The dynamic nature of HRM implementation: a structuration perspective

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\begin{abstract}
Over the past decades, scholars have dedicated substantial attention to the process of HRM implementation. Most progress has been made with debates on HRM system strength, roles of organisational actors in HRM implementation, and intended, actual and perceived HRM. In this paper, we challenge the current view on HRM implementation as being too static and one-directional. By building on structuration theory, we show that the process of HRM implementation is less straightforward than has been previously assumed. After their initial introduction, HRM practices evolve through turbulent developments. Furthermore, instead of neatly distributed roles following meticulously scheduled planning, HRM practices are influenced by various organisational actors. For successful implementation, HRM practices need to become inscribed into the interpretive schemes of organisational actors, resources have to be distributed, the HRM practice has to gain legitimacy. We develop a comprehensive framework that assists in understanding the process of HRM implementation.
\end{abstract}

\section{Introduction}

Since the turn of the century, a number of influential papers have laid the groundwork into HRM as a process. Lately, this has embodied research into the implementation of HRM (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Nishii, Lepak, & Schneider, 2008; Ostroff & Bowen, 2016; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007; Wright & Nishii, 2013), which entails broadly the transition process during which HRM policies and practices develop from an idea or goal, into an institutionalised, functioning organisational instrument. We have observed three main foci in the academic study of HRM implementation; even though these are not always termed as such: (i) HRM system strength (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Farndale & Kelliher, 2013;

Researchers in these focus areas have different ideas about how to achieve ‘successful’ implementation of HRM. For instance, Bowen and Ostroff (2004) postulate that HRM implementation would be successful if employees perceived HRM to be distinctive, consistent, and had perceived a consensus among policy makers. Bondarouk, Kees Looise, and Lempsink (2009), in their turn, advocated for an alignment in understanding of HRM between line managers and HRM professionals, while Wright and Nishii (2013) suggested that, in order to implement HRM successfully, the gap between intended, actual and perceived HRM should be kept to a minimum. Meanwhile, Bos-Nehles, Van Riemsdijk, and Looise (2013) stated that it was necessary to get line managers committed to the HRM practice.

Thus far, HRM practices are seen as to travel along a one-way street that is designed in the HRM department and aligned with the strategy, and applied top-down to achieve outcomes, such as commitment or organisational performance (Delery & Doty, 1996; Huselid, 1995; Jiang, Lepak, Hu, & Baer, 2012; Lepak & Snell, 2002). Also, HRM implementation is considered to be a rational process with predictable and analysable complications. The assumption here is that these complications can even be overcome or avoided if HRM is designed and managed correctly. An example of this is Wright and Nishii’s (2013) suggestion that making the gap between actual and perceived HRM as small as possible, by providing ‘social information’ from the start of introducing a new HRM practice, would enhance its implementation process.

We recognise the importance and convenience of many of the explanations and solutions offered by HRM researchers so far, which have led to many valuable insights into HRM implementation. However, the view on HRM implementation remains one-sided and static. Moreover, it does not follow the dynamics of HRM implementation, nor interactions between organisational actors and HRM. Therefore, we know only little about what happens during the process of HRM implementation, making it hard to understand and explain why implementation gaps occur. Moreover, the question remains in what way perceptions of different groups of organisational actors like HRM professionals, top managers and line managers, but also employees on the shop floor influence each other and how such a ravel of idiosyncratic perceptions, in the end, impacts the HRM implementation process. To summarise, scholars have failed to provide an accurate overview of the dynamics of HRM implementation.

Therefore, in this paper, we aim to conceptualise the HRM implementation process by considering the interaction between HRM systems, employees and
organisational context. We theorise a continuous interplay between organisational actors’ behaviour and their interpretation of HRM, an evolution of characteristics of HRM systems, and the dynamics of contextual factors and resources in HRM implementation. By a continuous interplay we mean a recursive process, where HRM practices, organisational actors like line managers, employees and HRM professionals, and the organisational context mutually influence each other, and gradually reach a stable phase characterised by a success of HRM implementation. Hence, after sending an HRM message, a recursive process starts, which emerges bottom-up from message receivers, feeding back towards the HRM message senders and, thereby, influences the HRM practice. We argue that HRM practices could be considered as though they are live entities that have their own dynamics and keep developing after their introduction. By taking the dynamic nature of HRM practices into account, this provides us with insights into understanding the HRM implementation process and, hence, facilitates a smoother introduction of HRM practices into daily work routines.

To conceptualise HRM implementation in this way, we build on structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) which serves as a lens through which we analyse the process of HRM implementation. The main premise of structuration theory is that a continuous interplay exists between structure and action. In this paper, we present a novel model on the HRM implementation process by assessing the non-linear reciprocal and recursive nature of the HRM implementation process, and the interplay between HRM systems, all groups of employees, and organisational context and resources. This approach differs from extant research and insights into HRM implementation.

Therewith, we contribute to the knowledge about the HRM implementation process in three ways. Firstly, by uncovering the dynamics of the HRM implementation process we add to the HRM-as-a-process debate (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Ostroff & Bowen, 2016). Secondly, by revealing organisational actors’ roles we extend the literature on the role of not only line managers (Gilbert et al., 2011; Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013; Nehles, Van Riemsdijk, Kok, & Looise, 2006; Trullen et al., 2016), but also of the broader HRM function (Beer, 1997; Valverde, Ryan, & Soler, 2006). Finally, by demonstrating the process through which new behaviour becomes incorporated within organisations we contribute to insights in the intended-actual-perceived HRM debate (Khilji & Wang, 2006; Makhecha et al., 2016; Piening et al., 2014; Wright & Nishii, 2013).

In the remainder of this article we first look back at scholarly insights into HRM implementation thus far and then we summarise the main ideas of structuration theory (Giddens, 1984). Subsequently, we present and explain our dynamic view on HRM implementation along with our framework.
**HRM implementation**

Scholars in the field of HRM implementation broadly focus on three topics. First, the stream of HRM system strength (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Ostroff & Bowen, 2016) is characterised by studies in which HRM practices or HRM systems are distinctive and consistent, and where consensus between policy makers exists (see Sanders, Shipton, & Gomes, 2014). Influential studies in this stream are those of Delmotte, De Winne, and Sels (2012), Sanders, Dorenbosch, and de Reuver (2008), Li, Frenkel, and Sanders (2011), Nishii et al. (2008), and Bednall, Sanders, and Runhaar (2014). A second stream of HRM implementation researchers study the difference between HRM (practices or systems) as intended and the way it is actually applied, along with the way organisational members (most often employees) perceive it. Leading studies in this stream are those of Wright and Nishii (2013), Khilji and Wang (2006), and Woodrow and Guest (2014). A third group of HRM implementation researchers focus more on the roles of organisational actors in implementing HRM; particularly on the contribution of line managers. Examples of such studies include Purcell and Hutchinson (2007) and Bos-Nehles et al. (2013).

Even though HRM scholars generally coincide in their view that HRM implementation does involve a process, they have not settled yet on what this process exactly comprises. For instance, HRM implementation is seen as actual and perceived HRM practices (Nishii et al., 2008), the translation of intended into actual practices (Khilji & Wang, 2006), or intended, implemented and perceived HRM practices (Makhecha et al., 2016; Piening et al., 2014; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007; Wright & Nishii, 2013). Other scholars view it more broadly and mention the design of HRM practices and policies as an essential part of HRM implementation (Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013; Woodrow & Guest, 2014). Furthermore, perspectives differ on what HRM implementation comprises and which tasks are to be included in the concept. When HRM implementation refers to the translation of intended to actual HRM practices, line managers are seen as the key actors (Boselie, Dietz, & Boon, 2005; Brewster, Gollan, & Wright, 2013; Geare, Edgar, & Deng, 2006; Wright & Nishii, 2013). However, when it is viewed as a multi-staged process, senior executives and HR managers are included in the framework (Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013).

Even though we acknowledge the effort done by scholars in the field of HRM implementation research, we consider the above-mentioned conceptualisations of HRM implementation to be insufficient. Furthermore, a literature review has shown that HRM scholars often write about HRM implementation, but rarely define it (e.g. Boselie et al., 2005; Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013; Runhaar & Sanders, 2013; Woodrow & Guest, 2014; Wright & Nishii, 2013). Therefore, at the outset of building our model, we provide a definition of HRM implementation. We borrow ideas from the study into innovation implementation by Klein and Sorra (1996), and define HRM implementation as: the process of gaining targeted employees’
appropriate, committed, and skilful use of an HRM practice, aligned with the corporate strategy.

**Structuration theory and its applications in HRM research**

The key principles of structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) inspired us to develop a dynamic view of the process of HRM implementation. The main objective of structuration theory is to explain the way in which social systems are produced and reproduced over time and space. Giddens (1984) theorised that a duality of structure exists: a continuous interaction between structure and action, which lies at the basis of the production and reproduction of any social organisation. This means that social systems do not exist merely because of structure or action, but because of the interaction between them: ‘structure is both medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices’ (Giddens, 1979, p. 5). Therefore, structure and action are not independent of each other: ‘We cannot take action without operation within structures and without producing and reproducing them’ (Feldman, 2015, p. 322).

Given that structure does not exist without action, and the other way around, structure influences the behaviour of actors, who, in their turn, recursively produce and reproduce that very structure (Jones & Karsten, 2008). Giddens also states that structure is not something physical, but merely exists as memory traces orienting the conduct of knowledgeable human agents (Giddens, 1984, p. 17). As a consequence, actors are constantly influencing the structure that enables and constrains their actions. If actors behave according to the rules of the structure, they reinforce it, but if they routinely (Jarzabkowski, 2008) move outside of those rules, they modify the structure. If actors do not make use of a structure at all, Giddens (1984) explains, the structure is virtually non-existent, because it does not influence their behaviour.

According to Giddens (1984), structure consists of rules and resources. Rules define the boundaries of behaviour, and resources can be either allocative (materials) or authoritative (over people). Structure limits behaviour, even though, at the same time, actors can move freely within those boundaries. Therefore, rules and resources both constrain and enable action. Giddens (1984) identifies three dimensions of structure: signification, domination and legitimation. These are transformed into action by three so-called ‘modalities’: interpretive schemes, facilities and norms.

Interpretive schemes are ‘the modes of typification incorporated within actors’ stocks of knowledge, applied reflexively in the sustaining of communication’ (Giddens, 1984, p. 29). Actors utilise their interpretive schemes to make sense of both their own actions and those of others (Walsham & Han, 1990). Interpretive schemes consist of information that they have learned beforehand. Examples in a work setting are: specific organisational terms and names of colleagues. Facilities are authoritative (to have the capacity to give commands to other actors, (Giddens,
(1984), or allocative (over objects and materials, (Jones & Karsten, 2008)). Norms are ‘tacitly understood moral imperatives’ (Jarzabkowski, 2008, p. 623). Therefore, norms give a sense of direction in daily life. They inform us what is acceptable and what is not. In interaction, actors draw upon these modalities and transform them into communication, power and sanctions (Turner, 1986). Even though the modalities were presented here separately, and will be applied in separate steps later in the paper, they have only been separated for analytical purposes. In real life, the modalities are interconnected and function at the same instance (Giddens, 1984).

Despite the fact that structuration theory was not specifically designed for the field of management studies, it has helped numerous scholars in their empirical studies to provide more insight in complex situation. For instance, Jones and Karsten (2008) found that structuration theory had until 2004 inspired scholars in more than 330 studies in the field of information systems. Furthermore, exemplary empirical studies using Giddens’ thoughts have been published in top-tier journals: Barley (1986), Orlikowski (2000), Jarzabkowski (2008).

HRM scholars have made use of structuration theory to a lesser extent, and their attempts – although very insightful – stay fragmented. Kroon and Paauwe (2014) used structuration theory as a lens to analyse why some agricultural companies make use of what they term ‘precarious employment conditions’, while others have more socially responsible policies. The authors used elements of structuration theory to explain why certain employment aspects remain over time, while others did not. By using structuration theory, they were able to identify structural properties of the agricultural sector, such as collective work permits, or seasonal labour conditions, which support organisations in adopting and maintaining precarious employment conditions, or hampers them from adopting socially responsible employment conditions. They also identified structural properties, such as good employer projects, and collective initiatives to improve working conditions, which can serve as a mediator towards more socially responsible employment relations. In another study, Meijerink (2014) used elements of structuration theory to theorise how employees enact the employee–organisation relationship. Since structuration theory explains that structure only exists in the behaviour of individuals, according to Meijerink (2014), employee–organisation relationships only structure employees’ day-to-day activities if they emerge from the recurrent actions of employees and managers. Festing and Maletzky (2011) used structuration theory to analyse how change in interaction between leaders and subordinates comes about, and to design a multilevel framework depicting the leadership adjustment process. Elements of structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), such as its modalities, and the interaction between them, allowed the authors to theorise the process of adjustment and add to the HRM stream of cross-cultural adjustment. In another paper, Björkman, Ehrnrooth, Mäkelä, Smale, and Sumelius (2014) adopted a practice-based perspective – the stream of sociological thought to which structuration theory belongs – to conceptualise how HRM literature
could benefit from adopting a practice-based perspective. The authors demonstrated that, by focusing on intersections between practitioners, HRM practices and praxis (behaviour), researchers could advance knowledge about both the HRM-performance stream and the HRM function. Earlier, Bondarouk and Ruël (2009) applied structuration theory to the HRM field. Their study helped us to understand that the transformation into information technology-enabled HRM services is not merely a process of designing and applying, but ‘a dynamic process in which stakeholders frame and reframe their perceptions and, thus, actually construct the transformation of the HRM function’ (2009, p. 273). Finally, Ostroff and Bowen (2016) suggested that (adaptive) structuration theory (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994) could shed light on the concept of climate strength by demonstrating how groups of employees differ in their perceptions on the climate.

The examples above clearly show that structuration theory has already informed HRM scholars to some extent. Previous HRM-structuration theory studies have mainly focused on individual HRM practices and HRM policies (Festing & Maletzky, 2011; Kroon & Paauwe, 2014; Meijerink, 2014). However, the main strength of structuration theory is to explain the dynamic interplay between structure and action, and how they maintain and modify recursively. Therefore, by theorising a dynamic interplay between HRM systems, context, and organisational actors, we move this tradition further, and enrich the literature on HRM implementation.

A dynamic view on HRM

In this section, we analyse what we see when we look at the HRM implementation process through the lens of structuration theory. The framework (Figure 1) we present in this paper focuses not merely on either HRM professionals (Rynes, Colbert, & Brown, 2002), managers (Nehles et al., 2006; Op de Beeck et al., 2016), or employees (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Nishii et al., 2008), but on the role of all organisational actors (managers at several organisational levels, HRM professionals, employees) at different hierarchical and functional levels. A manager can be the communicator of the HRM practice, as well as the receiver of the HRM messages. Similarly, an HRM professional can be a receiver of an HRM message sent by top managers, as well as the communicator to line managers.1

Starting from the premise that HRM practices consist of rules aimed at influencing employee behaviour, we consider HRM practices as a structure in Giddens’ sense. Therefore, by looking through the lens of structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), we consider a continuous process in which HRM practices and behaviour recursively and continuously influence each other. During that process, HRM practices influence the behaviour of organisational actors in two ways: by constraining and by enabling. The rules of HRM practices, demarcating behavioural boundaries, inherently constrain behaviour. However, within those rules, a certain degree of freedom exists, allowing the actor to fill in his or her role with
Figure 1. The recursive process of HRM implementation.
some discretion. Therefore, the behavioural guidelines of HRM practices do not only constrain, but also enable organisational actors during their work routines. Recursively, organisational actors influence the HRM practices to which they are exposed during their work routine by behaving within or outside of the behavioural boundaries of those HRM practices.

We have visualised this process in Figure 2. It demonstrates a continuous interaction between structural aspects of the HRM practice (rules and resources) and behaviour of organisational actors. Broadly, each cycle can be seen as one ‘round’ of the process depicted in Figure 1. Consequently, in Figure 2, we show that the HRM practice influences the behaviour of organisational actors, but also that it is influenced vice versa. Over time, both the HRM practice and the behaviour become more and more a mixed outcome of each other.

As stated earlier, more organisational actors are involved in the HRM implementation process than is assumed in existing HRM literature. Hence, not only HRM professionals design and line managers implement novel HRM practices, but HRM professionals or top managers do this as well. In designing new HRM practices, decision-makers are bounded by internal and external institutional elements. Examples of these are labour regulations. Depending on the organisation, the design of HRM practices can be the task of HRM professionals or top managers, but also line managers and end users. Examples of the latter are national government institutions in which new HRM practices are first discussed extensively through many organisational layers before introducing them (van Mierlo & Bondarouk, 2017). Top managers and HRM professionals are also often the organisational actors who take the decision to implement a new HRM practice or not (Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013; Valverde et al., 2006). Therefore, their contributions in the first two stages of HRM implementation (the idea of a new HRM practice

![Figure 2. The continuous interaction between HRM practices and behaviour.](image-url)
and its design) are significant. After a decision has been taken to create a new HRM practice and it has been designed, people responsible for administering it to the end users will be informed about this. In most organisations, this task is given to line managers (Guest, 1987; Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013; Valverde et al., 2006).

Managers function as the sender of HRM practices (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Wright & Nishii, 2013), but also as the receiver, since they have to understand it and become familiar with it. HRM professionals will inform the managers about the newly designed HRM practice, which managers will filter through their interpretive schemes. Their understanding of the HRM practice will further influence the way in which they will shape and deliver the practice to their employees. As theorised by Guest and Bos-Nehles (2013), the quality provided by managers while delivering HRM practices plays an important role in the final success of their implementation. Also, allocative facilities – money and other means to finance the new HRM practice – are provided to managers, while authoritative facilities explain the hierarchy for the HRM practice and who reports to whom. Formal norms explain tasks, responsibilities and expected behaviour, while informal norms inform managers about that behaviour which is seen as acceptable within the organisation and among colleagues. HRM professionals are tasked with informing the managers about the importance of the new HRM practice and solve or counter their objections. As mentioned earlier, even though these modalities were discussed separately, they were only separated for analytical purposes, as they are entwined in real-life.

Applying the HRM practice to employees – its actual introduction – is also portrayed in the framework by means of Giddens (1984) three modalities. Firstly, the manager introduces the HRM practice by communicating the new set of rules to employees, which the employees filter through their interpretive schemes, making sense of the message (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). Also, the way employees understand and perceive the HRM practice will affect its implementation. For instance, employees can accept a new HRM practice as some bureaucratic ritual and ‘tick the box’ after performing it (Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013), or actively contribute to its development (Meijerink, Bondarouk, & Lepak, 2016). Secondly, authoritative facilities, in the shape of the manager’s higher hierarchical organisational position, give a certain degree of power over the employees. For example, the manager can give a negative evaluation during the appraisal talk and, therefore, decide not to give a bonus, or to reject a leave of absence request. Allocative facilities can be the means to finance, for example, employee training. Thirdly, norms inform the employees that orders from their superiors should (informal norms) and must (formal norms) be followed to provide a moral order within the organisation (Orlikowski, 1992). Through these three steps, the behaviour of employees is influenced.

Following the structuration framework, we identify two possible courses of action that follow from the process described in the previous section. One possibility is that employees behave according to guidelines of the new HRM practice. Thereby, employees are reinforcing the HRM practice. More specifically, we
consider this to recursively influence the *actual* HRM practice. This is because managers see that their – possibly deviant – approach is working. As a result, managers will stick to their approach. Over time, the manager’s approach can become a best-practice within the organisation. Conversely, if the manager’s approach deviates from the originally intended HRM practice, this might eventually modify the design of the HRM practice.

In reality, this process is often less straightforward. For instance, communication difficulties could distort the message sent from manager to employee (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Den Hartog, Boon, Verburg, & Croon, 2013). Another possibility is that, even though the manager occupies a higher hierarchical position (hence possesses authoritative facilities), in practice, he or she is not able to convert these facilities into actual power or leverage. Therefore, the employees may overrule or ignore their manager. After all, not only superiors, such as managers and HRM professionals have facilities, but employees too, because of their ability to act according to the rules of the HRM practice, or to deviate from them. Hence, if employees ignore the HRM practice, it does not exert any influence over their work routine and, thus, can be considered non-existent. Therefore, employees will always possess a certain level of freedom, which they can use to undermine and even modify the existing structure of domination (Orlikowski, 1992). Even so, managers will adopt their approach to find out what works. In this stage, newly implemented HRM practices are in the stage of trial-and-error, instead of execution according to a detailed step-by-step plan.

At this phase, HRM professionals have the task to monitor the progress of implementation of the new HRM practice. In case the implementation of the intended HRM practice does not work as scheduled, decision-makers, such as top managers and HRM professionals, might respond by modifying the intended HRM practice to provoke a desired behavioural reaction from managers and employees. Therefore, through their work routines, employees recursively influence the intended HRM practices they are exposed to during their daily jobs. Also, the behaviour of line managers influences the shape of the HRM practice. It enhances their role from merely being the executor of HRM, towards a more active participant in the HRM implementation process.

If behaviour becomes routine, this eventually becomes institutionalised; meaning that people within the organisation behave in that way unconsciously (Giddens, 1984). The institutional elements of organisations contain organisational structures that are taken for granted by most organisational actors and they are consciously aware of. Since institutionalised structures are used unconsciously, they can be considered to be concrete, although still modifiable (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009) and observable (Lammers & Barbour, 2006). Consequently, the behaviour of organisational actors, such as managers and employees, might eventually become institutionalised.
HRM implementation: a never-ending process?

The process described thus far has theorised the way in which HRM practices evolve after their initial design. During that process, HRM practices can influence the behaviour of organisational actors, who can recursively contribute to the evolution of those HRM practices. Subsequently, we theorised how policy makers might adapt the rules of HRM practices to the behaviour of organisational actors. However, this raises the question: at what point does an HRM practice become stable?

We argue that HRM practices never completely finish evolving. As we discussed above, even institutionalised elements of organisations can be modified (Battilana et al., 2009). Furthermore, from routine dynamics literature, we know that even the most internalised and stable routines can change from one instance to the next (Feldman, 2015). However, after a period of turbulence and modifications, structures do become more stable. This is what we term the structuration process: an epoch during which structures are being undermined by actors whose behaviour influences the shape – or rather shaping – of the structure. New structures will provoke unanticipated behaviour because of misunderstandings, contradictions in its design, incorrectly distributed facilities, or different opinions regarding its usefulness.

Therefore, we claim that an HRM practice becomes stable once it has become inscribed into the interpretive schemes of its users, facilities have been appropriately distributed, and it is perceived as legitimate by all organisational actors (Taylor, Groleau, Heaton, & Van Every, 2001). In other words, organisational actors have to become aware of the rules of the HRM practice and understand them, acknowledge and obey the roles of the HRM function (‘who does what?’), and perceive the HRM practice as legitimate. Hence, an HRM practice becomes stable when it is accepted, legitimised and inscribed in the mental frames of all organisational actors. This process portrays the complexities of the HRM implementation process.

Discussion

Throughout this paper, we have claimed that the HRM literature can profit from a more dynamic perspective on the HRM implementation process. As the term implies, it is a process. Therefore, it inherently involves a variety of people, planning, evaluation, and inevitably setbacks. Yet, HRM scholars have not paid attention to this, thereby limiting the conciseness of the existing view on the HRM implementation process. Gratton and Truss (2003) have demonstrated that it is not only necessary that coherence exists between business goals, the HRM strategy, and HRM policies, but also that those policies – in the shape of HRM practices – actually have to be put into action.
This paper contributes to scholarly knowledge about the HRM implementation process in three ways. Our first contribution is that we, by adopting a structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) perspective, have added to the HRM-as-a-process (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004) and intended-actual-perceived HRM (Wright & Nishii, 2013) debates by focusing, not only on the design, implementation and perception of HRM practices, but also by theorising what happens to HRM practices after those preliminary steps. We argue that by taking HRM implementation further than looking for gaps between intended, actual, and perceived HRM, we have been able to create a more realistic view on HRM implementation. Practitioners can use these insights when implementing novel HRM practices by continuing to monitor the state of the implemented HRM practice, also after it has been administered and transferred to their employees. Structuration theory has played a key role in these insights, and – to our knowledge – no other theories consider this dynamic interplay. Some other concepts come close to examine certain aspects of HRM implementation, but they fall short to integrate the total complexity and dynamism of all aspects of HRM implementation. For instance, using a practice lens (e.g. Cetina, Schatzki, & Von Savigny, 2005) would have been useful to analyse the role actors play in the implementation process, but it would fail to show the way in which structure influences actors’ behaviour in the process. On the other hand, a functionalist approach, like institutional theory (Scott, 2005) would have underplayed the role of organisational actors, leading to the one-sighted view on HRM implementation that was common in HRM research before Bowen and Ostroff’s (2004) influential paper. Structuration theory on the other hand, incorporates both structural forces and actions and, hence, has been able to demonstrate the dynamic process of HRM implementation.

The second contribution that this paper makes is by theorising the roles organisational actors play in the implementation process of HRM, we have provided more accurate insights into the HRM function (Beer, 1997; Guest, 1987; Valverde et al., 2006). Analytically, structuration theory looks at all actors equally, and does not distinguish between top manager, HRM professional, higher-, middle-, or first-line manager, or employee. Rather, structuration theory looks at what actors do, instead of their duties in the HRM implementation process. We acknowledge that organisational actors have certain tasks and responsibilities while implementing new HRM practices but, as we have attempted to demonstrate with this paper, those tasks and responsibilities are less demarcated, and more diffuse and dynamic than merely the actor’s task description. We state that especially is this period, in which a lot of attention exists for topics like co-creation (Meijerink et al., 2016), job crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), and I-deals (Rousseau, 2005), it is important to look at contribution of all organisational actors in the HRM implementation process. Practitioners can use these insights to take into consideration when implementing HRM practices through a bottom-up approach, in which most policy concerning HRM practices is created in situ.
Finally, the notion that all managers interpret and understand new HRM practices idiosyncratically, truly adds to explaining the implementation gap (Piening et al., 2014). However, not only do managers have different objectives and goals (Nehles et al., 2006), they also understand the HRM practice differently from the way it was intended and designed by the HRM department (and possibly higher management). This adds to the line of research of Bowen and Ostroff (2004), Ostroff and Bowen (2016) in the sense that not only employees perceive and interpret HRM, but managers and other organisational actors as well.

Limitations and future research

Although this paper has provided new perspectives on the nature of HRM practices and HRM implementation, it also has its limitations. These limitations can serve as a basis for future research. We are aware that structuration theory has, throughout its existence, been criticised for being difficult to operationalise to obtain empirical results. Even so, many authors have been able to publish empirical papers based on structuration theory (for an overview, see Jones and Karsten (2008)).

For operationalisation’s sake, it is not necessary to apply structuration theory in full. As Giddens (1984, pp. 326–327) argues, structuration theory is rather meant to guide researchers in their endeavour:

The concepts of structuration theory, as with any competing theoretical perspective, should, for many research purposes, be regarded as sensitizing devices, nothing more. That is to say, they may be useful for thinking about research problems and the interpretation of research results.

Moreover, Giddens states:

I like least those works in which authors have attempted to import structuration theory in toto into their given area of study’ and that he rather sees studies ‘in which concepts, either from the logical framework of structuration theory, or other aspects of my writings, are used in a sparing and critical fashion (1991, p. 213).

As a consequence, in numerous studies, elements of structuration theory have been applied. Examples include Barley (1986) who focused on the recursive interaction between structure and (inter)action in radiology departments, while Orlikowski (2000) focused more on Giddens’ modalities in studying the usage of technology in organisations. Therefore, the elements that are most useful depend on the focal point of the study at hand. If the goal is to study dynamics – like is the case in this paper – then structure and action (and its modalities which demonstrate it) are the most useful. On the other hand, a researcher who wants to study processes in which actors make sense of their world might opt to incorporate Giddens’ thoughts on knowledgeability and consciousness. Therefore, we issue a call for further exploration of operationalisation possibilities of the structuration-based constructs for HRM implementation. A second limitation is that the danger exists that we have turned a relatively young field – HRM implementation – into an
overly complex concept. Indeed, it is always possible to study HRM implementation in more detail, including more different organisational actors, and actors external to the organisation (e.g. consultants and clients) as well. We did not intent to overcomplicate HRM implementation. However, in order to grasp the full complexity of the HRM implementation process, we feel that we needed to take a step further than HRM scholars have done thus far.

The above-mentioned limitations provide many opportunities for future research. Firstly, empirical papers could be valuable in obtaining knowledge on the evolution of HRM practices and HRM implementation. Woodrow and Guest (2014) demonstrated that a case study approach can provide great insights into the HRM implementation process and reveal events that would remain unknown with a more quantitative approach. Hence, following their recommendations, we suggest scholars interested in HRM implementation consider a case study approach when designing empirical studies. As Feldman and Orlikowski (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011, p. 1248) put so fittingly: ‘In the box-and-arrow figures so prevalent in organization theory, the boxes are always labeled, whereas the arrows are often unadorned by any text, as if they speak for themselves’. More than quantitative studies, case studies are able to open these arrows leading from one variable to another, instead of merely showing correlations between them. The outcomes of such research could possibly be used for a qualitative comparative analysis (QCA). Moreover, uncovering possible mechanisms leading from one phase of our framework (Figure 1) to another would provide great insights into what triggers the dynamic nature of HRM implementation. Studies applying techniques, such as process tracing, could test the hypothesised mechanisms subsequently.

Researchers might also be inspired to empirically study the dynamics of the roles of organisational actors during HRM implementation. We feel providing results to our claims, can both strengthen our claims and support practitioners while implementing novel HRM practices.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, an HRM practice is finished, neither when the HRM department gives the ‘green light’ decision, nor when a manager introduces it. Instead, HRM practices need to go through the entire HRM implementation process as described in this paper in order to become inscribed in the mental framework of all the relevant organisational actors. Furthermore, facilities have to be distributed properly, and the HRM practice has to become perceived as legitimate. Precisely because of the large number of organisational actors involved in this process, the risk of communication difficulties, conflicting interests, the (un)willingness to co-operate, and unforeseen setbacks, can lead to unexpected consequences that can prevent the HRM practice from achieving its desired effects. Even if these setbacks turn out to be very small or absent, newly introduced HRM practices still have to become internalised. Often, this process will involve much frustration and negotiation.
We finalise by stating that, even though the HRM department most often designs HRM practices, they come alive at employee-level. To make the HRM implementation process successful, it is necessary to pay attention to the understandings and desires of employees, and then see how the implementation process gradually works its way up into the organisation.

**Note**

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