

Humans or Resources?

The Ethics of Strategic Human Resource Management

Anne E. Kato

Baruch College & The Graduate Center, CUNY

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Since the 1980s, strategic human resource management (SHRM) has been the dominant paradigm of the field of human resource management (HRM). The establishment of SHRM represents a shift from a “soft” focus on employee issues toward a “hard” focus on HRM’s economic value contributions (Gerpott, 2015). This transformation has been hailed as a positive and necessary change—one that has given HRM a seat at the table with management and prevented HRM from becoming obsolete in a rapidly changing global economy. When considered from an ethical perspective, however, the narrative of SHRM is a bit more complex. Some have raised concerns, for example, that the adoption of strategic language and values within HRM has been at the expense of ethical reflection about how this approach affects various stakeholders, especially employees (Van Buren, Greenwood, & Sheehan, 2011). Such concerns have sparked a small but growing interest in examining the ethical dimensions of SHRM. This paper will examine the ethical arguments supporting and critiquing SHRM and their implications for the field of HRM.

SHRM Overview and Historical Background

SHRM is an approach to human resource management that focuses on how HRM can contribute to organizational performance (Boxall, 2014). From a theoretical perspective, SHRM has been defined as “the pattern of planned human resource deployments and activities intended to enable an organization to achieve its goals” (Wright & McMahan, 1992, p. 298). This definition distinguishes SHRM from traditional HRM on two dimensions: the vertical alignment of HRM practices with organizational strategy and the horizontal integration of various HRM activities across the organization. It also suggests that SHRM is inherently concerned with decisions about how best to utilize an organization’s human capital (i.e., employees’ collective

knowledge, skills, and abilities) in light of the organization's strategy. Thus, it can be said that SHRM "involves designing and implementing a set of internally consistent policies and practices that ensure a firm's human capital contribute to the achievement of its business objectives" (Huselid, Jackson, & Schuler, 1997, p. 171).

A popular conceptualization of SHRM in practice has been that of a strategic business partner (Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich, 1998). The original version of this model specified four roles for HRM: change agent, administrative expert, employee champion, and, most importantly, a business partner to management in executing organizational strategy. The role of strategic business partner involves cultivating a deep understanding of the business, helping management make strategic choices, defining the organizational architecture required to implement strategy, building the organization's talent capabilities, and prioritizing HRM activities in terms of their strategic importance (Ulrich, 1998; Ulrich, Younger, Brockbank, & Ulrich, 2012). In short, the strategic business partner model suggests that HRM should enhance organizational effectiveness by linking people, strategy, values, and performance (Becker, Huselid, & Ulrich, 2001).

The emergence of SHRM theory and practice is best understood in its historical context. According to Cascio (2005), the field of HRM began as a record-keeping function in the first half of the twentieth century, transitioned to a focus on compliance following the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and subsequently became concerned with contributing to organizational performance—first in terms of fiscal accountability, and later in terms of adding value to the business as a strategic partner. What precisely led to the adoption of a "strategic" focus for HRM? Devanna et al. (1981) point out that a variety of factors precipitated demands for change during the 1970's: economic pressures, demographic shifts in the workforce, the regulatory environment, and the increasing complexity of management. The predominant view at

the time was that traditional approaches to HRM were insufficient to address these challenges. In order to justify the continued existence of HRM, therefore, it was necessary to redefine the field to enhance its value (Ulrich, 1998).

In what many consider the earliest SHRM paper, Tichy, Fombrun, and Devanna (1982) made the case for a more strategic approach to HRM, arguing that human resource activities have a major influence on organizational performance and that effective strategic management therefore requires effective human resource management. These ideas signaled a dramatic turning point in HRM research and practice. Within a matter of years, the majority of the field shifted from a focus on managing people to one of creating strategic contributions to enhance organizations' competitive performance (Lengnick-Hall, Lengnick-Hall, Andrade, & Drake, 2009). As a consequence, SHRM is now the mainstream view of HRM and the standard to which the majority of HRM practitioners aspire (Greenwood, 2002).

The predominant narrative of SHRM is one of increasing the value of HRM and legitimizing a field that was once dismissed as irrelevant to the core mission of organizations. Some authors, however, have suggested that this strategic shift in HRM may have a "dark side" that warrants ethical consideration—including, notably, the dehumanization of employees as simply means to economic ends (Alzola, 2018; Lefkowitz, 2006; Van Buren et al., 2011). While the ethical dimensions of SHRM have been largely overlooked, a number of theorists have recently begun to subject SHRM to ethical scrutiny. Based on a variety of ethical frameworks and principles, these authors have arrived at differing conclusions about whether SHRM as is an ethically problematic approach to HRM. The following sections summarize the ethical arguments that support and critique the strategic approach to HRM, respectively.

Ethical Arguments Supporting SHRM

The ethical arguments supporting a strategic approach to human resource management have developed primarily in response to recent critiques. Nevertheless, they draw on ethical theories and principles that have long been used to justify other aspects of organizational management in a capitalist system. Three positions or frameworks that have been used to defend the ethical merits of SHRM are: (a) the managerialist position, (b) SHRM as ethical stewardship, and (c) the unitarist position.

The Managerialist Position

One of the most commonly employed ethical justifications for SHRM focuses on the inherent goodness or rightness of the objective around which SHRM defines itself: that of maximizing organizational performance. Several authors have pointed out that SHRM represents an extension of the broader managerialist position, which defines an organization's ethical responsibilities in terms of the classical liberal model of free-enterprise capitalism (Lefkowitz, 2017; Winstanley & Woodall, 2000). Thus, the same ethical principles that are used to justify the managerialist position have been used to support the strategic approach to HRM. These principles include ethical egoism and utilitarianism.

Ethical egoism. Ethical egoism is a minimalist meta-ethical position that claims that the only valid standard of conduct is to maximize self-interest, i.e., pursue one's own well-being above anyone else's (Lefkowitz, 2017; Winstanley & Woodall, 2000). When applied to organizations, the principle of ethical egoism asserts that it is not only natural but also appropriate that an organization would prioritize its own economic interests over all others', including the interests of employees (unless, of course, supporting employee interests is necessary for organizational well-being). In this model it is the responsibility of HRM (as an extension of the organization) to

support the organization's interests over the rights of employees. Thus, ethical egoism suggests that SHRM is *prima facie* an ethically valid approach to HRM.

Utilitarianism. Utilitarianism represents a teleological or consequentialist position on ethics, which focuses on the outcomes of human actions rather than their inherent rightness or wrongness (Lefkowitz, 2017). Specifically, utilitarianism is based on the criterion of producing the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Utilitarianism also allows for using people as a means to an end, as long as it is for the good of the majority. There are many ways in which utilitarianism has been employed to support a strategic approach to HRM. For example, some have argued that SHRM is ethical from a utilitarian perspective because an economically thriving organization will produce the maximum amount of good (Greenwood, 2002). Moreover, utilitarianism provides a justification for consequences of SHRM practices that have adverse effects on individual employees (e.g., foregoing costly training and development programs or cutting costs through downsizing), as long as such actions are pursued for the benefit of the organization as a whole and are effective at the organization level. As Legge (1998) points out:

Competitive advantage ensures organizational survival and organizational survival protects employees' jobs, quite apart from maintaining employment in suppliers, satisfying consumer needs and so on. Hence, using people to achieve competitive advantage is quite acceptable as long as it does deliver positive consequences to the majority" (p. 25).

SHRM as Ethical Stewardship

The framework of SHRM as ethical stewardship argues that, to the extent that HRM fails to help organizations optimize the use of human capital, it violates its professional duties and ethical obligations (Caldwell, Truong, Linh, & Tuan, 2011). This perspective is based on the definition of ethical stewardship as "the honoring of duties owed to employees, stakeholders, and

society in the pursuit of long-term wealth creation” (Caldwell, Hayes, Bernal, & Karri, 2008). Although the concept of ethical stewardship is based in stakeholder theory, which is often used to argue against SHRM (as will be explicated further in the following section), the basic moral position of ethical stewardship is that organizational leaders have the obligation to maximize long-term wealth creation, which is the ultimate duty owed by business to society. For HRM, playing the role of ethical steward involves understanding the operations of the business, developing systems by which organizations can maximize human performance, and advocating for the adoption of HRM practices that support organizational goals, among other things (Caldwell et al., 2011). Thus, the ethical stewardship model suggests that SHRM is the appropriate lens through which to approach the task of HRM both in theory and in practice.

It is important to note that implicit within the framework of SHRM as ethical stewardship is the view that this approach is mutually beneficial to organizations and employees. In order for organizations to maximize long-term wealth creation, they must implement systems that strengthen the organizational commitment of employees, and, in order to strengthen employee commitment, they must treat employees as valued individuals and organizational partners. Therefore, the ethical stewardship model suggests that the practice of SHRM will necessarily involve employee empowerment. Specifically, Caldwell et al. (2011) argue that “HRM practices that view employees as valued assets and contributors to the creation of strategic competitive advantage empower people to enhance their potential to contribute to the organization’s success while simultaneously improving employees’ skill sets along the way” (p. 175). In short, concerns about a loss of employee focus in SHRM are unfounded, because failing to serve the interests of employees undermines the organization’s ability to maximize long-term wealth.

The Unitarist Position

Taken further, the view that employee interests are an inherent part of SHRM represents another ethical justification for SHRM, a position known as unitarism (Guest, 1989; Van Buren et al., 2011). The unitarist perspective involves the basic assumption that there are “no underlying and inevitable differences of interests between management and workers” (Guest, 1989, p. 43). Whereas utilitarianism permits an organization to prioritize its own interests above the interests of employees for the good of the majority, unitarism claims that acting in the interest of the organization is synonymous with acting in the interest of its employees. An example of this position is the HRM business model promoted by Cascio (2005), which assumes a causal chain between effective management practices (i.e., SHRM), employee satisfaction, customer satisfaction, and long-term profitability and growth. Proponents of the unitarist position also cite empirical evidence linking SHRM practices with both organizational performance and employee attitudes, such as job satisfaction and commitment (Armstrong, 2005; Caldwell et al., 2011). In other words, unitarism takes the optimistic view that SHRM is good for employees because happy employees are good for business. Thus, ethical concerns regarding the treatment of employees are unfounded and there is no need for further ethical analysis of the practices involved with SHRM.

Ethical Arguments Critiquing SHRM

As previously mentioned, the ethical justifications for SHRM outlined above are largely a response to ethical critiques. While this criticism has taken a variety of forms, it can be summarized in terms of four main accusations: (a) SHRM violates the principle of respect for persons, (b) SHRM assumes an ethically deficient unitarist position, (c) SHRM focuses on shareholder interests to the detriment of other stakeholders, and (d) SHRM naively presents itself as morally neutral and value-free.

SHRM Violates the Principle of Respect for Persons

One of the primary ethical critiques of SHRM is that it violates the principle of respect for persons by treating employees simply as a means to achieve organizational performance (Legge, 1998; Winstanley & Woodall, 2000). This argument rejects the egoist defense for SHRM as untenable and takes the position that “self-interested acts must be shown to be compatible with more broadly based ethical principles if they are to be ethically defensible” (Singer, 1995, as cited in Lefkowitz, 2017). From this perspective, one of the most fundamental and universalizable moral principles is the Kantian principle of treating all humans as ends in themselves because of their inherent worth and dignity (Greenwood, 2002; Lefkowitz, 2017). According to Kant, one must never treat another human being solely as a means but also as an end. Therefore, the argument continues, SHRM can be considered unethical if it is found to violate this principle.

Although Ulrich’s (1997) original conceptualization of HRM as a strategic business partner explicitly includes the role of HRM as an employee champion, several authors have argued that this role is no longer central to the mainstream view of SHRM (Gerpott, 2015; Van Buren et al., 2011; Winstanley & Woodall, 2000). Rather, because the primary aim of SHRM is to contribute economic value, employee-focused HRM responsibilities have been marginalized in favor of more “strategic” activities that serve the interests of management. Others have argued that SHRM represents the adoption of values that fundamentally undermine respect for persons (Alzola, 2018; de Gama, McKenna, & Peticca-Harris, 2012). For example, among its guiding ideals, SHRM assumes an expansive view of private property rights wherein labor is understood as property that can be used and/or disposed of at the discretion of firm owners. This very notion, it is argued, reduces employees to something less than human and fails to respect their dignity as

ends in themselves (Alzola, 2018). Critical scholars have gone so far as to suggest that depersonalization and dehumanization are fundamentally embedded in the traditional capitalist conceptualization of the employment relationship (de Gama et al., 2012). The fact that the field responsible for overseeing the management of employees has labeled them as “resources” is one example cited as a reflection of these values.

SHRM Assumes an Ethically Deficient Unitarist Position

Another critique of SHRM is that it assumes an ethically deficient unitarist position. As noted above, one of the ethical arguments supporting SHRM is that employee interests are indistinguishable from the interests of the firm. Unitarism precludes the need for further ethical analysis because it assumes that what is good for the organization is good for its employees. Critics, however, have argued that it does not take much empirical scrutiny to come to the realization that organizational interests and employee interests frequently diverge. This divergence of interests is further exacerbated by the power imbalances that are endemic to the relationship between an organization and its employees. According to Van Buren et al. (2011):

The optimistic story offered by SHRM—of organization and employee interests intersecting to a high extent—is false. In part, this is because the organization ‘offers’ the role of employee, defines what that role is, defines what a successful employee does, controls the mechanisms of rewards and promotions, and defines the purposes and goals of the organization—and by extension, of the employee. (p. 213)

Unitarism is ethically deficient because it fails to recognize this reality or offer any tools with which to address it. Some have even argued that the unitarist position is itself a violation of employees’ rights to be treated as ends in themselves. According to Greenwood (2002), “a company which either explicitly or implicitly treats their employees as not having goals and

interests which potentially differ from those of the organisations would be considered to be infringing upon this right” (p. 274).

SHRM Focuses on Shareholder Interests to the Detriment of Other Stakeholders

A third critique of SHRM is that it focuses on shareholder interests to the detriment of other stakeholders. This critique is grounded in stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), which defines an organizational stakeholder as any party who can have an effect on the organization or who can be affected by it. Organizational stakeholders may include, for example, shareholders, management, employees, customers, suppliers, the local community, and society as a whole. The normative version of stakeholder theory is characterized by the notion that managers have a duty to attend to the interests of all stakeholders in the organization (Greenwood, 2002). This position is consistent with the meta-ethical position of universalism, which refers to “the premise that no person’s or group’s interests have a priori moral precedence over those of any other person’s or group’s” (Lefkowitz, 2017, p. 338). It also reflects the Rawlsian conception of social justice and the Kantian principle of respect for persons, both of which emphasize a view of people as ends in themselves (Greenwood, 2002). Thus, the main argument of this critique is that, by orienting itself around maximizing economic performance, SHRM gives shareholder interests a priori moral consideration, which is a violation of the rights of other stakeholders to be treated as ends in themselves. This position is akin to the employee-centered critique previously described, but considers broader implications. For example, Boxall (2014) argues that SHRM has paid very little attention to society as a stakeholder and ignored questions about how to support society’s interests. A specific example is the role that organizations play in contributing to unemployment issues. In times when the labor supply exceeds demand, it is not in an organization’s competitive interests to assume the costs of training and developing unexperienced workers, so these workers

become caught in a cycle that prevents them from attaining employment (no experience, no job; no job, no experience). Stakeholder theory suggests that organizations have at least some degree of responsibility to address this type of issue and support the interests of society.

SHRM Naively Presents Itself as Morally Neutral and Value-Free

A final critique of SHRM is that it naively presents itself as morally neutral and value-free. According to this view, SHRM has positioned itself as a scientific field that is based on empirical evidence rather than moral judgment (Alzola, 2018). This position assumes that the scientific enterprise is intrinsically objective and value-free (Lefkowitz, 2017). However, critics argue that the ethical dimension of SHRM is inescapable, because most of the decisions involved in SHRM constitute significant moral issues. The realm of SHRM encompasses decisions related to quality of work life, workforce diversity, recruitment and selection, training, performance appraisal, pay and benefit systems, union representation, health and safety, and workplace privacy, to name a few (Alzola, 2018). These decisions have significant consequences on individuals and involve broadly recognized ethical principles such as justice and caring; thus, they are inherently ethical issues (Lefkowitz, 2017; Wittmer, 2001). Maintaining a “value-free” stance prevents SHRM from acknowledging and addressing an important dimension of the field.

Some have argued that ignoring the ethical dimensions of SHRM is not only naïve but also potentially harmful. For example, de Gama et al. (2012) draw on the thinking of Bauman (1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1995) and Levinas (1998) to argue that the “moral neutralization” that takes place in organizations can have disastrous consequences—as in the case of the Holocaust, which was perpetrated, according to this view, in large part by morally neutral bureaucrats in morally neutralized bureaucracies. It is argued that this occurs because moral neutralization limits people’s focus to tasks, roles, and problem-solving and leads them to define their moral

obligations solely within the context of organizational objectives. Instead of liberating SHRM from its moral constraints, therefore, the “morally neutral” position merely redefines morality in terms of obedience and duty to the organization. This represents a dangerous position for anyone, but perhaps especially for those who are tasked with overseeing the management of people in organizations.

According to de Gama et al. (2012), the consequences of this moral neutralization within the field of SHRM are reflected in three coping strategies: distancing, depersonalization, and dissembling. The first two strategies involve separating the self from the outcomes one’s actions have upon other people and treating humans as resources rather than as people. The third strategy involves both reducing employees to bundles of skills, competencies, and capabilities and measuring oneself (as an HRM practitioner) against the sole criterion of adding value to the organization. De Gama et al.’s (2012) qualitative research among HRM professionals revealed evidence of these strategies in practice – e.g., the use of detached and dehumanized language, a focus on efficiency and return on investment, down-sizing or “right-sizing” of the workforce, and a “business first” orientation. Their interpretation of such behavior is that, far from becoming value-free, SHRM has become guided by an organizationally defined morality that has little regard for individuals as humans.

Discussion

Various ethical arguments supporting and critiquing SHRM have been summarized above. These arguments, while not exhaustive, highlight the complexities of attempting to provide a definitive ethical judgment on an entire field. What is one to take away from all of this?

First, the conclusions one reaches about the ethics of SHRM depend in large part upon the ethical position one adopts. Most justifications for SHRM are based on egoist, utilitarian, and

capitalist principles, whereas most critiques of SHRM are based on universalist, Kantian, and Rawlsian principles. These varying moral frameworks provide very different definitions of what is “good” or “right” in a given situation. Thus, someone’s acceptance of a particular ethical argument surrounding SHRM is likely to be contingent upon whether (s)he embraces the overarching ethical framework (Greenwood, 2002). This highlights the need for an ethical framework or set of principles that could be universally accepted as the basis for evaluating SHRM. The question is: does the literature offer us such a tool?

On its surface, stakeholder theory appears to be viable candidate, a convenient “middle ground” that allows organizations to maintain the importance of creating economic value for shareholders while also requiring them to value the interests of other stakeholders. Stakeholder theory may be a step in the right direction, but it is not without its flaws. For example, it does not clearly address how to prioritize the interests of stakeholders when they conflict with one another, though it is presumed that this will often occur (Lefkowitz, 2017). Additionally, stakeholder theory arguably does not go far enough in protecting employee interests. One reason for this is that it provides a loophole by allowing management to justify decisions that harm employees on the basis of organizational survival (Legge, 1998). Moreover, the theory conceptualizes stakeholders at the group level rather than thinking of them as individuals. Because of this, it is acceptable for individual employees to be harmed in the short-term for the long-term benefit of employees as a category of stakeholders. Such treatment does not seem consistent with the principle of respect for persons. Thus, “the ethics of stakeholder analysis, while looking persuasive at first sight, contain potential escape clauses that can render them little more than well-meaning rhetoric in practice” (Legge, 1998, p. 28).

In light of the competing ethical views of SHRM and the lack of a clear and compelling ethical framework to apply to SHRM, it is apparent that the field of HRM could benefit from more extensive ethical analysis and reflection. Perhaps it is time for mainstream SHRM to entertain a normative perspective to guide its theory and practice. Attempting to maintain a “value-free” position, as Lefkowitz (2008, 2011) has pointed out in reference to the field of organizational psychology, has in reality led to the uncritical adoption of the dominant value system of management—that of free-market capitalism. Moreover, the failure to develop theories that explicitly recognize the ethical dimensions of HRM has limited the field’s effectiveness and influence on practice (Beer, 2017). What, then, is required to address these shortcomings?

To begin with, the field should examine the ethical values and principles currently guiding the practice of SHRM as a whole. The little analysis that has been done so far reveals many inherent tensions, such as that between driving organizational performance and championing employee interests. More debate is needed, specifically around questions such as those posed by Greenwood (2002): *Under what circumstances, if any, is it allowable for employees to be “used” as a means to an end?*, and, *To what extent, if at all, should the organization act in the interest of employees?* Unless the field begins with an honest examination of where it stands on important ethical questions such as these, it will be difficult to move forward.

Additionally, mainstream SHRM would do well to recognize the humanistic concerns raised by its critics and invest in more employee-centered research. This includes research that directly considers employees’ perspectives on and reactions to SHRM practices in vivo (Grant & Shields, 2002). Such research can be considered an empirical test of the unitarist position, one that could provide support for the overall position of SHRM or highlight important limitations that must be addressed.

Finally, alternative models of HRM should be considered in lieu of the strategic business partner model that has dominated for the past several decades. This task is a daunting one, as it requires both empirical rigor and considerable imagination. It may in fact call us “to imagine other worlds and other social formations that might look inconceivable to us at the moment” (Jones et al., 2005, p. 78). Nevertheless, it may be time to reimagine HRM based on a broader set of criteria than those that have been employed by the strategic model—criteria that also consider what is good, what is right, and what is just in terms of how organizations relate to their employees and other stakeholders.

Conclusion

The strategic approach to human resource management, or SHRM, represents both the mainstream view and the aspirational standard of HRM. By aligning itself with management in the pursuit of economic value creation, the field of HRM has improved its credibility; however, this transformation has arguably had negative ethical implications. This paper has reviewed various arguments supporting and critiquing the field of SHRM from an ethical perspective. While the conclusion one reaches about the ethics of SHRM depends largely upon which ethical theories one espouses, I contend that greater attention should be given to these ethical questions within the field of HRM. This perspective aligns with Beer’s (2017) view that one of the three essential goals of a vibrant professional field is to develop *ethical* theories and practices. In order to continue its evolution, I recommend that the field of HRM engage in more extensive analysis and reflection on the ethics of SHRM. Specifically, the field should examine the values and principles that currently guide SHRM theory and practice, invest in more employee-centered research, and consider alternatives to the strategic business partner model.

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