

The Human Resource Management Gap In Context: A Case Study Of The Public Sector In The MENA Region

Ashraf Awad¹, Moez Ben Yedder^{2,3}, Fatima Bader³

¹Associate Professor, Abu Dhabi University, UAE previously Damitta University- Egypt
Ashraf.Awad@adu.ac.ae

²Assistant Professor, Abu Dhabi University, UAE Moez.benyedder@adu.ac.ae

³Assistant Professor, Syria Virtual University, Syria fatima.bader@outlook.com

Abstract: Since the early 1990s, several studies have focused on the gap between HRM theory and practice. While the first research on the gap was aimed at highlighting its existence, recent studies have attempted to draw lessons from this duality calling for more alignment between theory and practice in HRM. The aim of the present paper is to understand the gap, its origins and its manifestations in a particular context: the public administration in the MENA region. A survey questionnaire was designated to collect data for measuring the gap between hard and soft HRM model and to assess the factors that are likely to explain the gap. 305 questionnaires were addressed HR officers working in the public sector in three different countries of the region (Egypt, Syria and UAE). Collected data were analyzed through an index we introduced for estimating the gap in each of the studied countries. Cross-national comparison has been realized to give a contextual explanation of the gap. Our findings prove the existence of the gap in the region and shows that even in the same region cross-national differences appear to be meaningful. The present research opens the door for more contextualized studies of the HRM gap and introduce a new metric to assess it.

Keywords: Human resource management, theory practice gap, HRM gap, Middle East region, public administration, index estimation.

Introduction

Since the early 1990s, several studies have focused on the gap between HRM theory and practice (Keenoy 1990; 1999; Legge, 1995; 2005; Storey 1995; Watson, 2004). While the first research on the gap was aimed at highlighting its existence (Keenoy, 1990; 1999; Legge, 1995), more recent studies (Watson, 2010; Prabhu, 2011; Persson et al, 2017) have attempted to draw lessons from this duality and praised for a rapprochement between HRM theory and practice.

While previous research tends to focus on the duality between HR practitioner managerialism and HRM academia idealism

(Mueller and Carter, 2005; Dale, 2012; Klikauer, 2015) as a sole explication of the gap, the present paper approaches the question from a contextual perspective. Indeed, we think that a social phenomenon like the chronicle gap between theory and practice can rarely be explained by a single universal reason (Byrne, 2002; DeLanda, 2006; Morin, 2007). The critical review of the literature, we start the paper with, supports this assumption. Rather than being a linear tendency (Sikula, 2001; Prabhu, 2011), the gap is complex phenomenon that materializes in different forms and originated from multiple causes. We assume in this paper that those causes may be more

or less salient in a particular context. The aim of the present paper is to understand the gap, its particular causes and manifestations in a particular context: the public administration in the Middle East region. Indeed, previous research tend to suffer from universalistic bias (Brohman, 1995; Sheehan et al, 2010) assuming the gap between theory and practice in HRM has identical manifestations in all contexts. In the following paragraphs, the review of literature about the origin of the gap that has its roots in both academia and the managerial sphere. Previous research tend to achieve a consensus regarding the importance of the interaction between HRM academia and HR practitioner to challenge the gap.

Theoretical framework

1. The gap manifestations

Previous research on the theory/practice gap tends to consider it as a feature of HRM (i.e Legge 1995; 2005; Sikula, 2001; Prabhu, 2011). Reconsidering this aspect by acknowledging the complexity of the issue and uncovering its multiple facets is a first step for a better and more holistic understanding of the phenomenon (Byrne, 2002; DeLanda, 2006; Morin, 2007). In the following, we present the different manifestations of the gap. Based on our literature review, it appears that the theory / practice gap in HRM has three main manifestations with difference in interest, approach and perception between HRM theory and practice.

a. Difference of interest

A first observation is that academia and business practitioners are not interested in the same topics when it comes to HRM. For Gibb (2001), literature in HRM is struggling between diverging points of view with advocates of universalistic approach to HRM opposing arguments to scholars

pleading for the contingency approach. Meanwhile, the eyes of business practitioners are turned to completely different issues. Gibb (2001), based on a survey of HRM practitioners, finds that their areas of interest are gravitating around team management, recruitment and retention policies, communication or preservation of employee morale among the organizations (Gupta & Shaw, 2014). Debates on the universality of HRM, the contribution of theoretical frameworks imported from other disciplines or the reality of HRM contribution to business performance crystallize the interest of the HRM research community but are not points of interest for practitioners seeking to overcome daily problems.

b. Difference of approach

A second manifestation of the gap between theory and practice in the field is expressed by the obvious inconsistency between, on one hand, an idealistic academic rhetoric promoting human resource development and investment in people and, on the other hand, much less "humanistic" managerial practices. Sikula (2001) goes so far regarding this point as to talk about the "lies" of HRM. Thus, for Sikula the disconnection between theory and practice in HRM is such that he considers that universities are giving false lessons to business students so they do not prepare them to the reality they will face in the workplace. The gap between research and practice results in studies that are insufficiently empirically based and develop a discourse that contradicts concrete practices on company's ground. Mueller and Carter (2005) emphasize the dualism between a "realistic" understanding of HRM that inspires practice and a purely discursive and rhetorical concepts of HRM found in research. For instance, HRM researchers continue to consider the contribution of HRM to business performance as a way of legitimizing their discipline whereas, the

best performance of human resources are sometimes due to greater pressure on the staff (Boselie et al., 2009).

c. Difference of perception

Finally, the third aspect of the gap appears in the difference of appreciation of situations and concepts. Concepts that are considered useful or interesting by researchers can be, at the same time, completely discredited by managers and vice versa. Soltani (2005) notes this type of paradox in companies having implemented total quality management (TQM). While implementing TQM those companies were showing reluctance to personnel assessment, a practice largely advocated by HRM scholars. Soltani (2005) highlights the contradiction between research emphasizing the importance of human resource assessment and its merits and the view of business practitioners who want to see personnel assessment "scratched from the surface of earth" (p. 788). Soltani (2005) reports that major business practitioners such as the TQM "guru" Edward Deming have severely criticized personnel assessment as a "deadly disease" of the organization that reinforces supervision and undermines initiative and commitment of the personnel to the organization.

The gap between theory and practice thus has various facets: (1) divergence of interest, (2) contradiction between an idealistic discourse and a more nuanced reality in the daily business practice and (3) difference of perception of concepts and practices. This gap has its origin in several factors relating to academia, for some, and to business practice, for others.

2. Causes attributable to academia

Similarly to other management research area, HRM scholars conduct their studies

starting from empirical observations and therefore necessarily confront to the reality of business. However, the perspective from which they see things and some factors specific to academia concourse to the production of a rhetoric incongruent with business practice of HRM.

a. The reality distortion

For Zaccaro and Horns (2003) the narrowness of the perspective of analysis of HRM researchers removes any operational character to their conclusion. For instance, they note that researchers investigating on leadership tend to consider leaders to be related only to immediate subordinates when, in reality, most leaders have frequent exchanges with two or more hierarchical levels of subordinates. This basic and frequent reduction makes it possible to have a simpler and more comprehensible reading of reality but distorts the content. In fact, by operating through simplification and reduction, part of the social reality is ignored by researchers (Hutchinson, 2016).

Sikula (2001) thinks that unrealistic theories have, as a starting point, unrealistic postulates. For example, Sikula (2001) mentions the over-emphasis on profitability and its consideration as an essential determinant of individual and organizational behavior while, in reality, behavior can be explained by values, customs and ethics. Although several studies have supported this assumption and that entire academic disciplines are devoted to studying the determinants of decision-making, a significant proportion of HRM researchers still consider that managers and organizations make decisions dictated by profitability and the only pecuniary interest of the company (Kaufman, 2015). This example of how the classical approach of the firm continue to shape the way in which scholars perceive business, supports the argument that unrealistic theoretical

archetypes can give to HRM academia a distorted image of the reality.

In addition to reduction and stereotypes, another element contributes to skewing the perception of the field by researchers in HRM: it is their source of empirical data. Gibb (2001) believes that one of the limitations of HRM research is its over reliance on empirical data retrieved from HRM professionals or senior company managers. Indeed, the data collected from a single audience would reflect the point of view and the interests of this audience. This opinion is shared by Guest and Peccei (1994) who believe that collecting data from only one audience risks increasing the gap between rhetoric and reality in HRM.

b. The aesthetics of discourse

Previous literature recognizes that some notions of HRM are more intended to produce an aesthetic improvement of HRM discourse rather than guiding practice (Sikula, 2001; Mueller and Carter, 2005; Keegan & Boselie, 2006; Itani, 2017). For instance, Sikula (2001) believes that five common statements in the theoretical discourse of HRM are contradicted by the practices of the field and correspond rather to myths. These five assertions are: (1) human resources are the most important resource of the company, (2) experience and a higher level of qualification allow access to a job, (3) good individual performance increases pay, (4) loyalty and commitment are recognized and rewarded by the organization and, finally, (5) the idea that technological and human developments go hand in hand. The question that arises after acknowledging these evidences is why HRM scholars are so keen to (re) produce a mystifying speech.

The academic sphere in HRM as all academic spheres has the role of producing knowledge carried on by a speech that must

please to the academic audience to succeed (Itani, 2017). For this reason, research in HRM keeps producing attractive speeches. It is through the production of an agreeable rhetoric giving the hope of a more productive and human business (what Legge calls the soft HRM model) that HRM research has been institutionalized and has given itself an identity and a place among management academia (Guest, 1990). Keenoy (1999) is ironical on this point by suggesting that the more researchers in HRM advance in the break with reality and the more successful they are. Others criticize the attitude of HRM researchers who act as normative prescribers by continuing to legitimize practices in the field (Watson, 2010; Itani, 2017).

c. The theorization process

Beyond the discursive nature of academic production in HRM, the content of HRM research production has been criticized for not helping to solve the concrete problems faced by business because of its hermetic and unpractical nature (Prabhu, 2011). Indeed, Becker and Gerhart (1996) argue that while the development of theories is crucial to the development of any discipline, too much proliferation of theories eventually prevents the accumulation of knowledge. In this regard, Prabhu (2011) quotes Koontz who had already assimilated management theories in 1961 to an impenetrable jungle. Twenty years later, Koontz reiterated the essay and concluded that the jungle of managerial theories has become even more impenetrable. The language, the concepts and the theoretical construction are not always understood by business practitioners (Keegan and Francis, 2010). In these conditions, it is very difficult for managers to explore and exploit HRM theory "Jungle" through elements that are exposed to them in training session based on the identification of needs in concrete work situation (Prabhu, 2011).

Too hermetic to provide operational solutions, research in HRM is not always be sufficiently consolidated theoretically to provide fairly categorical answers to convince. For instance, the black-box case, the link between performance and HRM, is one of the most significant issues that HRM research struggles with since decades without bringing a clear answer (Kaufman, 2015). Regarding the thorny question of the link between performance and HRM, Fleetwood and Hesketh (2008) believe that this problem is "under-theorized" in the sense that the related research is done with little reflexive feedback. The authors denounce an important mass of works which describe the link but which do not make it possible to understand it in the absence of theoretical reflection.

Finally, the theorization process of HRM research suffers from its isolation from business. Indeed, the starting point for HRM research is often decided far from the managerial sphere. Zaccaro and Horns (2003) point this aspect by highlighting the lack of attention paid by researchers to the needs and challenges faced by practitioners. Keegan & Francis (2010) acknowledge that the tendency of having a business research partnership in HRM is just emerging and the decades long theorization production in HRM has been realized without enough engagement of business practitioners. Zaccaro and Horns (2003) point this aspect by highlighting the lack of attention paid by researchers to the needs and challenges faced by practitioners.

3. Causes attributable to the managerial sphere

To advocate HRM academia, one can argue that if process of theorizing in HRM has difficulty in understanding the reality of the organization that is partly due to the difficulty of capturing business reality. The

factors behind the gap include also factors related to business. Indeed, the complexity of business issues faced by management, as well as, the lack of assimilation of theoretical reflections can be pointed out to understand the gap. So far, business may find difficulties in integrating successfully HRM scientific production because the conditions within organizations do not always allow it and because in some cases, there is a real rejection of the theory.

a. Experience vs reflexivity

In the 1950s', Nobel Prize winner, Simon, has emphasized that the ability of managers to solve complex problems was very limited in comparison with the size of these problems. (Prabhu, 2011). When confronting a problem to be solved, a practitioner will have more the reflex to turn towards the same situations encountered in his experience than to turn to the results of the research (Zaccaro and Horns, 2003). This point has also been highlighted by Argyris and Schön (1978) who believe that managers facing challenging circumstances generally use their own theories of action. In doing so, they are often unaware of whether their theories are compatible with formal theories produced by research (Prabhu, 2011). In this respect, business management is commonly regarded as a strange mixture of alchemy, romantic idealism and reason (Kramer, 2008).

Prabhu (2011) emphasizes the division between HRM practice and theory is explained by differences between the logic of business practice and theory construction. For Prabhu (2011), when examining business practice it appears that managers make repetitive mistakes without questioning them and without resorting to theory. In fact, practitioners operate on a short-term horizon which prevents a reflexive return on the issue they face daily

(Zaccaro and Horns, 2003). Managers evolve in a complex environment, act in emergency and are torn between several constraints. The fire management metaphor is sometimes used to describe the life of business managers who are commonly engaged in a process of appeasement of problems they faces on a daily basis (Hutchinson & Purcell, 2010). Taking the necessary time to have a scientifically sound reflexion or formulating the issue and bringing it to academia is difficult for management.

b. The inexistence of the conditions of integration of HRM research

Just as the realities are distorted when they go back to the academic sphere, the theoretical recommendations are distorted when they arrive on the ground of business. Going back to the issue of the black box, Fleetwood and Hesketh (2008) asserted that if we ambition to see a contribution of HRM to business performance, we have to be interested in the ways in which the practices of HRM are transformed and change sense once they are implanted in a well-defined organizational context. In this respect, Fleetwood and Hesketh (2008) agree with Ulrich (1997) who emphasizes that leveraging the talents of staff to achieve a real business performance for the company is a work that requires much more than replicating architecture of HRM practices found in an another company. In this regard, it is worth to note that the business logic underpinning management practice reflects a particular interest for contextualization whereas managerial theory provides universal answers (Prabhu, 2011).

Gal (1995) carried out a retrospective case study of a company that decided to implement more developed HRM policies based on four objectives: integration, involvement, flexibility and quality. These four objectives are derived from Guest's

model (1991) which suggested at the time a number of practices associated with objectives. After a few years, the author finds that the company studied did not achieve the objectives set by this theoretical framework nor actually implemented the practices recommended by Guest (1991). Gal (1995) reports that the reasons for the failure of theory transfer to practice lie in the inability of the firm to create an environment conducive of the implementation of the desired HRM system. Gal (1995) also notes that the company had finally found a greater interest in pursuing the application of a traditional model of personnel management and ultimately only committed to the axis of flexibility considered attractive. Indeed, HRM theory is built on evidences generally matching with an archetype of business (i.e a large company in a competitive market seeking for financial performance and wishing to attract and retain talented people) that is far from representing the reality and the complexity of business. Thus each business when it implements theoretical recommendation from HRM accommodates it to its own reality through a process that can largely distort HRM theory.

c. Mistrusting HRM theory

Zaccaro and Horns (2003) emphasize that practitioners have habits that accentuate the gap between research and practice. The authors note the tendency of practitioners to resort to preconceived ideas and their skepticism and even mistrust of scientific research. An illustration is given by Zaccaro and Banks (2004) regarding the gap between theory and practice concerning the management of change. Zaccaro and Banks (2004) noted that while researchers have intensified studies in this area insisting that the ability to manage change is a key competency in HRM, practitioners in the discipline pay little attention to it and doubt even of the utility of this skill. In their work on the paradoxes, ambiguities and dualities

of HRM, Boselie et al. (2009) emphasize that the discipline remains strongly dominated by conceptual research on the nature of HRM and its impact on business while at the level of HRM practitioner little is known about the debate of HRM to performance.

For Mueller and Carter (2005), one of the reasons why the gap between rhetoric and HRM practice is that the discourse change of the discipline in the early 1980s came along with a shift in power relations within businesses in favor of employers with the advent of Thatcherism/ Reaganism. Sikula (2001) believes that the low regard given to human aspect by practitioners in a context of greater interest in financial profitability leads them to turn out from idealistic theoretical recommendations. Practitioners, generally, do not consider that theory is able to provide solutions to their problems. In this regard, managers do not attribute the repeated failures found in practice to the lack of connection to the theory, but rather think that the malfunctions are due to poor choices of corporate majors (Prabhu, 2011). When they turn to research it is only for a particular issue (policy towards the stakeholders, workflow ...) whereas the other aspects of their work are realized independently of any conceptual considerations (Zaccaro and Horns, 2003).

Hypothesis

Literature review allowed determining the origin of the gap that has its roots in both academia and the managerial sphere. To operationalize the gap between the two entities, one way is to focus on the interaction between them. Social interactions are particularly important because they reflect the possible existence of transaction and a cumulative aggregation of the outcomes of those transactions spreading over time and space (Glaeser & Scheinkman, 2001; Kline & Tamer, 2018). There are many example of transaction analysis in

organizational studies. For instance, Plaza-Úbeda et al, (2010) resorted to measuring the interaction between CEO's and stakeholders to assess the level of stakeholder integration in business strategy while assessed the existence of barriers in the interaction for the same purpose. Studies grounded in information systems discipline gave also a special attention to measuring the degree of collaboration between network entities (Vargas et al, 2016 ; Banaeianjahromi & Smolander, 2019 ; Senyo et al, 2019). They generally resort to the measurment of the flow of information exchange.

The interaction between management and academia can take several forms. Example of those interactions are academia's involvement in industrial development teams and networks, support for applied and fundamental research, thesis research conducted in industry, joint-value programs and resource-sharing (Saguy, 2011). Those interactions are commonly praised for spreading innovation through industry and giving a sense of purpose to academic work (De Fuentes & Dutrénit, 2012). However, they are more difficult to put in place in the case of social sciences (i.g organization studies and management) especially in emerging countries (Üsdiken, 1996).

In this research, we use more basic variables to assess the interaction between HR managers and HRM academia. The first variable is the background of the HR officers. Cohen (2007 ; 2015) noted that a significant part of HR mangers have no or little knowledge of HRM before joining the profession. In other words, a significant part of HR professional have had no interaction with HRM academia through their educational path. The absence of people having an HRM background can partly explain the HRM gap (Cohen, 2015). Accordingly, one can argue that the presence of HRM garduated among the HR officers in an organisation contribute to reduce the

HRM gap. Based on the above arguments, our first hypothesis can be formulated as following:

H1: the prevalence of HRM graduated among HR officers negatively influence the extent of the gap

In addition, a qualitative insight needs to be considered regarding the educational background of HR professionals (Barker, 2010; Wright et al, 2011). Many studies suggest that HRM certification can address the quality of education/background/continuous development in HRM (Cohen, 2012 ; De Nisi ; 2012 ; Lengnick-Hall & Aguinis, 2012). However, this variable is not suitable for this research as professional bodies rather than academic ones generally make HRM certification for HR officers. Thus, it does not reflect a level of interaction between academia and organizations. Instead, we will use a background with post-graduate studies as a proxy for measuring the qualitative aspect of the educational background. Indeed, people having made post-graduates studies (MBA, MSc, PhD) have had longer and deeper interaction with academia in their field during their educational path. According to the above, we expect the gap extent will be minored in the situation when HR officers have made longer studies in the field of HRM. Based on that, our second hypothesis can be formulated as following:

H2: the level of study of HR officers (having HR degrees) negatively influence the extent of the gap

HR professional do not interact academia with academia only at the moment of acquiring education in university. They may also interact with HRM academia through the continuous learning mechanisms. In fact, when benefiting from training and development opportunities they may discuss HRM theoretical knowledge provided by

HRM academia. While, one should acknowledge that continuous learning should not considered as a “back to school” mechanism, it is obvious that it is often the occasion to (re)-enter in contact with the academic view of the world. Accordingly, one can plead for the argument that the participation of HR officers in training and development opportunities is a way of interaction HRM academia view and thus at contribute to reduce the HRM gap. Based on those arguments, our third hypothesis can be formulated as following:

H3: training opportunities for HRM officers negatively influence the extent of the gap

Methodology

Data collection and sample

For the survey, data has been collected from three different Arab countries (Egypt, Syria and UAE). The choice of the three countries allows us to have the full spectrum of the middle-east region with a country from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) subgroup, namely UAE, a country from the Levant region subgroup, namely Syria, and Egypt, which by its demography and cultural specificities constitute a distinct case in the region.

The data collection process was based on a questionnaire administrated to HR officers working in the public sector. 305 questionnaires were distributed and 291 of them were returned corresponding to a response rate of 95.4%. The final sample encompasses 135 respondents from UAE (Abu Dhabi; Dubai and Ras Al-Khaima district), 111 respondents from Egypt (Cairo and Alexandria district) and 45 respondents from Syria (Damas district). The lower number of response obtained in Syria is explained by the ongoing conflict happening in the country at the moment of the study (first quarter of 2019).

Measure and analysis

A survey questionnaire was designated to collect data allowing to measure the gap between hard and soft model in the middle-east region to assess the factors that are likely to explain the gap. To assess the gap respondent were provided a list of 12 HRM topics. Half of them representing the hard HR model (Control of payroll cost, implementing of organization policy, performance monitoring, HR planning and control of absenteeism). The other representing the soft HR model (Autonomous work, HR development, collective bargaining, internal communication, achievement of people's goal and quality of life at work). All 12 topics were identified from previous research identifying practices related to hard and soft HR models (Cook et al, 2016; Marchington, 2015; Storey, 2014). Participants to the survey were asked to indicate the most important HR topics for their organization. Additionally, respondents were asked to indicate the level of studies of the HR officers (BA, Master or PhD) in the organization and whether their educational background was in HRM or in another field. Finally, participants to the survey were asked to indicate the number of training session provided for HR officers in their organization during the year.

To obtain a score index for the estimation of each HR model (soft and hard), we followed the steps indicated by Maziotta & Pareto (2013) for constructing a composite index. This approach involves two steps. The first

step is the calculation of an individual score for each item while the second corresponds to the calculation of the composite index. The gap was then calculated by estimating the difference between the score index of the two models. The details of the analysis are presented in the result section.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Table 1 shows the results for the level of studies of the HR officers and the proportion of HRM graduates among HR officers with a final degree for each of the three level (BA, Master or PhD). The percentage of final degree holder for each degree was calculated relatively to the total population. The percentage of HR officers having an educational background in HRM was calculated relatively to the total number of HR officers having the same final degree. The data shows that in the region, HR officers in the public administration tend to have an educational background in other fields of study. The most striking fact in this matter being the case of Egypt where the absolute majority of HR officers (99.1%) hold a degree in another field. This is explained by hiring policy of Employment Guarantee implemented by the Egyptian Government since the early 1960's. Under this policy, obtaining an administrative job in the government is a right for all graduates of all specialties (Assaad, 1997). This policy also explain the fact that only a few of HR officers (2.8%) go further than the bachelor degree in their educational path.

	Egypt (n=111)		Syria (n=45)		UAE (n=135)		Total (n=291)	
	Backgrou nd in HRM*	Grade Holder* *	Backgrou nd in HRM	Grad e Hold er	Backgrou nd in HRM	Grad e Hold er	Backgrou nd in HRM	Grad e Hold er
Ph.d	0%	0%	54.5%	12.5 %	38.5%	9.6%	45.8%	7.2%
Mast er	0%	2.8%	39.1%	26.1 %	42.9%	15.6 %	38.3%	14.1 %

BA	1%	97.2%	44.4%	61.4 %	39.8%	72.6 %	24.6%	77.8 %
Total	0.9%	-----	44.3%	-----	39.3%	-----	27.8%	-----

*Percentage of HR officers having an educational background in HRM relatively to the HR officers having the same final degree

**Percentage of HR officers with the mentioned degree as a final degree relatively to the total number of HR officers

Table 1: Level of education and proportion of HRM graduates among HR officers

Table 2 presents the number of training session offered to HR staff during year. As our data were gathered in the first quarter of 2019, the numbers reported in table 2 corresponds to the number of training session the HR staff benefitted from in 2018. For more intelligibility, results are also expressed in percentage after calculating frequency relatively to the sample. The

	Egypt (n=111)		Syria (n=45)		UAE (n=135)		Total (n=291)	
No session	13	11.7%	11	24.4%	11	8.1%	35	12.0%
1 session/year	51	45.9%	10	22.2%	55	40.7%	116	39.9%
2 sessions /year	47	42.3%	17	37.8%	50	37.0%	114	39.2%
3 sessions / year			3	6.7%	10	7.4%	13	4.5%
4 sessions /year			4	8.9%	9	6.7%	13	4.5%
Average	1.31		1.32		1.64		1.49	

Table 2: Training and development opportunities for HR officers

Calculation of the item score

For each item, we calculated an item score SI that reflects the relative interest of the studied organizations in the HR topic corresponding to the item. We estimated the occurrence for each item relatively to the number of valid answer (Ho, 2006; Huck et al, 1974). The score for each item SI was calculated as a percentage following this formula

$$SI = (ni/N) \times 100$$

Where ni is the number of occurrence for the item and N is the number of valid

average was calculated by summing the total number of sessions for each group then dividing it by the number (n) of surveyed organizations or the same group. The evidences from table 2 shows the majority of HR staff in the region benefits from 1 to 2 training session in a year. However, there are differences between countries. Indeed, UAE HR staff has a higher average of training session per year (1.64) comparing to Egypt and Syria (1.31 and 1.32).

respondents. The more the score is close to 100, the more the HR topic is important for the organization. In the opposite sense, a score close to 0 reflects a weak interest to the HR topic by the respondent. Due to the difference of the number of chosen items between the three countries we normalized the score for each items to allow comparison between the sub-group of the sample (Maziotta & Pareto, 2013) and to avoid statistical bias due to data heterogeneity (Codd, 1970).

Table 3 shows the score for each items for each of the studied country and for the total sample. For the items related to the HR hard model, it's "Performance monitoring of HR" and "Achievement of organization

objectives” items that obtain the highest scores for the whole sample. In other words, monitoring people performance and achieving organizational objectives are the top priorities of public organization in the region associated with the hard HR model. It is noticeable that for Syrian public organization, a high importance is given to the control of payroll. Syrian public administration is, among the three studied countries, the one who values the most the monitoring of people performance. On the other hand, the UAE public organization is the one which value the most the achievement of organizational objectives.

For the items associated to the HR soft model, “HR development” item obtains by far the highest score with the UAE based surveyed organizations according highest importance to the topic among the three investigated countries. “Autonomous work” items obtain the lowest score for the items associated with HR soft model with a particularly low score for both Syria (2.2%) and UAE (4.8%).

Calculation of the index score

The index score for HR hard model (S (hard)) and HR soft model (S (soft)) were estimated by calculating the average score for the items corresponding to each model. Analytically, the score index of the two models are expressed as following

$$S_{\text{hard}} = \bar{x} \text{ SI (hard)}$$

$$S_{\text{soft}} = \bar{x} \text{ SI (soft)}$$

where SI (hard) is the score obtained for each item representing the HR hard model and SI (soft) is the score obtained for each item representing the HR soft model. We retained the assumption of equal weight for calculating the score index in the absence of any objective or subjective criteria to

attribute a different weight to each item (Maziotta & Pareto, 2013).

The index score for each model are presented in table 3. Index scores are displayed by country and for the entire sample. Syria has the highest score for the HR hard model and the lowest for the HR soft model. It is opposed to Egypt that has the score for the lowest HR hard model and the highest for the HR soft model among the three studied countries. For the whole sample and for each individual country, scores of HR hard model are higher than those of HR soft model.

Gap estimation

In previous literature, the estimation of a gap in the observation of a set of variables is generally based on the analysis of frequency tables and the use of means procedure. The gap is materialized by the difference between subgroup means (Brown & Swartz, 1989; Faganel, 2010; Narasimhan, 1997). To determine the gap between the hard and soft HR model, we calculated the difference between the average score obtained for the six items representing the hard HR model and the average score obtained for the six items representing the soft model. The gap to be noted as G can be expressed analytically as:

$$G = \bar{x} \text{ SI (hard)} - \bar{x} \text{ SI (soft)}$$

where Si (hard) is the score obtained for each item representing the HR hard model and Si (soft) is the score obtained for each item representing the HR soft model. A positive value of G indicates the existence of a gap between hard and soft HR model as topic of interest for organization we are investigating. Accordingly, the higher is the value of G, the larger is the gap. Gap estimation for the total sample and for each of the studied countries is reported in table 3.

	Egypt	Syria	UAE	Total
Control of payroll cost	25.2%	57.3%	30.0%	37.5%
Organization policy implementation	26.7%	35.2%	42.4%	34.8%
Performance monitoring of HR	35.6%	57.3%	47.2%	46.7%
HR planning	32.7%	24.2%	26.3%	27.7%
Achievement of organization objectives	43.0%	41.9%	54.2%	46.4%
Controlling absenteeism	13.4%	8.8%	10.2%	10.8%
Index Score (S hard)	29.4%	37.4%	35.0%	34.0%
Autonomous work	19.3%	2.2%	4.8%	8.8%
HR development	49.0%	44.1%	63.8%	52.3%
Collective bargaining	28.2%	4.4%	1.6%	11.4%
Internal communication	32.7%	17.6%	23.6%	24.6%
Achievement of HR objectives	19.3%	13.2%	24.7%	19.1%
Quality of life at work	16.3%	35.2%	12.3%	21.3%
Index Score (S soft)	27.5%	19.5%	21.8%	22.9%
Estimation of the gap (G)	1.9	17.9	13.2	11.1

Table 3: Frequency analysis and gap estimation

Test of Hypthesis

The first hypothesis (H1) states that the prevalence of HRM graduated among HR officers negatively influence the extent of the gap. The hypothesis is grounded on the idea that the presence of HRM graduated among HR staff in an organization reduce the HRM gap. For testing this first hypothesis, we

examined the correlation between two variables: (G) corresponding to the gap estimation (the values were obtained in table 3) and (HR graduate) corresponding to the proportion of HR graduates among the HR staff (the values were obtained in table 1). As the two variables are continuous, we used a Pearson test of correlation. Results presented in table 4 show that the p value of the Test is above 0.05. Accordingly, there is no correlation between the two variables and H1 is invalidated.

Country	Egypt	Syria	Uae	Pearson	N	T-Statistic	DF	p value
G	1.98	17.99	13.23					
Hr graduate	0.01	0.44	0.39	0.987029	3	5.279816	1	0.119165
Hr training	1.31	1.36	1.64	0.351198	3	0.375091	1	0.771549

Table 4 : Pearson test of correlation

The first hypothesis (H2) states the level of study of HR officers with HRM degrees

negatively influence the extent of the gap. For testing the second hypothesis, we examined the correlation between two variables: (G) corresponding to the gap estimation and the rank of each country in terms of level of study of HR officers having a degree in HRM. Indeed, according to the data in table 1, Syria rank is first with the highest proportion of HR officers with Ph.d and master degree and with the highest

proportion of HRM graduated for each degree, followed by UAE and then by Egypt. As we are seeking to test the influence of an ordinal variable (rank of the country) on a continuous variable (G, the gap estimation), we used an ANOVA test. Results presented in table 5 show that the p value of the Test is above 0.05. Accordingly, there is no correlation between the two variables and H2 is invalidated.

ANOVA							
Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit	
Between Groups	123.30667	1	123.3067	3.595469	0.130815	7.708647	
Within Groups	137.18007	4	34.29502				
Total	260.48673	5					

Table 5 : ANOVA test

The third hypothesis of the study (H3) states that training opportunities for HRM officers negatively influence the extent of the gap. For testing this first hypothesis, we examined the correlation the gap estimation (G) and the variable (HR training) corresponding to the average number of training session (the values were obtained in table 2). Similarly, to the test effected for H1, we used a Pearson test of correlation as the two variables are continuous. Results presented in table 4 show that the p value of the Test is above 0.05. Accordingly, there is no correlation between the two variables and H3 is invalidated.

Discussion

Our results led us to invalidate the three hypothesis of our study. According to our findings, the HRM gap is not explicated by any of the three variables we studied (prevalence of HRM graduate among HR staff, level of study of HR officers and training opportunities for HRM officers). Thus, the main assumption of our

study is not verified in the context of the present research. In other words, the lack of interaction between HRM academia and management does not explain the gap in the public administration of the Middle East. However, the gap estimation shows significant differences between the three studied countries. Public administrations share similarities among the three studied countries but also have salient differences that may explain the differences in the HRM Gap. For instance, we know that public administration, in the three countries, is relatively recent and is associated with the development occurring the post-independence era but with different purposes. For instance, the social purpose of Egyptian public administration can explain the lower HRM gap found for this country. In Egypt, the main purpose of the public administration is social since the early years of the Nasserien regime through job provision for graduates in order to keep social peace (Assaad, 1997). Despite relatively low wages and overstaffing, the conditions offered by the Egyptian public sector make it the “Employer of Choice” for

young graduates (Barsoum, 2016). Previous research found that the social policy of the public administration toward employees explains the attractiveness of the public sector for generations (Barsoum, 2016).

In the UAE, the public administration has undergone extensive changes in the last years in order to sustain the economic development of country embracing a more competitive model of HRM inspired by private sector management (Jabeen and Isakovic, 2015). Thus, this managerial orientation of public sector HRM management clearly make it distinct from the social policy of Egypt and may explain the existence of a HRM gap similar in its extent and manifestation to what is found in the private sector (Dale, 2012; Klikauer, 2015) with descriptive results showing UAE respondents focusing on managerialist topics (HR development, Achievement of objectives...) for both hard and soft HR model related answers (see table3).

The Syrian public administration context of may explains why the country has the highest gap among the three studied countries in the region. While the country has implemented reforms to modernize its public administration (Hassna & Ahmad, 2006), it has not achieved a managerial transformation similar than to what occurred in the UAE. The prevalence of a non managerial model by Syrian public administration has been underlined in previous research (Milana & Maldaon, 2015). This is also shown by the responses of Syrian respondents (see table3) which less importance to the managerialist topics, in opposition to the UAE. The focus of respondents is on cost reduction, which can be explained by the scarcity due to the civil conflict in the country at the moment of the study. This explanation is consistent with previous research stating that financial austerity lead to harder HRM practice (Fodor & Poór, 2009).

Conclusion

Our research show that the gap between theory and practice in HRM goes beyond the interaction between the two spheres. After conducting a cross-national comparison, it appears that people passing from HRM academia to public organization HR department do not reduce the HRM gap in this kind of organization. More influential contextual trends can affect the extent and the shape of the HRM Gap. The key element to understand the gap and then to address it lies into the consideration of contingency and in highlighting the influential factors on HRM in their particular context. Our research in the public administration of three countries belonging to the same region showed that the priority of the public administration in each country can result in differences in the HRM gap. Further research is needed to assert with certainty the role of the factors we mentioned for each of the studied countries and above. For instance, future research on the HRM gap can focus on the role of strategy and strategic priorities of public administration in explaining the gap. It is also relevant for future research to investigate the role of strategy in the case of private business.

One of the limitation of the present study is its sample. Future research can consider wider sample in other context to obtain more generalizable results and uncover the specific reasons explaining the gap in other contexts. Another limitation of the present study is that we assessed the perception of the management side and assumed the academic sphere in the studied countries is endorsing the same HRM discourse of the international HRM academia. Further research is needed to explore the extent to which HRM academia in the region and in other contexts is aligned on the soft international HRM discourse and on their local public administration and business sphere HRM views.

At the end of this paper, it is worth to mention that previous literature on the theory/practice gap in HRM has acknowledged the possibility of bringing closer theory and practice in HRM (Mueller and Carter, 2005; Francis and Keegan, 2006; Hutchins & Burke, 2007; Keegan & Francis, 2010) and that there is a variety of views on how this reconciliation could be achieved. Drawing on our findings, we recommend also to HRM academia to give more consideration of the specific influential factors shaping private and public management because even the most persuasive academic discourse cannot change the structural factors deeply rooted in an organizational context. Similarly, ignoring HRM academic advances and examining on the HRM issues at the sole light of organizational priorities can only maintain the statu quo and the state of practice in public and private sector. Identifying contextual issues and engaging with academia to resolve them can help to bridge the opposing actors of the HRM gap and to bring out a more realistic HRM academic discourse useful to HR practitioners.

Acknowledgement: This research is supported by Abu Dhabi University through Internal Research Grant number 19300471.

References

1. Assaad, R. (1997). The effects of public sector hiring and compensation policies on the Egyptian labor market. *The World Bank Economic Review*, 11(1), 85-118.
2. Banaeianjahromi, N., & Smolander, K. (2019). Lack of communication and collaboration in enterprise architecture development. *Information Systems Frontiers*, 21(4), 877-908.
3. Barker, R. (2010). No, management is not a profession. *Harvard business review*, 88(7-8), 52-60.
4. Barsoum, G. (2016). The public sector as the employer of choice among youth in Egypt: The relevance of public service motivation theory. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 39(3), 205-215.
5. Brohman, J. (1995). Universalism, Eurocentrism, and ideological bias in development studies: from modernisation to neoliberalism. *Third World Quarterly*, 16(1), 121-140.
6. Brown, S. W., & Swartz, T. A. (1989). A gap analysis of professional service quality. *The Journal of Marketing*, 92-98.
7. Codd, E. F. (1970). "A Relational Model of Data for Large Shared Data Banks". *Communications of the ACM*. **13** (6): 377–387.
8. Cohen, D. J. (2007). *Strategic Partnerships between Academia and Practice: The Case for Nurturing Undergraduate HR Education*. Vida Scarpello, Thoughts on Human Resource Management Education in the United States. New York: McGraw-Hill Publishers.
9. Cohen, D. J. (2012). Identifying the value of HR certification: Clarification and more complex models required. *Human Resource Management Review*, 22(4), 258-265.
10. Cohen, Debra J. "HR past, present and future: A call for consistent practices and a focus on competencies." *Human Resource Management Review* 25, no. 2 (2015): 205-215.
11. Cook, H., MacKenzie, R., & Forde, C. (2016). HRM and performance: the vulnerability of soft HRM practices during recession and

- retrenchment. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 26(4), 557-571.
12. De Fuentes, C., & Dutrénit, G. (2012). Best channels of academia–industry interaction for long-term benefit. *Research Policy*, 41(9), 1666-1682.
 13. Delgado-Ceballos, J., Aragón-Correa, J. A., Ortiz-de-Mandojana, N., & Rueda-Manzanares, A. (2012). The effect of internal barriers on the connection between stakeholder integration and proactive environmental strategies. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 107(3), 281-293.
 14. DeNisi, A. S. (2012). Certification response: A response to Lengnick-Hall and Aguinis. *Human Resource Management Review*, 22(4), 266-268.
 15. Faganel, A. (2010). Quality perception gap inside the higher education institution. *International Journal of academic research*, 2(1), 213-215.
 16. Fodor, P., & Poór, J. (2009). The impact of the economic and financial crisis on HRM and knowledge-management in Hungary and Slovakia-Empirical research. *Acta Polytechnica Hungarica*, 6(3), 69-91.
 17. Glaeser, E., & Scheinkman, J. (2001). Measuring social interactions. *Social dynamics*, 83-132.
 18. Hassna, G., & Ahmad, H. (2006, April). E-government in Syria concepts, strategies and implementation policies. In 2006 2nd International Conference on Information & Communication Technologies (Vol. 1, pp. 894-899). IEEE.
 19. Ho, R. (2006). *Handbook of univariate and multivariate data analysis and interpretation with SPSS*. Chapman and Hall/CRC.
 20. Huck, S. W., Cormier, W. H., & Bounds, W. G. (1974). *Reading statistics and research* (pp. 74-102). New York: Harper & Row.
 21. Jabeen, F., & Isakovic, A. A. (2018). Examining the impact of organizational culture on trust and career satisfaction in the UAE public sector. *Employee Relations*.
 22. Kline, B., & Tamer, E. (2018). *Econometric analysis of models with social interactions. The Econometric Analysis of Network Data*, Amsterdam: Elsevier, forthcoming.
 23. Lengnick-Hall, M. L., & Aguinis, H. (2012). What is the value of human resource certification? A multi-level framework for research. *Human Resource Management Review*, 22(4), 246-257.
 24. Marchington, M. (2015). Human resource management (HRM): Too busy looking up to see where it is going longer term?. *Human Resource Management Review*, 25(2), 176-187.
 25. Mazziotta, M., & Pareto, A. (2013). Methods for constructing composite indices: One for all or all for one. *Rivista Italiana di Economia Demografia e Statistica*, 67(2), 67-80.
 26. Milana, E., & Maldaon, I. (2015). Managerial characteristics and its impact on organizational performance: Evidence from Syria. *Business: Theory and practice*, 16(2), 212-221.
 27. Narasimhan, K. (1997). Improving teaching and learning: the perceptions minus expectations gap analysis approach. *Training for Quality*, 5(3), 121-125.

28. Plaza-Úbeda, J. A., de Burgos-Jiménez, J., & Carmona-Moreno, E. (2010). Measuring stakeholder integration: knowledge, interaction and adaptational behavior dimensions. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 93(3), 419-442.
29. Saguy, S. I. (2011). Academia-industry innovation interaction: paradigm shifts and avenues for the future. *Procedia Food Science*, 1, 1875-1882.
30. Senyo, P. K., Liu, K., & Effah, J. (2019). Digital business ecosystem: Literature review and a framework for future research. *International Journal of Information Management*, 47, 52-64.
31. Sheehan, C., Fenwick, M., & Dowling, P. J. (2010). An investigation of paradigm choice in Australian international human resource management research. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 21(11), 1816-1836.
32. Storey, J. (2014). *New Perspectives on Human Resource Management (Routledge Revivals)*. Routledge.
33. Üsdiken, B. (1996). Importing theories of management and organization: The case of Turkish academia. *International Studies of Management & Organization*, 26(3), 33-46.
34. Vargas, A., Cuenca, L., Boza, A., Sacala, I., & Moisescu, M. (2016). Towards the development of the framework for inter sensing enterprise architecture. *Journal of Intelligent Manufacturing*, 27(1), 55-72.
35. Wright, P., Stewart, M., & Moore, O. A. (2011). *The 2011 CHRO challenge: Building organizational, functional, and personal talent*. Cornell Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies (CAHRS).