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Strategic human resource management: integrating the universalistic, contingent, configurational and contextual perspectives

Fernando Martín-Alcázar, Pedro M. Romero-Fernández and Gonzalo Sánchez-Gardey

Abstract From its origins at the end of the 1970s, strategic human resource management has developed quickly. After its uncertain first steps, the number of models and explanations proposed grew exponentially, especially after some theoretical revisions presented in the 1990s. The present explosion of literature requires a systematic revision of the state of the art in this field of research. This is the objective of this paper, which classifies the literature theoretically into four generic perspectives. The principal conclusion derived from this analysis is that, despite the differences among the universalistic, contingent, configurational and contextual approaches, it is possible to make their contributions compatible balancing their limitations. Finally, to illustrate this, we present an integrative exploratory model representing our actual understanding of the complex phenomenon of strategic human resource management.

Keywords Strategic human resource management; strategy; state of the art; integrative model.

Introduction

The strategic dimension of human resource management started to receive specific treatment from researchers at the end of the 1970s, with the confluence of two basic changes in the literature: first, the shift from the old personnel administration approach to the more modern concept of human resources and, second, the reorientation of generic strategic models to internal aspects of the organization. In this sense, we can consider the works of Galbraith and Nathanson (1978), Niniger (1980), Schuler (1981), Davis (1981), Lindtroh (1982) or Sweet (1982) as pioneers in developing explicit strategic human resource models. The discipline was developed from this starting point, and it was the object of a lot of criticism because of the lack of theory with which those first steps were given (Zedeck and Cascio, 1984; Dyer, 1985; Bacharach, 1989). But, as time passed, the number of articles proposing models to explain strategic human resource management (SHRM) grew, mainly after the crucial theoretical revisions presented by Wright and McMahan (1992), Jackson and Schuler (1995) or Kamoche (1996) and the special issues devoted to this topic by the *International Journal of Human Resource Management* (1997) and the *Human Resource Management Review* (1998). The models gained

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complexity in a process of scientific growth that progressively incorporated inputs from different strategic, sociological, economical and organizational theories (Jackson and Schuler, 1995; McMahan *et al.*, 1999). This explosion of approaches, still present in the discipline, requires a deep analysis of the literature, in order to reorganize all the explanations that scholars have offered from different points of view.

The objective of this article is to analyse the evolution and current state of the art in the field of SHRM research. Following Jackson and Schuler (1995), we use this term as an 'umbrella' concept that expands the traditional idea of HRM to encompass not only a functional and operational approach to HRM, but also a vertical link with the strategic management process of the organization (Lengnick-Hall and Lengnick-Hall, 1988; Schuler, 1992; Wright and McMahan, 1992), a horizontal link among the various HR functional practices (Schuler and Jackson, 1987a; Wright and Snell, 1991; Wright and McMahan, 1992) and an external link with other organizational and environmental factors (Baird and Meshoulam, 1988; Jackson and Schuler, 1995). Based upon a systematic revision of the literature, the first part of this paper defines four different perspectives from which this function has been studied. It concludes that, despite the evident differences between the approaches (discussed in the second part), if we balance their main contributions and limitations, it is possible to extract an integrative and global model. In order to illustrate our conclusions, an integrative definition and a broad exploratory model will be proposed in the last section.

Review of the literature

Four perspectives have been defined in the SHRM literature. If we use the terminology presented by Jackson *et al.* (1989), Brewster (1995, 1999) and Delery and Doty (1996), we have respectively the universalistic perspective, the contingent point of view, the configurational approach and the contextual outlook. Those four 'modes of theorizing' represent four different approaches to the same research question, each of them emphasizing a specific dimension of the reality of SHRM. This criterion allows a complete and systematic classification of the literature, because the four perspectives together show a spectrum that encompasses all possible approaches.

The universalistic perspective

The universalistic perspective is the simplest approach to the analysis of human resource management strategies. It starts, in all its explanations and prescriptions, from the premise of the existence of a linear relationship between variables that can be extended to the entire population (Delery and Doty, 1996). Researchers can, therefore, identify best human resource management practices that, following Becker and Gerhart (1996), are characterized by: (1) having demonstrated capacity to improve organizational performance and (2) having to be generalizable.

Regarding the level of analysis, universalistic models have focused mainly on a sub-functional point of view, analysing how certain isolated HR policies are linked to organizational performance (Terpstra and Rozell, 1993). In other cases, they analyse more than one best practice, defining what have been called high performance work systems. Nevertheless, we can observe that, contrary to the other approaches that will be described below, the universalistic perspective does not study either the synergic interdependence or the integration of practices, and the contribution of these practices to performance is analysed only from an additive point of view (Pfeffer, 1994; Osterman, 1994; Becker and Gerhart, 1996). As a result, this view implicitly denies that the different elements that build the system could be combined in different patterns of practices that could be equally efficient for the organization.

Although the literature has pointed out many best human resource management practices, it is possible to identify topics that emerge repeatedly, which, in general terms, represent the core of the universalistic contribution. At first sight, we can observe that this perspective focuses mainly on certain practices oriented to reinforce employees' abilities, for example, variable compensation (Gerhart and Milkovich, 1990), certain methods of recruitment and selection (Terpstra and Rozell, 1993), comprehensive training (Russell *et al.*, 1985) or performance appraisal (Borman, 1991). On the other hand, interest has recently shifted towards aspects much more related to commitment and participation of the workforce, consensus in problem solving, teamwork and work incentives, job redesign or the establishment of new mechanisms of compensation (Youndt *et al.*, 1996).

If we compare it to the other perspectives, the universalistic approach is characterized by a lack of solid theoretical foundations. Its emphasis on empirical testing of the HRM performance relationship leads to high levels of statistical significance, but, on the other hand, it also leads to lack of consideration of crucial variables, constructs and relationships. Among the theories that have been used to develop universalistic propositions, we can highlight the agency and transaction costs framework. According to the arguments of the universalistic writers, the influence on performance of certain policies, such as appraisal or benefit sharing, has been demonstrated because those practices contribute to overcoming the problems of opportunism and also to reducing internal management costs (Delery and Doty, 1996). Furthermore, the basic proposition of human capital theory, which argues that organizations with valuable knowledge, skills and abilities will present better performance levels, has also fostered many universalistic conclusions, such as those presented by Duncan and Hoffman (1981), Tsang (1987) or Rumberger (1987).

As has been said, from a methodological point of view, the application of a rigorous deductive logic in research leads the proponents of the universalistic perspective to a comparatively superior level of statistical strength in the testing of their hypotheses (Brewster, 1999), although these are basically developed through quantitative techniques.

The contingency perspective

The contingent model introduces a different starting assumption in relation to what the relationship between variables means. Contrary to the linearity argued by the universalists, they propose a model based on interactivity, bringing to the HRM context the generic contingent model proposed by Woodward (1965), Dewar and Werbel (1979), Schoonhoven (1981), Van de Ven and Drazin (1985) or Venkatraman (1989). The relationship between the dependent and the independent variable will no longer be stable, and it will vary depending on other third variables, named contingency variables. Those factors moderate the link between human resource management and performance and, therefore, deny the existence of best practices that could lead to superior performance under any circumstance (Galbraith and Nathanson, 1978; Delery and Doty, 1996).

Contingency research does not differ from the universalistic work in terms of level of analysis. Also, in this case we can observe contributions analyzing both single functional areas and groups of practice. But, again, when systems are proposed, neither the internal synergic mechanisms nor the integration of practices is considered (Delery and Doty, 1996), and researchers simply analyse practices which are individually linked to performance.

Despite the heterogeneity of approaches, we can group the contingency relationships proposed by the literature into three generic categories: (1) strategic variables:

a significant group of the contingent papers explains that the contribution of HR practices to performance depends directly on the extent to which they fit the business strategy (Niniger, 1980; Fombrun *et al.*, 1984; Hax, 1985; Van de Ven and Drazin, 1985; Kerr, 1985; Slocum *et al.*, 1985; Lengnick-Hall and Lengnick-Hall, 1988; Rhodes, 1988a, 1988b; Miller, 1989; Kerr and Jackofsky, 1989; Butler *et al.*, 1991; Cappelli and Singh, 1992; Begin, 1993). Furthermore, other contingency models also introduce the influence of HR on organizational strategies. In this sense, the human resource management strategy is considered in an interactive way, not in a unidirectional or reactive manner. This assumption about the strategic importance of the human factor was already present in the work of Lengnick-Hall and Lengnick-Hall (1988), but has been developed basically through the models proposed by Lado and Wilson (1994), Wright *et al.* (1994); Richard and Johnson (2001) and Wright *et al.* (2001); (2) organizational variables, such as size, technology or structure (Jones, 1984; Jackson *et al.*, 1989; Jackson and Schuler, 1995), internal political relationships (Jones, 1984; Pfeffer and Cohen, 1984; Pfeffer and Langton, 1988; Pfeffer and Davis-Blake, 1987; Balkin and Bannister, 1993, Pfeffer, 1987); and (3) a broad set of environmental factors, external to the organization, such as the competitive, technological, macro-economical and labour context (Kanter, 1983, 1989; Warner, 1984; Coates, 1987; Walker, 1988; Schuler and Walker, 1990; Becker and Gerhart, 1996; Boxall, 1998; Jackson and Schuler, 1995).

The arguments of the contingency approach build a theoretical body that is more solid than the universalistic foundations, although this approach does not reach the statistical strength of the latter. Basically, two theoretical frameworks have fostered the development of contingency models: behavioural theory and the resources and capabilities view of the firm. As far as the first theory is concerned, many contingency propositions have been proposed regarding the fit between business strategy and human resource management strategy (Miles and Snow, 1984; Schuler, 1987; Schuler and Jackson, 1987a, 1987b), as well as other organizational and environmental variables (Jackson and Schuler, 1995). On the other hand, the resources and capabilities view has not only been used to analyse strategic fit, but also to introduce the reciprocal relationship between human aspects and the formulation of organizational strategies. Its rare, valuable and inimitable character makes it a strategic asset, and a central element of strategic management (Wright and McMahan, 1992; Barney and Wright, 1998; Boxall, 1998; Hitt *et al.*, 2001; Richard and Johnson, 2001; Wright *et al.*, 2001; De Saá Pérez and García Falcón, 2002). Together with the behavioural and the resource-based paradigms, other theoretical perspectives have been used to explore contingency relationships, such as the institutional (Eisenhardt, 1988), transaction costs theory (Jones, 1984; Gómez Mejía *et al.*, 1987; Tosi and Gómez Mejía, 1989, 1994; Gómez Mejía and Balkin, 1992; Romero and Valle, 2001), social capital theory (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2000) or the resource dependence framework, which introduces power relationships as a contingency factor (Pfeffer and Cohen, 1984; Pfeffer and Davis-Blake, 1987; Pfeffer and Langton, 1988; Balkin and Bannister, 1993).

As in the universalistic perspective, the deductive logic of research is also present in the empiric analysis of contingency variables. The methodology used by this approach is again characterized by a quantitative focus, although the contingency works rely on much more varied statistical techniques, which allow a deeper understanding of the complex phenomenon of SHRM. In general terms, we can observe that many contingency propositions have been tested by using regression analysis (Koch and McGrath, 1996; Youndt *et al.*, 1996; Huselid *et al.*, 1997; Godard, 1997; Keng-Howe Chew and Chong, 1999; Khatri, 2000; Way-Kwong *et al.*, 2001), although in other cases other methodologies have been used, such as factor analysis (Ackerman, 1986), clusters

(Romero and Valle, 2001; De Saa Pérez and García Falcón, 2002), or meta-analysis (Tubre and Collins, 2001). We can point out several significant exceptions regarding contributions developed through qualitative methods, such as those proposed by Boxall and Steeneveld (1999), Shafer *et al.* (2001) or Kelliher and Perrett (2001).

The configurational perspective

The configurational perspective contributes to the explanation of SHRM with a useful insight about the internal aspects of the function, by means of the analysis of the synergic integration of the elements that build it. In this sense, the HRM system is defined as a multidimensional set of elements that can be combined in different ways to obtain an infinite number of possible configurations. From among them, researchers can extract management patterns that represent different ideal possibilities for managing human resources (Miller and Friesen, 1984; Ketchen *et al.*, 1993). Thus, the system must not only be consistent with the environmental and organizational conditions, but also internally coherent (Venkatraman and Prescott, 1990; Doty *et al.*, 1996; Delery and Doty, 1993). It is important to notice that these configurational patterns, rather than empirically observable phenomena, are ideal types in the same way as those proposed by sociological theory (Weber, 1949), to which real organizations tend to a certain extent (Meyer *et al.*, 1993; Doty and Glick, 1994).

A shift of approach concerning the link between the variables involved in SHRM lies under this new perspective. One of its main contributions relies on the assumption that the relationship between the configurational patterns and organizational performance is not linear, since the interdependence of practices multiplies (or divides) the combined effect. Thus, the 'black box' of the universalistic and contingency models is opened, so that the HR function can be analysed as a complex and interactive system. Although configurational models acknowledge the importance of contingency models, they are defined under the principle of equifinality, which entails the possibility of achieving the same business goals with different combinations of policies that may be equally efficient for the organization (Delery and Doty, 1996), and also by rejecting the universalistic objective of definitively finding best practices.

In order to explain the internal dynamics of the human resource management function, the configurational perspective has relied mainly on methodologies that allow the definition of management patterns, such as cluster analysis (Arthur, 1994; MacDuffie, 1995), factor analysis (Ackerman, 1986; MacDuffie, 1995) or neural network techniques (Woelfel, 1993). From a different point of view, it is possible to observe examples of regression as well, such as those developed by Wood and Albanese (1995). Nevertheless, several articles have also stressed the need to refine configurational methodologies. The analysis of the combination of the elements that build the HR system and the study of their synergic relationships require more sophisticated empirical tools, which could grasp the complexity of the internal integration of the system (Delery, 1998).

The contextual perspective

The contextual perspective proposes an important shift in the point of view of the analysis of SHRM. Unlike the previous approaches, it introduces a descriptive and global explanation through a broader model, applicable to different environments encompassing the particularities of all geographical and industrial contexts. This group of authors (many of them assembled in the Price Waterhouse Cranfield Project) argues that it is necessary to expand the concept of SHRM so as to offer a complex explanation, not only of its internal working and how it can reinforce the achievement of business goals, but

also of its influence on the external and organizational context in which managerial decisions are made (Brewster, 1999). In this sense, the main contribution of the contextual approach lies in the reconsideration of the relationship between the SHRM system and its context. While the rest of the perspectives, at best, considered the context as a contingency variable, this approach proposes an explanation that exceeds the organizational level and integrates the function in a macro-social framework with which it interacts. According to these authors, context both conditions and is conditioned by the human resource management strategy (Brewster and Bournois, 1991; Brewster *et al.*, 1991; Brewster, 1993, 1995, 1999). Strategies are not just explained through their contribution to organizational performance, but also through their influence on other internal aspects of the organization, as well as their effects on the external environment.

The change of perspective proposed by the contextual model becomes apparent basically in the reconsideration of three aspects of SHRM: the nature of human resources, the level of analysis and the actors implied in this organizational function (Brewster, 1999). The extension of the model that they propose, as has been said, reconsiders the importance of environmental factors by including variables that have been traditionally underestimated, such as the influence of public administrations or trade unions or the incidence of social and institutional conditioning (Legge, 1989; Gaugler, 1988; Albert, 1989; Guest, 1990; Pieper, 1990; Bournois, 1991; Brewster and Bournois, 1991). This reconsideration of the nature of human resources also influences the position of this function within the firm. In this sense, Brewster and Hoogerdoom (1992), Brewster and Soderstrom (1994) and Brewster *et al.* (1997) describe a function that is no longer the exclusive responsibility of personnel specialists, but is extended to the rest of managers, especially at the line level. Regarding the level of analysis, contrary to the organizational, and sometimes functional or sub-functional level in the previous literature, the contextual approach proposes a much broader scope, integrating the human resource management system in the environment in which it is developed. Because of that, much of the contextual literature is focused on a European level, or develops comparative studies about the implications of different national environments for human resource management (Brewster, 1999). Following this new nature, it is also necessary to reconsider the actors who participate in the human resource function. In this sense, works such as those proposed by Cappelli (1995), Jackson and Schuler (1995), Becker *et al.* (1997), Harrell-Cook and Ferris (1997) and Bowen *et al.* (1999) enrich the contextual model with the consideration of the strategic importance of what Schuler and Jackson called a 'multiple stakeholder framework' (Schuler and Jackson, 2000: 229). Thus, a broader set of stakeholders is considered in the formulation and implementation of human resource strategies. These stakeholders may be not only internal but also external, and both influence and are influenced by strategic decisions (Jackson and Schuler, 1995; Tyson, 1997). Thus, the mutuality of interests is considered as a necessary requisite for the maintainance of the firm's position in the long term (Brewster, 1995).

While the three previous perspectives share, in a broad sense, the same theoretical foundations, the contextual model has a different starting point. Its reconsideration of the framework of SHRM implies a criticism of many of the assumptions of the rational and normative theory. Contrary to it, their theoretical underpinnings are much closer to having an industrial relationship scope (Brewster, 1993, 1995, 1999; Sparrow and Hiltrop, 1994).

The descriptive objective of the contextual perspective determines the methodologies used to a large extent. In fact, the analytical techniques rely almost exclusively on simple statistics, such as the analysis of means and standard derivations (Brewster and Bournois, 1991). Nevertheless, it must be said that the application of more complex quantitative

and qualitative techniques could allow a deeper analysis of the social, institutional and political forces, and a better understanding of the effects of human resource management decisions on the environment (Gratton *et al.*, 1999). Thus, the contextual conclusions could complete the rational and normative approach of the rest of perspectives with a more social and descriptive insight. (Table 1).

Compatibility of contributions and limitations

Despite the evident differences between the universalistic, contingency, configurational and contextual perspectives, we believe that each approach complements the others, by adding constructs, variables or relationships not considered before. The confluence of these four explanations makes models more complex and, thus, enriches our understanding of SHRM. This field of research, like all that have the human being as the central element of study, requires multidisciplinary, multi-paradigmatic and multidimensional analytical frameworks.

As can be deduced from what has been said before, the universalistic perspective contributes to research in SHRM with an assessment of the importance of the human factor for organizational performance. Applying deductive logic, they achieve a high level of statistical significance in the test of this relationship. We can represent the universalistic contribution graphically (Figure 1) by making a difference between those models that propose a single 'best practice' and those that focus on a certain set of practices.

This simple model of analysis presents obvious limitations that have already been pointed out in the literature. In particular, it has been criticized because of the narrowness of its objectives, as well as because of the mechanistic and rational nature of its explanations, which fail when considered as crucial issues in the analysis of SHRM (Jackson *et al.*, 1989; Delery and Doty, 1996; Marchington and Grugulis, 2000; Cappelli and Neumark, 2001). For example, all these authors see important conceptual limitations in the definition of universalistic causal relationships. In this sense, the formulation of their main dependent variable – organizational performance – has been especially criticized. For instance, according to Rogers and Wright (1998), the universalistic measures of performance have relied almost exclusively on financial and accountancy indexes that, although they could appear more visible and practical, ignore not only other effects of human resource policies, but also the multiple levels in which they take place. The 'organizational performance' construct must be formulated through the combination of a broader set of measures with different origins and with different specific weights depending on the particularities of the organization. Furthermore, it is necessary to consider that the survival of the organization in the long term is conditioned by the confluence of the interests of many different stakeholders (Bühner, 1997; Rogers and Wright, 1998; Gerhart, 1999; Guest, 2001). More recently, authors such as Sherer and Leblevici (2001) have also pointed out that the stability and uniformity of the 'best practice' approach in universalistic research does not allow the analysis of strategic change.

Once the importance of human resources has been introduced, it is necessary to add complexity to the isolated universalistic framework. This is the main contribution of contingency analysis. Contingency analysts introduce external variables that influence the human resource management system. Thus, the convenience of a certain policy will always depend on certain environmental and organizational determinants that we call contingency variables. (Figure 2).

Table 1 *Comparison of the four research perspectives*

	<i>Basic assumption</i>	<i>Relationship among variables</i>	<i>Level of analysis</i>	<i>Methodology</i>
Universallistic	Existence of Best Human Resource Management Practices	Linear, and universally generalizable	Single practice One single practice leads to superior performance	Deductive logic. Regressions
Contingent	There are not Best Practices. Its effects depend on third variables such as corporate strategy or the internal and external environment	The relationship between the dependent and the independent variable will be mediated by contingency variables	Single practice Many contingent works just focus on a single practice	Deductive logic. Regression. Cluster and factorial analysis
Configurational	It is possible to identify SHRM patterns from the combination of the elements that built the HRM system. Those patterns could be equally efficient	The configurational perspective focuses on how the HRM patterns affect the organizational performance as a whole. Synergistic interdependence relationships are introduced	They always adopt a systemic level of analysis	Holistic approach. Cluster and factorial analysis. Principal component analysis. Network analysis

Table 1 (Continued)

	<i>Basic assumption</i>	<i>Relationship among variables</i>	<i>Level of analysis</i>	<i>Methodology</i>
Contextual	SHRM is understood as something broader than managerial decisions. It is considered as part of a bigger social macrosystem that both influences and is influenced by the HRM strategy	HRM variables are integrated in a supra-system	Supra-organizational level of analysis	Ideographic approach. Inductive logic of research. Focused more on the recollection of explicative evidence than on tests and predictions

Source: own elaboration

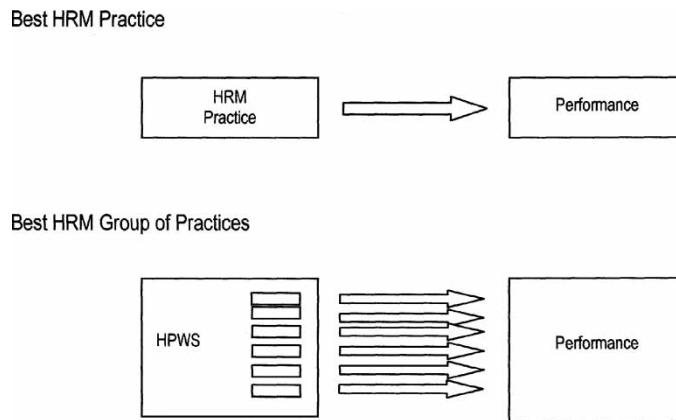


Figure 1 *The universalistic perspective.*

Source: own elaboration.

As we can see, the contribution of the contingency perspective has been crucial for the development of this field, but its models have also received criticism. For example, Becker and Gerhart (1996) argue that the methodology applied by these works, which rely heavily on regression analysis, leads them to conclusions similar to the universalistic ones, because the effect of a certain variable on performance is supposed to be constant for a certain level of the contingency variable (Sherer and Leblevici, 2001).

From a different point of view, Boudreau and Ramstad (1999) and Wright and Sherman (1999) point out that contingency research needs to improve its measures of contingency variables. The problem arises mainly when the variable considered is business strategy, because, in these cases, models are based almost exclusively on generic typologies, such as those proposed by Miles and Snow (1978). Following Chadwick and Cappelli (1999), we believe that contingency research needs a deep analysis of the human resource management function in order to develop specific typologies for the measurement of business strategy that could be used to study the HRM-strategy link.

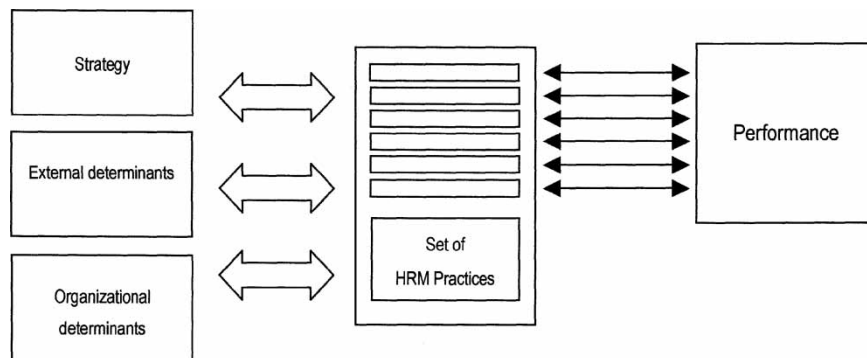


Figure 2 *The contingent perspective.*

Source: own elaboration.

Furthermore, the contingency perspective has been criticized because of its micro-orientation and because it does not consider political variables in the strategic definition processes. And, to conclude, we can also point out the disagreement of an important sector of the literature with one of the main contingency prescriptions: the need for fit with contingency variables. Many authors, such as Becker and Gerhart (1996), believe that the design of fitted management systems leads to excessively rigid and inflexible structures, which do not 'fit' with the increasing demand for adaptability in the present economic scenario.

The universalistic and contingency perspectives study SHRM without considering the integration of the practices that build the system. In this sense, the effects on performance of these sets of practices are defined in a cumulative way and, therefore, the possibility of synergic effects between them is implicitly denied. The human resource management system is therefore considered as a 'black box'. As has been said before, the configurational perspective completes the model in this sense, by defining the components of the system and analysing exhaustively and systematically the different ways in which they can be combined. Thus, as Figure 3 shows, it is possible to extract from the elements of the complex system multiple combinations, equally efficient, which will suit the organization depending on their particular external and internal conditionings.

Nevertheless, it must be said that those management patterns are in fact ideal types (Delery and Doty, 1996), and that the extraction of paradigmatic configurations from the elements that build the human resource system entails a simplification of reality. The complex interactions proposed by configurational models are difficult to measure with the statistical tools that are commonly used in organizational and strategic research. Accordingly, the empirical support for configurational conclusions is far from being as high as that for the universalistic perspective (Delery, 1998).

On the basis of its reconsideration of environmental influences, the contextual perspective adds an analysis of social dimensions to the SHRM model. The function appears integrated in the society in which it is developed, which is considered not only as

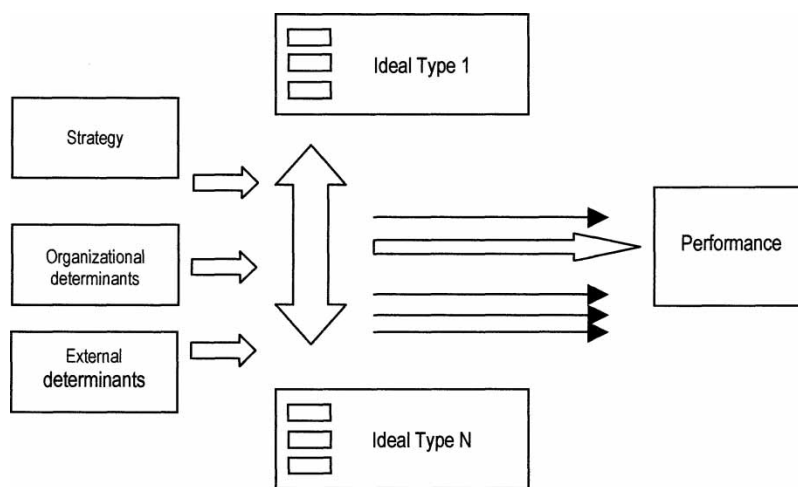


Figure 3 *The configurational perspective.*

Source: own elaboration.

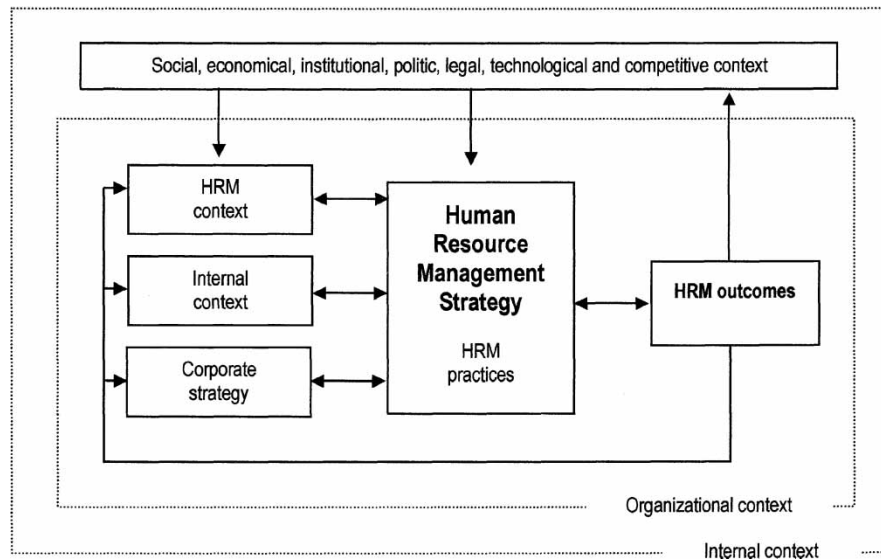


Figure 4 *The contextual perspective.*

Source: own elaboration.

a contingency variable, but also as a contextual framework. Therefore, strategic autonomy must be touched by aspects such as institutional, social or cultural influences and governmental or union policies. Furthermore, the human resource management system is also integrated in an internal organizational context, constituted by variables such as the firm's culture, climate, size, structure or the particular interests of the different stakeholders involved (Figure 4). Considering all the contextual variables introduced by this perspective, the model can be completed.

The closed model that follows from the contextual contribution has received deficient empirical treatment (Beaumont, 1992). The large series of data extracted from the Price Waterhouse Cranfield Project were analysed with a simple statistical methodology, perhaps due to the descriptive objective of the contextual perspective. Despite the fact that they explicitly adopt an inductive logic (Brewster, 1991), only in a few articles are qualitative methods used to test their propositions (Table 2).

Towards an integrative perspective

The universalistic, contingent, configurational and contextual perspectives are characterized basically by the fact that each of them emphasizes one of the main dimensions of SHRM. Therefore, and considering that the main assumptions of each approach are neither antithetical nor mutually exclusive (Brewster, 1999), now we are able to offer an initial exploratory model to analyse broadly the strategic dimension of human resource management.

The assumption that there is a positive and significant relationship between management of the human factor and organizational performance is a basic argument for SHRM. It is no wonder that the first models focused their attention on demonstrating empirically that people have a crucial value for organizational strategies, and that certain practices can foster and develop this value, leading to superior performance. Therefore,

Table 2 *Compatibility of contributions and limitations*

	<i>Universalist perspective</i>	<i>Contingent perspective</i>	<i>Configurational perspective</i>	<i>Contextual perspective</i>
Contributions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstration of the importance of the human factor in organizations • High level of statistical significance in the test of this proposition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consideration of third variables that mediate the relationship between HRM and performance • Those propositions are formulated with a stronger theoretical basis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal analysis of the HRM system • Consideration of synergy and interdependence among the different elements of the system • Consider that different HRM configurations can be equally efficient 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction of the social dimension of HRM • Integration of the HRM system in a macro-social context • Reconsideration of manager's autonomy of decision • Large series of data
Limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deficient theoretical foundations • Narrow objectives • Mechanistic and rational explanations • Conceptual limitations in the establishment of causal relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Micro-orientation • The statistical technique that they mainly use (regressions) leads them to universalistic conclusions • Excessive emphasis on 'fit' issues • Not consideration of political variables 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The definition of management patterns is a simplification of reality • It requires more complex methodologies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deficient empirical treatment, based mainly on descriptive statistical techniques • Its theoretical foundations are different from the rest of perspective, and are based mainly on the British approach to industrial relations • Deficient empirical support

Table 2 (Continued)

<i>Universalist perspective</i>	<i>Contingent perspective</i>	<i>Configurational perspective</i>	<i>Contextual perspective</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance measures based exclusively on financial indicators • It does not explain strategic change • Human resource management considered as a 'black box' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Human resource management considered as a 'black box' 		

Source: own elaboration.

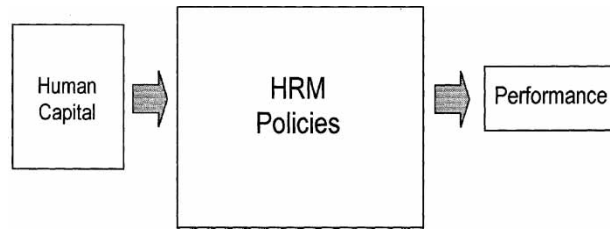


Figure 5 *Introducing the universalistic contribution.*

Source: Schultz (1971), Duncan and Hoffman (1981), Rumberger (1987), Snell and Dean (1992).

we start the construction of our model by acknowledging this causal relationship, developed by many universalistic scholars, and introduce the concept of human capital. As was said before, this research perspective relied heavily on the human capital theory, and developed an assumption that has also been adopted by the other perspectives (Lepak and Snell, 1999): people are crucial for the organization on account of their knowledge, skills and abilities, which build what has been called human capital (Schultz, 1971; Duncan and Hoffman, 1981; Tsang, 1987; Rumberger, 1987; Snell and Dean, 1992; Wright *et al.*, 2001). (Figure 5).

Nevertheless, as can be inferred from what has been said before, there is no explanation of how this human capital is created and activated. It is necessary to consider other variables that also influence the causal relationship. The contingency literature is especially useful to introduce these into the model. To do so, we have grouped the variables proposed by the literature into three broad categories: (1) environment, (2) organizational influences and (3) business strategy. These groups of variables influence SHRM, but we also consider, following Lengnick-Hall and Lengnick-Hall (1988), Wright and McMahan (1992), Lado and Wilson (1994) and Wright *et al.* (1994), that the relationship is reciprocal. Furthermore, following Wright and McMahan (1992) we also introduce into the model the assumption that the business strategy is conditioned not only by the human resource management system, but also by the human capital pool of the organization. (Figure 6).

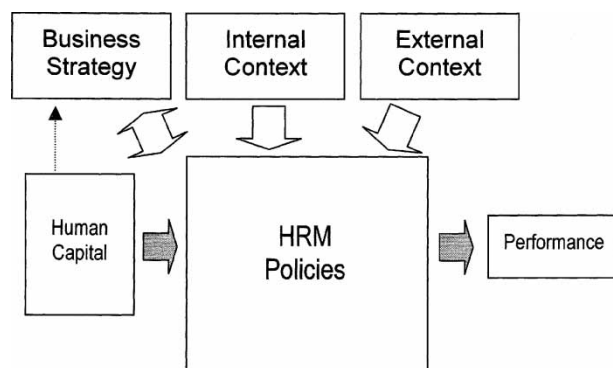


Figure 6 *Introducing the contingent contribution.*

Source: Jones (1984), Pfeffer and Cohen (1984), Pfeffer and Davis-Blake (1987), Jackson, Schuler and Rivero (1989), Balkin and Bannister (1993), Jackson and Schuler (1995).

We use the arguments of the configurational perspective to 'open the black box' of the human resource system. Drawing on the propositions of Tichy *et al.* (1982), Devanna *et al.* (1981), Miles and Snow (1984), Guest (1989), Wright and Snell (1991), Peck (1994) and Jackson and Schuler (1995), one can conclude that this organizational function consists of three interrelated elements: HR strategy, HR policies and HR practices. The human resource strategy describes the orientation of the company in the management of the human factor, giving cohesion to the set of practices through which it is implemented. On the other hand, practices are limited to more concrete functional areas, whereas policies are placed in an intermediate level because they describe the coordination of two or more practices to achieve objectives, such as employee involvement, security or the improvement of communication channels within the workforce (Walton, 1985; Guest, 1989).

From the analysis of the literature it follows that there is no consensus about the practices that should be integrated into the human resource system. In this sense, the work of Dyer and Reeves (1995) proves to be quite illuminating. Drawing on an analysis of the four most cited papers in HRM, they found that there were twenty-eight different practices. Anyway, we can observe that certain functional areas are steadily stressed in the literature, in many cases just with different labels. Following the patterns proposed by Tichy *et al.* (1982), Devanna *et al.* (1981), Miles and Snow (1984), Walton (1985), Schuler and Jackson (1987a, 1987b), Delery and Shaw (2001) and Wright *et al.* (2001), we consider in our model that the HR system can be divided into the following functional areas: job design, staffing, recruitment and selection, socialization, performance appraisal, motivation, compensation, training and development, and dismissal/retirement management.

Obviously, policies and practices depend on the human resource management strategy (which can be explicitly formulated or not), but, also, these activities are closely related. In addition to explaining the internal structure of the system, the configurational perspective gives arguments for the analysis of such integration. Following Delery and Doty (1996), Becker *et al.* (1997) and Delery (1998), we can argue that the relationships between practices can be: (1) additive: when the effects of the practices are simply summed up; or (2) interactive: when they depend on each other. In turn, interactive relationships can be substitutive (if they lead to the same goal) or synergic (when they multiply or divide the common effect). (Figure 7).

Drawing on the contextual proposition, two constructs are reconsidered: the external environment and the organizational context. They are defined as frameworks for SHRM, instead of as unidirectional contingency relationships. In this sense, institutional, social or internal pressures will influence the system and, in addition, it can also, to a certain extent, have repercussions for them. Thus, reinterpreting the contingency approach with the arguments of authors as Hendry and Pettigrew (1986, 1990), Brewster (1993, 1995, 1999) and Jackson and Schuler (1995), we can conclude that SHRM is integrated in an internal framework defined by a certain organizational climate and culture (Hendry and Pettigrew, 1990; Ferris *et al.*, 1998), and also by the firm's size and structure, its productive technology, orientation to innovation, as well as by the diverse interests of the different stakeholders involved (Jackson and Schuler, 1995). On the other hand, the external framework will be described by variables such as the legislative, governmental, political and institutional context, a certain set of social and economical factors (Jackson and Schuler, 1995; Brewster, 1999), cultural differences (Sparrow and Hiltrop, 1994), union influence (Brewster, 1995) or the particular conditions of the labour market and the educational and university system (Jackson and Schuler, 1995; Brewster, 1995, 1999). Those relationships add an international dimension to our integrative model that, as

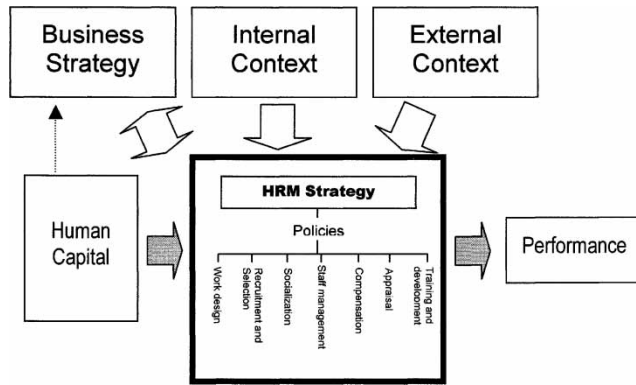


Figure 7 *Introducing the configurational contribution.*

Source: Trichy, Fombrun and Devanna (1982), Fombrun, Tichy and Devanna (1984), Miles and Snow (1984), Walton (1985), Schuler and Jackson (1987a,b), Delery and Shaw (2001), Wright *et al.* (2001).

a result of this, can be more broadly applied, considering the particularities of each geographic context in which human resource management decisions are made. (Figure 8).

A deeper analysis of the effects of the human resource system is necessary to close the model, and also, in this sense, it is particularly interesting to draw on the four perspectives. The universalistic approach, which uses mainly financial performance measures, has been complemented with the inclusion of other variables focused on the final purpose, where the contingency and contextual perspectives play a relevant role. Similarly, the model proposed here is based on Guest (1989), Wright and McMahan (1992), Jackson and Schuler (1995) and Ferris *et al.* (1998). It concludes that the effects of the human resource management system take place at three levels: (1) individual level:

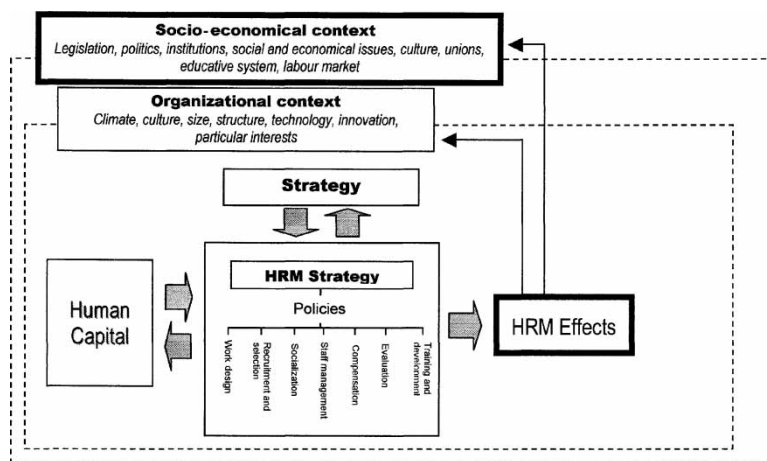
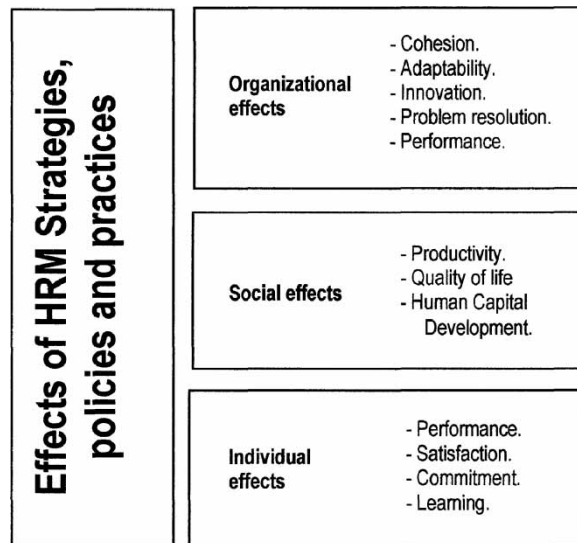


Figure 8 *Introducing the contextual contribution.*

Source: Sparrow and Hiltrop (1994), Brewster (1995), Walsh (1995), Brewster (1999), Schuler and Jackson (2000).

**Figure 9** *The effects of HRM.*

Source: Wright and McMahan (1992), Ferris *et al.* (1998).

most of the literature has pointed out the encouragement of those behaviours and attitudes that reinforce organizational performance as a main objective of HR practices (Wright and McMahan, 1992; Ferris *et al.*, 1998), but, at the same time, it is necessary to consider that they can also have effects on other individual issues such as satisfaction, commitment or learning (Guest, 1989; Jackson and Schuler, 1995); (2) organizational level: HR decisions also have influence on aspects such as cohesion, adaptability and innovation or problem-solving capabilities (Beer *et al.*, 1984, 1985; Guest, 1989; Jackson and Schuler, 1995), but, roughly speaking, they are designed to reinforce organizational performance (Wright and McMahan, 1992), following Rogers and Wright (1998), and (3): the social level, which refers to the effect of the human resource management system on the external context that frames the organizational activity (Brewster and Bournois, 1991; Brewster, 1993). (Figure 9).

Conclusions and implications

Drawing on the review of the literature presented above, we can conclude that, despite the evident differences between the universalistic, contingency, configurational and contextual approaches, if we balance their main contributions and limitations, it is possible to extract a comprehensive model. As has been said before, the value of the universalistic framework lies in the demonstration of the strategic importance of human resource management. Although its proponents achieved high rates of significance in their tests, it is necessary to consider that this approach has limitations in both the theoretical and the methodological domain. In this sense, the contingency perspective complements the universalistic model, including external relationships. To test this environmental dimension, researchers use more sophisticated empirical techniques that lead them to lower levels of empirical reliability, but allow a deeper understanding of SHRM. But, as has been stated before, this research framework also has an important

shortcoming: it does not consider how the human resource system is structured. It is precisely at this point where the configurational approach complements the rest of the perspectives. It offers an internal analysis of the function, defining its main elements and explaining how they can be organized. To do so, configurational researchers encouraged the use of empirical methodologies that allow the extraction of bundles of practices, such as cluster analysis. The configurational perspective also introduces the concept of internal synergies between human resource practices, policies and strategies. Finally, the contextual approach offers a broader framework for the analysis of SHRM, introducing a social dimension in the previous explanations. In this sense, external variables are studied not just as contingency factors, and how management systems can influence their environments is also taken into consideration. To analyse this, contextual researchers explicitly adopt an inductive logic, introducing a new empirical approach that complements the deductive and mainly quantitative focus of the previous streams.

As each of these perspectives focuses on a specific dimension of the system, together they offer a complete explanation of this organizational function that, in general terms, represents our common present understanding of the complex phenomenon of SHRM. Based upon the foregoing discussion of the compatibility of the perspectives, we propose the model presented in Figure 10, from which a broad concept of SHRM can be deduced. In this sense, and supported by the theoretical insights that build this model, we define SHRM as *the integrated set of practices, policies and strategies through which organizations manage their human capital, that influences and is influenced by the business strategy, the organizational context and the socio-economic context*. Both the model and this definition highlight the main dimensions of SHRM: (1) horizontally, SHRM is presented not only as the formulation of a certain HR strategy but as a congruent pattern of activities. The strategy, policies and practices that define this system relate to each other in a synergic way to manage and develop the stock of knowledge,

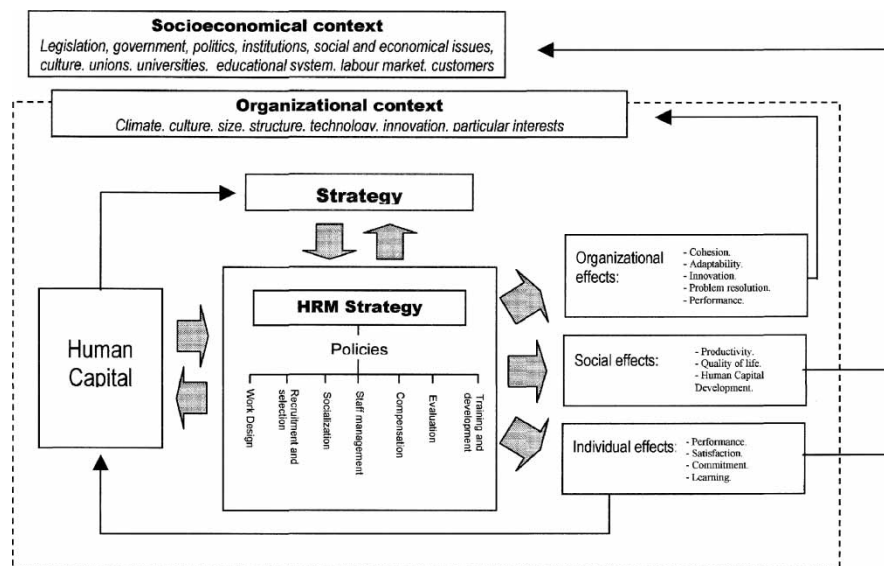


Figure 10 An integrative model for strategic human resources management.
Source: own elaboration.

skills and abilities of the organization. In this sense, human capital is considered the object of SHRM. Finally, the effects of the system are considered with regard not only to internal aspects of the organization, but also to the consequences of SHRM decisions on the individual and social level. (2) Vertically: in addition to the classical explanation of the business strategy as a contingency variable, the model considers a contextual framework for SHRM characterized by a certain set of organizational and socio-economic variables. The bidirectional sense of these relationships lets the model explain the dynamic nature of SHRM. Therefore, this function is conceptualized as an evolving process not only of adaptation, but also of proactive change.

Adopting a comprehensive perspective, a more powerful model to explain SHRM can be defined. Many important contributions have been made by scholars exploring each of the relationships included in the model, but this paper extends this literature by focusing on a broader perspective, integrating the universalistic, contingency, configurational and contextual approaches. Therefore, the model has implications for both academics and practitioners: first of all, it could be useful as a reference framework for future research in the field of SHRM, and could even foster the analysis of more concrete HR topics, such as certain policies or practices. In this sense, and considering it as a whole, the model identifies moderating or mediating variables involved in the process. Finally, the reconsideration of its vertical dimension also allows the application of the model to different international and inter-industrial contexts.

In our opinion, a unifying framework could result, which would be extremely important for the theoretical development of the field. It is our hope that the exploratory model presented provides at least a starting point for integrative explanations of SHRM.

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