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Research trends in the *South African Journal of Human Resource Management*

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Author:
Charlotte Pietersen[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of Business Management, University of Limpopo, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Charlotte Pietersen,
charlotte.pietersen@ul.ac.za

Orientation: A comprehensive framework for research in human resource management (HRM) in terms of fundamental knowledge orientations was found lacking.

Research purpose: The aim was to perform a typological review of research trends in the field of HRM, specifically of publications in the *South African Journal of Human Resource Management* (*SAJHRM*).

Motivation for the study: No previous research in the field of HRM in South Africa adopted a fundamental theory of knowledge.

Research design, approach and method: A qualitative design was followed, consisting of a documentary analysis of articles that were published in the *SAJHRM* for the period from 2003 to 2015. A detailed content analysis of published articles was performed in terms of a number of criteria, namely knowledge type, race, gender, authorship, author contribution and representation according to author institution and country of origin.

Main findings: An analysis of a final selection of 289 articles indicated that research in the *SAJHRM* was mostly on the following lines: research was mostly of the hypothesis-testing (Type II) knowledge type; involved multiple authorship; and was conducted by mostly white, male researchers, based at a relatively few South African academic institutions.

Practical and managerial implications: The *SAJHRM* should, in partnership with the HRM profession, promote and publish research that more prominently addresses the gap between academic HRM and HRM practice, especially in terms of the participatory or action research (Type IV) mode of knowledge generation.

Contribution: The present analysis of research trends in the *SAJHRM* provides a broader and more nuanced perspective on forms of research required for the HRM field in South Africa.

Introduction

The question that guided this investigation concerns the nature of research published in the *South African Journal of Human Resource Management* (hereafter: *SAJHRM*) and what changes occurred since its inception 13 years ago. In addition to an analysis of certain demographic trends, some comparisons with a similar analysis performed for research trends in the *South African Journal of Industrial Psychology* (*SAJIP*) were also made.

Contrary to a review of specific subject matter areas and methodological aspects in its sister journal, the *SAJIP*, by Coetzee and Van Zyl (2014), as well as the recent review of the business coaching literature by Schutte and Steyn (2015) and of the review of professional human resource competencies by Schutte, Barkhuizen and Van der Sluis (2015), the present analysis was conducted with the aid of a four-fold framework of interrelated knowledge orientations. Janićijević (2011) is of the opinion that the understanding and management of complex phenomena could be augmented by expanding the array of research approaches currently in use in various disciplines.

Purpose

The aim of the study is a typological review of research trends in the field of human resource management (HRM) in South Africa, specifically as reflected in the type of publications that appear in the flagship journal, the *SAJHRM*. Given this focus, attention was not directed to other outlets for HRM research, locally or abroad. No previous study, using the current broad typology of fundamental knowledge orientations, has been conducted on research published in the *SAJHRM*.

Literature review

There is a tendency in the field of HRM to divide the historical evolution of HRM into distinct stages (Ferris et al., 2007). Recently, Cleveland, Byrne and Cavanagh (2015), and Ulrich and Dulebohn (2015) distinguished among four consecutive phases in the development of HRM, namely (1) *HRM administration*, (2) *HRM practice* (the design of innovative practices), (3) *HRM strategy* (alignment of HRM practices to business strategy) and (4) *HRM and context* (connecting HRM to the broader context in which businesses operate). The anticipated fourth phase, according to Ulrich and Dulebohn (2015), is driven by an ever-increasing demand to add value to organisations. In future, HRM will only be relevant as a key organisational resource and role player by adopting '… an outside/inside approach where the external environment and stakeholders influence … is recognised' (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015, p. 188).

This evolution does not only place new demands on the practice of HRM in organisations but also has implications for research in HRM. The ever-increasing complexity of HRM has and will in future compel a change of focus in HRM (Stone & Deadrich, 2015). Articles published in scholarly journals, irrespective of a journal's specific focus, not only provide evidence of the development of a discipline but also furnish insight into research trends and foci in a field of study (Casper, Eby, Bordeaux, Lockwood & Lambert, 2007; Watkins & Labuschagne, 1991). A number of recent reviews in the international arena are also beginning to pay attention to the relationship between *research* on and the *practice* of HRM (see, for example, Markoulli, Lee, Byington & Felps, 2017; Stone & Deadrich, 2015; Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015).

A key issue that is frequently mentioned is that HRM practice in organisations, for the most part, does not inform academic research and vice versa (Björkman, Ehrnrooth, Mäkelä, Smale & Sumelius, 2014; DeNisi, Wilson & Biteman, 2014; Tenhiälä et al., 2016; Tucker & Lowe, 2014). Research findings are not implemented in practice because practitioners often do not have access to, or are unaware of, such findings (Deadrich & Gibson, 2009; Shapiro, Kirkman & Courtney, 2007). In addition, they may be familiar with the content of the academic literature but, nonetheless, prefer not to implement such knowledge (Deadrich & Gibson, 2007; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000) because researchers focus on topics that are not perceived as important by practitioners, or they fail to conduct research relevant to the practice of HRM (Meyer, 2014; Panda & Gupta, 2014).

The last issue is of particular importance because research conducted by academics has a key role to play in the future of HRM and in influencing the quality and relevance of HRM practice (Cohen, 2015). Traditionally, theory construction and theory verification in the sciences has been the domain of researchers attached to higher education institutions (Panda & Gupta, 2014; Vincent-Lancrin, 2006). Scholars in these institutions conducted research to satisfy their own curiosity and particular interests. Many of them still are not really interested in knowledge application in practice. This emphasis on basic and theoretical research, instead of applied research, could further deepen the divergence between HRM research and practice (DeNisi et al., 2014).

The commercialisation of research and the resulting pressure on academics to increase their research productivity has also impacted on the development of theory and knowledge production to support good practice in HRM. In the contemporary academic milieu, publications in accredited, peer-reviewed journals are essential to sustain or further the careers of academics (Winslow, 2011; Wissing, Du Toit & Rothmann, 2002). In South Africa, academics are increasingly pressurised to publish in journals accredited and incentivised by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) in order to be recognised and rewarded for their work (Department of Education, 2015). The so-called 'publish or perish' credo, coined many years ago by Boyes, Happen and Higan (1984), compels academics to, for example, focus on research topics currently in vogue or to use readily accessible data or populations (usually students or academic peers). In other words, the thrust is to conduct research in order to survive in the academic milieu or for financial gain, without considering the practical implications of their research in the work context (Hulin, 2001).

On the contrary, instead of academics influencing practice, HRM practitioners could conduct and publish research to influence their own practice as well as to inform academic research. Their research outputs are as valuable as research conducted by academics to narrow the research–practice gap. The probability of implementing findings of research conducted by practitioners themselves, or of research informed by them, is higher compared with the use of research conducted by academics in isolation (Anderson, 2011).

Therefore, it is imperative for the HRM community of scholars and practitioners to create a dynamic balance between research and practice. They have to monitor their research output to determine if it is time to refocus their research efforts to ensure that they remain relevant in an ever-changing environment. The South African Board of People Practice (SABPP) took note of this need and in 2007 a research agenda was formulated with the aim of increasing the flexibility and responsiveness of the HRM profession in dealing with new issues and to support institutions of higher education with relevant research to meet the needs of the HRM professional community (Meyer, 2016).

The flagship HRM journal in South Africa, the *SAJHRM*, recognises that HRM research and practice have a key role to play in adding value to organisations in the future. The journal is dedicated to provide a platform for both academics and practitioners (and other scholars) in HRM and related disciplines to publish quantitative, qualitative or theoretical articles focused on the broad field of HRM. The journal also aims at addressing the gap between research and practice in HRM, in particular in South Africa and the rest of the African continent, and to stimulate theory and good practice (AOSIS Publishing, 2017).

The stimulation of theory and good practice and bridging the well-documented gap between research and HRM practice could contribute to the effectiveness of HRM, which, in turn, could add value to organisational performance and functioning (Sanders, Van Riemsdijk & Groen, 2008).

In the present study, a four-fold framework was utilised to describe the nature of research reported in the *SAJHRM*. The framework is the result of an historical analysis of fundamental modes of understanding that shapes and directs the products of the human intellect (Pietersen, 2005). Subsequent analyses of knowledge production demonstrated similarities in terms of underlying intellectual mindsets in a number of disciplines (Pietersen, 2014, 2016). The usefulness of the typology to identify types of research was, for instance, demonstrated in the field of Industrial Psychology (Pietersen, 2005). The typology was also used to analyse fundamental research orientations in organisational culture research (Pietersen, 2017).

Briefly stated, four knowledge orientations were identified, namely the *theoretical-integrative* (conveniently designated as the Type I) mode, the *systematic-analytical* (Type II) mode, the *narrative-interpretive* (Type III) mode and the *pragmatic* or *action* (Type IV) mode (Pietersen, 2017). Types I and II are associated with abstract theory building, and positivist empirical research, respectively. In contrast, the other two types are primarily associated with understanding and with first-hand descriptions of the meaning of phenomena (typically referred to as qualitative research) (Type III) and with action research in the interventionist mode (Type IV). In general, researchers involved in theoretical (Type I), quantitative (Type II) and qualitative (Type III) research in HRM are familiar with the distinction between theoretical, quantitative and qualitative research. However, it is contended that Type IV research needs much greater emphasis. Action research in HRM is participatory in nature. In this mode, researchers and practitioners come together, *inter alia*, in an ongoing and collaborative process of research *within* the organisation to improve various aspects of HRM and its contribution to the effectiveness of the organisation (Van der Horst, 2015), instead of merely studying workplace phenomena at a distance, as in the Type I and II modes of knowledge.

Research design
Research approach

The researcher followed a qualitative design of document analysis by downloading, scrutinising and classifying articles that were published in the *SAJHRM* during 2003–2015, using a number of criteria, namely knowledge type, race, gender, authorship, author contribution and representation according to author institution and country of origin.

Method
Sampling

In view of the strict delimitation of the topic, confinement of the study to a single source of information, and of the specific purpose of the present review, no sampling was done.

Instead, the population of all *SAJHRM* articles for the period from 2003 to 2015 were downloaded from the archives of the open access AOSIS website for this journal.

Data collection method

The *first step* was to obtain full-text *SAJHRM* articles for the period under review. All articles (PDF format) were electronically downloaded and stored in folders for each of the years, from 2003 up to and including 2015. The *second step* was a detailed inspection of each downloaded file in order to arrive at a final selection of articles. Articles that used student samples and populations were excluded, as they were, for present purposes, not regarded as HRM research that directly involved and represented employee populations or HRM functions in work organisations. These were mostly psychometric validation studies of research instruments (questionnaires). Also excluded were editorials, book reviews and tributes. Of an overall count of 289 articles, 9 were excluded from further analysis at this stage. The *third step*, which formed the core procedure, consisted of a systematic process of analysis in which each of the final selection of articles were thoroughly and repeatedly studied to determine its content in terms of the following categories:

- *Type or mode.* An article's primary suitability, as evidenced by the research design that was followed in each case, for one of the four types of research chosen as template for the present review. A small number of articles reported the use of a mixed quantitative and qualitative methodology. In the event, 13 articles (less than 5% of the total) were included in more than one meta-category (mostly Types II and III).
- *Race.* Articles were inspected with regard to the racial composition of its authorship. It was possible to classify authors in terms of the designations: white people, black people and others. Given the multiple authorship of the vast majority of articles, the total count for this category exceeds the actual number of published articles selected for study.
- *Gender.* In view of the *SAJHRM* practice of reporting full names of authors, it was possible to determine the gender of participating authors. As in the case of race, the total count for the gender category exceeds the actual number of selected publications.
- *Authorship.* Articles were inspected to identify the number of participating authors. Authorship varied between one and four authors per article, as the case may be.
- *Institution.* The institutional origin of the authors of *SAJHRM* articles was determined. Sixteen South African academic institutions are represented, with about 13% of the articles submitted by non-South African authors.
- *Country of origin.* The country of origin of authors of *SAJHRM* articles for the period under consideration includes South Africa, the United Kingdom, Australia, India, Malaysia, Iran, Bangladesh, Finland, Kenya and Botswana.

Findings
Demographic indicators

The results for the demographic indicators are depicted in Tables 1–3. The following is evident from the findings:

TABLE 1: Author demographics (gender and race) for the *South African Journal of Human Resource Management:* 2003–2015.

Percentage	Male	Female	White	Black	Other
2003	63	37	85	9	6
2015	43	57	64	24	12
Overall	**59**	**41**	**74**	**17**	**9**

TABLE 2: Multiple authorship in *South African Journal of Human Resource Management:* 2003–2015.

Percentage	Single	Double	Triple	Four
2003	4	72	20	4
2015	0	52	40	8
Overall	**11**	**56**	**30**	**3**

TABLE 3: Top five author statistics: *South African Journal of Human Resource Management*, 2003–2015.

Author	Frequency
Roodt, G.	26
Coetzee, M. E.	18
Schurink, W.	15
Bussin, M.	13
Rothmann, S.	10

TABLE 4: Four foundational types of knowledge exemplars.

Type	Exemplar
Theoretical mode (Type I)	Theoretical-integrative
	SAJHRM Exemplar: Veldsman
Empirical mode (Type II)	Systematic-analytical
	SAJHRM Exemplar: Roodt
Narrative mode (Type III)	Experiential: Telling the story
	SAJHRM Exemplar: Schurink
Action mode (Type IV)	Change: Improving organisations
	SAJHRM Exemplar: Serfontein

SAJHRM, South African Journal of Human Resource Management.

- The predominance of white people (74%), male (59%) HRM researchers (Table 1).
- The majority (86%) of *SAJHRM* publications being authored by three or four researchers (Table 2).
- Many *SAJHRM* contributions since the journal's inception in 2003 were produced by a small number of authors/co-authors (Table 3 shows the top five authors in terms of frequency of participation).
- Five universities (University of Johannesburg, University of South Africa, University of Pretoria, North-West University and University of Cape Town accounted for 72% of *SAJHRM* publications, Uuniversity of Johannesburg being represented in 43% of the cases.
- In terms of country of origin of *SAJHRM* authors, South Africa accounted for 96% of the publications.

Research types

Research exemplars for each of the four types of knowledge in the *SAJHRM* are shown in Table 4.

A comparison of research approaches used in articles published in the 2003 and 2015 issues of the *SAJHRM* is shown in Table 5, and a comparative analysis of the presence of the four types of research in the *SAJHRM* and the *SAJIP* is provided in Table 6. The following is evident from these tables:

- The predominance of empirical research (56% overall) that reflects the hypothesis-testing nature of contributions to the journal, in the scientific (Type II) mode of knowledge.
- The substantial presence (31%) of qualitative research contributions, which compares favourably with that found for the *SAJIP*, in a much lesser period of time.
- A marked absence of Type I and Type IV research in recent years.
- Even though the time frames are different, it is interesting to note that a comparable picture emerges regarding the dominance of Type II (empirical, hypothesis-testing)

research published in the *SAJIP* and *SAJHRM*, with the noteworthy exception being qualitative (Type III or narrative-interpretive) research, where the *SAJHRM* is substantially in the lead.

Theoretical–conceptual (Type I research in the *SAJHRM*)

Examples of publications in the *SAJHRM* that are predominantly theoretical–conceptual in nature are outlined as follows: A literature study and conceptual analysis by Lombard and Crafford (2003) identified a number of skills, knowledge and personal competency requirements for planning and dealing with change and resistance to change. Clutterbuck (2005) proposed the following competencies, namely building rapport, setting direction, progression, winding down and professional friendship. A number of mentee competence categories are also identified, namely relationship initiation, relationship management and learning maturity/disengagement. Akinnusi (2008) identified and described four types of benchmarking, namely internal benchmarking, competitive benchmarking, functional benchmarking and generic benchmarking.

Empirical–scientific (Type II research in the *SAJHRM*)

Examples of publications in the *SAJHRM* that are predominantly empirical and hypothesis-testing in the standard scientific approach (Type II) are as follows: Stander and Rothmann (2008) used a cross-sectional survey design based on a random sample to test hypotheses concerning the relationship between the three variables of leadership, job satisfaction and organisational commitment. Mclaggan, Bezuidenhout and Botha (2013) used a cross-sectional, correlational survey design with random sampling to determine the relationship between leadership style and various types of organisational commitment. Madu and Urban (2014) used a cross-sectional survey design using

TABLE 5: A typology of *South African Journal of Human Resource Management* contributions: 2003 and 2015.

Percentage	I	II	III	IV
2003	17	33	33	17
2015	0	77	23	0
Overall	**8**	**56**	**31**	**5**

TABLE 6: A comparative analysis of *South African Journal of Human Resource Management* and *South African Journal of Industrial Psychology* contributions.

Percentage	I	II	III	IV
SAJHRM (2003–2015)	8	56	31	5
SAJIP (1975–2014)	21	69	7	3

Source: Pietersen, H.J. (2016). *The parting of the ways: Foundational orientations in human thought*. Johannesburg, South Africa: KR Publishing, chapter 28

a web-based instrument to test hypotheses concerning compensation practices and intrapreneurial behaviour.

Narrative–interpretive (Type III research in the *SAJHRM*)

Examples of publications in the *SAJHRM* adopting a narrative–interpretive paradigm, characteristic of what is often referred to as qualitative research, are as follows: Hall and Fourie (2007) followed a social constructionist approach in interviewing 10 human resource managers. Application of the grounded-theory method revealed three core sets of themes: industry-specific organisational challenges, role of the HR function and effect of HR roles on individuals in HR. Van Rooyen, Du Toit, Botha and Rothmann (2010) used a purposive sample of 14 artisans who were interviewed, showing that remuneration and development opportunities were important factors. Malambe and Bussin (2014) used a purposive sample of 19 hospital managers who were interviewed using thematic content analysis. Results revealed that short-term incentives were not particularly attractive to hospital managers.

Action research (Type IV research in the *SAJHRM*)

Examples of publications in the *SAJHRM* that typify the action research approach are as follows: Serfontein, Basson and Burden (2009) using a qualitative methodology evaluated a transformational change project in a South African organisation by exploring employees' experiences of the programme. Buys and Louw (2012) used interviews and internal project documentation to obtain data provided by 69 participating supervisors to evaluate the success of the programme. O'Neil and Horne (2012) using survey methodology measured the extent of value internalisation after the implementation of a long-term change strategy. A large sample was obtained with lower than expected levels of change.

Discussion

Outline of findings

The review of research trends in the *SAJHRM* over the past 13 years of its existence, in the main showed that quantitative, hypothesis-testing research (Type II) is well-represented in the journal. This trend is evident in other peer-reviewed journals too (Colquitt & Zapata-Phela, 2007; Hambrick, 2007). However, if the journal wants to stay true to the content of its publication policy (AOSIS Publishing, 2017), this is not

necessarily a good thing. In order to produce applicable, relevant theoretical and practical knowledge to narrow the gap between research and practice in HRM, more is needed than just theory verification, or as explained by Ridder and Hoon (2009), describing, explaining and testing the relationships among variables by means of hypotheses and statistical analysis is required. Conceptual and/or theoretical knowledge as well as empirical, qualitative and action research are needed to achieve a better, all-round knowledge corpus for the HRM profession.

With some exceptions, very few of the authors who published in the *SAJHRM* engaged in conceptual, theoretical research (Type I). This is so, despite the fact that theory-driven empirical research provides the foundation of HRM as a science (Ferris, Hall, Royle & Martocchio, 2004). Both theory construction and theory verification in the sciences is primarily the domain of researchers attached to higher education institutions (Panda & Gupta, 2014; Vincent-Lancrin, 2006). Despite this, a very limited number of scholars engage in generating new theories (Ferris et al., 2004). They rather attempt to add on to or refine existing theories, or to incorporate conceptual schemes from other disciplines. This is probably the reason why original contributions in theory development have been sporadic in HRM research.

Early in the history of HRM, researchers have opted to use theories from other disciplines such as Business Management, Industrial/Organisational Psychology, Industrial Sociology and Labour Economics instead of developing discipline-specific theories (Deadrich & Gibson, 2007). Theoretical research in HRM has mainly focused on theory refinement instead of on theory construction and so far efforts to develop a grand HRM theory have failed and, in the view of Ferris et al. (2007), will likely continue to fail in future. Theory construction is intellectually demanding and may not be the preferred scholarly orientation of many academics. In addition, workload demands may leave little time for theorising. Academics have to produce publications annually and Type II research is arguably the approach of choice because reputable research journals tend to emphasise theory *verification* (Colquitt & Zapata-Phela, 2007; Hambrick, 2007).

On the contrary, theory development 'is fundamental for any field, because it ostensibly is the basis on which ideas are tested and new knowledge and insight are gained' (Ferris et al., 2004, p. 238). Therefore, HRM scholars have to

continue in their theory development efforts (Paauwe, 2009) which may or may not have direct relevance to organisations. Another reason why theory construction is so important is that the development of HRM theory is of particular importance in South Africa and other African countries. Much of the content of HRM is based on ethnocentric Western-style theories and methodology (Kiessling & Harvey, 2005). Contextualised knowledge systems embedded in regional and local communities are needed within the African context (Emeagwali & Shizha, 2016). This will complement Western knowledge as it has the potential for research, development and innovation (Le Grange, 2004). In order to practice HRM, ground-breaking local and/or indigenous theories have to be constructed to supplement current conceptions of HRM in the African organisational arena.

Furthermore, indigenous cultures in SA have a predominantly oral tradition (Foxcroft, Paterson, Le Roux & Herbst, 2004). In order to build an indigenous knowledge base, researchers have to move away from a more traditional positivistic research tradition to a more qualitative approach in which the voice of people in organisations could be heard. Orlikowski (2010) suggests that HRM would benefit from a shift towards a more practice-oriented approach, incorporating an increased focus on role players involved in or affected by the practice of HRM and their activities. The use of qualitative research (Type III), in particular narratives, to investigate the experiences of role players in HRM and the meaning of events and processes in organisations are recommended by various authors (Fenton & Langley, 2011; Hormuth, 2009; Kaudela-Baum & Endrissat, 2009; Orlikowski, 2010).

Fortunately, the findings show that qualitative research formed a substantive component of publications in the *SAJHRM* so far. It would appear that many of the authors who published in the journal are comfortable with conducting qualitative research. However, local, experienced scholars should continue to mentor and develop promising young researchers to not only conduct qualitative research but also to sustain and develop this approach to research further (Schurink, 2003).

The use of action research would also help to narrow the research–practice gap. Boselie, Dietz and Boon (2005) recommend that the quality of HRM 'practice in action' (actual, functioning, observable activities and interventions) has to be assessed. This type of research could only be conducted inside organisations. Research by van der Horst (2015) demonstrates that research in HRM hardly uses the action research methodology in comparison to other disciplines such as information systems and education. It is not surprising, therefore, that articles with an action research (Type IV) focus are severely under-represented in the *SAJHRM*. This means that there is a critical gap in knowledge production in the field. Although it is beyond the scope of the present study, more research is needed to investigate why both academics and practitioners fail to conduct HRM action research in organisations and/or publish their research findings in the *SAJHRM*.

Demographic trends

The findings show that contributions by non-academics in the *SAJHRM* are negligible. It would appear that HRM practitioners in South Africa prefer to leave research activities to their academic counterparts. Practitioners, most probably, prefer to publish in practitioner-orientated journals (Deadrich & Gibson, 2007, 2009). More research is needed to understand why they are not as research active as they should be.

The overwhelming majority of authors in the journal are academics attached to universities in South Africa. Academics at the University of Johannesburg are responsible for almost half of the articles published in the journal and the vast majority of authors publishing in the journal represent only five universities in the country. This rather skewed trend is offset by some promising findings. There is a decrease, but still marked dominance, of white male authors. For example, the most prolific authors who publish in the journal are, with the exception of one female scholar, all white males. In general, senior white, male academics (older than 50) are largely responsible for research publications in the country (Robyn & Du Preez, 2013). However, the dominance of white (both male and female) authors in the *SAJHRM* is on the decrease, while female authorship and publications by non-Caucasian researchers are on the increase. These findings are promising and replicate similar previous research (Ruggunana & Sooryamoorthy, 2016) about the changing demographics of authors who publish in the journal.

It may be concluded that one of the critical challenges for HRM research by institutions of higher education in the country, namely the need to expand the pool of researchers to represent South Africa's cultural diversity (Kleinveldt, 2009), is slowly but surely being addressed. The slow progress may be attributed to many factors, including the entrenched patriarchy and unequal relations of power in institutions of higher education (Soudien, Mthembi-Mahanyele, Nkomo & Nyoka, 2008) and the influence of work-to-family and family-to-work spillovers (Callaghan, 2016). Multiple authorship is on the increase and this could be a contributing factor to the increase in authorship by female and non-Caucasian researchers. Multiple authorship may also be attributed to, among other initiatives, the mentoring of novice researchers, including females and non-Caucasian protégés, by senior academics (Schulze, 2009). In sum: the increase in publications by researchers from previously disadvantaged groupings is still slow and the pace of transformation needs to be accelerated.

Another concern is that the number of *SAJHRM* authors from outside the country is negligible with only two articles published by African countries other than South Africa. Previous research indicated that many mainstream journals are controlled by the so-called 'old boys network' (Govinder, Zondo & Makgoba, 2013). The question may be asked: Is this also the case for the *SAJHRM*, or are authors from the five universities mentioned in the present study just more prolific knowledge producers? It is also possible that South African

scholars prefer to publish internationally to gain greater recognition and scholarly standing. In addition, subsidy earnings are much higher for international publications. The turnaround time for submissions (in some cases 18 months) may also discourage academics and practitioners from submitting articles to the *SAJHRM*. Furthermore, the increasing importance of local issues in HRM practice and research may influence other African scholars to publish in journals in their own countries.

Practical implications

The use of a four-fold typology to identify basic research approaches in the *SAJHRM* provides a more comprehensive perspective on research in the HRM field in South Africa. The research trends in the journal have some repercussions for the production, dissemination and application of HRM knowledge in South Africa. As it is envisioned in its publication policy, the journal does provide a platform for researchers and practitioners to disseminate their research. It provides an opportunity for academics to produce accredited peer-reviewed publications. However, the editors of the journal may need to reflect on reasons as to why academics at many universities in the country, as well as researchers in the rest of Africa, do not make use of this opportunity. It could be that researchers prefer to seek exposure for their work elsewhere, that the publication fees are too high or that it takes too long to get an article reviewed by the journal. The journal should also (if it is not already doing so) encourage and assist novice researchers who submit research with publication potential. It is of particular importance to assist researchers who submit articles with a theoretical and/or conceptual and/or action-orientated focus to make their articles publishable.

It may be observed that the journal will not be able to really contribute to theory and good practice and eradicating the research–practice gap if it primarily publishes quantitative research rather than qualitative research. If researchers in the field do not expand and increase their research focus to develop relevant theories and to address problems experienced in the real-world practice of HRM, then the HRM field will stagnate and will increasingly become irrelevant. As a result, the discrepancy between HRM research and HRM practice will continue to increase. Unless researchers in academia and in HRM practice take note of the need to produce theoretical and, especially, action research, current publication trends in the journal are likely to remain unchanged.

Human resource management interest groups and the SABPP could also play a role in this regard by working closely with universities to meet the research needs of HRM practice and vice versa (Meyer, 2016). Better communication, dialogue, close alliance and formal and/or informal partnerships between academics and practitioners are needed to increase the rigour and relevance of HRM research and to turn knowledge into action (Deadrich & Gibson, 2007, 2009; Gray, Iles & Watson 2011).

Limitations and recommendations

The analysis of research trends in the *SAJHRM* largely focused on types of research and selected demographic indicators. The specific topics investigated by researchers and changes in topical focus of researchers who published in the journal were not analysed. The analysis of demographic trends may require further investigation. It is recommended that the basic framework of knowledge and research that was introduced here be considered by HRM academics and practitioners alike in order to advance knowledge in the field even further.

Conclusion

The research–practice gap is a worldwide phenomenon (Tenhiälä et al., 2016). DeNisi et al. (2014) observed that organisations today face problems that were non-existent a generation ago. To bridge the now generally acknowledged gap between research and practice, and to promote both theory and good practice in HRM, scholars, irrespective of whether they are academics and/or practitioners, must endeavour to offer real solutions to real problems in the world of work. An analysis of publication trends in the *SAJHRM* provides a foundation for identifying promising research opportunities to ensure the future relevance of HRM research and practice. It is clear that unless academics expand their research agendas to produce knowledge useful to practitioners, and become involved in real-life practice issues, the gap between the practice of HRM and HRM research will not easily be bridged. Be that as it may, the *SAJHRM* has the opportunity to provide leadership and be in the forefront of the needed changes in research focus.

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Competing interests

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