an extended discussion. Once key themes have been identified, they could be tested in a quantitative model, perhaps using perceived quality of the research as an outcome variable. Given the scarcity of empirical research on this topic, the sky is the proverbial limit.

Finally, although the focus of this paper has been on the HR-practitioner divide in relation to research, it could be argued that the implications of our study reach into the realm of learning and teaching as well. At a time when a university education is increasingly viewed with suspicion from key business leaders (Aratani, 2020), it would seem that we—not as researchers, but as lecturers—may be able to embed the idea of "industry-engaged academic teaching" into our curriculum. Further pedagogical research is needed to understand what this might look like in the classroom.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We sincerely thank the editors and reviewers for their insight and encouragement in the preparation of this manuscript.

Open access publishing facilitated by RMIT University, as part of the Wiley - RMIT University agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No data were used in this paper.

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How to cite this article: Timming, A. R., & Macneil, J. (2023). Bridging human resource management theory and practice: Implications for industry-engaged academic research. *Human Resource Management Journal*, *33*(3), 592–605. https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12523