

CRITICAL APPROACHES TO COMPARATIVE HRM

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Comparative HRM occupies an important position in the scholarship of international human resource management (IHRM) (Brewster, 1999; Brewster & Hegewisch, 1994; Brewster et al., 2004; Clark & Pugh, 2000; Dickmann et al., 2008). This is because it adopts a 'broader' view of the human resource practices and strategies than the mainstream approaches in IHRM research (cf. Keating & Thompson, 2004). By 'broader' we mean that it takes seriously the recent calls for more societally embedded organisational research as evidenced by the widespread use of neo-institutional theory (Drori et al., 2006; Granovetter, 1985; Scott, 2001), national business systems approach (Morgan et al., 2001; Quack et al., 2000; Whitley, 2002; Whitley & Kristensen, 1996;) and cross-cultural perspectives in management studies in general (Hall & Soskice, 2001; Maurice & Sorge, 2000). Thus, comparative research is prone to look into the wider societal issues and problems in its description and explanation of organisational and working life phenomena.

The comparative stance has demonstrated the limits of the HRM theories and models derived from the institutional realities of the North American context. The individualised approach to employment relations and people management has its roots in the US institutional environment where the unions are relatively weak and where there is a strong belief in the potency of the free markets in the organisation of labour relations. In contrast, the Continental European system has traditionally been organised along corporatist lines, with strong trade union membership and a tradition of collective bargaining. The European system, with its more regulative and representative character, has put more weight on the societal level agreements and on the active role of the government. At the same time, it is important to note that the HR environments in developing countries tend to lack even the most basic institutional frameworks that are taken for granted in the mainstream HRM literature (cf. Jackson, 2004). For example trade unions are banned completely in some Asian countries, whereas in Africa one can find societies where the informal or grey job market dominates the whole economy. With these kinds of insights, comparative HRM research has successfully demonstrated that what we take as the universal model of HRM is in reality a local North American approach transferred into the rest of the world as 'best practice'. Given the recent debates on the ethical shortcomings and societal irrelevance of Americanised management

practices and theories (Dore, 2000; Ghoshal, 2005; Mintzberg, 2004; Pfeffer & Fong, 2005), this is a timely message.

While we acknowledge the advances made in comparative studies, we want to push this approach even further in terms of its ability to connect with and apply critical perspectives. We draw from the critical theories and methodologies that have been put forth by the critical management studies movement. In particular, we offer global labour process theory, postcolonial analysis and transnational feminism as perspectives that can further advance the comparative approach to IHRM. Even though some scholars have already used and developed such ideas, a great deal can and needs to be done to map out and examine the various problematic aspects of IHRM in our globalising world.

The next section provides an overview of comparative HRM research and its contributions. This is followed by a look at the globalisation of employment management as a manifestation of neoliberal economic and societal policies and practices. The fourth section discusses critical management studies as a fruitful approach to organisations and organisational research. The fifth section focuses on global labour process theory, postcolonial analysis and transnational feminism, which are explained and illustrated in the following section. A brief concluding section wraps up our argument and suggests some avenues for further research.

Comparative HRM As A 'Broader' View On The Human Resource Management Phenomena

Comparative HRM as a field of study focuses on the national-institutional differences in human resource practices, strategies and systems. Originally contained within the emerging study of international human resource management, it has in recent years developed into an independent area in its own right. According to Brewster (1999, 2007), comparative HRM relies on a distinct research paradigm that sets it apart from the mainstream US human resource management discipline. The US scholars tend to view HRM from a universalist perspective, treating HRM as a general phenomenon that exists irrespective of the institutional environment where it is practiced. Comparative HRM, instead, insists that human resource management practices are best understood as societal phenomena, shaped by the institutional, cultural and political contexts of their occurrence. Brewster (2007) argues that a contextualist paradigm in comparative HRM makes a crucial difference in many respects. These include a more critical stance towards the 'goodness' of the North American conception of HRM as

manipulation of individual employees and employment contracts, incorporation of industrial relations issues and trade union topics into the conception of HRM, and a willingness to look at HRM from a national, EU or even global world systems level of analysis. The different realities of contexts such as the European welfare states as well as the Asian and African developing economies all need to be accounted for in search of a more accurate picture of human resource management worldwide (Jackson, 2004).

Comparative HRM differs from the mainstream human resource study also in terms of methodological preferences (Brewster, 1999, 2007). Comparative HRM seeks to understand individual national contexts and the way in which HRM is organised in each particular country. It is not interested in the discovery of general laws and causal mechanisms in HRM, but in gaining sensitivity for the locally contingent circumstances surrounding the particular forms and approaches to labour management. The focus on the particular is also reflected in the tendency to rely on the insights of empirical data in theory development. Comparative HRM seeks to develop new theories and understandings of the HRM outcomes without any strong commitment to a priori models and theories of human resource management. It is inductive rather than deductive in its methodology. Empirical data used in comparative HRM is often a combination of quantitative and qualitative materials, used heuristically to reach a deeper understanding of the different forms of HRM and how they are shaped in various institutional-national contexts (Keating & Thompson, 2004). Overall, comparative HRM has (tried to) set itself apart from the positivist-deductive methodology that has dominated HRM research in the North American field, with an interest in developing a non-managerialist theory of HRM as embedded in the variety of institutional and socio-political contexts and relations.

However, comparative HRM has not made explicit its standing vis-à-vis the various theoretical issues that preoccupy organisation and management studies as a branch of social science. Using the classical outline of organisational theoretical paradigms by Burrell and Morgan (Burrell & Morgan, 1979), it is not clear whether comparative HRM is committed to consensus sociology characterised by a unitarist conception of work organisations, to conflict theories that approach organisations as sites of structural contradictions and tensions, or to some other position. At times it seems to agree with the neo-Marxist and other radical views on the continuing presence of a power asymmetry between managers and workers, but this is not systematically noted nor made explicit. Comparative HRM seems also to hesitate between objective and interpretative positions with regard to epistemology and methods. While it is

keen to stress the use of qualitative data in making sense of organising HRM, it also tends to resort to quantitative survey studies of national forms of HRM (e.g. the Cranet survey). Given the broad range of different epistemological alternatives to objectivist approaches to methodology (Morgan & Smircich, 1980), comparative HRM lands in a fairly conventional area within organisational inquiry. These limitations become apparent if we take a closer look at globalisation of HRM as a manifestation of the spread of neoliberal capitalism to new areas around the world.

Globalisation and Neoliberal Capitalism

The spread of the individualised, market-based employment systems is one of the key interests in comparative HRM. The rise of contingent work, flexible working patterns and new organisational forms are manifestations of what Sennett (2006) calls the 'culture of new capitalism.' According to Sennett (2006, 1998), late modern capitalism is characterised by a shift from bureaucratic organisations and stable careers to flexible networks and contingent employment. The assumption that an employee is committed to one corporation for the whole of his or her working life is no longer valid; instead, workers are left largely to rely on their own devices as free agents seeking jobs in the constantly changing economic situations. Employees are treated as entrepreneurs, who are responsible for their own employment. As Bauman (2000) has noted, ours is the era of 'liquid modernity' in which capital is globally mobile and seeks to guarantee the best possible returns at the same time as labour continues to stay tied to its local communal contexts. As we now know, in spring 2009, the neoliberal experiment of unregulated international financial markets has ended in a major economic crisis. The promise of the finance-driven economy to bring prosperity to all through continuous growth has turned out to be an extremely one-sided and ethically questionable arrangement. The continuously shifting organisational and economic contexts made it difficult to build coherent working lives already before the financial crisis. Now, as the economic problems have spread from banking to other sectors, it is the workers who have to carry the burden of unsuccessful policies in the form of lay-offs. The underlying dynamics of neoliberal capitalism has come more visible, producing a wave of anger and protest against what is considered as an essentially flawed approach to organisation of economy and work (Wikipedia, 2009).

At the same time, however, organisational control has intensified its grip over the empowered employees. The market model of employment relations has not displaced

managerial control in organisations. The emerging organisational model is akin to a rationally controlled network, envisioned as a lean, managerially diluted and dispersed network of individual employees. Kunda and Ailon (2005; cf. Barley & Kunda, 1992) call this the Market Rationalist ideology that has connections to the classical Taylorist and Fordist techniques of managerial control. Employees constitute minuscule 'business units' that are analysed, measured and managed just like any other economic entities. Rational managerial techniques developed for financial accounting are applicable to human individuals, a development that has made work in large organisations highly competitive, short-term oriented and instrumental.

Global capitalism has institutionalised uncertainty to an extent that it can be regarded as one of the most acute problems facing working life today. While HRM scholars have noted this change, they have been unable to fully describe the human and social consequences of market-based human resource strategies. The notions of boundaryless careers and transactional psychological contracts refer to transformations in the world of work, but they have not been sufficient to illuminate the full scale of human experiences brought about by the 'HRMist' employment models. In a similar way, studies examining the global convergence or divergence of HRM practices have tended to look at the surface patterns and structural manifestations of contingent labour instead of elucidating the social meanings and lived experiences of workers, professionals and managers worldwide (cf. Hassard et al., 2007).

Let us exemplify this with a reference to our own immediate working environment as Finnish academic employees. Finland is typically portrayed in the comparative studies as following the Nordic model of HRM (Lilja, 1998; Lindeberg et al., 2004). This includes a high trade union organisation rate, comparatively strong government presence in business regulation and the tradition of collective bargaining processes. Yet the recent changes in private and public organisations suggest a rapid 'Anglo-Americanisation' of economic systems and industrial relations (cf. Tainio & Lilja, 2002). Collective bargaining is in crisis and precarious employment on the rise. In the public sector, traditional bureaucratic careers are being demolished in favour of flexible arrangements typical of the New Economy. As part of that shift, universities are undergoing profound reforms that touch the very essence of academic values such as the impartiality of professors guaranteed by their status as tenured civil servants. We have already witnessed a salary reform that has moved academic remuneration towards individualistic, performance-related compensation. Organisational and

individual performance is measured and appraised more frequently than before. The latest reform involves a change in the employment type of the academics who are to be attached in the future to the universities through standard employee contracts instead of being treated as civil servants. This implies a profound change in the nature and organisation of academic work but also manifests a broader transformation in the traditionally corporatist industrial relations system that has prevailed in Finland for the past decades. Stable labour market structures and communal values are being replaced by the principles of flexibility and short term profitability. Yet it is fair to note that while we see Finnish development as an example of the degradation of contemporary working life, people in extra-European countries often suffer from more acute problems. The core human rights such as the freedom to join trade unions are not within the reach of employees in many emerging economies. Without the social safety net, employees in those countries are much more vulnerable to external changes: for example the current economic crisis seems to hit worst the poorest nations and their citizens. To make better sense of these types of global shifts, and their human and social consequences for the employees, it is useful to take a closer look at the insights offered by critical management studies.

Critical management studies

Critical management studies (CMS) have become a legitimate approach within management and organisation studies. Following openings such as the paradigm analysis of organisational studies by Burrell and Morgan (1979), CMS has expanded during the last 20 years in the form of special conferences (International Critical Management Studies Conference), interest groups (the CMS Division at the American Academy of Management) and scholarly outlets. The roots of CMS lay in three discussions: labour process theory (LPT), critical theory (CT) and also some forms of postmodernist or poststructuralist theorising. LPT is a more materialist approach to the structuring of organisational hierarchies under the forces of late modern capitalism. Its main argument, the so-called deskilling thesis, was originally formulated by Braverman (1974). According to Braverman, the advances in modern people management techniques have not delivered autonomy and self-fulfilment for the employees of the modern corporation, but, instead, have sedimented and intensified the clash between the capitalist interests and the working conditions of organisational labour. Modern management strategies strip away individual creativity and dignity, providing the employees with monotonous tasks that are detached from their own personal aspirations. According to Braverman's deskilling thesis, work is degraded under monopoly capitalism because of an

inexorable tendency for the conception or planning of work to be separated from its execution. Conception is concentrated in an ever-smaller section of the workforce, while most workers are reduced to executing tasks conceived by others. In the LPT view, this Taylorist division of labour makes work meaningless for the majority of organisational employees.

CT is a more humanistic stream of radical theorising. Its roots lay in the so-called Frankfurt School and the work of scholars such as Adorno, Marcuse and Habermas. CT is interested in the one-dimensionality of our cultural beliefs and in the ways in which ideological constructions serve the interests of the powerful, or, capital. The work of Habermas (1972, 1984) has been pivotal in guiding the research on organisational culture and communication towards a critical agenda. According to Habermas (1984), the realm of work has been estranged from its self-realising and dialogic potentials, and has, instead, transformed into dispassionate activity with no connection to the deeper social and communicative needs of the employees. Organisational life takes on an instrumental outlook as the members resort to external motivations and markers of personal attachment. Also, communication is restricted to ideologically acceptable discourses and the free flow of debate is blocked by the accumulation of power and authority to the hands of the few, such as professional managers. Disciplines and scientific articulations of organisational management such as those contained within human resource management can be seen as manifestations of the broader ideological milieu where prevailing forms of understanding are shaped by the structures of power (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996). All this takes place in a world of conflicting interests between the privileged and those excluded from the benefits of contemporary capitalism. In addition, CT is keen to restore some of the emancipatory potential of the alienated employees and organisations in order to help them to better address their own interests and how they could be articulated in the corporate decision making and communication (Alvesson & Deetz, 2006).

The CMS movement has also been inspired by various postmodernist and poststructuralist theories and methodologies, especially by the work of Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida and Bourdieu. Foucault's discourse analysis has been particularly influential, as it has provided means to examine and elucidate how managerial and organisational phenomena are structured and governed by specific discourses. His ideas have also been very useful in highlighting how subjectivities and identities are constructed in contemporary organisations. Foucauldian critical analysis of institutional practices aims to uncover the techniques and relations of power implicit in the constitution of organisational objects and subjects. Given the

interest of Foucault on educational and psychological practices (Foucault, 1977, 1978), it is understandable that human resources management has received a wealth of attention in the recent debates inspired by poststructuralist theory. As to HRM, this perspective has been reflected in critical analyses of HRM practices and discourses and their implications (Barratt, 2003; Legge, 1989; McKinlay & Starkey, 1998; Townley, 1993).

In an attempt to develop a generalised research agenda for the CMS community, Alvesson and Willmott (2003) introduce five general themes that define the theoretical and epistemological approach taken by critical management scholars:

1. Developing a non-objective view of management techniques and processes: management techniques such as those practiced in HRM (selection, assessment, career development) are not merely technical procedures as they are deeply implicated in constructing the social realities and relations in the workplaces. Formal techniques are subjective or reality constituting in the same way as informal social practices.
2. Exposing asymmetrical power relations: organisations are microcosms that enact and reproduce wider power structures. Critical inquiry is motivated to expose and challenge the privileged position of corporate elites such as top managerial classes. Ideas like the division of labour between the strategic apex and the rest of the organisation are seen as political constellations that sustain inequality between different occupational or social groups.
3. Counteracting discursive closure: rational management practices are often taken for granted and not openly debated. Critical management studies aims to break up the communicative closures and to prompt democratic dialogue between the various stakeholders.
4. Revealing the partiality of shared interests: organisational goals and corporate decisions are often legitimised as being in the interest of the whole organisation or economy. However, a critical perspective reveals that shared interests often represent the aspirations of a limited clique (top managers, economic elite, state elite) instead of being declarations of negotiated intentions of a wider set of viewpoints.
5. Appreciating the centrality of language and communicative action: language is a socio-historical realm that carries, reproduces and transforms social realities and relations in and around organisations. Linguistic or discursive focus serves as a bridge between the issues

related to power, class and ideology and the local construction of social meanings in organisational life.

We subscribe to these ideas, and wish to present specific critical perspectives as fruitful avenues to further these interests in the context of comparative HRM.

Critical Perspectives On Comparative HRM

Having introduced a critical approach to management studies, we turn our attention back to comparative HRM. As noted, there is a need to account for and analyse the spread of new employment practices and organisational forms, associated with the emerging hegemony of neoliberal policies across countries and regions. This type of critical agenda could be informed and further developed by three theoretical and methodological approaches, namely global labour process theory, postcolonial discourse analysis and transnational feminism. We will introduce their respective theoretical and methodological assumptions next (see Table 4.1).

Global Labour Process Theory

Global labour process theory (GLPT) is an application of the main tenets of labour process theory to the globalising economy and working life. Whereas the traditional LPT research has tended to focus on nation-states and their organisation and management of work, Global LPT takes a more explicitly global or transnational look. The aim is to analyse how deskilling and related phenomena appear in contexts other than those researched in the United States and British studies of labour processes and management. With multinational corporations extending their operations to non-Western countries and the Anglo-American liberal market economy occupying a dominant role in the worldwide structuring of societies and organisations, it is of interest to test the deskilling hypothesis in new national and cultural environments. The GLPT research is particularly interested in analyzing whether there is an emerging convergence of employment management practices and organisational forms. The focus is on the adoption of neo-Fordist and neo-Taylorist HRM practices that manifest the intensification of managerial control. Unlike the more inductive convergence–divergence debates, GLPT takes as its starting point the deskilling hypothesis originally introduced by Braverman and subsequently empirically studied and theoretically elaborated by a number of organisational scholars. However, GLPT is slightly more attuned to the contemporary theorising that takes into account the role of agency and subjectivity in the organising of

social relations at work (Knights & Willmott, 1989). In this regard, it departs from the 'orthodox' LPT and its structuralistic assumptions about social and organisational life that have tended to neglect the role of subjective experiences and interpretations. This can also be seen in the methodology: GLPT uses qualitative methods such as field studies and organisational cases to complement the more broad-brush approaches such as surveys. At the same time, however, GLPT is inclined to adopt a more realist stance on epistemology than some of the alternative interpretative and poststructuralist perspectives.

GLPT is to our mind perhaps best exemplified by the studies of a British team of Hassard, Morris and McCann. Their empirical research has studied the changing work and organisation patterns in a variety of national contexts, including UK, United States, Germany, Japan and China. Empirical data for the research program has been drawn from organisational case studies of large and mid-sized companies undergoing major restructurings. Qualitative material includes interviews with senior and HRM management, as well as with employees from a variety of levels. In some cases, field studies are complemented with macro-data from surveys and economic statistics. Methodologically, Hassard et al. advocate a middle of the road position, which tries to get closer to the lived experiences and personal meanings of the employees without losing sight of the contextual and political structures affecting the organisation of working life in modern companies. Their approach can be seen as a response to the critiques of traditional structural theories that they ignore the role of subjectivity in the actualisation and reproduction of social structures (Giddens, 1979, 1984; Knights & Willmott, 1989). In short, the aim is to provide a counterweight to the under-socialised accounts of the mainstream international and comparative management research while at the same time arguing for a realist reading of the employee informants' narratives.

Research studies have revealed the structuring of work and human resource management against the continuing capitalist accumulation of surplus value in the globalised modernity. In their study of Japanese middle managers, Morris, Hassard and McCann (2006; McCann et al., 2004) found that the Japanese management culture, famous for its focus on lifetime employment, strong corporate culture and seniority-based hierarchy, shows signs of moving towards an Anglo-American model of individualised employment terms and flatter hierarchies. Management layers have been reduced in many companies to comply with the post-bureaucratic ideal celebrated in the market ideologies of the new organisational forms, although elements of the more stable hierarchies have remained. Similarly, companies have been forced to abandon the tradition of lifetime employment as restructurings have led to

redundancies and early retirement arrangements. Career moves and reward system have become more individualised and competitive instead of following the traditional Japanese emphasis on seniority and collective unity.

In comparison, the middle managers in a number of UK corporations seem to have experienced a more direct transformation. McCann, Morris and Hassard (2008) report that the middle managers interviewed all reported increasing workloads and pace of change. Many companies have cut their workforces, including also middle management, and the remaining employees have faced longer working hours, intensifying monitoring of their performance as well as tightening competition over the shrinking vacancies at the top management level. To some extent, the restructurings have meant constant re-skilling of the individual competencies of the employees but this has come with the price of having to lead ever more dispersed and fragmented teams and projects. Recent changes have often led to serious cases of stress and even deep burnout among middle managers continuing in their jobs after downsizings and restructurings.

The main argument from these studies is that although the changes among the UK and Japanese middle managers are not structurally similar, there is a remarkable similarity in the way recent work and HRM related transformations are experienced at the employee level. Hassard and his colleagues refer to the influence of the neoliberal ideology that has led to organisational arrangements such as the demolition of the internal labour market, rise of performance-related pay, reduced job security and increased work hours, all implemented in the name of international competitiveness. Although the factual statistical labour data does not always support the argument that changes they identify are widespread, the subjective experiences and the way middle managers and other employees interpret their situation give rise to global convergence. Insofar as employees in a variety of national-institutional contexts construct their own organisational environment as highly individualised, competitive and uncertain, the global convergence of employment management becomes produced as an enduring reality.

Comparative study of middle managers in the UK and Japan is an interesting application of some of the ideas of what we have labelled GLPT. The work of Hassard et al. contains an underlying assumption that global capitalism is intimately connected to the intensification of the labour process, manifested as increased workloads and the introduction of neo-Taylorist techniques such as the close surveillance of individual performance and the

installing of individualistic reward systems. This process touches not only the rich industrial countries but also the less developed economies: although the empirical studies mainly focus on developed industrial nations, a similar type of approach could be applied for researching the effects of the new ideologies on the working conditions and experiences of the employees in developed countries. The hypothesis of globally intensifying labour process is then explored through case studies of different organisations across a variety of national-institutional contexts. While there are national-institutional variations in the way in which the labour process is transformed, the overall trend is towards intensified control and exploitation of the worker input, including also middle managers.

Postcolonial Discourse Analysis

Postcolonial Discourse Analysis (PCDA) is an interpretative form of critical inquiry. It has its roots in the pioneering work of Saïd. Saïd's study on Orientalism (Saïd, 1978) opened new avenues for analyzing the relations between West and non-West, which has led to an emergence of postcolonial analysis as a theory in its own right (Bhabha, 1994; Spivak, 1987; Young, 2001). According to Saïd, 'Orient', or, more generally, non-West, is a Western construction. Analysing the discursive production of West and non-West is influenced by the ideas of critical theory where ideological beliefs about various social groups are seen as manifestations of dominance and hegemony. In addition, Saïd's approach has been inspired by the work of Foucault, especially in regards to how the non-West, or the Other, is constructed in various linguistic and institutional practices. Foucault's (1977, 1978) ideas have helped postcolonial theory to study both non-West and West as mutually sustaining subject positions that are ideologically imposed but at the same time empower those who adapt them as bases of identity and agency. This hybrid theoretical background has given rise to a vivid research program, also applied to organisation and management studies (e.g. Prasad, 1997, 2003; Westwood, 2001, 2004, 2006; Westwood & Jack, 2006, 2007).

While there are numerous potential objects of inquiry, perhaps the most interesting stream of research has focused on the way in which differences between West and non-West are constructed in the theory and practice of international management. Following Saïd and other postcolonial writers, organisational studies have concentrated on the production and consumption of ideas about cultural identity in discursive and institutional practices. The main questions have been 'How are West and non-West represented and constructed in discourses of comparative management?' and 'What are the implications of colonial identities to the

structuring of power in West non-West relations?’ The research program is epistemologically constructionist or relativist, meaning that it is mainly interested in the linguistic and textual articulations of identities and social relations, acknowledging that its own truth claims are also rhetorical accomplishments that have no external reference point outside of the discussion into which they participate. Constructionist epistemology is complemented with a relational ontology that assumes that the social world is composed of emerging and evolving relations of actors and identities. In terms of methodology, PDA leans on discourse analytical approaches, which implies a close reading of selected disciplinary, institutional and media texts in order to reveal the tacit privileges and hierarchies inscribed to the meaning constructions of literary and oral representations of cultural difference.

Postcolonial discourse analysis looks at the discursive processes of producing identities and relations between West and non-West. Essentially, PDA aims to reveal the implicit Western perspective in the allegedly ‘neutral’ descriptions and representations of non-West, West and the relations between them. As such, its empirical scope is somewhat broader than that of GLPT, encompassing a wealth of scientific, disciplinary and institutional (e.g. media) texts engaging with international relations and business management.

This has led scholars to inquire about the underlying assumptions of authoritative texts such as the academic writings on cross cultural management (Kwek, 2003) and stereotypical notions that are reproduced in textbooks on international management (Tipton, 2008). Westwood (2001, 2006) has provided particularly insightful analyses that criticise the very conceptions that characterise comparative international management. The point is that the Other (non-West) is always represented as underdeveloped, dangerous, exotic or mystical while the West is seen as developed, modern, rational, and normal. Although these analyses have not only focused on IHRM practices, the conclusion is clear: both the problems (HRM and other management issues) and the solutions (specific HRM practices) that are usually considered in this field echo this colonial mindset. Thus, postcolonial analysis can bring another critical perspective to comparative IHRM by deepening our understanding of the fundamental reasons of what is seen as normal and natural and what is not – as well as the implications of such assumptions.

Another important aspect of postcolonial analysis is its linkage to neo-colonialism (Banerjee & Linstead, 2001, 2004). In this view, neocolonial means a new form of colonialism linked with contemporary globalisation. Corporate-driven globalisation tends to

imply homogenisation and American cultural imperialism. While this is a relevant point for most areas of international management research, IHRM is a case in point here. As illustrated by the recent writings in comparative HRM (Brewster, 2007), the American dominance is evident in the assumptions that the specific practices originating from US corporations would be universal, normal, or transferrable to all places on the globe. This kind of neo-colonialism is not, however, normal or natural, and such assumptions bring with them cultural insensitivity, stereotypical thinking and prejudice – in the worst cases, something that comes close to xenophobia. Furthermore, such thinking is ideological in the sense of reproducing neoliberal ideals and Anglo-American hegemony.

Although postcolonial analysis is often thought to apply mainly to classic cases of colonial (Western) powers and colonised ones (non-West), constructions of postcolonial relationships can be found elsewhere, too. A revealing example is provided by Vaara et al. (2005) who have studied mergers and acquisitions in the Nordic financial services sector. Among other things, they analyzed the language policy in a Finnish-Swedish merger, which led to the choice of Swedish as the official language. Their analysis showed how language skills can be seen as empowering or disempowering resources in organisational communication, how language skills became associated with professional competence, and how this led to the creation of new social networks that favoured Swedish-speakers. The case also illustrated how language can be regarded as an essential element in the construction of international confrontation, how this policy led to a construction of superiority (Swedes) and inferiority (Finns), and also reproduced post-colonial identities in the merging bank (Swedes as the colonial power). Finally, they also pointed out how such policies ultimately led to the reification of post-colonial and neo-colonial structures of domination in this setting. However, despite the interesting dynamics inside Europe, it is appropriate to note that the main interest of postcolonial theory lies in the contested power relations between the advanced West and the developing countries of the East and South.

Transnational feminism

Feminism provides an array of critical perspectives that can be useful in comparative HRM. This, however, requires a broad conception of HRM and the key issues at play. One of key points of feminist organisation and management studies has been to extend organisation analysis to issues such as civil rights, well-being, equal opportunities, work-life balance, family and sexuality. These issues are not usually seen as the immediate concerns of

management in general or (I) HRM in particular; however, the feminist argument is that they should be. In fact, in addition to bringing up marginalised or silenced issues, or giving voice to those who are under-represented or in a less privileged position, feminism emphasises societal and corporate responsibility for such issues.

Feminism has a great deal to offer to contemporary analyses of globalisation from the point of view of linking the global division of labour to social relations between women and men and gendered social practices in and around organisations. For example, Calás and Smircich (1993) showed how a discourse that emphasises women's specific qualities in management is appropriated by management writers. Calás and Smircich demonstrated how this discourse serves to legitimate the gendered status quo where men occupy the central positions in the international arena while women 'keep the home fires burning'. Such observations have clear linkages to IHRM – especially in terms of explaining why inequality still prevails at top echelons in global corporations.

There is, however, not one form of feminism, but many. For example, Calás and Smircich (2006) distinguish liberal, radical, psychoanalytic, socialist, poststructuralist/postmodern and transnational/(post)colonial feminism. We will here focus attention on transnational feminism because of its potential for opening up new avenues for critical analysis in comparative HRM. The key characteristic of transnational feminism is that while it continues to probe into central questions of inequality from a feminist angle, it also problematises key assumptions of Western feminism. This is the case especially with how dominant Western feminist discourses tend to construct the women in the Third World. In this sense, transnational feminism is linked with postcolonial analysis. For instance, Mohanty (1997, 2004) has made the point that Western discourses of Third World women construct them as oppressed, underdeveloped and lacking essential qualities that they 'should have'. This picture is problematic precisely in the sense that again Western models and ideologies are naturalised, and the multiple and different cultural issues and values that are relevant are disregarded. As a result, the constructions of 'normal' or preferred careers, responsibilities at work and at home, equal opportunities and related HRM practices remain one-sided and ideologically laden. Moreover, even the well-intended feminist analyses easily portray Third World women as victims and passive recipients of knowledge and aid, thus reducing their agency and subjectivity.

Some forms of transnational feminism also question the usefulness of ‘gender’ as a sufficient category to be applied across cultures. It is less clear what the alternative is, but the implication is that future analyses of (I)HRM would do well to map out various complex linkages between gender, race, religion, nationality, education, career and sexuality without assuming that the solutions that appear the most natural or progressive from the Western point of view would be that for other cultures, religious settings, forms of family and so forth.

Mohanty (1997) provides an analysis that advances such understanding. Her critical starting point is that exploitation in its various kinds is linked with the political economy of globalisation in its material and discursive forms. She has chosen to speak of ‘One-Third/Two-Thirds’ worlds instead of the common notion of the ‘Third World’. Through such discursive choices, she has focused attention on commonly held and naturalised conceptions that deal with the legitimacy of Western consumerism and its ideals set for women – as well as men – in different parts of the world. As a way to improve the state of affairs, she has called for transnational solidarity building and struggle against harmful forms of globalisation (Mohanty, 2004).

Such reflections may at first appear remote for comparative HRM, but we maintain that they are not, if we wish to pursue broad understanding of the issues that HRM can or should be dealing with, and a critical attitude toward the universalist ‘best practices’ and other solutions provided. The fact remains, however, that to date we lack studies that would spell out the full-fledged implications of transnational feminism on IHRM and comparative HRM. This is a major challenge for future research.

Conclusion

The starting point for this chapter has been a need to spell out specific ways in which we could advance critical analysis in comparative HRM. We think that comparative HRM – more than other approaches or emergent sub-fields in HRM – can precisely lead to better understanding of broader social and societal issues in and around globalising organisations. For this purpose, we have argued that comparative HRM should be linked with critical management studies; at least in the sense that comparative HRM could make use of specific theoretical and methodological approaches that have already proven useful in other areas and have particular potential in view of the issues that IHRM can and should deal with. Hence, we have proposed global labour process theory, postcolonial analysis, and transnational feminism as examples of perspectives that can further advance the comparative approach to HRM. As

our discussion has illustrated, there are seminal studies that at least implicitly already deal with key issues of HRM in globalising organisations and economy. However, it is equally clear that a great deal can and should be done to further our understanding in these important and fascinating areas. It is also important to note that our discussion of the three critical perspectives is in no way meant as an exhaustive presentation of the available critical perspectives on comparative human resource management. Rather, we would like to invite a multitude of different theoretical programs to enrich and challenge the current state-of-the-art in this developing area of management studies scholarship.

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Table 4.1 Three critical perspectives on comparative human resource management

	Global Labour Process Theory	Postcolonial Discourse Analysis	Transnational feminism
Background influences	Labour Process theory: Braverman 1974 Reconstructed Labour Process theory: Willmott & Knights, 1989	Discourse analysis: Foucault (1977, 1978) Postcolonial theory: Saïd (1978), Bhabha (1994), Spivak (1987), Young (2001)	Feminist theories Postcolonial theory: (Spivak, 1987) Transnational feminism: Mohanty (2004)
Focus	Global convergence of management of work	Institutional-cultural differences between West and non-West (as constructed in practices and discourses)	Divisions of labour and social relations between men and women in globalising world, and differences in them
Research questions	How global convergence links to the spread of capitalist principles and practices? Is there a trend towards deskilling around the world? Are emerging economies adapting neo-Fordist or neo-Taylorist management methods? Are there national variations in the adoption of neo-Fordist techniques? How are employees across the world experiencing new organisational forms and management practices?	What are the underlying assumptions about West and non-West in comparative HRM? How are West and non-West represented in discourses of comparative management research and practice? What are the implications of the identities of the West and the non-West to the structuring of power? What kinds of practices are being legitimised with reference to colonial identities and rhetoric?	How are workplace and social relations organised between men and women in global capitalism in different locations? How do Western conceptions of Third World women reproduce domination and subjugation? Are there alternative discourses that allow one to go beyond simplified categories of 'gender' and 'Third World'? What role do HRM practices and discourses play in reproducing particular identities and subjectivities?
Epistemology	Objectivist/realist	Subjectivist/constructionist	Subjectivist/constructionist
Ontology	Structural	Relational	Structural and relational
Methods	Field work, organisational case studies National comparisons	Discourse analysis Critical reading of canonical texts Case studies	Discourse analysis Activism
Exemplary studies	Hassard et al. (2006)	Westwood (2001) Vaara et al. (2005)	Mohanty (2004)