

How Line Management Intentions Become Employee Perceptions: Conceptualizing the Role of Frames in HRM System Strength

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Abstract. This paper conceptualizes the linkages between the normative foundations that underpin HRM system strength, insights from cognitive psychology, social exchange theory, and the leader-member exchange concept in order to bridge the gap between HRM intentions and the organizational reality. We start our arguments from the notion of HRM system strength [1] that marks the break from the traditional content-based view of HRM, and moves on to view HRM as a process. We continue with the input from cognitive psychology that postulates that it is organizational members' perceptions, filtered through existing mental frames, which form the basis for the interpretation and shaping of organizational issues [2] such as HRM. More specifically, we build on the notion of "HRM frames" [3], where the HRM within an organization can have different connotations depending on the interpretations of the key groups of people involved (line managers and employees).

Keywords: HRM system strength; HRM frames; congruence; intended, actual, perceived HR practices

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¹ Bowen & Ostroff, 2004

² Hodgkinson, 2001

³ Bondarouk et al., 2009

Introduction

Since Bowen and Ostroff [1] introduced the concept of HRM system strength, researchers no longer focus solely on which HR practices affect firm performance and increasingly focus on how these HR practices should be implemented. They contend that the impact of HRM on firm performance also depends on features of the HR processes [4]. For HRM to affect firm performance, not only the contents of the intended individual HR practices and policies are important: it is equally important to design and administer the HRM system such that its content is perceived uniformly among employees. For this to occur, it is suggested that HRM needs to send unambiguous messages to employees such that a shared meaning of the situation and a collective sense of what is expected results [1].

An interesting discussion has developed in an attempt to explain how HRM sends these messages to employees. For example, Wright and Nishii [5] differentiate between intended, actual, and perceived HR practices. In their view, the process of the HRM system goes through several steps and involves several stakeholders. The HR department develops what they intend HR practices to be, line managers use these practices and implement them according to their own interpretations, where the intentions become actual practices, and employees then experience what they receive from line managers as perceived practices. It has been observed that employees' reactions to HR practices, as they experience them, can differ from the intended HR practices developed by HR professionals and/or those put into practice by line managers [6]. Gilbert, De Winne, and Sels [7] went a step further and argued that the level of HRM implementation depends on the levels of competence, of motivation, and of opportunity present in the line managers.

Recently, researchers have been nuancing the idea of HRM-message-sending by actively looking at the involved actors. It is postulated that the quality of HRM is dependent on the combination and integration of a range of perceptions of the HRM during its implementation [8]. Thus, HR professionals enter the HRM scene in the design and administration of the practices [9], line managers in their implementation [10], and employees, who receive what "lands" on the shop-floor level [9;11]. It is our argument that, of these stakeholders, it is the line managers and employees who play a crucial role in the HRM process. They perceive HR practices, as sent out and communicated by the HR department. Only as these are passed and filtered through line managers' and employees' perceptions, understandings, and experiences does the quality of an HRM system emerge.

We link our claim above with the growing recognition in the managerial literature that, ultimately, it is the actors' perceptions of organizational processes, filtered through existing mental frames that form the basis for the formulation and

⁴ Delmotte, De Winne & Sels, 2011

⁵ Wright & Nishii, 2006

⁶ Kinnie et al., 2005

⁷ Gilbert, De Winne and Sels, 2011

⁸ Guest & Bos-Nehles, forthcoming

⁹ Guest & Conway, 2011

¹⁰ Bos-Nehles, 2010

¹¹ Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007

interpretation of organizational issues [2]. Further, research shows that people act on the basis of their interpretations of the world and, in so doing, they enact particular social realities through giving them meaning [12;13;14;15]. Mental frames (or representations) of reality are seen to preclude and challenge the processing of information [16;17;2] through sense-making and sense-giving processes. This occurs when people face new actions, and interpret and communicate their thoughts about them [for an overview, see 18;19].

As such, it is logical to assume that what employees perceive as HR practices depends to an extent on what line managers intend to communicate and how they intend to apply these practices. This paper argues that understanding interpretations of HRM intentions (by line managers) and receptions (by employees) is critical to understanding whether HRM systems, as designed and implied by the HRM professionals, will be successful. Through this, this paper is contributing to the dialogue on HRM system strength. We contend that, before an HRM system becomes “strong” [1], the designed, signaled, and communicated HR practices have to pass through a two-step framing process. First, line managers have to receive a message from an HRM department and then intend to implement the HRM. Second, the employees have to receive the HRM message from the line managers. In these steps, the line managers and then the employees have to make sense of these messages; and it is in this sensemaking process that they develop particular assumptions, knowledge, and expectations that then shape their subsequent reactions to it. As research on shared frames has shown, it is beneficial if stakeholder groups have congruent, or at least similar, frames [20]. In such scenarios, different groups will work toward similar goals [3].

We continue with this scholarly conversation and aim to build a conceptual model linking the congruence of HRM frames (line managers and employees) with HRM system strength. In more direct terms, we offer a model that addresses the antecedents of HRM system strength: the HRM frames and their dependencies.

1. Development of a HRM system strength model

To help visualize our conceptualization, we here present the research model that we then explain in the text that follows.

¹² Bartunek and Moch, 1994

¹³ Goodhew et al., 2005

¹⁴ Orlikowski and Gash, 1994

¹⁵ Weick et al., 2005

¹⁶ Eden, 1992

¹⁷ Hodgkinson and Jonson, 1994

¹⁸ Armstrong, Cools, and Sadler-Smith, 2011

¹⁹ Hodgkinson and Sparrow, 2002

²⁰ Kaplan, 2008

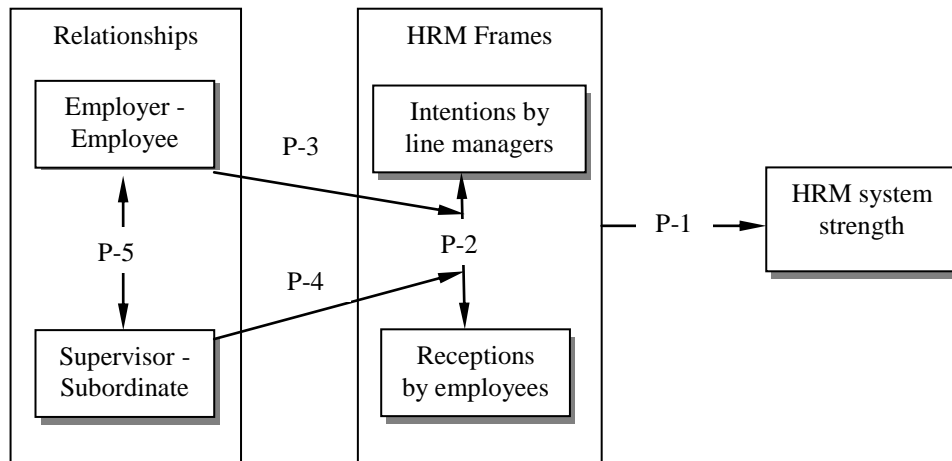


Figure 1. Conceptualization of HRM frames as antecedents of HRM system strength

1.1 HRM Frames and their Congruence

In order for a firm to perform well, its HRM system should be strong, “fostering the emergence of a strong organizational climate from (individual) psychological climates” [4, p.4]. A strong HRM system is, in turn, characterized by high distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus, resulting in shared perceptions in how employees understand the messages sent to them. If the organization achieves a positive assessment of the HRM system regarding its distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus, then the HRM system has succeeded in sending strong signals about what the goals of the organization are and what employee behaviors are expected and rewarded [1].

Adopting the concept of “frames” from cognitive psychology [21], this has been described as a “repertoire of tacit knowledge that is used to impose structure upon, and impart meaning to, otherwise ambiguous social and situational information to facilitate understanding” [22, p.56]. In a less profound way, frames are defined as organized knowledge structures that allow individuals to interact with their environment [23, p.274]. They include assumptions, knowledge, and expectations expressed symbolically through language, visual images, metaphors, and stories [14]. Various terms have been used to express the idea of cognitive frames, addressing in parallel notions of beliefs [24], categories [17;25], taxonomies [26], mental models [23], cognitive maps [13;16;27;28], cognitive frameworks [12], and scripts [20;29].

²¹ Bandura, 1986

²² Gioia, 1986

²³ Mathieu et al, 2000

²⁴ Walsh, 1995

²⁵ Dutton and Jackson, 1987

²⁶ Porac and Thomas, 1989

²⁷ Cossette and Audet, 1992

Cognitive psychologists argue that the only reasonable claim that can be made of mental frames is that they represent subjective data, and that they act as a tool to facilitate decision-making, problem-solving, and negotiating within the context of an organizational intervention [27]. By facilitating the decision-making and problem-solving processes, frames allow people to explain the behavior of the world around them, to recognize relationships between components, to construct expectations for what is likely to occur next, and to proactively shape the thinking processes of others through sense-making and sense-giving processes [30;31;32;33]. Hence, frames have three crucial purposes: they help people to describe, to explain, and to predict events in their environment [16;23]. We adopt the definition offered by Bondarouk et al. [3, p.475], and view HRM frames as

“...a subset of cognitive frames that people use to understand Human Resource Management in organisations”.

We argue that an understanding of line managers' and employees' interpretations of HRM is critical in understanding their interactions with the HRM system. To interact with the HRM system, line managers and employees have to make sense of it; and in this sense-making process, they develop specific assumptions, expectations, and knowledge of HRM, which then shape their subsequent interpretations of the HRM system. Cognitive frames have been related to managers' performance [13;34;35], decision-making [36], performance appraisal [37], strategic behavior [25], strategy formulation [17], exercise of power [38], leadership [39], and organizational performance [33]. Frames are always interpretive, flexible, and context-specific. As Lin and Silva [40, p.50] note, “individuals who rely on the same frame to make sense of the same object, in different contexts, may arrive at different interpretations of and conclusions about the same object”. That is, it is not possible to recognize components of one's HRM frame outside the context or in advance.

Based on studies of the involvement of line managers in HRM [41;42;43], we conclude that line managers and employees are unlikely to have identical perceptions and frames about HRM systems within their organizations. It is not difficult to imagine that line managers might have a longer-term perspective on HRM, expecting it to facilitate leadership and talent development. At the same time, they may anticipate extra work related to HRM policies, with HRM tasks being devolved from the HR specialists to them [43]. This may affect their motivation toward the

²⁸ Langfield-Smith, 1992

²⁹ Lord and Kernan, 1987

³⁰ Gioia and Chittipendi, 1991

³¹ Maitlis, 2005

³² Rouse and Morris, 1986

³³ Thomas et al., 1993

³⁴ Jenkins and Johnson, 1997

³⁵ Laukkanen, 1994

³⁶ Axelrod, 1976

³⁷ Gioia et al, 1989

³⁸ Bartunek and Ringuet, 1989

³⁹ Lord and Maher, 1991

⁴⁰ Lin and Silva, 2005

⁴¹ Kulik and Perry, 2008

⁴² Nehles, Van Riemsdijk, Kok and Looise, 2006

⁴³ Renwick, 2003

implementation of HRM practices and result in less priority given to HRM responsibilities [10]. Employees, may see themselves as passive actors in the HRM arena, maybe partially involved in executing some HR practices, especially given the latest developments in e-HRM [44]. At the same time, they may view themselves as targets in the HRM policy implementation, and this may put them in an opposing stakeholder group - challenging the HRM initiatives [8].

We draw on Davidson [45] in referring to congruence in HRM frames as the alignment of frames across different social groups. By congruent, we do not mean identical but, rather, related in content, values, and categories. Members of a group tend to develop similar frames of reference that guide their understanding in similar ways [46]. Congruent HRM frames would, for example, involve similar expectations about the role of HRM in an organization, similar ideas behind the HRM transformation, and similar views of HRM practices in organizational reality. These frames may lead line managers and employees to expect the same outcomes of a training and development program, leading to the same expectations of results. Social cognitive studies show that congruent frames lead to increased team effectiveness [46;47], collective efficacy [48], and improved organizational performance [49;50].

Incongruence, on the other hand, reflects different, or even opposing, assumptions about key aspects of the HRM implementation. To the extent that frames differ across different groups, problems such as non-aligned expectations, resistance, and skepticism may occur.

One conclusion from this is that if the interpretations of line managers and employees are congruent, then the HRM system may enjoy a high strength, and it may well develop better than where these interpretations are significantly different. Based on this, we state our core propositions:

Proposition 1: Congruence between the HRM frames of line managers and employees will enhance HRM system strength.

Proposition 2: The congruence between the HRM frames of line managers and employees is stronger when the HRM practices anticipated by line managers (actual HRM practices) and those perceived by employees are in line with the HRM practices intended by HR managers.

1.2 Antecedents of the HRM Frames Congruence: Relationships Matter

It is our claim that whether the HRM frames of line managers and employees are congruent depends on the relationship between the HRM “intenders” and the HRM “receivers”. Congruence between the HRM frames of line managers and employees concerning how organizational members are developed, rewarded, motivated, and retained in the organization can only exist if the receivers of HRM have a good

⁴⁴ Bondarouk, 2011

⁴⁵ Davidson, 2006

⁴⁶ Okhuysen and Eisenhardt, 2002

⁴⁷ Rentsch and Klimoski, 2001

⁴⁸ Gibson, 2001

⁴⁹ Bondarouk, 2006

⁵⁰ Reger and Huff, 1993

relationship with its intenders. The exchange relationship between HRM intenders and receivers affects the cognitive frames regarding HRM perceptions. Following the academic traditions of social exchange theory [51] and the norm of reciprocity [52], we distinguish two exchange relationships: the employer-employee relationship and the supervisor-subordinate relationship. The employer-employee relationship is characterized by an exchange relationship between employees and the organization. The supervisor-subordinate relationship is a more focused, dyadic relationship between subordinates and their superiors [53]. Both relationships, between employees and the employing organization and between employee and supervisor, have been shown to be based on fulfilling mutual expectations and satisfying mutual needs [54].

The relationship between the employer and the employee is defined as “a reciprocal exchange in which employees engage in work-related behaviors that benefit the organization in return for resources and support provided by the organization” [55] and is based on the beliefs of employees about the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares for their wellbeing [56;57]. This belief is often labeled perceived organizational support (POS) [57;58;59]. It is associated with trust that the organization will fulfill its exchange obligations, such as by rewarding employees. Employees are able to perceive support from the organization they work for because they tend to assign humanlike characteristics to the organization [57]. Actions taken by members of an organization are experienced as indications of the organization’s intent, rather than attributed solely to an agent’s personal motives [55]. High and low levels of POS can be distinguished. When the POS is high, employees perceive an obligation to repay the organization, but this obligation is absent when a low POS is perceived. This leads to our third proposition:

Proposition 3: The degree of congruence between HRM frames is contingent on the employer-employee relationship. Strong employer-employee relationships, characterized by high levels of perceived organizational support, will enhance the HRM frame congruence.

The relationship between a supervisor and his/her subordinates is dependent on the quality of the working relationship between the two, in which both are dependent on the other to maximize their individual contributions [54]. This reciprocal relationship between supervisor and subordinate is referred to as a Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) [55;60;61;62]. According to Graen and Scandura [63, p.182], this relationship is based on a social exchange, wherein “each party must offer something

⁵¹ Blau, 1964

⁵² Gouldner, 1960

⁵³ Settoon, Bennet & Liden, 1996

⁵⁴ Levinson, 1965

⁵⁵ Liden, Bauer and Erdogan, 2004

⁵⁶ Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchinson & Sowa, 1986

⁵⁷ Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002

⁵⁸ Eisenberger et al., 2002

⁵⁹ Rhoades Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006

⁶⁰ Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995

⁶¹ Sparrowe, & Liden, 1997

⁶² Uhl-Bien, Graen & Scandura, 2000

⁶³ Graen & Scandura, 1987

the other party sees as valuable and each party must see the exchange as reasonably equitable and fair". The basic premise of LMX is that supervisors differentiate among subordinates, rather than treating them all in the same way. In so doing, they form varying relationships, ranging from ones strictly based on the employment contract to relationships that involve the exchange of resources [55]. Based on the levels of mutual support, trust, and respect, two forms of LMX relationship can be distinguished. In a high-quality LMX relationship, supervisors like and trust 'in-group' employees who receive ready access to information and support, and can participate in decision-making [64]. In return, subordinates offer their commitment, engagement, loyalty, and performance [65]. In such a high-quality relationship, one can see a trade-off, with both partners supplying resources that support the other partner. On the other hand, a low-quality LMX relationship only exists as a formal work relationship which is determined by the hierarchy defined by the job positions that the members hold in the company [65]. This leads to our fourth proposition:

Proposition 4: The degree of congruence between HRM frames is contingent on the supervisor-subordinate relationship. A good supervisor-subordinate relationship, characterized by a high-quality leader-member exchange, will enhance the congruence between HRM frames.

HRM frames are characterized by the HRM receptions of employees that are congruent with the HRM intentions of line managers. The successful implementation of HRM practices is based on line managers and employees having shared perceptions, leading to congruent HRM frames based on the perceptions of line managers and employees.

The supervisor-subordinate relationship is a dyadic relationship between, in this instance, a line manager and an employee; whereas an employer-employee relationship can be defined as a global relationship between an employee and the organization [54]. We argue that a high-quality exchange relationship between a line manager and an employee can result in more congruent HRM frames than a high-level relationship between an organization and an employee because the HRM frames are dependent on the HRM intentions of line managers and the HRM receptions by employees, leading to our final proposition:

Proposition 5: A supervisor-subordinate relationship has a stronger explanatory power on the congruence of HRM frames than the employer-employee relationship.

2. Contextual factors

Among the broad range of contextual factors that might affect the congruence of HRM frames, and impinge upon the direct and indirect relationships in the suggested research model, we distinguish three that, in our view, produce crucial contingency effects.

⁶⁴ Brunetto, Farr-Wharton & Shacklock, 2010

⁶⁵ Zalesny & Graen, 1987

2.1 Internal fit of HRM practices

A fundamental idea in strategic human resource management is that HRM practices should be internally consistent and establish a complementarity or synergy [66;67]. This idea is based on the argument that a given HRM practice will be able to yield significant effects when it is combined with other effective HRM practices [68]. These practices thus need to support and enhance one another in a coherent system, or bundle, of practices. According to Delery [69], a configuration with internally-aligned HRM practices will lead to higher levels of organizational performance than single isolated HRM practices.

Reflecting Proposition 2, we assume that the congruence of the HRM frames of line managers and employees will be stronger when line managers' anticipation and employees' perceptions of HRM practices are both the same as the HR managers' intentions with the HRM practices. When the intended HRM practices are internally consistent, the HRM frames of line managers and employees are predicted to be more congruent than when the intended HRM practices are not aligned. If both line managers and employees have the feeling that the individual HRM practices fit together and support one another then their HRM frames will be more congruent because line managers anticipate and implement an internally consistent system of HRM practices and employees then perceive and understand the HRM practices as fitting together as a system. Should the intended HRM practices be internally inconsistent, HR managers run the risk that line managers and employees will question the effectiveness of the HRM practices and become confused about the intentions of the individual practices. Here, the congruence between the HRM frames of line managers and employees could be less.

2.2 HR orientation

Although HR professionals may perform multiple roles, we follow Lepak, Bartok, and Erhardt [70] and Marler [71] who contend that there will be a dominant HR orientation, i.e. a role in which HR managers spend the most time. Based on classic works on HR roles [72;73], we identify two main HR orientations: administrative and capability building. In firms where HR professionals are expected to build an efficient infrastructure, the dominant HR orientation is that of an administrative expert [72]. In firms where building organizational capabilities and human capital are the primary deliverables, HR professionals will spend most of their time on developing practices that develop and build human capital and boost internal organizational capability.

When firms view an HRM system (philosophy, policies, and practices) in terms of improving efficiency, reducing headcount, and lowering transaction costs, HR professionals are likely to spend most of their time on administrative tasks to justify

⁶⁶ Delery & Doty, 1996

⁶⁷ Wright & McMahan, 1992

⁶⁸ Lepak & Shaw, 2008

⁶⁹ Delery, 1998

⁷⁰ Lepak, Bartol & Erhardt, 2005

⁷¹ Marler, 2009

⁷² Ulrich, 1997

⁷³ Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005

and evaluate the HRM system on the basis of cost savings. Adopting a capability building perspective, firms are more likely to justify and evaluate HRM systems not simply by them cutting costs, but by making sure HRM contributes to the uniqueness of a human capital system that develops and supports organizational capabilities.

We assume that in order to boost the level of HRM frame congruence and, thus, HRM system strength, HR professionals need to be aware of their primary orientation. If the HR function is to strengthen the HRM system, then it should stay within this scope. Thus, an HR function that is largely oriented toward administrative expertise should focus on cost efficiency in communicating with line managers and employees. Conversely, an HR function primarily oriented toward building capabilities should focus on growth and development in its communications. If the HR function sends out messages that conflict with its orientation this is likely to increase confusion between line managers and employees, leading to incongruent HRM frames, and a weak HRM system.

2.3 Participation in the HRM system

Participation is acknowledged as a factor that affects people's commitment to an organizational phenomenon. In this paper, we define participation as activities and behaviors of organizational members related to designing and implementing an HRM system. Participation has been shown to have an impact on the attitudes of organizational members. Types of participation (of top management, HR professionals, line managers, and employees) can include HRM project initiation, determining HRM system objectives, and developing HRM deliverables.

We follow Barki and Hartwick [74] in proposing three possible dimensions for participation: overall responsibility, the organizational member-HRM relationship, and hands-on activities. Overall responsibility covers activities that reflect overall leadership in HRM development, including being the leader of the project team, being responsible for selecting personnel, estimating costs, and requesting funds. The member-HRM relationship includes development activities that reflect communication and influence; it may include the initial evaluation and approval of a formal agreement of work to be done by HR professionals, being kept informed during the various stages of the HRM system's development, and the evaluation of work done by the HRM staff. Hands-on activities are those specific physical implementation tasks that are performed on various levels.

It would seem reasonable to anticipate that if organizational members participate in the development process of an HRM system that they are likely to develop shared HRM frames. Consequently, they are likely to develop beliefs that the HRM system is good, useful, important, and personally relevant. Through participation, organizational members can develop feelings of HRM ownership, a better understanding of the firm's processes, and how those processes can help them in their work.

The way in which users participate, and the extent to which their inputs are actually used, can also vary, and this is addressed by Ives and Olson [75]. The degree of participation is usually equated to the amount of influence an organizational

⁷⁴ Barki & Hartwick, 1994

⁷⁵ Ives & Olson, 1984

member has over the final product (here the HRM system) [75]. The following categories provide examples of increasing degrees of participation: no participation (organizational members are not invited to participate); symbolic involvement (they are invited but their inputs are largely ignored); participation by advice (advice is solicited through firm-wide surveys or interviews); participation by weak control (organizational members have “sign-off” responsibilities at every stage of the HRM system’s development); participation “by doing” (organizational members are involved in project work); strong control (organizational members’ performance is directly dependent on the evaluation of the outcomes of their development effort and HRM system strength).

It is logical to presume that a high degree of participation in the design and development of an HRM system may pay off in terms of HRM frame congruence, and a stronger HRM system. Conversely, in organizations where only top management and HR professionals are involved in the HRM system design, or employees are only involved at the symbolic level, gaining shared perceptions and beliefs might be difficult, resulting in weak HRM systems.

Conclusion

In this article, we have suggested conceptualizing the antecedents of HRM system strength through the theoretical lens of cognitive psychology and social exchange theory. We follow the academic debates within framing research, and postulate that an organization’s members act according to the meanings they attach to an HRM system, and that their actions shape the meaning of HRM for others and for the organization as a whole. Even if HRM policymakers send clear HRM signals about HRM and thus shape a strong HRM situation [1], the ultimate outcomes will still depend on how the enacted HRM frames are constituted by employees.

We argue that how HRM policies actually work in the reality of an organization is not predetermined; rather HRM-in-practice will be affected by the actors’ understandings of the HRM policies and rules, based on their individual HRM frames. These understandings will be influenced by the images, descriptions, discourses, and rhetoric recurrently built into organizations by the HR specialists, managers, and the employees themselves [76]. Referring to the work of Regnér [77] we go a step further and call for a combination of these understandings. Integrating the perceptions of line managers and employees about HRM, rather than taking them individually, may satisfy the resource-based criteria of rareness and uniqueness, and thus contribute to the competitive advantage of an organization.

Given that the concept of frames refers to a dynamic process, it is especially valuable to examine changes associated with HRM implementation over time. Social cognitive research has shown that mental frames are “hidden” sense-making and sense-giving mechanisms during the process of organizational change [78]. Similarly, HRM frames could be used to track changes in the meanings that employees ascribe to HRM policies and practices over time, thus providing a basis for a research method for investigating HRM changes.

⁷⁶ Keenoy, 1997

⁷⁷ Regnér, 2008

⁷⁸ Isabella, 1990

Attempting to assess congruence, or the lack of it, in HRM frames through the analysis of people's assumptions, expectations, and interpretations also raises a number of methodological issues, and there are a number of research methods that could be applied in studying HRM frames across relevant social groups. Approaches such as discourse-based interviews [49], critical linguistic analysis [79], ethnographic methods [80], and conversation analysis [81] all potentially provide useful guidelines for eliciting meanings.

⁷⁹ Phillips and Hardy, 2002

⁸⁰ Geertz, 1973

⁸¹ Titscher et al., 2005

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