HUMAN OR INHUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT?

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THE STORY OF TWO COOPERATIVE INQUIRY PROJECTS WITH HRM PROFESSIONALS

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Summary

During the last two decades, there is a surge of interest and a small explosion in the academic publications on business ethics, but only a 'modest growth of interest' in the field of ethics and HRM (Pinnington et al. 2007:2). In my paper I would like to show the possible value and significance of the participatory paradigm, and the cooperative research methods (Heron 1996) in the exploration and development of several aspects of HR ethics.

I will claim that the theoretical and the practical framework of participatory paradigm, in which theory and practice research together, ethical dilemmas of HRM ethics can be explored and developed in a democratic, collaborative and emancipative research method, integrating theory and practice. Finally I will present the results of two cooperative inquiry research projects undertaken with Human Resource Management professionals on the subject of ethical HRM.

Keywords: business ethics, human resource management ethics, participatory paradigm, cooperative inquiry

Introduction

"Human or inhuman resource management?" this is the (hypothetical) question put forward by Steyaert and Janssens (1999) on the pages of 'Organization', referring to one of the basic dilemmas of human resource management in modern-day organisations i.e. the downgrading of human beings into 'resources' and the challenges to human dignity here. In this connection, we can also pose a question: ethical or unethical HRM? What might 'being ethical' mean as related to the HR function? When and why does an HR manager act ethically or unethically? In my paper I would like to get to understand and discuss this topic - and I come up with one possible answer to this question.

HRM and Ethics

In the last two decades, there has been a surge of interest and a miniatureexplosion in academic publications on business ethics (and in related fields, e.g. corporate governance or CSR), yet only a 'modest growth of interest' in the field of ethics and HRM (Pinnington et al. 2007:2). As a sign of this modest interest, books and collections of essays have been published on the subject (e.g. Parker 1998; Deckop 2006; Johnson 2007; Pinnington et al. 2007; Boulton and Houlihan, 2007) and theoretical articles and research project results have appeared in leading business ethics' and HRM journals (e.g. Journal of Business Ethics, Personnel Review, Human Resource Management Review). These discussions build on previous works, namely issues related to employees and to the rights of the employee (Bowie 1998; Werhane et al 2004; Crane and Matten 2007), which have been part of business-ethical discussions right from the start; CSR activity dealing with employees, as the most significant stakeholder group (Simmons 2006); and HRM professional literature, especially critical HRM, which touches upon ethical issues (e.g.

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Towney 1993; Legge 1998, 1999, 2005; Delbridge and Keenoy 2010). However, the number of theoretical works and research efforts explicitly focusing on this field is rather low, considering its importance. Thus, neither the HRM profession itself nor workplace role ethics literature have enjoyed major focus regarding individual ethical behaviour - in contrast, for example, to medical, police or even management activities and roles.

I wish to contribute to filling up this gap with my research work. I would suggest that HRM is an area of great importance in several respects - and it is an exciting place for ethical research. This importance has, in general, been underlined in the last two decades by its (perceived) increased value as a 'human resource' – that is, as a critical organisational resource - and also by its strategic significance as a function (Legge 2005).

It seems indubitable, that in modern corporations HRM professionals, as individuals and as members of HRM departments, are key players there, being persons who face increasing levels of external pressure to cope with multiple levels of ethical dilemma (Greenwood 2007). Based on the existing literature, an ethical analysis of HRM theory and practice is relevant at three inter-related levels: the macro (system), mezo (company and HRM department) and micro (individual) levels (Martin and Woldring 2001). On a macro (i.e. social, economic system) level a fundamental issue is how we can see theoretical assumptions and practices of modern corporations as ethical - and if these are not or are only partially to be seen as such, then how we can form a judgement at all on HRM ethics (Legge 1998; Guest 2007)? The HRM department may have a critical, formal and informal role in developing overall company ethics (the mezo level, Simmons 2008). This may have a major impact on which ethical aspects are regarded (e.g. fairness, equal treatment) and to what extent these might be applied to developing and operating various HRM systems. Finally, individuals and group of individuals (the HRM department) will face such issues in their organisational and professional roles - where they will encounter moral situations that are different from what ethical values are applied in private life (Wiley 1998); thus organisational and professional roles themselves can well have contrasting sets of expectations (for example, Ulrich, 1997: sub-roles tied to HRM activities, the employee champion and the strategic partner). For HRM activities do have a direct effect on employees themselves, on their physical, intellectual and mental health; and they may also affect close relatives; so serious responsibilities pertain to the issue, with further ethical concerns emerging (Greenwood 2007). (Below, in Table 1, I illustrate some of the characteristic questions occurring in HR ethics literature

	Characteristic questions, focus	**Related article, author**
Macro (system) – level	- Analyses of modern market economy and economic systems; the basic assumptions and operations of modern organizations. - The ethical nature of basic propositions of HRM activity (e.g. hard and soft HR).	Legge (1998) Bauman (1993) Ackers (1999) Guest (2007)
Mezo (corporate) – level	- Contribution to - and participation in - the responsible behaviours of corporations. - The role of HR as moral champion within the corporation, ethical organizational culture and communication, and participation in the creation of ethical leadership.	Lepak and Colakoglu (2006) Orlitzky and Swanson (2006)
HR function / department level	- An examination of HR systems based on one (or more) ethical schools. - Analysis of ethical problems related to HRM in general, or focusing on special cases/phenomena. - Examination of the ethical aspects of HR functions or roles (e.g. Ulrich (1997). Ethical analyses of role conflicts. - Detecting, classification of and managing individual-unethical behaviour in the workplace; employee deviance.	Mathis and Jackson, (2006) Alford and Naughton (2004) Murphy and Pyke (2002) Wooten (2001) Wiley (1998) Ulrich and Beatty (2001) Cardy and Selvarajan (2006) Schumann (2001)

Micro-individual level	- Individual moral decision-making connected to HRM functions and roles; individual perceptions and sense-making.	Wooten (2001) Dachler and Enderle (1989). O'Higgins and Kelleher (2005)

Table 1: Levels of ethical examination of HRM

What I shall claim here is that HR managers are trapped in dominant mental models concerning the functioning of the modern corporation, expected roles and the functions of HR, and the unavoidable role morality inherent in HR. An individual's basic assumptions and beliefs related to the world and to other people (and to the individual him/herself) are of fundamental importance in his/her ethical behaviour (Johnson 2005). The HRM area has clearly become a management-focused activity in struggles for its strategic role, and in recognition of shareholders and corporate management and professionalism (Legge 2005; Wray-Bliss 2007; Deelbridge and Keenoy 2010). People are regarded as resources, managing human capital requires impersonal, neo-classical business logic, decision-making is based on rational and emotion-free methodologies, and profit-orientation is predominant –these are the characteristic features of the profession's dominant mental model. Today, business education at the university-level strongly represents these forms of mental model at the level of the individual - and it is incorporated in the curricula (Ghoshal 2005; Pedersen 2009); then, as a result, organisations, institutions and the professional medium further strengthen these fundamental conclusions of young HRM experts (i.e. who have been socialised into such perceptions). Ethics and morality can be detected at a lower level in this dominant logic, therefore – and in its organisational context they barely exist: they may appear intermittently as a tool for maintaining profitability, competitiveness and efficiency (e.g. strategic CSR activities and related rhetoric; HRM programs aimed at retaining manpower; values linked to ethical behaviour in the organisational culture). At this point, then, concepts related to moral imagination (Werhane 1999; 2005) can have importance. Moral imagination is*'the ability in particular circumstances to discover and evaluate possibilities not merely determined by that circumstance, or limited by its operative mental models, or merely framed by a set of rules or a rule governed*'(Werhane 2005:358).

Not irrespectively of the above-mentioned factors, **moral muteness** and an ensuing silence regarding moral and ethical problems may typically be found within HRM activities (Waters et al. 1987; Bird and Waters 1995; Bird 2005). Arguing about ethical issues might seem to be a 'pseudo' form of action, a wasting of precious energy in HRM 'efficiency-rhetoric', so it might appear a weakness (thus it may jeopardise a position of power that was so difficult to capture). Ethics and morality issues can be only be grasped with difficulty, for they are so complex and theoretical; the concepts do not easily relate to language used in the organisation; thus all of this might even seem frightening. Though the Ulrich (1997; 2008), Ulrich and Beatty (2001) models can perhaps define a professional identity in the most accepted way, they cannot offer reliable orientation as regards finding solutions to ethical conflicts arising from HRM roles - indeed its unambiguous management-focused approach and unitary mindset can make the whole issue appear superfluous. Although ethical discussion might incorporate certain risks – e.g. organisational pseudo-action, downgrading ethical arguments to mere rhetoric (Bird and Waters 2005) – encouragement could be important for both individuals, the organisations and for actual members of the profession.

Closely connected to tendencies, the coordination of tasks related to corporate responsibility and ethical behaviour within some organizations is undertaken by persons in the HRM field. Certain authors stress that in spite of there being heterogeneous organizational CSR solutions, HRM is usually regarded as being 'the conscience of the organization' (Wiley 1998), the focal point of ethical conduct concerning employees, the 'ethical champion', 'ethical steward', or the authority in charge of ethical affairs (Greenwood 2007; Simmons 2008; Caldwell et al. 2011).

There has recently been a growing number of studies focussing on HRM professionals and how they relate to ethics (Toffler 1986; Wiley 1998; Wooten 2001). Researchers in most cases have an outsider's role, necessarily - i.e. are objective observers. The theoretical models and empirical methodologies (based on such models) cannot easily integrate both theory and actual practices, and do

not support people in being able to manage such situations more successfully or easily (indeed, this is not included in the goals). In my view, such a topic can be understood and the processes discovered only from *the inside* - that is, in a cooperative manner - via the provision of genuine support for people, and all by integrating theory, action and reflection. A starting dilemma for my research was thus to see whether it was possible to conduct such scientific research, i.e. in which the researcher generates scientifically valid and reliable knowledge, and where, at the same time, ongoing study results helped participants in their practices.

I have therefore selected the participatory paradigm and co-operative inquiry research method for my analyses (Heron and Reason 2001). Theory and practice, rationality and emotions can be integrated via this methodology - based on participation and democracy - and research participants (in addition to making discoveries and gaining theoretical data) will be able to acquire practical, pragmatic and usable knowledge. I hope that this will help deal with the phenomena of moral muteness, too.

The basis of my research is the following, general question: **What do HRM ethics/the ethics of HRM actually mean? How can one make sense of ethical HRM?**

Research paradigm and methodology

As far as research methodology is concerned, I wanted to use action-based research, which is '*a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowledge in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview... It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities*' (Reason and Bradbury 2001:2).

Within the action research family, I have put my research in a **co-operative inquiry** group (sometimes referred to in US professional literature as *collaborative inquiry*) (Reason 1988). Co-operative inquiry has different roots: besides a critical and emancipatory attitude, the anthropocentric, democratic approach of humanistic psychology also plays a central role. Its theory and practice is built, inter alia, on Lewin's (1946) research on theory/methodology for experience learning and on action research that has participation and democracy as its basis. This is additionally supported - primarily in the area of humanistic psychology - by the thoughts of Maslow (2003) and Rogers (2004) on the individual who is able to act freely, under self-direction and towards self-development, and who is able to decide how they would like to live their life.

Thinkers from the critical school had significant effects on how the co-operative school evolved. The aim of critical theory is to open up culturally-conditioned worldviews of actors and to unveil the asymmetrical power relations which sustain the prevailing socio-economic environment (Duberley and Johnson 2009). Freire's (1982) opinions must be emphasized here, too - especially the concept of '*consciencisation*', that is the phenomenon of sensitivity and conscience development as related to social, political and economic injustices. Habermas' work (1981) on the theory of communicative action (the importance of the evolution of agreement, free-of-violence consensus and communicative space) and the significance of emancipation have also had a great effect on the evolution of cooperative inquiry.

The theoretical foundation of the methodology and the elaboration of practical research factors are primarily connected to John Heron's and Peter Reason's work (Heron 1996; Heron and Reason 1997; Heron and Reason, 2001; Reason 1988; Reason 1999).

My decision to choose the cooperative inquiry method was based on two main motives. Primarily, I thought that the deep roots of ethical behaviour could not be seen, explored or understood as an objective outsider; thus, only as a deeply involved participant in a research process 'with' people who are fully involved as partners and co-researchers could these roots be identified - rather than in research 'on' people (i.e. who are only passive subjects of the observation or experiments) (Heron 1996). I agree with Brinkmann (2009) that moral criticism should be empathetic and constructive; for listening and understanding, encouraging self-reflection and self-criticism are a vital part of ethical studies. Secondly, I wanted to integrate theory and practice and to facilitate individual- and group-level learning through an

experiential learning process (Kolb 1984) while taking into consideration the idea that professional competencies include deep *a priori* assumptions too (Gelei 2005).

The purpose of cooperative inquiry may be exploration and/or transformation – and I wished to take steps in both of these directions in my research project (Heron 1996).

A cooperative inquiry cycle contains four phases of reflection and action (Heron and Reason 2001). In Phase 1, a group of co-researchers come together, they agree on the focus of the research, develop a set of questions which they would like to investigate, plan the methodology, and lay out the rules. In Phase 2, the co-researchers become subjects and undertake action, observe themselves and each-other, and, finally, they record the outcomes. In Phase 3 they go more deeply into the experience and become fully involved with the action; thus, new understanding is born from the research. In Phase 4, co-researchers gather and share their experiences and lessons learned - and might develop new ideas or reframe their original ideas, and then decide on follow-up action to be taken.

The research process

Research sampling: selecting the research groups

In my research I am looking for individual and collective interpretations - and, based on these, the inter-relationship between HRM profession and ethics can be better understood and interpreted while transferring all into a contemporary social, business and organisational environment and context. Several individual stakeholders appear in the research (e.g. experts working in HRM, other organisational players, academic experts in HRM and/or ethics, society as a whole, etc.); yet HRM profession representatives are the focus of the research and of research questions based on these problems - thus I regard them as the unit of analysis in the research. Based on the said principles and selection opportunities, I shall apply the *purposive* and, in justified cases and also supplementing it, so-called *snowball* sampling processes (Blakie 2009).

According to Reason (1999), and with the co-operative inquiry methodology, the research group selection issue is important in several respects. Firstly, the research process requires serious, regular and long time periods and energy investment as well as genuine, full commitment from participants (i.e. rather than, let's say, filling in a questionnaire or having a single interview). Secondly, based on Reason's ideas (1999), the level of sampling is also a concern, i.e. an initiating researcher may look for an already existing group as his/her research focus, or may him/herself come up with a group for the research. There are clear benefits and disadvantages in both cases - and I have decided to utilize both forms (identifying them as projects "A" and "B").

Characteristics of the group	**Research group "A"**	**Research group "B"**
Forming the research group	Existing group – HR department of a Hungarian bank of 600 employees	New research group formulated for this research: committed HR professionals who are interested in HR ethics, with various company backgrounds and experiences
Number of participants	7+1 persons	6+1 persons
Date of research	May- December 2011(7 months)	October 2011 - April 2012
Number of research cycles	7 research cycles	6 research cycles
Age and gender profile of the group	HR manager (50+), other participants were women with a university degree (30-40 years old)	Two participants were women aged under 30, other participants were women with a university degree (30-40 years old); one man with a university

		degree
Location of discussions	Corporate site, during working hours (usually 2-4 p.m.)	University rooms, usually in the evening (5-9 p.m.)
Duration of cycles	2-5 weeks	2-5 weeks
Place	Company, other sites	Everybody's own company, other sites
Nature of activity/action	Common, individual, paired	Individual
Examples of actions	- Watching a movie together. - Having an interview with a person involved in an ethically interesting case. - Participation in/observation of ethical code workshops. - Carrying out activities laid out in a case analysis. - Analysis of Loyalty Regulations on the basis of previously agreed aspects.	- Having an interview with a person involved in an ethically interesting case - Mini research: on the basis of two hypothetical cases, everybody does an interview with 3 people within the same organisation - Analysis of the Hungarian New Code of Labour

Table 2: Characteristics of the two research groups

Reseachers' role

In conformity with the chosen paradigm and methodology, I was to be present in the research as a reflective partner (Blakie 2009). In this role, understanding is based on dialogue, where the researcher and research subjects participate as research partners, with a focus on the (inter alia) emancipation of research partners (Habermas 2001) and, via Freire's concept (1982), on the development of sensitivity and conscience as related to social, political and economic injustices. My belief is that looking at reflectivity - firstly on a group level - is critical for every phase of the research (planning, reflection, action, analysis); and in the research projects I have deliberately strived to ensure active and deliberate understanding and self-reflection as related to my own pre-assumptions, role and courses of action. Thus, learning and development by research partners and the research group was my goal throughout the entire process, in addition to what I could gain for my own learning and development.

Research cycles

At the first meeting, all co-researchers shared their motivations and expectations concerning the research aims and output - and we then considered individual objectives and decided about common group aims. Also, during this meeting we discussed the cooperative inquiry method, agreed on the number of cycles, on the types of action to be taken, and we additionally discussed our shared norms.

At follow-up meetings, we followed the same structure. First, we reflected on the latest types of action to be looked at, following Kolb's (1984) learning cycle, and decided on the following: focus, time and locations, and special tasks. (In Table 2, above, I have introduced details of the two research projects and also activities to be undertaken.)

Data collection and analysis

In my preliminary analysis and interpretations I rely on the following data:

- Transcripts: during research cycle reflection phases, group members reflected and debated issues - and I recorded these discussions and made word-for-word transcripts of them.

- I also recorded other materials connected with reflection, conversations and thoughts as written on flip-charts, and also I made a note of research materials.

- Documents, interview protocols and accounts born in the action phases of research cycles (for example in the "A" research I saw as action documents the materials of the ethical codex workshops and in the case of group "B" there were interview notes and protocols).

- My own research diary: during the research projects I kept a research diary, where I put down plans, emotions, thoughts and experiences related to specific meetings in great detail, and in chronological order.

- E-mail communication during the research: especially in the case of group “B”, e-mail exchanges between meetings were an important group-formative element and also a communication channel.

- Group members received my analyses, and we discussed them in detail. Transcripts of these conversations are also available.

In order to help interpret the texts, I first of all carried out a meaning categorization, which means building up a category system and systematically coding texts (Kvale 1996; Gelei 2002). In doing so, I relied on the help of the ’Nvivo’software. Even though on the basis of codes, sub-codes, their connections and contradictions some patterns were already being outlined, I didn’t feel they were sufficient; so as another leg of my analysis I searched for background patterns and interpretations spanning a number ofcodes that went beyond the existing texts, including my own impressions and changes of mind, too. To help with the transparency of these interrelationships according to a particular script, I outlined thoughts arising in meetings - that is, how particular questions and lines of thought were interweaving and shaping one another. This can be seen as a sort of meaning-compression (Gelei 2002).

In accordance with the original texts, and structured by the codes, and condensedby them, I carried out interpretations of meaning. I approached the texts with an understanding orientation: I firstly strove for true-to-text interpretations, rendering individual and shared interpretations of specific co-researchers; secondly, I sought out critical interpretations of hidden meanings. The two interpretations were interwoven and framed by continual critical reflection - so the research group reflected on its own functions and we co-researchers reflected on our own individual functions.

Main empirical results of the research

When I was planning the research I relied on literature and my own previous experience - and eventually created four question groups via which to try to find answers within my two research projects. Apart from exploring phenomena it was also my objective to take steps towards 'transformation' i.e. to change participants' ways of thinking, possibly the HRM operations of the involved organisations and also the organisations themselves. This emanates from the fundamental nature of participatory research and from the integration of theory and practice. When dealing with research results, in this paper I depict the theoretical knowledge (basic concepts in Figure 1).

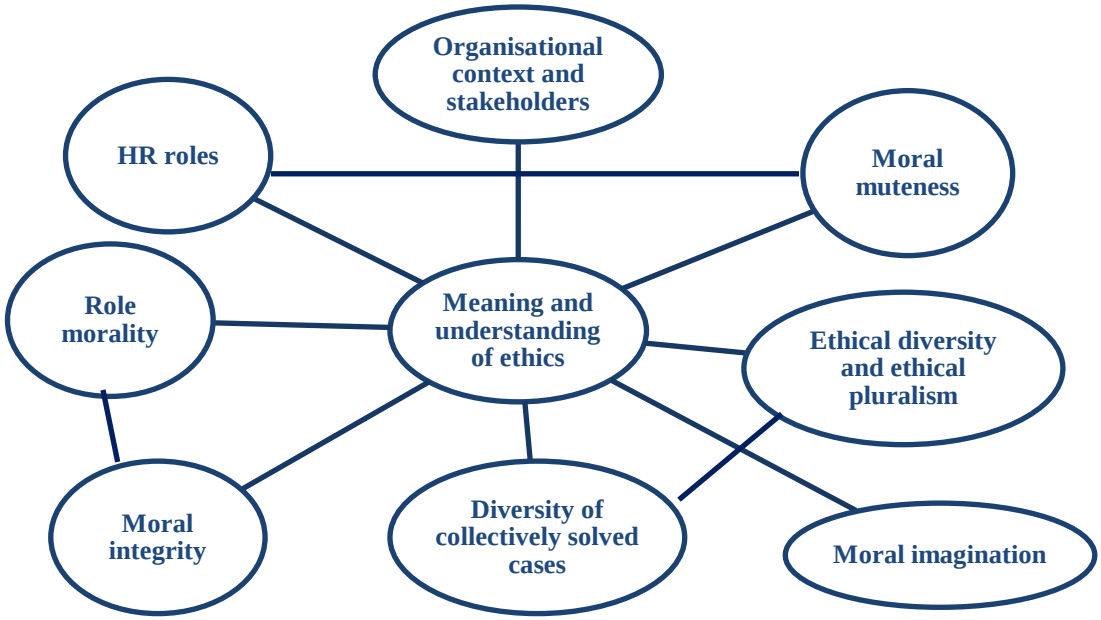

Figure 1: Mapping of main concepts

What does ethical HR mean? How does one make sense of ethical HRM?

Difficulties with the formulation of an ethical framework

The formulation of the concept of ethics – or, more specifically, **HRM ethics** - **involved a taxing and lengthy process with both teams**; yet the participants themselves were aware of and emphasized its fundamental **importance and indispensability**. The incomprehensibility of ethical or unethical behaviour, repeated efforts to produce definitions together and the research's creative process all reflected the (analogous) story in 'The Little Prince' (Saint-Exupéry 2011) as cited by Levinas (1999). Levinas refers to the scene where the pilot draws a lamb enclosed in a box to the Little Prince. The participants came from various backgrounds and represented different set of values. Therefore, it was rather difficult to precisely define ethical terms either individually or as team members - or to see what would we like to discover exactly (i.e. one doesn't know for sure what is inside the box one is leaning over). Nevertheless, we were confident that during this process of thinking in concertand carrying out actions together in this 'leaning over' we might eventually forge a community and make advances in unison; we could get to comprehend and experience things that individuals or outsiders simply couldn't do. The trust we had in one another, and the research project as a cooperative achievement and learning process had all become the essential element in the process. This kind of experience also became apparent in Imre's reflection on the research: *"I think we're creating value as we go along, even if we don't concentrate on one specific value. We're just doing it, and by this process alone we are creating values... Goal-oriented, performance-focused operations can no longer make sense at all." (Imre)* The process itself and the road we were taking with all its burdens and difficulties had become as important as the goal we were heading towards – which echoes findings made by other authors (e.g. Reason and Marshall (2001), dealing with cooperative research.

The challenge of **tackling ethical diversity** was a dilemma for both teams. As one learning point, Team "A" saw that diversity in our own way of thinking is not necessarily a symptom of weakness or unethical behaviour (so there is no need to deny it or hide it behind a seemingly homogenous stance); rather, it might bring about a new opportunity to produce real ethical solutions (after giving them thorough consideration in several respects). Team "A" members realized that if they consciously accept undeclared but existing roles - special views (employer vs. employee centeredness or a rational vs. emotional attitude), differences in ethical definition (e.g. rule ethics vs. consequence ethics) and various moral

arguments (e.g. relying on rules or cases) – they might attain a higher level of ethical sensitivity, which could then help in interpretations of specific cases too. This way, persons could also cultivateone another and contribute to the advancement of the team as a whole. Another significant factor is that team members faced and critically reacted to other people's roles and views - so their aptitude for critical reflection was also improved. It would seem that putting critical reflection into practice may in itself get people closer to more ethical ways of operating both on individual and organisational levels.

The creation of a universally accepted definition of ethics, at both team or organisational levels, represented an important learning point for both teams. **Resulting shared interpretations along with efforts made in common in processes, common construction, participation and involvement all became of equal importance.** In the light of this, conscious organisational development and value-centered (or commonly accepted ethics-based) organisational culture development processes may have a major significance (Orlitzky and Swanson 2006). It remains to be seen how HRM conceives its own role within the corporate conscience (Wiley 1998, Ulrich and Beatty 2001) or in the role of moral champion (Greenwood 2007).

Problems were mostly dealt with at the **micro and mezo levels.** In the ”A” research, according to the expectations of fellow researchers we focused on a given organization, on problems that might be encountered there, and on relevant individual perceptions and concerns. Here, macro level thinking appeared in 'flashes' - only making hints at the role played by business higher education and reflections on people’s responsibility in the reproduction of moral-free organisational operations. In the ”B” research, the main focus was also at the level of individual perceptions and decision-making, and interactions between the individual and the organization - though the issue of the present and future sustainability of HRM (with direct reference to the current economic set-up) had appeared at the level of research questions. Such a difference may (also) be due to the composition of teams (individuals vs. members of a given organisation). A surpassing of individual micro level observations was important for two reasons. In accordance with the opinion of Wray-Bliss (2007), participants declared that ethical factors had their relevance in economic organisations at micro, mezo and macro levels – and with this they took a big step towards genuine integration of ethical concerns. On the other hand, in both teams we experienced an interlocking of different levels, and it became clear that (though to different extents) everybody is in a decision-making position at his/her own level.

Breaking moral muteness

On the basis of fellow researchers' personal experiences and perceptions, moral muteness is a characteristic feature of both their own organisations and the HRM profession as a whole – and its being broken will not be easy (as our own later experiences confirm).

In both projects we gradually got to the stage where participants ventured to do actions (e.g. made interviews) outside the team. This meant that - openly or less openly - they made interviews on ethical issues with other involved parties in the company or they launched programs that had ethical overtones. This 'moving out' was not easy: even interested and committed fellow researchers saw it as dangerous and risky to expose ethical concerns in an organisational environment and to ask direct questions about ethics. In order to act confidently they needed some previous absorption in the topic, a common interpretation of concepts, a secure background and a shared commitment, and mutual support; and they needed to build up a daring attitude so as to break down moral muteness (which occurred to differing extents and with different forcefulness.) **Moral courage** (Trevino and Weaver 2003) leading to a breaking of moral muteness has clearly-drawn steps: (1) start talks and discussions in a high-quality communicative space within the group (Pataki et al. 2001), (2) take action with group members, with immediate/off-line reflections, (3) start talks outside the group, either in the organisation or at professional forums, (4) initiate action outside the group. It should be possible to create a secure communication background within an organisation’s HRM department – and using this as a starting point it may be possible to formulate and develop ethical discourse and to integrate results, in practice, on an organisational level.

An individual's ethical behaviour is basically influenced by the **moral reference group**,in which the individual seeks moral reassurance. The opinion of Jones and Ryan (1998) is that the individual forms his/her own responsibility level in the light of expectations via the reference group. Although both teams had critical comments relating to Hungarian HRM communities, they were identified as potential reference points or reference groups. In the aftermath of our research projects, one might see the viability of a

professional community - a communicative environment where HRM professionals would be able to critically react to situations and get a deeper understanding of ethical problems and their roots. Consequently, they would also be able to put into question current conditions. Building on understanding and a willingness to change, they could shape their closer and wider environment in a learning process that integrates theory and practice and makes use of their own ethical framework. This reform process must start within the HRM profession and can only be successful with the voluntary and committed participation of the involved parties. It remains to be seen whether the representatives of HRM in today's Hungary have this kind of interest and commitment, though. Another intriguing question would concern the role and responsibility of the academic sphere, of HRM teachers dealing with reform procedures. Ghoshal (2005) says that today's higher education reproduces moral-free and opportunistic behavior, and it frees students from moral ties. The question arises: how can this situation be changed in the medium and long term? How might professionals obtain theoretical and practical help? A starting point for responsible HRM education would be the launching of graduate and post-graduate programs with a more thorough integration of ethical aspects and ethically questionable case studies. One practical way of using such research could be application of more than 40 specific cases for educational purposes (with the permission of participants). Education could also have an important role to play in establishing a 'lingua franca' which would link allegedly abstract ethical concepts and terms with specific company practices (Wray-Bliss 2007).

Some of the organisations involved in the research had ethics-related concepts for use in everyday practice and organisational culture. These concepts might be used as a starting point for ethical discourse within an organisation. As experience proved in both research projects, **even these currently used and accepted concepts may become empty and lose their meaning** (e.g. see the concepts of sincerity and equal opportunity in mini research ”B”). **In extreme cases these ethical concepts even legitimatize unethical ways of operating on the individual or organisational level.** This, again, calls attention to the ethical role of HRM - i.e. it has a far greater significance than just being a factor in shaping systems and sets of values. Major importance should be given to continual reflection, common interpretations, redefinitions and development.

Yet how can we involve organisational members in reinterpretation processes pertaining to ethical concepts? One potential obstacle might be this moral muteness; another problem might be that the created common ethical framework – one arrived at with difficulty - might go against the 'performance-centered approach' of an organisation. There is a great risk that, instead of genuine involvement, a handful of appointed representatives (say, management and a few opinion-leader employees), with a need for quick results and efficiency, will come up with ethical definitions and pass them on to others as ready-made products. **This, however, may contribute to a ”culture of silence”** (Reason 1994) in both the medium and long terms, while alienating people from the accumulation of knowledge (in this case from a critical interpretation of the concept of ethical behaviour) and, in a wider sense, from autonomy. Such a finding was further confirmed by thought-provoking experiences in our ”A” research, concerned with revision of the ethical code of an organisation (Cycles 5-6). A significant number of interviewed employees did not really want to have a say in reinterpretation of the code, had no serious comments to make and did not take part in procedures. Few of them felt it was a responsibility to make use of a genuine opportunity to participate, did not want to sacrifice time and energy to it; few saw it as their *own* business, that this code would be a creation coming from their cooperation. How does one address and really involve silenced and alienated groups? A so-called ‘alienation from knowledge’ was also conspicuousin our ”A” research, for at the start our participants backed off from the researcher’s role; it was difficult to convince them that they had 'valuable' inputs that would be of use in each phase of the process.

Genuine participation is important for another reason: with a lack of open discourse, parties will be able to get little information regarding mutual expectations. A recurrent theme in the ”B” research was that involved parties (including HRM) may only have a vague picture of others' ethical expectations in any specific or more general situation; then they either want to - or don't want to - respond to these imaginary or construed expectations.

A 'paradox of credibility and incredibility' was also identified in the research. From the beginning of the projects, members had great confidence in one another, in both teams. (In the ”A” research, such confidence was underlined by permission having been gained from company management to take part in

research that would probably entail novel and unpredictable lesson learning via cooperative effort; or where research ”B” participants had sacrificed their free evenings to do such activity/reflect upon issues.) We shared many previously had experiences, presented dilemmas, saw private life situations and played political or organisational 'games'. However, in perceptions of and in reflections on the outside world – and especially in discourses related to the operations of today's Hungarian companies, and social and economic processes – the most marked theme was non-credibility. Our research team (who ”trusted one another and wanted to make a better world”) and 'present-day Hungarian reality' (“where individualism, egoism and unethical behaviour rules”) contrasted drastically with each other. How could one break down the wall of silence? How could such a team attain a higher level of credibility in a business organization? These may be key issues for ethically-grounded social reforms, too. The question arises once more: What might be the role of the academic sphere in this process?

HRM roles

Emerging as one of the important learning points is that **there is no such thing as a minimum level of responsibility in HRM ethics or in the ethical nature of HRM operations: each and every HRM professional has to make ethical decisions.** The 'nature' of experienced dilemmas may vary depending on positions held in the hierarchy, the organisation itself or the kind of industry involved. The diversity of industry-based backgrounds had to be *personally* experienced, and we had experiences from FMCG, the media, energy, transport, telecom - and from such 'stigmatized' areas as tobacco production or alcoholic beverages, too. Yet, in each situation and at each level, HRM operations have to face up to ethical issues and decision-making requiring short- and long-distance solutions. **Our job here is for a person to take responsibility for the provision of ethical ways of working – everybody at their own level and area.** In the phase of making subsequent reflections on the research, someone from research group ”A” put it like this: *”I think everyone is an (ethical) flagship in their own right - but with a different composition...” (Zsófi, research group “A”)*

However, the role of '**ethical compass**' and '**moral champion**' is neither simple nor rewarding – and this proved to be a basic finding in both teams! The dilemma may be interpreted at several levels: Does this kind of responsibility really exist and, if so, where is the source of such expectations? Society increasingly wants HRM to meet ethical requirements - though the same kind of expectations and requirements from organisational parties are not so definite or structured.

Secondly, the question may arise: **If HRM does not adopt the role of 'moral champion' – who will**?! Let us see a tough opinion on this: *“In a company context it is only HRM which is able to represent humanity and ethics. Several managers give it the right to do this. But whether the manager has to take these aspects into account and how openly is it declared is another question! It's not a HRM task to make a manager's wishes accepted - rather, it has to be prepared for fighting, because if you bring in ethical aspects, you'll get conflict situations and clashes. HRM should be able to have courage... This should be declared institutionally, and it should say that it is its mission to bring in those ethical factors....” (Zsófi, research group ”A”)*

Thirdly, what could this role mean? On one hand, HRM may adopt the role of the moral **champion who plays with open, revealed cards**,trying todirectly represent and legitimize this aspect. On the other hand, it may take on the role of **orientating compass, one which exerts influence from in the background** and has the talent to 'sell' ethics (under the label of economic necessity, investing in the future, employee branding, lawfulness, humanity), where, in an indirect and continuous way, it can get more and more ethical operations within the organisation. A similar pattern (champion vs. 'éminence grise', see Bokor et al. 2005 and 2010) appears in the general role concept of HRM too, though it is especially vivid in connection with ethical issues. Even people who are unsure about practical implementations attach great importance to such roles.

Tense, complex ethical controversies are also reflected in the **employee champion role**. In larger-sized organisations 'partnership' might be overshadowed and ethical dilemmas might be generated if a HRM professional is 'loyal' first and foremost to his/her own HRM unit. Such dilemmas will usually come interwoven with a political bias - and are created by conflicts of interest caused by power games in the organisational background. Interestingly enough, HRM – in its own perceptions – is often regarded as a means, a 'counter- weight' or 'a pawn on the chess board' that gets involved in these power games. Solutions applied in the research, critical reflection, and the developing of moral imagination all helped, in both teams, to reveal and to evaluate power games from ethical perspectives - and to try to find solutions

to issues.

The most characteristic question, however, concerned the **extent and intensity of employee representation.** One emerging pattern is **'keeping employees in check'**,which means laying them off, avoiding responsibility, (the occasional 'demonization ' of employees) and the general notion that employees are tricksters, thinking only about themselves, putting on fake shows, etc. This concept partly reflects the image found in 'The Human Mirror' (Bokor et al. 2005), where there is a manly combative, assertive approach – but with a difference: here, HRM acts as an outsider playing the role of a kind of referee, who blows his whistle when there is foul play, eliminates serious offenders - in short, who monitors the 'fairness' of the game. This interpretation confirmed the presence of the **conscience role** (see Ulrich and Beatty 2001). Such a role is not popular in the eyes of employees - and if HRM adopts the same stance towards management, it will not be popular for them, either. A recurrent and relevant question is whether employees accept the 'referee's judgments'? How ethical do they think HRM decisions are? Supposing HRM defines this role for itself: how does *it* react if its 'judgments' are considered unethical? Another dilemma in this role concept is how much does HRM regard itself as pro-active and future-oriented? In what ways does it create linked ethical systems and frameworks? Or does it confine itself to a strictly reactive role (i.e. trying to find solutions to specific cases only)?

The other general pattern with the employee-champion role is the **supportive, coach-**role-conception. Here, HRM is 'at one's service', giving help to those who ask for it or who fall within its scope, be it a manager or employee. (This may partly go in parallel with the feminine interest-harmonizing role as identified by Bokor et al, 2005.) But what happens to those who do not dare, are unable to or are unwilling to ask for help? Or to those who are not in key positions or do not have a personal contact with HRM staff? How can we 'weave a cobweb' with which anyone who needs support *will get* support? According interpretations in both teams 'upward' communication channels in the majority of organisations work with low efficiency – if they work at all! Also, there are serious problems with the interest representation competence of trade unions (and with trade unions in general). A solution here might be existing practice at company "A", where opinions are directly 'channeled in' through regular social consultations. This way, communicative spaces among HRM professionals, workers and employees, and management are created. Although it is not altogether free from power and dominance exercising, at least such a thing exists!

At a crossroads between role morality and moral integrity (at present and in the future)

Team members drew a sad picture of amorality in present-day workplaces and of the defenselessness of employees. Seen like this, HRM representatives are – like other employees – victims. In interpretations of situations related to HRM tasks the dilemma of classic moral consistency can be identified (Whyte 2002): are we able to harmonize our principles and actions in specific situations so as to attain **dynamic consistency**? Is it important that our moral sensitivity, the process and result of moral decision-making and our actual deeds should strictly cover or be harmonious with each other (Rest 1986)? Especially in Research "A" there was a distinct division between those who stressed the importance of consistency and those who accepted a lack of it. Yet **role morality and moral integrity** issues did appear (Goodpaster 2007); and do we deem it acceptable or legitimate to act differently in a HRM role in comparison with how we would act in our private lives? Or do we believe in the feasibility of a moral integrity which does not differentiate between public or private roles? Interaction between the two concepts is shown in Table 3.(Practical relationships between the two concepts still need further clarification.)

	Same principles in private life and in a HRM role (moral integrity)	**Different principles in private life and in HRM role (role morality, a lack of moral integrity)**
Moral principles, arguments, logics and action harmonize (consistency)	Full moral harmony	Consequent role morality
Moral principles and actions	Disharmony of principles and	Moral chameleon

have no harmony (lack of consistency)	actions	

Table 3: Moral consistency and role morality

Fellow researchers have put forth diverse ways in which to tackle the above dilemmas. Some have pointed at HRM's buffer role and defenseless position when seeking to justify (permanent or occasional) differences between their principles and actions, and a lack of consistency, thus legitimizing HRM-related role morality. Here, 'naturalization' of the phenomenon of role morality had become clearly palpable: some persons simply accepted role morality as a fact - and saw it as natural, while others described it as a struggle and a type of pain. Openly declaring the above issue came as an important turning point in both teams, i.e. when participants actually questioned the **"unalterability of conditions"** (and also the lack of consistency and the 'embeddedness' of role morality)**.** To our astonishment, we realized how 'imprisoned' we had become in our own misconceptions and stereotypes (in relation to amoral managers, selfish employees, good-for-nothing trade union representatives etc.), instead of thinking over current, specific cases (and making use of our own powers of moral imagination).

Role morality and a lack of consistency are worth mentioning not only because they are justified and well-grounded but also because of their individual and organisational effects. Especially in Research "B" we saw that, on the basis of personal and shared examples,this kind of dissonance may demand. X?? Given an unremittinginner tension, some individual people may be forced to make constant self-justifications - and this may lead to moral burn-out and an erosion of responsibility-taking (Baumann 1993). Indeed, consistent stress may force some people to quit a given organisation or give up a career in HRM altogether. On an organisational level, however, individuals may support one another by mutual justification of role morality and via their giving up on moral integrity. The moral reference group may play an important role in this perspective as well. When HRM experts encounter role morality questions, one might ask: 'Can they reasonably expect 'moral impulses' from their own professional reference group or other organisational party?'

The issue of moral integrity (Goodpaster 2007) has surfaced in research studies on two levels. On one part – as has been said before – **HRM experts themselves struggle with contradictions between professed and followed principles, that is, there is a tension between principles and action.** Formulation of a definition of 'ethics' has played a significant part in realization of the above notion - or, rather, discussions about whether 'ethics' are defined by principles, sets of values and/or action); all-round examination of the general, theoretical concept helped a great deal, too – something that was complemented with case solutions (where principles were declared again but were now linked to actions/consequences) and with concrete action taken (where one faces the consequences of action and can reflect on definitions). The presence or lack of moral integrity surfaced in other organisational groups, too. During research work with Team "B" (building on several cases) it was astonishing to see how often **interviewees went against their own professed ethical principles in practice (within the same case) or how inconclusively they behaved (between cases).**

Different cases and moral imagination

In the two research projects we had more than 40 specific cases. One part were processed together (a formula-routine for case processing constituted one of the major learning points of the researches). The relevance of these cases for HRM systems reflected literature groupings (Wooten 2001) and we plan that they will be put to good use in HRM education.

As regards the structure(s) of ethical problems, certain patterns can be identified (which in all probability constitute only one componentof all possible patterns):

- The HRM professional in his/her own field of operations is **faced with a dilemma or situation that possesses ethical relevance; an ethical challenge has to be responded to.** These dilemmas appear at every hierarchical level but obviously differ when it is a HRM manager or junior specialist. In these situations, individuals often experience conflicts between ethical principles and interests ("When do I really act ethically?") or when they have to choose a lesser evil (as in a case of lay-offs).

- The HRM professional **experiences an ethically questionable situation or phenomenon running in parallel with his/her own field of operations or elsewhere in the organisation.** In such situations the individual often clearly sees what the ethical solution would be, but is unsure whether he/she can act according to his/her own personal or professional judgment. The fundamental issue here is how much is it *their* business? How much can *they* have a say in it? Such cases often involve conflicts among organisational roles (e.g. organisational member vs. HRM professional). Or the old dilemma arises: **Does HRM have a 'conscience' role?** And, if so, what does this mean in a given situation?

- The HRM professional is instructed to do something he/she deems ethically questionable - or is not allowed to do something he/she deems ethically necessary. A fundamental dilemma in these situations is to what extent and by what means do they resist and 'stick to' their own solution? This issue can be clearly linked to the **conflict between different role interpretations (i.e. ethical brake vs. serving maid).**

- The HRM professional does not personally face an ethical problem but another organisational party questions the ethics behind a certain HRM decision. The question here is **how much the HRM professional is able or willing to understand and shape the views of other involved parties? How clearly can they communicate their own views? And how much are they able to surpass their own pre-conceptions?**

- In this latter case it might be problematic if **organisational parties have opposing ethical views or if there are contradictory interpretations of ethical behaviour within HRM itself**. Do any of the stakeholders enjoy priority? On what grounds? Which of the different interpretations should have priority? How does one reach a consensus?

The actual practice of solving cases spanned a bridge between theory and practice. Cases we, in the research program, solved together often yielded concrete practical results - and even organisational level changes (e.g. the 'proprietor' of a given case could reassuringly close it; or by making amendments to loyalty regulations, future dilemmas could be avoided). Team members' **moral imagination** saw development (Werhane 1999, 2005).

(1) By solving cases in a team, individual pieces of information were added up, clarified - and were confronted by different interpretations from other team members. Questioning and critical alertness had become a natural part of the common solution-finding process. Apart from alertness, moral sensitivity was also enhanced; our own reasoning and framework formulations had been made things persons were conscious of, and typical answers and solutions were revised. 'Self-recognitive elements' had appeared in team "A", not only at individual but also at the team level.

(2) Aquired solutions differed by qualitative measures from those usually routine actions suggested *before* a case analysis. On the basis of the team's retrospective evaluations, the interests of more involved parties had been considered, while new, freshly proposed starting points and aspects had emerged and – in a more holistic way – other time spans had also been taken into account. Apart from given cases, suggestions for change concerning organisational operations had been made as well.

(3) Cooperative work boosted self-confidence, too: team members managed to formulate a fuller, ever more multi-faceted diagnosis in relation to a complex situation. Thus, persons had become 'armed' with the ability to transform occasionally frustrating situations.

(4) Especially memorable was the phase concerning **moral memory.** A solution to the case led to specific actions which – according to team perceptions – meant a more ethical solution to an employee's problem; and this satisfied the HRM staff. Yet beyond concrete cases people had also made decisions about changes that could endorse more ethical company processes and decisions in the future. **Conclusively- and theoretically-based, common decisions may not only affect current specific situations - they can also lead to concrete, long-term changes involving the whole organization, and not just HRM itself**.

Conclusion

According to their own evaluation both research team had gone a long way in the seven cycles. After the initial phase of showing cautious personal interest they eventually realized ethical aspects are important and legitimate and wanted to integrate them in their daily and strategic operations as well. „ *These talks*

we've had sends – in essence – the great, big, all-important message that we should make this aspect real in our everyday operations. And you should take up responsibility and representation of these things and yes, these issues are rather complex." (Sofi). Of course they had only made the first steps on this 'Marathon' distance. Change may be perceived in the individuals' way of thinking and also at the organisational level but it remains to be seen whether these practices and acquired empirical knowledge have permanent or quickly fading effects in everyday life, in medium or longer time stretches. How much are they willing or able to support and develop one-another and the organisation?

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