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Abstract
This article defines ‘human resources’ as the overt talents and underlying characteristics that people possess, and identifies three agendas in human resource management: the individual, the organisational and the societal/global. The academic discipline of human resource management (HRM) has grown up around the second agenda: the needs of managers to hire, motivate and develop people with the talents that organisations need. Like the curate’s egg, it is of variable quality: a tension between ‘best-practicism’ and analytical thinking is still present in it. Research in industrial relations has been more helpful in describing the spread of employer behaviour and analysing the reasons for it. However, the growing emphasis in academic HRM on understanding the psychological and social processes inside the ‘black box’ of the firm is encouraging the study of mutuality and sustainability in employment relationships. This direction has the potential to make academic HRM more relevant at the societal level where we confront issues of underutilisation and overutilisation of human resources and where we have a mix of human resource philosophies that both help and harm society. The challenge is to build a theory of how organisations can meet their needs for profit and renewal while supporting employee fulfilment and well-being over the long-run.

Keywords
Analytical human resource management, black box, human resource management, human resources, industrial relations

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Introduction

My task in this article is to think about the future of employment relations from the ‘perspective of HRM’. I will approach the challenge through three questions: First, what are ‘human resources’ and whose perspective are we talking about? Second, where is the management discipline of human resource management (HRM) taking us? Third, how can the discipline of HRM make a stronger contribution to social solidarity?

What are ‘human resources’ and whose perspective are we talking about?

Many texts and dictionaries over the last 30 years have mistakenly defined ‘human resources’ as the people employed in an organisation. Human resources should instead be understood as the intrinsic resources that we possess as human beings, which we can apply to the various tasks of our lives, both in workplaces and in activities such as child-raising, recreational leisure and community service (Boxall, 2013). Imagine that you and a group of friends are marooned on a desert island. You lose all your physical and financial possessions but what you still have are your human resources: your knowledge, skills and energies and, underpinning these, your physical and emotional health, intellectual capabilities, personality and motivations (e.g. Brymer et al., 2011; Frederickson, 1998; Hoare, 2006). Together you have a strong capacity for social learning and cooperation, as anthropologists such as Chris Stringer (2011) emphasise. Human resources are the talents, latent and apparent, that have made us distinctive as a species and dominant on the planet.

This definition means that we can analyse HRM from various perspectives or agendas: individual, organisational, societal and global. Human resources belong to individuals, so the correct place to start is with them. As individuals, we make choices about how to deploy and develop our human resources (Boxall, 2013). We may apply them in an ongoing process of development or may underuse our talents. There is an underlying potential that can be more or less realised in a human life, as Maslow (1970) argued in the theory of self-actualisation. We can also over-invest our talents, typically in working too hard, a phenomenon encapsulated in the infamous deathbed confession ‘I wish I hadn’t spent so much time at the office’, a type of regret that Australian palliative-care worker, Bronnie Ware (2011), ranks as the second most common in her experience among the dying.

Alongside underuse and overuse, there are difficult, and at times tormenting, issues of targeting: Are one’s particular abilities better fitted to this role or to another? Which job offers the best scope for personal development? As Inkson (2008) argues, individuals face a challenge of self-management. I am going to call this the first agenda.

For their part, organisations cannot hope to survive without human resources: as appreciated by Edith Penrose (1959), the progenitor of the resource-based view...
of the firm, organisations need the services that only people, working with physical, symbolical and financial resources, can provide. Human capabilities are critical to conceiving, growing and renewing organisations, and inevitably make organisations somewhat idiosyncratic. This means that HRM is an essential function in organisations (Boxall and Purcell, 2011; Watson, 2005). It does not mean that workers and organisations have the same interests in HRM, although it rests on a substantial overlap of interests. It is complicated by the interaction of management and organisational interests and the agency questions associated with them. I will call this the second agenda.

This engagement between workers and organisations takes place within the context that communities and societies provide. It is the wider community and society that nurtures human resources, bearing the fundamental costs of their development, such as investments in child support, education, healthcare and social regulation. It is therefore possible to take a societal perspective on HRM, focusing on issues such as the renewal of a society’s human resources as the competitive environment changes, and the extent to which prevailing patterns of organisational behaviour are consistent with long-run societal welfare. To this one can add supranational or global perspectives, focusing on human development generally, an approach epitomised in the writings of Amartya Sen (1983, 2005) and exemplified by such international organisations as the International Labour Organization (Hughes and Haworth, 2011) and the United Nations Development Programme. There are naturally tensions between the national and the global, but I will call this the third agenda.

Where is the management discipline of HRM taking us?

In practice, the field of HRM has evolved around the second agenda. It has been focused on organisational needs for human resources and the role of management in hiring, motivating and developing people to meet these needs. This is what people naturally associate with HRM and it has generated a major demand for tertiary education in it. The management discipline of HRM has survived and reproduced itself in the academic world because it fits this niche: it focuses on activities that managers have to go out and do, and for which management students seek some preparation in relevant theoretical frameworks and skill sets. This incorporates the micro activities of HRM – recruitment, remuneration, training, performance management, and so on – and their overall patterns and interactions with organisational strategy. The latter, ‘strategic HRM’, is concerned with how models of HRM vary across societal, industry and organisational contexts and with how HRM in any particular firm can be used to enhance its performance, a mission that is essential to its role in business schools.

The question that has faced those of us in universities charged with meeting this practical need is how to place academic HRM on an appropriate footing. Along with my colleagues John Purcell and Patrick Wright, I have tried to advocate for an analytical approach to HRM (Boxall et al., 2007). Analytical HRM, a term we
coined in the *Oxford Handbook of Human Resource Management*, aims to build a rigorous understanding of the contexts, processes and outcomes of managing work and people in organisations. It aims to understand *what* managers do in HRM, *why* they do it, *how* they go about it and *who* benefits from it.

Drawing on a range of social sciences that throw light on work and people, and integrating them with business disciplines, the role of analytical HRM is to faithfully describe, contextualise and explain before advocating any courses of action. Only on this basis can it avoid the traps of ‘best-practicism’. As Karen Legge (1978) argued in her landmark critique, management textbooks that advocate particular best practices, irrespective of the context and without regard to conflicts of interest among organisational actors, are dangerous guides to action. Inappropriate advocacy of performance-related pay, for example, is part of what brought us the Global Financial Crisis, a point to which I will return.

Where have we come to? To what extent has the discipline of HRM enhanced our understanding of workplace behaviour? The record so far is mixed. It is evident that a tension between best-practicism and analytical thinking is still present in academic HRM, and Bruce Kaufman (2010a, 2010b, 2012), in his critique of strategic HRM research in the United States, is right to put his finger on this. In his view, much of the US research has misunderstood the role that economic factors play in management choices, leading to the inappropriate prescription that more HR practices will create better business performance (Kaufman and Miller, 2011), a proposition that does not stand up to empirical scrutiny. He awards a grade of D to F for American studies of strategic HRM, caning the field for its ahistorical assertions about the behaviour of US employers and for its failure to account for the contemporary dispersion in management behaviour. Although, in the huge diversity of research in the United States, it is possible to find studies that challenge the idea that more HRM is always better (for an excellent recent example, see Chadwick et al., 2013), I can only agree with Kaufman that much of the literature deserves the assessment he gives it as an external examiner.

He recognises, however, that the international literature on strategic HRM has done a better job of understanding HRM in its ‘broader economic, social and political context’ (Kaufman, 2012: 13). In this respect, it is no accident that many of us working in the international literature on strategic and comparative HRM are informed by industrial relations research and incorporate it in our descriptions of management behaviour (e.g. Boselie, 2010; Boxall and Purcell, 2011; Brewster and Mayrhofer, 2012; Paauwe, 2004). One of the core insights from Industrial Relations (IR) research is that managerial philosophies are diverse and innovations in management practice, such as ‘high-performance work systems’, do not necessarily diffuse nearly as far as their advocates imagine (e.g. Godard and Delaney, 2000). Among other things, IR research has regularly reminded us of the existence of a large low-wage sector in most economies (e.g. Appelbaum et al., 2003; Katz and Darbishire, 2000). While the general principle is that all firms need a human resourcing process (Watson, 2005), the reality is that
managers adjust their investments in HRM, and the practices they choose, to suit their business goals and the economic and socio-political contexts in which they are embedded.

Kaufman’s (2012) critique is targeted at wrong-headed answers to the question: ‘How does HRM vary with its context and, in particular, what is the role of economic variables in the choices that managers make?’ In his view, American ‘SHRM suffers from too much psychologizing and not enough economizing’ (Kaufman, 2012: 26). Could this, however, be a strength in other respects? Let me pose two other questions for the examination paper on strategic HRM: ‘How can HRM help firms to build and defend competitive advantages?’ and ‘How can the “black box” of HRM be made to work better and who benefits if it does?’

The first of these internal questions is the one that interests business-school researchers in strategic management. Inspired by the heterodox economist Edith Penrose (1959), studies in strategic management have applied the resource-based view of the firm to the question of how firms can build competitive advantage (Barney, 2000; Wernerfelt, 1984). There are serious difficulties involved in identifying sources of competitive advantage because firms rely on systems of interdependent activities that fit their contexts (Porter and Siggelkow, 2008), but there is an inevitable dependence of these systems on leadership and on firm-specific human capital, generated through internal processes such as teamwork and knowledge-sharing (Boxall and Purcell, 2011). Key lines of enquiry in strategic HRM, then, concern the ways in which managers can build ‘alignment advantage’ with workers who have the skills and potential they need, and how they can combine the talents of diverse individuals and groups into a business model and production system that is hard for others to copy, short of buying the firm itself (e.g. Boxall and Purcell, 2011; Coff, 1999; Gottschalg and Zollo, 2007).

This emphasis on hard-to-imitate, internally developed resources accords a large role to the management of human talents and leads naturally to the third question on the exam paper: How can the ‘black box’ of HRM be made to work better and who benefits if it does? On this human-oriented question, psychologists are leading the charge, contributing to a growing emphasis in HRM on business performance and employee well-being as dual outcomes. What has been occurring is an integration of the first (worker) and second (organisational) agendas, a widespread acceptance that you can’t understand one without the other. Studies bringing the worker perspective into HRM have grown enormously over the last 15 years. A landmark paper written by David Guest in 1999, ‘Human resource management – the workers’ verdict’, heralded the trend and challenged radical views on how HRM was experienced by workers.

As study of the mediating links inside the ‘black box’ of HRM has expanded, research into worker perceptions, responses and well-being has become widespread. This incorporates both examination of the psychological climate and analysis of the formation of social climates in which groups come to share a common view of the management process (e.g. Bowen and Ostroff, 2004). Studies of the impacts of HRM across a range of well-being outcomes – psychological, physical and social – are now
being analysed in literature reviews (Peccei et al., 2013; Van de Voorde et al., 2012). Frameworks for organising the analysis of worker responses and well-being, such as the job characteristics model (Hackman and Oldham, 1980), the demand-control-support model (Karasek and Theorell, 1990), the job demands-resources model (Demerouti et al., 2001), self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000) and the broaden-and-build model of positive psychology (Frederickson, 1998) are being integrated into HRM research (e.g. Marescaux et al., 2013; Soane et al., 2013; Sterling and Boxall, 2013; Van Veldhoven, 2012; Wood et al., 2012).

There has been a shift away from studying management reports of HR practices, and widespread acknowledgement that we do not understand the HRM process unless we have studied what workers think of it (e.g. Geare et al., 2006), including the diverse attributions they may make about management intentions (Nishii et al., 2008). While still concerned with supporting management development, analysis in academic HRM is increasingly focused on the double agenda of performance and well-being. And it is approaching it with better methods, including multi-level and multi-source data (e.g. Paauwe, 2009). In this way, it is positioning itself to help managers analyse the mutuality and sustainability of their work systems (Boxall, 2013).

This is not to say that economics is irrelevant in understanding the nuanced questions that lie inside the black box. Economists developing the techniques of ‘insider econometrics’ are providing us with some of the most compelling evaluations of when particular HR practices will be functional and when they will be perverse (e.g. Frick et al., 2013). However, where psychology stands to make its mark is when we look behind the veil of practices: How is a set of policies being interpreted and enacted by managers and how do employees perceive what managers are doing in terms of their needs? Methodologically, this is not about counting practices, as reported by managers, but about probing beneath them to assess underlying psychological and social processes (e.g. Macky and Boxall, 2008).

An interesting illustration of my point can be seen in a recent paper by Wood and de Menezes (2011) on employee involvement in Britain that uses both management-reported data on workplace practices and employee-reported data on what they perceive and experience, taken from the 2004 Workplace Employment Relations Survey (Kersley et al., 2006). I find it interesting that the forms of employee involvement that are measured by management data (i.e. what managers tell us about forms of involvement in decision making) do not connect to employee assessments of their well-being, but employee perceptions of the extent to which their jobs are actually enriched do.

Standing back from this ferment of activity, I think that the idea of a divide in HRM between ‘mainstream’ and ‘critical’ perspectives is now less useful. Critical writers have drawn on social science to focus on the first (worker) and third (societal) agendas and often imply that mainstream academics are mired in a managerialist approach to the second agenda. And yes, you will find plenty of examples of this and, as Kaufman reminds us, you ought to be wary of it. Critical scholars remind us of the wider economic and socio-political conditions that are needed to
foster mutuality in employment relations (e.g. Thompson, 2004) and underscore the active role that workers play in constructing their employment relationships (a particularly poignant example is McBride’s (2008) analysis of worker responses to ‘high-performance work systems’ on Tyneside). These are very good reminders. But what we have now is a situation where the ‘mainstream’ of HRM scholarship is not only concerned with management interests and is both collaborating and competing with the ‘critical’ stream to develop the theory of worker well-being.

**How can the discipline of HRM make a stronger contribution to social solidarity?**

While the contribution of HRM to the double agenda has improved, its contribution to the third agenda, that of social solidarity or societal well-being, is not nearly as well developed as that of IR, which has a much stronger tradition of contribution to policy debates around labour market processes and regulation.

What kind of value can HRM add to societal well-being? This, I submit, should focus on the ways in which organisations and individuals can work together to enlarge the scope for mutuality and sustainability, making better use of human resources for society’s long-term benefit. It helps, I think, to ask how we can reduce waste in a society’s human resources.

I want to begin by acknowledging that the most distressing problem of wasted human resources in today’s societies is the rate of unemployment, particularly youth unemployment, resulting from the Great Recession. According to Eurostat (2013), in April 2013 the youth unemployment rate stood at 23.5% in the EU-27, ranging from lows of 7.5% in Germany and 8% in Austria to highs of 62.5% in Greece, 56.4% in Spain and 42.5% in Portugal. Lack of employment denies young people the opportunity to deploy and, thus, to discover and develop their skills. At the levels we are currently observing, it is a threat to social cohesion and a long-term threat to both the individuals who experience it and to the organisations that will, in due course, need their latent skills. As Wilthagen (2013) puts it:

> ...it’s crucial for young people to gain work experience. Without work experience it is hard to get a job or even an invitation for a job interview. Without a job, no experience is gained and a vicious circle emerges: no experience, no job; no job, no experience.

This shortfall in work opportunities is the ‘elephant in the room’.

Where the discipline of HRM can potentially contribute is around what occurs inside organisations where we can analyse types of waste ranging from underutilisation to overutilisation. One of these is the problem of ‘learning traps’. These are work situations in which the skills of workers are underutilised and their personal development is restrained at a sub-optimal plateau (Boxall, 2013), creating job dissatisfaction and a higher propensity to quit (e.g. Allen and Van der Velden, 2001; O’Brien, 1982). Karasek and Theorell (1990) argue that this occurs in ‘high-strain’ jobs, which combine high levels of work demand with low levels of employee control,
leading to employee health problems. At the extreme, skill underutilisation leads to skill atrophy. Untapped potential can work to the detriment of both parties. While human performance may be perfectly satisfactory in the short run, the learning needed to foster innovation and higher quality are very hard to achieve with a workforce suffering from skill atrophy (e.g. Sterling and Boxall, 2013).

The main contribution of academic HRM here is in the study of work reforms that enable employees to reach more of their potential. Across a range of traditions, research argues that the process of reversing skill underutilisation depends on creating greater scope for worker control: these are ‘high-involvement’ work systems, a more descriptive term than ‘high-performance work systems’ (e.g. Lawler, 1986; Macky and Boxall, 2008; Vandenberg et al., 1999). Forms of work organisation that offer workers greater opportunity for involvement in decision making create the conditions for greater use of their skills and stronger learning (e.g. Felstead et al., 2010).

Progress in applying this principle depends on finding ways that serve both worker and employer interests. The challenge lies in how we can simultaneously enhance employee learning, security and rewards, on the one hand, and business innovation, flexibility and cost-effectiveness, on the other. For example, how do we enhance workers’ autonomy while also improving the quality of teamwork? I say this because European research shows that workers very often prefer autonomy to teamwork (e.g. Bauer, 2004; Harley, 2001), yet the latter is critical to knowledge-sharing and better quality of implementation in almost any kind of strategy. Another question: How do we ensure that the production systems management actually want to implement, like lean production, open up dynamic learning possibilities and do so without excess pressure? I say this because the research is divided over whether lean production can be implemented without work intensification (e.g. Danford et al., 2008; Niepce and Molleman, 1998; Parker, 2003; Sterling and Boxall, 2013).

These are very much the kind of questions being explored in the current interest in the European Union on workplace innovation (e.g. Hoyrup, 2010; Pot, 2011). There are conditions that need to be addressed at organisational level, which research is helping to identify (e.g. Eurofound, 2012), and larger questions of how societies can do a better job of supporting high-involvement working in what Paul Thompson (2004: 371) calls an era of ‘disconnected capitalism... circumstances in which employer objectives in the labour process... are frequently at odds under the inter-related impacts of globalization, the shift to shareholder value in capital markets and systemic rationalization across the value chain of firms’.

While theory in HRM is focused on the organisational level and not equipped to handle the larger debate in political economy, one issue on which it can clearly add value is the organisation and development of management. A fundamental insight that is critical to reducing waste in human resources is the observation that most of HRM is mediated through the immediate line manager (e.g. Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007). How well this person understands the needs of workers and is able to help them explore their potential is crucial and, lying behind this, how well HR specialists and senior managers support them to do so. As Eraut (2004)
argues, front-line managers are enormously important in creating the conditions that foster employee development, but how well do our organisations enable them to foster the learning of the workers they supervise?

An effective public policy on management development has to have some way of fostering management capabilities in the small and medium-sized enterprises that make up a substantial proportion of employment in any advanced society but which lack the resources that large organisations can invest in management development (for an interesting analysis in respect of Italy, see Della Torre and Solari, 2013). The demands on line managers, even in small firms, are increasingly complex. Line managers need to relate to the needs of different age and educational groups and to people whose inclusion is affected by communication skills and cultural differences. They are critical in shaping the organisational ‘climate for diversity’ (e.g. McKay et al., 2008). Whether an individual from a minority background feels capable of reaching their potential will largely depend on how well the supervisor facilitates their inclusion.

The high-involvement strategy for work reform, which relies on enhancing employee control and fostering its enabling conditions, is one major path for reducing socially undesirable waste in HRM, but there are others. One is associated with the question of how to retain the working commitment of older workers, who are often prematurely lost to the workforce, raising the costs to society of their retirement and contributing to social isolation and health deterioration. An interesting study on this question has been conducted by Sanders et al. (2011), using longitudinal data from the Netherlands Working Conditions Study. They examine the work ability and motivation of less educated workers over 45 years of age, using an augmented version of Hackman and Oldham’s (1980) job characteristics model. What they show is that the path to retaining more of these workers in the workforce lies not so much in enhancing their autonomy, but in improving the quality of their social interactions: in the support that supervisors give them, in the support that they give each other, and in the opportunities they have to interact positively with customers. This is the kind of study that shows the value of incorporating comprehensive models of worker well-being into research on HRM.

At the other end of the spectrum, of course, we have problems of overutilisation where the wear and tear of working life undermines other parts of the life. As is well known, work intensification has the potential to generate fatigue, creating a feeling of being wasted by work and robbing the individual of the energy they need to develop in other ways (e.g. Halbesleben et al., 2009; Macky and Boxall, 2008). One element of this is the growing problem of stress in time-poor households, where couples are struggling to ‘combine career and care’ (Van Engen et al., 2012). Another is the set of forces that Green (2006) shows is undermining the satisfaction of British professionals: declining discretion and increasing pressure, much of it arising from excessive bureaucratisation of the roles that professionals occupy. Yet another is the set of conditions that can lead any individual into a situation of ‘burnout’ (Maslach and Leiter, 1997).
The current interest in ‘employee engagement’ needs to be considered in this wider social context. The term carries notions of high levels of absorption in work and high levels of commitment (e.g. Newman and Harrison, 2008). Research in HRM is investigating the antecedents of engagement. A recent study, for example, demonstrates that engagement is higher, and absenteeism is lower, when workers find their work more meaningful, pointing to dual pay-offs if employers can provide workers with the kind of challenges they find interesting (Soane et al., 2013). At the same time, psychologists are warning us of the dangers of what Robertson and Cooper (2011: 32–33) call a ‘narrow view of engagement’, arguing that ‘a sustainable approach to engagement must also include specific and substantial recognition of the need to maintain employee well-being’. The concept of ‘engagement’ can be taken to unhealthy extremes and it is pleasing to see it being subjected to both rigorous research and vigorous critique by HRM academics (e.g. Guest, 2013; Truss et al., 2013).

This discussion of waste in human resources leads inevitably to the risks that bad ideas, or good ideas taken to an unhealthy extreme, can cause in damaging wider society and the need for a critique of them. As Werner Nienhueser (2013: 6) puts it, ‘HRM practices may destroy their own functional social prerequisites’.

One of the most obviously dangerous ideas is the notion of contingent compensation or performance-related pay. The ways in which this complex practice needs to be carefully related to its surrounding conditions and designed to minimise perverse incentives (Roberts, 2010) was frequently overlooked in the rush to construct lists of high-performing HR practices in the 1990s. The global financial crisis of 2008–2009 and the ensuing Great Recession have made the risks all too clear (Boxall and Purcell, 2011). As is well known, banking executives and traders profited enormously from annual bonus payouts based on short-term performance targets while the long-term health of their organisations was undermined, or fatally compromised, by unconscionable, ill-informed and excessive risk-taking (Stiglitz, 2010, 2013). Tragedy turned to farce when bankers profited not only from the bonus-generating financial instruments that helped to fuel the boom, but also from the government bail-outs afterwards, while shareholders were losing capital and a range of workers were being laid off, not only in banking, but also well beyond it. If ever one needed an example of the power of ill-conceived approaches to HRM to do more harm than good, this was it (Boxall and Purcell, 2011). As Nienhueser (2013) emphasises, an important part of the discipline’s future must lie in building a societal analysis of the quality of HRM, one that is capable of addressing the social prerequisites and consequences of different approaches to the management of work and people.

Conclusions

To sum up, people are not ‘human resources’ but they possess human resources, which are the overt talents and underlying characteristics that distinguish us as a species, and which account for our impacts on the planet. Individuals, organisations
and human society, at national and global levels, need the wise, sustainable use of human resources. The academic discipline of HRM has grown up around the needs of managers to hire, motivate and develop people with the talents that organisations need. Like the curate’s egg, it is of variable quality. Research in industrial relations has done a better job of describing the spread of employer behaviour and the reasons for it. This has been a weakness in much of the HRM research, as Bruce Kaufman argues. However, the emphasis on how HRM can enhance business performance through understanding the psychological and social processes inside the ‘black box’ is advancing a dual agenda around organisational and individual needs. It may have started with a business motive, but it is encouraging the study of mutuality and sustainability in employment relationships. The driving question is this: How can HRM simultaneously enhance organisational performance and employee well-being? This question is, in turn, starting to make HRM more relevant at the societal level where we confront issues of underutilisation and overutilisation of human resources, and where we have a mix of human resource philosophies that help and harm society. What lies ahead? In my view, the challenge in HRM is to build a theory of how organisations can meet their needs for profit and renewal while supporting employee fulfilment and well-being over the long-run. This has to incorporate recognition of the difficult balances that need to be managed, such as the balance between flexibility and security, between effort and reward, and between work and life (Boxall, 2013). At the highest level of human society, the goal before us is to create the conditions that enable all people to explore their potential and to do so in ways that are sustainable across generations.

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References


Biographical note

Peter Boxall is Professor of Human Resource Management and Associate Dean of Research at the University of Auckland Business School. His research is concerned with strategic HRM and with worker well-being. He is the co-author with John Purcell of *Strategy and Human Resource Management* (Palgrave Macmillan), the co-editor with John Purcell and Patrick Wright of the *Oxford Handbook of Human Resource Management* (Oxford University Press) and the co-editor with Richard Freeman and Peter Haynes of *What Workers Say: Employee Voice in the Anglo-American Workplace* (Cornell University Press).