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To cite this article: Paul Boselie, Jasmijn Van Harten & Monique Veld (2019): A human resource management review on public management and public administration research: stop right there...before we go any further..., Public Management Review, DOI: [10.1080/14719037.2019.1695880](https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2019.1695880)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2019.1695880>



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Published online: 26 Nov 2019.



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# A human resource management review on public management and public administration research: stop right there...before we go any further...

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## ABSTRACT

This overview paper focuses on the increased popularity of human resource management (HRM) in public management and public administration research. This is reflected in empirical articles published in scientific journals linked to HRM, public management and public administration in the period 2000–2016. The findings of the paper show some cross-fertilization between the different disciplines and the lack of it in some areas. The outcomes also provide input for a future research agenda including alternative theories, models, methods and research techniques for rigour and relevant HRM research in the public sector domain.

**KEYWORDS** Public management; public administration; human resource management; HRM; literature review

## Introduction

Human resource management (HRM) is gaining popularity in public management research. In the period 1999–2002, 5 per cent of the publications in *Public Management Review* (PMR) were explicitly focused on HRM. In 2015–2016, this has increased to 14 per cent according to Osborne (2017) who performed an analysis on paper topics across 1999–2002 and 2015–2016 in PMR. HRM has not only gained popularity, but has become one of the dominant themes in PMR comparable to other popular themes such as performance management and accountability. In line with Osborne's analysis (2017) we observe more publications on HRM in the public sector domain within Public Management (PM) and Public Administration (PA) journals such as *Public Management Review* on the one hand, and publications on HRM in public sector contexts in HRM journals such as *Human Resource Management Journal* on the other hand.

Before researchers go any further with research on HRM in public settings, we need to 'stop right there' and identify the lessons that can be learned from prior research in the fields of PA/PM and HRM. Seen from an academic perspective, identifying important lessons on the crossroads of HRM and PA/PM could enable that research in one field enhances research progressions in the other field. This means that HRM research insights would inform and enrich the PA/PM literature, and vice versa. The academic community has seen similar developments in other disciplines before, for example related to the empirical research development of HRM and organizational

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behaviour (OB) in the 1990s and 2000s (Wright and Boswell 2002). HRM research benefited from the theoretical and methodological rigour in OB research, while OB research was affected by the contextualization that characterized HRM research.

From a practitioner perspective, determining the important lessons means that we can avoid the risk of imitating 'best practices' in HRM, that are developed and tested in private companies (Pfeffer 1994), to the public sector domain, without fully considering contextual differences (institutional, political and cultural) between sectors (Brown 2004). A textbook case is the implementation of the HR practice pay-for-performance in the public sector. PA-research has demonstrated that this best practice does not stimulate individual performance. On the contrary, pay-for-performance is found to non-significantly or even negatively impact public sector employees' attitudes and motivation, because of, amongst others, institutional constraints in the public sector (Perry, Engbers, and Jun 2009).

The central question of this paper is therefore: What do we empirically know about HRM in public sector contexts from the disciplines of PM/PA and HRM? In addition, to what extent is there a degree of cross-fertilization among these disciplines? Finally, the insights that we gain when studying these questions can be used to construct a research agenda. In other words: What lessons can be learned that could guide future research?

### **What is HRM?**

There is a substantial body of literature since the early 1980s on HRM. Our definition of HRM is the following based on Boselie (2014): HRM involves management decisions related to policies and practices that together shape the employment relationship and are aimed at achieving certain goals. These goals concern performance goals which have been defined and measured in multiple ways. Using the Harvard model of HRM, Beer, Boselie, and Brewster (2015) bundle these goals into a multidimensional performance construct. Performance is not only regarded as organizational effectiveness (that reflects financial performance indicators and productivity measures for instance), but also as creating employee well-being (reflected in satisfied and healthy employees) and societal well-being (e.g. an organization's impact on society).

Delery and Doty (1996) make a distinction between three modes of strategic HRM theorizing – universalistic (best practices), contingency and configurational – highlighting the best practice versus best-fit proposition in HRM research. The best practice approaches (universalistic) build on the notion of one-size-fits-all in HRM. The best-fit approaches (contingency and configurational) are more sophisticated emphasizing that the internal and external organizational context affects HRM choices, HRM outcomes and the relationship between HRM and outcomes. The complexity of public sector organizations, both internally and externally, requires a best-fit approach in which context matters.

In a literature review of 104 empirical articles on the added value of HRM Boselie, Dietz, and Boon (2005) focused on journal articles that used a 'multiple HRM-style practices' operationalization of HRM. In contrast to for example psychological approaches to employment relationships like OB in which the focus is mainly on single HR practices such as recruitment, HRM is considered a *bundle* or *system* of practices that shape the employment relationships in and around organizations. A bundle or system of human resource practices draws on notions of high-commitment HR systems, high-

performance work systems and high-involvement work systems existing of coherent and consistent sets of practices like selective recruitment and selection, socialization, training and development, performance appraisal and pay, employee autonomy, teamwork and job design (Boxall and Purcell 2016; Luu 2018). Internal- or horizontal fit suggests that the alignment of individual HR practices within a bundle or system strengthens organizational performance. The HR system approaches are generally applied in HRM research in private and public sector organizations. One of the most popular theories in contemporary HRM research is the AMO theory. The underlying idea of the AMO theory is that employees show positive attitudes (e.g. affective commitment and job satisfaction) and desired behaviours (e.g. organizational citizenship behaviour and excellent service quality) when (Boxall and Purcell 2016):

- (1) They have the Abilities in terms of knowledge, skills and competences to do their job (through selective recruitment and selection, training and development, and coaching);
- (2) They are Motivated (through performance appraisal and feedback, payment and promotion opportunities);
- (3) They have the Opportunity to participate in decision making and the shaping of their own work (through employee involvement, autonomous teamwork, job rotation, job enrichment and job crafting).

The HR system or bundle approach is often built on the theoretical foundation of the AMO theory. Huselid (1995) was one of the first to apply the HRM system approach and AMO model to HRM and performance research. He constructed HRM bundles of HR practices (horizontal fit) and studied the so-called vertical alignment of the HRM bundles to the business strategy and the impact on performance. This vertical fit has been a subject of many HRM studies over the past decades. The necessary fit between HRM and context (1. horizontal fit between individual HR practices; 2. vertical fit between HRM and the business strategy; 3. organizational fit between HRM and organizational systems, structure and culture; 4. environmental fit between HRM and the external institutional contexts) is far more complicated as suggested by Paauwe, Guest, and Wright (2013). Given the highly institutionalized contexts these notions on fit and alignment are even more relevant for HRM research in public sector contexts. This requires contingency and configurational approaches as suggested by Delery and Doty (1996) in combination with institutional approaches as suggested by Paauwe (2004).

We decided not to include the concept of leadership in our analysis because we think that HRM itself does not include leadership, although leadership and management are necessary to shape HRM (see our HRM definition). A different but related popular concept – people management – does incorporate the concept of leadership (see Knies and Leisink 2018). People management, however, has only recently been developed in the HRM literature.

The Harvard model is a theoretical framework that includes multiple stakeholders, organizational context and a multidimensional performance construct (Beer, Boselie, and Brewster 2015). The AMO model can be considered a theoretical framework for specifying HRM and the Harvard model a theoretical framework for the shaping of an HRM value chain and the definition of performance affected by context and stakeholders involved.

### **What is the public sector domain?**

Definitions vary on what the public sector domain entails, we therefore provide a short overview of the most common criteria that are used and elucidate the perspective that is central to our review. There seems to be a growing consensus that there is no such thing as *the* public sector (Knies and Leisink 2018). Generally, the three formal criteria of government ownership, source of funding and degree of political control with organizational activities are used to distinguish public and private sector organizations (Bozeman 1987). This means that, ideally, public sector organizations are publicly owned, funded by taxpayers, and densely regulated by law (Kjeldsen and Jacobsen 2013). Although these criteria can usually be applied to general government activities, public services such as education and healthcare are not always organized in such a way and could contain private sector characteristics. For example, hospital care in the Netherlands is delivered by organizations that are legally private bodies and have a complex funding system in which the Dutch healthcare authority (an autonomous administrative authority) annually assesses a budget per hospital, but the hospital only receives their funding through making arrangements with health insurers, patients and other healthcare organizations on how much they receive per health care activity. Whereas in the UK, hospitals are part of the National Health Service and can be regarded as state-owned and directly funded by taxpayers. Despite their organizational structure, in both countries, it is the mission of hospitals to deliver health care services in such a way that it meets the needs of society (e.g. high-quality and efficient hospital care that is available for all citizens). In line with Rainey (2009), we therefore use the additional criterion of public value creation to include organizations that deliver public services but are not always state-owned or entirely funded by taxpayers. The above example shows that such organizations could even be non-profit or private organizations as it is their mission that makes them different from profit-seeking organizations (Knies and Leisink 2018).

## **Methods**

### **Search strategy**

To ensure high-quality research, we restricted our search to HRM and public sector domain articles that have appeared in pre-eminent, international journals. This decision meant that we had to exclude valuable work published in books, reports, unpublished papers and dissertations. Following a similar approach of focusing on target-journals as used by Wright and Boswell (2002) and Boselie, Dietz, and Boon (2005), we focused on eight journals with which readers of *Public Management Review* were likely to be familiar. First, *Human Resource Management* (HRM), *Human Resource Management Journal* (HRMJ) and the *International Journal of Human Resource Management* (IJHRM). HRM, HRMJ and the IJHRM represent three mainstream HRM journals that are representative for the field. Second, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* (JPART), *Public Administration* (PA), *Public Administration Review* (PAR) and *Public Management Review* (PMR). JPART, PA, PAR and PMR represent the field of PA and PMThird, *Review of Public Personnel Administration* (RoPPA) can be considered a PA and PM journal with a very specific focus on HRM that needs to be included in the analysis given the journal's focus on public sector employees. The eight journals are all listed in the ABS (the Association of Business Schools) 2015 journal list.

All journals have high impact scores above 2.00 according to the Web of Science in 2017. Based on the ABS 2015 journal ranking and the Web of Science 2017 journal impact factors, all eight journals represent high quality and high impact research.

Given the broad range of public sector specific journals, for example related to subsectors such as healthcare (e.g. *Health Care Management Review*) and education (e.g. *Teaching and Teacher Education*) we only include general HRM, PM and PA journals. Our deliberate choice for HRM versus PM/PA journals provides a unique insight in the different contrasting disciplines with, on the one, the more managerial and psychological HRM discipline and, on the other hand, the more contextual PM and PA discipline(s). Both sides of the same coin (with coin defined as HRM research in public domains) each have their own communities, audiences and journals. Our analysis provides opportunities to study these research communities and the degree of cross-fertilization (RQ 2).

### **Selection criteria**

First, the selection process included a search for articles in the eight journals using the keywords 'HRM', 'public', 'public sector' and 'human resource' in the title, keywords and/or the abstract. This resulted in 190 references. Second, full texts were screened using the following criteria. First, only articles that presented empirical research were selected in line with another literature review by Mauro, Cinquini, and Grossi (2017). Second, only articles that appeared between 2000–2016 were selected. 2000 marks the beginning of a new era in both theory and practice (a new millennium) including several well-cited HRM and public sector publications in PA/PM and HRM journals, for example the publications of Teo (2000), Hondeghem and Vandermeulen (2000) and Nutley (2000). Third, articles were checked on the definition of HRM and included when they adequately fitted our operationalization of HRM as a composition of multiple HR practices. Fourth, articles were checked on a meaningful use of the concept of the public sector domain. This implies that the inclusion of a single control variable for public sector in a regression analysis without explaining how the public sector was defined and/or measured, was not regarded as meeting our selection criteria. Criteria 1, 3 and 4 were frequently violated. For example, we excluded 11 articles because they did not present empirical data and 16 articles were excluded because they did not use the public sector in a meaningful way. Finally, we decided that each article needed to reflect a unique sample. We checked the samples of articles written by the same author. In case of multiple articles per sample, we selected the first published article and deleted the others as including all articles on the same sample could potentially bias our findings. In all, we deleted 113 articles, leading to a final sample of 77 articles. Of these, 40 articles stem from the three HRM journals and 37 articles come from the five PM and PA journals reflecting a good balance (see Table 1).

### **Criteria for analysis**

A full-text analysis has been applied to the 77 selected articles using the following criteria:

- Research design;
- Continents/regions;
- Organization type and public subsector;

- Type of respondents;
- Applied theory/model;
- HRM theme and main findings on the theme.

## Results

In this section, we first present the results regarding the research characteristics of the 77 articles, followed by the results on theories/models and HRM themes.

### Research characteristics

#### Type of empirical study

As can be seen from Table 1, 68 per cent of the journal articles ( $N = 52$ ) were based on quantitative data, mostly survey data. 23 per cent of the articles ( $N = 18$ ) were built on qualitative data, mostly interview data. Srinivasan and Chandwani (2014), for example, used interviews with top managers to study the HR challenges arising from privatization and corporatization of Indian healthcare facilities, and the new emerging business models being used in healthcare delivery. 9 per cent of the articles applied mixed methods combining quantitative and qualitative data ( $N = 7$ ). The study by Kooij et al. (2014) represents mixed method research using multiple sources such as interviews, focus groups, policy documents and surveys on managing ageing workers in a Dutch Ministry. Overall, there was a wide range of research methods applied in our article sample. Although rare, we also observed the application of alternative research methods such as archival data analysis (Melton and Meier 2016), action research (Pichault 2007), focus groups (Butterfield, Edwards, and Woodall 2004) and observations (Redman et al. 2000). When looking at the prevalence of the various research methods over the eight journals, we observed that JPART, PA and PAR presented mainly quantitative studies, while HRMJ, the IJHRM and RoPPA, presented varied methods.

Table 1. Details of studies included in the review.

	HRM (N = 5)	HRMJ (N = 8)	IJHRM (N = 27)	JPART (N = 2)	PA (N = 3)	PAR (N = 4)	PMR (N = 10)	RoPPA (N = 18)	Total (N = 77)
<i>Publication year</i>									
2000-2003	-	1	4	1	-	-	-	1	7
2004-2007	-	1	8	-	1	-	3	4	17
2008-2011	-	2	5	-	1	2	3	4	18
2012-2016	5	4	10	1	1	2	4	9	36
<i>Type of empirical study</i>									
Quantitative	4	3	14	2	3	4	9	13	52
Qualitative	1	3	8	-	-	-	1	4	18
Combination qualitative and quantitative	-	2	5	-	-	-	-	1	7
<i>HRM theme</i>									
Added value HRM	5	5	19	1	2	4	9	11	56
(re) shaping of HRM	-	3	8	1	1	-	1	7	21

HRM = Human Resource Management; HRMJ = Human Resource Management Journal; IJHRM = the International Journal of Human Resource Management; JPART = Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory; PA = Public Administration; PAR = Public Administration Review; PMR = Public Management Review; RoPPA = Review of Public Personnel Administration.



The 68 per cent quantitative research papers is in line with the further quantification of the fields of HRM, PA and PM. The latter is also reflected in the rise of behavioural PA (Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2017) and more attention for lab experiments that is strongly related with the further psychologization of applied sciences (Godard 2014). Finally, it is important to note that, with the exception of two recent studies (Melton and Meier 2016; Kilroy et al. 2017), all studies were cross-sectional in nature.

### **Continent**

The majority of the articles came from Europe (N = 33) with the following leading countries: the UK (N = 16), the Netherlands (N = 6) and Belgium (N = 5). 20 articles came from North-America with the USA taking account for 17 studies and Canada 3. Asia (N = 12) was represented by a wide range of studies from various countries such as China, India, Japan, Jordan, Korea, Malesia, Oman and Vietnam. Africa was represented by 6 studies and Oceania also by 6, the latter all based on Australian data.

### **Public subsectors**

The data in 77 articles were based on different organization types with healthcare organizations (N = 20), local government (N = 18), central government (N = 13), education (N = 8) and provinces/state government (N = 8) as the most popular organizations for empirical data analysis on HRM in the public sector. Healthcare organizations such as hospitals and nursing homes have already attracted a lot of HRM research attention given the major reforms and employee related challenges (for example ageing population and ageing healthcare workers). The study by West et al. (2002) on HRM and mortality rates in hospitals is an example of this type of healthcare research. Another example is the study by Mostafa (2016) on high-performance HR practices, work stress and quit intentions in the public health sector.

### **Type of respondents**

Employees were by far the most popular data sources in the 77 articles (N = 30 studies that used a single data source of employees). In the HR process model by Wright and Nishii (2013) a distinction is made between *intended HR practices* (policies and strategy; input from executive directors, HR directors and top managers), *actual HR practices* (implementation; input from frontline managers) and *perceived HR practices* (perception; input from employees). We counted only a limited number of articles that included data from managers (line managers, middle managers and superintendents) that relate to actual HR practices in the model presented above. Overall, there was a lot of attention for HRM perceptions of employees (perceived) and to some extent HRM policies (intentions) from top management and the HR professionals. One remarkable and positive finding is the relatively large number of multiple source data articles (N = 27), for example using data from top management in combination with employees.

### **Theories and models**

There was a wide range of theories and models used in the 77 articles and to obtain an overview we categorized them into 5 groups (see Table 2) that we describe below, in order of frequency. We deliberately use the concepts of 'theory' and 'model' because we



**Table 2.** Theories and models.

Theory/model:	Nr. of citing articles in PM journals (% of selected articles)	Nr. of citing articles in HRM journals (% of selected articles)
<b>HRM models/theories (N = 50):</b> <i>e.g. HRM bundles, HR value chain, system strength, HR attribution theory, human capital theory, social capital theory, resource based view</i>	20 (54%)	30 (75%)
<b>OB theories/models (N = 39):</b> <i>e.g. fit theory, leadership theory, social identity theory, motivation theories, social exchange theory</i>	18 (49%)	21 (53%)
<b>PA theories/models (N = 16):</b> <i>e.g. public service motivation, (neo)-institutional theory, rational choice theory, public values</i>	11 (30%)	5 (13%)
<b>General management/economic theories and models (N = 13):</b> <i>e.g. socio-technique, transaction cost theory, process theory</i>	7 (19%)	6 (15%)
<b>No theory/model presented (N = 5)</b>	3 (8%)	2 (5%)

do not want to get into a discussion about whether a conceptual framework is a theory or a model.

The first category that we distinguish includes typical HRM theories such as system strength, HR attribution theory, human capital theory, social capital theory and the resource-based view. In 50 articles, HRM theories were the foundation of the research. The second category represents OB theories. These are psychological theories often aimed at employee attitudes and behaviours in organizations. 39 articles in our review used OB theories such as social identity theory, social exchange theory, motivation theory and leadership theory. As can be seen in Table 2, the HRM theories (category 1) and OB theories (category 2) were popular in both the PM/PA and HRM journals in our review. OB theories were almost equally used in HRM and PM/PA journal articles. HRM theories were used slightly more in HRM journal articles but a significant amount of 54 per cent of the PM/PA journal articles in our selection used HRM theories as well. For instance, Gould-Williams (2004) in *Public Administration* used a framework of high-commitment HRM to examine the impact of HR practices on employee attitudes and behaviours in local government organizations. Apparently, the HRM and OB theories have found their way to research on HRM in public management and public administration journals. The third category of theories refers to PA. 16 articles in this review applied PA theories or models such as public service motivation (PSM) theory, neo-institutional theory in a political context, rational choice theory and public values theory. Most of the articles that used this category can be found in the PA/PM journals (N = 11) and only 5 HRM journal articles used PA/PM theories. An example is the study by Morris and Farrell (2007) in *IJHRM* that used an NPM framework to examine how HRM has changed in various public sector organizations in local government, healthcare, police, broadcasting and transport. Although the field of PA and PM has constructed and provided a wide range of theories, it appears that only a limited number of articles in our review applied these theories. The HRM and OB theories were dominant. Moreover, our findings in Table 2 seem to indicate that PA/PM theories have not quite found their way to HRM journals. The fourth category represents general theories and models such as socio-technical systems theory and transaction cost theory. 13 articles in our review

made use of general theories, quite evenly distributed over PA/PM and HRM journal articles. The fifth category represents articles without any clear theory or model. We identified 5 articles that fitted this category.

Overall, most articles applied multiple theories across the categories. Here, usual combinations were, on the one, social-exchange theory or person-environment fit theory (OB) with, on the other hand, the resource-based view or SHRM models such as the HPWS framework (HRM). Although less frequent, we also detected HRM and PA/PM theory combinations in 7 articles. Usual combinations were the NPM framework, PSM theory or institutional theory (PM/PA) with SHRM models or the AMO model (HRM). Sporadically, articles combined OB, HRM and PM/PA theories (e.g. Gould-Williams et al. 2014; Steijn 2004).

### **HRM theme**

The 77 articles reflect a wide range of results on HRM themes ranging from performance appraisal to diversity management in public sector contexts. We have classified the articles into two major HRM themes, to provide a meaningful overview of the research findings of the 77 articles without going into too much detail per study.

#### **Theme 1: added value of HRM**

The first HRM theme we distinguish is ‘the added value’ of HRM, which represents research in line with the ongoing HRM and performance debate that started in the mid-90s (Guest 2017) and that focuses on HRM outcomes. We found 56 articles on this theme (see Table 1). A further analysis of this theme reveals that most studies focused on the relationships between ‘perceived HRM’ and HRM outcomes (N = 23). HRM outcomes include employee attitudes, behaviour and well-being indicators and the following list shows a high diversity of outcomes that were used in our sample: job and work satisfaction, trust, engagement, emotional exhaustion, organizational and affective commitment, motivation, intention to stay, stress, employee and job performance, absence due to illness, employee turnover, discretionary effort and organizational citizenship behaviour, burnout, fairness, job quality improvement, commitment to change and work-life balance. Of these variables, job satisfaction, commitment and health related outcomes such as stress, burnout and exhaustion were the most frequently used. Next, we could only identify 8 articles that focused on a subjective or objective form of *organizational* performance (instead of individual level performance), such as client satisfaction with the work (Kim 2010) or patient mortality rates (West et al. 2002).

Another 8 articles in the added value theme focussed on the effects of HR mini-bundles. A mini-bundle refers to a limited number of HR practices that are aligned to each other and that are targeted towards a specific aim such as employee development (Guest, Conway, and Dewe 2004). We found mini-bundles aimed at for example diversity management (Ashikali and Groeneveld 2015), performance management (Decramer, Smolders, and Vanderstraeten 2013) and talent management (Van Den Brink, Fruytier, and Thunnissen 2013). Van Waeyenberg et al. (2016), for example, show that a performance management system that is carried out consistently and that is linked to strategic goals, reduces employees’ intentions to leave. These findings are in line with the HRM system approach in which it is assumed that horizontal and vertical alignment of HR practices lead to beneficial outcomes.

Finally, we analysed the (empirical) support for the added value of HRM in the 56 studies and observe that the far majority of these articles present a positive relationship between a certain type of HRM and the type of outcome used in the study.

### **Theme 2: (re)shaping of HRM**

The second theme that we identified is labelled '(re)shaping of HRM'. This theme focusses on the impact of contextual factors on HRM. 21 articles fitted this theme and most articles aimed at understanding the content of HRM and the ways in which HRM is (re)shaped and implemented in governmental and public service organizations (see Table 1). Many authors conclude that institutional pressures have a large impact. Among the large scale of context factors that we witnessed in our data, there were several commonalities. First, several authors found that a country's policy agenda and political opinions are key drivers for HRM reforms. For instance, Morris and Farrell (2007) found that cost-pressure led to downsized and delayed public organizations in the UK, implying more demanding jobs for public managers in which they had less job security and opportunities for a hierarchical career. Thompson (2017) concludes that 'HRM developments can be best understood in the context of evolving societal values' (22) and found amongst others that political neutrality, accountability and efficiency are important political values impacting HRM developments in US governmental organizations. Related, public pressure or opinion was used by several authors to explain the higher prevalence of work-life balance support opportunities (Den Dulk and Groeneveld 2013) and employee involvement (Lonti and Verma 2003) in public organizations when compared to the private sector. Next, rules and regulations on fair and equal treatment of public servants were found to have a significant impact on HRM. Boon and Verhoest (2018) for example show that regulative pressures determine recruitment practices in Belgium's civil service. Finally, the administration systems and traditions of a country were found to play a key role. The content of HRM and the organization of HR decisions are significantly rooted in the administration tradition, as Meyer and Hammerschmid (2010) for instance showed in a comparative study of HRM in Europe. Amongst others, they found that the Anglo-Saxon and, to a lesser degree Scandinavian, traditions with more room for contractualism, marketization, decentralization and managerialism, explain the higher level of HR decentralization when compared to continental Europe (with a *Rechtsstaat* tradition).

### **Conclusion and future research agenda**

Our literature review shows an increased attention for HRM in public sector research in line with Osborne (2017). In the paragraphs below, we further elaborate on this finding that is related to our central question to review and summarize research on HRM in public sector contexts. In general, in this review we observe a quantification and psychologization of research on HRM in the public sector domain. This is reflected in the predominance of quantitative research, especially in PA/PM journals, and the heavy focus on individual-level employee attitudes and behaviours such as satisfaction. The HRM literature has recently been criticized for a further psychologization of the field (Godard 2014), and our findings indicate that this is not a private-sector trend, but that it also applies to HRM research in the public sector. Most of the studies we analysed stem from Western country data (USA, Australia and Europe), although there is a wider range of studies from other continents including Africa and Asia. The most

popular sectors were healthcare, government (local and central) and education. The popularity of research in the healthcare sector can be explained by the multiple organizational and employee challenges that healthcare organizations worldwide face. These challenges are related to for example issues of an ageing patient and workforce population, governmental cuts, organizational reforms and reorganizations.

Next, our thematical analysis of the 77 articles indicates the popularity of the ‘added value of HRM’ theme, directly related to the ongoing HRM and performance debate (Guest 2017). The popularity of this theme can be explained by the strong performance orientation in the public sector in the last two decades (Osborne 2017). In combination with the trend of a further psychologization of the field, it is not surprising that we found most studies to examine the impact of HRM on individual-level performance indicators. These indicators are often derived from HRM research in private organizations and cover a wide array of different variables, meaning that a rich, yet fragmented picture on the individual-level outcomes of HRM in public organizations is provided. Only a small group of papers included organizational performance indicators, meaning that definitive conclusions on how HRM impacts public sector performance cannot be drawn.

Although less prevalent than the first theme, the research findings in the second theme on (re)shaping HRM (referring to organizational reforms that are often related to governmental cuts, paradigm shifts in strategic decision making and austerity) indicate that institutional pressures and constraints that are characteristic of the public sector, directly impact HRM. Notably, cost-pressures, public opinion and rules/regulations are found to impact the form, content and impact of HRM in public organizations. The prevalence of the second theme in our review can be explained partly because of organizational challenges that have to do with work (re)design in a complex and dynamic environment and partly because of inevitable reorganizations in many public sector organizations because of governmental cuts and NPM initiatives. Indeed, several studies in our review show that a country’s political agenda has a significant impact on HRM in public organizations. Gooderham, Mayrhofer, and Brewster (2018), for example, emphasize the differences between countries in comparative HRM research on the basis of significant institutional differences between countries using Cranet data in the decade 2007–2017. The International HRM or comparative HRM research presented by Gooderham, Mayrhofer, and Brewster (2018) also provides lessons on a country’s political agenda and its impact on the shaping of HRM in public sector organizations.

A second question of our review was to study the degree of cross-fertilization between the disciplines of HRM and PA/PM. We conclude that true cross-pollination has only marginally been established. We found that HRM and OB theories inform the field of PA/PM, but the other way around was far less prevalent: PA/PM theories were mainly applied in the PA/PM journals and only marginally in HRM journals. We did find a small group of studies that used both HRM/OB and PA/PM theories indicating that cross-fertilization is not completely lacking.

### ***Future research agenda***

What are the lessons that can be learned from this review? The first lesson is that the added value of HRM for public sector performance is largely unknown and needs to be explored empirically. The added value of HRM is now a claim that is mainly based on

findings from private sector research. Moreover, when the subject is studied in the public setting, the focus is mostly on individual worker performance using cross-sectional data. Researchers can learn from private sector research that use advanced research designs. Van der Voorde, Paauwe, and Van Veldhoven (2010), for example, present an empirical study on HRM and performance in financial services using longitudinal data from individual employees and 171 branches of the company. Their analysis is multi-level using subjective employee survey and objective branch performance data. Another example of is the study by Tregaskis et al. (2013), who present longitudinal data (both subjective and objective) based on a UK based heavy engineering plant of a multinational. The second lesson is related to the further possibilities of cross-fertilization between HRM, PM and PA research. PM and PA research can learn from the rigour in HRM and performance research of more than two decades of private sector research (see Guest 2017). HRM research in its turn can learn from PA and PM research on contextual mechanisms and contextualized theories given the complexity of the internal and external contexts of public sector organizations. Such a cross-pollination means that the general HRM theories and methods will be refined and contextualized for the public sector, also leading to an evidence-based insight in the added value of HRM for public sector performance. Based on the most frequently studied PA/PM theories in our review, we provide two examples. First, PSM theory could be integrated in the (general) AMO model by viewing the M for motivation not only as general intrinsic motivation but also as public service specific motivation that could be stimulated by different types of HR practices and for instance not performance-related pay (Vandenabeele 2007; Vermeeren 2017). This way, oversimplification and imitation of best practices can be avoided in theory and practice. Second, institutional theory can be used to better understand the composition of HR systems and their impact on employees' attitudes and behaviours. For instance, coercive mechanisms are found to impact HR practices' prevalence in the public sector (Den Dulk and Groeneveld 2013; Lonti and Verma 2003). Moreover, coercive mechanisms such as rules and regulations could also be perceived as red tape by employees and negatively impact their motivation and well-being.

On the basis of our review, future research on HRM in the public sector domain could take into account the following methodological implications. First, a further theorization based on sector specificity requires the inclusion of sector-specific characteristics such as professionals, in particular medical specialists in hospitals, judges in courts, teachers in schools, police officers, fire fighters and civil servants. From a professional perspective this also implies specific characteristics and challenges such as hybrid managers in health care organizations, who are basically medical specialists with a management responsibility (Sartirana, Currie, and Noordegraaf 2018). The combination of tasks and responsibilities (professional norms and management tasks) can be unique with significant theoretical and methodological implications for HRM research in public sector areas. Professionals as part of context has not been a subject that we encountered extensively in our literature study.

Second, it is important to apply longitudinal instead of cross-sectional research designs and start using methods such as experiments to test for causal effects over time (see for example Molineux 2013) and to provide a solid empirical basis for claims on the added value of HRM for public sector performance. In addition, it is relevant to apply mixed methods and making use of multi-actor data (not just input from employees, but top management and line managers as well) to acknowledge the multidimensionality of public sector performance taking a multi-actor perspective

(cf. Andersen, Boesen, and Pedersen 2016) and to get a better understanding of the whole value chain from intended, actual to perceived HRM practices in line with the HR process model by Wright and Nishii (2013). The HRM and performance study by Van der Voorde, Paauwe, and Van Veldhoven (2010) is a good example of private sector research using advanced methods and techniques that have not been picked up in public sector research probably partly because of lacking access to data and partly because of challenges in defining public sector performance in terms of objective data (see also Knies et al. 2018; Vermeeren, Kuipers, and Steijn 2014).

Third, in addition to the comments raised above it is relevant to define and measure organizational outcomes and performance in contrast to the dominance of HRM outcomes (for example job satisfaction and employee commitment) used in the analyses, because good performance is more than employee perceptions and employee well-being. In line with the multidimensional performance construct – employee well-being, societal well-being and organizational effectiveness – we make a plea for widening performance in future research (Beer, Boselie, and Brewster 2015). This also implies a further contextualizing of empirical research using multi-stakeholder approaches (Beer, Boselie, and Brewster 2015) and PA/PM theories that are known for their contextuality. In our opinion contextualizing (and widening) performance in the public sector domains includes two important notions. First, the acknowledgement that there are very specific outcomes such as patient safety and quality in hospitals and productivity in schools. Mortality rates can be relevant in a health care context while totally irrelevant in another public sector context. Second, some outcomes are more important than others given sector specific challenges that can be temporarily. Employee retention, for example, appears to be highly relevant in health care organizations given challenges such as labour market shortages, a poor reputation of health work and additional urban challenges that are the direct result of extremely high housing prices (for example in the London, Paris and Amsterdam regions). The combination of situational factors (shortages, reputation and urban factors) can lead to a necessary prioritizing of certain performance indicators.

Fourth, researchers could include a broader range of public organizations beyond the popular subsectors healthcare, government and education. Specifically, research is needed within the police, military services, social services, the energy sector and the transport sector given the lack of empirical research in these areas that are also subject to governmental cuts, major reforms and organizational change. International governmental organizations (IGOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are also left out of mainstream HRM research. Except for Brewster and Cerdin (2018) there is little or no HRM research on these types of organizations.

Fifth, future research could pay explicit attention for effective implementation and line management enactment of HRM policies and practices with an important role for leadership (Cho and Lee 2012) and management (Knies and Leisink 2018). The role of line managers in the shaping of HRM in public sector organizations is underdeveloped in prior research (Bauwens, Audenaert, and Decramer 2018; Krause and Van Thiel 2019), although this has not been a specific subject of the analysis in our review instead it is mainly based on additional insights from the references mentioned here. In addition, the role and position of HRM professionals in public sector contexts as innovators, designers, facilitators and shapers of HRM in public sector areas is both interesting and relevant. Larsen and Brewster (2003) were among the first to acknowledge the importance of line managers in the shaping of



HRM. This is now known as devolution theory approach. Their ideas were picked up by Purcell and Hutchinson (2007) and Wright and Nishii (2008 Cornell paper) focused on private sector HRM and performance research. The devolution approach and the role of line managers in the shaping of HRM is echoed in public sector research a couple of years later, for example by Knies and Leisink (2018). Similar to the observation that private sector HRM research has applied more advanced techniques, we observe that line management enactment attention was picked up earlier in private sector HRM research than in public sector HRM studies. However, we need to be careful in using insights from HRM research in private sectors and avoid mere imitation but instead look for meaningful applications that considers the institutional context. Recent work by Vermeeren, Kuipers, and Steijn (2014) could help to advance this proposed direction.

Stop right there, before we go any further. The observation of a further quantification and psychologization of research on HRM in public sector contexts implies more 'rigor' at the expense of 'relevance'. Relevance refers to the meaning and possible implications of certain findings to organizations in practice. More rigour at the expense of relevance implies a risk of overestimating the extent to which individual public sector workers can be steered towards performance. In an ideal situation, research on HRM in public sector organizations reflects both rigour (theory and methods) and relevance (context and impact).

### ***Limitations***

This study has several limitations. First, the data analysis is limited to specific sources excluding books, dissertations, conference papers and research reports. The focus on a selection of peer-reviewed journals does, however, provide some assurance regarding the quality of the research. Second, we did not provide an in-depth analysis of every individual empirical journal article beyond the results of the added value articles. The selected articles in this study form a rich source for further analysis on the meaning and impact of HRM in public sector domains. Third, research on HRM departments, HR roles and HR competences was not included. The role and position of HRM professionals in public sector organizations are an interesting and relevant topic for further research. Finally, some of the findings reflect the attention paid to it in academic research without knowing if it is also popular or relevant in practice.

### ***Concluding remarks***

Human resource management (HRM) is gaining popularity in public management research. The overview in this paper provides some yardsticks and suggestions for new research areas and guidelines for setting up new research. The contribution of this study is threefold. First, the overview highlights what we already know about HRM in public sector domains based on empirical journal articles. Second, the study reveals cross-fertilization in some areas and the lack of cross-fertilization in other areas. Finally, the overview provides a future research agenda that could lead to more rigour in theories, research designs, methods and analyses.



## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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