

Editorial: Scholar-stakeholder collaboration for rigorous and relevant HRM research—Possible contributions and key requirements of collaborative studies in HRM

Marco Guerci¹ | Tony Huzzard² | Giovanni Radaelli³ |
Abraham B. (Rami) Shani⁴

¹Università degli Studi di Milano, Milano, Italy

²Lund University School of Economics and Management, Lund, Sweden

³Warwick Business School, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

⁴California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California, USA

Correspondence

Marco Guerci.

Email: marco.guerci@unimi.it

Abstract

Human Resource Management research is striving to develop rigorous and actionable knowledge for today's social and environmental global challenges. For years, academic-stakeholder collaborative knowledge creation processes have been considered as potentially rewarding ways to achieve this objective. However, applications of collaborative HRM research are still relatively sparse, as HR scholars tend to engage with more traditional processes of knowledge creation. The aim of this editorial is to foster more widespread conduct of collaborative HRM research in the future. Drawing on Habermas, whose ideas on human knowledge are considered to be at the core of the epistemology of collaborative management research, we first highlight three avenues for collaborative HRM research that addresses our technical, practical and emancipatory knowledge-constitutive interests. For each of them, we highlight key theoretical assumptions and risks. Thereafter, we describe two key requirements for rigour and relevance in the context of any collaborative HRM study. Finally, we

Abbreviations: HR, human resources; HRM, human resource management.

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present the papers included in this special section and discuss their implications for HRM research.

KEYWORDS

collaborative research, HRM research, knowledge constitutive interests

Practitioner Notes

What is currently known about the subject matter?

- Stakeholders face complex challenges demanding practical solutions from scholars. However, doubts regarding the practical relevance of HRM research persist.
- Scholar-stakeholder collaborations have the potential to enhance both the rigour and relevance of HRM research. Yet collaborative studies are still scant.

What does this paper add to the debate?

- We discuss three theoretical foundations of collaborative HRM research, emphasizing how scholar-stakeholder collaboration can enrich the diversity of HRM research.
- We elaborate on how scholar-stakeholder collaborations can address technical, practical, and emancipatory concerns in HRM research.
- We outline three collaborative criteria that HRM studies must satisfy to achieve these objectives: unwavering rigour, multiple perspectives, and truly multidisciplinary approaches.

The implications of the study's findings for practitioners

- HR researchers should cultivate an ambidextrous ability to achieve rigour and relevance, and can use collaborative methods to expand the depth and breadth of their research toolkit.
- Stakeholders should have an active role in research projects while respecting researchers' need for rigour.
- HRM doctoral programmes should encourage PhD candidates to critically reflect on their epistemological foundations and interact with practice to catalyse a more collaborative approach to HRM research.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Management research is today expected to support stakeholders with practical insights on how to address the severe societal and environmental crises our societies are facing (e.g., Cunliffe & Pavlovich, 2022; Mair & Seelos, 2021; Reinecke et al., 2022). Various labels have been attached to those challenges, such as 'wicked problems', given that they require multiple stakeholders to cooperate to integrate fragmented knowledge (Rittel & Webber, 1973), 'messes' because it is impossible to decompose them into isolated and homogeneous components (Ackoff, 1997), or 'grand challenges' because they involve multiple and non-linear dynamics which make them radically uncertain (Ferraro et al., 2015). Social sciences can provide a unique solution to these challenges through 'transformative-systemic-collaborative projects' (Bartunek, 2022), in which researchers and stakeholders work closely together to explore such complex phenomena and to generate actionable research outcomes (Adler et al., 2004; George et al., 2016; Klag & Langley, 2022; Williams & Whiteman, 2021).

Through collaborative knowledge creation processes, academics hope to generate more relevant and better theory by embedding themselves in stakeholders' contexts of application, and collaborating with stakeholders throughout the research process (Mirvis et al., 2021; Shani & Coghlan, 2021). Management research has framed collaborative knowledge creation processes in different ways (for a review, see Shani et al., 2008), such as Mode 2 (Bartunek, 2011; Gibbons et al., 1994, 2011; MacLean et al., 2002), design science (Van Aken, 2005), intervention research (Oliva, 2019), or engaged scholarship (Van de Ven, 2007). All these perspectives share the idea that collaborations need to be rigorous, relevant, and reflexive (Pasmore et al., 2008), and that the divide between rigour and relevance is not unbridgeable.

HR research appears especially well-equipped to provide actionable knowledge on social and environmental challenges, as it is heavily engaged in exploring the contribution of people to management practices for social and environmental sustainability (Beer, 2022). However, examples of collaborative knowledge creation processes are still rare. Recent commentaries have argued that HR research is dominated by traditional knowledge production processes mostly performed by and aimed at academics, and which are therefore driven by theoretical and disciplinary concerns rather than practical ones (e.g., Deadrick & Gibson, 2007, 2009; DeNisi et al., 2014; Farndale et al., 2020; Harley, 2015; Kougianou & Ridgway, 2022; Kulik, 2014; Markoulli et al., 2017). As a consequence, the HRM research community and HRM stakeholders have grown more and more apart (e.g., Jewell et al., 2022; Markoulli et al., 2017; Rynes et al., 2007). Calls for more collaborative forms of research have thus multiplied in recent years, alongside conceptual articles providing HR researchers with recommendations on how to organize collaborations with stakeholders (e.g., Bleijenbergh et al., 2021; Chandrasekaran et al., 2020; Fisher et al., 2023; Guerci et al., 2019; Kaufman, 2022; Lawler & Benson, 2022; Oliva, 2019; Van Aken et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2015). Some empirical examples of collaborative research have recently been published in top HR journals (e.g., Malhotra et al., 2020; Ram et al., 2022; Sanchez et al., 2023).

Within this context, in 2020 the *Human Resource Management Journal* launched a call for papers for a special issue entitled 'Relevant, rigorous and reflective knowledge creation in HR through scholar-stakeholder collaborative research'. This call originated from a simple observation: the growing conceptual and theoretical acceptance of collaborative approaches in the academic HRM community had not translated into a significant number of published studies (e.g., Bartunek, 2011; Carton & Mouricou, 2017; Paterson et al., 2018). Conversations with peers inside and outside the HRM field, in particular, revealed that several studies intentionally 'hid' their collaboration with stakeholders within more traditional narratives—because doing so is widely regarded as 'safer' for publication. Several colleagues told us that they still perceived the academic world as dominated by a traditional mindset, and the HRM field specifically by a positivistic mentality that treated alternative epistemologies with suspicion (Bonache, 2021; Harley, 2015). Our call for papers sought to stimulate a conversation about the relevance of HRM research in today's business, social and political context (Wood & Budhwar, 2021). We consequently looked for submissions which (i) explained how scholar-stakeholder collaborations had been accomplished in real-life, and (ii) how they had generated unique contributions to HRM research.

This experience added to our own experience of publishing in the HRM field; hence, this editorial offers some suggestions on how scholars can state their case for publication by (i) highlighting the type of contribution that their study makes; and (ii) signposting how their research does not just comply with academic rigour but adds to it.

2 | THREE CONTRIBUTIONS OF COLLABORATIVE HRM RESEARCH: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS, RISKS AND SUGGESTIONS

Collaborative HRM research comes in different shapes and forms (cf. Shani et al., 2008), and it has the potential to make contributions to the field that overlap only partially with those made by Mode 1 research, which comprises an

array of contributions, for example, ones that detect correlations or cause-effect relations between variables, and analyse the evolution of variables over time. Mode 1 contributions are usually explained as theoretical and empirical, whilst collaborative HRM research claims it can make 'practical' and 'relevant' contributions. What does this actually mean?

We suggest that Jurgen Habermas did the groundwork for clarifying the *types of contribution* that collaborative research can make to the HRM field (cf. Kemmis, 2001; Kemmis et al., 2015). His seminal work, 'Knowledge and Human Interests' (Habermas, 1971), introduced two 'anti-positivistic' concepts that form the basis of collaborative management research. First, he contested the passive mirroring of natural facts, advocating instead the development of human knowledge through 'exploration of the validity of propositions in communicative action' (Kemmis, et al., 2015, p. 455). This approach emphasizes the pursuit of intersubjective agreement, mutual understanding, and consensus among people. Secondly, Habermas criticized the notion of value-neutrality in human knowledge, positing that it is deeply ingrained with what he termed 'knowledge-constitutive interests'. These interests encompass: (i) a technical inclination focussed on predicting and controlling phenomena; typically associated with the 'empirical-analytic' sciences, it aims at the material reproduction of the species through labour on nature; (ii) a practical interest geared to comprehending social systems and their underlying mechanisms; commonly developed by the 'historical-hermeneutical' sciences, it is oriented to the social reproduction of human communities; and (iii) an emancipatory interest that emerges through the use of critical perspectives intended to improve the human condition and liberate individuals from forms of domination and coercion. Against this theoretical background (which, given the scope and nature of this paper is neither challenged nor extended here), collaborative HRM research is a family of research approaches that can address each of these knowledge constitutive interests—and thus can, and often need to, take multiple shapes and forms. In what follows, we will review each of these knowledge interests in turn with its particular frame of reference, and associated risks (see Table 1).

TABLE 1 Types of collaborative HRM research (from Habermas, 1971).

| Types of collaborative HRM research | Objective | Typical frame of reference | Type of HR knowledge generated | Associated risks | Methodological emphases |
|-------------------------------------|--|----------------------------|---|--|--|
| Addressing technical interests | 'Know that' Control what HRM practices benefit performance | Unitarist | Instrumental and functionalist, based on 'objective' causal relations | Co-optation: Doing research <i>for management</i> | Positivist criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Validity and reliability • Generalizability or transferability |
| Addressing practical interests | 'Know how' Better understand how actors perceive and behave in HR systems | Pluralist | Hermeneutic and constructivist, based on 'subjective' | Over-politicization: Doing human resource politics, rather than management, research | Constructivist criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Credibility and authenticity • Accommodation |
| Addressing emancipatory interests | 'Know why' Emancipate and empower humans from oppressive HR systems | Critical | Critical and radical, based on political values | Stereotyping: Doing research <i>against management</i> | Constructivist criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heteroglossia and multivocality • Hegemonic unsettlement |

2.1 | Collaborative HRM research responding to technical interests

Technical interests have been traditionally associated with positivistic research, and originally with research fields such as medicine, chemistry or engineering where interventions are designed and tested 'through rule-following action based upon empirically grounded laws' (Grundy, 1987, p. 12). Here, research generates instrumental knowledge, for example, causal explanations, that predict how certain inputs will affect certain outputs—and will thus help in designing interventions that can manipulate and direct real-life phenomena towards desired outcomes. This is arguably the prototypical role of strategic HRM, which theoretically investigates the casual relation(s) between HR practices and organizational performance—seeking to inform what companies can do to motivate workers and achieve superior performance (see, for example, the seminal study by Huselid, 1995). Technical interests also represent the prototypical role of collaborative HRM research, despite (often) not being informed by a positivist mindset.

Collaborative research based on action research, intervention-based research, or design science aims at developing interventions that 'make a difference' for HRM stakeholders. It conducts a scientific investigation of how certain choices and factors produce certain effects, and why. These approaches start from real-life problems; they interrogate the context of application to understand why that problem exists and how it could be averted; they generate an 'answer' based on rigorous research; and finally they develop a more general and abstract action/intervention that others can replicate—if conditions allow it, and rules are followed (e.g., Chandrasekaran et al., 2020; Shani & Coghlan, 2021). In responding to these technical interests, collaborative HRM research owes its legitimacy to its ability (i) to improve outcomes important for its immediate stakeholders—which is why it emphasises that the intervention was generated in a context of application, and what impacts it created; and (ii) to abstract the action towards a theory-in-action—because the relevance of collaborative HRM research is contingent upon its ability to demonstrate potential for replication and transferability (Van Aken et al., 2016).

A naïve technical interpretation of collaborative HRM research risks uncritically adopting a unitarist frame of reference which assumes that employers and employees share common goals and interests, and thus that the action/intervention will please 'everybody' (cf., Boxall, 2013). When collaborative HRM research adopts a unitarist approach, it risks being co-opted by the interests and objectives of the employer, at the expense of the employees and other stakeholders (cf. Beer et al., 2015). In practice, this means that collaborative HRM research is restricted to academics and executives, while other stakeholders are neglected. Instead of being research *with* stakeholders, collaborative HRM research may become research *for* the employer. In this regard, Bresnen and Burrell (2013) warned that collaborative research should not go 'back to the future', that is, devolve into earlier versions of Mode-0 research where academics in effect acted on behalf of 'patrons' paying for the collaboration. These authors pointed out that 'academic life may face a situation in which Mode 0 is re-asserting itself – particularly when it comes to the sponsoring closeness of patronage in medical research (the pharmaceutical companies), engineering (the defence industries), finance (the City, Wall Street), actuarial statistics (insurance companies), jurisprudence (the market for international law) and the market in fine/high art' (p. 34). To mitigate this risk, we suggest that collaborative HRM researchers should avoid the reductionist term 'HR practitioners', and emphasise the broader concept of 'HR stakeholders', which could encompass powerless (and often neglected) actors related to HRM. An example of this approach is provided by one of the earliest collaborative HRM studies, Pasmore & Friedlander (1982), which was based on action research addressing an HRM-related question of importance for employers and employees—how to reduce the number of preventable injuries? This issue was resolved through the collaborative generation of a new theory on the causes of injuries transferable to other contexts. In this line, collaborative HRM scholars that seek to generate HRM knowledge responding to the technical interests of employers and employees should abstract the intervention beyond the specific boundaries of their collaboration, so that readers can appreciate the transferability of the analytic knowledge generated which informed the intervention(s).

2.2 | Collaborative HRM research responding to practical interests

Practical interests are instead associated with hermeneutic and interpretive research that seeks to understand how societies function, and how human beings make sense of each other (Grundy, 1987). This is arguably the prototypical role of HRM research focussed on professional identity and diversity of interpretations, which has typically used qualitative methods (e.g. case studies) to investigate how individuals experience HR practices and their institutional context, as well as how they develop relationships with others (Kaufman, 2015). This is also the prototypical role that collaborative HRM research plays when it looks beyond causality and correlation, and explores the nature of HR practices, actors, and relations within the designed HR systems.

For years, collaborative research has been emphasising the importance of discovering differences between espoused theories and theories-in-use; showing how theories-in-use inform decision-making; and analysing how theories-in-use evolve as a result of contingencies, such as different objectives or cognitive schemas of the stakeholders involved (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014). The gap between espoused theory and theory-in-use is not simply a matter of application (i.e., how academic and 'objective' research is 'transferred' to stakeholders); it is also a matter of interpretation and communication among stakeholders. This is of key importance for the refinement and innovation of HR systems, especially when stakeholders' interpretations provide researchers with new understanding of how HR practices and systems function. Working alongside stakeholders can provide a more-than-ethnographic experience for scholars because they do not simply observe what stakeholders do, but interact with them on a deeper level of decision-making, learning and mutual reflection.

Theoretically, collaborative HRM research addressing a practical interest embraces a multi-stakeholder perspective. This is rooted in a pluralist frame of reference, that is, employers, employees and stakeholders have a mixture of shared and conflicting interests, all of which are legitimate (Ackers, 2014; Heery, 2016). The risk of an uncritical adoption of a pluralist collaborative HRM research is that of endorsing an over-politicized posture, so that 'we begin to see politics everywhere and to look for hidden agendas even where there are none' (Morgan, 2006, p. 205). This might mean, for instance, focussing exclusively on differences in, and conflicts among, stakeholders' interests, and how these are negotiated or left unmediated—even when, such differences and conflicts do not represent the main 'story', like in cases of HRM practices with mutual gains for shareholders and stakeholders (Boxall, 2021).

To mitigate this risk, collaborative HRM researchers should spend time on providing adequate evidence for politicized interpretations. Interestingly, this suggestion points in the same direction as a consideration in the seminal book *Images of Organization* (Morgan, 2006, p. 205): 'The analysis of interest conflict and power easily gives rise to a Machiavellian interpretation that suggests everyone is trying to outwit and out manoeuvre everyone else'. To avoid over-politicization, it is not sufficient to mobilize the view of every different stakeholder; rather, local interpretations need to be checked against each other, and against objective data when possible. When this happens, collaborative HRM can expand or change the horizon of topics studied in the HRM field, as for example, happened in the case of strategic HRM. Indeed, two foundational books in this HRM sub-field, that is, *Strategic Human Resource Management* (Fombrun et al., 1984) and *Managing Human Assets* (Beer et al., 1984), can be interpreted as the results of multiple collaborations with stakeholders with whom the authors engaged and which allowed them to establish a new subfield which is still informed by their seminal contributions (Kaufman, 2015). In conclusion, collaborative studies aimed at generating HRM knowledge responding to practical interests should show how their interpretive studies could mobilize stakeholders' views (taking constant care not to over-politicize interpretations) in order to contribute to a redefinition and/or expansion of certain HRM constructs or theories.

2.3 | Collaborative HRM research responding to emancipatory interests

Emancipatory interests are associated with critical research that seeks to emancipate members of society from inappropriate practices and rules and empower them (Adler et al., 2007). This is the prototypical role that critical HRM

research has long pursued, endorsing a radical rethinking of the foundations and goals of both the academic discipline and HRM practice (e.g., Bevort et al., 2018; Delbridge & Keenoy, 2010; Watson, 2010). In this regard, Harley (2015) lamented that the dominance of positivist methodologies and correlational thinking in the field implies incremental advances in knowledge and an institutionalized defence of the status quo. Hence, the expansion of theoretical and methodological thinking is important to sustain more radical and progressive forms of change. It is thus not surprising that, since its origins, collaborative research with stakeholders has been pursued with an explicit emancipatory objective in mind. Two founders of collaborative management research, namely Kurt Lewin and Goodwin Watson, were even put under FBI surveillance for their pro-labour posture, and thus subjected to allegations of socialist sympathies (Cooke, 2007). Similarly, recent historical accounts of the Frankfurt School have shown how the founders of critical theory engaged dialectically and practically with several actors operating in the field (Cluley & Parker, 2022).

In the employment relations literature, several calls for emancipatory collaborative research have been put forward (e.g., Almond & Connolly, 2020; Brook & Darlington, 2013), and papers showing how to undertake such work have been published (Huzzard & Björkman, 2012; McGrath-Camp et al., 2022). In general, collaborative HRM research represents an essential opportunity: (i) to give a voice to stakeholders that are perceived as 'marginal' or 'dangerous' to business (cf. Mitchell et al., 1997), and (ii) to represent the 'action' or the 'intervention' as successful when—more than improving stakeholders' productivity and well-being—it accomplishes more radical forms of empowerment or emancipation (Keenoy, 2009).

Emancipatory forms of collaborative HRM research also carry significant risks. These need to be recognized and mitigated. A critical frame of reference assumes that employment relationships are shaped by antagonistic conflicts of interest among unequal groups; hence, disadvantaged groups can emancipate themselves only through radical change (Heery, 2016; Thompson & Newsome, 2004). Collaborative HRM research that uncritically adopts this frame of reference thus risks seeing every organizational socio-material practice as intentionally constructed by the advantaged groups to reproduce their superiority. Critical scholars have sometimes recommended scholars not to engage with management practices, to avoid any form of co-optation (cf. Fournier & Grey, 2000). Other critical scholars have criticized this choice as being informed by an anti-preformative stance that could lead to sterile forms of research *against* management (e.g., Spicer et al., 2009). In conclusion, future collaborative HRM studies should include management in the collaboration, and prevent stereotyped depictions of its motivations and actions. Accordingly, in our call for papers, we referred to that tradition by asking for studies which could demonstrate *dialectical* collaborations among researchers and stakeholders, the dynamics of the collaborative inquiry process, and the role of researchers as facilitators of a discovery *and emancipatory* process. We asked authors to provide evidence of if/how collaboration elicited self-reflection among researchers and stakeholders about taken-for-granted assumptions on current potentially exploitative management practices, from which either could be freed.

3 | COMMUNICATING (INNOVATIONS IN) RIGOUR AND RELEVANCE: THREE ENABLERS

Technical, practical and emancipatory forms of collaborative HRM research have divergent stances on rigour (see Table 1). At one end of the spectrum, technical forms of collaborative HRM research regard rigour as a necessity, and interpret it through positivist lenses. For instance, action research studies might adopt formulaic patterns to pursue validity, reliability and transferability—while being criticized for standardizing research outcomes (e.g., Alvesson & Gabriel, 2013). At the other end, emancipatory forms of collaborative research might regard an 'excessive' reliance on positivist rigour as a burden on both theory and practice, and call for an emancipation from it (e.g., Harley, 2015). Because the current literature has identified multiple forms of rigour, we suggest that HR researchers should account for three enablers when communicating the rigour of their collaborative research (e.g., Farnedale et al., 2019).

First, studies should demonstrate that collaborative HRM research comes with greater, not less, rigour in data collection, analysis and presentation. Management research currently allows for different modes of engagement, for

example, positivism, neo-empiricism, critical or postmodernism (Johnson et al., 2006). Hence, collaborative HRM studies are invited to present their core ontological and epistemological assumptions, and choose methodological commitments that are consistent with them. Rather than communicating that collaborative research 'simply' complies with one of these interpretations of rigour, studies should communicate how collaboration increases the depth and precision of their data collection and analysis. Specifically, this means: (i) being prodigal and transparent with the use and presentation of data; (ii) persuading readers they can trust data collection and analysis, showing how collaboration helped positivist criteria of validity and reliability, constructivist criteria of credibility and authenticity, or critical criteria of heteroglossia and multivocality; and (iii) generating findings that extend beyond the local empirical context of the collaboration and account for positivist criteria of generalizability or transferability, constructivist criteria of accommodation, or critical criteria of hegemonic unsettlement (Johnson et al., 2006; cf. Table 1). Collaborative HRM studies should be heavily data-rich because the interactions with stakeholders are themselves sources of data. Data-rich studies are fundamental for collaborative research, not least because they show that such an approach is not a shortcut for publication, that is, they showcase relevance at the expense of rigour; on the contrary, such work should be an ambitious attempt to find 'both/and' solutions to the relevance and rigour paradox (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014). Collaborative HRM research can apply any qualitative and quantitative technique of data collection available to more traditional research, such as interviews, participant and non-participant observation, ethnographic diaries, surveys, and many more (Shani et al., 2020). Likewise, collaborative research can apply any qualitative and quantitative technique of data analysis available to traditional research, from inductive thematic and process analyses, to abductive grounded theory, and deductive statistical analyses (Shani & Coghlan, 2021). With expanded data collection and data analysis comes rich data presentation, in which 'show and tell' is conceived as a non-negotiable requirement for publication.

Available guidelines for collaborative management research highlight transparency regarding the 'who' and 'how' of the collaboration with stakeholders, as well as the 'what' and 'so what' of the collaboration (Mohrman & Lawler, 2011). Any combination of data collection and analysis techniques and data presentation strategies needs to demonstrate a deep engagement with the context of application, so that the essence and dynamics of the collaboration are captured as part of the methodology (Guerci et al., 2019).

Second, collaborative HRM research should come with multiple accounts, not one. Discourses on rigour and relevance usually assume that the former is for academics, and the latter for stakeholders (Kieser & Leiner, 2009). Stakeholders, however, look for evidence when making decisions, that is, if they skip the methodological and findings sections, they are most likely to skip the whole manuscript. The gap between academics and stakeholders appears to be more closely related to how rigour is presented to both. As a consequence, top journals have recently been urging academics to develop companion pieces, that is, more agile and informal summaries (or rewritings) of the academic content aimed at stakeholder audiences. The *Academy of Management Journal*, for instance, uses *Academy of Management Insights* as its companion magazine to present the same research from an academic and practitioner perspective (cf., Solomon et al., 2022a, 2022b). Likewise, journals such as the *Journal of Operations Management* invite published researchers to write a companion piece for *California Management Review*, *Harvard Business Review*, *Management and Business Review*, or *MIT Sloan Management Review* to reach out to practitioner audience.

Compared to these standards, collaborative research has a further opportunity, in that stakeholders are directly involved in the research and can create their own account of the study. In our call for papers, we invited the authors to provide a companion piece, which we labelled the 'practitioner account'. This account was a document designed for HRM stakeholders, not unlike the companion pieces described above. However, it could also be a document entirely led by the stakeholders, who could use their own sensibility and expertise to re-tell their story from a different perspective and for their peers. In essence, rather than creating an account that is a compromise between rigour and relevance by and for academics, and rigour and relevance by and for stakeholders, the companionship between an academic and a practitioner account provides an opportunity to tell the same story multiple times and in different ways. In this regard, we note that medical journals such as the *New England Journal of Medicine* have long used comment sections alongside their main articles, allowing medical practitioners to share their experience with the

topic, and potentially communicate directly with the authors (cf. Hartzband & Groopman, 2016). The options for bridging rigour and relevance outside the academic world are boundless; indeed, perhaps in a near future, immersive technologies might even enable academics and stakeholders to share their actions and interventions through hyper-realistic simulations of environments, characters, and objects.

Third, collaborative HRM research should be clear about its disciplinary commitment and contributions—and it should make careful claims about its inter-disciplinary or cross-disciplinary nature. Throughout this editorial process (and in several other reviewing experiences), we have frequently observed a nonchalant attitude to 'inter-disciplinary' claims based on the notion that HR academics have established relationships with stakeholders with finance, sustainability, production and/or R&D backgrounds (to name but a few). The engagement of a functionally diverse group of stakeholders, however, does not make the collaboration necessarily multi-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary. It is worth reiterating that the object of the collaboration—rather than its subjects—will determine its disciplinary status. For instance, a collaboration among HR academics, HR department, executive board, marketing department and production department on the issue of 'talent retention' is unlikely to be inter-disciplinary as long as diverse stakeholders are converging towards HRM ideas and tools. In essence, collaborative management research transgresses *organizational* boundaries because academic-stakeholder interactions occur, almost by definition, between at least two different organizations. This does not mean that collaborative studies necessarily cross disciplinary boundaries. Hence when this happens, collaborative studies need to properly evidence how it has done so.

Collaborative HRM research often traverses multidisciplinary, cross-disciplinary, or inter-disciplinary boundaries. This is especially likely when HR researchers collaborate with practitioners with a stronger disciplinary identity (e.g. doctors, scientists, lawyers, creatives), engage stakeholders with a heightened non-managerial praxis (e.g., social movements, political parties), and deal with HRM implementation (e.g. Trullen et al., 2020). In such contexts, expert stakeholders are likely to draw on their own professional identity and knowledge to shape, and enrich, HR interventions with 'foreign' frameworks and ideas. The identification and retention of talents in healthcare, for instance, is likely to cross the boundaries of HRM research to meet the sociology of professions, for example, to understand how talents interact in professional bureaucracies (e.g., Evetts, 2011), and psychology, for example, to understand the specific forms of burnout and anxiety connected with healthcare (e.g., Connor et al., 2018). The interplay between different disciplines has multiplicative effects only when properly attended and represented. On the one hand, academics and stakeholders with different disciplinary perspectives may have conflicting interests, frames of reference, ontologies and epistemologies. These differences may result in clashes if they are ignored or dominated by one perspective. These tensions, however, are part of research itself, that is, they are arguably some of the most potent resources with which collaborative research can demonstrate how and why a certain disciplinary perspective is not sufficient to make a positive contribution to practice. Hence, it is vital that collaborative research collects data about the tensions, reflects on them, and reports them. We recommended authors to follow a few but necessary steps: (i) review the disciplinary grounding of the actors involved in the collaborative knowledge creation process; (ii) provide spaces and opportunities for each disciplinary perspective to express its voice; (iii) evaluate whether the knowledge outcome has to be multi-, inter- or cross-disciplinary, or whether it would be more effective to produce separate disciplinary accounts; and (iv) communicate this process adequately in the study (cf. Guerci et al., 2019).

4 | THE ACCEPTED PAPERS: CONTRIBUTIONS AND KEY REQUIREMENTS

Three studies in our special section successfully incorporate the points raised above. Table 2 includes a brief overview of each study, with their main contributions and rigour requirements.

Anastasia Kulichyova, Stefan Jooss, and Thomas Garavan contribute a study on creativity development. This study responds to the above-presented 'technical' research interest of collaborative research by providing new knowledge on how to develop creativity knowledge, skills and abilities through ad hoc events. The study investigates the implications of a structured academic-led intervention through the lenses of event system theory. The authors

TABLE 2 Contributions and key requirements of accepted papers.

| Author(s)—Stakeholders | Knowledge interest targeted | Theory | Research question addressed | Methodology | Supports for future collaborative HRM research |
|--|-----------------------------|--|---|---|--|
| Kulichyova, Jooss, and Garavan—4 hotels in Northern Ireland | Technical | Event system theory | How to design structured interventions as events which activate cycles of experiential learning that lead to the development of creativity knowledge, skills and abilities | Structured pre- and post-workshop surveys; structured observations during the workshop and post-workshop; 23 semi-structured interviews (9 months in total) Abductive logic in qualitative data analysis | Account of the benefit of the collaboration from the direct words of 2 workshop participants (see practitioner note) Consent form, the structure of the workshop component of the structured intervention, observation protocols, a data protocol, and suggestions for collaborative research (see methodological note) |
| Currie and Spyridonidis—A health-care organization aimed at integrating clinical academics and doctors | Practical | Professional identity, HRM co-creation | How actors (i.e. clinical academics and doctors) make sense of HRM practices (performance management, job design) in professional contexts (health care clinical/ research structure) | 134 semi-structured interviews in 30 months, fieldnotes Abductive logic in data analysis | How to design the job of 'knowledge brokers' and support their creation of communities of practices (see practitioner note) Example of memorandum of understanding with involved organization(s) for managing research interactions (see methodological note) |

TABLE 2 (Continued)

| Author(s)—Stakeholders | Knowledge interest targeted | Theory | Research question addressed | Methodology | Supports for future collaborative HRM research |
|--|-----------------------------|-------------------|---|---|---|
| Ramirez and Islam—Atalanta, one sustainability manager operating in a French business School | Emancipatory | Employee activism | How dialectical relations with researchers can support stakeholders in engaging in progressive forms of employee activism | Full time fieldwork with Atalanta (a sustainability manager) for 3 months, based on shadowing, meetings participation, and formal and informal interviews Triangulated analysis of the history of encounters between the first author and the practitioner | Account of the benefit of the collaboration from the direct words of Atalanta (see practitioner note) Guidelines for developing short, medium and long term dialectical research-oriented relations with individual stakeholders (see methodological note) |

elaborate on how structured collaborative interventions trigger an experiential learning process that underpins the development of creativity knowledge, skills, and attitudes, which can last over time.

Graeme Currie and Dimitrios Spyridonidis contribute to this special section with an interesting spin on collaborative HRM, that is, investigating somebody else's collaboration efforts. This study responds to the above-presented 'practical' research interest of collaborative research by increasing our understanding of how and why collaboration between stakeholders works. The authors observed and analysed collaboration between clinical academics and doctors in the context of translational research. Employing a large arsenal of qualitative data (notably, 134 interviews conducted longitudinally), the authors identify how development workshops are used to co-design HRM interventions, with a specific emphasis on how professional identities and jurisdictions align through them. This study reveals a triangular relation among management scholars, clinical academics and doctors, in which the former provides the latter with a reflection on their collaborative management research.

Finally, Manuel Ramirez and Gazi Islam contribute with a study on employee activism, and how the collaboration between researchers and stakeholders can affect it. This study responds to the above-presented 'emancipatory' research interest of collaborative research by reflecting on how 'research-practitioner' collaborations can enable progressive forms of employee activism. The study shows the potential of scholar-stakeholder collaboration to enact (and simultaneously observe) stakeholders' critical thinking. The authors adopted an ethnographic method during their collaboration with a practitioner, which enabled them to build theory on the researcher-practitioner dialectic. This study successfully contributes to an established topic in HRM research (i.e., employee activism) and identifies a significant gap for theory and practice. It then elaborates on an effective presentation of the collaborative methodology and established analytical strategies; and finally uses the data-rich findings to discuss what it conceptualises as the 'praxis encounter'.

5 | LOOKING FOR AN AMBIDEXTROUS FUTURE FOR MODE 1 AND MODE 2

To conclude, our main hope for the future is that HR researchers and stakeholders develop an ambidextrous ability to perform Mode 1 and Mode 2. The community is currently divided between researchers that commit to Mode 1 and those that commit to Mode 2. But both should be part of our research toolkit; we should use one or the other according to the occasion and opportunity. In this sense, collaborative HRM research complements (rather than challenges) traditional Mode 1 (see also Zhang et al., 2015). This ambidexterity would enhance the diversity of epistemological assumptions within the HRM research field, and it would enrich the landscape of opportunities that an individual researcher can pursue (Bonache, 2021). These implications extend to HRM stakeholders. The collection presented here illustrates a wide array of processes for stakeholder involvement, indicating that the early engagement of stakeholders in the research process enhances the potential for mutually beneficial research. Interestingly, the three papers exhibit two seemingly contrasting features: all of them emphasize the transformation of HR stakeholders from passive consumers to active participants, yet each project strictly respects the boundaries between parties. Paradoxically, maintenance of their distinct perspectives emerged as a common feature, resulting in more profound and higher-quality interactions. Similar to most academic papers, the three contributions included in this collection have implications for HR education. While conventional papers often offer recommendations for educating future HR practitioners or stakeholders, this collection could contribute to the education of prospective HR researchers. Many doctoral programmes in the field primarily focus on traditional epistemologies, often without thorough discussion and examination of them. Incorporating sessions on epistemology, and on collaborative epistemologies, within doctoral programmes could encourage PhD students and early-career researchers to adopt a more critical approach, thereby enriching their research orientations. For those particularly interested in collaborative HRM research, educational institutions could channel existing bridging mechanisms (e.g. DBA or MBA programmes; grants), to facilitate collaborative HR research initiatives.

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

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