Introduction

As corporations increasingly strive to expand their operations across national boundaries, human resource managers are compelled to develop an enhanced appreciation of and responsiveness to the impact of different national contexts on the managerial form and function. The activities of multinational corporations (MNCs) influence the working lives of a growing number of employees in many different countries, and the sheer scale of their operations poses formidable challenges to conventional human resource management (HRM) practices. In the field of international human resource management (IHRM), scholars have endeavoured to assist practitioners by conducting research that is routinely framed by two questions: (a) what is general and universal in the management function; and (b) what is peculiar or specific to one nation or culture? A central theoretical concern underlying the field of IHRM is the tension between global integration and local adaptation. Straddling an escalating number of national spaces, MNCs are ever more concerned with the particularities of the institutional and normative frameworks of the countries within which they operate. An understanding of these national characteristics is imperative because MNCs do not organise their activities in a vacuum, but rather in the context of the multiple structural, organisational and cultural landscapes on which they operate. To be sure, given their often-substantial resources, MNCs may also play a part in constructing these environments (Almond et al., 2005; Boyer et al., 1998; Ferner & Quintanilla, 1998), which is likely to shape the experiences of employees and employers in the host countries. In other words, all national social relations have global as well as local conditions of existence and impacts.

The discipline of sociology – as a study of the social structures, relations and processes of society – has much to offer the field of IHRM. This is reflected in the recent calls for ‘more societally embedded organisational research’ as evinced by the proliferation of studies drawing on neo-institutional theory, national business systems approach and cross-cultural perspectives in management studies (Peltonen & Vaara, 2012:69). A disregard of epistemological and ontological concerns, in particular, tends to be a persistent and debilitating source of weakness in management studies. Drawing on a realist-inspired sociology, for instance, would allow for the eschewal of a triple set of twinned mistakes: the ontological errors of voluntarism and reification, the constitutive errors of individualism and collectivism, and the epistemic errors of methodological
individualism and social determinism (Bhaskar, 1979). The relational structure of societies and their irreducibility to individuals are essential insights for non-reductionist studies in IHRM. However, since all the social sciences are principally anchored at the level of the nation-state, there are limits to the insights into the study of transnational organisations and processes that IHRM may derive from sociology. Although...
the present conjuncture of ‘third-wave marketization’ is the public sociologist, who must ‘fight for a countermovement that foregrounds society rather than installing a despotic state or appealing to a market utopia’ (Burawoy, 2009:197). Making sense of the relationships between sociology and associated disciplines requires not only an awareness of the distinct objectives and purposes of the various sociologies, but also an appreciation of the key problematics in the discipline. Sociological explanations of the multilayered relations between structural conditions and human agency provide IHRM with the means to evade the reductionism associated with a social atomistic ontology and its epistemological manifestation, methodological individualism. Next, we consider the divisions between the functional, analytical and critical strands within HRM. These divisions add another layer of complexity to the task of assessing the impression that sociology has left on IHRM. While mainstream HRM has generally shown some reluctance to draw on industrial sociology, analytical HRM has revealed some ambivalence to do so and critical HRM has eagerly and extensively deployed concepts from industrial sociology.

A focus on the limitations of and divisions within HRM is necessary since these are largely carried over into the field of IHRM. In particular, a research agenda dominated by performance measures and a managerialist conception of the firm typify the functionalist strands of IHRM.

The central focus areas of IHRM are filtered through an integration-differentiation matrix that trades on a contrast between ‘best-practice’ and ‘best-fit’ managerial practices. As with HRM, the influence of sociology on IHRM is variegated and this variegation is partly dependent on the methodological and ideological orientation of the scholar/s in question. Comparing mainstream analyses from IHRM with sociologically orientated perspectives on work and employment reveals significant differences, including the nature/level of analysis and the conceptualisation of conflict in the workplace. Finally, the role of institutions is especially important in any assessment of sociology’s impact on the study of management in general and IHRM in particular. Following a concise sketch of neo-institutionalist and economic sociology, some of the fundamental applications of institutional theory in the IHRM literature are briefly outlined.

Sociology: professional, policy, critical and public

Evaluating the impact of sociology on other disciplines is complicated by the fact that it is internally differentiated. In a series of papers, Burawoy (2004, 2005, 2007, 2009) distinguishes four types of sociology – namely, professional, policy, critical and public – each with its own distinctive practice and purpose, its own notion of truth and politics. The universality of this scheme follows from two fundamental questions: first, ‘knowledge for whom?’ and second, ‘knowledge for what?’ For Burawoy (2009:191–192), policy sociology is explicitly aimed at solving ‘problems’ as defined by clients, developing strategies and providing solutions. Professional sociology pursues ‘puzzles’ defined by research programmes. This is how science develops: taking as given a range of assumptions that define a paradigm and then grappling with its internal contradictions and external anomalies. Professional sociology, according to Burawoy (2007), lies at the heart of the discipline and occupies a privileged position in the division of sociological labour: it supplies the necessary tools and techniques and advances knowledge that allows the other sociologies to flourish.

Sociologists, ingrained in a research programme, cannot pursue these puzzles and at the same time question the assumptions on which these puzzles are based. To do so, they need critical sociologists who specialise in questioning assumptions. In other words, because sociology is part of the society it studies, Burawoy (2004) argues that the discipline needs a critical sociology to interrogate and when necessary criticise the foundations and assumptions on which professional
sociology rests. Here, Burawoy (2009) cites Sorokin’s critique of the obsession with quantification or Gouldner’s critique of structural functionalism. Critical sociologists take professional sociology to task for failing to examine the ideological and normative underpinnings that unwittingly promoted particular visions of society, which benefit one segment of the population at the expense of others. If critical sociology involves a dialogue with other sociologists about the foundations of professional sociology, public sociology is the dialogue about the foundations of society with publics beyond the academy. Public sociology, according to Burawoy (2004), also differs from the other three forms in that it explicitly engages in dialogue with these publics about issues that are morally and politically important.

In an effort to clarify his conception of public sociology, Burawoy (2009:192–193) draws a contrast between ‘traditional’ and ‘organic’ public sociology. Traditional public sociology includes the celebrities of the discipline – such as C. Wright Mills, Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens – whose works bring a sociological perspective to public issues, or, in the memorable phrase of Mills, turn private troubles into public issues. They do so by the specifically sociological exercise of showing the interconnection between micro-experience and macro-structure. According to Mills, a key part of the ‘sociological imagination’ is a willingness to combine ‘ideas that no-one expected were combinable’. The publics addressed by traditional public sociology are broad, thin, passive and mainstream, with an amorphous presence. For Mills, Bourdieu and Giddens, sociological education emanates from above in the sense that ‘dialogue’ is characterised by a one-way flow of communication from author to public.

Organic public sociology, by contrast, assumes that subjugated populations possess, in the words of Antonio Gramsci, a kernel of good sense contained in their common sense (ibid.). In this regard, sociological education is an unmediated dialogue between sociologist and public, employing sociological concepts to reveal and elucidate the fundamental insights into social structure that everyone possesses. Public sociology engages directly with specific publics in specific settings and focuses on the specific interests of whatever public the sociologist is working with. Here, Burawoy (2009) cites educators such as Paulo Freire and feminists like Dorothy Smith, who believe in working from the experience of the oppressed. Alain Touraine’s action sociology, which is also included, develops the insights of activists in social movements through the discussions and interventions coordinated by sociologists. In this case, the public is thick rather than thin, local rather than broad, active rather than passive, oppositional rather than mainstream.

The organic public sociologist, who works in the trenches of civil society, is invisible and very different from the traditional public sociologist, whose effectiveness depends upon his or her visibility . . . There is often a deep animosity between the two types of public sociologist. The traditional public sociologist regards close encounters with publics as contaminating whilst the organic public sociologist regards knowledge incubated in the academy as serving the powers that be. This mutual hostility has its roots within the academic hierarchy as well as ideology, but I will argue that each benefits from the presence of the other – the traditional public sociologist gives overarching direction and legitimacy to and receives energy and insight from the intense involvement of the organic public sociologist.

(Burawoy, 2009:193)

This four-fold scheme depicts a division of sociological labour, within which sociologists specialise in one or more types of knowledge and through which they move as their careers develop. The division of labour also represents a configuration of domination among the four types of knowledge that vary over time and by country.
Despite divisions and conflicts between protagonists of the various types of sociology, Burawoy (2009:195) argues that a thriving sociology requires all four types of knowledge, and that underlying their antagonism there is a fundamental interdependence, the foundation of a ‘symbiotic division of labour’. For example, professional sociology acquires its vitality from infusions of public sociology, advances under pressure from critical sociology, and is often sustained by policy sociology. The antagonists are all locked into a common division of labour, and ‘to the extent that professional sociology becomes irrelevant, critical sociology becomes dogmatic, policy sociology becomes servile or public sociology becomes populist, that is, to the extent any given type lose touches with and loses respect for the others, all suffer, and our discipline loses its vitality’ (ibid.). For Burawoy (2009:196), this ‘putative unity-in-division’ or ‘antagonistic interdependence’ is grounded in the standpoint sociologists share, namely the standpoint of civil society. To be sure, the claim that sociologists study the world from the standpoint of civil society does not mean that they only study civil society. Rather, they study the state or the economy, for example, from the standpoint of their social benefits and/or consequences. Given the wide-ranging implications of and the notable reservations still attached to ‘public sociology’, it is hardly surprising that it has sparked a rigorous and extensive debate (see Blau & Smith, 2006; Bridger & Alter, 2010; Clawson, 2007; Jeffries, 2009; Nichols, 2007; Swedberg, 2007).

Making sense of the relationships between sociology and associated disciplines requires not only an awareness of the distinct objectives and purposes of the various sociologies, but also an appreciation of the key problematics in the discipline. The core of sociology, according to Scott (2005, cited in O’Reilly, 2009:222)), revolves around a framework of ideas about social relations: all human activity is socially embedded; the ‘social’ constitutes inter-subjective phenomena that are irreducible to biology or psychology, to individual actions or the meanings attributed to them; inter-subjective phenomena form social structures (social facts, forms of social life, norms and institutions) which, in turn, are reproduced by and form the conditions for individual and collective actions by becoming embedded in social relations, embodied as tendencies, acknowledged or witnessed by actors in the form of rules or laws, or simply acted upon as norms and conventions; and these social structures are relational, institutional and embodied (cited in O’Reilly, 2009:222). Sociology is therefore an emergent set of ideas designed to explain ‘the social’ in terms of the interrelationship of social actors and social structures. This work occupied the foundational theorists, who conceptualised the social in terms of a materialist conception of history (Karl Marx), the existence of objective social facts (Emile Durkheim), meaningful action (Max Weber) or emergent forms of social life (Georg Simmel). It is continued in the work of contemporary theorists, who conceive of the social using a theory of practice (Pierre Bourdieu), structuration theory (Anthony Giddens) or analytical dualism (Margaret Archer). It is advanced by developing concepts, which are designed to avoid the reduction of conditions to actions and vice versa, such as habitus and field, positioned-practices, internalised structures or performance and embodiment.

Neither subjectivist explanations of society as the product of conscious human activities nor objectivist explanations of society as existing independently of conscious human activities are adequate (Archer, 1995). The social dimension is not captured by the reified position of structuralism that reduces humans to mere bearers of structures or by the spontaneist conception of voluntarist humanism in which everything can be explained in terms of human activity. The objectivist emphasis on the role that institutions play in shaping the conduct of (pliable and largely reactive) individuals suggests that society creates people. In subjectivist conceptions, human agency exercises an active, formative and recursive influence on social institutions in the sense that people create society. In reality, however, society does not directly create people any more
than people directly create society. This is unavoidable since social structures, as the ‘sedimented deposits of past actions’, become the conditions of subsequent activities (Lawson et al., 1996:146). Simply combining these approaches will not solve the problem: it makes no sense simultaneously to posit a voluntaristic idealism whereby individuals create the social structure and a mechanical determinism whereby people are essentially the product of their situation. While social structures and intentional action presuppose each other, they are quite different kinds of things and cannot be reduced to, or reconstructed from, each other. Indeed, Bhaskar (1979:43–44) argues that there is a real distinction – an ‘ontological hiatus’ – between human agency and social structures:

[If], following Durkheim, one regards society as providing the material causes of human action, and following Weber, one refuses to reify it, it is easy to see that both society and human praxis must possess a dual character. Society is both the ever-present condition (material cause) and the continually reproduced outcome of human agency. And praxis is both work, that is conscious production, and (normally unconscious) reproduction of the conditions of production, that is society.

He refers to the former as the ‘duality of structure’ and the latter as the ‘duality of praxis’. Society is not the creation of unconditional human agency, nor does it exist independently of it; individuals neither completely determine, nor are they completely determined by, social structures. Bhaskar (1979) is therefore proposing a conception that people, in their conscious activity, for the most part unconsciously reproduce (and occasionally transform) the structures governing their substantive activities of production. Human action is necessarily dependent on the existence of social structures and these depend on being reproduced through such activity. Social structures impose limits on the acts we can perform, but they do not determine our actions. Human agents have the potential to engage in transformative practice, albeit within specific limits. This means structures are both enabling and constraining, albeit in a specifically determined manner. In other words, people reproduce and sometimes transform society, but they do not create it ab initio since they always transform existing material conditions. The role of sociology is to explore the multi-layered relations between structural conditions (such as dispositions, institutions, constraints, norms) and human agency (such as desires, meanings, intentions, actions).

Bhaskar rejects atomistic views of society for implying that knowledge of society can be reduced to knowledge of people. His relational alternative to atomistic models of society underlines the fact that our social acts presuppose relations of various kinds – for instance, one is an employee only because of one’s relation to an employer. Yet, the relations and the related individuals may be ontologically independent in the sense that it is possible to focus study on the relations (which endure through changes of the related individuals), or on individuals (who may circulate around the network of relations that is society). The ontology of social atomism along with its epistemological manifestation, methodological individualism, remains a form of reductionism. The subject matter of social science cannot be reduced to principles governing the behaviour of human individuals and descriptions of their situations. Bhaskar follows and builds upon the insight of Marx that society is not only a sum of individuals, but also comprises the totality of positions and social relations in which these individuals stand. Social reality is thus conceived as ‘intrinsically dynamic and complexly structured, consisting in human agency, structures and contexts of action, none of which are given or fixed, and where each presupposes each other without being reducible to, identifiable with, or explicable completely in terms of, any other’ (Lawson, 1997:159). The relational conception of social forms entails that
the social conditions for the substantive activities of transformation in which agents engage can only be relations of various kinds. And the transformational model entails that these activities are essentially productions. The subject matter of sociology is, thus, precisely: relations of production (of various kinds).

(Bhaskar, 1979:56)

On this view, social phenomena are not things, but relations. As Bhaskar (1989:28–29) puts it:

Sociology is not concerned, as such, with large-scale, mass or group behaviour (conceived as the behaviour of large numbers, masses or groups of individuals). Rather it is concerned, at least paradigmatically, with the persistent relations between individuals (and groups), and with the relations between these relations (and between such relations and nature and the products of such relations).

Bhaskar’s transformative model of social activity accounts for the fact that, in their interactions with society, human agents act as both its effects and its causes. In order to combine these insights, we need

a system of mediating concepts, encompassing both aspects of the duality of praxis, designating the ‘slots’, as it were, in the social structure into which active subjects must slip in order to reproduce it; that is, a system of concepts designating the ‘point of contact’ between human agency and social structures. Such a point, linking action to structure, must both endure and be immediately occupied by individuals.

(Bhaskar, 1979:51)

This mediating system is that of the positions occupied by individuals, and of the practices in which, by virtue of their occupancy of these positions (and vice versa), they engage. ‘Now such positions and practices, if they are to be individuated at all, can only be done so relationally’ (ibid.). The relations with which the social sciences are concerned must therefore be conceptualised as holding between the positions and practices (‘positioned-practices’), not between the individuals who occupy or engage in them. While the existence of social structures as a condition for and outcome of human practice is a necessary feature of all societies, the specific form of these structures is of an historical character, which has been determined by (among others) class antagonisms, cultural practices and institutional frameworks.

### Human resource management: functional, analytical and critical

It is not only the divisions within sociology, but also those in management studies in general that complicate the task of assessing the impression which the former discipline has left on the latter. Management studies, as Knights and Willmott (1997) show, are defined by the social division of labour between researcher and practitioner as well as that within academia. In addition, much of the mainstream management scholarship is characterised by a disregard (aversion?) for broader question of meta-theory (see Edwards, 2005; Fleetwood & Hesketh, 2008; Syed et al., 2010; Thompson & Vincent, 2010). This is particularly prevalent in the HRM literature and lies at the root of many of its limitations and oversights. As Keegan and Boselie (2006:1506) note, ‘debates on meta theory, the linguistic turn, and reflexivity have not taken root or changed the way most research is undertaken and published in the field of HRM’. Consequently, they argue, debates in HRM tend to be narrow, technocratic, managerialist, exclude consideration of broader
moral, social and political questions on HRM practice and policy, and are lagging behind leading edge theoretical developments in social scientific analysis evident in other fields of management and organisation theory. This has been an enduring problem.

In one of the two influential reports published in 1959 on the state of research in business schools in the USA, Gordon and Howell bluntly stated: ‘[the] business literature is not, in general, characterized by challenging hypotheses, well developed conceptual frameworks, the use of sophisticated research techniques, penetrating analysis, the use of evidence drawn from relevant underlying disciplines – or very significant conclusions’ (cited in Agarwal & Hoetkera, 2007:1305). Given the embryonic nature of management as a discipline at the time, it is not surprising that related disciplines had a significant impact on its development. Drawing directly on established and related disciplines was an obvious way to establish and secure the legitimacy of management as a discipline, increase the depth and reach of management research, and allow management studies to benefit from the established research techniques and conceptual matrices of the related disciplines. Drawing parallels with the knowledge base of an evolving industry, Agarwal and Hoetkera (2007:1305–1306) argue that the relative importance of knowledge from outside a discipline’s boundaries decreases as the discipline matures. In its formative years, management turned to related disciplines for not only ‘content’ or theories, but also for ‘method’ or intellectual rigour (Knights & Willmott, 1997). As management matured, given the development of management-specific research and graduate training, both forms of borrowing become observably less important. Starting at a level of published research output much lower than that of economics, psychology or sociology, management surpassed sociology in the early 1990s and has come close to economics in recent years.

Drawing on the division in management research between ‘micro’ (focuses on individuals and teams) and ‘macro’ (focuses on organisations and extra-organisational issues), Agarwal and Hoetkera’s (2007) survey of selected literature reveals the dominance of a single discipline (i.e. psychology) in micro-oriented articles. In macro-orientated articles, citations to psychology, economics and sociology have been roughly equal indicating the lack of a singular dominant discipline. However, while the macro-oriented research in management is multidisciplinary, it only draws on one discipline at a time. The relevance of multiple disciplines to management, according to Pfeffer (1993:615), has led to the lack of strong paradigm development as management scholars regard the field as a multidisciplinary ‘[large] tent in which fundamentally any theoretical perspective or methodological approach is as valid as any other’. This view is common among mainstream management scholars and reflects the tensions between practical relevance and academic rigour (Syed et al., 2010). Although they acknowledge the value to management studies of theories and methodologies introduced by scholars from related disciplines, Agarwal and Hoetkera (2007:1318) believe that the extent to which value is captured depends on the ability of the management discipline to assimilate relevant perspectives, which itself relates to whether consensus exists on the value of a ‘disciplined integration of multiple perspectives’.

There is a significant discrepancy between the pervasive promotion of interdisciplinarity and its limited manifestation in management research and teaching (Knights & Willmott, 1997). While management scholars routinely characterise HRM as a multidisciplinary field, reviews of published work only reveal strong links with psychology – which may be due to the field’s early development and the academic discipline of its early theorists and practitioners – but only indirect links to political, economic and sociological perspectives (Warner, 2011:3227). Only a minority of papers in the leading, largely US-based HRM journals provide an adequate cultural, historical or social setting for their contribution. Liang et al. (2010) reach a similar conclusion in terms of the material published in the leading Chinese language management journals.
According to Warner (2011:3228), a significant proportion of the published work has a conventional ‘managerialist’ perspective and the paradigm increasingly invoked in the global academic marketplace has a decidedly North American orientation. Furthermore, HRM research generally is premised on a micro-level understanding of management action at firm level, which fails to account for supra-organisational influences or constraints on management behaviour (Collings, 2008:175). The HRM literature appears to be too narrowly focused and insufficiently interdisciplinary. More specifically, it may be said to often lack a firm cultural/historical grounding. It may also be more likely to have a psychologist’s perspective, rather than an economist’s or sociologist’s (or for that matter, an anthropologist’s) orientation . . . Hardly any studies in HRM deal directly with the main props of sociology, such as class, status and power. Only a few HRM scholars concern themselves, however, with industrial conflict . . . Much of the work in HRM, too, is socially uncritical . . . A considerable amount of research on the other hand does deal with psychologists’ constructs, such as commitment, trust and so on. In a number of cases, academically fashionable topics such as empowerment, high-performance HR, organizational citizenship and so on are prevalent . . . We can advance as a generalization that the preponderance of studies does appear to be rather more micro- than macro-oriented. (Warner, 2011:3229–3230)

Unsurprisingly, the value of multi-disciplinarity in management studies is the subject of intense debate, which largely turns on the rigour-versus-relevance dilemma. To use a recent example, Markóczy and Deeds (2009) draw on a narrow empiricism, which characterises much of mainstream HRM, forcefully to reject Zahra and Newey’s (2009) call for interdisciplinary research as a means to (a) develop new theories at the interface of theories from sister and base disciplines in management, (b) challenge accepted norms and paradigms, and (c) open up the field to discussion and exploration. For Markóczy and Deeds (2009:1079), paradigmatic development requires a ‘consensus on theory, methods and focal phenomena’, while Zahra and Newey’s model of interdisciplinary research leads ‘the discipline of management away from consensus and towards a permanent condition of subservience to the “mother” disciplines which they advise we draw upon to have “impact”’. Appealing to an atavistic scientism, Markóczy and Deeds (2009) suggest that management scholars need to develop the same confidence in their work that physicists have in theirs. That is, management scholars need to trust that the methods, the results and the theories of management studies provide ‘unique value, insights and knowledge of their own and can stand on their own without continual reference to and integration of theories from our base disciplines or sister disciplines’ (Markóczy & Deeds, 2009:1079). A narrowly defined ‘professional relevance’ takes precedence over broadly conceived notions of ‘academic rigour’.

For scholars in this mould, advocating interdisciplinary research as the best way of conducting high impact management threatens the management discipline’s ability to build legitimacy and identity, and may even endanger the long-term existence of its scholars as a professional group. Calling for Kuhnian ‘normal science’, Markóczy and Deeds (2009:1080) suggest that management research can only create value when theory development has been uniquely motivated by the challenges faced by firms and managers. On this view, HRM should be more, not less, impervious to influences from disciplines such as sociology:

our larger and more important critiques apply to . . . the continual call for interdisciplinary research in management . . . [It] is time for management to grow up and quit placing its
fate in the hands of other disciplines. Researchers need to focus on the development of a cohesive, critical mass of studies that clearly differentiates from economics, psychology and sociology . . . Rather than strengthening the discipline, the continual focus on inter-disciplinary theory building is holding back the paradigmatic development so crucial to realizing the promise of the discipline of management.

(Markóczy & Deeds, 2009:1086; see also Hambrick, 2007)

Arguing along similar lines, Agarwal and Hoetkera (2007:1319) claim that the advancement of management research requires more than simply conducting psychology-, sociology- or economics-based research in a business setting. This, they suggest, would create little value beyond that available in the particular related discipline. Rather, it is necessary to connect disciplinary insights with those generated by the 'increasingly rich management discipline', thereby generating unique theoretical advances that would help address a major critique of management research and education: that it no longer relates to 'real business problems' (ibid.). A significant proportion of HRM research has been dedicated to understanding the maximising of efficiency through effectively managing human resources (see Boselie et al., 2005; Hesketh & Fleetwood, 2008; Marchington and Grugulis, 2000; Paauwe, 2009). As a ‘distinct discipline’, management has greatly benefited from related disciplines, but management researchers need to be cautious about interactions with the related disciplines and need to ‘examine these connections more closely to ensure that they do not bind us, but rather enable us to provide valuable insights regarding management practice’ (Agarwal & Hoetkera, 2007:1320).

A more recent review of HRM studies appearing in leading American and British management journals revealed that theoretical development in the HRM field remained relatively limited (Batt & Banerjee, 2011). For example, most studies tended to draw on two broad theoretical paradigms: (a) micro-theories of organisational behaviour and individual motivation, cognition or affect; and (b) theories of human capital and the resource-based view of the firm. Even the papers that addressed new issues or developments in HRM rarely went beyond traditional HRM perspectives or embraced interdisciplinary approaches to analysis. Although there were some recent papers adopting broader theoretical perspectives, for example, industrial relations or sociological perspectives such as institutional theory and social capital theory, these studies constituted only a small minority of the papers reviewed (Batt & Banerjee, 2011). In fact, there are not even sustained attempts to synthesise the contributions of different specialisms within management studies (Knights & Willmott, 1997). Hence, there is not much evidence to suggest that management scholars have decisively moved the discipline beyond Gordon and Howell’s caustic assessment made more than half a century ago.

The deficiencies of the managerialist agenda of HRM are increasingly a matter of concern even among some mainstream HRM scholars. For instance, in their introduction to a key HRM handbook, Boxall et al. (2007:4) argue for an ‘analytical’ approach to HRM, which ‘privileges explanation over prescription’, in order ‘to emphasize that the fundamental mission of the academic management discipline of HRM is not to propagate perceptions of “best practice” in “excellent companies” but, first of all, to identify and explain what happens in practice . . . [and] account for the way management actually behaves’. As Caldas et al. (2011) also point out, the limitations inherent in the dominant HRM-performance research question and in the prevalent managerialism have meant that most research has been largely empirical and theoretical development in the HRM field remains relatively limited. The sweeping and complex research agenda that is required to address these concerns will compel HRM researchers to draw on a much broader set of theories than has historically been the case. More fundamentally,
the theoretical frameworks used continue to be focused on the micro-level and founded on positivist principles, most notably psychological theories of motivation, economic theories of human capital, and the resource-based view of the firm. These frameworks are consistent with strategic HRM’s conceptualization of the firm as an atomistic actor, with little or no attention paid either to the institutional environment or to the political and economic relationships in which firms are embedded.

(Delbridge et al., 2011:487)

From its more established and pervasive influence in organisation studies, critical theory has evolved into HRM and its context. Despite the ‘concessions’ from some management scholars, critical HRM scholars (see Alvesson & Willmott, 2003; Delbridge & Keenoy, 2010; Keegan & Boselie, 2006; Kelemen & Rumens, 2008; Legge 1995) and critical scholars in associated disciplines (see Fleetwood & Hesketh, 2008; Thompson, 2011; Watson, 2004) continue to draw attention to the narrowness and conservatism of the mainstream HRM approach. The progression of critical management studies since the 1990s – drawing on Marxist, critical, feminist, post-modernist, post-structural and post-colonial theories – was characterised by ideological criticism, an emphasis on the social construction of reality, and a general questioning of extant social orders, dominating practices, ideologies, discourses and institutions (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Alvesson & Willmott, 1996). Fournier and Grey (2000) argue that critical management studies is organised around three core propositions: (a) ‘non-performativity’ – a disavowal of the automatic and unquestioning commitment to conventional business outcomes such as profit maximisation as inherently and inexorably the top priority in organisations; (b) ‘de-naturalisation’ – a recognition that the way things are is not natural, rational or inevitable and therefore could be different; and (c) ‘reflexivity’ – a rejection of the positivistic assumption that reality exists ‘out there’ waiting to be captured by the researcher in favour of recognising the role of the researcher in the construction of knowledge (see also Peltonen & Vaara, 2012).

The key substantive and methodological criticisms of the mainstream include the obsession with linking HRM and business performance, an unreflexive acceptance of the managerialist perspective, assumptions of unitarism and universalism, the decontextualization of management practices, and the dominance of functionalist and/or positivist approaches (see Delbridge & Keenoy, 2010; Janssens & Steyaert, 2009; Keegan & Boselie, 2006; Keenoy, 2009; Khan & Ackers, 2004). In fact, critical management studies is presented as ‘the only alternative to a stylized US-based, global managerial HRM paradigm, with a narrow positivist focus on business performance and individual behaviour, grounded in labour economics and managerial psychology’ (Ackers, 2011:324). Essentially, critical management scholars do not find mainstream management to be either ‘intellectually coherent and/or ethically defensible’ (Willmott, 1995:36). The goals of critical management studies include challenging the oppressive character of management and organisation; maintaining a critical stance towards instrumental reason; opposing dominant power, ideology, managerial privilege, and hierarchy; and analysing relations between power and knowledge, with the aim of showing how forms of knowledge, which appear to be neutral, serve to legitimise asymmetrical relations of power (see Adler et al., 2007; Alvesson et al., 2009; Keenoy, 1997; Kelemen & Rumens, 2008). According to Alvesson and Willmott (1992:1),

The disciplines of management are generally understood to be devoted to the (scientific) improvement of managerial practice and the functioning of organizations. It is assumed that questions directly and indirectly connected to efficiency and effectiveness are central; and that knowledge of management is of greatest relevance (only) to managers.
Like public sociologists, critical management scholars seek not just to explain social reality but also to change it. The primacy of instrumental rationality over social and human needs accentuates the need for organisational change, with the role of the researcher being to guide change in organisational processes. Critical researchers recognise that their work is value-laden and that their findings should help organisational members to understand the conditions for organisational change (Grimes, 1992:29). That is, critical scholars enter the research site with explicit philosophical assumptions and political objectives (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994:140). Critical perspectives on management are closely tied to the ideas of emancipation from oppressive beliefs and institutions, and organisational learning geared towards exposing the structures of dominance that (re)produce the social relationships and cultural practices within the organisation. Critical scholars tend to question the prevailing positivist consensus and its technocratic agenda, bemoan the dearth of ethnographic research, criticise the attempts to apply natural science methodology to management research, and reject the treatment of models of management as systems of free-floating ideas in favour of exploring the social mechanisms that (re)produce them (see Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Hesketh & Fleetwood, 2008; Piekkari & Welch, 2011; Syed et al., 2010).

Critical management studies offer philosophically and socially grounded critiques of the dominant ideology in Western society and the institutions which reproduce that ideology (Grimes, 1992:26). At the core of the critical theory lies a desire to develop a more rational, enlightened society through a process of critical reflection on the organisation and existing institutions and ideologies (Alvesson & Willmott, 2003). Critical researchers attempt to use their work as a form of social or cultural criticism and accept that ‘all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are social and historically constituted; that facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription; that language is central to the formation of subjectivity and that certain groups in any society are privileged over others’ (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994:140). Focusing on injustices and inequalities, critical management studies underscores the relations of domination in organisations, encourages collaborative engagement with the less powerful, and views the role of the researcher as identifying strategies for change. Central in many of these arguments are the sociological concepts used to explain most social behaviour: institution, network, power and cognition (Dobbin, 2004).

From the late 1970s, concepts and insights from sociology were incorporated into a form of ‘engaged scholarship’ revolving around a ‘sociology of work and employment’ approach, which was a critical and analytical alternative to the prescriptive and functionalist scholarship in personnel management, with its emphasis on prescribing ‘best practices’ in labour management (Watson, 2010:916). This approach was fuelled by a number of critical strands, including Weberian organisational theory and Marxian labour process theory, and enabled a searching study of managerial practices with the objective of understanding them rather than advising managers how ‘best’ to manage. Despite this sociologically inspired approach, an emphasis on ‘best practice’ was revived by the emergence of academic HRM, most notably in influential papers by Pfeffer (1993) and Huselid (1995).

Being ‘critical’, for much of the contemporary HRM literature, means not venturing too far from the mainstream and making sterile pronouncements about the distinction between ‘rhetoric’ and ‘reality’. A ‘critical’ label for the study of HRM would be ‘unnecessary if social science were to be seen as intrinsically critical in the sense of continuously challenging taken-for-granted assumptions about social institutions and practices and constantly acknowledging that conflicts of interest, social and economic inequalities and unintended consequences of organisational initiatives are an undeniable part of the reality of the social world’ (Watson, 2010:927). Systematic analyses of academic journal coverage of HRM show a ‘dominance of
consensus-oriented discourse [that is] prescriptive, positivist, managerial, functionalist and strategic’ (Keegan & Boselie, 2006:1505–1506). The rationalistic, unitary view of the firm, which informs much of the HRM literature, largely rules out the possibility of unintended and/or unanticipated consequences, disconnects managerial practices from the wider social and institutional context, and overlooks the often-competing interests and objectives shaping the behaviour of actors at various levels within the organisation (Kristensen & Zeitlin, 2005).

The analytical weakness of the unitarist conception of the work organisation, which so much HRM research tends to adopt, has long been exposed by the industrial relations tradition. In the latter, it is conventional to emphasise the social embeddedness of labour practices, whereas the universalist tradition of much HRM research means that this has been less explored in the HRM literature (Farndale et al., 2008:2007). Industrial relations scholars place greater emphasis on conflict and power than cooperation and normative integration, and any sense of ‘good’ industrial relations proffered invariably rests on a post hoc situational analysis, rather than on any transportable formula for national institutional reform (Akers, 2011; Edwards et al., 1994). In contrast to HRM, industrial relations have historically drawn extensively on sociology in general and radical workplace sociology in particular. As a result, the industrial relations tradition is sympathetic to labour and has an open, flexible theoretical stance that enables it to thrive in an interdisciplinary environment (see Ackers & Wilkinson, 2003). From the 1970s, as Ackers (2011:307) shows, the British industrial relations tradition ‘centred on a major programme of workplace research, increasingly informed by sociology and energized by a debate between pluralism and Marxism’. This trend was reflected in (a) the sociological turn of Alan Fox, Richard Hyman, Eric Batstone, and others, which drew pluralist industrial relations into dialogue with the radical sociology of work, thereby invigorating and renewing both areas of study; and (b) the sceptical and empirical engagement with management, which laid an intellectual foundation for the work of Sisson and others on HRM since the 1980s (ibid.). The combination of these two strands provided a legacy that is central to the contemporary field of work and employment relations.

Oswick et al. (2011:320) reveal the widespread ‘borrowing’ from sociology in the various fields of management studies – for example, institutional theory (DiMaggio), discourse theory (Fairclough), social network theory (Granovetter), labour process theory (Braverman), structuration theory (Giddens), and actor network theory (Latour). Critical approaches, in particular, have drawn extensively from sociology to analyse management and organisations as social rather than simply technical phenomena, which are deeply implicated in the (re)production of structures of domination and/or exploitation. Significantly, however, Adler et al. (2007:132–133) show how critical management studies have drawn on different aspects of Weber and Durkheim as compared to mainstream management scholarship. The latter uses Weber to naturalise the assumption that large, complex organisations must be organised in a bureaucratic form, even if it is invertebately alienating. Critical management studies scholars find in Weber resources for critical analyses. On the one hand, Weber is mobilised in the assessment of market relations as vehicles for domination, in the appraisal of bureaucracy as embodying the ‘iron cage’ of modernity, and in the critique of the advance of formal over substantive rationality. On the other hand, some critical scholars draw on Weber’s argument that bureaucracy can be a rampart against domination while others find in Weber a stimulus for charting the lived realities of managerial work. Durkheim is used by mainstream research in ways that naturalise the anomic conditions of the modern world, whereas critical research uses Durkheim to comment on these conditions and suggests that alternatives are possible.

Despite major differences in the assessments and forecasts given by mainstream HRM scholars at the centre and critical scholars at the margins of the discipline, according to Delbridge
et al. (2011:486) there are some important points of convergence. First, HRM research has been
too narrowly focused on the individual organisation, and even specific management practices
within the firm, without sufficient weight being given to the historical, institutional, economic,
and social contexts of these organisations and their practices. Second, despite enduring dis-
agreements, there is some consensus emerging around broadening the range of actors and voices
that are included in the HRM research agenda, especially those of employees. For instance,
Boselie et al. (2009:464) suggest that the critical and mainstream strands of HRM research are
‘growing closer together’ and are united in the view that there is ‘a need for small-scale, contextual
studies of HRM and a more inclusive, value-based understanding of employees, managers and
other stake-holders of the organization’. However, as Cai et al. (2011) among others point out,
the opinions of non-managerial employees have been largely neglected in work on HRM, which
tends to rely exclusively and problematically on managers as respondents.

Third, there is a growing appreciation of the need to broaden the objectives of HRM research
and to develop a research agenda that seeks explanation over description or universalist prescrip-
tion. Arguably, convergence on these point is more apparent than real: critical scholars have
shown that mainstream HRM researchers routinely overlook extra-organisational stakeholders
and that a pluralist understanding of organisations has fatal consequences for the unitarist
foundations of mainstream HRM and its managerialist agendas (see Collings, 2008; Delbridge
& Keenoy, 2010; Janssens & Steyaert, 2009).

Drawing an explicit connection to Burawoy’s call to harness sociology’s ‘longstanding
critical imagination’, which reminds us ‘the world could be different’, Watson (2010:927–928)
argues that it is possible to work in a ‘critical participative’ way in ‘interactive engaged’ research.
The latter should not underestimate the degrees of conflict of interest that exist in employment
situations, nor should it exclude the wider public in the sense of equipping the citizens of society
with an understanding of the realities of their situations and prospects. Such an understanding
is vital if meaningful public debate about social change, work and employment is to occur (Syed
et al., 2010). However, this advocacy raises the question of the extent to which academic HRM
researchers have an interest in, a capability for, or the legitimacy to support going beyond being
scholars to act as public intellectuals. The challenge, therefore,

is to bring into this debate all of those who are interested in the academic study of HRM. If
HRM research is going to have an impact on all of those in society whose lives are
affected by HRM practices, then a debate about how it can be taken into the public arena
needs to occur. This requires bringing together, on the one hand, those who are currently
happy devoting their efforts to identifying ways in which employment management
practices might enhance the ‘performance’ or the ‘competitive advantage’ of employing
organisations and, on the other hand, those who currently dissociate themselves from such
work by attaching the word ‘critical’ to their work.

(Watson, 2010:928)

It is difficult to envisage a study of HRM practices in the absence of concepts such as social
construction, discourse, contradiction, struggle, identity, contingency, and so on. There are,
however, three caveats to consider. First, appreciating the socially constructed nature of social
phenomena is not a licence for the kind of voluntarism that makes them merely discursively
revisable (Bhaskar, 1989). Social institutions have a structural integrity, which limits and enables
what they can and cannot do. Second, an obvious way to pursue a critical agenda is for the
researcher straightforwardly to attach their work to a particular political agenda; to engage in
an ‘oppositional’ form of critical study. A hazard in this regard, according to Janssens and Steyaert (2009:143), is that ‘a form of criticism which only resists HRM tends to remain within the existing frame(s) and offers no theoretical alternative’. But even if this is avoided, there remains a significant problem for any kind of critical management studies concerning itself with the emancipation of particular social groups (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992). Pragmatic realism presents this kind of critical strategy with an especially tough challenge; it recognises that a pragmatically worthwhile piece of knowledge has the potential to be helpful to anyone who reads it, regardless of his or her interests or concerns (Watson, 2010:926).

**International human resource management**

While HRM has become a dominant perspective through which the employment relations of capitalist corporations are evaluated, this rise to dominance has come at the cost of a narrowing of the research agenda and an increasing reliance on managerialist and economistic theories of the firm, which reflect a broader free-market, anti-statist orientation within HRM. These concerns are especially pertinent to IHRM: it has focused primarily on ‘the policies, practices and strategies of HRM practitioners in individual multinational enterprises, exhibiting both a managerialist perspective and an organizational level of analysis at the cost of a wider assessment of the context of employment relations, their negotiated and local nature, and their range of potential outcomes’ (Delbridge et al., 2011:483–484). Broader questions of corporate governance are also closely tied to different paradigms or ways of conceptualising the organisation or firm (Aguilera & Jackson, 2010). IHRM has therefore been vulnerable to the same flaws as HRM more generally (Dowling, 1999; Keating & Thompson, 2004), but with the problem further intensified because it has been dominated by a particularly narrow set of concerns centred on the managers and management practices of large, Western MNCs.

There is a persistent, albeit largely unheeded, disquiet about the limited progress that has been made towards establishing a systemic treatment of the sources of cross-national labour management diversity that is genuinely useful in explaining the reasons for and nature of that diversity (see Almond & Menendez, 2012; Clark et al., 1999; Hyman, 2004; Paauwe & Boselie, 2007; Peltonen & Vaara, 2012). Much of this lack of progress can be traced to prevailing epistemological and ontological assumptions. Empiricist conceptions of causation and/or voluntarist notions of strategic choice lie at the root of the failure by HRM researchers to account for the tendential, emergent and contradictory properties of managerial responses to the environment. These concerns are brought into stark relief when HRM turns its ethnocentric gaze to the developing world (see Adeleye, 2011; Elvira & Davila, 2005; Jackson, 2012; Lehrer & Delaunay, 2009). As Caldas et al. (2011:442) contend,

it seems reasonable that ideas such as naturalization and an exclusive focus on efficiency and control, which are typical of the criticism of HR management in general, would also apply to IHRM. The typical positivism of HR research seems, indeed, to have crossed frontiers and, in the same way as its domestic equivalent, has concentrated on scientific approaches that favor the transposition of an objectivist and naturalizing epistemology of social phenomena in the cross-frontier context, which may magnify its limitations and deficiencies as a scientific field. If, in a domestic environment, the generalization of concepts and the extrapolation of tendencies were already debatable, any attempt to reproduce this across frontiers gives rise to even more suspicion, and its rigor to even greater doubt.
Recent applications of post-colonial theory to the study of MNCs encourages a conceptualisation of these corporations in terms of not only a clash between different ‘logics of appropriateness’, but also an unequal encounter between colonising (mostly Northern) and colonised (typically Southern) organisational actors (Boussebaa et al., 2012:470). For critical scholars, the IHRM approach explains the neo-colonialist movements of MNCs in practice (Caldas et al., 2011; Clark et al., 1999; Peltonen, 2006). That is, they embed global-local tensions in longstanding, macro-level processes of colonial and imperial domination. Such a perspective is necessary because the various national contexts across which the MNC operates are not merely separate and different institutional settings; they are also social formations that have been imbricated in a complex and shifting hierarchy of nations over centuries. Presently, the USA may be seen as a ‘society-in-dominance’ – that is, a society ‘deemed to represent “modernity” or the future, and act . . . as a measure of “progress” and “development”’ – that provides a model of employment practices that are viewed as ‘best practices’ at the global level (Smith & Meiksins, 1995:256). Similarly, drawing on the insights of global labour process theory, discourse analysis and transnational feminism will deepen IHRM’s understanding of the ways in which asymmetrical power relations, structured inequalities, discursive and institutional practices, and the politics of identity shape the actions of MNCs (Peltonen & Vaara, 2012).

Although Björkman and Stahl (2006) and Peltonen (2006) correctly point out the difficulty of establishing the parameters of IHRM, given its infancy as a distinct discipline, certain broad inferences have been drawn about the IHRM field. This field, according to Jain et al. (1998:553), has evolved along at least three distinct, although interrelated, lines of inquiry. The first of these, outwardly the most developed, concerns the application of HRM techniques in the management of expatriate employees. The literature in this area is extensive and consists of descriptive, prescriptive and analytical work. In general, the focus is on the concerns of companies in assuring that the HRM practices utilised contribute to organisational effectiveness. Delbridge et al. (2011:484) encourage a move beyond this narrow focus at the enterprise level to situate the study of IHRM within wider economic, organisational, political and institutional contexts. In an explicit attempt to challenge the managerialism of mainstream HRM, Delbridge et al. (2011) build on the concerns of those placing the emphasis on ‘comparative HRM’ and a broader, ‘societally embedded’ approach. In so doing, they seek to contribute to an emerging interest in critical HRM and to accentuate the need for a broader research focus, which will expose the fundamental weaknesses of universalist assumptions and demand a wider range of theoretical resources be brought to bear than has been the case in mainstream IHRM (see also Keating & Thompson, 2004; Peltonen & Vaara, 2012). In particular, Delbridge et al. (2011:484–485) argue for the broadening of IHRM through the development of a wide-ranging research agenda, which (a) extends beyond the organisation to give weight to context; (b) goes beyond managerialism to give voice to the multiple actors involved; and (c) eschews universalism to acknowledge the contingent and emergent nature of management, and embraces the full range of relevant theories in order to examine and explain (as opposed to describe and prescribe) aspects of IHRM.

A second area, which has been largely descriptive, deals with national HRM systems. It is concerned with understanding the types of HRM practices typically utilised within a given country with regard to indigenous employees, as well as comparing such practices cross-nationally or cross-culturally (see Edwards et al., 2007; Morley & Collings, 2004; Schuler et al., 2002). A third major area concerns the interplay between MNCs, host countries and HRM practices as applied to host-country nationals. The principal focus of research dealing with the host-country HRM practices of MNCs is largely on the extent to which MNCs should or do localize versus import HRM practices (see Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989; Clegg et al., 1998; Fu & Kamenou, 2011;
Jain et al., 1998; Ngo et al., 1998; Schuler et al., 1993). As Morgan (2012) points out, this is conceptualised in terms of a dual institutional logic: the micro-politics within MNCs versus the macro-politics between MNCs and the institutions of the national business system. Neo-institutional perspectives increasingly predominate in the accounts of national variations in the HRM practices of MNCs. These accounts are couched in terms of a distinction between liberal and coordinated market economies, which revolves largely around degrees of institutional density.

Mounting criticisms of the global integration versus local responsiveness framework encouraged the refinement and introduction of a number of distinctions to characterise the various approaches adopted by MNCs (see Almond, 2011; Boussebaa et al., 2012; Edwards & Kuruvilla, 2005; Ferner et al., 2004; Keating & Thompson, 2004; Whitley et al., 2003). According to Edwards (2011), there are diverse ways in which MNCs operate and despite the role of technological developments in building linkages between the operations of MNCs across countries, these linkages can take many different forms, shaped in part by the character of the nation-states from which the MNCs originate and the sectors in which they operate. For Lertxundi and Landeta (2012), approaching strategies of exportation/adaptation as two exclusive alternatives oversimplifies the issue, undervalues the distinction between general policies and specific practices, does not do justice to the different levels of study, and fails to go beyond convergence and divergence of management systems to cross-convergence. To be sure, localisation versus importation is not an all-or-nothing proposition: in practice, firms are likely to draw on both local and imported HRM practices. The mix of local versus imported practices depends on a range of factors manifesting themselves at various levels – some specific to the parent company and some specific to the host-country subsidiary and its environment – which may lead to headquarters-subsidiary tensions that undermine the development of unified global organisational structures (see Almond & Ferner, 2006; Blunsdon & Reed, 2003; Boussebaa et al., 2012; Edwards et al., 1996; Geppert & Williams, 2006; Kristensen & Zeitlin, 2005).

Findings from analyses of papers appearing in leading IHRM journals confirm the limitations of the field, which include a narrow focus on the attitudes of top managers of MNCs, a preponderance of performance management issues, and American- or British-centric research with almost all the empirical studies carried out in advanced countries with large corporations (see Batt & Banerjee, 2011; Clark et al., 1999; De Cieri et al., 2007; Gerhart, 2008; Harvey, 2002; Warner, 2005). As voices and organisations other than those that are traditionally heard in the IHRM literature grow more relevant in the globalised context, the emphasis in HRM on furthering the managerial agenda via a narrow focus on performance issues in MNCs from the developed economies becomes increasingly irrelevant to and disconnected from employment relationships. In fact, Delbridge et al. (2011:489–490) argue that

IHRM will become increasingly irrelevant to both researchers and practitioners if it does not extend and replenish the theoretical resources at its disposal in order to allow a more comprehensive and compelling articulation of the increasingly diverse and complex range of issues that are important in managing people in international contexts. This needs to go beyond the ‘global integration-local responsiveness’ framework that has been useful for descriptive purposes but cannot embrace the complexity inherent in such global dynamics nor offer the multi-level analytical framing that will be required in seeking explanations of empirical findings.

The integration argument is that there are universal best practices which can be cost-effectively and fairly adopted across the organisation worldwide (Pfeffer, 1994). The differentiation
approach focuses on the need to fit HRM practices to local conditions, rejecting the notion of one best way of doing things in all contexts (Delery & Doty, 1996). This integration/differentiation terminology is closely linked to debates about the value of HRM, which relate to the opposition between universalistic claims of ‘best-practice’ and contextualised accounts of ‘best-fit’ (see Almond, 2011; Brewster et al., 2008; Farndale & Paauwe, 2007; Kim et al., 2010; Lertxundi & Landeta, 2012; Paauwe & Boselie, 2003). The idea that organisations are embedded in a wider institutional environment and that their behaviour is a response to market pressures as well as formal and informal institutional pressures is juxtaposed to the idea that certain human resource practices are universally successful. Besides the significant methodological weaknesses in universalistic accounts of HRM ‘bundles’ (see Hesketh & Fleetwood, 2008; Kaufman, 2010; Marchington & Grugulis, 2000; Paauwe, 2009), the implication is that employers are largely unconstrained in their ability to manage employees and to construct control mechanisms in the workplace. Since it fails to take seriously the institutional nature of the employment relationship, this conception is fundamentally flawed (Marsden, 2004). Sociologically based studies consistently show that the negotiation of order and the institutionalisation of the wage-effort bargain in the workplace are far more contested, intricate, muddled and contradictory than is generally assumed in the mainstream HRM literature (see Beynon & Nichols, 2006; Edwards, 1986; Jermier et al., 1994; Knights et al., 1985; Pritchard et al., 2000; Smith et al., 1991).

Sociology and international human resource management

As with HRM, the influence of sociology on IHRM is variegated. Part of this variegation is dependent on the methodological and ideological orientation of the scholar/s in question. In this regard, Collinson and Morgan (2009) identify two distinct theoretical approaches and conceptual frameworks in the literature on MNCs. The first approach regards MNCs as broadly positive and progressive. In this view, MNCs are agents of economic progress, principal factors in the expansion of the international division of labour, and the diffusers of modern technology and production techniques, which generalise the benefits of globalisation. This approach draws largely from economics and is based on ‘issues of performance, ownership, prices and costs, profit maximization, markets and hierarchies, internationalization, rational agents and strategic intent’ (Collinson & Morgan, 2009:6).

The second view is that MNCs reflect both the increasing concentration of capital and the growing integration of production on an international scale. MNCs seek to maximise the exploitation of the workforce, strengthen the economic grip of the developed societies on the natural and human resources of developing countries, and transcend the regulatory institutions anchored at the level of the nation-state, thereby ‘fermenting international rivalries’ (Collinson & Morgan, 2009:5). MNCs exercise this power by locating plants in countries with what they consider less restrictive regulatory environments, by lobbying governments and international institutions, by comparing performance across the MNC, and by squeezing costs in subsidiaries through coercive comparisons and threats to relocate production. This view is loosely based on sociology with an emphasis on ‘issues of social relations, contexts, institutions, learning, interest groups, power, authority and exploitation’ (Collinson & Morgan, 2009:6). This distinction is mirrored in the debate in IHRM between the so-called functionalists and the opposing critical approach (Caldas et al., 2011:435). Whereas the functionalist tradition focuses attention on economic considerations and the transfer of HRM best practices across borders, critical approaches tend to highlight sociopolitical issues and point out that IHRM, just as domestic
HRM, would be ultimately concerned with maintaining managerial control and power relations in organisations.

Comparing mainstream analyses from IHRM with sociologically orientated perspectives on work and employment reveals significant differences. Voss points to three noteworthy, underlying premises that differ between these perspectives (cited in Collings, 2008:176–177). First, the nature and level of analysis – while HRM research focuses almost exclusively on endogenous factors within the firm, sociologically orientated perspectives expand the analysis to exogenous influences, such as the economy, society and culture (see Ackers & Wilkinson, 2003; Bélanger et al., 1994; Marginson et al., 1988; Rubery & Grimshaw, 2003; Whitley & Kristensen, 1997). Accordingly, sociologically based research has the potential to provide insights into aspects of labour management in MNCs – such as trade union recognition, collective bargaining and employee participation – that are often neglected in the mainstream IHRM literature, which views the firm as an atomistic entity operating without political challenges.

Sociologically orientated work and employment studies may also be distinguished from IHRM based on their consideration of the responses of other industrial relations actors (such as the state, employers’ organisations, trade unions, works councils and work groups) towards managerial strategies in MNCs. Furthermore, as corporations have adopted networked forms of organisation and outsourced a growing number of operations, the firm as the unit of analysis has become problematic (Grabher, 1993). This makes it perilous to attribute firm profitability to the HRM strategy of a principal firm when it depends on the management of a complex supply chain and tiers of subcontractors in different contexts over which HRM has little or no control (Delbridge et al., 2011). There are also broader, more significant and compelling issues than maximising MNC performance that have come to the fore since the advent of globalisation and neoliberalisation. These have encouraged sweeping changes to the structures and institutions of the traditional employment relationship, and are characterised by the rise of new forms of organisation, flexible work, polyvalent skills, the emergence of new multinational actors and so on (see Thornley et al., 2010; Usami, 2009).

In a review of the literature, Clark et al. (1999:534–536) outline some of the key characteristics of research on IHRM: (a) it has a greater focus on functions, such as hiring, compensation and training, and therefore does not integrate the results obtained with issues like the organisation of work or industrial relations; (b) it is predominantly quantitative, using questionnaires which may not be appropriate for the study of complex themes like cultural differences or the adjustment of practices; (c) there are few longitudinal studies; (d) it focuses mainly on the most industrialised countries in the North; (e) it tends to be ethnocentric, since it uses theories and instruments largely developed in Anglo-Saxon countries and then reproduces them as if they were universally applicable; (f) in general, it indicates, but does not explain the differences or similarities between countries, and when they are explained, the cultural and institutional factors (commonly supported by the work of Geert Hofstede) are the most widely mentioned, with little indication of either the nature of these factors or how they exercise an influence on the research topic; (g) it is more directed towards the study of top managers than the production or white-collar workers within MNCs; (h) it shows little evidence of cross-fertilisation of relevant debates from related disciplines; and (i) it fails to explore the role of wider regulatory agencies such as the state in any meaningful way. Work and employment studies tend to adopt contrasting positions on all these characteristics.

Second, the understanding of conflict in the workplace – while IHRM is largely premised on a unitarist understanding of conflict, sociologically orientated perspectives provide alternative perspectives such as pluralism (Khan & Ackers, 2004). The weaknesses of IHRM’s narrowly
unitarist and economistic approach to understanding the employment relationship are widely explored in the field of industrial relations, for example. In contrast to IHRM studies, sociologically orientated perspectives are more likely to focus on the role of power struggles and structural determinations in society; emphasise the antagonisms between the parties; be sensitive to conflict, uncertainty and tension; and recognise the significance of collective groups of employees, often represented by a trade union, as a pluralist interest group within the firm (see Alonso & Martinez-Lucio, 2006; Edwards, 2005; Kaufman, 2008; Wilkinson & Townshend, 2010). The collective determination of terms and conditions employment, in particular, is an area of study where work and employment relations scholars have a significant advantage over IHRM researchers. Indeed, IHRM research has been widely criticised for its lack of consideration of the significance of power in management. As Edwards and Kuruvilla (2005) note, since institutional factors do not have determining effects, there is scope for organisational politics and power to shape the ways in which MNCs manage their international workforces. They further note that the impact of power has also been largely neglected in studies of the global–local debate in IHRM research (see also Edwards & Bélanger, 2009; Geppert & Williams, 2006). Arguably, a sociologically orientated perspective, with pluralist underpinnings, would assist researchers in addressing these and other related deficiencies and in advancing theory in the field.

Third, the fundamental reason for unions – sociologically orientated perspectives challenge the managerial assumption that trade unions are a response to bad management, a failure of HRM policies and/or the work of agitators. Rather, they are a means of redressing the power imbalance between labour and management. Despite the extensively debated shortcomings of Braverman’s (1974) seminal work, what must be retained from his analysis is a rejection of the view of the employment relationship as merely an exchange relationship, as primarily a site of negotiation rather than of exploitation. Given the lack of a theory of power in IHRM, the consideration of power is one of the key means through which industrial relations research can contribute to a better understanding of management in MNCs. The analysis of collective bargaining by industrial relations scholars reveals the significant contribution of industrial sociology to elevating the discussion of bargaining ‘styles’, ‘values’ and ‘power’ beyond a narrow focus on the workplace (Ackers, 2011:319).

Particularly significant in the context of the global business environment within which MNCs operate is the fact that, like other social relations, attempts to regulate and control the employment relationship have unintended consequences, which may conflict with employers’ original intentions. These insights are derived from an essential feature of the employment relationship: the employer can only purchase the employee’s capacity to work and has to ensure that this capacity is realised. Hence, there can be no fully determinate ex ante model of labour management. For individual capitalists as for capital in general, according to Hyman (1987:30), there is no ‘one best way’ of managing the contradictions of capitalist production, only ‘different routes to partial failure’. The implementation of managerial strategies is shaped by a host of contextual factors and invariably generates unforeseen and unintended consequences. Managerial strategy is therefore best conceptualised as ‘the pragmatic choice among alternatives none of which can prove [entirely] satisfactory’ (ibid.). While this is occasionally acknowledged in the IHRM field, given the unitarist underpinnings of much of its research, it is typically assumed that these tensions can be overcome through the application of ‘best practice’ techniques, which tend to pay no heed to exogenous influences and solutions.

The role of institutions is especially important in any assessment of sociology’s impact on the study of management in general and IHRM in particular. For instance, in contrast to the idea of ‘best practice’, the notion of ‘best fit’ draws strongly on neo-institutional theory
(Lertxundi & Landeta, 2012). The foundational works in sociology exemplify the discipline’s central concern with explaining institutions (see Adler et al., 2007; Arts, 2004; Dobbin, 2004). Durkheim introduced the idea of institutions as systems of shared beliefs, norms and collective sentiments that mould social behaviour. Weber pioneered the interpretive study of social institutions through his comparative analysis of cultural beliefs, economy and polity. Parsons later developed a structural-functionalist framework that conceived of institutions as organised systems of shared cultural beliefs, norms and values.

Sociology’s longstanding concern with explaining institutions is particularly significant given the difficulties encountered in explaining institutional factors by using the concepts and methods of associated disciplines such as (neoclassical) economics. As Nee (2003) points out, economists interested in studying social institutions have found that the more they come to understand the workings of institutions as endogenous to social processes in society, the more their work must address questions that require them to integrate sociological variables. Generally, neo-institutionalism in economics and sociology is unified around the belief that neoclassical economics is severely limited by (among others) its unrealistic behavioural assumption of individual utility maximisation and its improbable supposition of zero-transaction costs, which imply that extant institutions, social relations and cultural beliefs are extraneous to explanations of economic and organisational life. The common starting point of these approaches is the claim that institutions matter and that understanding institutions and institutional change is a principal task of the social sciences.

Sociological neo-institutionalists – such as John Meyer, Richard Scott, Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell – have reshaped the study of organisations by analysing how institutional context and cultural beliefs shape their behaviour. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) introduce into neo-institutional theory the ideas of Weber, which is evident in their account of how organisational fields emerge and then constrain the actions of agents under conditions of uncertainty. Sociological perspectives include the cognitive-cultural as well as the regulatory dimension, thereby offering a broader understanding of institutions, which takes into account that institutions not only constrain but also enable social actors by framing social situations and making sense of them (see Heidenreich, 2012; Ebner & Beck, 2008; Kostova et al., 2008). Neo-institutional economic sociology, according to Nee (2003), includes ideas and insights from this organisational research programme, and integrates these into a framework of sociological research that examines context-bound rationality shaped by custom, networks, norms, cultural beliefs and institutional arrangements. For Nee (2003), institutions are not simply the formal and informal constraints that stipulate the structure of incentives or discrete institutional elements (such as beliefs, norms, organisations and communities) of a social system, but fundamentally involve individual and/or collective actors, who pursue real interests in concrete institutional structures.

Economic sociology is heterogeneous and diverse, with no single, dominant theoretical perspective. The influence of Weber and Parsons is pervasive. So too is the ideas of Polanyi concerning the ‘economicist fallacy’ of equating the economy with the market and his concept of ‘embeddedness’. The latter idea is often employed in a loose sense as largely synonymous with the view that the economy is part of a larger institutional structure. Granovetter (1985), however, uses the notion of embeddedness in a more precise way, to mean that economic action takes place within the networks of social relations that constitute the social structure. This entails an explanation of organisational diversity that cannot be reduced to the mere search for efficiency by atomistic individuals or firms. The choices made by actors are influenced by their social relations and by their cognitive and normative attitudes (see Arts, 2004; Beckert, 2003; Trigilia, 2004). While Granovetter’s embeddedness approach laid the basis for the revitalisation of the sociological study of economic life, his singular emphasis on the nature of interpersonal
ties and the structure of networks contributed to a narrowing of the scope of economic sociology from the broader institutional canvass in the foundational writings of Weber, Schumpeter and Polanyi (Nee, 2003). Moreover, others have argued that economic action is embedded not only in the social structure but also in culture (Aguilera & Jackson, 2010; Almond & Menendez, 2012). In this regard, Zukin and DiMaggio (1990) have attempted to distinguish between different kinds of embeddedness, such as cognitive, cultural, structural and political. The debate on embeddedness draws attention to the flaws of over- or under-socialised accounts of firms in comparative cross-national studies (Krippner & Alvarez, 2007). In comparative institutional analyses, the embeddedness of MNCs is analysed as (among others) the outcome of the close interconnections between a ‘national business system’ and firms’ governance systems (Whitley, 1999) or as the alternative paths of organising businesses and management created by different ‘societal effects’ (Sorge, 2004). Even so, the concept of embeddedness remains in need of greater theoretical specification and empirical exploration.

Economic sociologists – such as Neil Fligstein, Richard Swedberg and Victor Nee – argue for a change in emphasis towards an explanation of how institutions interact with social networks and norms to mould and guide economic action (Nee & Swedberg, 2005). The neo-institutional model essentially holds that organisational survival is determined by the extent of alignment with the institutional environment. For instance, MNCs operating in a new context are subject to ‘a range of forces (coercive, mimetic and normative) to develop a HRM approach that is perceived to be legitimate to influential stakeholders within this context’ (Lertxundi & Landeta, 2012:1788–1789). While allowing for a nominal amount of agency, neo-institutionalists largely suggest that the incorporation of institutionally mandated elements allows organisational actors to portray the organisation as legitimate, thereby enhancing its likelihood of survival (Kostova et al., 2008). Sociological approaches, as Heidenreich (2012:573) shows, broaden the analysis by focusing on the influence of the wider institutional milieu on MNCs (‘macro-institutional embeddedness’), the micro-political and cognitive-cultural dimensions of agency (‘micro-institutional embeddedness’) and the interdependency between transnational and other social spaces (‘organisational embeddedness’).

An increasing number of IHRM scholars are applying institutional theory to the study of MNCs since it provides fertile theoretical ground for examining a wide range of critical issues and allows for theorising at multiple levels of analysis, which is essential for understanding MNCs (see Björkman & Gooderham 2012; Brewster et al., 2008; Farndale et al., 2008; Ferner & Quintanilla, 1998; Geppert & Williams, 2006; Jackson & Deeg, 2008). In general, most IHRM scholars draw extensively from neo-institutionalism and utilise the concepts of organisational field, legitimacy, isomorphism, and mechanisms of institutional pressures.

Kostova et al. (2008:994–997) identify the following fundamental applications of institutional theory in the current IHRM literature: (a) to conceptualise national environments in terms of regulatory, cognitive and normative ‘pillars’, introducing concepts such as country institutional profile; (b) to conceptualise processes of large-scale transformation of national systems through the notions of institutional transition, upheaval and imperfection; (c) to explain comparative national business systems based on institutional embeddedness; (d) to explain similarities in practices across organisations resulting from isomorphic pressures; (e) to study constraints on the diffusion and institutionalisation of organisational practices across borders and units of MNCs; and (f) to explain the relationship between MNCs and their host environments based on notions such as legitimacy and liability of foreignness. Institutions are therefore symbolic, economic, political and legally sanctioned orders that are reproduced and dynamically transformed by embedded social actors, who are, in turn, moulded by these institutions (Heidenreich, 2012:556). An extended embeddedness concept, which assimilates the roles of agency, multi-dimensional
institutions and the co-evolution of individual and corporate actors and structures, may facilitate a wider perception of the social construction of MNCs. In addition, if terms such ‘political’ and ‘economic’ institutions are understood as applying to underlying generative mechanisms (rather than events or things), all of which may govern any particular institution and codetermine its activities, many misconstructions may be avoided.

**Conclusion**

The task of assessing the role of sociology in IHRM is complicated by several factors, chief among which is the fact that neither discipline is homogenous. On the one hand, both areas of study draw on a number of distinct disciplines. On the other hand, the different fields of sociology have had a differential influence on the various sub-fields of HRM. The sociology of work and organisations as well as economic sociology have had a significant impact on studies in IHRM that explore issues such as embeddedness, institutions, human resource development, knowledge flows, social capital, network relations, corporate social responsibility, research and design, and the role of culture and discourse. By contrast, sociological theories and concepts are less evident in what are arguably the mainstream concerns of IHRM. In many ways, the emphasis in industrial sociology on conflict, contradiction, struggle and reflexivity is inimical to the stress on consensus, integration, harmony and best practice by the mainstream HRM literature. Furthermore, although notions such as ‘path dependence’ and ‘embeddedness’ have strong sociological roots, the path dependence and embeddedness of corporate governance arrangements are explained by different generative mechanisms across the theoretical paradigms in HRM.

A key challenge posed by interdisciplinarity is sustaining disciplinary rigour without sacrificing social relevance. Burawoy’s call for the creation of a public sociology, which is more relevant and useful to the people whom sociologists study and with whom they work, represents one of the more meaningful responses to the longstanding and increasingly compelling criticism that the disciplines of higher education are out of date, out of touch, and are failing to address pressing societal issues. Public sociology is therefore a commendable attempt to bolster the discipline. However, as Burawoy (2005) also shows, professional work needs to be protected, at some level, since sociology can have no public, critical or policy face without tried and tested methods as well as accumulated bodies of knowledge. In this regard, disciplinary work is vital because it exposes the pitfalls of focusing on one aspect of the social: on structure at the expense of agency, on global at the cost of local, on policies at the expense of practices, on institutions at the cost of culture, on stability at the expense of change, and so on. This is apparent, for instance, in the failure by many IHRM scholars to disentangle the relative influence of MNC internal and external regulative, normative and cultural processes as well as explore the sub-national embeddedness of MNCs.

Research shows that ‘the notion of the global corporation transcending national boundaries is, very largely, myth’ (Ferner, 1997:19) and that the creation of a transnational social space is a precarious and exacting task because it requires balancing the conflicting demands of local and corporate embeddedness (Morgan, 2001:11). Distinct strategies of competitiveness are forged in the context of conflicting organised interests, with particular organisational and institutional resources, which struggle to assert discrete paths of restructuring in a context of specific strategic selectivities (Jessop, 2011). Despite these and other challenges, there are some encouraging signs of (elements within) HRM shifting away from the rather bland and prescriptive approach of earlier accounts towards a stress on the negotiability, uncertainties and contested nature of the managerial process. Yet, this shift is largely confined to the critical margins of the discipline.
Sociology has much to offer IHRM in this regard. For instance, it would call much more attention to the ambiguities, contradictions, silences and tensions that always plague strategic action.

Taxonomies of managerial practice – a key concern and focus of HRM – must reflect endogenous as well as exogenous opportunities and constraints as mediated through prevailing normative and institutional frameworks, discursive apparatuses, organisational structures and regulatory mechanisms. Variation in managerial behaviour is rooted in different configurations of regulatory mechanisms, diverse dynamics and trajectories, and specific institutional arrangements. Consequently, it is necessary to conceptualise general taxonomic categories not only in terms of successive phases of development, but also in terms of ‘historically coexistent and competing local alternatives’ (Peck, 1996:120). When imported, managerial practices tend to be translated and recombined with local practices before they are adopted, only certain dimensions of these imported practices are fully implemented, and their adaptation often leads to new or hybrid forms of these practices (Aguilera & Jackson, 2010; Boyer et al., 1998). While ‘hybridisation’ is a pervasive phenomenon across and within national capitalisms, the hybridisation thesis should not be reduced to the claim that organisational variety is purely a product of the way employers have modified the guiding principles of HRM in response to the requirements of the local institutional context. A significant part of the variety within and between firms is a product of managerial efforts to draw on local institutional and normative resources in ways that offer distinct compromises between conflicting interests in the workplace. Research on hybridisation has frequently deployed it in an undifferentiated, mechanical fashion that impedes multi-scalar analysis and conceptual bricolage (Gamble, 2010). The constitution and institutional bases of hybridisation are empirical questions that require detailed historical evidence of the processes of institutional diffusion, borrowing, clashes and complementarity. Broad generalised categories are inadequate to explore the complex dynamics and diverse patterns of hybridisation. This suggests that the binary opposition between best-practice and best-fit HRM is poor reflection of the variety in managerial practices. Ultimately, ‘hybridisation’ is proof of the constitutive heterogeneity, discontinuity and contingency of actual managerial practices.

Although dominant national regulatory models tend to place limits on the patterns of work and employment relations, there are no a priori rules dictating how diverse regulatory mechanisms will be coordinated in a specific empirical context. This is partly a product of the differential interaction across time and space between the institutional processes associated with production, reproduction and social regulation (Peck, 1996). Given the variety of levels at which the employment relationship may be coordinated and the non–zero-sum articulation of markets and institutions, it is misleading to classify managerial practices in terms of a simple contrast between the relative influence of markets and institutions. The forms that regulation assumes and the dynamics that it displays are determined in large measure by the structures and propensities of the object that is to be regulated. The employment relationship is dependent on numerous mechanisms of reproduction, regularisation and governance capable of generating the social rules and conventions necessary for its cohesion and durability. As a complex and contingently realised ‘fit’ between institutional mediation and capital accumulation, labour regulation is patterned by prevailing institutional frameworks; unevenly realised across space, time and scales; and inherently unstable and conflict-ridden. A search for coherent regulatory modes is misguided: regulation is always emergent and tendential rather than being achieved (Painter & Goodwin, 1995). In other words, the reality of local ‘regulatory dialectics’ is incompatible with the idea of a standard set of solutions that can be applied independently of local contexts. This approach allows us to proceed beyond mere taxonomies of managerial practices to explore their conditions of possibility, emergent properties, contradictions, reproduction and propensity for transformation.
References


