

**REVIEW ARTICLE**

# Gender in Human Resources: Hiding in plain sight

Susan Ainsworth  | Andreas Pekarek 

Department of Management and Marketing,  
Faculty of Business and Economics, The  
University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Victoria,  
Australia

**Correspondence**

Susan Ainsworth, Department of Management  
and Marketing, Faculty of Business and  
Economics, The University of Melbourne, 198  
Berkeley St, Melbourne, VIC 3010, Australia.  
Email: [susanaa@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:susanaa@unimelb.edu.au)

**Funding information**

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

**Abstract**

This paper argues an important aspect of Human Resources (HR) as an occupation has been largely overlooked by mainstream and critical scholars alike: its gendered qualities. Gender is 'hiding in plain sight' in the sense that its high concentration of women is obvious but has attracted only sporadic academic commentary. We suggest rather than simply a 'feminised' area of management, contemporary HR is a complex mix of both masculine-coded and feminine-coded values, priorities and norms derived from earlier traditions of welfare and personnel management as well as the later influence of strategic management. Attention to this gendered complexity can help us understand how the HR occupation is experienced in everyday interactions and provide an alternative perspective that enriches Critical Human Resource Management.

**KEYWORDS**

critical HRM, gender, HR occupation, HR practitioners, HRM function

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Human Resource Management (HRM) has attracted critical debate since its inception in the 1980s with its claims to be a paradigmatic break from earlier personnel management and industrial relations (e.g. Storey, 1989). Three decades on, HRM has become an established field of academic inquiry and area of management practice. Yet questions about its relevance and legitimacy persist, both in terms of its role and value to organisations, employees and broader society (Dundon & Rafferty, 2018; Kaufman, 2020; Kochan, 2007; Marchington, 2015; Thompson, 2011).

**Abbreviations:** HR, Human Resources; HRM, Human Resource Management.

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Those from Critical Management Studies traditions have provided several insightful analyses about the state of mainstream HRM scholarship, its performative assumptions and its unproblematised focus on serving employer interests, which at the same time seems to have little impact beyond the academy (e.g. Delbridge, 2010; Harley, 2015; Janssens & Steyaert, 2009; Vincent et al., 2020).

In reviewing this literature, we were struck by two related features. The first was that much of the debate takes place at a high level of abstraction – HRM as ideology, critique of Human Resources (HR) strategy, its ethical underpinnings, HR systems and practices – rather than drilling down to research the people comprising or performing the function (for notable exceptions, see: O'Brien & Linehan, 2014; Pritchard, 2010), a point also made by Janssens and Steyaert (2009) in their call for greater reflexivity in HR research. The second was the lack of scholarly attention to, and reflection about, what seemed like an obvious characteristic of the HR occupation given the dominance of women within this management speciality—its gendered associations, that is, the meanings attributed to the occupation related to the embodied identities of those who typically perform it (see Ashcraft, 2013). For example, 2020 data from the US Bureau of Labour Statistics (2021) indicates that 74.3% of HR workers and 76.8% of HR managers are women while in the UK, women account for 87.5% of HR administrative occupations, 67.7% of HR and IR officers and 60.9% of HR Managers or Directors (Office for National Statistics, 2021). That these two points—the abstract character of debates about HR and its gender blindness—should coexist is not coincidental: it is only when we see work as embodied that we are confronted with the need to move from 'gender-neutral' (and by implication, gender blind) abstractions to understand how organisations and occupations are differently gendered (Acker, 1990, 1992).

In this paper, we argue for the need to make the 'hidden, gendered practices and processes currently concealed within norms, customs and values' (Broadbridge & Simpson, 2011, p. 470) associated with the HR occupation more visible and analysable. Gender can also be conceptualised in different ways. We outline one feminist scholarly tradition that could help with this undertaking: 'doing gender'. First introduced by West and Zimmerman in 1987, this theory approaches gender as a 'doing' that happens through social processes and practices rather than (just) an individual attribute or social category, and which is accomplished in interaction with others and in relation to specific contexts (West & Zimmerman, 1987). From this perspective, the emphasis is on how individuals negotiate and accomplish gender in ways related, but not reducible to, their biological sex (Acker, 1992, 2006; Gherardi, 1994; West & Zimmerman, 2002).

Our focus is on the HR occupation and those working within the HR function, i.e. HR practitioners. While the high concentration of women working in HR has attracted academic attention since the 1980s to the present day (e.g. see Bolton & Muzio, 2008; Brandl et al., 2008; Gooch, 1994; Legge, 1987; Reichel et al., 2013; Reichel et al., 2020; Roos & Manley, 1996) reflection about the gendered associations of HR-as-occupation has remained marginal to the field as a whole. Our overall argument is that gender is largely a 'blindspot' in current theorising and critique of HRM. Our goal is to explain why and how gender could be made visible, and in doing so shift it from 'hiding in plain sight' to 'under the spotlight': in applying a feminist lens to explore how we might consider HR and gender, we also identify several areas for future research. In doing so, we purposely broaden out the scope of critical HRM, and suggest ways it can contribute to addressing some of its current concerns about the state of mainstream HR scholarship. These concerns include: its *conservatism* which does not incorporate adequate attention to issues of power and inequality (Delbridge, 2010; Dundon & Rafferty, 2018; Godard, 2014); a lack of *reflexivity* about the project of HRM knowledge production, including dialogue with other fields and theoretical traditions (Harley, 2015; Janssens & Steyaert, 2009; Kaufman, 2020); and *irrelevance*, that is, the disconnection between much HR research and theory and practice (Delbridge, 2010; Harley, 2015; Janssens & Steyaert, 2009; Kaufman, 2015; Vincent et al., 2020).

We begin by explaining the tradition of gender scholarship on which we draw and how it could be applied to think through some of the ways in which the HR occupation might be considered gendered at different levels of analysis. These are firstly, the gendered associations of HR, secondly, gender in HR as social practice and interaction and thirdly, how context is bound up with the simultaneous 'doing' of gender and HR. Each of these substantive points concludes with some questions and suggestions for further research and illustrative research questions that would

advance existing understanding. This is followed by a discussion of how greater attention to gender could enrich critical HRM scholarship.

## 2 | DOING GENDER; DOING HUMAN RESOURCES

Gender is one of the major axes of difference that underpins the organisation of work, institutions and society (Acker, 1990, 1992, 2006; Ashcraft, 2013; Crompton, 1987; Davies, 1996; Kirkham & Loft, 1993; Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993). We understand gender to be the cultural, shared meanings attributed to physical sex-based markers, meanings that vary between different times and places. While such meanings may become entrenched, they are also open to change, and continually reproduced, maintained or resisted and challenged through processes of social interaction. Rather than a pre-existing individual characteristic then, gender is both embedded in institutional arrangements and 'done' or accomplished through social practices and interaction, including within and around organisations (e.g. West & Zimmerman, 1987, 2002, 2009; Gherardi, 1994; Ridgeway, 2009; Rissman, 2009; Wright, 2016).

In characterising gender in this way, we are explicitly drawing upon feminist literature within gender studies that adopts a 'doing gender' approach. While there are different theoretical paradigms within feminist scholarship, 'doing gender', first proposed by West and Zimmerman in an article published in *Gender and Society* in 1987, has been extremely influential (Gherardi, 1994; Martin, P.Y. 2003; West & Zimmerman, 2002; West & Zimmerman, 2009). West and Zimmerman's (1987) original piece was reacting against more structural, static and essentialist understandings of gender, arguing it was better understood as 'a routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction' (1987, p. 125). Drawing on Goffman's (1976) ideas of gender role and gender display, they defined gender as the 'activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative concepts of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category. Gender activities emerge from and bolster claims to membership in a sex category' (1987, p. 127). They made the point that, while linked, gender and sex category were analytically distinct: participants in a social interaction may invoke 'commonsense' understandings of sex categories but gender emerges from the interaction itself involving the management of gender displays that make sense in that context, producing more nuanced, fluid and adaptable variations than is accounted for by sex categories. Individuals therefore 'do gender' but West and Zimmerman (1987, p. 126) stress that gender is not a 'property of individuals'; it is an outcome of social activity involving actual and imagined individuals and groups, who draw upon shared understandings, cultural norms about gendered difference and the taken-for-granted arrangements in the particular society and contexts in which they are based.

This 'ethnomethodologically informed, and therefore distinctly sociological' (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126) approach to understanding gender as socially constructed but having material consequences resonated with empirical researchers in particular and 30 years on there is a substantial body of work that draws upon the idea of 'doing gender' to explore not only issues concerning women but also men and masculinities. Alternative ways of conceptualising the 'doing of gender' have also been taken up, most notably Judith Butler's (2004, 2007) notion of 'gender performativity': this more poststructuralist idea emphasises fluidity and flexibility to a greater extent as it does not assume gender identity exists in advance of interaction (Nentwich & Kelan, 2014, p. 123). Rather it focuses on the possibilities for gender identity allowable within a particular situation or discourse and how individuals 'become recognisable gendered subjects' (McDonald, 2016, p. 24) by enacting practices that have gendered connotations. It also draws attention to the potential that gender may not be as relevant in some situations and that established gender identities can be subverted or 'undone' (Deutsch, 2007).

However, the popularity of 'doing gender' has led some to complain it is now invoked ritualistically without deeper engagement (e.g. Wickes & Emmison, 2007). This has arguably contributed to confusion about what aspects and which version of the concept are being examined. Starting from these concerns, Nentwich and Kelan (2014, pp. 124–130) develop a topology of approaches to 'doing gender' with the aim of bringing greater conceptual clarity and providing guidance to researchers. These five approaches are 'doing gender' as: 'doing structures' (which includes the gendered associations of occupations and gender as embedded in organisational structures); 'doing hierarchies' (the

symbolic valuing of masculine over feminine); 'doing identity' (how individuals do gender in different ways through social practice so that identity cannot simply be 'read off' from an occupation or role); 'flexible and context specific' (how 'doing gender' varies depending on who is doing it and in what context); 'gradually relevant and subverted', the last of which draws heavily on Butler's (2004, 2007) ideas of gender performativity. While not advocating researchers adopt a "pure" epistemological orientation' where they are expected to choose 'either ethnomethodological interactionism or poststructural discourse approaches' (2014, p. 131), Nentwich and Kelan nevertheless suggest that greater specificity about which aspects or versions of 'doing gender' are being invoked would assist in developing more sophisticated and nuanced theorising and analysis.

Accordingly, in the following sections we have selected three of these specific approaches to 'doing gender' to illustrate and explore how they could make gender in HR more visible and analysable (cf. Davies, 1995), each of which centres around enduring sociological concerns: the first deals with 'doing structures' focussing on the gendered associations of HR as an occupation; the second explores how HR work can be understood as 'doing identity' through processes of social interaction; and the third directs attention to the 'flexible and context specific' aspects of gender and HR.

## 2.1 | Approach 1: Human Resources as gendered occupation

What does it mean to say that an occupation is gendered? Rather than just referring to whether a job is female or male-dominated, as may be the case with some of the literature on occupational segregation, understanding occupations as gendered is not as straightforward as it might first appear. Certainly, the numerical dominance of men or women in an occupation will leave its traces on how that occupation evolves, and its relative status and power. As Cynthia Cockburn put it (1988, p. 38) 'People have a gender, which rubs off on the jobs they do. The jobs in turn have a gender character that rubs off on the people that do them.' However, the numerical domination by sex category and its gender-coding (i.e. its masculine and/or feminine associations) are related but distinct concepts.<sup>1</sup> An occupation can be 'transgendered' (Britton, 2000, quotation marks in original, p. 442) in the sense that it may be coded as masculine or feminine but become dominated by those of a different gender. One example of this is veterinary science (Irvine & Vermilya, 2010) which was historically 'masculine' but experienced rapid entry of women since the early 1990s to the extent that they now dominate. And while Milkman (1983) argued that, once established, the 'sex-typing' or gender-coding of an occupation tends to be entrenched, there are instances where change has occurred over time, for example, in general practice in medicine (Wallace, 2014; Walsh, 2013).

This point is demonstrated in some detail by Ashcraft's (2007; 2013) tracing of the shifts in gendered associations of aircraft pilots in the twentieth century. Once the province of 'lady flyers' and considered an intuitive and feminine pursuit in its early years, aircraft flying became progressively more masculinised, technical and professional to the point where women were confined to the ancillary role of flight attendant, catering to passengers and shoring up the elite status of the pilot. Ashcraft's historical account resonates with other feminist scholarship tracing how the status of 'profession' for some, typically male-dominated and masculine-coded, occupations was achieved both through the exclusion of women as well as their inclusion in adjunct support roles (e.g. Broadbent et al., 2017; Crompton, 1987; Davies, 1996; Hearn, 1982; Witz, 1990, 1992). The work done by the latter was essential to maintaining the elite status of professions and their ideology of the rational and detached individual, unencumbered with personal responsibilities. Moreover, at the same time as such 'feminised' support work was needed for 'professions' to function, it was also devalued (see Davies, 1995, 1996). It is no accident that female-dominated occupations such as teaching and nursing have struggled to gain recognition as professions of the same status as law and medicine because 'the very meaning of "profession" is gendered' (Ainsworth & Flanagan, 2020, p. 253; see also; Hearn, 1982; Broadbent et al., 2017).

Occupational or professional identity is thus intertwined with gender identities (Ashcraft, 2013; Kirkham & Loft, 1993). Elaborating on this point, Ashcraft (2013) proposes that, rather than continue in the tradition of studying

occupational or professional identity as a target of individuals' affiliation, it be conceptualised as a form of social identity in itself: 'If we think of occupations as having *collective* selves...we are compelled to acknowledge empirical evidence for an *associative* view of the work-practitioner relation, wherein the nature of work is known by the company it keeps.' In other words, the identity of an occupation is intertwined with the social identities of those who perform it. Using the metaphor of the 'glass slipper', she argues occupational identities 'fit' some people better than others to the extent that they reflect the image of the gendered 'figurative practitioner', that is, those who are 'discursively or emblematically associated with the work' (p. 8). Further, she suggests that activities that make up the occupation also have gendered identities. This implies that within the same occupation, some specialisations may have different collective gendered associations.

Applying these ideas to the HR occupation, we can make several observations. Firstly, as Reichel et al. (2020) note, overall HR is a management specialisation where women have traditionally been dominant, increasingly so over recent times, and is 'perceived as matching women's stereotypically assumed talents' (p. 583) of dealing with people and showing a concern for others (see also Bolton & Muzio, 2008; Brandl et al., 2008). The traditional associations of HR with 'allegedly female skills such as communication, organisation and emotional support' (Bolton & Muzio, 2008 p. 289) makes it a 'gender authentic' (Faulkner, 2009, p. 172) career choice for women that requires little explanation. However management more generally, as an 'aspiring professional project' (Bolton & Muzio, 2008, p.283; see also; Farndale & Brewster, 2005; Pohler & Willness, 2014) focussed on rationality, performance, instrumental outcomes and economic logic, has long been associated with men and masculinity (e.g. Moss Kanter, 1977; Schein, 2007) and particular types of 'hegemonic masculinities' (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). We could thus interpret the HR occupation as a form of limited and very specific feminine inclusion that preserves the broader masculine ideology of management.

It is important to bear in mind though that the gendered associations of both management and HR are not static and have changed over time. For example, since the mid-1980s there have been shifts in the dominance of masculine and feminine associations within management generally (Broadbridge & Simpson, 2011).

While the early 1990s saw a celebration of essentializing constructions of women's 'feminine advantage' (Calás & Smircich, 1993) at communication, 'soft skills' and participative leadership, this was arguably followed by a 'remasculinisation' in the 2000s associated with hyper-competitiveness, long hours and greater risk-taking. Human Resources, on the other hand, has a more complicated gendered genealogy as discussed by Legge (1987), Gooch and Ledwith (1996), and Reichel et al. (2010). The precursors of HR, personnel management and industrial or labour relations, were differently gendered: the former had their origins in 'lady social workers' of the late 1890s and were concerned with employee welfare and administration, particularly female employees; whereas the latter was dominated by men and had relatively higher status. By the 1960s and 70s, industrial relations was both more central and more powerful than personnel management (see Legge, 1987). However, this position was unsettled with the rise of HRM in the 1980s alongside economic changes such as the growth in service sectors, the decline of manufacturing and mining industries as traditional male union strongholds, and weakening of employment regulation and collective institutions of labour relations (Kochan, 2007; Thompson, 2011). In the US context, personnel and then later HR was increasingly feminised from the 1970s onwards and its power grew with the institutionalisation of equal opportunity and civil rights, despite attempts under the Reagan administration to wind back existing legal protections (Dobbin, 2009; Dobbin & Jung, 2015).

The heritage of strategic HRM as a 'child of strategic management' (Jackson et al., 2014, p. 5) arguably introduced additional masculine coded ideas and practices, associated with planning, measurement and control (Broadbridge & Simpson, 2011), performance orientation and an instrumental framing of people as 'resources'. Yet the imprint of earlier feminine-coding of personnel management, with its welfare and administrative orientation, still circulates, which complicates how HRM is practiced and understood. Its evolution illustrates how gender and occupation are ongoing, intertwined cultural processes. We argue that HR now consists of a complex mix of gender-coded priorities, values and practices with implications for how it is experienced, accomplished in social interaction, and how it is conceptualised and critiqued. Moreover, the gender-coding of HR could vary between different roles

and specialisations. Taking this as a starting point, we can therefore identify several areas for future research on HR as a gendered occupation. For example, do operationally-focussed or development-oriented HR have a different 'gendered inflection' than more strategic roles or those concerned with labour relations and compensation? If so, how are these 'gendered inflections' manifested and understood, and what are the implications for relative status, power, rewards, professionalisation and careers? Depending on the specific empirical focus, methods associated with sensemaking, critical discourse analysis and/or performativity could be suitable to explore these and related research questions. In any case, such inquiry could provide a more nuanced understanding of the gender-coding of HR by identifying the constellations of associations that coalesce around the variety of sub-functions and work that makes up HR.

## 2.2 | Approach 2: How do individual actors do gender? Gender in Human Resources as social practice and interaction

The second approach to 'doing gender' that illustrates how gender in HR could be made more visible and analysable concerns how this is accomplished in social practice and interaction. This draws attention to the role of individual agency: while there may be collective gendered associations of an occupation or profession, there is still scope for individuals to vary in the way they practice gender and occupation—to suggest otherwise would risk reifying both (Britton, 2000; Nentwich & Kelan, 2014). In other words, individuals 'do' gender by mobilising shared cultural understandings of gender as discursive resources and versions of masculinities and femininities in how they construct the meaning of what they and others do, in relation to each other (e.g. Rissman, 2009; Wright, 2016). They may selectively emphasise, reproduce or challenge the collective gendered associations of their occupation or profession. Empirical research exploring this idea has shown how women in non-traditional that is, masculine and male-dominated STEMM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine) fields can uphold and emphasise the masculine associations of their occupation, rather than challenge them. In her study of female scientists, Rhoton (2011), for instance, detailed how they asserted their professional legitimacy by stressing the 'masculine' characteristics of their work while distancing themselves from 'feminine' coded behaviour such as emotional involvement, affect and care. Conversely, research on men in female-dominated occupations such as nursing, caregiving, teaching, and temporary administration has shown how they too commonly engaged in both appropriating and distancing from the 'feminine' associations of their field to reframe their work in masculine terms (e.g. Cross & Bagilhole, 2002; Henson & Rogers, 2001; Perra & Ruspini, 2013; Pullen & Simpson, 2009; Simpson, 2004). Individuals may thus reproduce or resist the commonly-held gendered associations of their occupation but it still 'forms the backdrop' against which such practices take place. As such the gendered associations of an occupation can be both a resource for, and a constraint on, individuals 'doing' both gender and occupational identity simultaneously.

This is particularly important once we consider that social practices happen in interaction with others (Ridgeway, 2009): if behaviour is seen as gender 'inauthentic' (Faulkner, 2009) or transgressing gendered norms, the 'doing' of gender becomes more unstable and risks being contested and seen as illegitimate or 'implausible'. For example, those women who pursue occupations dominated by men and carrying masculine associations, such as engineering or surgery, are called upon by others with whom they interact to justify, and account for, their deviation from gendered expectations (Ainsworth & Flanagan, 2020; Rodriguez, 2013). Similarly, previous research has shed light on how men in 'feminine' occupations experience challenges to their masculine identity, heterosexuality and acceptance (e.g. Bagilhole & Cross, 2002; Henson & Rogers, 2001), particularly in caregiving roles including working with young children (e.g. Børve, 2017; Pullen & Simpson, 2009; Simpson, 2004). Social interaction thus contains the potential for contradictions, tensions, and differences in (gendered) expectations if those interacting with women or men expect one thing but get another.

Also relevant is Ashcraft's (2013) distinction between the 'figurative practitioner' (the gendered 'image' of the occupation) and those who actually perform the work. Moreover, the collective gendered associations are not

necessarily controlled by those inside the occupation. Here she warns against 'assuming that insiders (i.e. practitioners) are the most active and pivotal identity producers, whereas external constituents are comparatively passive consumers' (Ashcraft, 2013, pp. 14–15). Instead she advocates for a view of occupational identity as 'co-constructed', combining ideas of what the work entails and who is associated with it, the meaning of which is negotiated between insiders and outsiders.

Building on our characterisation of the complex gendered associations of the HR occupation, we can speculate about how this could play out in social processes and introduce the potential for contradictions and tensions. For example, those within HR may have a different understanding of its gendered associations than those outside the occupation, including those with whom they work. Human Resources practitioners could be perceived as transgressing gendered norms by those with whom they interact, such as senior managers, line managers and employees. Many years ago, Moss Kanter (1977) identified how being and acting competent in some occupations, such as management, often implicitly and explicitly takes the form of 'masculine-coded' traits and behaviours, for example being agentic, authoritative, analytical, decisive etc. However, if women behave in these ways, they risk disapproval because they transgress gendered expectations that women will be communally oriented, caring, nurturing, deferential and concerned with relationships (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Kolb et al., 2010). In addition, women tend to be expected to perform more organisational citizenship and provide support to others, work often rendered invisible and without reward because it is seemingly 'natural' that is, reflecting gendered stereotypes (Gooch & Ledwith, 1996; Huff, 1990). When the strategic priorities of the organisation, and the handling of particular cases, require 'hard HRM' (Storey, 1989, 1992), or involve women working in HR behaving in 'masculine-coded ways', we could expect to find others reacting to this gendered transgression in two senses. Firstly, the individual woman, in interaction with other line managers, employees and other stakeholders, risks social disapproval. This might then be compounded by backlash against transgressing or contradicting HR's more 'feminine' associations of employee welfare and development, violating the 'injunctive' or prescriptive gendered norms expected of it by others (see Eagly & Karau, 2002). In such a situation, the female individual HR practitioner doing gender and occupational identity simultaneously risks violating both the more general gendered norms expected of women as well as the collective 'feminine' associations of the HR occupation.

On the other hand, HR's combination of feminine and masculine associations may have different implications for men, depending on their level of seniority, the role they occupy or the particular version of HR they are called upon to implement. Previous research on men in traditionally 'female' occupations has shown that they can experience not only challenges to their masculinity but also 'special consideration' (Simpson, 2004) whereby they are encouraged to pursue a more careerist orientation and rise more quickly through the ranks, a phenomenon Williams (1992), termed the 'glass escalator', a variation on the 'glass ceiling' experienced by women and minorities that blocks their career progression.

In summary then, even given the gendered associations of an occupation, individuals can still 'do gender' in different ways. However, individual agency is constrained because the gendering of occupations is co-constructed and unfolds in social interaction involving a range of actors, not just those within the occupation itself. In relation to HR, we suggest there is the potential for contradictions and tensions and perhaps different versions of its gendered associations, stemming from its history and the current complexity of its gender-coding. Therefore, future research could fruitfully focus on how individual HRM practitioners understand their work in 'gendered' terms, and how these understandings are shaped in interactions with line managers, executives, and employees (e.g. Pritchard, 2010). For example, what tactics or practices do HR practitioners use to resist, challenge, stretch or otherwise negotiate the gendered associations of their work and what limits or constraints do they face in doing so? How does this play out in the micro-politics of interactions with line managers, senior executives and employees and with what implications for those involved? These are just some of the research questions that could be explored by focussing on 'doing gender' as social practice and interaction.



### 2.3 | Approach 3: Flexibility and gendered contexts

The third approach to 'doing gender' that would assist to make gender in HR more visible concerns how contexts are bound up with the simultaneous accomplishment of gender and occupational identity. Here context is not considered a variable or passive backdrop but rather inherent in the construction of gender itself. West and Zimmerman's (1987) original conceptualisation of 'doing gender' stressed the importance of attending to the specific contexts in which it took place: in 'social activity involving actual and imagined groups', (p. 126), actors invoked and relied upon shared cultural understandings of gender differences, gender-appropriate norms, and institutional arrangements. In other words, in social interaction, aspects of context were either taken-for-granted as cultural knowledge shared by those interacting and/or explicitly or implicitly mobilised to 'do gender'. For gendered occupational identities to be accepted as plausible and legitimate, they need to 'make sense' in a given context and cannot be understood in isolation from such contexts.

We suggest that this attention to context in 'doing gender' is consistent with recent calls within critical HRM for greater consideration of the multilayered influences of wider political, economic, social and cultural forces on HR approaches and practices. In a recent editorial on the political economy of HRM, Vincent and colleagues (Vincent et al., 2020) outline different 'levels' of context including 'cultural knowledge systems' and 'financial, regulatory and governance systems' among others that would help broaden the focus of HR beyond the organisation. Applying this perspective to gender and HR, we would consider that the gendered norms and ideologies that circulate in different countries constitute a form of 'cultural knowledge system'. By this we mean the taken-for-granted assumptions about the desirability of equality between genders and the roles and activities in which men and women are expected to engage in political, economic and social spheres, the distribution of wealth, education and family structures (Hennekam, Tahssain-Gay & Syed, 2017) and the way these are embedded in institutional arrangements, that is, 'financial, regulatory and governance systems' (Vincent et al., 2020: 467). For example, in a 22-country comparative study of the strategic orientation and integration of HR directors, Brandl et al. (2008) found in those countries with more gender-equal attitudes and government systems supporting women's participation in the workforce, female HR directors were more involved in strategic activities, relative to their counterparts in countries with less gender equality and enabling social policies. We could also expect other contextual dimensions relating to work to have a bearing on the gendering of HR (Cooke, 2018). The norms, regulatory systems, institutions and traditions underpinning employment relations in different countries could contribute to the HR occupation being 'gendered' in divergent ways, depending on where it is practiced (Reichel et al., 2020).

Other research on gender, the labour market, the family and education suggests the need for a nuanced approach to characterising and interpreting patterns in gender-related attitudes and beliefs between countries as well as assumptions equating progress towards gender equality with degree of modernisation (Charles, 2011; Charles & Bradley, 2009; Knight & Brinton, 2017). For example, in a series of studies on cross-country variations in gender segregation in labour markets, Charles and colleagues (Charles, 2011; Charles & Bradley, 2009) show how women's representation in non-traditional STEM fields such as engineering and computer science is higher in developing economies than in advanced industrial countries (Charles, 2011, p. 362). Charles (2011, p. 366) concludes: 'Some of the most sex-segregated labour markets and educational systems are found in precisely those countries reputed to be the most gender-progressive in their cultural values and social policy provisions.' She attributes this outcome partly to the dominance of 'liberal egalitarianism' which reinforces the importance of individual free choice in vocation and field of study, choices which are, however, conditioned and constrained by 'cultural knowledge systems' (Vincent et al., 2020) that perpetuate and legitimise gender essentialist norms about appropriate occupations.

On a related note, Knight and Brinton's study (2017) of attitudinal change in Europe suggests there are 'varieties of gender egalitarianism' that exist alongside versions of gender essentialism about women and men's roles in the family and in the labour market. Rather than a single continuum with conservative and traditional values at one extreme and gender equality at the other, they identify more specific and alternative constellations of gender-related attitudes and values or 'interpretive schemes'. For example, in addition to 'liberal egalitarianism', they identify



'egalitarian familialism', which they describe as beliefs that women should be active in the family as well as in the paid labour force, while 'flexible egalitarianism' rejects adherence to both or either of these norms. This alerts us to the need to move beyond a simplistic characterisation of gendered cultural knowledge systems to explore empirically what interpretive schemes (or combination of schemes) about gender are being assumed or invoked by actors in a particular context, interaction or account.

Conceptualising context in this multilayered way directs attention beyond the boundaries of organisations where much HR research has concentrated (see Vincent et al., 2020). Certainly industry and organisational context will still be relevant to understanding how gender is 'done'. One could imagine how different gendered cultures could evolve in HR, reflecting the masculine or feminine orientation of the industry or region (see Pan, 2015) in which it is situated. Human Resources in the construction or transport sectors, for example, could take on a more 'masculinised' ethos, mirroring the male-domination of workforce (WGEA, 2019); in contrast, in welfare and social service organisations, HR may develop and display more 'feminised' characteristics. The particular HR strategy and approach to employees adopted could also influence the gendered associations of the occupation: a firm pursuing a strategy along the lines of 'hard' HRM with a focus on controlling labour costs and reliance on 'disposable' labour (see Storey, 1989, 1992) carries more 'masculine' overtones than one involved in relatively high investment in the workforce and concern for retaining more 'valuable', highly-skilled employees. However, attention to the broader dimensions of gendered contexts allows scholars to identify the 'macro' influences in the 'micro' of interactions, in other words, how the 'political binds' (Vincent et al., 2020, p. 465) and contradictions that HR practitioners may experience are generated by the convergence or relationship between broader political, economic, social and cultural forces.

More fundamentally, because gender is such an ingrained part of culture, we cannot assume that individuals see their occupation, or the contexts in which it is performed, as gendered at all (see Lorber, 1994). Scholars would thus need to investigate not just what is said or done but also what is assumed and taken-for-granted by social actors, in specific (or different) HRM settings. In other words, different gendered interpretive schemes might be implicit and/or inferred as shared background knowledge or 'common sense'. Which dimensions of context are relevant in a given interaction and setting can only be established empirically. Therefore, an important question that warrants investigation is how different aspects of context are constructed, understood and mobilised in making sense of the practices and interactions that constitute HR and what role gender plays in these processes.

Exploring gender and HR at the level of the profession/occupation, social practices and interaction, and as flexibly deployed in specific contexts, are some of the ways in which scholarship could be advanced to overcome this current 'blindspot'. As challenging taken-for-granted ways of seeing, and not seeing, is part of the broad project of critical research (Delbridge, 2010), in the following section we argue why bringing gender out from 'hiding in plain sight' has the potential to broaden, complement and contribute to critical HRM.

### 3 | HOW CAN TALKING ABOUT GENDER ADDRESS CONCERNS OF CRITICAL HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

'[C]ritical voices are crucial to the development of a field. Critical readings of HRM indicate how this field sets priorities and limits, and, by enquiring into these boundaries, they point to blind spots and provide space for alternative readings and new perspectives' (Janssens & Steyaert, 2009, p. 144).

Approaches to gender vary and not all are critical (see Calás & Smircich, 1996; also; Martin J., 2003), for example, some research still adopts a relatively unproblematised assumption that gender is a 'given', equivalent to biological sex, a binary, demographic variable and individual characteristic (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Nevertheless, the three approaches to 'doing gender' we have discussed so far have the potential to contribute to critical HRM debates by providing another way of addressing some of its key concerns. In particular, greater attention to gender can enrich analyses of three recurring and inter-related points of contention: the *conservatism* and incrementalism of much HRM

research dominated by psychology-based inquiry which does not take into account broader issues of power and inequality (Dundon & Rafferty, 2018; Godard, 2014); a lack of *reflexivity* on the part of HR scholars about the values that underpin their research and their 'blindness' to alternative theoretical traditions (Harley, 2015; Kaufman, 2020); and the self-referential dynamic of mainstream HRM academic knowledge production, which does not speak to audiences beyond itself, even at the same time as it pursues agendas directed towards enhancing employee performance and productivity for the benefit of the organisations in which they work (e.g. Jackson et al., 2014; Kaufman, 2015). In other words, even as much HRM research focuses on instrumental concerns, it has little *relevance* and translation to practice (Delbridge, 2010; Harley, 2015; Janssens & Steyaert, 2009).

In relation to the first point, HRM research has been criticised for a conservatism maintained and reproduced through a lack of attention to power and broader structures of inequality (Dundon & Rafferty, 2018). This has resulted, at least in part, from the dominance of individual psychology as an underlying theoretical paradigm which tends to decontextualise social phenomena and actors in order to render them amenable for analysis (see Farndale et al., 2020). This has led to path-dependencies in the way the field has evolved, leading to a focus on incremental development of concepts and measures derived from the same psychologically-based theories (Harley, 2015). In contrast, critical HRM calls for serious consideration of the political, economic and social contexts in order to recognise and explore the 'broader patterns of domination' (Delbridge, 2010, p. 26) that operate in employment, organisations and institutions (Vincent et al., 2020). Bringing a gendered lens to the study of HRM immediately foregrounds one axis of difference which is used to organise society and justify, but also potentially challenge, the continuation of entrenched institutional arrangements (Martin J., 2003). Gender intersects with other dimensions of political, social and economic context, and invites reconsideration of that which has been taken for granted, such as the normative separation between public and private spheres and the assumptions on which work and organisations are based. More fundamentally, some traditions of gender scholarship would see the discrete, rational individual actor at the heart of much management and economics literature, as a 'fiction' and an effect of power (e.g. Acker, 1990, 1992). A greater focus on gender in HR could thus assist in bringing issues of power and context to the fore and help reorient the trajectory of psychologisation that is currently dominant.

A second point of critique has been a lack of reflexivity within HRM. While recognising the term has different meanings, following Janssens and Steyaert (2009, p. 144) we use 'reflexivity' to mean critical examination and questioning of assumptions, so as to bring in 'alternative descriptions, interpretations, vocabularies and voices that could be taken into account'. Janssens and Steyaert (2009; see also Delbridge, 2010; Harley, 2015; Kaufman, 2020) have argued that HR scholars demonstrate a lack of awareness of other theoretical traditions, their roles in the knowledge production process and how they may be perpetuating its narrow focus. Engagement with other traditions then, has the potential to enrich scholarly reflexivity by bringing in alternative ways of seeing and thinking about a social phenomenon. Such reflexivity encourages pluralism: it does not attempt to resolve or collapse difference and contradictions between traditions, but uses these to prompt ongoing dialogue. Given much feminist literature developed largely separately from the critical theoretical traditions that inform varieties of critical HRM (see Martin J., 2003), we consider feminist gender theory can encourage reflection about the gender-blindness or gender-neutrality of both critical HRM and mainstream HR scholarship. The interdisciplinarity of gender studies (Pavlidou, 2011) could bring new ways of seeing to a field criticised for its narrow focus on 'technocratic' and 'managerialist' concerns. Instead of a niche area of specialised inquiry, we see gender as having the potential to broaden the scope of critical HRM that to date, has demonstrated little interest in 'exploring the ways that ostensibly gender-neutral ideas and practices reflect gendered assumptions about both masculinity and femininity' (Martin J., 2003, p. 83).

Finally, despite its managerialist and performative orientation, mainstream HRM has been criticised for its lack of relevance to practice. Purporting to be producing research and theory about managerial concerns, it is a field that increasingly appears to be targeted towards itself, producing ever-more obtuse measurement of constructs of limited utility to those involved in HRM (Harley, 2015). Admittedly, lack of relevance is also a charge levelled at critical management studies which has prompted ongoing debates about whether critical scholarship can, in fact, be 'practical'. In response, both Delbridge (2010) and Janssens and Steyaert (2009) argue it can if there is a 'consistent

commitment to engagement with management practitioners in order to seek change and some form of transformation of systems and structures' (Delbridge, 2010, p. 32) and a greater focus on the processes 'through which HRM is produced and practiced' (Janssens & Steyaert, 2009, p. 149).

It follows then, that such a focus would involve greater engagement between critical scholars and those who work in HR, that is, HR practitioners. As Ashcraft (2013, p. 12) argues in relation to literature on occupational identity more generally, 'the tacit mandate seems to observe practice without seeing the practitioner. i.e., what practitioners do while minimising what they think and ignoring who else they are.' Given critical management studies, or least some strains of it (e.g. Watson, 2004), have long recognized that 'managers are themselves managed and thus subject to potential control and exploitation' (Delbridge, 2010, p. 34), we suggest such an understanding be extended more frequently to those within a specialisation of management dominated by women—HR. This would respond to Bleijenbergh, van Mierlo and Bondarouk's (2020, p. 2) call for HRM scholarship to 'better involve practitioners in the research process.' Such an approach would take seriously the capacity of those working within HR to 'reflexively engage' with their own contexts, that is, be able to identify contradictions and tensions, make sense of the complexity of their roles and relationships and interpret the dynamics of the interactions in which they engage and the practices they undertake. If we accept that gender is fundamental to social life and the organisation of experience and its meaning, then it is not such a great leap of logic to propose that it might operate in the practices, interactions etc. that make up the work of HR. Perhaps if HR research paid greater attention to HR practitioners, rather than just focus on practices and systems (cf. Ashcraft, 2013), and accounted for them as embodied and gendered actors, this may lead to HR scholarship that had greater practical relevance.

#### 4 | 'INTO THE SPOTLIGHT': GENDER IN HUMAN RESOURCES

No doubt our reading of some of this critical scholarship is itself open to contestation. Less easily rebutted though, is our observation of the gender-blindness of much of the critique and the lack of scholarly attention to the gendered nature of HR. What we are suggesting then, is that the adoption of a gendered lens has the potential to add depth and nuance, particularly to critical HRM. This was illustrated through applying three related approaches of 'doing gender' as occupation, doing gender in interaction, and doing gender as flexible and context specific. Our discussion of each concluded with some indicative ideas for future research including: exploring the different gendered inflections of HR sub-specialities and their implications for relative power, rewards and careers; whether and how HR practitioners understand their work in 'gendered' terms and how this plays out in the micro-politics of interactions with line managers, senior executives and employees; how different aspects of context are constructed, understood and mobilised in making sense of the practices and interactions that make up HR and what role gender might play in these processes. Conceptually, we have only scratched the surface of what a more sustained and comprehensive engagement and application of diverse feminist theorising can reveal about HRM. We see considerable scope for exploring the potential of further concepts that approach gender as a socially constructed, but materially experienced, phenomenon and how this plays out in the interactions that constitute HR work.

This would go some way to a more complex understanding of how HR is experienced by those who work within the function and how they interpret, and act upon, the contradictions of their roles. Recent studies highlight the analytical gains from a focus on the everyday work of HR professionals (e.g. O'Brien & Linehan, 2014), a line of inquiry that we feel could be further enriched through applying a gendered lens. As Delbridge (2010, p. 37) has noted, 'Understanding HRM as processes of ongoing enactment and social production recognizes that HRM is "continually performed" and allows for the reflexive engagement of actors in their contexts.'

Greater critical reflexivity would benefit not only HR research but also HR practitioners. As Jacques (1996, p. 7) has argued "[b]oth practice uninformed by theoretical reflection and theory disconnected from the workplace are sterile and reinforce the *status quo*'. One way forward then is to develop greater capacity for critically reflective practice (see Cunliffe, 2016), that is to say, engaging HR practitioners in questioning assumptions and 'blindspots',

including the lack of attention to gender and how it may play out in the dynamics that constitute the interactions and contexts of HR. Equipping HR practitioners with alternative perspectives and conceptual tools for understanding their work, interactions and relationships with others would assist them to see the 'macro in the micro', and potentially reframe their role, responsibilities and possibilities for action. This could, in turn, generate more critical dialogue between HR practice and scholarship. Professional associations could play a potentially important role in facilitating these exchanges. They could provide structured opportunities for practitioners to collectively reflect on, and question, taken-for-granted assumptions and explore alternative ways of making sense of the work and relationships that constitute HR.

In addition, as we have argued, a more systematic and explicit focus on the gendered nature of HR has the potential to extend and refine recurrent debates about the state of HRM as an academic field. Perhaps equally, if not more important, and in keeping with the emancipatory mission of critical inquiry, we hope that our suggested emphasis on gender can help pinpoint and redress gendered disadvantage within HRM in practice. After all, 'by just talking and writing about gender we are already changing gender relationships, just as we change them every day in the organisations where we work' (Gherardi, 1994, p. 607).

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the participants of subtheme 54 "Exploring the Labour Dimension of Sustainable Organizations: Ideologies, Struggles, Solutions" at the 35th EGOS colloquium in Edinburgh in 2019, especially Rick Delbridge, for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declare no conflict of interest.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No primary data was used for this article. Secondary sources are all available.

### ORCID

Susan Ainsworth  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7989-6684>

Andreas Pekarek  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7385-1787>

### ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> When discussing sex-distribution between occupations, some authors use the term sex and gender interchangeably whereas we follow West and Zimmerman (1987) in understanding them as related but analytically distinct concepts. Further, while numerical dominance by men or women in an occupation is an instance of sex distribution, this inevitably also influences the gendered associations such jobs acquire (Ashcraft, 2013; Cockburn, 1988).

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**How to cite this article:** Ainsworth, S., & Pekarek, A. (2022). Gender in Human Resources: Hiding in plain sight. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 32(4), 890–905. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12437>