

Gaps and paradoxes in theory and practice: the public sector human resource management discourse in South Africa¹

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Abstract

There is currently a gap between the work of academics and that of human resource (HR) practitioners. This is due to specific paradoxes inherent to the field. Within this paradoxical context, the article reflects on a future framework for public sector human resource management (PSHRM) thought and practice. Academics are predominantly preoccupied with the relatively unpredictable process of exploring and questioning. One assumes that academics seek one universal truth, namely an integrated, structured knowledge base, as opposed to a situation where there are disconnected facts and ideas. Practitioners find themselves identifying (and trying to rectify) workplace problems in order to improve conditions for all employees, and to enhance the performance of public sector institutions. This depiction of the respective roles of academics and practitioners creates the potential for conflict, thereby complicating the HR component. Within this context, the article sheds light on what should be the primary focus of academic thinking and managerial practice in the PSHRM field.

Keywords: gaps, human resource management, paradoxes, practice, public sector, theory

1 INTRODUCTION

For the largest part of the twentieth century, some debate has revolved around the assumption that PSHRM theory, as taught by academics, is ‘the good or ideal way’, and that PSHRM practice does not really match up to these ideals. One does not have to be an expert in the management and administration of government

institutions to know that it is true that many of the theoretical ideas taught in university classrooms are rarely applied in the workplace (Sikula 2001: 419). Mokgoro (2007: 49) concurs with this premise when he argues that ‘there is often a serious misfit between what we teach and what reality is’. In addition, several books, although not always written in the PSHRM context, illustrate the type of re-theorising that is necessary to solve the problem at hand. Wheatley (1999: 49–61) provides an example to remind academics and practitioners why current thinking points so strongly to the fact that more attention should be paid to better HRM theory and practice to resolve the HR problems and challenges of the future. For Wheatley (1999: 7),

each of us lives and works in organizations designed from Newtonian images of the universe. But science has changed. Revolutionary discoveries in chaos and complexity theory, quantum physics, and biology are overturning the models of science that have dominated for centuries. Today, there is a new scientific management which requires new theories and new ways of viewing organizations and their purposes.

Kelly (in Sikula 2001: 421) also indicates that the current state of affairs is not acceptable and that a new order is needed. It is Kelly’s (in Sikula 2001: 421) view that

corporations favour stakeholders even when there’s no rational reason to do so. It’s a form of discrimination based on property. It’s aristocratic. And it’s out of step with both democratic and free market ideas We have democratised government, not economics.

It seems that currently the discipline and the profession present an important observation regarding the management of people: many authors admit that the interconnectedness of the professional management of human resources and the delivery of effective public services has become very evident (Handley 2005: 624). Therefore, it may be asked why it is so evident that many of the PSHRM ideas taught at universities are not experienced in the real world of work in the public service. Stated differently: why is it that managing people is so difficult? Why do managers fail to such a large extent when they manage people? It is argued here that contemporary PSHRM is full of flawed theories and practices that generally result in paradoxes in managing people in modern-day public services. There are too many clashes between apparent truths that can lead to confusion amongst academics and public managers. Too many people confuse the issue of the *study* and the *practice* of PSHRM, with seemingly incompatible ideas and practices. Therefore, a great deal of thinking regarding PSHRM theory and practice interface needs revision. This article suggests a practical approach, or

agenda, for academics and practitioners when confronted with this challenge. In order to explore the dynamics of the interrelationship between theory and practice in examining the existence of gaps and paradoxes, it is important to note that the scope of the article is explicitly limited to the learning and research facets of PSHRM.

Therefore, the purpose of this article is to provide an overview of those PSHRM principles that should be the primary focus of academic thinking and managerial practice. More specifically, the article demands answers to the following questions:

- Are there any gaps between PSHRM theory and practice?
- Why is PSHRM teaching potentially ineffective?
- Why is it necessary to consider new PSHRM theories and practices?
- What are the paradoxes that PSHRM is confronted with?
- What is the future framework for PSHRM theory and practice?

2 GAPS BETWEEN THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF PSHRM

Many observers deem it difficult to defend the *status quo* of HRM theory and practice (Sikula 2001: 420). A critical focus on this reveals that it implicates much deeper questions about PSHRM in South Africa, because the field is full of flaws. A number of examples illustrate the fact that there are numerous tensions at the academic/practitioner interface level that call for a fresh approach in developing new theoretical knowledge and practical wisdom. Some questionable HR practices were, for example, reported. These include:

- *Cases lodged at the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA)*. During the 2005/2006 financial year, 167 402 hearings were conducted, each equivalent to an average of 664 working days (Republic of South Africa 2005/2006: 2). The number of cases reported to the CCMA during the 2005/2006 financial year reflects the vast array of problems experienced in the management of human resources;
- *Public service strike of 2007*. In 2007, the public service experienced a massive strike, emanating from a breakdown in negotiations between the government and organised labour (Republic of South Africa 2008: internet);
- *Number of grievances*. During 2006, a remarkable increase in the number of grievances (3 372) in the public service was recorded. This trend suggests that a fairly large number of public servants are dissatisfied with the way they

are treated in the workplace. In fact, the average turn-over rate of the public service between 2001 and 2002 was 8.5 per cent, which is relatively high (Republic of South Africa 2008: internet);

- *Competency gap.* A study conducted by the Public Service Commission (the central personnel agency of the public service) concluded that senior managers have, on average, two-and-a-half degrees (theory), but lack managerial skills (practice) (Mokgoro 2007: 49). Senior managers are relatively well qualified, but a competency gap exists, which results in a lack of preparedness amongst such employees to address challenges in the public service.

These cases can possibly be regarded as evidence of failures in the effective utilisation of public servants, and they are probably a reflection of possible flaws in current HR practices. Further, there is little doubt that the lack of collaboration between academics and practitioners has distorted the theory and practice of PSHRM in South Africa. This confirms that tension resides at the academic/practitioner interface (Kuye 2007: 50). However, which of the two realms represents the legitimate source of knowledge production? According to McLennan (2007: 45) during the 1970s and 1980s the field was dominated by academics. During this period, the Public Administration (PA) paradigm was overwhelmed by the Generic Process Approach (GPA), which defined PA as a process involving policy making, financial administration, organisation, work methods and procedures, control and personnel provision and utilisation. McLennan rightly argues that this approach facilitated the administration of apartheid policies (separate development), and that the theoretical principles of this approach dominated public affairs management. It soon became apparent that the GPA was too descriptive and reductionist, lacking analytical techniques. Therefore, academics and practitioners opted for a new approach. From the 1990s, efforts at collaborative interaction took various forms, including:

- Case study workshops (through the Kennedy School of Government);
- The New Public Administration Initiative (a loose network of universities, technikons, non-governmental organisations, and practitioners);
- The Joint Universities Public Management Education Trust (consisting of six universities);
- The Public Administration and Management Standards Generating Body (a collaborative project between academics, the South African Qualifications Authority, and the Public Service Sector Education and Training Authority);

- The South African Association of Public Administration and Management (a discussion forum for academics and practitioners);
- The Association of Southern African Departments of Public Administration and Management (a forum for academic discourse and dialogue);
- Joint conferencing;
- Accredited publications (both academics and practitioners have the opportunity to publish in journals such as the *Journal of Public Administration*); and
- The South African Public Management Conversation, a conversation forum established by the Minister of Public Service and Administration for academics, practitioners, civil society, and the private sector).

These initiatives aim to establish forums to debate different theoretical approaches and their practical application (Clapper 2007: 39). During the 1970s and 1980s the search for theories and practices was mainly driven by academics, while from 1990 onwards it was characterised by control on the part of practitioners. The conceptualisation of the scientific administration approach followed, with an emphasis on the principles of New Public Management which focuses on efficient and effective public service delivery. On the one hand, practitioners busied themselves with the establishment of new systems and procedures of government. These included, for example, the introduction of the New Public Service Management Framework (PSMF) which focuses on delivering quality public services, as opposed to being preoccupied with the rules and regulations that the public service is well known for. Within the parameters of this framework, HR practitioners develop their own HR policies and practices according to the set service delivery objectives (New Public Service Management Framework: Baseline Implementation Guide 2005: internet). On the other hand, academics tended to submit to the demands of government, with the result that participation in public debate and research was nullified (McLennan 2007: 42). A negative outcome of this state of affairs was the erosion of theorisation about the new paradigm. Neither the discipline nor the practice was enriched by these actions. Change in roles of leading the academic/practitioner collaboration is not an ideal situation – one group should not be in a dominant position. Group dominance appears to be detrimental to theory *and* practice, which is probably why PSHRM is currently so paradoxical.

3 PARADOXES IN PSHRM

The previous argumentation and references to the literature clearly show that there are a number of paradoxes encapsulated in PSHRM. Notwithstanding this, the effects of these paradoxes are not well documented, particularly their impact on employment relations in the South African public service. The intention here is to focus on some of these paradoxes.

3.1 Paradox 1: Bureaucratic measures enhance workplace democracy

Essentially, workplace democracy centres on a moral commitment that the individual is the primary concern and that the development of the worker is the highest priority of any democratic bureaucratic system. Practically, this implies that principles such as individuality, equality and participation are highlighted. In contrast to these democratic principles are the ideals of bureaucratic management, which differ from those of workplace democracy. In contrast to workplace democracy, bureaucratic management principles focus on the group or organisation, the bureaucratic hierarchy, and top-down decision making and authority (Denhardt and Denhardt 2006: 18–19). How are these principles reconciled with modern-day PSHRM? For example, is it acceptable for a democratic system to carry out its work through authoritarian top-down hierarchic HR institutions such as the Public Service Commission and the Department of Public Service and Administration, that are inherently bureaucratic? This can be illustrated by focusing on current events and conditions in the South African public service. In order to illustrate why specific bureaucratic measures introduced by the South African government have not always gone hand-in-hand with workplace democracy, the following examples are appropriate.

First, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996 prescribes that South African citizens (including public servants) enjoy a wide variety of civil rights, such as freedom of association, freedom of speech, and freedom of equality. This implies that the highly constitutionalist (democratic) nature of the South African public service workplace cannot be ignored. It is possible to argue that the overriding message in this regard centres on the premise that the 1996 Constitution has a direct influence on the management of human resources. It then becomes clear that the 1996 Constitution appears to be a prescription for the management of human resources. The central question for consideration is: what does this tell us about PSHRM? It is obvious that employees who work within the employment relationship in the South African public service are themselves subject to the constitutional mode, especially in their role as HR managers. Thus,

the process of constitutional scrutiny concerns all public servants. Clearly, there is an imbalance here, because practice has shown that public servants experience few of these precious rights in the workplace. For example, subordinate workers in the public service very seldom have a direct choice in the recruitment, selection and appointment of their superiors. This implies that they are not allowed to freely associate democratically with the appointment (bureaucratic processes) of key members of the work team. One part of the South African bureaucratic administrative system stresses key democratic measures such as individualism and equality, while the other part emphasises bureaucratic measures such as conformity, inequality, and submission to power. Indeed, these opposites are currently revealed by the paradoxes that exist in almost every organisational structure at all levels of government. More often than not, public servants will value freedom very highly; what is a matter of concern in this case is that these rights are significantly reduced by the public service institutions for which they work. As Rousseau (in Berman et al 2006: xiv) observed: ‘Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains.’

Second, the introduction of many other bureaucratic measures has made its own contribution to the eroding effect of workplace democracy in the South African public service. Although it is understandable that bureaucracy as a form of organisation remains desirable in certain circumstances, this research has revealed that, paradoxically, it is normally the detailed HR instructions vested in legislation, regulations and White Papers that are the key factors hampering democratic ideals and impacting negatively on the rendering of public services. But, the real debate is not on the question whether or not bureaucratic measures in general are desirable. Rather, the debate appears to be on how extensive the application of bureaucratic measures should be in order to balance democratic ideals and bureaucratic realities. Very little attention has been paid to the minimalisation of bureaucratic measures in the South African public service. For example, the freedom of public servants is seriously undermined through detailed administrative measures in different Acts such as the Public Service Act (Act 103 of 1994), regulations such as the Public Service Regulations of 2001 (Republic of South Africa 2001: internet), and White Papers such as, for example, the *White Paper on Human Resource Management* of 1997 (Republic of South Africa 1997a: internet). Notwithstanding the presence of these bureaucratic prescriptions for public servants, research conducted by consultancy firm Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu (2007b: internet) indicates that only 33 per cent of senior public service executives interviewed, were of the opinion that ‘complying with regulatory questions’ is regarded as critical to the success of the public service. This observation takes on new importance and poses a challenge for HR managers in the public service who must effectively execute bureaucratic measures directed to them, while simultaneously applying the principles of

workplace democracy. In conclusion, one can say that bureaucratic measures have a place in the public service, but implementation needs to be sensitive to operational reality, and to what is feasible in the political and democratic context of a specific environment.

3.2 Paradox 2: Public servants are not valuable resources

The literature argues that public servants should be regarded as the most important assets of the public service. In reality, however, human resources are not managed accordingly. In fact, in practice public servants are treated in quite the opposite way. In their global survey on people and corporate challenges, Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu (2007b: internet) observed that poor institutional performance and a lack of quality service delivery affect the way people are handled in the workplace. This survey concluded that more than 85 per cent of all surveyed senior public service executives were of the opinion that people are vital to all aspects of the institution's performance. In fact, other responses and follow-up interviews of the same survey indicate that 88 per cent of respondents believe people issues will become more important over the next three to five years. Empirically, the emphasis on people issues may not be surprising. In practice, however, a totally different perspective exists. This can be illustrated by the annual report of a city council in the following example (Van der Westhuizen 2005: 11):

The Council has always been very conscious of the fact that most local government services are inherently staff intensive and that employment costs consequently represent the largest single element of revenue expenditure. Staffing levels are consequently subject to continual monitoring to ensure that every practicable opportunity is taken to reduce manpower. Despite this, employment costs were higher than budgeted because the Council had to implement the undesirably high pay awards negotiated by the various National Joint Councils Every opportunity has been taken to maintain a high level of capital expenditure, with capital receipts being used to the full to supplement the level permitted by the government's capital controls. This year's capital payments are the highest ever achieved by the Council.

As the statement indicates, the resources of an institution constitute a potential source of conflict in decision-making processes. Drawing from a practical example such as this, people are not always highly regarded in public service institutions. In addition, there is a widespread belief that most HR offices appear to have the administrative tasks covered, such as remuneration and performance management, but neglect strategic HR issues. This observation is illustrated by another finding of the survey by Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu (2007b: internet), which indicates that the strategic HR agenda, such as, for example, talent management and workforce productivity, is not properly addressed in the public service: some senior public

service executives did not even mention the role of the HR function in any of their responses. The key concern here is that 36 per cent of respondents indicated that they do not have a chief HR officer or any other executive who is responsible for the HR function. Moreover, PSHRM language is increasingly applying terminology such as 'transformation', 'outsourcing', 'downsizing' and 'rightsizing' (Republic of South Africa 1995, 1997a and 1997b). During the late 1990s, these concepts and practices became the orthodoxy in the management of the employment relationship in the South African public service, and was one of the most effective ways to dismiss public servants (Budhwar and Debrah 2001: 205). Practically, this means that public service institutions are opting for labour flexibility strategies to avoid the financial and management burden of administering those services directly. Proponents of the HRM transformation discourse observed that countries such as Malta, Malaysia, Singapore and South Africa have recorded remarkable achievements in this regard (Ayeni 2002: 3). However, the tendency in the public service is to increasingly employ part-time and temporary workers in order not to pay for, amongst others, health and pension benefits. In addition, public service institutions are outsourcing traditional HR functions such as training, recruitment, selection, and compensation administration. During the 1990s, the public service subcontracted a significant segment of government services (Bangura, Yusuf and Larbi 2006: 42). If one aligns the abovementioned arguments with those of Sikula (2001: 426), one can add further substance to the view that for years now, public service employers have not regarded people-related strategic issues as a priority. Almost 50 per cent of the senior public service executives in the Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu (2007b: internet) survey viewed advances in technology as one of their top priorities, rating it almost the same as traditional HR issues, such as compensation, conditions of service, and HR operational efficiency.

In almost 15 years of democratic public administration in South Africa, the government has established different systems of HRM, with the aim of retaining skilled personnel in the public service. For example, the introduction of the Senior Management Service created greater stability in the top echelons, which is an indication that public servants in South Africa are regarded as important instruments in improving service delivery. However, the impression is created that the core elements of these HRM systems are sometimes paradoxical, as different administrative forces drive them in different directions of the HR function – and with varying success. The situation is particularly acute in provincial administrations and municipalities, where the importance of professional HRM is not sufficiently recognised. Some tensions appear to be in the field of career pathing. Since 1994, career pathing has not been fully developed, and skilled and experienced personnel who have been developed since 1994 have been lost to

the private sector (Republic of South Africa 2006/2007: 51). In this setting, it is increasingly evident that public service employees are treated as disposable resources. The pursuit of prioritising HR issues has wrongly caused public service employers to underplay the positive effects vested in the employment contract, which centres on transforming labour power into productive labour.

3.3 Paradox 3: Experience/age will land you a position

According to Sikula (2001: 423), '[T]he idea that experience will help you get a job may have been true once, but not today.' This view is reinforced by the fact that many public service employers prefer so-called 'virgin' employees, or first-time hires, whom they can train from scratch. Public service employers are not looking for 'used cars' anymore. According to Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu's (2007a; 2007b: internet) survey, senior public service executives indicated that 'replacing retiring workers' is one of their least significant workforce challenges. According to the survey, the recruitment and sourcing of new talent in other countries is a strategic priority – even more important than replacing more experienced and older workers. Another way to grasp the low value the South African government affords to experienced and older people in the public service is by focusing on the representation of public servants in different age categories. A close analysis of the labour force statistics of the public service reveals that only a small percentage of employees is retained after reaching the retirement age of 60. The labour force participation rate of the 60 year-plus segment is only 3 per cent. Current labour force statistics also show that the biggest representation (37 per cent) of public servants is in the 35–44 year segment (Republic of South Africa 2007). The past 13 years have also seen different forms of age discrimination in recruitment. This discriminatory practice is evident in the government's option for a representative approach, where HRM candidates who will enhance representativeness, are preferred. In South Africa, blacks are regarded as the representivity group, since the apartheid system disadvantaged them in terms of workplace opportunities. In recent years, advertisements have reinforced a focus on affirmative action, while vigorously downplaying age. This is illustrated by the following two stipulations in the White Paper on Human Resource Management in the Public Service of 1997:

- Government departments are instructed to formulate advertisements in such a way that applications from blacks, women and the disabled are encouraged;
- Seniority will no longer be a factor.

Thus, affirmative action has typically been one of the key components of the representative approach, which the government applies to reach specific targets. Evidence suggests that advertisements for public service positions contribute to this objective. Essentially, this forms part of what has been labelled the 'affirmative action model' of employment reform in the South African public service. The following advertisement of the Department of Trade and Industry, in the *Sunday Times*, illustrates the focus on affirmative action (Erasmus et al 2005: 224):

We are an equal opportunity, affirmative action employer. Preference will be given to candidates whose appointment will enhance representivity in the DTI. The DTI reserves the right not to fill an advertised position, should no suitable candidate be identified.

A key issue emerges from the third paradox. The overemphasis on the affirmative action model could have a significant impact on the representivity of older people, especially in terms of the loss of institutional memory, expertise, leadership, and continuity. A broader perspective is demanded when considering age discrimination. As noted by Guy and Newman (in Condrey 2005: 143), older people form part of a group and they require protection in order for the public service to capitalise on their attitudes, skills and abilities. Therefore, it is argued that recruitment strategies need to be inclusive. Empirical research supports a number of assertions about older workers, stressing that they have lower rates of absenteeism, fewer accidents, fewer problems with alcohol and drug addiction, they experience less stress at work, often cost employers less and have lower turnover rates (Wooldridge in Condrey 2005: 168). Therefore, the South African public service calls for a rethink in current recruitment approaches. The adoption of American HRM practices, for example, needs to be assessed in this regard. From this perspective, it is suggested that the South African public service should start refocusing its attention on age discrimination, and re-evaluate its current preoccupation with the affirmative action model. An option for age discrimination legislation has become a reality to promote the employment of older people.

4 FUTURE FRAMEWORK FOR PSHRM THEORY AND PRACTICE

It appears that the gaps between theory and practice, as well as the existence of some paradoxes are central to current problems experienced in PSHRM. What is done about this? One might conclude by arguing that the academic community must radically change what it is teaching, and that public servants must transform their institutions. It is instructive to elaborate on three distinct models that currently shape thinking in PSHRM. The overall intent is to provide an HR focus and to

foster discussion of a framework that combines the features of all these models. No single model can address the particular needs of every stakeholder. In the final part of the article, arguments are consolidated through a synthesis of these models, including the traditional, reform, and strategic models, which emphasise the people factor.

4.1 The traditional model

Proponents of the traditional model argue that HR service delivery is centralised through a central personnel authority. The principles of the traditional model were designed so that central personnel agencies focus on the uniform enforcement of rules in order to take politics out of the field of PSHRM and eliminate political patronage. One of the purposes of this approach is to ensure merit-based recruitment and promotion (Cayer 2004: 26–27; World Public Sector Report 2005: internet). Many of the characteristics of the traditional model are evident in various PSHRM systems all over the world, including South Africa. These systems of HRM are basically organised in the commission model and the policy model, which reflect a relatively strong degree of centralisation. Insofar as the commission model is concerned, there is a centralised Public Service Commission (also in South Africa), which is an independent statutory institution that is regulated exclusively by national legislation to fulfil a so-called ‘watchdog’ role on HR issues. In terms of the policy model another centralised institution – the Department of Public Service and Administration, in the case of South Africa – is entrusted with policy-making functions. In South Africa, the Department of Public Service and Administration (with the Minister of Public Service and Administration as political head) is responsible for HR policy-making in areas such as the training of personnel, remuneration, conditions of service, and labour relations (Van der Westhuizen 2005: 26–27). Although these measures have been adopted, the public employment system in South Africa has become heavily politicised as a result of increasing political interference in the administrative processes. One of the most prominent examples is the case of the suspended head of the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA). All indications are that the former head of the NPA attempted to prosecute a senior government official. He was subsequently suspended by the President (*Mail & Guardian* 2008: internet; News24 2008: internet). The traditional view is shared by many and it has frequently been pointed out that a key advantage of a centralised HR system is that it may have the ability to exercise strategic leadership, safeguard political neutrality, promote professionalism and ensure a merit-based public service (World Public Sector Report 2005: internet).

The South African experience provides hard lessons and choices about the nature of future PSHRM, and particularly in terms of safeguarding political neutrality.

4.2 The reform model

The reform model is almost a mirror image of the traditional model where HR authority is centralised. The implication of this is that the reform model strips important functions from the central personnel authority and cascades these downward to other operating units at a lower level of service delivery (Nigro et al 2007: 37–39). This implies that line function managers should be allowed more freedom, while remaining accountable for their actions to ensure enhanced efficiency and effectiveness. Within this environment, a great challenge facing PSHRM is the need to develop policy guidelines for line function managers, rather than systems of detailed rules and close control (Tompkins 1995: 11). The difficulty with this approach is that HR decisions may be taken by managers who have little formal training in modern HRM principles and techniques. A close examination of HR systems reveals that many of the features of the reform model are currently applied in the South African public service. A classic example of the reform model is the South African government's implementation of the new Public Service Management Framework (PSMF) in 2001. This framework assists the government in becoming more client/citizen-centred where it devolves and decentralises HR powers to lower levels of management (Erasmus et al 2005: 69). Some critics question the gains of the PSMF. Hunter (in *Financial Mail* 2008a: 49), for example, warns that some of the reform measures could significantly weaken an already strained skills base in the public service. More importantly, in spite of the creation of the new PSMF framework, reforms have failed to address public service delivery concerns. This is evident in, for example, an increase in claims against the government because of poor service delivery. During the 2007 financial year, the government budgeted R11 billion for settling such claims. Civilians lodged claims of more than R6.9 billion against the South African Police Service for damage to property, shooting incidents, assault, and other incidents (*Financial Mail* June 2008b: 50). This provides hard lessons about the nature of reform and the role of PSHRM. Thus, the government needs to focus on results-oriented management in order to ensure quality service delivery.

4.3 The strategic model

The strategic model is one of the contemporary generation developments that seek a goal orientation that is respectful of effective HR practices, yet responsive to the institution's overall goals, including the goals of the wider public service

context (Condrey 2005: 7). To some extent, the strategic model is a collaborative effort between HR practitioners and line function managers. When compared to the traditional and reform models, the strategic model has probably matured as an approach that is different in important ways. Returning to the subject of centralisation, one important tool that the strategic model employs is that it requires the HR practitioner to break out of the central personnel agency box and become intimately aware of the needs of line function employees. A further insight from the strategic model is that line function managers are exposed to opportunities that influence the delivery of HR services. In applying the strategic model to its fullest consequences, Mesch, Perry and Wise (in Condrey 1995: 7) agree that

the strategic human resource management model emphasizes decentralization and devolution of authority. It seeks not uniformity but variety in personnel policies and practices. Strategic human resource management attempts to pare down excessive rules and regulations, enabling managers to function more efficiently and to focus on achieving their organizational mission within a competitive environment.

Probably the most important attempt to conceptualise the strategic model is the imaginative work of Tompkins (1995). His point of departure is that the HR specialist is an organisational consultant and a valued member of the managerial team. As such, the HR specialist is not viewed as a roadblock to be avoided, but forms part of integrated service delivery at all levels of the institution (Tompkins 1995: 11–12). The strategic model emphasises a ‘tying-it-all-together’ approach to all HR activities and operational work. The strategic model was stimulated by the Public Service Regulations of 2001 (Republic of South Africa 2001: internet). It is evident that these Regulations entail an integrated framework designed to promote effective performance of the HR function. In many respects, the Public Service Regulations of 2001 have the most advanced forms of integration between operational work and HR activities. Although strategic PSHRM is seen as an important effort, the *State of the Public Service Report 2008* of the Public Service Commission (Republic of South Africa 2008: internet) highlights the need for line function managers to demonstrate their commitment to fulfilling their role in HRM. The Report observes that line function managers should become involved in the full spectrum of HR functions generally considered to be outside their domain (Republic of South Africa 2008: internet). This finding advocates a more intensive strategic HRM role for line function managers to improve the HR line function partnership.

These models set out a number of requirements for PSHRM. What can academics and practitioners do? A new PSHRM synthesis should combine the best features of all three models. Combined, these three models lay the foundation

for a new synthesis and highlight some of the newer developments in PSHRM. Reflecting on these complementing models to PSHRM suggests that they can be synthesised, as they are an integral part of an HR culture that emphasises better service delivery.

5 IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section reflects on the gaps and paradoxes, analyses and interprets the implications for newer thoughts and practices in PSHRM, and offers recommendations for further research.

First, a number of gaps can be identified between PSHRM theory and practice. One possible explanation for the existence of these gaps is related to the employer/employee relations level. Currently, there are many questionable HR practices in the public service. This can be an indication that the theoretical principles of PSHRM are not always applied in the day-to-day management of people affairs. The perception is that current PSHRM practice does not meet the expectations of PSHRM theory. This needs to change. A second reason points to a lack of cooperation between PSHRM academics and practitioners. In addition, practitioners are currently driving the knowledge production process. Clearly, closer cooperation and interaction between academics and practitioners is required to reinforce the links between theory and practice. The need for a dynamic interrelationship between academics and practitioners is apparent, and the different role players should take full cognisance of this aspect when identifying new interventions.

Another possible explanation for the existence of the gaps referred to is that research results suggest that the PSHRM field is full of paradoxes. It was mentioned earlier that although public servants are operating in a democratic public service workplace, their daily activities are highly affected and hampered by rule-bound bureaucratic and administrative measures. Despite arguments for the use of workplace democracy principles, they are not widely applied in the South African public service. Evidence suggests that bureaucratic measures such as legislation, White Papers and Regulations could possibly hamper the freedom of public servants. It would seem that an attempt to effectively execute bureaucratic measures while also emphasising the application of the principles of workplace democracy is of the utmost importance. The gap between what senior public service executives regard as vital for institutional performance and what happens practically (i.e. the mismanagement of people), is worrying. Valuing people in the public service is seen as an important concept because it is specifically linked to quality service delivery. Another implication of viewing public servants as

valuable assets is an emphasis on experienced and older workers. Research has shown that there is a need for the representivity of experienced and older people. Perhaps the most important intervention here refers to a refocusing of the South African public service on its preoccupation with the affirmative action model. From a pragmatic perspective, this implies an inclusive approach with an explicit focus on age discrimination legislation.

In conclusion, it can be argued that the evolving thoughts of PSHRM are changing how we manage people in a major way. Some of the implications, as highlighted in this research, include the following:

- Central personnel agencies will take on a new role. Future challenges lie in balancing a system where strategic leadership is exercised with a system where the consistent application of HR policies is the order of the day, to ensure a politically impartial, professional, and merit-based public service.
- There will be a strong focus on results-oriented management. Essentially, results-oriented management would comprise features such as hands-on professional management and a greater emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness. An important consideration with respect to this practice is to strengthen the service delivery capacity so that government departments might convert policy directions effectively into practice, and utilise the resources allocated to them efficiently.
- Strategic PSHRM will become more important. According to the strategic approach, a shared vision of what is to be achieved in the area of HRM (and how this is to be accomplished) is required – especially from line function managers.

PSHRM still has a long way to go before it reaches anything like the basic assumptions spelt out earlier. Such a change will take some time to bring about new theories and practices. However, by seeking to foster partnerships between academics and practitioners, an attempt can be made to break away from older patterns of adversarial relations.

6 CONCLUSION

A primary focus of this article was to highlight the status of the theory and practice of PSHRM. The message is clear: working together as academics and practitioners is one way of ensuring that one continues in a positive direction, to find new theories and practices for the future. This conclusion will further be devoted to the research questions stated in the introduction to the article.

It has been argued that there are many gaps in South African PSHRM. Overall, the research suggests that because of these gaps, several tensions exist at the academic/practitioner interface level, which requires specific interventions in the future.

The first question was: what is wrong in PSHRM teaching and practice? It was argued that something is indeed wrong. It was argued that the human factor was (and still is) totally neglected, and that it has not always been the focus point.

The second and third questions respectively were: why are PSHRM teachings wrong, and why do we have to put new PSHRM theories and practices on the table? It was determined that PSHRM teachings are incorrect because the field abounds with inaccurate theories and practices. For example, in the work of both Kelly and Wheatley (1999), evidence was found that one has to pay attention to better HRM theories and practices in order to resolve the HR problems and challenges of the future. Further, it seems clear that the links between theory and practice should be reinforced, and that this form of action should be employed by PSHRM for the foreseeable future. This will indeed require major changes in the teaching and practice of PSHRM.

The fourth question was: what are the paradoxes that confront PSHRM? It was argued that many paradoxes exist in the PSHRM field, and that these have profound implications for human resources management. The arguments put forward by Condrey (2005) are compelling in this regard. He calls for new insights into both the discipline and practice. In addition, much of this article emphasised that the latest professional literature advocates change and new ways of doing things in PSHRM.

The fifth question was: what is the future framework for PSHRM theory and practice? It was pointed out that numerous challenges face academics and practitioners. It was suggested that an appropriate strategy for a future framework should combine the best features of three models. The author also called for a new synthesis, and highlighted newer thoughts.

This contribution has demonstrated that it is possible for academics and practitioners to work together, to get rid of the paradoxes, and – most crucially – to focus on the human capital of the public service. The discussion here has certainly not settled these issues. However, there is no doubt that these are some of the issues that are truly critical for the survival and evolution of PSHRM. It is the intention that these observations will stimulate debate amongst scholars and HR practitioners in such a way that they will expand on what has been presented here, and that they will propose additional solutions.

NOTE

1. This article is based on the author's inaugural lecture at the University of South Africa on 7 November 2006.

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