



Turnover, HRM and Motivation in Humanitarian Organizations: A Review

Rafael Wittek



Four Explicit Questions in Papers

- › Why and how do people become an aid worker?
 - Roth, Narayanan, Bjerneld et al.
- › Why do aid workers leave early or quit?
 - Heyse et al.
- › How do Humanitarian Organizations manage the employment relation?
 - Korff et al.
- › How does government regulation affect professionalization?
 - Crawford



Two Implicit Questions in all Papers

- › Are humanitarian aid workers and their careers special? The papers suggest they are, because
 - Their motives are noble
 - They have higher expectations towards their organization
 - They are paid less and are exposed to higher risks
- › Are humanitarian organizations and their HRM practices special? The papers suggest they are, because
 - They serve “higher” goals
 - Should have non-businesslike HRM practices
 - Are event driven
 - Operate under difficult conditions



Purpose and Structure of this Review

- › Summarize stylized facts, emerging big picture
- › Synthetic reconstruction of theoretical arguments
- › Exploration of potential shortcomings and discussion of possible alternatives
- › Discussion structured around four key players
 - Aid workers (Roth, Bjerneld et al., Narayanan, Heyse et al.)
 - Government (Crawford)
 - Profession (Korff et al., Crawford)
 - Aid Organization (Heyse et al., Narayanan, Korff et al.)



Aid Workers

**Macro
Level**

**Increased Welfare
Postindustrial values**

**Turnover
Performance Problems**

Motivation theories

**Mismatch: Unfulfilled
expectations**

**Micro
Level**

Join Aid organizations for
self-actualization





Theory of Needs (Maslow)

› Assumption

- hierarchy of needs, lower level needs (e.g. physical safety) have to be fulfilled before higher level needs (self-actualization) can be realized

› Hypothesis

- individuals with opportunity for self-actualization see aid work as instrument to reach this goal, and are more likely to become aid worker

› Problem

- unidimensional and static conceptualization of goals: cannot explain why motivated individuals lose motivation with tenure

Alternative: Social Production Function Theory

- › makes explicit distinction between foreground and background goals
- › allows for substitution: if realization of one goal becomes more difficult because prize for producing it increases, individuals switch to other instrumental goals.
- › Can explain loss of motivation through frame decay



Job Characteristics Model (Hackman & Oldham)

Assumption

- › Job characteristics affect motivation potential score (mps), which in turn positively affects “critical psychological states”. The latter affect outcomes like performance or turnover.

Hypothesis

- › People with more complex, autonomous jobs will show lower turnover.

Problem

- › Theory cannot explain why so many individuals scoring high on the mps leave the organization
- › Effect on critical psychological states was not confirmed in much research.
- › One-sided focus on demand factors of a job (e.g. task variety demands various skills), neglects supply factors (i.e. constraints)

Alternative: Simon’s Four Span’s Model.

- › Demand factors
 - accountability: how will performance be evaluated
 - Influence: how many stakeholders to I need to influence to get my job done
- › Supply factors
 - control: how many resources do I have to complete my job
 - support: how many others do I need to help me to perform my job well
- › Explains why people with high mps leave: if demand exceeds supply: creates stress, violates controllability principle.



Theory of intrinsic motivation

Assumption

- › people choose for aid work not because doing so brings them material extrinsic rewards, but because it creates immaterial intrinsic rewards.

Hypothesis

- › Aid Organizations that rely on extrinsic rewards and neglect creation of conditions that produce intrinsic rewards will attract less aid workers and have higher turnover rates. Extrinsic rewards crowd out intrinsic motivation.

Problem

- › Compensation issues seem to be among the major HRM policy domains in HAO.
- › Large percentage of respondents indicate that both extrinsic and intrinsic rewards are important for joining or staying in the organization.
- › Empirical research shows that both extrinsic and intrinsic rewards can coexist

Alternative: take self-determination theory seriously, incorporate more recent advances.

- › Motivation depends on perceived locus of control; external locus undermines cognitive self-determination.
- › External rewards can have two effects on loc
 - controlling (strengthens perceived external control)
 - informing aspect (strengthens perceived internal control because emphasizes perceived competence).
 - Extrinsic rewards have negative effect only if they are perceived as controlling rather than providing information on the job.
- › Can explain why many aid workers stay: perceive extrinsic rewards not as controlling but as informing, strengthening perceived competence



Government

**Macro
Level**

**Need to regulate
professions**

Coordination Failure

?Rationalization
theory?

**Mismatch: neglect of
complex web of
stakeholders**

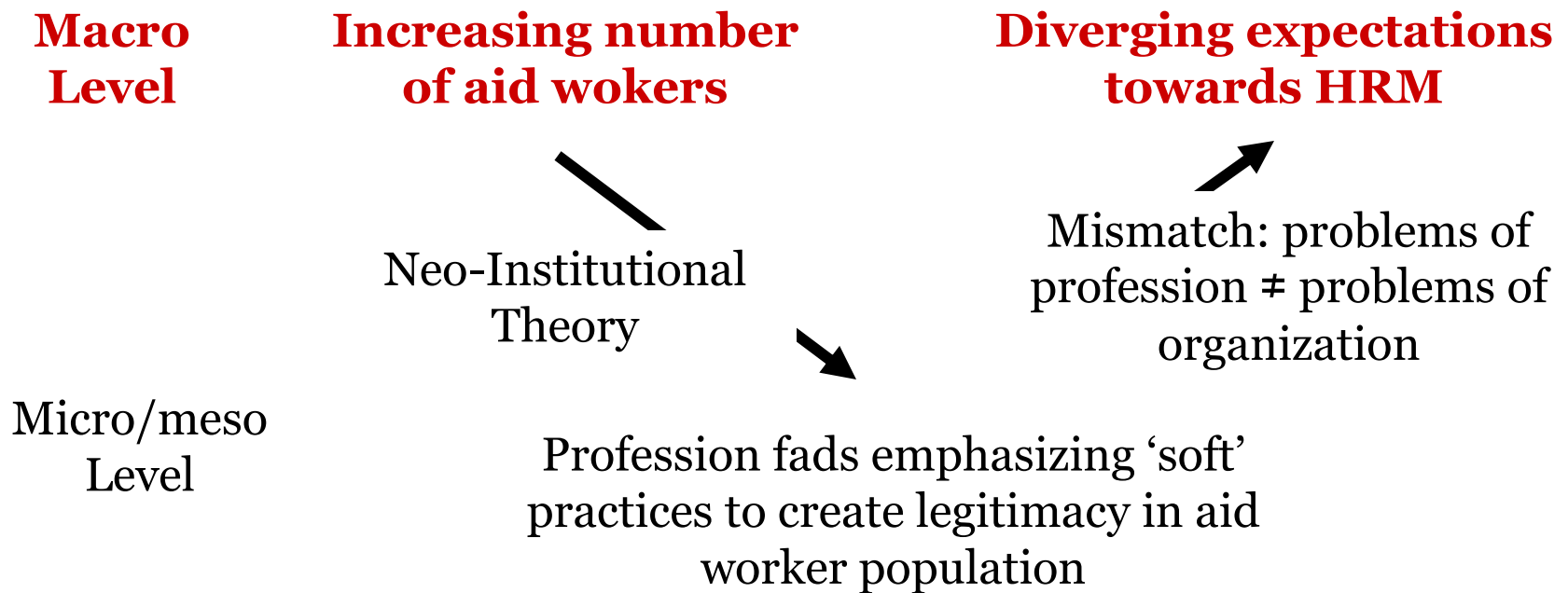
Micro/meso
Level

Top Down standardization





Profession





Neo-Institutional Organization Theory

Assumption

- › Organizations need legitimacy from environment, therefore adapt to pressures from environment

Hypothesis

- › HRM policies in organizations will follow practices salient in professional discourse, not necessarily related to real problems in organizations

Problem

- › For some practices, professional discourse seems to follow what dominant organizations do, rather than vice versa

Alternative: Rule Regime Theory

- › Perceives organization not as passive recipient reacting on outside influences, but as actively adjusting to internal problems
- › Can explain implementation of HRM policies independently from external pressures



Humanitarian Organizations

**Macro
Level**

**Increasing
accountability pressure**

**External convergence
Internal conflicts**

Theories of organizational
governance

**Mismatch: Inconsistent
HRM Practices**

Micro/meso
Level

Formalization





Gift Exchange and High Performance HRM

Assumption

- › Practices that are considered as a “gift” by employees (e.g. involving costs for the organization, signaling relational and long term commitment) will trigger solidarity frame, feelings of obligation, and extra effort.

Hypothesis

- › Retention and performance will be higher and turnover lower in organizations with comparatively high investments and care for employees.

Problem

- › turnover, retention, and recruitment remain problematic also in organizations that have implemented practices that can be interpreted as gifts (training, leave, indirect compensation)

Alternative: Consistency Theory

- › Practices need to be consistent (i.e. complement, reinforce or buffer),
 - Internal consistency (among different HRM practices)
 - Contextual consistency (between HRM practices and organizational context)
- › Explains why implementation of single practices alone is not sufficient to retain personnel.
- › Formalization is interpreted as being at odds with gift exchange. For example, implementation of performance evaluation can be seen as controlling, can be buffered by professional development.



Conclusion and Recommendations

- › Papers provide excellent first-hand insights on Humanitarian Organizations and aid workers motivations
- › Very original range of qualitative methods applied
- › Papers would benefit from enriching their theoretical discussions by
 - Grounding their arguments in a theory of action
 - Explicating the mechanisms
 - Explicitly addressing macro-micro-macro links
- › Neither aid workers nor aid organizations are so special that “standard” organization theories could not deal with them