Ethics and HRM: Theoretical and Conceptual Analysis

An Alternative Approach to Ethical HRM Through the Discourse and Lived Experiences of HR Professionals

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Abstract   Despite the ongoing consideration of the ethical nature of human resource management (HRM), little research has been conducted on how morality and ethics are represented in the discourse, activities and lived experiences of human resource (HR) professionals. In this paper, we connect the thinking and lived experiences of HR professionals to an alternative ethics, rooted in the work of Bauman (Modernity and the Holocaust, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1989; Theory, Culture and Society 7:5–38, 1990; Postmodern Ethics, Blackwell, Oxford, 1991; Approaches to Social Enquiry, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1993; Life in Fragments, Blackwell, Oxford, 1995) and Levinas (Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, PA, 1998). We argue that the study of HRM and ethics should be contextualized within the discourses used, the practices and activities of HR professionals. Through the analysis of interview data from 40 predominantly Canadian HR practitioners and managers we experiment with Bauman's notion of 'moral impulse' to help us understand how HRM is both a product and perpetuator of moral neutralization in organizations. We suggest that HRM as it is practiced is concerned with *distancing*, *depersonalizing*, and *dissembling*, and acts in support of the 'moral' requirements of business, not of people. However, we also recognize that HR practitioners and managers are often confronted with and conflicted by actions and decisions that they are required to take, therefore opening possibilities and hope for an alternative ethical HRM.

Introduction

In the paper *Are humans resources?*, Inkson (2008, p. 277) argues that the "terms 'human resource' and 'human resource management' and the way of thinking about people at work that they embody and encourage, appear to be increasingly dissonant with the new, non-hierarchical, network organizations and knowledge-based workers with self-directed careers of the twenty-first century". He goes on to suggest that the 'discourse' reflected in the term *human resources* may result in encouraging a depersonalized and dehumanized view of the employment relationship. Implicit in this argument is not only that there are such things as new, non-hierarchical, network organizations actually in existence, but that somehow a new term (Inkson suggests—*human partnership management*) will actually encourage a less depersonalized and dehumanized view of employment relations.

While the notion that a change in terminology might encourage more ethical employment relationships, at least for the "knowledge-based worker" is naive, what such a discussion highlights is the elemental problem of morality and ethics in the concept of human resource management (HRM) and in its practice. Critical and radical scholars, for example, would argue that depersonalization and dehumanization are fundamentally embedded in the nature of the capitalist employment relationship, whether this relationship is called HRM or something else (Townley 1993, 1994). There has been a great deal of work exploring a range of issues concerning the ethics of HRM and

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proposing more ethical frameworks for HRM, effectively decontextualizing the practice of human resource (HR) and assessing its ethical and moral nature against abstract standards (Deckop 2006). A preoccupation of many of these contributions has concerned the application of "everyday ethical frameworks" (Woodall and Winstanley 2001, p. 45) to HR activity. Lowry (2006) has argued, on the contrary, that given the heterogeneity of HRM in practice asking whether HRM is inherently ethical or not is inappropriate. What is more appropriate, she argues, is the consideration of the constraints on ethical action and ethical inaction. In particular it seems that a concern for the contexts within which management, and in particular HR professional's act, points to the possibility that in some contexts, as well as specific situations, more ethical decision-making and morality might be possible. This is in-keeping with lines of argument in ethical management and business more generally (Jones et al. 2005).

Despite the ongoing consideration of the ethical nature or otherwise of HRM (Deckop 2006) little research has been undertaken on how morality and ethics may be represented in the discourse and lived experiences, activities and practice of HR professionals. In this paper, we are concerned to investigate this connection through interview data collected from 40 predominantly Canadian HR professionals (see Appendix). In particular, we are interested in understanding how HR professionals articulate their role and practice in organizations with a 'moral impulse' (Bauman 1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1995) given that, in rhetoric at least, HRM has some concern for the welfare of employees in the creation of a more humane organization. The first part of the paper considers the ethical positions taken by a range of scholars with respect to the subject of ethics and business ethics from an alternative perspective. In particular, we are concerned to highlight the ideas of Bauman (1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1995) and Levinas (1998), as well as further consideration of their ideas as they have been pondered by other scholars (Attertton and Calarco 2010; Hand 1989; Peperzak et al. 1996). Such an approach to ethics differs from 'conventional' approaches, for example, frameworks such as utilitarianism, rights-based, virtue, stakeholding, Rawsian justice theory, and others. Second, we convert these ideas into discussions that may illustrate how an alternative approach to ethics might inform our understanding of the discourse and lived experience and practice of HR professionals. Third, we address these questions through a body of qualitative data derived from interviews with HR professionals. In doing so, we hope to illuminate the actual practice and lived experience of HR professionals in contemporary organizations in relation to a discussion of an alternative approach to thinking about ethics and HRM. Finally, we offer some discussion of the implications of our research

for an understanding of the relationship between ethics, and the discourse and practice of HRM in organizations. Specifically, we consider how an alternative approach to ethics might fundamentally question the nature and role of HRM and its practice.

While alternative ways of thinking about ethics have been applied in the broader business field (Jones et al. 2005; Rasche 2010), we believe the application to the field of HRM requires further attention, complementing the earlier work of Townley (1993, 1994) and Barratt (2003) in particular and their consideration of the relevance of Foucault (1995) to HRM. Consequently, the major contribution of this article is to investigate the intersection between an alternative approach to ethics and the lived experiences and activities of HR professionals, and the discourse they use to interpret their role and experiences. In contrast to much previous work on HRM and ethics (e.g., Deckop 2006), we are concerned with viewing HRM through the lenses of practitioners rather than through reflection on the putative ethical qualities of HRM policies and practices in relation to 'everyday ethical frameworks'. We hope to outline a new way of thinking about 'ethical' HRM that contributes to broadening and deepening the discussion of ethics within the discipline and which implies a new role for HRM in organizations. In doing so, we attempt to offer a way of thinking about HRM and ethics associated with Levinas (1998) and particularly Bauman (1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1995). It is our contention that debate about HRM and ethics is currently unable or unwilling to start with the questions—what is ethics? What does ethics mean? Where do ethics begin? By considering the lived experiences, perceptions, and activities of HR professionals, and by using Levinas (1998) and Bauman (1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1995) as our conceptual framework, we hope to focus a little more on these questions. If ethics begins with *innate morality* and *being for* the Other in a proximal relationship, how might this illuminate HRM and ethics beyond the typical debates about the intentions or consequences of the a*ctions* of HR professionals?

An Alternative Ethical Human Resource Management?

In this article, we are essentially interested in four broad issues/questions concerning the way HR professionals discursively represent their lived experience in organizations. First, to what extent can we sense that HR professionals are 'separated' from the moral consequences of their actions? Second, how do they discursively depersonalize their relationships with other employees? Third, do HR professionals represent their role and tasks in such a way that it reflects dissembling others into systems of classification and monitoring; and fourth, do they discursively construct their own

performance against organizational rather than human welfare standards? In considering our empirical data, we seek to apply Bauman's (1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1995) and Levinas' (1998) ideas concerning the 'moral impulse'. In the remainder of this section we outline key elements of their arguments.

Bauman (1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1995) argues that society and organizations attempt to rationalize and universalize people's moral impulse or moral nature. In attempting to do so, particularly through bureaucratic organizations and rule-governed ethics, morality in organizations is not enhanced but neutralized. His most provocative example of this is his argument that the Holocaust was not an anomaly of modern society, but actually a product of it, perpetrated by morally neutral bureaucrats in morally neutralized bureaucracies (Bauman 1989). This happens because bureaucrats are focused on only tasks, jobs, roles, and problem-solving, and consequently accept the organization and its aims as givens and their role within it as defined by these organizational objectives. Morality in organizations is not, therefore, something driven by 'higher-order' objectives that concern integrity, autonomy, dignity and so forth, but by obedience, compliance, discipline and duty (Bauman 1989). The test of 'morality' for the bureaucrat is not related to a conversation concerning the morality of actions and outcomes, but whether they have conformed to explicit and implicit rules of organizational morality and ethics. Bauman (1993, p. 199) further argues that bureaucracy dissembles the moral self in favor of moral rules that transcend the individual moral impulse and, is part of an ideology that enforces conformity to a 'moral' standard (and discourse) defined by organizations and society.

We argue that the neutralization of the moral impulse through Bauman's (1993) three connected strategies has direct relevance to HRM activity. Reading Bauman (1993) in a certain way the first, *distancing*, can be reflected in decisions, driven often by law, that puts space between the 'doing' one and the 'suffering' one. Decisions over layoffs, for example, that follow legal requirements, but are distant from its impact on those made redundant. *Depersonalization*, or, as Bauman (1990) puts it 'effacing the face', is expunging the Other as an object of moral consideration and is partly reflected in Foucauldian analysis of HRM (Barratt 2003; Townley 1993, 1994). Here, classification, categorization, measurement and surveillance substitute for a 'whole person'. For example, in recruitment and selection, the still extensive use of personality tests can be viewed as depersonalizing and classifying. A personality 'type' is less about a person and more concerned with creating a non-person made up of parts, therefore not worthy as an object of moral responsibility. This is linked, we think, to *dissembling*; in HR terms this is people as

"aggregates of functionally specific traits", who become bundles of competencies subject to competency 'modeling'. Their performance is 'measured' against tasks and characteristics dissembled into measurable formats. HR professionals are both dissemblers of others (Townley 1993, 1994) and themselves dissembled. In this sense, it is possible we suggest, to recognize this 'disinterestedness' (Bauman 1993, p. 114) and overall distancing of HR professionals from Others in the professional capabilities that are often desired of certified HR professionals.

'Ideal' professional capabilities required of HR professionals, often represent HRM as the Third (Bauman 1993, pp. 112–113); the Third is "encountered only when we leave the realm of morality proper, and enter another world, the realm of Social Order ruled by Justice – not morality." The Third establishes 'standards' through which it judges and acts as umpire, the "he-who-passes-the-verdict…the Third may now set the 'objective criteria' of interests and advantages" (Bauman 1993, p. 114). HR professionals might be considered reflections of this Third, setting objective criteria such that the "unique Other has dissolved in the otherness of the Many" (Bauman 1993, p. 114) and establishing distance between themselves and their internal clients. In this sense, the relationship between the HR professional as a person (the 'I') and the individual employee (the 'Other') (the dyad), is now subject to a "Social Order ruled by Justice – not morality" (Bauman 1993, p. 113). The 'profession' of HR and the society within which it operates represents the "moral party…[that] congeals into a *group*" (Bauman 1993, p. 114); the Third that is outside the proximal relationship.

Bauman's (1993) concern that proximity is important to morality indicates the significance of the Other in moral behavior. Being proximal to the 'sufferer' personalizes and humanizes moral responsibility. This concern for the Other as the basis for morality is central to the work of Levinas (1998), who argues that responsiveness to other persons is driven by the fact of sociality—we cannot avoid experiencing contact with others—and this response comes before any codification of ethical rules about *how* to respond. This implies that morality, and indeed ethics, is not only contextual but also relational. Nealon (1997) discusses these issues in relation to not only Levinas (1998), but also Bakhtin (1981, 1984) and he argues that both "insist that ethics exists in an open and ongoing obligation to respond to the other, rather than a static march toward some philosophical end or conclusion" (Nealon 1997, p. 133). Ethics and morality, furthermore, are connected closely to the lived experience of relations with Others in specific times and places (Gardiner 1996). Ethical responses cannot occur through systems of rules and guides, or through utilitarianism that measures outcomes for the many. Rather, ethics and morality occur through

direct responses to Others "without falling back on total-izing gestures of a universalizing, rule- or norm-governed structure" (Nealon 1997, p. 134).

To return to HRM, of all of the functions of business, it is probably the one that faces the dilemma, at least theoretically, of balancing a concern for employees with a concern for 'adding-value' to a business. While much has been written on whether HRM can be moral or ethical (Fisher 2000; Deckop 2006; Legge 1998), or how HRM can become more ethical and moral (Deckop 2006), little research has been conducted on the thinking and practice of HR professionals in relation to morality and ethics. We focus on an alternative approach to ethical HRM by converting our discussions above into relevant questions and issues for an understanding of the lived experiences and practice of HR professionals as reported in our interview data. Rather than concern ourselves with ethical frameworks that could be applied to HRM policy and practice (Woodall and Winstanley 2001) we are interested in a *contextualized* ethics, where the discourse and practice of HRM is articulated through the lived experiences of those who are entrusted with the conduct of HR in actual organizations, partly in an 'issue-contingent' way (Jones 1991), and partly in recognition that exercising moral responsibility is never complete, it is always contextual and 'to-come' (Rasche 2010). In this sense, we suggest, the ideas we have discussed above, experimenting with an alternative ethical HRM, offers frames for interpreting our interview data as it represents the discourse and lived experiences of HR professionals.

We suggest that HR professionals, in some instances, might be neutralized from their moral impulse and become ethically inactive through a process of distancing. *They are tasked to perform a role that separates them from the outcomes of their actions.* In interpreting our interview data, we have sought evidence of this separation. Second, HR professionals might depersonalize and dehumanize Others such that they should not be given moral consideration. *They have a role that treats humans as resources rather than people.* We consider our interview data in light of this possibility. Third, people in organizations are dissembled as bundles of skills, competencies and capabilities to be classified, monitored and maintained. HR professionals *have a role and tasks that embody this dissembling and they are also dissembled performatively and measure themselves against 'adding-value' to the organization.*

Such questions seek to contextualize the activities of HR professionals as they are embedded within their lived experiences in organizations. The purpose is to demonstrate among other things, the existential struggles that engage some HR professionals as they carry out their roles in environments where they are subjected to pressures to 'contribute' to the success of an organization, yet where in many cases, they have a felt need to be concerned for employees. They are in essence, subject to a "catalogue of postmodern fears" (Bauman 1995, p. 105), multiple contexts, roles and pressures. This leads to a consideration of the extent to which HR professionals give allegiance primarily to the organization; for example, is their central relationship to organizationally defined goals and objectives, and therefore to organizationally defined ethics, or, to being responsible for the employee (the Other) unconditionally?

In the following section, we analyze our interview data through the broad lenses of the three issues/questions above and associated issues. Inevitably the questions overlap and this is reflected in our presentation of the data. First, we describe the participants in broad terms (see also Appendix) and indicate key elements of the research process and data analysis. Second, we consider our data through an alternative approach to ethics, rooted primarily in Bauman (1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1995) and Levinas (1998) as represented in our discussion above. Third, we offer a discussion of the implications of our analysis for a critical interpretation of the relationship between ethics, morality and the discourse and the lived experiences of HR professionals, and what it implies for the role of HR in organizations.

Method

This paper draws on two qualitative studies of HRM professionals. One of the studies was focused on the talk of HR professionals concerning their work in the context of what HRM meant in rhetoric and as it was experienced in practice ($n = 23$). The second data set focused on the lived experience of HR professionals and how they experienced happiness in their roles, tasks, and professional identities ($n = 17$). The two studies are part of an ongoing and international research project investigating the 'rhetoric' and 'reality' of HRM and the professionalization of HRM. In order to access the participants, snowball sampling was used. This is a non-probability technique where existing participants help to recruit other participants from their network (Rossman and Rallis 2003). The advantage of this sampling technique is that after interviewing the initial subject the researcher is able to ask the subject to help identify people with similar traits or interests. While snowball sampling has been criticized for yielding a sample group that may be too homogenous or like-minded, we were interested in HR professionals from a variety of organizational contexts with no specific representative sample in mind, consequently snowball sampling facilitated access to a broad-based network of HR professionals.

Data Collection

In both studies, participants were given the opportunity to craft their own answers to broad questions concerning the HR work that they did; how the reality of their work reflected the rhetoric about what HR work 'should' be and; how they experienced their role and position in the organizational context and what they felt about it. A major concern in all interviews was to provide and allow participants an opportunity to describe broadly their lived experiences as an HR professional. Given that social desirability bias is an issue in ethics research (Brunk 2010), we believe that the strength of this paper lies in the triangulation approach of bridging two related but distinct studies. This cross-examination allowed us to be more confident with our findings given that both studies yielded similar responses. There was no intention of focusing the discussion deliberately towards equality, diversity or issues of discrimination; we were interested in what HR professionals themselves considered important to talk about in a general sense. This enabled us, we think, to access the whole of the lived experience of a HR professional, rather than to dissemble them in order to focus on certain specific elements and features of their role and thoughts.

Data Analysis

The semi-structured interviews lasted between 45 and 90 min were digitally recorded and then transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then analyzed using NVivo 8, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis system. This system facilitated template analysis (King 2004), where dominant and secondary 'nodes' were identified representing themes identified in the data as they related to the study's research objectives.

Given the issues to be addressed in this paper, the data was analyzed in an iterative manner, as the authors went back and forth between the data, and each other, to confirm agreement on the themes for the data analysis. Specific focus was given to understanding how elements of Bauman's (1993) distancing, depersonalizing and dissembling could be seen in the data and be relevant to the lived experiences of HR professionals (Miles and Huberman 1994). In particular, we were very concerned to 'sense' the connectedness of the concepts of distancing, depersonalizing and dissembling to participants' articulation of their role and activities as an HR professional. We acknowledge here that it was necessary for us to allow "the empirical material to inspire, develop, and reshape theoretical ideas" (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009, p. 273). We thus engaged in a form of bricolage (Kincheloe and Berry 2004) and creative research work (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009) to

bridge the two studies and analyze examples of distancing, depersonalizing and dissembling.

All three authors analyzed the data from the interviews. This allowed the findings to be more 'trustworthy' by enhancing the study's credibility and consistency in particular (Atherton and Elsmore 2007). Data analysis was accessible to all three researchers which enhanced intercoder reliability. In addition, 'coding reports' could be created, discussed and evaluated to ensure consistency. This process allowed for 'fine-tuned' analysis and supported closer collaboration between the researchers. The 'memo' facility in Nvivo enables researchers to add a note to documents, codes and trees posing questions about the data, suggesting 'hunches' to follow-up, or points of disagreement or alternative interpretations of the data. This was very useful for stimulating discussion and also facilitated consistency.

Given that the 'themes' of distancing, depersonalizing and dissembling were important, at least two authors worked together to develop consistency. Once the data had been analyzed a further round of analysis took place to work though disagreements and to discuss and debate interpretations. At this point the researchers were simultaneously connecting the analysis to the conceptual framework more intimately and in vivo. For example, we needed to be clear that our interpretations were plausible within the conceptual framework we were using and the ideas we were developing.

The interviews for us represented a way into understanding the relationship between the participants and their life-worlds. Our conversations concerning interpretation revolved around the relationship between the text (what HR professionals do and how they feel about this 'doing'), and context, (in what circumstances do HR professionals 'do HR' and how might they think about this 'doing). In this manner, we engaged in an interpretive effort to understand the *meanings* of words provided by participants such as 'termination' or 'business professional'. This approach involves "a 'reading', an interpretation of the self-interpretation of others within a context" (McAuley 2004 p. 196). As a research team, we therefore recursively moved between the process of suggesting an interpretation about participants' responses to 'validating' these interpretations through common human understandings (Blaikie 1993).

As such the combined sample for this paper consists of a total of 30 females and 10 males aged between 26 and 55 years of age, with the majority of participants (62.5 %) in the youngest or second youngest age category. This sample represents a wide variety of industries including consulting, education, energy, financial services, government, IT consulting, mining, telecommunications, manufacturing and retail. Participants' professional tenure varies

from 0–25 years with the majority of participants at the beginning of their careers in HR (30 % of participants had 0–5 years of experience), with another 30 % of participants with 6–10 years of seniority with titles ranging from Human Resource Advisor to Human Resource Manager, Human Resource Director through to Vice President, HR (Appendix). We found no evidence within and throughout our analysis of significant differences in the overall lived experiences of men and women HR professionals when it came to the application of an alternative ethical framework.

Findings

Separation and Distancing from Moral Consequences of Organizational and Personal Actions

It was evident from the way many of the participants talked about their role and experiences of being HR professionals that they could articulate a distance from organizational actions that had difficult consequences, for example, reorganizations, restructurings, lay-offs. This finding resonates with arguments made by other authors about how professionals (e.g., engineers, accountants, lawyers, doctors) distance themselves from sensitive engagement with the human element and implications of their work (McPhail 2001). Maria (government), in describing a restructuring and reorganization, speaks of 13 % of the workforce being "eliminated", including many in her own HR department. In addition, not only was Maria able to distance herself from the consequences of the restructuring, the actual process of being involved was exciting for her.

> [I]t's probably going to sound really bad but when we worked on the restructuring in December, we worked on it top secret, like obviously. So me and my VP and some of senior management worked on the restructure, where we could outsource functions, which people we would keep. That was really exciting. There was a weird kind of rush with it. Anxiety. But excited.

Although Maria records that this may 'sound really bad', the excitement she felt being part of this 'top secret' group trumped, it seems, any moral impulse she felt about making decisions concerning what work should be outsourced and which employees should be dismissed. Here is an exemplar of the distance between the 'doing' and the 'suffering' one, such that there is seemingly no recognition of a moral responsibility felt towards the 'sufferers'. They are, we suggest, depersonalized and dissembled as fragments of skills to be considered as useful, and kept, or not.

We also observed in many interviews evidence of dehumanization ("termination"), and a focus on tasks, problem-solving and roles. Maria 'thinks' as a dissembled self, apparently simply performing tasks, stripped of the "totality of the moral subject" (Bauman 1993, p. 127). Indeed, we might suggest that she shows a general lack of concern for the Other.

> I don't like the day to day boring, routine things. It's like if I have to tell one more person why their vacation is whatever…You know, the repetitive things, where people don't seem to learn, don't read emails, the hand-holding, babysitting – I don't like that. I think people need to be a lot more proactive in their own world and their own careers…I'm like, take some responsibility people! (Maria).

The focus on performing tasks and solving problems undertaken in a morally neutral fashion was salient in many interviews. Susan (telecommunications), for example, "so my day really depends on the time of year. I could be working 100 % of my time on a massive reorganization. We had quite a few lay-offs in November of last year". Stephanie (financial services) notes that "the issues we deal with are really tough…It's never just somebody who is off work with a mental issue. It's, they have been off work with mental issues and they have been stealing". There is implicit here a distancing and separation of a person performing HRM tasks from the human aspect and consequences of their decisions or the decisions to which they are a party, but not, we might add, without recognition of how 'tough' this can be. There is, perhaps, a sense that HR professionals are very aware of their in-between space, at the intersection of 'business' and 'humanity'. In Bauman's (1993) terms, HR is the Third, the umpire, the judge and separated from the Other. Indeed, for many participants, difficult decisions concerning 'termination', 'downsizing', and 'firing' *required* distance.

This separation of HRM from the human and relational element of the workplace is also captured by Fraser (industry not known), emphasizing that much of HRs work is not about doing things *for* Others but *on* Others (Levinas 1998; Roberts 2001).

> You ask people, you know, why they want to be an HR professional, why they want to get into HR. And they say "well I like working with people". And to me, that is a very grey answer because, and it may not be correct. It's not about working with people, although there is a component of that, or a part of that. It's managing people as a resource, which to me is a different context about it. It's a very hard job. So if you want something that, you know, it's essentially done every day and everything is pleasant, this is not the profession for you (Fraser).

There was evidence in the data that concern for the Other in a Levinasian sense was "obscured, deferred or

marginalized" (Roberts 2001, p. 9). Some participants simply ignored the broader questions of the consequences of decisions and used the discourse of distancing and depersonalization, e.g., termination, downsizing. Others openly argued that HRM cannot be human or relational. A distancing is implicit in the nature of HR work that requires neutralized bureaucrats. Faith (government) for example, argues "We're supposed to be neutral, we are the holder of all the secrets…We can't be buddy, buddy with people in the organization".

This is an exemplar of how concern for the Other is obscured, deferred and marginalized, and reflects HR as a neutral referee. To be too close to the Other is to be almost unethical. For Faith being ethical is not relational, it is to be disinterested, neutral and distant (Ten Bos and Willmott 2001). While distancing dominated accounts both of 'doing' HR and rhetoric as to what HRM was about, in the minority were HR professionals who struggled with the moral ambivalence of their role and activities. They were in effect, concerned about the distance from the relational element of their work with people and the depersonalization and dehumanization that this implied. We investigate this in the following section.

Depersonalization and Dehumanization of Relationships with Other Employees

There were widespread exemplars in our data of HR professionals depersonalizing relationships with other employees in terms of both activities and cognitively in order to retain 'distance'. At the same time, a minority of participants struggled with the moral ambivalence of being in HR and being concerned with 'people' and balancing that with the 'needs' of the business. In a broad sense, HR professionals engage in a process of depersonalization of the role of HR through emphasizing that they are concerned to be business people first, for example, Jillian (retail), "I'm in business, I work in HR"; and Nicola (consulting), "…but I would consider myself as a business professional first, an HR professional second". A material effect of this 'business first' discourse is likely to be a view of employees as *resources* rather than humans. As evidenced by Ben (energy sector), the 'strategic' element as to how HR can contribute to the business by using people as resources is more interesting to him than other aspects of the HR role.

> But to be honest there are aspects I really hate. I mean establishing policies and procedures, while important for protecting the company, going forward isn't really something I have a long term interest in. The day to day aspects of HR can really wear on me. Ummm, really it is only where HR strategy intersections with

business strategy that I have any real interest in the function.

Nicola emphasizes the 'new' strategic view of HRM.

> [H]uman resources has developed over the past few years…there has been more of an interest in employees as a return on investment, and they are viewed as human capital. So, human resources, essentially, is a strategic function in the business unit.

Nicola reflects a discourse of employees as resources on which an investment is to be made and a return expected. This is the view of HRM as 'hard' and it permeates the views of participants (Storey 1992; Truss et al. 1997). To view employees in this way is to depersonalize them and to preclude them from something to be given moral consideration.

For Jacob (retail), HRM is all about *efficiency,* if "you are not contributing to the efficiency in a measurable way, then you are not practicing a business discipline". For the majority of our participants, the rhetoric of a strategic HRM, utilizing and thinking of humans as resources and a concern for a return on investment, dominated their view of HRM. There is little in this discussion which suggested any moral consideration as a part of this. Our impression was that for self-interested career purposes and/or because of the perceived reality of their lived organizational experience, HR professionals think of the role and practice of HRM as a business function, managing resources for greater efficiency and a 'return-on-investment'. In a minority of cases, HR professionals articulated a more personal, human and Other-centred perception of the HR role. In order for this to manifest itself there needs to be recognition of the Other and proximity to them as persons; an awareness that they are worthy of moral consideration. This awareness of employees as more than resources is evidenced in Simon's (mining industry) comment—"most of the time they want consistency and I don't like this word, but I'll use it – fairness".

Erica (telecommunications) also sees part of her role as meeting the 'needs' of her 'internal customers' and "ensuring that I'm taking care of them". Tina (IT consulting) argued that meeting the needs of employees and being business focused can happen "in the right environment". Audrey (mining) noted that "I would see us as really being there for the wellbeing of people whether being in an organization or in a setting or in an environment or whatever, we are really there to represent people"

Our participants represent the 'hard' and 'soft' view of HRM (Storey 1992). It seems to us that those who talk of working on behalf of employees, talk differently, more intimately, more wrapped up in the face to face (Levinas 1998) of the relational. Their proximity is felt in their

voice, where in most others the human is marginalized and ignored. Those who speak of a concern for people express moral ambivalence in relation to the balance between a role that has an organizational *and* human welfare element which we consider in the next section. Overall, however, we think those who talk differently of the role of HRM offer hope. In some ways, a hope of developing a HRM that is explicitly and palpably on the side of people, *representing* people, not simply administering, measuring, and directing. It is important to think about how such an HRM might develop and to find explicit exemplars of where it might currently exist. This hope might tell us that bureaucracies are not hegemonic, that there is perhaps space in the informal aspects of the bureaucratic and business world for a connection with the Other which might act as transformation of organizations themselves.

Dissembling Employees and Themselves to 'Add-Value' to the Organization

It might be argued that a material effect of depersonalization and dehumanization of employees as *resources or investments* is to dissemble employees, and HR professionals themselves, into resources that perform tasks which are designed to 'add-value' to an organization. This neutralizes a moral self-conscience and prevents moral conduct (Bauman 1993). It also lends itself to the prospect that HR professionals will act in accordance with what the 'boss' and the organization wants (Jackall 1983, 1988). There is more than a suggestion in our data that HR professionals measure their performance against organizational criteria and give allegiance primarily to business and organizational goals and objectives. The Other for which the majority are most concerned is the organization in the context of their own self-interest (Roberts 2001). This represents again HR and HR activities as the activity of the Third; the he/she who passes the verdict. We are sensitive to not being overly critical of HR professionals in this context given that all of us author our lives in the "beliefs given to us to think" (Sarup 1996 p. 54), however, such 'beliefs', ideologies and/or discourses are implicated in the dissembling of the moral subject. For John (IT consulting), a key question in his role is "how can I actually impact the bottom line", the "commercial contribution". This focus on contribution to the goals of the organization is evidenced in Ben's comments.

> I can be part of overall business discussions, deciding what the next steps are to achieving greater revenue and growth, because it has always been my role. If I wasn't engaged in the overall business decisions and then started making suggestions on HR strategy I

think it would be a lot harder to obtain buy-in. There would be this reluctance to accept what I was saying.

Ben offers an exemplar of the view that to be taken seriously HR professionals have to understand the language of business and where its priorities lie, and most importantly have to show that they can 'add-value' ("financial sense"). This concern to 'add-value' has a self-interested aspect, Ben's credibility and career, for example, rests on being taken seriously and this means ensuring HR meets the organizational and boss' needs for relevance (Jackall 1988).

Jillian and Nicola both emphasized that they were in "business first, an HR professional second". For Shane (retail) the role of HR is essentially to develop incentives to enhance performance of people in order that the organization can achieve its goals. Fraser noted that HR should ultimately reflect "on the business performance of the organization, in terms of profitability". For Fraser, people are resources in the same way finance is a resource. Most participants talked of HR in this distant, 'strategic' way. HR is a business function, not a people function. The primary concern of HR is considered to be to add-value to business objectives and facilitate profitability and performance. There were, however, examples of moral ambivalence about the role of HR. This is evidenced by Cindy (financial services),

> You know, when I think about HR they have to wear two hats right? So if you are not in HR and you are not happy about something you can turn round and say you know, I am not happy about this as an employee. But if you are in HR and you are not happy about something, you may not agree with what it is, but you still have to go out there and support whatever decision is being made. We need to sell that to people whether we like it or not. Whether you think it is fair or not. Where in marketing you don't have to do that. They can turn around and say "you know what, I don't agree with that, why does it have to be".

Given the putative role of HR in organizations, HR professionals are often in a difficult position, supposedly looking out for the interests of employees (soft HRM) but also the interests of the organization (hard HRM). This creates inevitable confusion for those who *experience* such a conflict or imbalance and indicates how they are dissembled as professionals acting *on* Others rather than *for* them. Indeed, ironically, in the view of some participants, HR is actually the last place to be located in an organization if you have a concern for 'people' or a concern for a moral and authentic self.

Martin (mining) also recognized the importance in any organization of "engaging employees and by treating them with respect and having a valued culture". Tania (consulting) noted that "[B]ut we also have the employees. And I think HR is that mediator between those looking out for the business; that is the best interest of the business, and the employees". These comments signify among some participants an attention to the employee as Other; a recognition, to follow Levinas (1998), of sociality, the fact that we cannot avoid experiencing contact with Others. It is a representation of the 'soft' attitude to HRM to be juxtaposed against the 'hard' version represented in most participants' considerations of the nature and role of HRM in organizations. Yet we argue it is a very much marginalized view, almost an afterthought, perhaps due to the way in which HR professionals are shaped by the rhetoric or fantasy of what it is to be in HR.

Discussion

Much of the work on 'HRM and ethics' has focused on the application of ethical frameworks to HRM policy and practice. Frameworks such as utilitarianism, rights-based, virtue, stakeholding, Rawsian justice theory and others, could all to a greater or lesser extent exonerate HRM and its ethicality and morality (Wilcox 2002; Wiley 2000; Woodall and Winstanley 2001). In this sense, whether HRM is ethical and moral depends on the framework one wishes to use to assess it. This seems to us as an example of the neutralization of the moral impulse. Morality merely adapts to society, in one way or another, it does not shape it. Equally, in organizations, morality adapts to the requirements of a specific organization, or marketized business system, it does not shape it. This, we suggest, creates space for consideration of HRM in relation to an alternative ethics. Instead of the application of ethical frameworks to HRM, premised on the Hobbesian view that humans are morally ignorant, inept and depraved and need to be 'saved' through ethical guidelines for moral behavior, or the Humean idea that moral goodness is related to how agreeable or disagreeable consequences are for an individual and/or the collective, we follow a line of inquiry associated primarily with Bauman (1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1995) and the idea that humans have a moral impulse which is repressed and neutralized by societal and organizational rules and requirements. This contributes to the conversation about "introducing a new language for thinking and talking about business ethics" (Jones et al. 2005, p. 6), specifically with regard to HRM.

Organizations within a given society inevitably accept the need to coerce people into what is believed to be moral conduct, and consequently the organization becomes the arbiter of what is moral and what is not. However, as Bauman (1993) makes clear, humans can be controlled through the belief that without rules governing moral conduct things would be worse than they might be; organizational anarchy would ensue and consequently the rules are necessary. From an organization's point of view disruption of the innate moral impulse requires control of the 'morality' of the organization. If people were enabled to act on their moral impulse it would disrupt and dislocate the control of organizationally defined morality. Bauman (1993) argues for an innate morality and following Levinas (1998) this is based on a concern for the Other, a concern which "has nothing but the Other himself (sic) as its motive. This is a concern with the Other for the Other's benefit" (Bauman 1993, pp 12–13). Furthermore, this concern for the Other "must be simultaneously an unconcern with the subject's own comfort, pleasure or welfare" (Bauman 1993, p. 13). Such ethics are practiced with no calculative intent relating to costs and benefits for the subject. Ethics cannot be discovered in "ontological and rational foundations" indeed, "one is for the Other before one has time to think of principles or norms, before looking and being looked at, before being for oneself, being with, being-in-the-world, before being" (Bauman 1993, p. 16).

In this paper, we experiment with what this might mean for HRM. As we have attempted to argue, HRM, as a system of control, classification, measurement and surveillance (Townley 1993, 1994) has put distance between the 'I' and the 'Other' and has constructed HRM as part of the 'Third' (Bauman 1993), which together with society, creates distance and 'standards' against which to judge morality. Once this distance is established the Other becomes an object to do things *on,* not to *be for.* HRM in this sense is undertaken calculatively, and to some extent, self-interestedly. In this context HRM offers an illusion of proximity to employees, but in fact, sits in judgment of them.

Bauman (1990, p, 29) argues that,

> The major achievement of modern society has not been an imposition of moral order, but the liberation of the social order from moral significance, and of the forms of human interaction from moral constraints.

What if there is some truth in Bauman's (1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1995) and Levinas' (1998) argument; what if we were concerned, not with constructing ethical HRM, but with its meaning? We feel that in organizational and bureaucratic life there might be instances of HR professionals being *for* the Other, being disruptive and being disobedient. Where can we find such instances and what do they mean in the contexts in which they occur?

However, before this, what if the professional capabilities of a HR professional association were based on *being*

for? How would such capabilities look, how would they read? What if the preparation of HR professionals followed a Baumanesque and Levinasian route? What if they truly were the critics and conscience of the organization? Could we envisage a HR profession driven in this way? There are signs of hope in our data. We felt signs of existential anxiety and the struggles of HR professionals as they were caught in the space between the Third and the Other. How can this be gathered into an alternative HRM?

To pursue an alternative model of HRM based on the ethical relationship between the 'I' and the 'Other' may call us "to imagine other worlds and other social formations that might look inconceivable to us at the moment" (Jones et al. 2005, p. 78). At the organizational level, the role of HRM and the HR professional specifically, would be very different. The capabilities of HR professionals would be related to their ability to develop close and proximal relationships with employees; tools and techniques would no longer be based on classifications, measurements, traits and attributes. The very idea of the human as a 'resource', on which to do things, would be fundamentally undermined, not because of what is happening in the wider business world (cf Inkson 2008), but because of the essential responsibility an HR person has to the Other as a human being. HRM becomes, thus, relentlessly disobedient; always questioning, urgently occupying "these gaps between social roles and the moments when they are breached and undecidable decisions need to be made" (Jones et al. 2005, p. 95). It becomes the critic and conscience of an organization, not the umpire of fairness and justice *for* the organization, seeking to apply moral codes and bureaucratic policies that suppress rather than release the moral impulse.

Presently HRM as a profession, we suggest, is part of the Third, "the realm of Social Order ruled by Justice – not morality" (Bauman 1993, p. 113). This order serves to act on Others rather than to be *for* them. Despite the idea that HRM offers employees a better alternative than trade unions to meet their individual and collective needs, what it offers seems to rather act on them in ways that suit business needs. HRM concerns capturing the employee to be *with* the business Other, not *for* the Other as a human being.

More specifically what is the role of HRM education and HR professional associations? Clearly such education and professional body activity will be specific to a national context, but what role can/should they play in establishing a 'new' ethical HRM based on Bauman and Levinas? McPhail (2001) considered the education of accountants and argued that it needed to be 'rehumanized' to "develop a sense of moral sympathy for others" (McPhail 2001, p. 291). In North America, debate around HRM education has tended to focus on skills and the acquisition of a 'body of knowledge' implying that HRM is a 'true profession'

(Wiley 2000). In addition there is a focus on how HR practitioners can add-value to the organization and bridge the gap between 'evidence-based' research and managerial practice (Wilcox 2002). In our view, HR education, as it is currently offered through post-secondary education or through professional associations, cannot provide an alternative ethical approach that is concerned with *being for* the Other. To be for the Other implies a disruption not only of what HRM is but of the whole system of which it is a part. In this sense, HR education and professional associations should shift their focus to the human element of organizations and away from the managerialist orientation to 'add-value' to the organization, particularly through 'evidence-based' research. This cannot be done through exposure to the humanities, 'real life case studies' and personal value journals (McPhail 2001). The role of HR education and HR professional bodies should perhaps be to establish firm objectives and capabilities that privilege being for the Other above all else. Such a view of the role of HR fundamentally disrupts its managerialist purpose and it is also fundamentally disruptive of the system within which it operates. To develop a "sense of moral sympathy for others" within a system that suppresses the possibility of a moral impulse is not possible, and this is precisely Bauman's (1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1995) point and which goes unrecognized in attempts to transform ethical education for professionals (McPhail 2001). HR education and the role of HR professional bodies in HR education, need perhaps to begin with the meaning of ethics for HRM and ask the question: is HR for the human or for the human as resource? The answer to this question can define what HR education should be about and what the ongoing role of HR professional associations should be. If HR is to *be for* the Other it is this that needs to be central to undergraduate and postgraduate education in HRM, and central to the role of professional associations in HRM. This envisions something very different from what HRM is now.

Rather than discussing an alternative ethical HRM in abstract terms, it is critical to ground these ideas with empirical data. We encourage researchers and teachers to utilize multiple methods from a macro- and micro-perspective to develop an alternative ethical HRM, which might 'disobey' and 'subvert', and perhaps therefore, change what is business.

Conclusion

As an alternative to generalized prescriptions of what the ethics of HRM *should* be, this paper discusses the relevance of an alternative ethical HRM rooted in Bauman (1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1995) and Levinas (1998) and articulated through the lived experiences, activities and practice of HR

professionals. In contrast to the prevailing discourse surrounding HRM's concern for the welfare of its employees, we experiment with the idea that HRM is an aspect of a technical bureaucratic system, and has thus been *liberated* from its 'moral constraints' (Bauman 1990). Through interview data we demonstrate that HR professionals largely operate to perpetuate a framework of distance, depersonalization and dissembling in the management of people in organizations, serving to neutralize the moral impulse. While HRM may be *with* the Other, it is not *for* the Other. To end on a positive note, we did find evidence of hope; examples of the mix of self-seeking motives and altruistic ones (Martin 2000, p. 26) that indicate both the struggles that HR professionals confront in their daily activities over ethics, and their concern to sometimes 'do good' for the Other. It is here upon where there may be places to build for developing an alternative ethical HRM.

Appendix

List of participants

Name	Age	Gender	Industry	Current title	Yrs in HR
Janice	26–30	Female	Entertainment	HR Advisor	0–5
Maria	26–30	Female	Government	HR Generalist	0–5
Angela	26–30	Female	Recruiting	Executive Recruitment Specialist	0–5
Jillian	26–30	Female	Retail	HR Manager	0–5
Laura	26–30	Female	Manufacturing	HR Manager	0–5
Tania	26–30	Female	Consulting	Employee Relations Representative	0–5
Nicola	26–30	Female	Consulting	Manager, Operations	0–5
Cindy	26–30	Female	Financial Services	Manager, HR	6–10
Maya	26–30	Female	Advertising	Director, Human Resources	6–10
Claire	26–30	Female	Sales	Human Resource Business Partner	6–10
Tina	31–35	Female	IT Consulting	Senior Associate, People Success	0–5
Ben	31–35	Male	Energy	Director, Human Resources	0–5
Lydia	31–35	Female	Retail	Regional HR Advisor	0–5
Alexis	31–35	Female	Manufacturing	Manager, Labor Relations	0–5
Erica	31–35	Female	Telecommunications	Manager, Human Resources	6–10
Susan	31–35	Female	Telecommunications	Manager, Human Resources	6–10
Aaron	31–35	Male	Education	Manager of Administration	6–10
Emma	31–35	Female	Education	Administrative Officer	6–10
Lauren	31–35	Female	Energy	Internal HR Consultant	6–10
Audrey	31–35	Female	Mining	Recruiter	6–10
Natalia	31–35	Female	Retail	HR Manager	6–10
Sabrina	31–35	Female	Education	HR Consultant	11–15
Victoria	31–35	Female	Financial Services	Senior Manager, People Strategy	11–15
John	31–35	Male	IT Consulting	Senior Manager, People Success	11–15
Shane	31–35	Male	Retail	Consultant	11–15
Faith	36–40	Female	Government	HR Manager	0–5
Stephanie	36–40	Female	Financial Services	Manager, Employee Relations	6–10
Rhona	36–40	Female	Not for Profit	HR Specialist	11−15
Charlotte	36–40	Female	Telecommunications	Senior HR Manager	11–15
Gail	40–45	Female	Manufacturing	VP Administration	6–10
Lisa	41–45	Female	Consulting	Consultant	11–15
Maureen	41–45	Female	N/A	N/A	16–20
Martin	41–45	Male	Mining	VP Organizational Development and Talent Management	16–20
Ruth	46–50	Female	Manufacturing	Employment Equity Administrator	11–15
Chris	46–50	Male	Government	Senior Manager	16–20
Emily	46–50	Female	Retail	VP HR	21–26
Jacob	51–55	Male	Retail	HR Manager	21–25

Table continued

Name	Age	Gender	Industry	Current title	Yrs in HR
Fraser	51–55	Male	N/A	N/A	21–25
Simon	56–60	Male	Mining	Director, Human Resources	26–30
Nathan	56–60	Male	Healthcare	Senior Director of Human Resources and Labor Relations	31–35

Names are pseudonyms

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