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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Brandl, J., Kozica, A., Pernkopf, K., & Schneider, A. (2019). Flexible Work Practices: Analysis from a Pragmatist Perspective. *Historical Social Research*, 44(1), 73-91. <https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.44.2019.1.73-91>

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Flexible Work Practices: Analysis from a Pragmatist Perspective

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Abstract: »Flexible Arbeitspraktiken: Eine Analyse aus pragmatischer Perspektive«. Traditional human resource management (HRM) research can hardly relate to today's developments in the world of work. Organizational boundaries are blurred because of the complexity due to globalization, digitalization, and demographic changes. In practice, new ways of organizing work can be found that depend on the specifics of the work situation. In this paper, we build on the economics of convention (EC) to elaborate on the current challenges HRM scholarship is confronted with and provide a theoretical lens that goes beyond the tension between market and bureaucracy principles in actual employment settings. We apply EC's situationalist methodology to examples of the challenging coordination of flexibility in the workplace. We explain two hybrid forms of coordination – compromises and local arrangements – and highlight the dynamics of employment practices in organizations related to these forms. Thereby, we show that different modes of coordination in employment are applied in a fluctuating manner that depends on the specific situations. In doing so, we further seek to remind HRM scholars of the fruitfulness of the pragmatist perspective in analyzing work practices, as well as extending its conceptual toolkit for future analysis.

Keywords: Human Resource Management, employment practices, pragmatism, economics of convention, market, bureaucracy, flexible work.

1. Introduction

Contemporary ways of organizing work have always been a primary interest for human resource management (HRM) scholars. For many decades, the tradi-

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tional model of work – entailing full-time contracts, regular hours and pay, and the integration of employees in hierarchies of control and supervision – was the form of work being practiced and studied. However, the traditional employment relationship is being challenged by demands for more flexibility. Currently firms increasingly replace traditional models of employment by using flexible work forms for productive purposes (Matusik and Hill 1998; Knox and Walsh 2005). Work is increasingly organized in alternative ways. Such flexible work arrangements can entail different work practices, such as contingent work (employing people in non-standard jobs, with fewer hours and no tenure, e.g., part-time, contract work, and external employees, such as freelancers), flexible hours, and using alternative work places or remote offices (Spreitzer, Cameron and Garrett 2017).

These developments challenge HRM as it is currently practiced in organizations. Traditionally, the focal point of HR practices has been based on hierarchical modes of coordination in traditional firms. Employees in these firms are “managed” by supervisors who apply the bureaucratic instruments of HRM, such as performance management, reward systems, and career management. Behind these accepted ideas of what HRM is about is a reified view of organizations as entities that exists in reality. Alternative work arrangements now challenge the assumed “fixed” nature of organizations. Rather than having clear boundaries, the new ways of working imply a “fluid” nature of organizing work (Schreyögg and Sydow 2010; Barley and Kunda 2001).

HRM research discusses these developments. In early models of HRM, scholars proposed market-based models as an alternative to classical bureaucratic ways of managing employment (Beer et al. 1984; Atkinson 1984; Lepak and Snell 1999). These early assumptions have a long-lasting influence and still influence contemporary writing on HRM. However, while Watson (2007) and other scholars emphasize that work and employment in real organizations do not exactly match ideal types, the consequences of the hybrid nature of ideal-typical management principles as well as the dynamics of work practices lack systematic attention.

To understand the fluid nature of organizing work, we draw on insights from the economics of convention (EC), a research program that is sometimes also referred to as French pragmatism (Thévenot 2014). EC research draws upon conventions considered as frames, which are cultural resources for (“ordinary”) actors and thus serve as a tool to study how coordination works in practice. EC is interested in analyzing how concrete compromises (or local arrangements) that are built on various principles of coordination work, how actors handle these compromises and with what consequences. Its situationalist methodology facilitates a closer analysis of various hybrid modes of coordination, for example bureaucracy- and market-based work practices, in the different areas of employment (e.g., hiring, performance, rewarding), rather than characterizing work practices as more or less bureaucratic (or market-based). Assuming the

fragile nature of such practices, EC furthermore provides a detailed account of the conditions fostering the dynamics of work practices. Given recent developments in contemporary workplaces (e.g., flexibility, non-tenure work, external work arrangements), an engagement with the concepts of EC is promising to further understand work arrangements in practice.

In the remainder of this paper, we introduce EC and elaborate how it contributes to knowledge about hybrid forms and dynamics in actual work practices. An EC perspective is applied to highlight the hybrid nature of work practices (bureaucratic vs. market-based flexibility in the workplace) and to theorize how the potential dynamics of such practices unfold. By introducing ethnographic fiction science, we conclude by suggesting further topics in HRM research that could benefit from EC.

2. Forms of Coordination in Flexible Work Arrangements

2.1 Bureaucracy and Market Coordination Modes in Flexible Work Arrangements

An important topic in today's HRM research is increasing the amount of flexibility of firms through alternative work arrangements (Spreitzer, Cameron and Garrett 2017). In the wake of societal trends, HRM actors shape alternative work arrangements in their areas of responsibility by implementing rules (such as a policy for remote work) or by introducing more flexible HR architecture (Lepak and Snell 2008). An early and influential HR architecture is the concept of the "flexible firm" from Atkinson (1984). He contrasts two ideal-typical work practices based on two different workforce categories, which he labels "core workforce" and "external employees." The latter category is needed to provide numerical flexibility and comprises those who work on the basis of a contract for specific work (freelancer, agency workers) rather than on the basis of a permanent employment contract (Atkinson 1984). For the core workforce, management control is based on deployment, and the related management style is participative. Salary is based on working time, and performance appraisals are used for managing motivation via providing incentives. Furthermore, the workforce is supplied with recruitment and training, which matches the bureaucratic coordination mode for employment. By contrast, to manage the external workforce the focus is based on delivery against specification, the management style is directive, and work is remunerated by a fee. The incentive system rests on the delivery of results, and the workforce is composed of those who win a competitive tender, which corresponds with the market coordination mode.

From an HRM perspective, it is important that each mode has a distinct way of handling key employment activities, such as organizing work, handling employee participation, providing incentives and managing workforce mobility

(Lepak and Snell 2008). The bureaucratic mode of coordination includes clear hierarchies, rewards primarily based on job requirements and mobility based on career progression within a functional area. Typical HRM practices are performance appraisal, career management, compensation and benefits, which is not surprising since the natural focal point of HRM is organizations “characterized by their use of bureaucratic ways of coordinating task-based activities” (Watson 2007, 109). This view refers to Weber’s ideal type of bureaucracy to analyze the bureaucratic nature of decision-making processes on employment in contemporary work settings. Social arrangements for which HRM practices mainly apply are large companies, schools, churches, armies, and public administrations – all of which are characterized by the bureaucratic way of coordination (Watson 2007).

By contrast, the market mode is characterized by assigning specific tasks (to individuals or collectives); participation occurs based on contracts; rewards are provided based on outputs and mobility is “offered” based on new hires and redundancy. The role of HRM in a market coordination mode is restricted to managing the HR architecture from a strategic perspective, i.e., ensuring that people who are seen as “resources” serve a productive purpose either as a contractor (for which no further HRM practices apply) or as an employed member of the organization (for which further HRM practices apply).

2.2 Ideal Types and the Hybridization of Coordination Modes

The delineation of bureaucratic versus market coordination modes has informed HRM thinking from its very beginning. Yet, Watson and Beer and their colleagues underline that these models do not represent real organizations and that the practice of HRM might be better characterized as a both-and rather than an either-or form of managing employees. Similarly, Watson argued that two ideal types can be treated as two ends of a continuum, enabling one to analyze where the actual organization is located on this continuum (Watson 2004). And in the broader management research, today the coexistence of multiple coordination modes in organizations is broadly acknowledged as hybridization (Battilana and Lee 2014). While Watson acknowledges the plurality of coordination modes, especially in the wake of new work arrangements, and sees them as occurring at the “surface level in bureaucratic forms” (Watson 2010, 920), other HRM scholars have proposed market-based models more explicitly as full alternatives to classical bureaucratic ways of coordinating employment activities (Beer et al. 1984; Atkinson 1984; Lepak and Snell 1999). In their influential work, known as the *Harvard Model of HRM*, Beer and his colleagues (Beer et al. 1984) suggested that managing employment

issues in organizational settings can be based on three alternative principles: bureaucracy, market, and clan (see Ouchi 1980).¹

The consequences of the hybrid nature of bureaucratic and market modes for coordination as well as for the dynamics of work arrangements lack systematic attention, however. Questions arise about how market and bureaucracy can simultaneously inform work practices and the implications for the development of these practices. Following the pragmatist reasoning above, we would argue that a theory that incorporates concepts to analyze the empirical hybridization of market and bureaucracy modes for managing employment helps HRM practitioners and other actors in organizations to understand opportunities for changing or maintaining work practices. Therefore, understanding the hybridization of market and bureaucracy modes for managing employment and their dynamics in a specific organizational setting requires an integrative and processual analysis, which we will illustrate with an example of work flexibility in the next subsection.

3. Pragmatist Research in HRM and Economics of Convention as a Variant of Pragmatism

Contemporary writing on HRM often neglects the embeddedness of work in organizations. In their plea for linking organizational theory and work, Barley and Kunda (2001) argue for focusing on actions and interactions in and around organizations rather than analyzing work by focusing on structures. Following this argument, we now introduce a pragmatist view for discussing flexible work practices.

3.1 HRM and the Pragmatist View

Pragmatism has been suggested as a powerful intellectual perspective for producing knowledge (James 1907). This theoretical perspective draws on practice theory (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011) and is interested in systematically understanding the rationality of practice (e.g., Björkman et al. 2014; Ehrnrooth and Björkman 2012). Studies in this tradition combine, for instance, ethnomethodology and discourse analysis to investigate how employee selection works (e.g., Bolander and Sandberg 2013). Pragmatist theories hereby focus on how actors cope with social situations and question actors' abilities to act in face of the complex and contingent nature of social relationships. Rather than concentrating on individuals and the formation of social order, pragmatist theories

¹ While we focus on market and bureaucracy in this paper, we do not question that the clan mode plays an important role in employment practices. For an illustration of its relevance, see Kozica and Brandl (2015).

have an interest in problem solving and the concrete performances of actors in situations.

From a pragmatic perspective, cognition and actions are tightly intertwined and different entities of specific situations – such as other actors, norms, values, objects – are constitutive for both (James 1907; also see Joas and Knöbl 2009, 123-30). Human beings hold models of how to cope with social reality (e.g., problems associated with managing employment or work in organizations) and adjust these models based on the outcomes of their activities. Therefore, theories on their choices and efforts are necessarily provisional and collapse in future investigations (Dewey 1938). Consequently, scholars need to be skeptical about existing categorizations of people and their motivations as well as of assumptions about the location of work and employment practices “within both their societal/global and organizational contexts” (Watson 2010, 925).

Pragmatist thinking in HRM research is part of a broader endeavor of practice-oriented research that examines HRM “as a set of practices” (Steyaert and Janssens 2009, 143). Latour, Mueller and Carter (2005) analyze how HRM is built on specific practices, discourses, and strategies and how actors perform these practices in specific contexts. The work of Watson (2010, 2011, 2007, 1997) is a relevant elaboration of pragmatism as a theoretical position in the field of HRM and more tightly linked to pragmatist philosophers, such as James (1907) and Dewey (1938). To conduct empirical investigations, pragmatist scholars need to make conceptual choices and draw on resources from various research paradigms as these appear relevant to HRM issues under investigation (Watson 2007, 112).

To meet the pragmatist challenge of producing useful knowledge (i.e., how and why things work) in the context of flexible HRM, scholars need to perform a systematic analysis of employment practices in action. The EC perspective offers conceptual tools to perform such an analysis.

3.2 Economics of Convention

Economics of convention (EC) is an interdisciplinary research program originating in France, which is sometimes also referred to as French pragmatism (Nachi 2006; Thévenot 2014; Diaz-Bone 2018). The development of EC has been closely intertwined with its engagement in the field of employment (Favereau and Lazega 2002). Theoretical and empirical analyses related to productivity, labor contracts, employability, hiring, compensation, and labor market intermediaries (e.g., Salais 2011; Salais and Thévenot 1986; Storper and Salais 1997) have been sources to elaborate concepts of EC, illuminating its methodological position and developing its contributions. Most analyses within EC to date have aimed at critically engaging with institutional economics, in particular with their ways of conceptualizing markets and organizations (or “bureaucracies,” when using their vocabulary) as pre-given alternatives to coordinate

economic activities between which participants choose rationally (e.g., Williamson 1991).² Since familiarity with EC cannot be expected of HRM scholars, this section provides an overview of EC's assumptions (Bessy 2012; Bessy and Chauvin 2013) to clarify its positioning within pragmatist thinking and with regard to applied fields, such as HRM.

EC assumes various ideal-typical modes of coordination – market, bureaucratic/industrial, domestic, civic, inspired and opinion; each mode has a distinct way of viewing and judging the efficiency of practices (Thévenot 2006; Salais 2001). These modes have developed over time and form the possible and mutually exclusive approaches for human beings when they need to work together. The tensions between coordination modes and the fact that none of them is binding for specific activities or places, suggest that human beings need a joint framework in each social situation for coordination. This joint framework, called the conventional form for action in EC (Thévenot 2006) (in short: convention), embodies the mutual expectations towards possible participants in the situation at hand, governing possibilities and setting the foundation of how human beings can reach their goals. In line with broader pragmatist thinking, human beings are thought to use conventions as instruments for planning their actions in social situations. If they recognize that the existing convention is not instrumental in reaching their goals, they may undertake efforts to change the convention. In this sense, human beings use conventions in a pragmatic way, rather than valuing particular coordination modes in themselves (Thévenot 2006, 111).

Conventions that are constructed on the basis of different ideal-typical coordination modes are called *compromises* (Thévenot 2001). Compromises explicitly respect each of the coordination modes; as Jagd (2011, 347) puts it, “the compromise is consolidated by specific constructions that present a common justification based on different worlds.” Compromises incorporate the elements from different ideal types within a practice that declares the equivalence of these elements. Compromises stabilize practices because they

maintain an intentional proclivity towards the common good by cooperating to keep present beings relevant in different worlds, without trying to clarify the principle upon which the agreement is grounded. (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999, 374)

If compromises are built into material objects, they become sustainable beyond the specific human beings involved in the situation. Conventions that are prag-

² For institutional economists, the hierarchy differentiates organizations from markets in the first place (Ouchi 1980). Following such a perspective, organizations have clear boundaries defined by the people involved in the organization by formally accepting the hierarchy with their employment contract. Working with other people based on a market contract is then considered to be something like consulting or supplying a service that comes from the external environment of the organization.

matic solutions for particular problems at hand are *local arrangements*. Local arrangements imply that human beings tolerate exceptions in specific cases and trade concessions in decisions between situations rather than relating their activities to ideal-typical coordination modes. Local arrangements can be challenged easily (Thévenot 2001) because, when these practices are evaluated more closely, they satisfy none of the many imperatives or demands at hand.

Since we stated that HRM scholars should be skeptical about generalizations (and oversimplifications), we need to be more explicit about what we mean by social situations. When investigating employment practices, much of the HRM literature uses the organization (as an *ex ante* given entity) or specific employee categories (e.g., employees 50+, talents) as the unit of analysis. By contrast, EC uses the situation as the unit of analysis. A situation is temporal and characterized by uncertainty in regards to the classification of the situation, and it requires interpretive effort to enable coordination with other actors (Wagner 1994). As Diaz-Bone (2011, 49) puts it:

This situation is characterized by uncertainty about the outcomes of the interactive process. Interaction is seen as not determined by individual intentions or by external constraint (except in situations of violence). Thus, actors face uncertainty in situations of coordination and they have to address it.

EC's methodological position of situationalism aims to capture the reciprocal character of social actions to focus on problems of coordination to understand the dynamics of coordination. This situationalist methodology plays a prominent role in Strauss's (1978) negotiated order approach as well as in Goffman's (1964, 1971) work on rules for relations in public. Goffman (1964) highlights the ways in which talk is organized within the social order. Who speaks to whom and what is said characterizes what the individuals consider to be conventions when engaging with immediate or distant others in a gathering. EC shares the position that talk and conduct in a gathering are important aspects of the analysis. EC also emphasizes that material objects provide important clues for human beings to find out which conventions 'work for' coordination. An important implication of the situationalist methodology is that EC decomposes the organization into various gatherings in which human beings engage with each other (in the presence of others or more distant). We recognize the possibility for a distinct convention for each employment issue – managing mobility, organizing work, providing incentives and employee participation (Beer et al. 1984). At the same time, we recognize that the various employment practices are interrelated for the purpose of developing products or delivering services (Salais 2011). When empirically investigating modes of managing employment issues, we can expect to find indicators from various principles, such as of bureaucracy and market-based modes, in the conduct of participants when they engage with each other and in the objects they refer to for evaluating the work practice they are currently engaging with.

To address our research question of analyzing hybridization and dynamics of contemporary work practices, we now apply EC as theoretical lens.

4. Analyzing Flexible Work Practices from a Pragmatist Perspective

The account below illuminates how the hybridization of market and bureaucracy coordination unfolds in work organizations. The story is written in the tradition of ethnographic fiction science (Watson 2000). Ethnographic fiction science is a research strategy that bridges the genres of creative writing (common for novels) and social science. Ethnographic fiction science underlines that the genre of social science needs to be elaborated (Czarniawska-Joerges 1995) and builds on the assumption that all scientific articles are like stories, requiring conscious and active shaping (Watson 2000, 490). Ethnographic fiction science also builds on the idea that social science writers need to combine imagination with sociological concepts and research fieldwork to develop an account between case-study and fiction, as it is traditionally known from the student teaching context (Czarniawska 1998, 14).

Watson (2000) characterizes ethnographic fiction science as bridging the broad agenda that fiction writers address (e.g., existential dilemmas of life) with the more focused agenda of a social scientist who takes clues from specific scientific literature. As fiction, an ethnographic fiction science account makes no claim to articulate what really happened, but creatively combines diverse inputs to invite the reader to identify with a character or be thrilled by events. As a social scientific account, an ethnographic fiction science account refers to concepts in the social science literature for researchers and requires the author to use research skills for their fieldwork. Ethnographic fiction science claims to produce truth in a pragmatist sense, i.e., invites readers (researchers and practitioners alike) to appreciate concepts to orient themselves and act effectively when in a similar setting.

4.1 Employment Practices at ABC University

Our fictive organization is a university in a German-speaking area (we call it ABC University). This university contains academic departments for a broad range of subject areas, including law, sociology, business studies, and language along with some support departments. HRM is responsible for the administrative support of the department heads in managing various areas of employment, which involves, for instance, onboarding, determining work hours, and conducting employee performance appraisals. The employees in the academic departments strive for tenure positions and, to this end, acquire project budgets and seek to have their manuscripts accepted by peer reviewed journals. For

manuscript submissions, they often need language editing services. When a manuscript is written, the author usually needs to engage a freelance editor, sign a contract with a proofreading service based on the terms for external contracting (which can be based on hours or on number of words), and get the costs refunded from ABC University if there is enough of the project budget available. Among other service providers, the employees working at the language department at the ABC University, holding part-time positions, also offer these language editing services on an occasional basis. Astrid, the head of the language department, regularly states in interdepartmental meetings that she is happy to forward requests for language editing to her department members.

Lars, a post-doc researcher employed in the sociology department, needs language editing services for a manuscript that he wants to submit to a major journal in his field, and he has reserved some project budget to finance this. He has no experience with the services offered by the language department but is interested in Astrid's "offer," as he has a friendly relationship with her and assumes that the work will be performed with a high amount of dedication. Astrid told him that as a university employee, Lars could also receive a special discount in the form of four hours free of charge for the manuscript, which was subtracted from the total number of work hours. Lars agreed, forwarded the manuscript to Astrid and was soon contacted by Mary, a part-time English lecturer in the language department and a regular participant in the language editing service (according to her personal website). The offer included the price she would charge for manuscript editing and a breakdown of the hours needed minus the cost of the four hours for which she would not charge. She calculated 20 hours for the service at a cost of 20 euros per hour; instead of charging 400 euros, the total price was 320 euro and she estimated that she could return the manuscript within one week. This price was not only a bit lower than other services he had used in the past, but he also thought he would benefit from having an easy way to communicate with Mary in case she had questions related to the manuscript, and he agreed to the offer.

Mary was content about the opportunity to earn some extra money. From previous similar activities, she knew that she could probably do the work in the office and Astrid would not mind if she used the department's infrastructure for these activities. So, in the next few days she focused on checking the manuscript while sitting in the office. From time to time she asked her colleague Lucy for help with expressions that she was unfamiliar with. Postponing other activities, such as the preparation for her classes for the week, was not a problem since the teaching season was still a few weeks away anyway. When Mary returned the manuscript to Lars, she also added the invoice for 320 Euros. Lars recognized that she had identified a few but not many mistakes and was glad to see that his manuscript had already been in a good shape. He transferred the agreed-upon amount to Mary's bank account and forwarded the transfer confirmation with a request for reimbursement from his project budget to the fi-

nance department of the ABC University. After two months, Lars heard back from the journal; the manuscript was rejected. In a side note, the editor wrote: “[...] this manuscript still requires a rigorous proofreading.” Lars could not believe it when he read this and double checked that he had sent the correct document. Nevertheless, he felt that it was difficult to complain about the work since he did not want to question the competence of the people in Astrid’s department. Therefore, he decided to remain silent and consult ‘external’ service agencies for language editing in the future rather than the people from the university’s language department.

4.2 Conventions and Dynamics in Flexible Work Practices

From an EC perspective, the account of the ABC University allows us to study the hybridization of market and bureaucratic coordination modes in work organizations. In contrast to a general classification of participants into internal and external workforce, as is often found in studies of flexible work practices, EC is interested in the moment of its enactment and reconstruction. For example, if we asked Mary whether she regarded herself as a co-worker or as a service provider, she would probably have no straightforward answer. For Mary to obtain the job, her supervisor suggested her, forwarded her the request (in the form of the raw manuscript), and she was also involved in the pricing of the work. For Lars, deciding about the offer, trusting in the qualifications of people who hold positions in the language department and having expectations about the special dedication for the task associated with the department head’s assurances were important considerations rather than the offer’s competitiveness. These factors made Lars, for instance, not consider alternative offers on the market for language editing service providers. Although the work was defined within the freelancer contract, where conditions, such as deadlines for delivery, are specified in advance, the offer involved elements of hierarchy (extra-hours, discount) and contained elements more typical of employment contracts (e.g., specification of working time). When executing the job specified in the freelancer contract, Mary used equipment and resources which she had access to as an employee of the language department.

The example of flexible work practices, such as networks and emergent and project organization, is especially relevant in the field of HRM because these concepts suggest that organizations change their practices to coordinate work and employment from bureaucratic to market-based modes. From an EC perspective, the fluid nature of organizing work (in our case ABC University) lies within the idea, in contrast to neo-classical economic approaches, that markets are not only to be considered as the result of organizations’ manifold transactions between each other, but rather are located at the intersection of markets (Favereau 1989; Favereau et al. 2002), their forms of organizing (e.g., their modes for managing employment) are a result of the constant coordination

between different markets and their corresponding demands (Thévenot 2001). Accordingly, any (hybrid) form of employment management in a firm is an attempt to coordinate the plurality of (market) demands the firm faces. Among the many demands of ABC University, there are the demands to provide and produce high-quality academic research as well as to save costs and work efficiently.

The work practices at ABC University illustrate both compromises of market and bureaucratic modes of coordination, and validity of local arrangements. For example, the editing of the manuscript performed by university employees (during regular work hours in the office) is clearly a local arrangement. The pragmatic notion of the EC is there, where actors are able to check if the way things are done (e.g., university employees earning some extra money for proofreading) is feasible according to the plurality of demands (e.g., quality of editing, saving costs) in a given situation. To reduce the uncertainty of a situation (e.g., to be able to take a decision), actors rely on the established modes of coordination as they suppress other alternative and move towards the “regime of planned action” (see also Knoll 2013). In the case of Lars, the local arrangement allows him to commit to the way things are done, but not to publicly raise his concerns about the quality of the editing. If someone from HRM became aware of this practice, critique could be expected on the improper use of resources and violation of worktime regulations. Since the critique is hard to counter, this local arrangement between bureaucratic and market modes of coordination would be unlikely to continue. The account of ABC University also provides hints of how the dynamics of work practices can be triggered. Could Lars not have raised critique himself in this situation? Apparently this local arrangement of a hybrid work practice to produce a high-quality scholarly paper at a reasonable price did not sustain the situation described above and Lars will probably not use the university’s services anymore.

By contrast, ABC University’s general subsidizing of freelancer contracts can be regarded as a compromise of market and bureaucratic employment practices to coordinate between demands to provide and produce high-quality academic research as well as to save costs and work efficiently. A “compromise is consolidated by specific constructions that present a common justification based on different worlds” (Jagd 2011, 347); in this case, subsidizing their own language-department employees is compatible with the goal to support high-quality research in the sociology department whilst keeping the personnel costs low and flexible. From an EC perspective, it is especially the complex arrangements of human and non-human entities, such as objects (e.g., tools, trademarks, written instructions, trainings, documents, or technical devices), cognitive formats (e.g., rules, norms, knowledge), persons, events and, more recently, discourse (Diaz-Bone 2017, 2018 for overviews), that can be qualified by different worlds, allowing for various interpretations, and thus contribute to stabilizing a compromise. However, from an EC perspective, the (multiple)

meanings of objects cannot be derived from the object as such, but need to be understood from the actor's interpretations in the situation (Knoll 2013). Therefore, and in contrast to local arrangements, compromises allow for public critique and are more sustainable since they can address multiple demands in the situation of their enactment through the interpretation of actors. In the case of ABC University, the price can be understood as an equivalent to the demand for an unknown freelancer on the market as a competence indicator for high-quality language editing, but can also be understood as an equivalent to very cost-sensitive considerations underlining the preference for the in-house language editing service. In this sense, the practice of promoting (and subsidizing) in-house freelancer contracts appears to create benefits for all participants, as Astrid can strengthen her authority as department head and Lars can save his project budget, which stabilizes the compromise.

4.3 The Role of HRM in the Flexible Work Practice at ABC University

Looking from an HRM perspective, i.e., the management of employment and work practices by actors of HRM (professionals and line managers) reveals a number of relevant insights. First, the hybrid nature of flexible work arrangements, as described above, is not deliberately or strategically introduced, which is contrary to the thinking in strategic HRM in which organizations deliberately introduce HRM architectures to enhance organizational performance (Lepak and Snell 2008). The story shows that concrete alternative work arrangements can emerge from an actor's activities in specific situations.

Second, it would be a mistake to assume that formal HRM practices do not have a part in the story. HRM policies are relevant, as are HRM professionals. For instance, Astrid, Mary, and Lars were hired by the university and passed the recruiting procedures, which allowed them to be part of the situation in the first place. Further, Astrid, Mary, and Lars are part of several HRM practices, such as an annual performance appraisal or employee development. Therefore, the bureaucratic nature of employment is present in the story, but remains in the "background." From an EC perspective, these practices are part of the complex arrangements of human and non-human entities. For instance, written documents, formal job descriptions, or other people inform the situation, but actors need to interpret the relevance in the concrete situation. Mary could think about her own job description, which certainly does not entail earning some extra money with clients provided by organizational structures and procedures. However, she might interpret her job description in a way that allows integrating the activities she is actually performing (or see them as at least not conflicting with her duties in her job description).

Third, employment practice is fluctuating and dynamic. Lars, for instance, moves between different options in a fluid way based on his understanding of

quality and uncomplicated procedures, which shows that flexible work practices have a fine-grained dynamic that unfolds in specific situations. This concept is different from an understanding that sees the dynamics of flexible work arrangements either in the change of employment structures (i.e., adjusting the HRM architecture) or in the collaboration between internal and external workforce (Bidwell 2009).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The intention of this paper is to extend the pragmatist perspective on HRM to appreciate the actual nature of flexible work arrangements. While HRM research recognizes alternatives to bureaucracy to organize work and employment, this insight has had little impact on the analysis of actual work practices and their dynamics in real organizations so far. We advance the idea that EC can offer fruitful tools to analyze empirically such actual practices. Building on the insight that flexible work practices incorporate facets from various management principles, we explicate the hybridization that draws on bureaucracy and market coordination modes and illuminate potential dynamics related to such practices. We suggest that the particular ways in which these modes are built into actual work practices can provide insights on the stability and change in such practices. To analyze these dynamics, we suggest focusing on situations in which bureaucratic structures might play a certain role for coordination – but are dependent upon how the specific situation unfolds.

Such an account would also allow to analyze recent developments of work practices within traditional forms of organizations. For instance, work practices, such as remote work or a self-imposed work time, challenge the hierarchical nature of the “typical” organization (Spreitzer 2017). Even the German military, representing a type of organization considered to be very hierarchical, allows soldiers working in office environments to opt to work remotely – even though this hampers direct supervision and control. By introducing more uncontrolled spaces in traditional work practices, the nature of employment changes – but not in the sense that formal organizations are replaced by fluid ones. Rather, work practices reconfigure how they hybridize different forms of coordination within specific work situations.

These analyses are important given current developments in organizational theory. Recently, it has become fashionable to contrast traditional organizations with more fluid ones. For instance, Kornberger (2017) argues that distributed innovation systems, such as Linux or Wikipedia, have their own principles for organizational design. While we sympathize with analyzing innovative coordination settings, such as distributed innovation systems, we see a potential danger in contrasting such new forms with “traditional” organizations. Such an argument implies that there are “formal” organizations, characterized by formal

hierarchies and rules, i.e., a bureaucratic mode of coordination, and organized entities characterized by other forms of coordination. Such an understanding does not capture the hybrid and dynamic character of work practices even in “traditional” forms of organizations.

We share these concerns about contrasting formal organizations with non-formal ones with Du Gay and Vikkelsø (2017), who worry that the traditional concept of organization with an emphasis on hierarchies and formal structures may increasingly be seen as an anachronism (p. 2). In another study, we argued that phenomena such as Wikipedia fit well with the traditional concepts of “organizations,” including a higher level of formalization than most people would intuitively assume (Kozica et al. 2014). From our perspective, it therefore makes little sense to contrast the formal organization with the non-formal setting of, for example, innovative networks (Kornberger 2017). Rather, it is important for HRM research to establish analytical toolkits that allow analyses of both what we consider traditional firms (such as corporations, military, administrations, universities) and more contemporary firms, such as partial organizations (Ahrne and Brunsson 2011; Kozica et al. 2014) or innovative networks (Kornberger 2017).

In this paper, we explicitly used an example of a traditional form of an organization (ABC University) to analyze flexible work practices. Instead of starting from the perspective of the freelancer or other forms of flexible work practices, we focus on a setting in which work is accomplished in the intersection of traditional and non-traditional forms of coordinating work. Analytically, we analyzed a “situation,” rather than assuming a priori an “organization” as a given entity characterized by a bureaucratic mode of coordination. Thereby, by generally assuming an unstable nature of practices, EC provides an account of the dynamics and situated nature of contemporary work and employment. This perspective can help scholars to conduct investigations beyond standard classifications (e.g., the internal and external workforce) of HRM.

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