The value of including employees: a pluralist perspective on sustainable HRM

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to advance a conceptualization of sustainable HRM that builds on scholarship focusing on the pluralistic nature of human resource management. The paper seeks to advance the promise of sustainable HRM as an alternative to HRM scholarship that adopts a unitarist frame of reference.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper draws on a variety of HRM-related literatures to offer new insights about what a pluralist perspective on sustainable HRM from the perspective of employees would look like and what it would accomplish, and in so doing allow sustainable HRM to become socially sustainable.

Findings – Taking a pluralistic perspective is essential for making the concept of sustainable HRM more distinct and robust. Sustainable HRM can offer a challenge to the dominant unitarist perspective on the employment relationship, focusing the attention of researchers on the extent to which employment practices benefit both employers and employees while contributing to social sustainability outside of the employment context.

Originality/value – This paper adds analyses of pluralism and unitarism to the current literature on sustainable HRM while also focusing attention on how sustainable HRM might be more robustly conceptualized and also more normative in its orientation.

Keywords Sustainable HRM, Unitarism, Pluralism, Power

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

Human resource management (HRM) has both organizational and ethical implications. The ways in which employment relationships are structured and managed affect the likelihood that an organization will achieve its goals, as argued by scholars working within HRM literatures such as strategic HRM theory (Boxall, 1996; Huselid et al., 1997; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2009; Wright et al., 2005) and high-performance work systems (Appelbaum et al., 2000; Ramsey et al., 2000; Shin and Konrad, 2017). Indeed, analyses of how the employment relationship should be managed for organizational benefit have been expressed as long as there has been management theory, starting with frameworks such as scientific management (Taylor, 1911) and continuing to the present. Given that organizations can only create value with and through employees, it is manifest that HRM scholars—as well as other management scholars working in areas such as strategic management and organizational behavior—would seek to connect HRM policies and practices to various organizational-level outcomes such as profitability.

Here it is important to discuss the historical turn toward SHRM and its etiology. As a variety of industries faced increasingly globalized competition (Sparrow and Marchington, 1998; Wright et al., 2005), pressures on organizations increased and new approaches to management became necessary (Johnson, 2009). Businesses needed to change the ways in which they procured and deployed labor, whether directly in their own operations or through supply chain management (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2013). As a result, businesses recognized that employees and human capital (1) were essential organizational assets and (2) their management was an important source of sustained competitive advantage (Barney and Wright, 1998). SHRM theory and practice therefore became more prominent as a response to
shifts in the external environment as well as increasing sophistication in management theory and business practice.

Work in sustainable HRM has taken the analysis of how HRM is linked to organizational- and societal-level outcomes in a different direction from strategic HRM. Ehnert et al. (2016, p. 90) offer this definition of sustainable HRM: “[s]ustainable HRM can be defined as the adoption of HRM strategies and practices that enable the achievement of financial, social and ecological goals, with an impact inside and outside of the organisation and over a long-term time horizon while controlling for unintended side effects and negative feedback.” This definition draws on the key insight from prior work in sustainability: the need for a long-term perspective on economic activity that ensures the present does not harm the future. In this respect, sustainable HRM sits alongside frameworks such as socially responsible HRM (Shen and Zhu, 2011), which can be understood as terms of CSR-related policies and practices that address the welfare and concerns of employees (Newman et al., 2016). What makes sustainable HRM distinct in this stream of socially and ethically oriented HRM scholarship is its explicit connections to sustainability as well as the inclusion of outcomes beyond the employer-employee relationship. The intuitive insight of sustainable HRM is obvious: the ways in which people and employment relationships are managed can have positive and negative effects on various conceptualizations of sustainability, whether economic, environmental or social.

Parallel to work in these domains of HRM scholarship, there have been persistent debates about the positive and negative effects of various employment practices on employees. While scientific management, for example, was an advance in management theory from the ad hoc theorizing that had been emblematic of previous management discourse, it was incredibly controversial in the early 20th century (Tikhomirov, 2017) due to concerns that employees in workplaces influenced by it were being both dehumanized and overworked by managers without receiving either remuneration consistent with their enhanced productivity (Hill and Van Buren, 2018; Paxton, 2011) or basic respect for their humanity. Later work in areas such as human relations and human resources sought to correct the perceived excesses of scientific management (Van Buren, 2008) by adding greater concern for the welfare of employees.

But concerns about whether contemporary employment practices truly work to the benefit of employees have found expression even within strategic HRM scholarship; as Lengnick-Hall et al. (2009, pp. 76–77, emphasis added) put it, “[v]irtually all SHRM research takes the managerial/organizational perspective with an emphasis on the consequences for organizational performance. Few, if any, question the impact of SHRM on individuals.” In a similar vein, Kramar (2014, p. 1,073) notes that

The SHRM approach, however, is fraught with difficulties, including failing to take into account a variety of stakeholder requirements, the reality of HRM inconsistencies within organisations, the ambiguities, paradoxes and dilemmas of HRM practice and inadequate account of external influences. In the main, the SHRM literature fails to adequately address the influence of different stakeholder perceptions and national contexts. The short- and long-term financial outcomes are given precedence and reflect shareholder interests.

Put succinctly, the problem with SHRM is that in overvaluing organizational goals, it harms employees and their interests, diminishes the HRM function (Kochan, 2004) and in the long run often (and in an ironic and self-defeating way) works to the detriment of organizations themselves. As a result, a presumption that strategic HRM is at odds with sustainable HRM seems entirely reasonable.

There are also persistent concerns about whether HRM professionals can or even should play the role of employee champions (Harris, 2007; Thompson, 2011). The employment relationship is central to ethical analyses of organizations (Francis and Keegan, 2006;
Greenwood, 2002; Greenwood and Van Buren, 2017). An over-emphasis on the strategic role of HRM has led many HRM professionals to diminish the potential role of internal employee champions as well as potentially harmful to their organizational legitimacy (Sheehan et al., 2014). As a result, many human resource managers are less capable of addressing the ethical issues endemic to their organizations’ employment relationships than they would be if they better balanced the roles of strategic partner and employee advocate. While HRM can play an essential role in promoting responsible behavior by organizations (Jamali et al., 2015), it often has failed to do so. More generally, HRM as a function and as a profession is facing a crisis of trust and legitimacy (Kochan, 2004; Paauwe and Boselie, 2005) as employee cynicism about HRM has become stronger (Brown et al., 2017; Kochan, 2004) due to a perceived shift in the terms of exchange in the employment relationship in favor of employers.

The broader point is that HRM by its very nature addresses inexorable and deep ethical questions, whether or not they are explicitly considered in HRM scholarship or practice. Here I define “ethical” in terms of normative ethics, which encompasses analyses of what ought to be in the employment relationship. Ethical analyses of employment seek to interrogate employment practices in order to ask questions related to fairness, respect for rights and procedural and distributive justice. Ethical analyses of employment relationships therefore seek to inform changes in employment practices through regulation and/or through voluntary actions undertaken by organizations. By extension, there is also no such thing as HRM for which ethical analysis is inapplicable or ethical implications are absent. Employees are the one essential stakeholder group upon which the organization depends and without which it is unable to engage in any sort of collective action (Greenwood, 2002). Work in the emerging field of sustainable HRM is—and should be to an even greater extent—focused on asking challenging questions about whether HRM policies and practices work to the benefit of employees as well as employers, as well as whether other social and environmental goals are being promoted through HRM.

For HRM to be truly sustainable, however, it needs in particular to grapple with the challenges that pluralism in the employment relationship poses, the problem of power imbalances, and the necessity of including employee perspectives on sustainability. The research question I am taking up in the paper is this: how can sustainable HRM better integrate ethical concerns about employee treatment and in so doing ameliorate some of the problems associated with imbalances of power within the employment relationship? As will be discussed in a subsequent section, sustainable HRM scholarship takes in a variety of approaches and foci. Kramar (2014) notes that sustainability itself is fraught with semantic difficulties, making its integration with HRM even more challenging. I will not be addressing issues related to environmental sustainability and its relationship to HRM in this paper. Rather, I wish to reorient the conversation about sustainable HRM toward greater consideration of employee-related outcomes. In this respect, the perspective I am taking is explicitly normative rather than theory building or oriented toward empirical analysis.

Because questions related to the employment relationship are inherently ethical—whether or not the ethicality of HRM is recognized in research or practice—sustainable HRM scholarship can and should create space for ethical analyses as a way of understanding how sustainability and HRM should be brought together. After providing a brief overview of the sustainable HRM literature and discussing the key distinctions between unitarism and pluralism in the field of HRM, this paper will take up the problem of power and sustainable HRM within a pluralist frame of reference, and conclude with implications for future research. This paper attempts to answer the call of Westerman et al. (2020, p. 1) to move beyond “[t]he one dimensional single shareholder purpose of HRM,” which “must be supplemented or replaced with strategic and operational people-management practices that take the development of social, environmental, and human capital into account.”
Sustainable HRM

Sustainability is a concept that dates back to the work of the World Commission on Environment and Development, which defined sustainable development as “development that meets the need for the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987, p. 43). More broadly outside of the developmental economics context, sustainability can be defined in terms of actions by various actors—including governments and firms—that seek to ensure “the preservation, regeneration, and development of the ecological, economic, and social resources of a system” (Senna and Shani, 2009, p. 84; see also Ehnert et al., 2016). Sustainable HRM, as Kramar (2014) notes, is a growing area of research within the wider HRM literature (see, among others, App et al., 2012; De Prins et al., 2014; Diaz-Carrion et al., 2018; Ehnert, 2006 and 2009; Lopez-Cabales and Valle-Cabrera, 2019; Mariappanadar, 2012a and b; Mariappanadar and Kramar, 2014). Lopez-Cabales and Valle-Cabrera (2019, p. 5) posit that “one reason why the corporate sustainable strategies do not produce the desired effects is because these strategies do not integrate HRM into their strategic planning and implementation processes.”

Sustainable HRM potentially offers a corrective to strategic HRM scholarship that implicitly or explicitly privileges organizational outcomes over employee outcomes; not in ways that necessarily privilege employee outcomes over employer outcomes, but rather to find space for the explicit consideration of employee outcomes. By extension, the construct of sustainable HRM further allows for the explicit recognition of legitimate outcomes vis-à-vis HRM beyond organizational benefit while also recognizing that HRM can have a dark side that under some circumstances harms rather than benefits employees (Kramar, 2014).

As well-discussed in previous scholarship, there are myriad theoretical framings and conceptualizations of sustainable HRM. While this is a possible strength in an emerging area of research, it is also a potential weakness. Here Kramar (2014, p. 2070) is instructive: “There are considerable semantic difficulties associated with the definitions of [the] terms sustainability, SHRM and HRM. There are no definitive definitions and their meanings vary according to the factors that frame their consideration.” Given that the semantic difficulties for these concepts exist in isolation, it follows that their combination with other concepts would compound those difficulties. Kramar (2014, p. 1,075) further notes that sustainable HRM “has been used to refer to social and human outcomes which contribute to the continuation of the organisation in the long term, that is to a sustainable organisation. It has also been used to refer to HRM activities which enhance positive environmental outcomes [such as] Green HRM (GHRM), and positive social and human outcomes for their own sake, rather than just as mediating factors between financial outcomes and strategy.”

All of these conceptualizations of sustainable HRM are illustrative of one or more conceptualizations of sustainability, whether in the traditional environmental sense or in the sense of economic or social sustainability. Further, because sustainability does have multiple definitions and conceptualizations, it follows that all of these streams of research capture something important about the relationship between sustainability—however defined—and HRM. However, the downside of such conceptual diversity is a lack of conceptual clarity and therefore easily understood application to organizational practice, at least without careful delineation of what is meant by “sustainability” in the context of HRM.

Here Kramar (2014) usefully differentiates among three main streams of sustainable HRM research: capability reproduction, promoting social and environmental health and connections. Capability reproduction is best understood as an extension of strategic HRM research, seeking to bring together beneficial outcomes for both employers and employees. While focused on economic outcomes from the perspective of the organization, research taking this perspective posits that in the long term, sustainability for the organization can also be achieved through generating positive outcomes for employees (see Ehnert, 2009). In this line of analysis, only through consideration of employee outcomes can organizations...
maintain the kinds of human capital that bring about long-term, sustainable competitive advantage. It is less than manifest, however, whether employees themselves are part of the conversation about which human capabilities are to be developed and for what purpose.

Promoting social and environmental health approaches to sustainable HRM “refer to HRM practices which contribute to both positive ecological/environmental and human/social outcomes, with the intended purpose of achieving economic results” (Kramar, 2014, p. 1,078). In this line of analysis, investments in sustainability have positive effects on organizational competitiveness through influencing stakeholder perceptions of responsible business behavior. There is a longstanding line of research (see, e.g., Orlitzky et al., 2003; Walsh et al., 2003; but also see Zhao and Murrell, 2017 for a conflicting point of view on this point) suggesting a positive link between social/environmental and financial performance—which can be extended to investments in sustainable HRM. Similar to capability reproduction, however, employees are largely absent from conversations about which elements of social and environmental health are to be included.

Finally, connections-oriented sustainable HRM research “group examines the interrelationships between management practices, including HRM and organizational outcomes. These outcomes include environmental, social and financial outcomes. Implicit in these writings is a moral concern with organisations behaving responsibly” (Kramar, 2014, p. 1,078). This stream of sustainable HRM research looks much like research in the areas of corporate social responsibility and corporate social performance (for a review, see Wood, 2010). It arguably finds a stronger place for sustainability in HRM practice as intrinsically valuable beyond its effects on organizational performance than do the other two streams previously discussed. However, even here, organizational concerns are paramount relative to concerns about employee welfare (Kramar, 2014).

These three streams of sustainable HRM literature make important contributions to the literature. There are other, more recent, conceptualizations of sustainable HRM that are more explicitly focused on creating benefits outside of the organization, such as Aust, Matthews, and Muller-Camen’s (2019) conceptualization of Common Good HRM, which seeks to move beyond narrow conceptualizations of corporate sustainability to take in business contributions to sustainable development goals. However, they each have a major blind spot: a lack of inclusion of the employee perspective. In capability reproduction, promoting social and environmental health, and connection—the three main streams of literature within sustainable HRM—it is the organization and HRM managers that are the primary drivers of defining and implementing it, with less attention given to employee perspectives and definitions thereof.

Where does this leave the literature on sustainable HRM? It is clear that it is gaining traction as a subfield within the broader HRM literature. Sustainability is largely seen as complementary to organizational goals and interests, although the intrinsic value of non-organizational goals varies from scholar to scholar and research stream to research stream. It is also clear that the prevailing definitions of sustainability within HRM, its operationalization and its implementation are largely driven by managerial decisions and discretion rather than engagement with employees as partners in the conversation about what sustainable HRM is and what goals it should seek to achieve. Employees, I suggest, are largely missing from the discourse about sustainable HRM. Table 1 outlines each of these three areas of sustainable HRM research with regard to their inclusion of employees as stakeholders and employee perspectives.

While there is no one definition of sustainable HRM common to the entire literature, scholarship in the area generally posits that HRM practices should seek to promote some sort of economic, social and environmental sustainability while also helping the firm to become more profitable and competitive. Missing, however, from much of the extant sustainable HRM literature are the perspectives and concerns of employees, as well as an analysis of what
it would be mean for employees to benefit from sustainable HRM and for employee welfare to be included as an outcome germane to sustainability. In this respect, sustainable HRM suffers from some of the deficits of mainstream HRM research conducted from a unitarist perspective, a topic to which I now turn.

**Unitarism and pluralism**

Unitarism and pluralism represent alternate positions on the relationship between employers’ and employees’ interests as well as on the role that managers and employees should play in structuring and governing the employment relationship, which in turn has implications for HRM. Unitarism is (Greenwood and Van Buren, 2017, p. 663; see also Fox, 1966; Geare et al., 2006; Guest, 1999; Kamoche, 2001) “the view of the organisation as a unitary structure characterised by harmony and trust where emphasis is placed on common objectives and values said to unite all participants in a common enterprise.” Unitarism further suggests that employers and employees share common interests that do not conflict but rather converge, meaning that there is no inevitable conflict between employers and employees. In contrast, pluralism “sees the organisation as comprising different groups with both common and divergent aims and objectives” (Geare et al., 2014, p. 2,277). A pluralist analysis of HRM takes differences in interests between employers and employees seriously; while hostility and antagonism between these two groups are not inevitable, there is a persistent need for employees in any organization to exercise voice in order to defend their interests precisely because there are inevitable conflicts between them and their employers. Pluralism in this

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research stream</th>
<th>Inclusion of employees as stakeholders</th>
<th>Inclusion of employee perspectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capability reproduction</td>
<td>Employees matter because human and social outcomes experienced by them affect the organization’s long-term competitiveness</td>
<td>Minimal: the organization largely determines which capabilities are to be reproduced and for what purpose, the latter being largely focused on long-term business survival</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting social and environmental health</td>
<td>As noted by Kramar (2014, p. 1,078), “[p]erforming well on social/human and environmental indicators represents a form of strategic investment and is a means of satisfying a variety of stakeholder expectations,” of which employees are one of many</td>
<td>Minimal: while employee perspectives on social and environmental health matter, there is little discussion of how their perspectives are integrated into this conceptualization of sustainable HRM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections</td>
<td>Employees are a greater focus in terms of both involvement in sustainable HRM practice and a focus of it in terms of outcomes</td>
<td>Higher than either capability reproduction or promoting social and environmental health; connections-oriented sustainable HRM anticipates “HRM practices which build the capabilities of the workforce, provide for participative decision-making, diversity management, high levels of workplace health and safety and performance indicators that reflect ethical concerns (Kramar, 2014, p. 1,079), although there is less attention given to the mechanisms of employee participation than is warranted</td>
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Table 1.
Sustainable HRM research with regard to the inclusion of employees as stakeholders and employee perspectives on sustainability
respect is the counter frame to mainstream HRM scholarship that assumes a unitarist frame of reference (Greenwood and Van Buren, 2017).

Unitarism is implicit in “mainstream” HRM research (Geare et al., 2014; Greenwood and Van Buren, 2017; Van Buren et al., 2011), so much so that it is not named as such. The appeal of unitarism to HRM professionals and scholars is obvious. If unitarism is true, then what is good for an organization and its owners is also good for employees. By extension, HRM professionals working for that organization would not face role conflict between the demands of strategic HRM and their role as employee champions. However, extant literature in this area indeed suggests that role conflicts as experienced by senior HR managers are largely resolved in favor of employers and a strategic HRM perspective (Sheehan et al., 2014). Similarly, HRM researchers find personal utility in taking a unitarist stance for similar reasons, although Nienhueser (2011, p. 390) notes that “empirical research [in HRM] is reproducing an existing unitaristic idea[ology]... empirical research produces or enforces the kind of image that best reflects employer interests.”

The distinction between sharing genuinely shared interests and employees being expected to share their employers’ interests is fundamental to ethical analyses of the employment relationship. If employers and employees together co-create and co-determine a set of interests that are genuinely shared—while also recognizing that the inevitable differences between the two parties to the employment relationship always remain as challenges to be managed rather than overcome in favor of the employer—HRM is far less likely to be exploitative than if employee interests are viewed by organizational managers as obstacles to be overcome in favor of employer interests. Whether those interests are solely pecuniary or whether they include some conceptualization of sustainability, the key issue is whether the pluralism endemic to all employment relations is recognized or not.

Unitarism suggests that the exercise of employee voice is not only unneeded but also counterproductive for both parties to the employment relationship. If employers and employees share the same interests, then by extension managers and HRM personnel are constantly acting in the interests of employees whether or not they mean to as they promote the interests and goals of the organization—making the independent exercise of individual or collective voice by employees to protect their interests unnecessary and indeed a distraction from the task of management. Further, unitarism both buttresses managerial authority to set the terms of exchange in the employment relationship and organizational autonomy to do so free from governmental interference (Geare et al., 2014; Van Buren, 2008). A pluralist analysis of employee voice, in contrast, takes a different position: voice is not only necessary for employees to defend their legitimate interests, but also necessary for any employment relationship to be fair to employees precisely because employer and employee interests diverge at least in part, even as they may also converge in part (Van Buren et al., 2011).

In their article about ideology in HRM scholarship, Greenwood and Van Buren (2017, following Habermas, 1998) distinguish among three types of validity claims vis-à-vis unitarism. Descriptive unitarist claims seek to advance the propositions that (1) the interests of employers and employees are aligned or able to be so as well as (2) particular and extant HRM practices actually do serve to align these two sets of interests. However, the problem with descriptive unitarist claims is that they cannot be neatly separated from normative claims. Put another way, HRM scholarship—and especially research implicitly assuming unitarism is descriptively true, “is often presented as an objective truth claim without regard to the normative assumptions embedded in it” (Greenwood and Van Buren, 2017, p. 671). HRM scholarship that seeks to be descriptive and facially neutral with regard to values, therefore, cannot avoid being enmeshed in the messy world of what ought to be true in social relationships such as employment. Here it is also important to note that there is little evidence that unitarism is descriptively true as a matter of empirical analysis (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2009), in large part because of a relative lack of empirical research on employee-level outcomes within the HRM.
literature. Further, it is suggested that employees are not a uniform stakeholder group with regard to analyses of whether unitarism is descriptively true; for some employees whose skills are perceived to be rare and valuable, it might be truer than for others, but for employees who lack power or voice (a point to which I will return) it is far less likely to be so.

Normative unitarist claims in and of themselves are more straightforward: they posit that in a philosophical sense employers and employees ought to have the same interests as a matter of what is right and good. Here Greenwood and Van Buren (2017) make an important distinction between two competing ways of thinking about shared interests: employers and employees jointly determining what interests are truly shared versus employees being expected to share and adopt the interests of their employers as their own, which can be termed as employees being expected to share their employers’ interests. The former way of thinking about shared interests suggests a high degree of codetermination and collaboration, with give and take necessary for employers and employees to come to a place where they have jointly defined shared interests in a way that is satisfactory to them both. The latter, however, is emblematic of coercion and “is far more accurate with regard to how the notion of ‘shared interests’ is actually meant and used in mainstream HRM research and practice than the first” (Greenwood and Van Buren, 2017, p. 671). It is one thing to suggest that employers and employees ought to share interests through careful normative argumentation and a robust analysis of how such genuinely shared interests might come to be operationalized, and quite another for employers to use their coercive power over employees to enforce a conceptualization of shared interests that does not represent employees’ true preferences.

Finally, instrumental claims about unitarism seek to elucidate what could be and in so doing “develop frameworks that connect HRM practices to the alignment of employee and employer goals” (Greenwood and Van Buren, 2017, p. 672). The corollary claim is that well-informed and -executed management practice in the employment arena makes such alignment possible, with the embedded normative claim (again) that employer and employee interests should be aligned. In much the same way that descriptive unitarist claims fail to be supported empirically—because of a paucity of employee-level research vis-à-vis employees’ goals and interests as well as inadequate theorizing of how HRM practices are linked to both employer and employee outcomes—instrumental claims also fail.

Interestingly, unitarism might itself become a way for HRM practitioners to shield themselves from having to consider the possibility that conflicting interests within the employment relationship might require careful ethical analysis and perhaps the adoption of policies explicitly designed to benefit employees. In this respect, unitarism can be a self-serving ideology; HRM managers holding to that position (Geare et al., 2014) achieve the best of all results for themselves: they can believe that their own actions work to the benefit of their organizations and to employees while also crediting themselves with a nuanced and enlightened view of the employment relationship, with its associated pitfalls and ethical dilemmas for employees, that through their enlightened perspective have been able to avoid bad outcomes for employees while also achieving benefits for their organizations.

Here it is important to return to the concept of sustainable HRM in the context of unitarist and pluralist analyses of the employment relationship. If unitarism is true in any sense, then the notion of “sustainable HRM” from the perspective of employees and their interests is superfluous: employment relationships that maximize employer/owner benefit are by definition both sustainable (in a social sense) and good for employees. Thus, by extension, all HRM would be sustainable in a unitarist world. If pluralism is true, however, the challenge of making HRM truly sustainable is much harder—requiring careful analysis of how HRM might serve the genuine interests of employers and employees. This is not to say, of course, that sustainable HRM is necessarily unitarist in its orientation, or that it inherits all of the problems and blind spots that strategic HRM has. Rather, I am making a simpler and more direct claim: sustainable HRM has the promise of being a more humane, employee-focused
model of HRM as it simultaneously advances the environmental and social goals of organizations. However, for sustainable HRM to realize this promise and to advance organizational sustainability in all of its dimensions, employee perspectives and participation are essential.

Power and sustainable HRM in a pluralist frame of reference

Power is central to the analysis of any relationship between an organization and a stakeholder group (Mitchell et al., 1997; Van Buren, 2001) and particularly so in the employment relationship (Greenwood, 2013; Kaufman, 2015). Stakeholders that possess some sort of relevant power are able to withhold consent from the terms of exchange with an organization and thus negotiate for better treatment from it (Van Buren, 2001). If unitarism is true, then imbalances in power between employers and employees really do not matter; any organization and its managers will simply do what is sensible for both and managers will act in ways that are consistent with good stewardship for employees as well as for the organization.

However, if pluralism is a truer depiction of the employment relationship—as this paper suggests is the case—then analyses of power matter considerably in defining sustainable HRM in both theory and practice. Put another way, HRM cannot be truly sustainable if (1) employee perspectives are not included and (2) employers use imbalances of power in ways that harm employees. Employees who lack power will find themselves to be vulnerable to mistreatment by employers precisely because harming them can make employers better off. Here the concept of frames of reference is useful. A frame of reference (Greenwood and Van Buren, 2017; Snow and Benford, 1988) is both a claim about what is ideal (thus functioning at the level of ideology) and an epistemological claim about how knowledge is produced in support of the ideal. Fox (1966) was the first to identify unitarism as the dominant frame of reference within HRM scholarship. Frames of reference are particularly powerful and highly durable because they function as taken-for-granted beliefs about what is and what should be. They are all the more powerful because they function best when they are subconscious: not being aware that one’s work is influenced by a frame of reference makes it highly unlikely that one’s basic assumptions in that work will be analyzed and questioned. Contemporary HRM research has largely adopted unitarism as the dominant frame of reference for the employment relationship.

For sustainable HRM to make a significant contribution to scholarship in HRM, it needs to take in analyses of unitarism, pluralism and power. It needs to offer an accurate depiction of how relationships between employers and employees actually unfold in order to address structural imbalances between them. As a normative claim, I posit that frameworks for sustainable HRM should seek to address employee rights and dignity in order to promote social justice and employee welfare, even as organizational managers (rightly) seek to promote goals and interests relevant to organizations. In a very real sense, sustainable HRM scholarship and practice should seek to advance consideration of questions such as:

1. Who defines what “sustainable” in the employment relationship means?
2. How do employees participate in conceptualizing sustainable HRM?
3. How can sustainable HRM be measured, and what role does data from employees play in this regard?
4. How is sustainable HRM best put in conversation with other conceptualizations of organizational sustainability, such as environmental sustainability?

This is not to say that sustainable HRM cannot also serve organizational goals. Sustainable HRM might, for example, be helpful in establishing a stronger brand for employers seeking
the best employee talent (App et al., 2012; Kryger Aggerholm et al., 2011). It can have positive effects on employee commitment to their employers (Diaz-Carrion et al., 2018) and work to the benefit of organizations generally as they seek competitive advantage (Guerci et al., 2014). Focusing on sustainable HRM from the employee’s perspective, however, allows for a more critical and normatively grounded analysis of the employment relationship as it affects employees. It permits a greater focus on employee welfare and fairness in the employment relationship (De Prins et al., 2014) as well as preventing harm to employees (Mariappanadar and Kramar, 2014).

Such a stance is consistent with Greenwood and Van Buren’s (2017) call for a new pluralist perspective on the employment relationship. New pluralism holds out the possibility that employers and employees can engage in genuine partnerships based on partial congruence on interests, even as their interests also diverge in part. Such partnership is possible when employers and employees negotiate goals that are genuinely shared rather than employees being coerced into adopting employer goals that may be inimical to employee interests, as previously discussed. Further, new pluralism (Greenwood and Van Buren, 2017, p. 669) “offers the possibility of decentralisation and local consensus, preferring pragmatism brought about by local narratives that an organisation and its employees both participate in constructing.” While old pluralism tends to think of conflict between employers and employees as inevitable, new pluralism allows for creative thinking about how conflicts can be managed for the benefit of both parties. Returning to the Greenwood and Van Buren (2017) framework for analyzing claims related to unitarism—which can be made in descriptive, normative and instrumental terms—I proffer two normative claims about sustainable HRM:

Normative claim 1 about sustainable HRM: Employee-related outcomes should be a stronger and more explicit focus of sustainable HRM scholarship and practice.

Normative claim 2 about sustainable HRM: Employee perspectives should be included within sustainable HRM practice.

It is important to note what normative claims can and cannot do. Normative claims are different from conceptual or empirical claims; as Greenwood and Van Buren (2017, p. 671) note, a normative claim “is a statement of what should be and thus is not falsifiable through empirical evidence or evaluative analysis. Rather, arguments for and against normative claims...must be made in ethical terms through appeal to widely agreed-upon norms.” Normative claims are claims about ideals, seeking to advance a set of values that are then the basis of debate on those terms rather than on whether they are empirically true or false.

Normative claim 1 does not suggest that employee-related outcomes have not been a focus of prior sustainable HRM scholarship. Indeed, they have been (see, for example, De Prins et al., 2014; Kramar, 2014; Mariappanadar, 2012a and b): sustainable HRM has included concerns about such outcomes in much the same way that work in socially responsible HRM has (Newman et al., 2016). However, employee-related outcomes could be a more explicit focus of work in sustainable HRM, and in so doing better connect social sustainability to environmental sustainability. Normative claim 2 is focused on sustainable HRM practice, and as such should push HRM managers and companies to bring employees into the conversation about sustainability more strongly than they do now.

Both of these questions lead to a broader point: sustainable HRM, understood through the prisms of employee outcomes and participation, can do two important things. First, sustainable HRM can better integrate ethical concerns about employee treatment—long present in critiques of HRM, particularly strategic HRM (Greenwood and Van Buren, 2017)—to the extent that the inclusion of employee perspectives is understood as essential to what it
means for HRM to be truly sustainable. In this respect, sustainable HRM can become an analytic framework for ethical analyses of HRM within academic scholarship as well as ethical HRM practice. Second, sustainable HRM can become a framework for interrogating imbalances on power in the employment relationship. Simply put, employment relationships in which more powerful employers exploit less powerful employees—or that deny employees meaningful voice and participation—are unlikely to be sustainable.

As noted previously, HRM itself is laden with ethical implications, whether recognized or not (Greenwood, 2002). Further, normative work in stakeholder theory has recognized the importance of including stakeholder for perspectives into organizational decision making as a good outcome in and of itself (Phillips, 1997; Van Buren, 2001). Because employees are the one essential stakeholder group for any organization and because they are affected by any organizational decision—including decisions related to HRM generally and sustainable HRM particularly, it follows that employee interests, perspectives, and participation should be central to sustainable HRM. This includes not only considering how employee-related outcomes are an explicit outcome of sustainable HRM, but also how employees participate in organizational decision making about sustainable HRM. Bringing together descriptive and instrumental claims, I argue that stronger inclusion of employee-related outcomes and employee perspectives makes for the development of robust theoretical frameworks related to sustainable HRM (instrumental claims) and also makes the success of sustainable HRM initiatives more likely, based on strong empirical evidence (descriptive claims).

Implications for future research and practice
Taking a pluralistic perspective, this paper has argued, is essential for making the concept of sustainable HRM more distinct, robust and inclusive of employee interests and participation. Sustainable HRM can challenge the dominant unitarist perspective on the employment relationship, focusing the attention of researchers on the extent to which employment practices benefit both employers and employees while contributing to social sustainability both within and outside of the employment context. In this section, I outline four future pathways for research in this domain.

First, future research might usefully start by assessing, with qualitative and quantitative methods, how employees conceptualize sustainable HRM and the extent to which their conceptualizations differ from those of managers. As noted previously, sustainability has multiple definitions, as does sustainable HRM. These differing definitions have implications for the growth of sustainable HRM as a field, to be sure. However, more important for the present analysis is whether employees and managers have differing definitions of sustainable HRM. If this is so, then managers seeking to implement sustainable HRM might find that employees with definitions differing from their own might not be as supportive of sustainability initiatives. But more significantly, a mismatch in how managers and employees define sustainable HRM might itself become a source of discord in the employment relationship, as employees might well become more cynical towards their employers if the latter claims to be promoting sustainability and sustainable HRM in ways that fail to account for the former’s perspectives (Bush, 2018).

Second, research in this domain might also develop stronger conceptual frameworks that link particular definitions of sustainable HRM to outcomes relevant to employers, employees and society. Sustainable HRM has the potential to become a powerful framework that brings together organizational concerns about performance with measures of sustainability as defined by both organizations and their stakeholders. However, for this potential to be realized more fully, it is necessary for sustainable HRM, however it is defined, to become more conceptually robust. For example, Kramar (2014) discusses capability reproduction as one stream of research within sustainable HRM. For capability reproduction to be practicable,
However, it must be based on conceptual frameworks that link organizational outcomes with outcomes associated with employee welfare and capabilities that then can be measured. This is all the more important because of a paucity of research on employee outcomes in research domains such as strategic HRM (Lengnick-Hall, 2009).

Third, future research might think about how specific bundles of HRM policies and practices support various definitions of sustainability. This point is related to the previous one about the need for stronger conceptual frameworks for sustainable HRM that can then inform empirical research. There is considerable work, for example, about the effects of different HRM bundles (Bello-Pintado, 2015; Jiang et al., 2012; Subramony, 2009) on organizational performance. An analogy can be drawn with sustainable HRM: given a specific conceptualization of it, what are the bundles of HRM practices that allow that conceptualization to be realized by an organization? In this respect, research from a parallel field—strategic HRM—can help sustainable HRM to become more fully theorized and therefore useful to managers than it is at present.

Finally, sustainable HRM research might delve into normative considerations, addressing what the purposes of HRM should be beyond narrow conceptualizations of employer benefit. Sustainability as a concept, by its very nature, is morally laden. Bringing HRM together with insights from sustainability scholarship allows for a more robust conversation about what HRM should actually do and whose interests it should serve, the relative importance of employer benefit associated with HRM practices vis-à-vis outcomes experienced by employees and other stakeholders, and ultimately whether HRM can ever be truly moral at all (Greenwood, 2002). The promise of sustainable HRM scholarship is that it can allow for a broader-ranging conversation about the purposes and outcomes of HRM than is currently occurring, and in so doing bring ethical analysis squarely into the ambit of HRM research.

The analysis in this paper also has implications for HRM practice. First and foremost, it is essential to note the importance of employee participation with regard to sustainability. Second, the measurement of sustainable HRM at the organizational level should take into account employee-related outcomes, which has noted before is a weakness of much HRM scholarship and by extension practice (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2009), particularly in the area of strategic HRM. Finally, sustainable HRM might provide a lens for HRM professionals to address important ethical questions about the HRM function as well as HRM practice.

Conclusion
Sustainable HRM at present offers an interesting and important set of ideas about how HRM can contribute to a more just world and to more just organizations that are also better placed to create competitive advantage. It offers the possibility of linking HRM to employee welfare and societal well-being, in addition to other outcomes related to social and environmental sustainability. Further, sustainable HRM can address power imbalances in the employment relationship and in turn make HRM more ethically oriented. This paper has offered some ideas about how the promise of sustainable HRM might be better realized by explicit consideration of pluralism and power within HRM scholarship and practice, as well as considered what future research in this domain might look like. Sustainable HRM, it is hoped, can do much to challenge established ways of thinking about HRM while advancing a vision of what HRM could become if it was more ethically grounded and more inclusive of employee perspectives. This matters for one essential reason: “the health of our planet for future generations is dependent on new business models and systems that can effectively address the looming intertwined social and environmental crises” (Westerman et al., 2020, p. 4).
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