ACADEMIC STRUGGLES IN HRM:
A DISCURSIVE ANALYSIS OF TEXTS AS ‘SUSPICIOUS PACKAGES’

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Introduction

The inspiration for this paper is Karen Legge’s (2001) critique of what she refers to as modernist and positivist research in Human Resource Management (HRM) – the psychologically informed, empirically driven approach that dominates the study of the employment relationship in the United States. In Britain, this approach is increasingly displacing the traditional model of pluralistic industrial relations, much to the frustration of researchers like Legge (see also Willmott, 1993; Keenoy, 1999). In critiquing this work, Legge (2001) adopts a constructivist approach, arguing that any ‘findings’ or ‘facts’ are produced by processes of social construction, regardless of authors’ claims of rigour, validity, reliability and generalizability. In this regard, she tries to undermine the epistemological basis of the modernist/positivist approach to HRM1 i.e., no matter how ‘good’ this approach to HRM research is, it does not and cannot reveal the ‘truth’ about HRM; instead it helps to construct what passes for knowledge in the field of HRM. She goes on to argue that, even according to positivist strictures, research of this type fails to achieve its intended goal of demonstrating that ‘good’ HRM (commonly conceptualised in terms of ‘high performance work systems’) leads to superior performance. In making this argument, she attempts to challenge this approach on its own terms by identifying a series of methodological and conceptual shortcomings. She concludes that the attempt to present HRM as a ‘silver bullet’ – ‘good’ HRM practices as a universal panacea – is not only flawed, it is a ‘spent round’.

Despite Legge’s assertions that HRM has inherent flaws this modernist/positivist approach is firmly entrenched in US academic circles and continues to grow in the UK. Adopting Legge’s bullet metaphor, we ask is it the case that, in spite of all her efforts to counter the growth of this approach to HRM, Legge has been ‘firing blanks’? Is her attempt to provide a compelling alternative view of HRM just as futile as she claims the positivist project to be? To answer this question, and in keeping with Legge’s social constructivist sensitivities, we use discourse analysis to examine a series of articles and book chapters in which Legge engages with the work of David Guest, considered by many to have played a key role in ‘repackaging’ the US HRM literature for a ‘reluctant and suspicious British audience’ (Keenoy, 1999, p. 1). By analysing the engagement between the two authors as a struggle to shape academic discourse, we attempt to address the ‘real puzzle’ about HRM: how ‘in the face of such apparently overwhelming empirical ‘refutation’ it has secured such influence and institutional presence’ (Keenoy, 1997, p. 837)
This paper makes a number of contributions. First, by using discourse analysis to examine a selection of texts that is indicative of a larger corpus of texts on HRM, we are better placed to understand how academic HRM discourse has developed and how academic knowledge is produced. Second, we provide an understanding of some of the challenges confronting critical researchers as a result of the discursive context in which they work. A third contribution is the identification of some of the ways that critical researchers might engage in discursive work to meet these challenges. Finally, we make a methodological contribution by developing a systematic approach to discourse analysis.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, we present an overview of the discursive struggle in HRM. Second, we summarise two sets of texts in this struggle published by David Guest and Karen Legge, showing the success of Guest’s text in influencing academic HRM discourse in the UK. We then examine the relationship between discourse, power and these texts in more detail. Our analysis shows that the texts in question are both embedded in a particular discursive setting, but that one set of texts appears better positioned to leverage and exercise power through it.

**HRM: A Discursive Struggle**

In employing a discursive perspective, we adopt a social constructivist position that explores the way in which language constructs reality (e.g., Fairclough, 1992; 1995). We use the term discourse to refer to an ‘inter-related set of texts, and the practices of their production, dissemination, and reception, that bring an object into being’ (Phillips and Hardy, 2002, p. 3;). Discourse ‘governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others’ (Hall, 2001, p. 72). A change in discourse does not just change the way in which people talk about the social world, it changes the way in which people understand and experience it; it changes who can act upon it; and it changes how they act upon it. ‘Thus the discursive constitution of society does not emanate from a free play of ideas in people’s heads but from a social practice which is firmly rooted in and oriented to real, material social structures’ (Fairclough, 1992, p. 66).

We are interested in how the academic discourse of HRM brings into being a series of practices and understandings. While recognizing its shifting nature (Keenoy, 1999), the main characteristics can be summarized as: a concern with organisational performance as the primary goal; the adoption of a
unitarist perspective; and a corresponding belief that employers and employees can be beneficiaries of ‘good’ or ‘soft’ HRM (Storey 1987) if employees are nurtured and developed as valuable members of the organisation who help it achieve its goals (Legge, 1995a). ‘Hard’ versions of HRM focus on ensuring that HRM policies are aligned with the broader strategic initiatives of the organisation and tend to lead to less ‘people friendly’ policies (Legge, 1995a, p. 67). In both cases, HRM is a central business function, carried out by line managers and senior executives rather than professional personnel or HR managers. In academic terms, the term HRM has often been associated with modernist/positivist research practices in attempts to establish the link between HRM and performance.

Prior to the 1980s, ‘human resource management’ was a term little used in Britain. Previously dominant discourses were the pluralist and radical perspectives on the employment relationship that emphasise conflict and competition between employers and employees, as well as the need for professional, specialist staff to manage the function (Noon and Blyton 1997; Blyton and Turnbull 1998). In the context of social, political and economic changes associated with Thatcher’s government in the UK and Reagan’s presidency in the US, however, HRM emerged to displace these discourses (Guest, 1990; Keenoy and Anthony, 1992; Keenoy 1997):

[HRM] has been projected as the alternative to pluralistic employee relations. And, both as a range of normative-descriptive discourses about how employees ought to be managed and as a variety of social practices designed to engage or re-engage employees in the organisation, HRM has been directed at the daily routines of people management, employment and – generically – re-engineering work organisation (Keenoy, 1999, p. 2).

Academic discourse has been particularly influenced by HRM. A search of the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) shows that in 1990 only 24 articles were published which had the terms ‘human resource management’ or ‘HRM’ in their keywords, text or title. In 1995, the annual figure had increased to 118; and in 2001, there were 154 such articles published. A further indication is provided by the growth of HRM departments in the UK. According to the Commonwealth Universities Yearbook, in 1990 there were no departments with ‘HRM’ or ‘human resource management’ in their titles (ACU 1990). By 1995 the number had increased to 5 (ACU 1995) and by 2000 to 15 (ACU 2000). As Keenoy puts it ‘HRMism has gone from strength to strength’ (1999, p. 1).
While observers agree that the discourse of HRM has become more dominant at the expense of discourses such as collective bargaining and personnel management, it is by no means a totalizing discourse that has colonised all academic work on the employment relationship. Rather, it is a site of struggle among different groups, including scholars in industrial relations, industrial sociology and labour process theory to name but a few. We are interested in the ‘dialogical struggle’ (Grant et al., 1998) to ‘fix’ this discourse, by which we refer to ‘the privileging of a particular discourse and the marginalisation of others’ (Keenoy et al., 1997, p. 150). Discourses are embodied in texts (Parker, 1992), which include verbal and written transcriptions, as well as many other kinds of symbolic representations (Taylor and Van Every, 1993; Wood and Kroger, 2000). Accordingly, the struggle around the discourse of HRM is embodied in such texts as speeches, training videos, books, company and union reports, academic articles, collective agreements, government legislation, etc. that are produced by a range of actors, including ‘managers, employees, unions, politicians, consultants, academics, and publishers’ (Keenoy, 1999, p. 2).

Our study concentrates on the struggle over HRM in academia. Accordingly, we examine a series of texts by Legge (1978; 1989; 1995a; 1995b; 1998; 2001) and Guest (1987; 1989; 1990; 1995; 1997; 1999), which represent the engagement of these two authors in the struggle to shape the academic discourse of HRM and associated research practices. We have chosen to focus on Legge and Guest for three reasons. Firstly, both are scholars who have very high profiles in the field of HRM. Secondly, they have engaged directly and critically with each others’ work. Finally, we see them as exemplars of the ‘critical’ and ‘mainstream’ positions, respectively, in debates about HRM. As Chalaby (1996, p. 694) notes: texts are ‘weapons that agents in struggle use in their discursive strategies’ as they try to change understandings of a social situation, shape particular experiences and invoke certain practices within a system of meanings (Mumby & Clair, 1997; Phillips and Hardy, 1997).

Texts on HRM: Weapons in the Struggle

In this section, we present an overview of the two sets of texts published by Guest and Legge. We suggest that Guest’s texts have had a considerably degree of success in ‘sticking’ in ways that produce a broader discursive effect (Hardy and Phillips, forthcoming).
‘Sticky’ Texts

Guest’s 1987 article ‘Human Resource Management and Industrial Relations’ had, according to the SSCI, been cited 135 times as of August 2002. Since then he has produced an impressive volume of material in leading UK journals. A ‘cited reference’ search of the SSCI in February 2003 found over 700 references to Guest’s work. We are not suggesting that it was Guest alone who shaped the agenda for HRM research in Britain – his work is part of a larger discursive setting (Keenoy and Anthony, 1992; Keenoy, 1997). We focus on his work because he is among the more successful British HRM researchers as indicated by publications and citations of his work; he has been attributed with playing a central role in promoting HRM in the UK (e.g., Keenoy, 1999); and he and Legge have engaged directly and critically with each other (e.g., Guest, 1999; Legge, 2001). By focusing on selected texts written by these authors we restrict our analysis to a manageable ‘data set’, while examining texts that are indicative of the larger corpus of modernist/positivist and critical texts on HRM.

Originally sceptical of HRM, Guest adopted a positivistic position in arguing: ‘if the concept is to have any social scientific value, it should be defined in such a way as to…allow the development of testable hypotheses about its impact’ (1987, p. 503). He also made reference to the discourse of HRM and how it might make HRM seem ‘real’. However, he clearly separated discourse and practice when he expressed his concern that the talk about HRM would outstrip its practice in the workplace:

there is a danger of … assuming that because human resource management is being talked about it is also being practiced. There is a risk that it will be ‘talked’ or ‘written’ into existence, independent of practice… (1987, p. 505).

Guest’s (1989) chapter explored the implications of HRM for trade unions and discussed the potential incompatibility of unitarist HRM approaches with pluralistic industrial relations in Britain. He continued this approach in his (1990) article about the ideological appeal of HRM in the US in the late 1980s, which argued that, even in its home in the United States, there is very little evidence that HRM exists as a set of widespread managerial practices. Rather, HRM is an appealing idea to many American managers because its underlying values reflect the ‘American Dream’. He went on to say that while the political milieu of Thatcherism may represent a more hospitable environment for such ideas, differences between Britain and America would likely limit its reception in Britain.
Guest’s 1995 chapter focused on different configurations of industrial relations and HRM that were emerging in the 1990s, as well as union responses to it. It relied chiefly on reviews of available case study and survey evidence published by other scholars to inform its assessment of developments. In 1997, Guest made a decisive move in testing the links between HRM and performance and laying the groundwork for further empirical testing – by reviewing the mostly US literature in the field and by arguing for the need for more research. Other recent papers have also been concerned with testing theoretical claims about HRM using large-scale quantitative databases (Guest 1999, 2001, 2002). Adopting a broadly positivist approach, he has sought to test empirically the claim that ‘good’ HRM has a positive effect on organisational performance while also having positive outcomes for employees (Guest, 2002). This research is very much consistent with the US tradition of hypothesis testing in management research (see Becker and Gerhart, 1996). It also represents a growing trend in British HRM research, with numerous researchers (one of us included) routinely using this approach (e.g., Wood and de Menezes 1998; Wood 1999; Ramsay et al., 2000; Addison and Belfield 2001; Roche 2001).

In his 1999 paper, Guest directly challenges the critical work of Legge and others (Keenoy, 1997; Willmott, 1993) for their scepticism of HRM. He criticises their use of empirical data as displaying ‘a hint of slippage in the analysis to reflect a preferred interpretation’ (1999, p. 8). In so doing, he justifies his own approach i.e., the rigorous testing of theoretical claims using survey data. He also challenges (1999, p. 9) these critical theorists for failing to take workers’ experiences of HRM seriously: ‘In addition to the absence of evidence, there is an embedded problem of dealing with false consciousness. What if workers liked HRM? Does this mean that workers have been duped? Or does this view reflect insufficient respect for them?’

‘Slippery’ Texts

Karen Legge is also a leading academic in the field whose work is extremely influential. A search of SSCI in February 2003 identified nearly 500 citations of her work. However, despite her critiques (and those of others), the tide of positivist HRM research has not been stemmed. As Legge (1995a, p. 33) herself admitted in 1995, the ‘floodgates’ were already open:

Not only are job advertisements … as likely to ask for a ‘Human Resource Manager’ as a ‘Personnel Manager’ … but erstwhile personnel management courses are being retitled and content refocused, new courses in HRM are being set up, guided by
incumbents of newly established professorships in HRM and a large literature is emerging … associated with this term.

Such a marked trend suggests that the texts countering HRM, of which Legge’s are a notable example, have had trouble ‘sticking’ and neither qualitative empirical work or postmodernist HRM look likely to displace the increasingly popular modernist/positivist approach.

Legge’s (1978) early work, which analysed the structural subservience of the personnel function, discusses key themes that later became central to the discussion of HRM, notably the problem of integrating decisions about the management of personnel with broader organisational decision-making. She noted a concern with ‘human resources’ (1978, p. 21) and ‘the human resource dimension’ of management (1978, p. 42), using the terms in a general way to refer to personnel management. She did not consider ‘human resource management’ as a potentially distinctive approach until the late 1980s, when her 1989 chapter considered whether there was any such thing as ‘HRM’ in management practice. She compared HRM and personnel management, drawing attention to the contradictions in the former and, like Guest, called for more empirical research. This article also acknowledged that the term HRM was a ‘new label’, which fitted better in the ideological environment of Thatcher’s UK and Reagan’s USA than the term personnel management (1989, p. 40); views echoed in Guest’s (1990) paper. She has continued to explore the apparent gap between rhetoric – what is said and written about HRM – and reality – ‘what is going on out there’ (Legge 1995a, p. 40).

Compared to Guest, Legge has focused more attention on the changing nature of the language and, particularly, the way in which it allows managers to use people-centred rhetoric to cloak managerial controls (Legge 1995a). Her (1995b) book takes her interest in language further by developing an explicitly postmodernist analysis of HRM, arguing that ‘postmodernism as a theoretical perspective rejects both the modernist realist ontology and positivistic epistemology’ (1995b, p. 301). From a postmodernist perspective ‘the ‘real’ is not ‘out there’ to be discovered, but is created through discourses emergent from power/knowledge relations’ (1995b, p. 306). Legge’s key concern was to posit postmodern analysis as an alternative way of making sense of HRM, although her concern about the gap between rhetoric and reality remained central (Keenoy 1997).

This work lays the groundwork for her argument that, to understand the implications of HRM for workers, we need to assess HRM in moral or ethical terms (Legge, 1998), although she also calls for more empirical work to assess the existence and effects of HRM. By 2001, Legge’s ethical and
methodological critiques of most HRM research had come together in a sustained attack on researchers seeking to demonstrate a link between HRM and performance by employing a positivist epistemology and statistical analysis. In responding to Guest’s 1999 attack on critical writers, herself included, Legge (2001) argued that any ‘findings’ or ‘facts’ are produced by processes of social construction, which include doing academic research. As a result, all HRM research, including research conducted under the guise of positivism, serves only to help construct the phenomenon under investigation. While this article marks a continued strengthening of Legge’s constructivist position, she retains her belief in the importance of empirical work as she identifies a series of methodological and conceptual shortcomings in modernist/positivist empirical work.

In summary, both Legge and Guest have focused on the gap between rhetoric and reality in HRM; both have called for more empirical work; and each has tried to undermine the other on the basis of their own assumptions. Guest has in the past explored the linguistic aspects of HRM but, increasingly, advocates more positivistic research. Legge has called for more empirical work – qualitative and longitudinal, more than quantitative – and has moved increasingly towards a social constructivist position. In spite of the critique of HRM that Legge has developed (with others), the discourse of HRM continues to grow and to dominate academic spheres, as Legge (1995a) herself acknowledges. While Legge’s work is highly influential, such critiques have found it difficult to ‘stick’ – to embed in the broader discourse. In the next section, we examine why this might be the case.

The Author and the Text

To explore the success of Guest’s texts and the obstacles facing Legge in challenging this discourse, we examine the authors and their texts in order to understand their impact on the larger discourse of HRM.

The Power of the Author

Discursive activity – such as the production of texts – structures the social space within which actors act. It privileges some actors at the expense of others, and results in different constellations of advantage and disadvantage (Fairclough, 1992; Deetz, 1992). Foucault’s work (e.g., Foucault, 1980; 1982) suggests that the prospects of any actor using power to shape particular outcomes in any way not determined by discourse are limited. While actors may act to produce texts, they can only draw
on existing discourses and therefore what they can construct is limited. At the same time, writers such as Fairclough (1992) and Hardy and Phillips (forthcoming) suggest that the discursive context allows some actors to exercise power as a result of ‘the position the agent occupies in the field and by the regularities of the field of discursive production’ (Chalaby, 1996, p. 695). In other words, discourse produces particular subject positions, some of which are more powerful than others (Hardy and Phillips, 1999).

Guest and Legge occupy similar subject positions within the same discursive context. Drawing on the sources of power identified by Hardy and Phillips (forthcoming) that actors might exercise within a particular discourse we can note the similarities. For example, an actor may be constructed as possessing formal power, or authority (Astley and Sachdeva, 1984): both Legge and Guest are senior academics, working in leading British institutions, and well known for their research.

Certain subject positions are associated with access to resources that are valuable within the particular discursive context, such as money, rewards, sanctions, information, credibility, expertise, and political access (e.g., Pettigrew, 1973). Within the context of academic discourse generally and HRM more specifically, resources are likely to revolve around academic credibility, access to data, research funding, etc. Again, there is no evidence to show that either author was positioned differently with regard to their access to resources.

A subject position may also be powerful through links to other actors, which confer the ability to mobilise economic, social and cultural capital through existing social relationships (Bourdieu, 1993). Legge’s longstanding role as editor of *Journal of Management Studies* might be interpreted as occupying a more powerful subject position than a ‘mere’ academic; however, it is difficult to argue that journal editors are accorded significantly greater privileges than other senior academics, especially since two of Guest’s articles (1987; 1990) appeared in this journal. Similarly, Guest’s connections to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, which has provided grants for his research (Legge, 2001) and for which he conducted a major survey in 1997 (Guest, 1999), may allow him to occupy a particular subject position with regard to practitioners, but probably does not significantly differentiate his position with regard to academic discourse on HRM.

Finally, a subject position may be accorded discursive legitimacy (Hardy and Phillips, 1998), whereby the actor is understood to be speaking legitimately about particular issues and on behalf of other actors. However, we see little difference in the position of the two authors, since both are
senior, well-established scholars with lengthy careers devoted to researching and writing about HRM.

This analysis suggests that relatively little weight can be accorded to authorial power in explaining their discursive impact since, on balance, there appears little difference between the subject positions of two authors. We must, then, turn to the characteristics of the texts that have been produced by the two authors.

The Power of the Text

In this section, we consider what is it about a text that allows it to construct meaning, not just locally, but in a way that produces a broader discursive effect. What types of texts ‘stick’ or, in Ricoeur’s (1981; 1986) terms, become ‘fixated’ to produce enduring meanings and understandings regarding HRM? Hardy and Phillips (forthcoming) argue that the following dimensions increase the likelihood that a text will influence discourse.

First, analyzing how texts connect to other texts and discourses helps to answer ‘questions about what social resources and experiences are drawn upon’ in the interpretation of texts, and what other discourses are ‘assimilated’ in this interpretation (Fairclough, 1995, p. 200). These connections are referred to as intertextuality and interdiscursivity (Fairclough, 1992). Depending on which other texts and discourses are drawn upon, and how well embedded they are in the discursive context in question (e.g., Ott and Walter, 2000), more broadly grounded understandings and meanings are invoked that will influence the interpretation, acceptance and meaning of a particular text, and the impact it will have.

Second, the form or genre of the text is also important. Genres are recognised forms of communication that are characterised by particular conventions and invoked in response to a recurrent set of circumstances e.g., letters, memos, meetings, training seminars, and resumes (Orlikowski and Yates, 1994; Yates and Orlikowski, 1992; 2002). A genre shares similar substance in terms of the topics discussed, and form in terms of particular physical and linguistic features (Kuhn, 1997). Certain genres are more effective than others in a particular context, and genre rules can be manipulated to increase the effect that the text has (Yates and Orlikowski, 1992; Gephart et al., 2000).
Third, texts construct narratives (e.g., Boje, 1991; O’Connor, 2002) that create a ‘figured world’ (Kitchell, Hannan and Kempton, 2000) of identities and relationships (Gergen, 1994). Narratives influence the material and social world (Cobb 1993) by, for example, persuading others (Witten, 1993), resolving conflict (Jameson, 2001), and legitimating interests (Mumby, 1993). Actors use various means to increase the legitimacy of their narrative through, for example, the construction of plots (Cobb and Rifkin, 1991), or the use of rhetoric (Davis 1986; Kieser 1997; Watson, 1995), metaphor (Grant and Oswick, 1996), irony (Hatch, 1997) and humour (e.g., Collinson, 1988).

Fourth, the distance between the text and its original production helps it create enduring meaning (Ricoeur, 1981; 1986). Taylor et al. (1996, p. 6) argue that distancing (or ‘distanciation’ as they refer to it) occurs through the ‘scaling up from locally situated conversation to more complex networks’ as the text is increasingly separated from the circumstances of its production. (Re)inscription in the form of more permanent media results in the text becoming increasingly objectified, generalised and anonymous. The objectifying nature of the distanced text produces a reified representation of ‘what is no longer a situated set of conversations’ but a ‘template so abstract that it can be taken to represent not just some but all of the conversations it refers to’ (Taylor et al., 1996, p. 26).

Analyzing the Texts

In this section, we show how we analyzed the texts in the light of the dimensions described above and discuss our findings.

Data Analysis

We selected a series of articles by Guest (1987; 1989; 1990; 1995; 1997; 1999) and Legge (1978; 1989; 1995a; 1995b; 1998; 2001) that engaged with each other. We chose them by starting with Legge’s (2001) direct response to Guest (1999), which is, in turn, an explicit challenge to Legge’s work. Working backwards, we identified a total of 12 texts that included journal articles and book chapters on HRM in which these two authors engage with each other and with the discourse of HRM. We considered these texts to be representative of a larger academic struggle through which HRM discourse becomes ‘fixed’.

We coded these texts according to the dimensions discussed above. For each dimension, we first discussed in general terms what each involved and some of the different ways in which each might
be manifested. We then developed the following ‘operationalisation’ of the dimensions by jointly examining two key articles (Guest, 1999; Legge, 2001).

**Social resources:** we coded the texts to ascertain *interdiscursivity* and *intertextuality* i.e., discourses and texts that we saw as being drawn on to support the arguments of the paper in question. With regard to discourses, we refer to the long-range, macro-systemic discourses identified by Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) whose general themes can be identified across a variety of local settings. For example, we considered ‘Marxism’, the ‘psychological contract’ and indeed ‘HRM’ itself to be discourses. Texts were defined broadly to include not only verbal transcriptions ‘but any kind of symbolic expression requiring a physical medium and permitting of permanent storage’ (Taylor & Van Every, 1993, p. 109). Hence, the texts that we identified included not only citations of academic articles but also, for example, Harvard Business School’s HRM course curriculum and various surveys.

**Genres:** can be identified by their socially recognised purpose as well as their form i.e., observable characteristics of the communication, such as medium or structural features (Yates and Orlikowski, 2002). Our first classification of genre showed little variation among the texts – all the articles were either journal articles or book chapters. We then drew on Gephart et al.’s (2000) classification of genres, which identified ten distinctive forms, to provide a more nuanced classification of the genre’s *substance*.

**Narrative:** contained a number of sub-categories. In line with Cobb (1993) and Cobb and Rifkin (1991), who argue that narratives that are interpreted as coherent tend to dominate while less coherent narratives tend to be marginalised, we examined the degree of coherence. They identify coherence as the perceived completeness, linearity and temporal structure of the narrative (also see Gergen, 1994). To investigate these aspects, we coded our interpretation of *plot structure*. We identified statements that we interpreted as reducing ambiguity and closing off alternative lines of enquiry, such as statements that discount evidence that is inconsistent with the author’s line of explanation, and developed flowcharts of our interpretation of the narrative of each text (see Figure 1 and Figure 2 for examples). The comparison of flowcharts helped us to assess the extent to which texts either ‘narrowed down’ or ‘opened up’ discussion.

INSERT FIGURES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE
Cobb (1993) argues that coherence is associated with ‘cultural resonance’ – the connection to mainstream metaphors. Accordingly, we also coded for narrative style, as evidenced by our perceptions of the use of language, rhetoric, metaphor, humour etc., as well as the overall nature of the way in which the narrative was presented. Narrative theorists argue that the identities constructed in a narrative – the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ – and the identity of the narrator influence the force and outcome of the narrative (e.g., Davies and Harré, 1990; Cobb, 1993; Barry & Elmes, 1997). We therefore coded for the identities that we saw as being constructed in the narrative; our perceived positioning of the author vis-à-vis these identities; and the perceived target of any criticism in the narrative.

Gergen (1994) argues that acceptable narratives establish a valued endpoint that is meaningful within the relevant cultural perspective, movement towards which may involve incremental improvement or a decremental, downward slide. As a result, we coded for what we interpreted to be the progressive or regressive nature of the narrative – our understanding of whether a valued endpoint was established; the depiction of movement through the narrative towards that endpoint; and the consequences of reaching the endpoint.

**Distancing:** Taylor et al. (1996, p. 24) identify six ‘degrees of separation’ during which the text becomes increasingly distanced from the circumstances of its production, the last of which are the most important for creating enduring meaning. They include the transformation of a text into a technical language that encourages particular practices; the transformation of a text into a materialised physical frame such as manuals and software; and widespread publication and broadcasting. We adapted these stages for our data by coding for instances of conversion, which we defined as the conversion of complex attitudes, concepts, and ideas into more simple, quasi-scientific forms, such as statistical tables and theoretical models; and the existence of templates, which were what we perceived to be ready ‘packaged’ models that are easily transferable to other situations.

Having agreed upon this framework, we coded the remaining papers separately and compared our findings. We discussed any discrepancies: some were reconciled and incorporated into the results; where we could not reach agreement, we removed that result. At some point, we agreed that we had gone as far as we could although, as Wood and Kroger (2000, p. 97) point out: ‘it is not always easy to decide when to stop and go with what you have.’ At this point, we examined the results of our coding to see what patterns we could discern (see Table 1).
Findings

Starting with *social resources*, we can see a marked difference between the texts. Both sets of texts invoke different discourses to support their own case and undermine each other’s arguments, but Guest’s texts evoke a larger variety of discourses and make particular reference to scientific and business discourses. In this way, they draw on coherent, uncontested, societal-level discourses that are familiar to readers in HRM and management. Moreover, these discourses are deeply embedded across the broader academic community and in Western society more generally. In drawing on such discourses, these texts are also drawing on the enduring, relatively taken for granted meanings they embody. At the same time, because of the diversity of the discourses, Guest’s texts are also able to draw on discursive ‘niches’ such as (pluralist) industrial relations or the psychological contract. These discourses may not have the pervasive or enduring meaning of science, but they nonetheless evoke a set of meanings that resonate with particular subject positions, such as workers and HR managers. Legge’s texts refer to fewer discourses overall and have difficulty in evoking science. More generally, the discourses that are invoked are – for some readers at least – tangential to HRM, such as philosophy, sociology and linguistics. Since these discourses are likely to be less familiar to readers and their relation to the argument more debatable, their impact on how the texts are interpreted will probably be more variable.

Guest’s texts make reference to fewer academic texts than those of Legge but they refer to a wider diversity of texts, many of which symbolise links between business and academia (e.g., such as Harvard Business School’s HRM curriculum and surveys by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development). The academic texts that are cited tend to be US studies of HRM. Legge’s texts draw on larger numbers of academic texts and there are larger numbers of citations. In this way, Guest’s texts are grounded, not just in academic practice but in broader management and teaching practice and legitimated with reference to a variety of well-known institutions.

As far as *genre* is concerned, both authors use the same, well-established ones – academic articles and chapters. The majority of Guest’s texts appear chiefly in respectable UK journals directed at both ‘mainstream’ and ‘critical’ academic HRM audiences. None of Legge’s texts appear in refereed journals, although they do appear as chapters in her own books (which Guest’s do not). A number appear in books that explicitly state their critical approach, although it should be noted that Guest’s work also appears in some of these volumes. Legge’s texts are more likely to take the form of polemical essays, utilising already-published data rather than presenting new analyses or primary
data. Guest’s texts regularly take the form of research papers that present his own analysis of data. This use of research essays with empirical data reinforces the discourses of science but, otherwise, there appears little else to differentiate the texts in relation to genre. What may be more important is the overall genre that encompasses the relations between the texts, which is effectively an argument and rebuttal format. Is this regard, Guest enjoys ‘first mover’ advantage in two ways. First, despite Legge’s (1978) early reference to HRM, it was in Guest’s (1987) text that HRM first appeared as a ‘product’, which Legge’s texts attempt to refute. Second, while the authors had already engaged each other, Guest’s 1999 text was the first to throw down such a direct challenge to critical theorists, to which Legge’s 2001 text was a response. Accordingly, Legge’s texts, by responding to arguments laid down earlier, inevitably reproduce the very thing they are trying to resist.

As far as narrative is concerned, the analysis shows that Guest’s texts are far more linear in their use of ‘closing out’ sentences as well as overall structure, as indicated in the comparisons of the flowcharts. They embody scientific, neutral styles and rarely use evocative language, such as irony or extreme metaphors, etc. Fewer identities are constructed in the narratives, but those that are tend to be more coherent and generally more benignly or positively portrayed; while the authorial identity is more likely to be positioned as an insider who identifies with a wide range of identities. As a result, the text is able to connect in a sympathetic way with a range of different interest groups – workers and managers, positivist theorists, even critical theorists to a certain extent – and to position the author as a combination of a caring insider and a curious outsider. There is, accordingly, less likely to be a direct target of criticism. These texts also embody progressive narratives – a clear challenge is identified, but one which can be resolved, often in the form of a ‘win-win’ solution through the clearly defined next steps with which the narrative often concludes.

Legge’s texts are less linear – there are fewer closing out statements and, in contrast, the text is more likely to open up new arguments and ideas even late in the paper. The narratives celebrate ambiguity and complexity to a far greater extent – less narrowing down and more broadening out of ideas. In addition, there is greater evidence of evocative language, including humour, irony, sarcasm, and extreme metaphors, constructing a personal and engaged narrator, rather than a dispassionate one. The narratives involve a greater number of identities, but they are less likely to be coherent and more likely to be fluid and fragmented. While sympathetic to some of these different identities, the author is more likely to be positioned as an outsider who, not surprisingly, is critical of particular targets. The narratives are more likely to be regressive – there is no simple challenge or clear goal; no simple solution; no clearly delineated next steps to take. Accordingly,
the endpoint often embodies analytical ambiguity and at times even a degree of despair rather than a win-win solution (see for example Legge 2001: 34).

We also note important differences in terms of *distancing*: Guest’s texts show more instances of conversion and templates, while Legge’s texts show virtually none. Guest’s texts present more numbers, tables and figures. In this way, generalizable and scientific ‘truths’ about HRM are presented in a transportable, apparently neutral format, which is increasingly distanced from any particular author or research project. Their meaning requires interpretation but, within the academic context of HRM, it is relatively predictable. In addition, Guest’s model of HRM (Table 1 in Guest, 1987, p. 509) represents a ‘template’, which can be easily re-presented in other articles, textbooks, course notes, flip charts or transparencies, regardless of situation. Such templates become a form of shorthand, which can be easily disseminated and which everyone ‘understands’, helping to simplify and reify a complex and contested discourse.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

According to Keenoy (1999), HRM as a concrete set of practices and understandings has not been ‘fixed’ and never will be. However, this observation does not mean that certain socially constructed, fluid, contested meanings do not appear sufficiently solid (e.g., Callon, 1986) to become taken-for-granted, while alternatives are viewed with suspicion. In this way, the particular vision of HRM outlined in this paper has increasingly come to be accepted as ‘true’ and looks unlikely to be dislodged from academic discourse in the near future. It is a discourse that is consistent with the interests of powerful actors in society (Legge, 1995). It legitimises managerial prerogative, reinforces the view that the rational calculation of ‘bottom line impacts’ is the only way to measure the value of organisational practices, and undermines alternative ways of managing the employment relationship. Its convergent identity also embodies an advantage for managers through the way it masks a far more fragmented ‘reality’. If we all know what ‘HRM’ is and that it is a ‘good’ thing, whatever is done in its name is also good, giving employers considerable scope for action. It becomes possible, for example, to implement ‘hard’ HRM practices while using the language of ‘soft’ HRM. Practices, such as work intensification or downsizing, which may lead to ‘bad’ experiences and material consequences for employees, can be enacted because the convergent, benevolent identity of HRM will conveniently construct them as an ideologically ‘good’ thing. This combination of convergent meaning and ambiguous practice makes HRM a powerful tool for managers.
Because HRM discourse potentially has such effects critical work is vital in interrogating it, even though our analysis identifies a number of difficulties. First, because critical work challenges existing orthodox work, critical scholars often find themselves locked into a de facto ‘reply’ genre: narrative analysis shows that the first story to be told tends to be the most persuasive, with the counter story mainly serving to reproduce it (Cobb, 1993). Consequently in resisting HRM, critical scholarship also reinforces it, reacting to the agenda – rather than setting it. Second, the orthodoxy is, by definition, composed of powerful discourses, while critical scholars often have to draw on less powerful discourses and less persuasive texts from outside the orthodoxy, which may be less familiar to readers. Third, to the extent that critical scholars adopt evocative language to highlight the political nature of the concepts, they risk undermining the appeal of their arguments in a context where scientific neutrality is valued. Fourth, it is difficult to present a linear narrative when the aim is to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions, open up alternative interpretations, question reality, and disengage truth from knowledge (Fournier and Gray, 2002). Finally, critical scholarship is never going to translate into reified, abstracted prescriptions in the way that modernist/positivist work does with such ease, even if its proponents wanted it to.

In contrast, texts like those of Guest are able to draw on discourses of science and business that provide important social resources, and on a range of texts that validate HRM with reference to a variety of highly legitimate institutions. Similarly, the apparently neutral style reinforces scientific rationality, disguising the political nature of the texts. As Cobb and Rifkin (1991) note, neutrality is an important rhetorical device. Guest’s texts also construct convergent, ‘progressive’ narratives that are more authoritative (Cobb and Rifkin, 1991; Gergen, 1994), especially within the context of the broader discourse of science that ‘expects’ the answers to society’s problems to lie in academic texts. Convergent narratives also establish continuous, coherent identities across time (Gergen, 2001a) – such as the identity of HRM – which are more likely to be judged intelligible and acceptable making widespread adoption easier. Finally, modernist/positivist methods provide resources such as statistics and models that facilitate reproduction.

Does this mean that Legge and other critical scholars should do what Guest does – draw on powerful discourses, write a convergent, upbeat narrative in a disinterested style, and narrow the narrative down to two simple concepts of HRM and performance? We would argue not: critical work is not a matter of getting a simple story straight, because there are not simple stories to get straight. Rather than providing a simplistic recipe for success, we hope that our analysis provides some food for thought regarding the production of academic knowledge – both orthodox and
critical. In particular, we believe that the analysis presented here invites consideration of a broader conceptualization of what constitutes critical studies in management. We have examined one particular “brand” of critical work i.e., a constructivist approach in which critical and postmodern insights are combined (e.g., Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Fournier and Grey, 2000), but this is not to suggest that it is the only form of critique. Indeed, we argue that there is clearly room for empirical and quantitative work in critical management studies (see for example Ramsay et al 2000).

Gergen (2001b) warns us against accepting stereotypical differences between constructivists and positivists: traditional demarcations between subjectivism and objectivism (e.g., Burrell and Morgan, 1979) are blurring. For example, Boal et al. (2003) position themselves in the middle of the continuum between realism and constructivism. Further, they separate realism from positivism, pointing out that quantitative research is realist and objectivist, but not necessarily positivist. Donaldson (2003: 122), a long time proponent of positivism, now concedes that: “A positivist can accept many of the points of the constructionists.” From the constructivist side, Czarniawska (2003) argues that constructivism is not anti-realist but anti-essentialist.

The fixed identities created through the paradigm wars thus appear to be breaking down. Individual scholars use both realist and constructivist discourses: “Those who typically champion constructionism might well employ a realist discourse to throttle the realist, and the realist might willingly adopt a constructionist arguments to subvert constructionism” (Gergen, 2001b: 17), as we have already seen in our analysis. Rather than represent constructivism and realism as separate but fixed, essential paradigmatic identities, we should view them as forms of talk and text produced by scholars to achieve produce certain outcomes:

To the extent that such discourses are useful for various groups, we are also positioned to see them as cultural resources, modes of intelligibility developed with certain cultural transitions and now adding to the contemporary cultural repertoire. In this frame we can explore more pointedly the situated utility of both such discourses (Gergen, 2001b: 15).

If either of these discourses can be successfully employed to reveal structures of oppression and to offer emancipatory ideas, they have a place in critical management studies.

In fact, quantitative work – in mounting a critique of the ontological claims of the orthodoxy (Thompson, forthcoming) – may have a number of advantages as a vehicle for critical scholarship.
For example, quantitative researchers can draw on discourses of science, adopt a neutral style of narrative, and employ resources such as statistics and models. And while they may not produce ‘progressive’ narratives, they provide a means to establish a counter-narrative on the same terms as the subject of their critique. In other words, if we abandon the notion of fixed paradigmatic identities and the attendant dualisms such as “constructionist/positivist”; “subjectivist/objectivist”; “realist/relativist” and, instead, view them as culturally embedded discursive resources, there is no reason to exclude either constructivist or quantitative work from the critical arena.

Finally, we must return to our initial question: does the pervasiveness of HRM mean that Legge’s attempt to challenge this discourse has been futile? Has she been ‘firing blanks’? We argue, certainly not. While critical and postmodern theorizing undoubtedly do face difficulties in displacing modernist/positivist research in organisation and management studies, critical management studies has nonetheless become increasingly visible over the last thirty years (Clegg and Hardy, 1996; Fournier and Grey, 2000). One of the reasons for this outcome is the accumulation of hard-fought, local skirmishes, such as the engagement between Legge and Guest, which have put critical views of HRM on the map. Legge’s critique is now a key part of debates in HRM, as citations of her work clearly indicate and mainstream writers like Guest are forced to engage with it and, in so doing, reproduce the broader body of critical research. Legge has done far more than fight a rearguard action against the forces of orthodoxy: she has influenced the way that HRM is understood and ensured that voices outside the mainstream have been heard.
Figure 1: Flow Chart from Guest (1987)

Is HRM happening

Is HRM different to PM?

HRM

Contrasted to PM

Empirical models of HRM

Theories of HRM

What HRM is (policies)

Is it successful?

Is it likely to be successful in UK, probably not.

But given no data, there is need for research
Figure 2: Flow Chart from Legge (1989)

- Is HRM different to PM?
  - US PM
  - UK PM
- Descriptive models
- Normative models
- Comparison
- Contradictions
- HRM won't work
- Contradictions are useful linguistically to managers
- New Right is real cause of interest in HRM
- US HRM
- UK HRM
- integration
- internal
- external
- capitalism
- HRM
- No data
- HRM model
- HRM
- PM
- PM

Is HRM happening
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 1: Summary of Analysis</th>
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<td><strong>Power of Texts:</strong></td>
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<td>Resources</td>
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<td>Plot structure</td>
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<td>Narrative style</td>
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<td>Identities</td>
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<td>More coherent; More positively or benignly represented</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positioning of author</td>
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<td>Target of criticism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Endpoint</td>
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<td>Distancing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Many instances of conversion into tables and models</td>
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<td>Template</td>
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References


1 In using the term ‘modernist/positivist approach to HRM’ we are adopting a shorthand terminology. Guest (1999:9) refers to researchers, such as himself, who ‘maintain a foot in the modernist and positivist camp.’ Legge (2001: 23) refers to researchers, including Guest, who ‘are of a modernist, positivistic persuasion’.

2 Keenoy (1999) calls this discourse ‘HRMism’, in which he includes management practice. For the purposes of this article, we confine our analysis to academic practice. This is not to suggest that academic and practitioner discourses regarding HRM do not intersect and interweave, but our focus is on relationships between academic texts, academic discourse and academic practice.

3 Examination of the number of departments almost certainly underestimates the impact of HRM in universities because in many cases HRM courses are taught in departments that do not have ‘human resource management’ in their names. The Commonwealth Universities Yearbook includes a ‘Directory to Subjects of Study’. In 1990 HRM did not appear as a subject of study, although numerous institutions offered industrial relations (ACU 1990). By 2000, the category of HRM had been added to industrial relations (ACU 2000). Unfortunately the figures cannot be broken down into the two separate categories as a means to compare their relative importance. Nonetheless, the mere fact that HRM has become a category in this directory is indicative of its growing importance in universities.
Of particular note is the work of Storey (see for example Storey 1987, 1992).

One issue that we have not considered here but which is an important element in understanding the effects of text on discourse is consumption. Our analysis has focus on our interpretation – or consumption – of the texts but we have been unable to consider the wider consumption of academic texts that is a pivotal part of the production of academic knowledge (see Hassard and Keleman, 2002).

We acknowledge that we have, ourselves, adopted a positivistic style and used a relatively standardized form of content analysis. In our defence, we refer to Phillips and Hardy (2002: 10), who note note: ‘What makes a research technique discursive is not the method itself but the use of that method to carry out an interpretive analysis of some form of text with a view to providing an understanding of discourse and its role in constituting social reality. To the extent that they are used within a discourse analysis ontology and epistemology, many qualitative techniques can become discourse methods.’ We would argue that we have used these methods in a way that is keeping with discourse analysis. We also are aware that Phillips and Hardy go on to note that discourse analysis should be highly reflexive because of the social constructivist epistemology that underlies it. It would be fair to say that we have not been able to pay much attention to this issue in this paper, although readers may at least enjoy a certain irony in that one of the authors, who is known for his quantitative work, is here writing about discourse analysis; while the other has done more counting for this paper than in her entire academic career to date. Of course, being only gingerly reflexive, we acknowledge that we have committed these comments to the relative safety of a footnote.

This definition is taken from (Hardy and Clegg, 1997) and is consistent with Alvesson and Deetz (2000) and Thompson and McHugh (1995).

For example, Legge’s (1995a) article and her (1995b) textbook had, between them, 157 citations as of August 2002 according to the SSCI.