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Mick Marchington's applied pluralist contributions to human resource management research methodologies, philosophy, and policy are mapped out in this article.

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INTRODUCTION

Human resource management (HRM) professor Mick Marchington rose to prominence in the 1980s, a time of profound upheaval in Western economies and social structures. In 1990, the Human Resource Management Journal (HRMJ) was established, and Mick would go on to serve as its fourth Editor-in-Chief (Farndale et al., 2020). The 'neo-liberal' governments of Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the US led a global shift away from central planning in favor of market-based individualism and a growing intolerance for group decision-making among industry managers (Dundon & Rafferty, 2018). The growing neo-liberal project presented significant difficulties for the social sciences, particularly those concerned with the analysis of labor and human resource management.

The present writers are part of a larger group of researchers that worked under Marchington's direction on a series of important empirical studies that used a novel mixed-method approach to chart the dynamic landscape of employee engagement and participation (EIP) across time and geography. To this end, Mick used in-depth case studies, strong comparative and longitudinal aspects, and "full recognition of the complexities of institutional context" (Ackers et al., 2006, p. 75) to investigate workplace conflict and cooperation. These extensive empirical research yielded new theoretical frameworks that have been essential in the evolution of a pluralist approach to human resource management in Europe, Australia, and elsewhere, one that is different from US and other prescriptive interpretations of the discipline (Kaufman, 2012). Also, we argue that Mick's theoretical and methodological contribution to the social sciences has had a lasting impact on human resource management. The following outline was used to establish the argument presented in this article. Next, we provide an overview of three large-scale studies Mick has directed and discuss the significant contributions made by each. Based on Mick's pluralist, employee-centered insights, we give a wide and nuanced perspective on the topic. Other contributors to this issue remark on further significant research by Mick, whose work has affected the area beyond the initiatives we draw from.EMPLOYEE VOICE IN THE NEW WORKPLACE

1.1 | New development in employee involvement (the 1990s)

This first major study of Employee Involvement (EI) in Britain was funded by the Department of Employment (DoE) in 1989, led by Mick Marchington and John Goodman. Data were collected from 25 organisations from all the main economic sectors. This foray into non-union services and SMEs was itself quite an innovation at the time.

Continuing with an IR case study tradition while using paired comparisons within an industry setting was also a novel method, especially as many of the leading academic journals started privileging positivistic methods and the promotion of large-scale quantitative data sets. Nonetheless, the comparative method combined the *depth* of qualitative case-studies with the *breadth* of a large-scale cross-sector sample (Marchington et al., 1992). By contrast, many quantitative studies merely counted the number of companies claiming to practice techniques like total quality management (TQM), without exploring what this meant in practice in individual organisations and, crucially, how this integrated with established institutions like trade unions and CB (Wilkinson et al., 1992). Paired comparison also related changes within organisations to larger sectoral shifts (Marchington, Wilkinson, Ackers et al., 1993).

There were six main findings from this research that added a more informed multi-level analytical framing to EIP and subsequently HRM. First, the range of EIP techniques was found to be broad and incorporated four categories (or clusters) of practices: *representative participation*; *downward communications*; *financial EI*; and *upward problem-solving*, hence extending the single focus beyond unions and CB. A great strength of the study was to see the various techniques within their socio-economic and political contexts. Second came an interest in the HRM strategy behind the new EIP mechanisms. Contrary to the view of HRM as an exclusive unitarist project intent on by-passing and weakening trade unions, this study reported how management, workers and unions at times adapted to competitive pressures to carve out collaborative spaces to improve quality control and customer care: the objective being to help grow the cake rather than bargain over a zero-sum share. Third, the popular management labels attached to company initiatives, like TQM or Team Briefing, were a poor guide to how schemes were enacted in different organisations. What was a trivial gimmick in one company, might become a serious, well-resourced initiative in another setting. In short, content and context mattered (Cooke, 2018).

Fourth, the research built new theory. Specifically, EIP spread in *waves*, driven by both external influences, such as state policy and product market competition, and the internal agency of management, consultants and/or trade union objectives. This open-ended, contingency theory contrasted with Harvey Ramsay's cycles of control model, suggesting that despite the growing power ascendancy of employers, the motives for EIP varied over time and space (Ackers et al., 1992). Importantly, some workers (and unions) felt there was some added value in the new EIP landscape: they contributed not only to organisational decisions but also by being able to express their concerns to management (Marchington, Wilkinson, Ackers et al., 1993). Fifth, the research found that the new EIP agenda did not always deliver the gains in employee commitment predicted by popular management gurus (Marchington, Wilkinson & Ackers, 1993). But nor was direct EI a 'phantom' of good employment relations, as suggested by Ramsay (Ackers et al., 1992). Finally, these research findings signalled a newer HR strategy, with the different *waves* of EIP mechanisms found to be running alongside one another. A key contribution from the DoE research period was the 'Marchington et al. Escalator' of participation, depicting the extent to which workers can (and cannot) have a genuine say in matters that affect them at work (see Figure 1 below).

The escalator concept, capturing the depth of EIP, allowed for a more holistic and open-minded exploration of the varied actual relationships between CB and the newer HRM techniques. For example, subsequent studies have examined engagement, non-union voice, informal EIP, partnership or employee-share ownership schemes, among other mechanisms, and in doing so extend our understanding about shallow and/or deep voice. These have bridged the collectivist traditions of IR with a new HRM agenda of the time, applying a critical social science approach.

1.2 Management choice and employee voice (the 2000s)

The second Marchington-led EIP project came at a time when the world of work was witnessing further socio-political shifts. Indeed, the terms participation and involvement became replaced by that of employee voice; itself reflective of changing expectations and increasing managerial power and assertiveness over the form of participation.

By the time of this fieldwork, New Labour had recently come to power in Britain and the idea of 'fairness not favours' was being promoted through an agenda of 'social partnership' between employers and unions. Employment Act (1999) established legal provisions for trade union recognition, alongside European Directives to enhance worker voice with European Works Councils (EWC) and rights for employees to be informed and consulted on a range of business matters. The policy direction was very much sympathetic to both newer EIP techniques and trade unions, hoping to link both to efficiency and competitiveness. The research, funded by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), looked more explicitly at *management strategy* concerning EIP choices. The research involved 18 case study organisations and provided both a comparative (UK and Republic of Ireland sample of cases) and stronger longitudinal focus, with a sub-sample of 7 companies revisited from the DoE study reported above (Marchington et al., 2001).

The research made four contributions to EIP and HRM. First, the change in state policy towards partnership influenced employer behaviour, extending the waves theory with multiple meanings of voice using both collective and individual mechanisms among some employers who saw them as complementing one another, rather than as competitive channels for EIP (Dundon et al., 2004). Of note was the dynamic nature of employee voice arrangements shaped by external policy drivers, but also management choice being constrained by various factors, some internal and others exogenous to the organisational context. The research added a more fluid shape to the meanings of EIP and worker voice.

Second, EIP had become 'normalised' and routinely embraced by a new generation of managers, many of whom rationalised employee voice in relation to broader strategic goals. This included managing workforce diversity and embracing an agenda of inclusion (Wilkinson et al., 2004). Third, strategic choice was very much shaped by employer ideology. While some employers were overtly hostile to power-sharing through trade unions, others were more sophisticated in articulating their preferences for direct and individual channels of EI. Managers were generally more resistant to conflictual, rights-based views of employee voice, preferring to stress versions that 'added value' to the business organisation (Dundon et al., 2005).

A final finding was about new strategic responses from some trade unions. Those unions in the competitive private sector, were acutely aware and tuned into changing conditions that posed difficulties around partnership. It was reported that some trade union representatives felt that too adversarial an approach with employers could result in counter management resistance; while too weak and unrepresentative, they risked becoming a redundant element in the company's EIP mix (Ackers et al., 2005). Partnership was one way of squaring this circle for some union activists on the ground: it gave them legitimacy to speak-up for members while ensuring they had access to management decision-makers. The research contributed to partnership as a complex and uneven set of techniques, showing that some trade unions were innovative in how they adapted to a New Labour agenda where partnership was charged with adding commercial value to a business through a mix of direct and indirect channels (Ackers et al., 2005).

1.3 Towards a fair voice agenda: Changing regulatory spaces for HRM (2008 onwards)

The third research project advanced new insights concerning 'fair voice', which contributed to debates about the changing patterns of labour market regulation. Mick's research at this time became increasingly more comparative and international with projects examining EIP across liberal market regimes of the UK, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand (NZ) (Marchington, 2015a, 2015c). The contextual factors to the research are also important. On the one hand, conservative and then Conservative-Liberal coalition governments in Britain sought to present a caring face to employment policy (for example, including support for a national minimum wage previously introduced under the Labour government, along with parental leave and other individual employment rights). On the other hand, however, the extent of imposed austerity cuts raised concerns about the scale and growth of inequalities in employment and across society (see Grimshaw & Rubery, 2012). Such concerns were also applicable in other countries experiencing the impact from a global financial crisis from 2008, in Ireland, Australia and New Zealand as comparative areas for Marchington's research across liberal market economies (Cooper & Ellem, 2008; Geary, 2015; McDonough & Dundon, 2010). It was during this time that Mick was a key inspiration in the creation of a new Fair Work Research Centre (FairWRC)¹ at the University of Manchester, becoming its first Director in 2008. Mick retired from the University of Manchester in 2011 and worked part-time with Strathclyde University until 2015. He continued to research and write about fair voice in the years 2008–2015 in part with funding from the Leverhulme Trust.

2 | DEVELOPING A PLURALIST MULTI-DIMENSIONAL APPROACH TO WORKER VOICE

In this final section we suggest a framework based on our synthesis of the Marchington-led research contributions. This draws together multiple research methods, various voice practices, and the range of outcomes for organisations, workers and unions that offer a mapping beyond EIP to the study of how people are managed more broadly. The framework in Table 1 starts with the various approaches and academic disciplinary boundaries to the study of HRM and EIP (Barry & Wilkinson, 2021; Nechanska et al., 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2020). These include (1) *Industrial/Employment Relations*; (2) *HRM*; (3) *Work Sociology/Labour Process*; and (4) *Organisational Behaviour (OB)* (including *Industrial and Organisational (I&O) psychology*).

3 CONCLUSION

The three research projects we refer to above spanned Mick Marchington's career, and at least one of us was involved in each. These Marchington-led studies are notable for mapping a pluralist and empiricist middle way between two a priori political perspectives. On the one hand, Mick's work helped to critique the trend towards a unitarist and prescriptive vision of HRM, often dominated by US sources with a managerial interpretation of HRM as something to drive company performance. On the other hand, his research also questioned a Marxist dismissal of non-collective forms of EIP as being small beer and deemed not worthy of scholarly investigation. This middle-way injected the study of HRM with a nuanced plurality that also reflected Mick's engagement with professional and real-world practice at the organisational level, as evident in his roles as Chief Examiner and later Chief Moderator of HR standards for the educational syllabi of the CIPD. The multi-dimensional framing to the study of EIP and subsequently the academic discipline of HRM provide the intellectual tools to unpick management fads, ensure robust social science analysis of practices and processes from varying actor perspectives, and to question the validity of overblown claims linking new HRM (and EIP) directly to alleged improvements in employee commitment, engagement and company performance often peddled by consultancy firms.

The Marchington framing of the subject recognised that so often causation would run the other way: successful workplaces find it easier to involve employees. Also, by identifying obstacles, such as half-hearted top management commitment, middle management inertia, union resistance and, in some instances, transient superficial sloganising about 'all things involvement' or 'talent management', his intellectual framing identified how HRM may be seen for what it is and how it could be made to work better and more fairly.

In summarising Mick's contributions to HRM research, theory and policy, there are several key legacies which have a lasting imprint and future advice to guide scholars and practitioners. First, his research has shown the value of conducting contextual research over time in real places, rather than generating all-purpose normative theories of participation from the thoughts of Karl Marx or Tom Peters (Ackers et al., 2006, p. 84). Second is the principle of fairness in voice and HRM towards better policy-driven outcomes through research. For example, a key guiding factor in the problems and issues Mick researched is refusing to rule out the potential efficacy of new and emerging EIP schemes, whether based on collaboration and partnership with employers and trade unions or via non-union voice channels, before examining the evidence. Third is how Marchington helped to maintain a social science tradition of case study research methods by drawing on a diversity of contextual factors and institutional structures that embed a pluralist hallmark on the academic subject domain of HRM. These three take-away summaries from Marchington's contributions provide both an intellectual and practical footprint that enable others to continue to redefine and critique the many emerging fad and fashions in HRM for many decades to come.

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