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On criticism, HRM and civility

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INVITED REVIEW

On criticism, human resource management and civility

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Abstract

If you are interested in people as a subject, even if you are interested in them only as an aspect of the effective managing of organisations, you are likely to be more aware of the impact of your actions and reactions on others, and therefore more likely to be civil. But perhaps we still need to keep the issue of civility in our minds as we write our papers and our emails, review others' work and aim to develop a new generation of researchers.

KEYWORDS
autonomy, career management, civility, criticism, HR professional, wellbeing

Key points

- We know that civility matters, but it has to be tempered with our ability to continue to engage critically with fellow scholars.
- Criticism has two meanings: one involving attacks on the motivation or character of the individual concerned and the other involving analytical deconstruction of individual's work.
- Given how much of ourselves we put into academic work, we need to be extra careful to disentangle the two forms of criticism.
- Human resource management scholars are.

In addition to his 'day job' (or, he may say, as part of it), Peter Buckley has in recent years identified, explored and clarified important topics that address key issues for business and management scholars - including recently the need to make our scholarship relevant to some to the grand challenges in the world (Buckley, McPhee, & Rogaly, 2017; Buckley et al., 2017), to take due account of the role of China (Buckley, 2019) and to emphasise the importance of

Abbreviation: HRM human resource management.

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history in our studies (Buckley, 2021). His call for civility (REF) raises another issue which, if not as grand a challenge as these others, nevertheless matters. It matters because, as he says, our debates appear to be becoming more fractured, and more fractious, and this undermines polite discourse and even progress in research and its publication. Just the latest case in point is the recent widely circulated email discussion attacking, quite personally, one journal's editors for publishing a call for papers challenging some of the underlying premises and prospects of capitalism in business studies.

People may be uncivil because they are not very nice people, but perhaps at least some of the problem may be traced to a confusion in our understanding of the notion of criticism that lies at the heart of our scholarship.

Much of the scholarly discussion of 'criticism' comes from the arts, from politics and from law. There is a set of writings about criticism in relation to academic performance and careers that will interest some readers, but there is surprisingly little analysis of the theory of criticism in the business and management field. It is one of those dangerous 'taken for granted' concepts.

I don't know enough about other fields of study to be able to say how human resource management compares or where we are in the scale of things, but ours is certainly a field in which construct clarity is often lacking - indeed even the notion of human resource management itself has very limited construct clarity. Without construct clarity any kind of disinterested criticism becomes difficult – on what basis are we building our critique? – and it is almost impossible to make progress (Suddaby, 2010). Being clear about our meanings enables us to enjoy (civil) criticism of a clearly delineated field of study. A lack of construct clarity often allows those in a particular field of study to criticise others in the field in a deliberately negative manner.

It has been pointed out by previous Editors of this journal that there are two basic conceptions of 'human resource management': one 'tradition focuses more on performance and an organisation-level model of an HRM system … [and leans towards] a unitarist, shareholder perception' and the other 'takes a more critical stance …. with a pluralist stakeholder approach …. entailing more influences from outside the organisation' (Farndale, et al., 2020, p. 3), noting that since its earliest days, HRM has included both elements: the first seminal textbooks (Beer, et al., 1984; Fombrun, et al., 1984) took these different positions. The editors believed that *HRMJ* is based firmly on the latter, multi-stakeholder, construct. This distinction between the two potential meanings maps across onto the long-standing and continuing discussions of whether the focus should be on the H or the M in HRM: is it a 'human' (social) science or a 'management' science (Cooksey & Gates, 1995; Kaufman, 2015)?

This consideration of our concept of HRM maps across onto discussions of the contribution (Leidner, 2020), the impact (Salter, et al., 2017) or the practical implications (Kougiannou & Ridgway, 2021) of our research. In the words of Bob Dylan, 'you gotta serve somebody' and we have different views of who we should be serving and what constitutes a 'proper' contribution from our research. Many scholars assume that they should be, in some small way, contributing to improving the performance of businesses and ask questions like 'how does your research help to improve the management of an organisation?' In most cases these authors assume, and in many cases they have tested, that the impact should be measured against the impact of HRM on profits or share prices in the relatively short-term timescales adopted by the accountancy measures of firm performance. Other scholars take a more pluralistic (Boxall, 2021), multi-stakeholder (Beer et al., 2015; Kaufman, 2015), or critical (Alvesson, 2009; Watson, 2004) approach and do not see finding ways to improve the financial interests of owners or shareholders as the objective of their research.

One problem this creates is that HRM scholars are either unaware of these different constructs or try to bridge the two. Hence, perhaps, the issue that we have with the 'jangle fallacy' (Molloy & Ployhart, 2012), continually inventing new abbreviations or terminologies in the lexicon, most of which have no more construct clarity than does HRM (a full list would leave no room for the rest of this paper but, as examples or alternatives to HRM, think about strategic HRM, human capital management, talent management, sustainable human resource management) - if we start examining specific topics or functions within HRM the problem grows exponentially. Even where scholars are aware of the variety of constructs that can be encompassed within HRM, there are few papers indeed that clarify the construct they are using up front. One consequence is something of a 'dialogue of the deaf' where neither side wishes to hear

the messages from the other. At its best, this can manifest as simply ignoring the alternative literature; at its worst it can become uncivil, where each side assumes that the other is not only approaching the topic differently but doing so for unpleasant or illegitimate motives, and criticism spills over from attacks on ideas to attacks on individuals.

There are many different types of criticism: Google 'art criticism' or 'literary criticism' and you will get millions of hits. However, dictionaries give us, again, a dichotomy with two baseline meanings of the word 'criticism': one, connected, at least, to the idea of incivility, involves the expression of disapproval of someone or something on the basis of perceived faults or mistakes. The other involves the analysis and judgement of the merits and faults of a literary or artistic work. In this sense, criticism is fundamental to scholarly activity (see Calma & Davies, 2021 for a review). This is the approach taken by the purveyors of critical management studies and critical human resource management (though some of them find it difficult to keep out of their writings a note of scorn for those 'taken in' by the capitalists).

In some contexts, separating these two types of criticism (as attacks on the person or as attacks on their output) is relatively clear and relatively easily accomplished. In other contexts the theoretical distinction is less apparent in reality: in the arts, so much of an individual's time, energy and being goes into their output that it is difficult to separate, for example, an attack on an actor's performance from an attack on the actor. In this case, the profession has developed ways of speaking and writing that sound 'false' to those outside the profession but are necessary to those within it to cope with the overlapping of the notions of criticism.

What about us HRM scholars? For us, too, though perhaps not so completely as those in the arts, we invest much of ourselves, much time and energy, much of our credibility, in what we produce. Those of us with a long list of rejections of our articles or looking at reviews of our work by other academics (or even by our students) still find it difficult to entirely separate ourselves from our work.

Is it civility that often makes us quick to cite, to name and credit, those who we think agree with us or those we think admirable in some way? And, by the same token, is it civility that means that we are loath to put names to those we disagree with or are attacking? But by 'not naming or quoting their opponents, [writers] avoid the tiresome task of marshalling evidence against real-life adversaries whose subtle or complex arguments may be hard to defeat and who may demand a chance to defend themselves' (Shirley, 2011, p. 577). Shirley argues that many of us (*mea culpa*) have avoided naming people whose views we oppose, preferring 'straw men' (I can find no non-sexist term for the notion that arguments are presented as less nuanced and more aggregated than they are). Hence, some of our writing includes phrases like 'the dominant discourse', 'the received wisdom', 'unitarist writers' and, because this avoids the (possibly uncivil) practice of naming names, becomes in the process incontrovertible, even incontestable. This is not something that our scholarship should aspire to.

But can we, in all civility, aspire to the opposite? Would we want to, would our community want us to, would our journals allow us to, carry out even polite total deconstructions of another named author's work? What would that do to the social interaction when we meet those authors at conferences?

It is, of course, easier to be uncivil the further away you are. HRM folk are generally immensely civil when we meet together, we usually, but not always, are when we email each other; we may be less civil when we write about each other – and reviewing potential articles, where both partners are in theory at least unknown to each other, we can be particularly lacking in civility.

In the latter case, one issue may be that scholarship is gradually drowning in a sea of papers. Journals report ever higher numbers of submissions as universities around the world begin to adopt some version of the American 'tenure system', where academics feel their employment to be at risk unless they achieve tenure. Tenure is: 'an indefinite appointment that can be terminated only for cause or under extraordinary circumstances such as financial exigency and program discontinuation',[1] so that apart from gross misconduct, or their work ceasing to exist, employment is more or less guaranteed. The idea behind tenure was that it allowed faculty to espouse unpopular or idiosyncratic areas of research, or possibly views - research and views that have on occasion proved to be of huge benefit to society - without risking the loss of their employment. Whether it achieves that purpose and whether there are other downsides to, in effect, taking job performance out of the equation is a matter for debate. Tenure is a much-discussed

notion, with a particular emphasis on its spread around the world, but what concerns me here is less the rationality of the system than the fact that because an underlying principle in most tenure decisions is whether the individual concerned has contributed to the international discourse in their field, usually measured by whether they have published in reputable journals, the effect has been an increase in the number of papers being submitted to journals.

One result has been a developing 'reviewer shortage' as many editors feel constrained to ask for reviews form people whose name or output they know little of, academics with little experience of being asked for reviews. As with doctoral supervision and other areas of academic work, there is an assumption that anyone with a doctorate can do it, so very limited training is available for reviewers, and there are few benefits to doing it well and few penalties for doing it badly. But, again as with doctoral supervision, the effects on others can be considerable. One of the less serious effects seems to have been an increase in confusion between the two baseline meanings of criticism. When inexperienced academics find themselves in a position where, anonymously, they can criticise other academics, perhaps people not so different from themselves, the elision of the two meanings of criticism is more likely to occur.

It is always easier to raise questions than to provide answers and there are perhaps no answers to the demand for more civility. In our academic discourse we must be civil to our opponents as well as our friends otherwise scholarship is seriously weakened. But we need to ensure that we can continue to be critical; we therefore need to tread a fine line between the risks of being civil but banal or incisive but uncivil. It would, I think, help if we were to focus on some of the bigger questions, as Peter Buckley suggests, which helps to put our own position, as some of the most privileged people in society, into perspective. In the case of HRM, that means not just addressing these issues in general but also raising the question of HRM's role as a contributor to what are now historically high levels of economic inequality and, perhaps more importantly, poverty (Butterick & Charlwood, 2021). We need to move away from the 'scientism' (Haack, 2011; Kaufman, 2020) and 'physics envy' (Thomas & Wilson, 2011) that afflicts many top journals – and which, wonderfully, *HRMJ* has eschewed. It has become, in many other journals, an example of *illusio* (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Vassilopoulo, et al., 2022) 'defined as the appeal of a game which draws players together, while in turn stripping them of the possibility of questioning its rules and stakes, even when the game harms the players themselves. *Illusio* also enables the absence of responsibility and accountability' (Vassilopoulo, et al., 2022). Avoiding these strict and constraining approaches would enable us to develop a more 'integrated social science perspective' and to look at issues using an 'inside out' rather than an 'outside in' approach (Casson, 2021), allowing in turn the development of indigenous theory (Bruton, et al., 2021). Together, such approaches may do much to ensure that we can continue to be critical in the sense of analysing the merits and faults of our work whilst maintaining civility.

Does the lack of civility apply any more or less to HRM scholarship than to any other kind? That, of course, is an unanswerable question, but it raises some pertinent issues. Perhaps there is less incivility in HRM because HRM people are, generally, rather nice people: they are, after all, as the HR Division at the annual meeting of the Academy of Management had it 1 year, 'people people'. If you are interested in people as a subject, even if you are interested in them only as an aspect of the effective managing of organisations, you are likely to be more aware of the impact of your actions and reactions on others, and therefore more likely to be civil. But perhaps we still need to keep the issue of civility in our minds as we write our papers and our emails, review others' work and aim to develop a new generation of researchers.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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ENDNOTE

[1] Taken from the 1915 'Declaration of Principles of the Association of American Colleges'

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