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Socially *irresponsible* human resource management?

Conceptualising HRM philosophy and practice in relation to in-work poverty in the UK

Abstract

This article is motivated by extant literature on how first-world countries, such as the UK, increasingly face problems with poverty arising from employment (in-work poverty). The main problem addressed by this article concerns making a clearer conceptual link between HRM philosophy and practice and in-work poverty. To address this conceptual problem, life history interviews (n=27) were conducted with employees experiencing in-work poverty, due to their effectiveness at explaining why people get into low pay cycles. Based on a lens built through consulting literature on socially responsible HRM (SRHRM) and in-work poverty, the findings demonstrate a conceptual link between HRM philosophy and practice and in-work poverty, resulting in a proposed model of socially *irresponsible* HRM (SIHRM). We suggest that, negative and important employee outcomes from forms of SIHRM arise not just in the work setting, but also at the work-life interface. The article has implications in terms of informing a range of HRM and in-work poverty debates. Further research and the testing of the ideas generated through this article is recommended before concluding on the wider implications of a model of HRM based on social *irresponsibility*.

Key words: socially responsible HRM, socially *irresponsible* HRM, low pay, in-work poverty, UK, employment law

Introduction

HRM has evolved in many ways in the past four decades. One key development is the incorporation of corporate social responsibility into HRM, leading to what is referred to as socially responsible HRM (SRHRM) (Barrena-Martínez, López-Fernández & Romero-Fernández, Online Early). Early theorists referred to SRHRM as “HRM with morals”, or going beyond minimal legal requirements and treating employees with dignity and respect, resulting in high levels of confidence and trust between employee and employer (Carroll, 1991). In more recent times, SRHRM has increasingly been theorised in terms of employer positive attitudes towards remuneration, promotion, training, internal information and communication, health and safety in the workplace, equal opportunities and non-discrimination (Celma, Martínez-García & Coender, 2014).

At the same time as increased interest in SRHRM, the UK is said to be experiencing the most severe decline in real wages for nearly 180 years (Tiley, 2016). The UK is also witnessing increased and record levels of in-work poverty - situations where employee income is at or below 60 per cent of national median income (Marx & Nolan, 2012). Indeed, despite government commitments to a “National Living Wage” and the high-profile campaigning work of the National Living Wage Foundation, it is estimated that 17 per cent of the workforce or 5.25 million UK employees are affected by in-work poverty (Markit, 2013). However, research privileges the subjective experience of in-work poverty – for example, suggesting in-work poverty to be a deeply degrading experience, with millions of UK employees unable to afford household durables and housing (Eurostat, 2016), enjoy a positive well-being (Deeming, 2009) and take part in wider society (Abe & Pantazis, 2014). As such, if SRHRM is an increasingly common and meaningful practice, why is it countries such as the UK are facing widespread, long-term and growing problems with wage stagnation and in-work poverty?

Given recent negative trends in pay and wages in the UK, the aim of this article is to consider the possibility of a further emergent strand of HRM, one of socially *irresponsible* HRM (SIHRM). What this is suggesting is a link between HRM practice and in-work poverty, with such a link conceptualised in contradistinction to the ethos of SRHRM. This is an approach adopted successfully by Ackroyd and Thompson (1999) in their work entitled *Organizational Misbehaviour*, where an attempt is made to conceptualise and give more prominence to a range of common and routine non-conforming and non-dutiful behaviour in organisations, historically and habitually ignored by mainstream HRM and organisational behaviour theorists. Taking this lead, the view take in this article is one of HRM theorists routinely failing to recognise HRM's role creating the conditions for in-work poverty, with this oversight requiring urgent and immediate attention.

To explore a possible and previously under-researched and theorised link between HRM practice and in-work poverty, the article is based on the following overarching research questions (RQs):

- RQ1:** How can HRM be conceptually linked to in-work poverty?
- RQ2:** What does the experience of in-work poverty under HRM practice look like?
- RQ3:** What is the significance of linking HRM to in-work poverty?

To answer such questions, the article is organised as follows. Firstly, the concepts of SRHRM and in-work poverty are discussed, with a view to considering how in-work poverty can be understood within a framework of SRHRM. Following a discussion of the method adopted for the current article, the findings based on employee experiences of HRM and in-work poverty are presented. Such findings are used to explore links between HRM philosophy and practice and employees experiencing in-work poverty. A final section contemplates the

evidence and relevance of SIHRM and discusses significance, limitations and contributions of such findings.

Conceptualising socially responsible HRM and in-work poverty

The article now turns to developing a conceptual framework linking HRM with in-work poverty. A further aim of this section is to provide the basis for answering RQ1. The following discussion is designed to link the research questions identified in the Introduction section to the emergent and growing, yet separate literatures on SRHRM and in-work poverty. Figure 1 encapsulates key findings and propositions to emerge from this section of the article. What is more, key facets to building a conceptual framework of SRHRM are italicised in the following sub-section (see Figure 1).

Socially responsible Human Resource Management

SRHRM is further defined in a range of ways. However, key recent theorists believe SRHRM simply concerns an attempt to 'address the interests of, and satisfy, both internal and external stakeholders' (Shen & Zhu, 2011, p. 3021). Given the focus of the current research, SRHRM is taken to equate to a management style *strategically designed to address employee interests*.

SRHRM is also conceptualised in a range of ways. For instance, Arnaud & Wasieleski (2014) conceptualise SRHRM in relation to *humanist* principles of *autonomy, liberty, dignity, equality between people, and the right and necessity to develop human potential*. In HRM terms, humanistic principles equate to *high levels of autonomy, opportunities to be stimulated and challenged, and a culture of trust*. Carroll (1991) conceptualises SRHRM as integrating *ethical sensitivity into decision-making, policies and actions*. In practice, ethical principles lead

to *consultative/participative leadership styles*, with *employees entitled to due process, privacy, freedom of speech, and a safe place of work*. Further conceptual work by Voegtlin & Greenwood (2016) propose the existence of three variants of SRHRM – instrumental, social integrative and political. However, it is the political approach that matches most closely with humanist and ethical philosophies. Indeed, the political approach, based on political theories of democracy and critical understandings of HRM, focuses on *employee rights* and *addressing power imbalances*. Taken together, such accounts detail the underpinning philosophy of SRHRM (summarised in Figure 1) and appear purposefully designed to lead to a range of *positive employee outcomes*.

SRHRM is conceptualised using a range of philosophical terms, often using *moralistic-styled language*. In such accounts, there is reference to employers treating employees with *dignity* (Carroll, 1991), employer promotion of *social justice* (Parkes & Davis, 2013), *fairness in pay determination* (Barrena-Martinez et al., Online Early), *equity for all employees* (Boyd & Gessner, 2013) and *management nurturing workplace relations based on respect* (Arnaud & Wasieleski, 2014). Collectively, the philosophy of SRHRM is *employee-friendly*, and when managed through HRM practices, also leads to a wide-range of *positive employee outcomes* (see Figure 1).

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

SRHRM is understood in relation to common HRM practices. For instance, Kundu & Gahlawat (2015) believe employers should take a *responsible approach* to a wide-range of common HRM practices, including recruitment and selection, training and development, pay determination, and equal opportunities and diversity. Further writers refer to employers adopting a responsible approach to *information sharing* (Ezzedeen, Hyde & Laurin, 2006), *performance appraisal* (Orlitzky & Swanson, 2006), *promotion* (Shen & Benson, 2016) and

workplace democracy (Shen & Zhu, 2011). By taking a responsible approach, employers open themselves up to *accountability* and *scrutiny*, which is likely to interest and satisfy employees.

Linked to HRM practice, is an underpinning ethos of employers going *beyond employment law compliance* (see Figure 1), leading to an *enhanced work-life balance* (Kundu & Gahlawat, 2015) and an ability to *address a range of work-related personal concerns and development needs* (Newman et al., 2016). Going *beyond legal compliance* brings a range of further benefits to employees, including the advantages of *meaningful trade union recognition* (Shen, 2011), *less chance of lay-offs* (Shen & Zhu, 2011) and a *safer working environment* (Celma et al., 2014). Such attitudes to employment law benefit all employees, but should *particularly benefit employees with protected characteristics*.

Employee well-being represents a specific, yet key employee outcome from SRHRM (see Figure 1). Employee well-being is improved because *employers are caring, invest in people, empower and reward initiative and excellence* (Rok & Mulej, 2014). Employee well-being improves under SRHRM because of *continuously improved working conditions* (Bučiūnienė & Kazlauskaitė, 2012), *improved job quality* (Celma et al., 2014), *provision of onsite facilities related to healthcare and childcare* (Boyd & Gessner, 2013), creation of more humanistic work environments (Arnaud & Wasieleski, 2014) and *high levels and inclusive forms of human learning and development* (Garavan & McGuire, 2010). As such, *catering for the innate and practical needs of employees leads to high and consistent levels of employee well-being*.

Low pay and in-work poverty in the UK

There has been considerable media attention focussed on UK based firms whose international supply chain features low paid workers. An example is the clothing and food chain, Marks and Spencer, who were found to be working with employers who pay below the living wage within

Asian countries (Butler, 2016). It has been suggested that the incorporation of poverty alleviation into international supply management can be an effective route to overcoming in-work poverty (Rodríguez, Giménez, Thomsen, Arenas & Pagel, 2016). However, little attention has been paid to SRHRM within the UK as it applies to poverty alleviation. The UK has a long running problem with low pay, a problem intensifying since the 2008 Financial Crisis. Low pay in the UK features widely in HRM debates. Such debates consider low pay in relation to productivity problems (Rizov, Croucher & Lange, 2016), declining employment protection (Heyes & Lewis, 2014), broken labour markets (Bailey, 2016), a lack of pressure on employers to pay more (Metcalf & Dhudwar, 2010) and shrinking opportunities for progression at work (Poinasamy, 2011). Low pay has also been related to “low-road” approaches to HRM. In such instances, organisations strategically contain and drive down labour costs as part of their business model and competitive advantage (e.g. see Gittell & Bamber, 2011; Gill & Meyer, 2008; Cooke, 2001). Collectively, the very existence of such debates is an indication that SRHRM is perhaps only aimed at elite employees, sporadic, rare, or simply over-reported in UK HRM research. However, given HRM in some shape or form is almost universal in UK industry (van Wanrooy et al., 2013), what kind of HRM is practiced where in-work poverty prevails?

Why OECD countries such as the UK face problems with low pay has been widely debated. Low pay problems have been found to be connected to four key themes. Firstly, labour immobility and technological displacement of employees whereby the automation that improved economies with the IT sector, resulted in job losses in other sectors. (Ukpere & Slabbert, 2009). Secondly, globalisation driving a surge in temporary and precarious employment (Van Arsdale, 2013). Specifically, through globalisation, UK based organisations can sub-contract out services and manufacturing to countries where wages are comparatively

much lower and there are fewer labour protections (Wills and Linneker, 2014). However, international patterns of the effects of such globalisation vary, for example, Giesselman (2015) has suggested that women are more vulnerable to in-work poverty in Germany, and older workers more vulnerable in the UK. Family dynamics (e.g. male bread winner model in Germany) and closed or open employment relationships influence how globalisation is related to poverty within OECD countries. Thirdly a global decline in trade union density (Brady, Fullerton & Moren Cross, 2009) has resulted in fewer workplaces recognising trade unions and a reduced power of trade unions to collectively bargain for increased wages and improved working conditions.

Research, moreover, has indicated an inability of HRM to break low productivity-low pay cycles (Rynes, Gerhart & Minette, 2004). Such findings further link HRM philosophy and practice to the incidence of low pay, but other factors are attributed to creating such conditions.

A range of statistics confirm the UK as having a long-term problem with low pay. For instance, only one in forty jobs created since the 2008 Financial Crisis is a full-time job, resulting in 1.3 million part-time employees unable to find a full-time job, double the number in 2008 (TUC, 2014). A further key statistic reveals part-time jobs steadily increasing in the UK, rising from 20 percent of all jobs in 1985 to 24 per cent in 2015 (OECD, 2016). The rise of employers recruiting employees on a part-time basis represents an important factor in low pay, as the income employees receive in such cases will in most instances compare unfavourably to median income levels. Scotland's (focus of current study) position in terms of in-work poverty is slightly different to the rest of the UK. Analyses from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation reveal that despite lower average wages in Scotland, in-work poverty exists at a lower rate in Scotland than in other parts of the UK (Tinson & Kenway, 2014).

However, an increase in in-work poverty in the years 2014 to 2017 has been reported, suggesting that the problem is worsening (Scottish Government, 2018). Such statistics provide essential data on the levels of in-work poverty in the UK, however they do not allow an understanding of the lived experiences of working below the poverty line, or how organisational policies and practices allow in-work poverty to exist.

The “cost” of low pay in the UK is estimated at £11 billion per year, the price of topping up low income, through in-work benefits such as Working Tax Credits, to a level deemed acceptable by the government (Citizens UK, 2015). However, the price of low pay does not end with the provision of Working Tax Credits, the wider and longer-term impact of low pay is less easy to measure, but is thought to negatively and seriously impact on consumer spending (Davis & Sanchez-Martinez, 2015), economic growth (Poinasamy, 2011) and mental health (Fell & Hewstone, 2015). Such findings highlight how the low paying HRM philosophy and practice of many UK employers contributes to a wide range of social and economic problems.

Closely linked to the concept of low pay is in-work poverty, which in the most basic economic terms is when an employee earns up to or less than 60 per cent of national median income (Marx & Nolan, 2012). In reality, in-work poverty is widely conceptualised in a subjective fashion. For example, the United Nations (1995) reflect on in-work poverty as being first-world situations characterised by unsustainable livelihoods, inadequate housing, hunger and malnutrition, and marginalisation from civil, social and cultural life. In-work poverty, in effect, further demonstrates the wider damaging and irresponsible outcomes of HRM practice.

In-work poverty is further conceptualised in a range of ways. In-work poverty is associated with the type of family unit an employee belongs to. Indeed, couples with children

are the most common family unit affected by in-work poverty (Gottfried & Lawton, 2010). In-work poverty is unevenly spread in society, with women and disabled groups most likely to find themselves in work and struggling to get by (Gardiner & Millar, 2006). In-work poverty is conceptualised in relation to contracts of employment, with people who undertake seasonal employment, casual work and agency work at most risk (Metcalf & Dhudwar, 2010). In-work poverty is conceptualised as a cyclical phenomenon. Studies highlight, for instance, employees failing to escape in-work poverty because of the stigma and shame of living on the margins of society (Shildrick & Rucell, 2015). In-work poverty has been found to drive and keep down personal levels of social and financial capital, factors critical for escaping such situations (Ansari, Munir & Gregg, 2012). Employees in in-work poverty also face a heightened battle to cope and clear debt, which can undermine mental health and detract from underlying reasons for being in debt in the first place (Watkins, 2009)

While it has been demonstrated in the wider literature review how SRHRM delivers superior results for employees, it is also evident how wider governmental and global economic forces create conditions for low pay and in-work poverty in the UK, indicating the likelihood of HRM philosophy and practice representing one of the main forces required to create and sustain inferior results for employees. At the least, the existence of SRHRM indicates many employers have significant control over managing and rewarding their workforces. Further, UK employers also have widespread opportunity to resist adjustments to HRM practice under long-term legislative changes designed to de-regulate, weaken and individualise employment law. Even when accounting for broadly uncontrollable governmental and global economic forces, many employers, as is evident in the SRHRM literature, retain the capacity to manage out or prevent the conditions for in-work poverty, but perhaps lack the will or inkling to do so. A further clear link can also be made, linking low

pay and in-work poverty to employee outcomes predicted under the proposed concept of SIHRM, a concept to be further developed through a range of empirical findings discussed later in the current article.

As the available literature indicates, in-work poverty is a growing issue despite parallel arguments of the benefits to employers and employees of SRHM. In other words, discussing in-work poverty reveals a gap in HRM practice and by discussing SRHRM suggests something very different, if not opposite in a way to SRHRM, may explain the rise of in-work poverty in countries such as the UK. However, less is known about how in-work poverty is experienced by employees, and how HRM philosophy and practice creates the conditions for in-work poverty.

Method

The key to exploring the research questions is through drawing on the lived experiences of employees in in-work poverty. A qualitative approach helps researchers determine meaningful patterns and themes in the lives of participants (Patton, 2016) and explore a subject in a real a manner as possible (Ormston, Spencer, Barnard & Snape, 2013). A qualitative approach is appropriate for specialised reasons, including suitability to participant responses to poverty and vulnerability to poverty across a range of contexts (Edmiston, 2015). A qualitative approach also helps highlight conventional and less conventional poverty-related themes (Baxter, Courage & Caine, 2015).

Data collection

In terms of methods, life history interviews were used to explore lived experience of in-work poverty as they can help explain why people get into low pay cycles (Shildrick & MacDonald,

2013), allowing participants a clear perspective on personal experiences (Atkinson, 1998). From an ethical point of view, life history interviews are suited to the task as they give back history to disadvantaged people (Thompson, 1998). As this article does not aim to generalise to the broader population, a qualitative approach which prioritises the lived experience of those working at or below the poverty line is appropriate. As such an approach is adopted which gives voice to those marginalised people whose experiences can be used to understand how in-work poverty is experienced and created by HRM philosophy and practice.

The interviews covered life and work histories, with participants asked to describe their experiences from childhood to present day in relation to work and education. Further questions specifically related to HRM practices, informed by the extant literature, were included, for example: pay and wider reward, contracts of employment, health and safety, opportunities for advancement and promotion, work-life balance and opportunities for training.

Interviews lasted between 53 and 187 minutes, averaging 98 minutes each. Interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription company. The eventual dataset comprised approximately 465,000 words.

Sample

The study took place in Scotland, a part of the UK with an estimated in-work poverty rate of 14 per cent (Scottish Government Social Research, 2015). Participants - employees experiencing in-work poverty prior to and at the time of the study - were recruited to the study in ways designed to minimise expected problems with shame and stigma associated with poverty (Shildrick & Rucell, 2015; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013). Participants were recruited via civil society organisations and local authority initiatives with a vested interest

in reducing all forms of poverty. Participants were also recruited by the researchers writing to local newspapers with view to having study information published in readers' letters pages.

The recruitment exercise led to a convenience sample of self-selecting participants (Saumure & Given, 2006). The eventual sample comprised 27 workers in in-work poverty (see Table 1). Interviews took place between March and July 2015.

INSERT TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE

Participants lived and worked in a range of locations throughout Scotland, from as far south as Dumfries and north as Lerwick. Participants came from as far west as Ullapool and east as Kirkcaldy. Approximately 50 per cent of participants lived and worked in highly urban areas, such as Edinburgh and Glasgow. Participants were aged between 25 and 55 years, resulting in an average participant age of 41. Table 1 shows participants mainly employed in a range of low and middle-skilled jobs. While nearly half are employed in the public-sector, the rest are employed by a range of small and medium-sized private and third-sector organisations. Nineteen from 27 participants reported holding an open-ended contract of employment, with the remaining participants employed on a range of atypical contracts. More women than men volunteered for the study (n=24) and just over half qualified as disabled under equality legislation (n=16), although nearly all had not disclosed to their employer. No one family unit dominated, but lone parents represented nearly half of all participants. While not entirely representative of the groups most affected by in-work poverty in the UK, the sample was sufficiently varied to make it suitable for an exploratory qualitative study.

Research ethics

All interviews were compensated for their time with a £20 supermarket voucher. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and at a time and place convenient to the participants.

Participants were given advance extensive information concerning the study, including information on what participation involved. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions about the study and informed of their rights before signing a consent form.

Data analysis

Data were manually coded by the lead author based on key themes to arise from the literature. Codes included: conceptual principles of SRHRM, such as, ethical practice, social justice and fairness; as well as codes based on key SRHRM practices, such as, workplace democracy, work-life-balance and learning and development opportunities (see Figure 1). However, such codes were inversed to reflect an expectation of finding evidence for contrasting and conflicting principles and practices. Framework analysis was used to examine the data, mainly to produce highly structured outputs of summarised data (Spencer, Ritchie, O'Connor, Morrell & Ormston, 2013). Framework analysis was chosen because of a close fit with qualitative methods (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). A high emphasis on priori themes also makes framework analysis suitable for examining large datasets (Parkinson, Eatough, Holmes, Stapley & Midgley, 2016). The coding was verified by the second author.

The lived experience of socially *irresponsible* HRM and in-work poverty

Rather than providing evidence for the existence of SRHRM, the data reveal socially *irresponsible* forms of HRM and how this form of HRM contribute to the creation of in-work poverty, as well as create conditions that make it difficult for employees to break free from in-work poverty. As in the previous section, outcomes of HRM practice are highlighted to help build a concept of SIHRM (considered in Figure 2 in the final section of the article). As such,

key facets necessary to build a conceptual framework of SIHRM are italicised in the following sub-section. This section also serves to answer RQ2.

The philosophy of socially irresponsible HRM

The section begins with the presentation of data relating to employee experiences of having their interests and satisfaction undermined by HRM practice based on anti-humanistic and unethical philosophies. All research participants (n=27) could recall employment-related situations that appeared to reveal a hidden employer philosophy. Such events arose out of a range of employment settings, including public, third and private sectors (see Table 1). In the following interview extract, Maggie, an NHS employee, recalls a situation involving an employer demanding a long-term employee upgrade their educational achievements, yet at the same time *provide no support to the low paid employee in achieving career and organisational goals*:

It's work that's telling me that I need a degree to continue what I've been doing for the last seven years... but they're not willing to help fund that and I've got no method or means of getting funding or anything like that... (Maggie, Interview 25, Support Worker)

Maggie's comment implies an underlying management philosophy built on *unfairness*. The comment also suggests the management philosophy is of creating *human stagnation*, as the employee will not be able to fund a mandatory educational upgrade, leading to *very limited career prospects* for the employee. A similar incident was provided by Kelly, except in this instance the employer is a globally recognised higher education establishment. The following quote details the employee attaining the advanced qualifications demanded by the employer, yet appears to be increasingly frustrated with an employer *failing to recognise necessary career-related achievements and keeping the employee on a lower paid and less secure contract of employment*:

At the moment, each of the [casual] jobs that I'm doing are still paid at graduate teaching assistant rate, so they're not taking into account the fact that I've got a PhD... it will come a point where I suppose it will start to annoy me quite a bit that I'm not getting paid for the level of qualification that I've got and the level of work that I'm doing... (Kelly, Interview 13, Academic)

As Kelly illustrates, the employee interprets the employer's actions as *unfair and disrespectful*. Maggie and Kelly's experiences were reflective of the majority of research participants (n=19) in that, while the employee appears willing to tolerate the employer's attitude for a while, it is the employee who unfairly shoulders the burden of the irresponsible employer.

Anti-humanistic and unethical employer philosophies were also reported by participants employed in the private sector, particularly in terms of widespread reports of a *sense of being under or not valued* at all by employers (n=22). Unethical attitudes, moreover, manifested mostly in terms of *minimal or sub-level compliance with employment legislation*. How participants reported such philosophies varied, with private sector participants, compared to public sector participants, far more likely to report such incidences based on direct experiences with owner/managers. Public sector participants accounts, as such, tended to reflect the bureaucracy of large organisations and how no one individual could be blamed for *a sense of being treated badly or unfairly*. Indeed, such negative attitudes widely manifested in settings where employees sought a pay rise through current or external employment opportunities. In the following example, Mary attempts to ask one of her three employers, a private care home, for pay rise:

When was our last pay rise? We probably got 52p about two years ago, 52p extra an hour and it hasn't risen since [hourly rate at the time of the study was just above National Minimum Wage], and if you mention it they'll say you're lucky we're not cutting your wages with the

state of the nation. And just that classic, you know, you're so lucky to be working for that and if you don't... (Mary, Interview 10, Care Worker)

Mary's experience, illustrative of the experiences of the majority of private sector employees in the sample, demonstrates a paternalistic attitude whereby the employee is *not treated as valued asset*, but as someone who the employer feels should be grateful for employment. Mary's example epitomises a management philosophy of *disrespecting employees*, employees who are least paid in the organisation and who the employer relies on day-in and day-out for care-giving to the organisation's only source of income. Agnes, a local authority employee, provides further evidence of *employer wider unaccountability on pay*:

And sadly, I think employers know [many people are desperate for work in rural parts of Scotland] and it's a buyer's market. So, they know they can offer the minimum wage and treat you like dirt... (Agnes, Interview 23, Clerical Assistant)

Collectively, the two quotes reveal a range of further dimensions to employer philosophies on pay. In one sense, employees are either *denied a chance to verbalise their disquiet* with minimal pay rates, or when an employee gets such an opportunity, the *employer is under no obligation to justify minimal rates of pay*, espousing vague and unhelpful explanations for not granting a pay rise. Specifically, both accounts reflect experiences of the broader sample that public and private sector employers either explicitly or implicitly project an attitude of expecting gratitude from employees, rather than seeing employees as the most valued asset of an organisation.

Employers' attitudes towards employees were also revealed when terms and conditions other than remuneration were discussed by interview respondents (n=17). Holly, a cook employed by a small, privately run and owned café-restaurant highlights her *employer's apparent lack of respect* for her booked annual leave (a statutory right in the UK):

[My holiday] was all booked up, organised, everything and one of the girls [at work] was taken ill. So, [my owner-manager] told me I'd have to cancel my holiday because I needed to be in the kitchen cooking and I was like, well, I haven't been on holiday for years... then [the owner-manager] went off for her holiday for three weeks... I thought, why did I cancel my holiday and you haven't cancelled yours? (Holly, Interview 21, Cook)

The quote suggests a *disrespectful, unfair and unaccountable attitude of the owner-manager* towards Holly. What is of further note, however, is the employee is left believing, in one sense, they are an indispensable part of the business, but in another, Holly's *rights at work* and her *well-being were not valued by her employer*.

Minimally legal compliant HRM practice

The data reveal all employers in some respect (n=30 – some participants held more than one job) basing HRM practice on *minimal compliance with UK employment law*, even in publicly-run or publicly-funded organisations. While minimal compliance with employment law was widely experienced by employees in the study, the following account, provided by Jackie, demonstrates how *employees on zero-hour contracts are often left in dark in terms of how much they get paid and for what*, leaving the onus on already vulnerable employees to query how their pay is calculated:

Tomorrow I get my pay and I'm really curious how much I've got in this month because [although] they should, they don't pay for travel time. So, when I'm spending like 12 hours in my work, they pay me for 6 or 7, because the rest of time it's like travelling time, so they don't pay me. (Jackie, Interview 20, Care Worker).

As is apparent in Jackie's quote, the employee faces not only a consistent *lack of transparency in how monthly earnings are calculated*, an already low rate of *pay is reduced to a sub-National Minimum Wage level* due to the employer refusing to pay for time spent travelling

between care-receivers. As such, Jackie's experiences suggest *employers find ways of circumventing their legal obligations*.

The data revealed many reports of employers breaching employment law (n=15). In the following example, Irene, employed by a medium-sized third-sector organisation, details her employer *distancing itself from complying with UK's Equality Act 2010*:

[The Access to Work Assessor] was as like my fairy godmother and I thought he was going to come and, you know, do this [dyslexia] assessment and I was going to get all these things and they're going to get put into place and, you know, my working life would be so much less pressure. But my organisation is dragging their heels on it and don't want to put up the money for it. (Interview 11, Family Support Worker)

For context, within the UK, disabled employees are entitled to access support for workplace adjustments through a scheme called *Access to Work*.

Employer unwillingness to comply with employment law also revealed itself in relation to providing a safe working environment. The following account by Rab, employed by a small, private transport provider, revealed details of *employers doing little to tackle cultures of bullying and intimidation*, which form a wider part of employment conditions that prevent employees escaping in-work poverty:

My workplace is terrible for bullying... Every one of them [laughs], all people you wouldn't expect but, yeah, it's terrible... There's a young lad who works with us, he's just in his 20s and [my manager is] terrible with him, terrible towards him... (Rab, Interview 7, Car Valet)

As indicated above, the problem of bullying is made worse as it is the person who is responsible for the duty of care towards employees who is the main perpetrator of such behaviour.

In many instances (n=20), employers simply *adhered to employment law in the least way possible*, in relation to key terms and conditions related to pensions and sick pay. As informed by Brian, employed by a small third-sector organisation, the following quote details employers' minimal compliance with the UK Pensions Act 2008:

We could have paid [into employer pension scheme], it was optional but last year we brought in this that everybody had to have a pension through their work. But I opted out because there was no point in me putting a pension in for one per cent of my wage. It's not worth it. (Brian, Interview 6, Resettlement Worker)

It is important to note the employee is disincentivised by the employer's attitude towards new workplace pensions legislation, leading to a situation where employees face both short-term and long-term financial hardship. The data revealed further examples of *minimal compliance with employment law* and how minimal compliance exacerbated employee problems. The following quote by Mary, in this instance recalling experience of employment with a small private retailer, exemplifies employer minimal adherence to employment law, with the result leading to *employees going to work unwell*:

[There are only statutory sick pay arrangements] ...you just should battle on... You just go. You know, you just go, you should go [to work]... (Mary, Interview 10, Retail Worker)

Taken altogether, the findings in this section reinforce the notion of linking anti-humanistic and unethical HRM practice to in-work poverty. More specifically, the findings highlight how HRM practises minimally compliant with employment law act as the means by which employer anti-humanistic and unethical philosophies can be realised. Further, *employers appear to find ways to circumvent employment law designed to prevent in-work poverty*.

Socially irresponsible HRM and the work-life interface

The previous sub-section provided an example of an employer's lack of care for an employee's well-being by denial of holiday entitlements. In this part of the findings the aim is to explore SIHRM at the work-life interface, or the intersection of working and private life, as experienced by workers who experience in-work poverty. The negative experiences of in-work poverty were particularly stark for those reporting mental health conditions (n=12), whether related to employment or not. The interviews seemed to suggest the opportunity to escape in-work poverty was hindered by poor mental health. Paula, revealed that she has to rely on her mother to help her survive financially, resulting in a blurring of work and non-work boundaries.

I shouldn't be having to rely on my mother [for financial support], who's an old age pensioner...

I shouldn't have to stress out with any of this. So, I didn't for a long time and then I got really ill... I was really depressed. I started taking antidepressants... (Paula, Interview 1, Learning Support Worker)

Paula felt the distress caused by her *low pay/financial precarity was associated with a diagnosis of depression*. Paula's experience reveals how the nature of the job may not be the main contributor to poor employee mental health, it is the *level of pay which drives unmanageable financial struggles and a resulting decline in mental health*. Furthermore, as is the case with Ria, employed by a local authority, who disclosed a long-term mental health condition related to a non-work experience at the start of the interview process, in-work poverty can *impact on pre-existing mental health conditions*, leading to little prospect of positive and sustainable well-being:

It's the constant, right, can we do that, can we do this, when can we do this, when can we fix the shower, when can we finish the living room... It's that constant at the back of your head strain... (Ria, Interview 5, Creative Learning Co-ordinator)

The negative impact of in-work poverty on well-being is not just experienced by employees, in-work poverty *impacts on the wider family unit* too. Indeed, the data point towards further ill-health ramifications in settings where employees have partners and/or dependent children (n=17). As described by Maggie, in-work poverty can lead to the creation of ill-health in the employee's wider household:

My daughter has autism, she needs to link in with a lot of the support systems and groups and activities that are held within the local autism support, and we can't afford it. There's just no way that we can afford it, which obviously is impacting on her well-being which has an impact on my well-being. (Maggie, Interview 25, Support Worker)

Further evidence of SIHRM emergent at the work-life interface and resulting in *ill-health* emerged from the data. In many instances, concerns about *mental health* arose out of *inadequate housing, lack of participation in the consumer society, and being cold and uncomfortable in winter due to unaffordable heating costs*. However, the findings highlighted specific instances of *food poverty*, cases where employees and *their families do not have the finances to consistently obtain an adequate and nutritious diet*. Food poverty, as experienced by many of the participants (n=18), is detailed by Sue, employed by a medium-sized third-sector organisation:

Well, there's been times obviously like we've went without fruit... went without general nutrition, you know, buying food that's not particularly good for you instead of broccoli... the healthy food's more expensive than cheap food... We're eating like stodge instead of like nice, crisp, juicy vegetables. (Sue, Interview 22, Administration and Information Officer)

In the short-term, employees and their wider families may not succumb to ill-health because of food poverty. However, the possibilities of employees and their families avoiding health conditions, such as *malnutrition or wider and similarly serious and hard to treat health*

problems, in the longer-term appears dependent on escaping in-work poverty. Similarly, problems associated with mental health are likely to continue or intensify unless the employer radically improves their HRM practices, or more realistically, the employee finds an employer with a more responsible attitude towards employee interests and needs.

Caught in cycles of in-work poverty

Building on all the findings so far, this sub-section contemplates evidence to support the notion of HRM philosophy and practice as a critical factor in locking employees into cycles of in-work poverty. The most common HRM-related barrier to escaping in-work poverty reported by participants involved a distinct *lack of opportunities to progress into better paid and career-enhancing roles* (n=18). The following quote from Peter, an employee of a medium-sized private sector manufacturer, tells the common tale of *employers not recognising and rewarding employees performing duties and tasks above their pay grade*:

I effectively run the department I'm working in, but there's been no supervisory position paid for that role. You just [do the supervisory role] by virtue of being the guy who's worked there the longest. I'm expected to run that department and I get paid the same as the guys who've just started. (Peter, Interview 26, Butcher)

What is interesting is how Peter's employer appears to have no regard for even the most basic and informal commitment to job evaluation practices. However, the data suggest a further need to explore the work-life interface when considering the full range of ways employees struggle to escape the tyranny of SIHRM practice. As explained by Molly, employed by a medium-sized third-sector organisation, cycles of in-work poverty can be perpetuated by *unsustainable debt accumulation*, caused by poverty-level pay:

Towards the end of the month I start using my credit card a lot more and then when I get paid I pay that back off and that takes a chunk off the wages again. So, it's a bit of a cycle at the moment... (Molly, Interview 27, Office Administrator)

The quote reveals how in-work poverty, as further explained by the clear majority of participants (n=24), involves “constantly juggling” precarious finances and strained mental health, leading to little if any quality time to explore routes out of in-work poverty. Further obstacles to escaping in-work poverty, only visible when recognising events occurring at the work-life interface, emerged from the data. For instance, a *sense of shame or stigma* further prevented several participants escaping in-work poverty. How shame and stigma manifest at the work-life interface is typified in a quote by Abigail, a Civil Servant:

My mum's great but... I feel sorry for having to ask her all the time [for financial help]... It's a wee bit of guilt feeling... So, you just kind of feel a wee bit ashamed to think you need to [say] I have no bus money to go to work... just a wee bit embarrassing... (Abigail, Interview 18, Office Administrator)

Escaping in-work poverty also related to participants having *low levels of social capital*, such as that associated with friendship and wider networks, often helpful when searching for employment. The findings highlight how low levels of social capital often becomes the norm for employees in in-work poverty (n=18), with this norm relating back to a combination of poverty-levels of pay and poor career prospects. As detailed by Rab, low or no disposable income can quickly result in *social isolation* and *minimal prospects for accumulating or holding on to potentially career-enhancing social capital*:

It can be hard because, like, well, a couple of my friends are going out: “Are you coming for a night out?”. I was like, no, I can't. I can't come for a night out, not got much money. This happened a few times and then they just started going out without me and I don't even get an invite anymore (Rab, Interview 7, Car Valet)

A further dimension to low social capital emerged from a dataset reflecting in-work poverty experiences of disabled employees (n=16). As can be seen from the quote by Sam, employed by a small third-sector organisation, disability intersecting with SIHRM and in-work poverty, leads to *life-long low and problematic accumulation of social capital*.

[Having a hearing impairment] makes it more difficult for me to make friends, because I don't go out to social things. It has an impact on employment... it's formed my personality so much that I've adapted my life around it (Sam, Interview 19, Care Worker)

Jointly, it can be seen how cycles of low pay, in-work poverty and poor employment conditions link to SIHRM philosophies and practices. However, it can be seen how cycles of low pay, in-work poverty and poor employment conditions appear to link to situations within and outwith the place of employment, with an irresponsible form of HRM seemingly a critical factor in such proceedings.

Employing data from life history interviews gives a clear indication of what the experience of in-work poverty under SIHRM looks like. To answer RQ2, it can be shown how employees in in-work poverty not only receive poverty-levels of pay, they experience re-occurring poor employment conditions and prospects. Such employees also more widely experience in-work poverty at the work-life interface, revealing, for example, levels of stress/anxiety, marginalisation and isolation, unlikely to be experienced in the case of employment under SRHRM practice. In the broadest sense, the data point towards the existence of an HRM philosophy and practice that contributes to employees locked into cycles of in-work poverty. As such, the data also at least broadly support an emergent concept of HRM based on socially *irresponsibility*, which is discussed further in the final section of the article.

Discussion and conclusions

The final section of the article is now given over to presenting and further discussing a model of SIHRM derived from consulting the literature on SRHRM and in-work poverty combined with empirical findings relating HRM philosophy and practice to the rise of in-work poverty in the UK. This section, as such, further answers RQ1, as a key consideration is reflecting upon how HRM can be conceptually linked to in-work poverty. A further discussion considers significance of the study, thus providing an answer to RQ3, as well as discussing limitations of the findings and suggestions on how to proceed further in terms of reflecting on the existence and importance of SIHRM.

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Further conceptualising links between HRM and in-work poverty

As can be seen by consulting Figure 2 (above), Figure 2 represents a fuller conceptual depiction of the newly proposed model of SIHRM. This model gives prominence to HRM philosophy and practice that, as has been the case with acts of organisational *misbehaviour* (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999), appears to be historically and habitually ignored by HRM theorists. Figure 2, moreover, reflects the importance of considering the impact of HRM philosophy and practice at the work-life-interface (McMillan, Morris & Atchley, 2011). In the first instance, as depicted by the top text box in Figure 2, is the consideration of the philosophical component of the proposed concept of SIHRM. What is evident, for example, is the absence or marginal role of humanist principles (Arnaud & Wasieleski, 2014), ethics (Carroll, 1991), a strong belief in addressing employee rights and organisational power imbalances (Voegtlin & Greenwood, 2016), social justice (Parkes and Davis, 2013) and equity for all employees (Boyd & Gessner, 2013), as depicted earlier in Figure 1. Replacing key underlying philosophies of SRHRM, as noted widely in the findings, is an almost counter-

philosophy based on, for example, being unsupportive of employees, unfair towards employees and a lack of transparency and input in how HRM decisions are made.

Linking closely to emergent philosophical characteristics of SIHRM, as was the case with SRHRM (see Figure 1), is the central role of employment law and attitude of HRM practitioners towards employment law. Figure 2, as with the case of Figure 1, highlights the centrality of employment law in the conceptualisation of SRHRM and SIHRM in this article. In the case of SRHRM, for example, there is a key philosophical requirement to exceed the minimum provisions of employment law in relation to a range of HRM practices, and in some instances significantly exceed what is set out as minimum statutory requirements related to employment (e.g. Newman et al., 2016; Kundu & Gahlawat, 2015; Shen, 2011). The findings, however, provide evidence of a very different employer and HRM driven philosophical attitude towards employment law. Such findings highlight widespread minimal compliance with and circumvention of employment law related to contracts of employment, pay, equality, health and safety, pensions and sick pay.

How SIHRM is acted out in practice represents a key means to further demonstrate a case for a new model of HRM, as well as further demonstrating the relevance of an underpinning philosophy and attitude towards employment law (see lower text box in Figure 2). In the case of SRHRM (see Figure 1), HRM practices, such as, improving job quality (Celma et al., 2014), providing onsite health and childcare facilities (Boyd and Gessner, 2013) and retention and redeployment strategies (Shen and Zhu, 2011), provide a critical means to deliver key socially responsible organisational goals in an employment-related context. However, by consulting Figure 2, it can be seen how the findings give prominence to HRM practices that, for instance, silence employees, dictate key and commonly inferior/basic employment terms and conditions, and pay little attention to employee well-being.

Unlike the work of many SRHRM theorists, attempts to conceptualise SIHRM is further strengthened and justified in this article with a consideration of the manifestation of HRM practice at the work-life interface (McMillan et al., 2011) (see Figure 2). In this instance, as discussed earlier in relation to in-work poverty, this brings into the conceptual equation indirect, yet important contemporary and emergent trends related to low and poverty-level paid employment, such as, problems with mental health (Fell & Hewstone, 2015; Watkins, 2009), shame and stigma (Shildrick & Rucell, 2015) and social capital often required to be successful in contemporary employment markets (Ansari et al., 2012). A range of work-life interface matters arising at least partly the result of HRM practice can be seen through consultation of Figure 2. In this instance, the findings highlight how irresponsible HRM practice relates to, for instance, high levels of stress and anxiety, often related to managing personal debt, as well as widespread reports of marginalisation and isolation from mainstream and consumerist society, and problems related to maintaining a basic diet and wider living standards.

Reflecting on the impact of HRM on the work-life interface completes a first attempt to conceptualise HRM in relation to in-work poverty. The article now ends with a brief reflective account on the implications of such findings.

Implications: The value of conceptualising links between HRM and in-work poverty

Linking HRM to low pay is not a new feature of HRM literature, and as demonstrated earlier in the article, HRM theorists have made many conceptual links between HRM and low pay. However, scant attention has been given to linking HRM to in-work poverty, an emergent, growing and largely experientially understood aspect of low pay in advanced industrial nations, such as the UK. As such, the view taken in this article, and has been demonstrated so far in this article, is one of making a case of there being significant value in establishing

conceptual links between HRM philosophy and practice and in-work poverty. To summarise, a key contribution of this article is in terms of making a case for linking HRM to in-work poverty and at the same time facilitating the start of a debate specifically linking HRM to in-work poverty.

However, there are further implications for the findings in relation to HRM debates. Firstly, the article privileges a “dark”, “hidden” and “lived experience” side to HRM and puts forward a notion of a model of HRM existing exclusively in organisations, yet also likely to co-exist in organisations with “good” HRM practice, where groups of employees, particularly low status employees, are subjected to an inferior form of HRM. The findings help challenge the positive and often uncritical narrative of HRM and have the potential to allow HRM theorists and practitioners a chance to greater reflect on links between HRM and in-work poverty. The article contributes to the growing and flourishing literatures focused on SRHRM and in-work poverty. The contribution comes in terms of establishing a sub-field to the SRHRM literature, yet also helps establish a new sub-field to the literature on in-work poverty by making clearer conceptual links to how people are managed in organisations. The findings, as such, have the potential to also inform a wider range of HRM debates related to productivity, employment protection, low-road HRM and employment market regulation.

This study is not without a range of limitations related to sample size, scope of study, geographical location and nature of research design. As such, it seems sensible to recommend further testing of the theory developed in this article across a range of specific and wider contexts and applying a wider range of research methodologies in doing so. A priority of further research/theory testing and development would be to bring in the voices of a wider set of stakeholders to in-work poverty in an HRM-related context. A priority within such a

suggestion is to consider further exploring cause and effect between in-work poverty and HRM.

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