

The Norm of Norms in HRM Research

A Review and Suggestions for Future Studies

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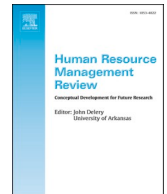
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The norm of norms in HRM research: A review and suggestions for future studies

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a systematic literature review of how norms are used in a sample of 436 articles in the human resource management (HRM) field. In exploring how norms are theorized, applied, and operationalized, the article identifies four main thematic fields in which norms are commonly used: culture, diversity, labor market, and work-life. The article makes three main contributions to the existing literature. First, it reveals a pervasive inconsistency in the use of norms across HRM research such that any assumption of a “norm of norms”—that is, consensus on the meaning of norms in HRM—is erroneous and in need of critical reflection. Second, the review offers a typology that outlines four similarities and differences in how HRM research employs norms. Finally, the authors propose a norm-critical research agenda as a relevant basis for future critical and reflexive enquiry into norms in both HRM theory and practice.

1. Introduction

There is a consensus in research that social norms influence human resource management (HRM) practices and policies and on how norms are understood, performed, and/or resisted (Afota, Ollier-Malaterre, & Vandenberghe, 2019; Branine & Pollard, 2010; Kapoutsis, Papalexandris, Thanos, & Nikolopoulos, 2012; Thacker, 2015). Norms are commonly acknowledged not only to inform but also to govern—that is, inhibit or enforce—HRM practice and are therefore frequently referred to in research on the management and organization of human resources (Feierabend & Staffellback, 2016; Ford, Atkinson, Harding, & Collinson, 2021; Groen, Wilderom, & Wouters, 2017; Wiggins-Romesburg & Githens, 2018). However, despite the omnipresence of norms in HRM research, there is no consensus on, let alone attention paid to, what norms *are* and what norms *do* (Hill, 1974). Addressing this lack of a clear and critical understanding of norms, this review article unpacks the largely taken-for-granted assumptions concerning the theorization, application, and operationalization of norms in HRM research and proposes a critical understanding of norms from the perspective of norm critique to advance the scholarship on HRM.

In HRM research, norms are commonly understood as a set of largely unwritten rules that structure, guide, and inform social interactions (Chen, Tsai, & Hu, 2008; Heap, Barnes, & Weller, 2018; Hebson, Rubery, & Grimshaw, 2015; Kwon & Farndale, 2020),

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although this understanding is seldom clearly defined but, rather, subtly implied. Norms are often delineated against formal rules and institutional regulations or laws, or in relation to similar concepts such as values, joint beliefs, and shared assumptions (Ali, Azim, & Falcone, 1993; Bolton & Laaser, 2020; Entrekina & Chun, 2001). Broadly, norms are acknowledged to regulate the societies we live in, the organizations we are employed in, the teams that we work with, as well as the occupations with which we identify (Bealer & Bhanugopan, 2014; Hoffmann, 2006; Mishra & Smyth, 2013). More specifically, societal, organizational, and group norms fundamentally influence the way HRM practices and policies are interpreted, enacted, and resisted (Blagoev, Muhr, Ortlieb, & Schreyögg, 2018; Branine & Pollard, 2010; Carney & Junor, 2014; Charlesworth & Heron, 2012; Peetz, 2015). Norms are thus a core concern for understanding and theorizing human behavior and its management in organizations. However, while the concept of norms is ubiquitous in HRM research, the majority of articles mobilize this term uncritically, unreflectively, colloquially, and without clear definition (Boivin, 2016; Grimshaw & Carroll, 2006; Hofstetter & Harpaz, 2015).

This inconsistency in usage means that our understanding of human relations is fundamentally based on a taken-for-granted assumption, namely that the HRM research community shares the same “norm of norms” that all study areas of HRM understand and mobilize in the same way. But this is not the case. The literature, as this review will show, exhibits large discrepancies in how norms are theorized, applied, and operationalized in HRM research. This is problematic for at least three reasons. First, it risks misinterpretation of study results that refer to norms as explanatory factors, implicitly assuming a shared understanding, while in fact such joint conception of norms is nonexistent in HRM research. Second, it creates a barrier for understanding *how* norms influence the management and organization of human resources, moving beyond the shared assumption *that* norms influence HRM. Third, it inhibits critical reflection on the legitimacy of norms and their effects.

This article addresses the outlined problems associated with an assumed norm of norms through a review of the extant HRM research. We focus on the reviewed literature's theorization, application, and operationalization of norms to collate knowledge about their use in the theorization and management of human resources. Moreover, the review points to shortcomings in existing research and provides suggestions for how to address them in future. To that end, our review is grounded in the following research question:

How are norms theorized, applied, and operationalized in HRM research, and which avenues should future research investigate?

In answering this research question, the review offers three contributions to the existing literature. First, it reveals a lack of consistency in the use of norms in HRM research, which exposes an assumed norm of norms to be erroneous and in need of more critical reflection. Importantly, we do not argue for a reinstitution of a norm of norms but rather for a reflexive, attentive, and more transparent approach to working with norms in HRM. Second, to provide a basis for such critical reflection, we present a typology that outlines four main similarities and differences in how norms are used in HRM research. Third, this review suggests a norm-critical approach to HRM research as a relevant future research avenue, which provides a starting point for a more reflexive engagement with, and use of, norms in HRM theory and practice.

The article will progress as follows: Section 2 details the methodology used to review the literature. In Section 3 we discuss our findings. Sections 4 and 5 together present the typology, looking more closely at the similarities and differences in how norms are used in HRM research. In Section 6 we present four thematic fields where norms are commonly used in the reviewed studies. In Section 7 we discuss our main findings, and we conclude the article in Section 8 with a concrete suggestion for future HRM studies to adopt a “norm-critical” research agenda. By norm-critical, we mean research that not only renders norms the object of study but also critically attends to normative practices for organizing (Arifeen & Syed, 2019; Blagoev et al., 2018; Martin, 2010; Mishra & Smyth, 2013) and questioning the legitimacy of prevailing norms that structure social and organizational relations, standards, and expectations.

2. Methodology

The current body of research into norms is extensive, thus a systematic and rigorous review process was important to produce a relevant and robust result. Many recent high-level review articles in both HRM and management studies more generally (Afrahi, Blenkinsopp, de Arroyabe, & Karim, 2021; Calabrò et al., 2019; Nabi, Liñan, Fayolle, Krueger, & Walmsley, 2017; Nofal, Nicolaou, Symeonidou, & Shane, 2018) rely on the systematic review method explicated by Tranfield, Denyer, and Smart (2003). We have adopted the same approach, following the steps of a systematic rather than a narrative review. Tranfield et al. (2003, p. 209) clarify the difference between the two as follows: “Systematic reviews differ from traditional narrative reviews by adopting a replicable, scientific and transparent process, in other words a detailed technology, that aims to minimize bias through exhaustive literature searches of published and unpublished studies and by providing an audit trail of the reviewers' decisions, procedures and conclusions.”

We have followed Tranfield et al.'s (2003) protocol and have documented our methodological steps as transparently as possible to both minimize bias and allow for replication. Tranfield et al. (2003) recommend structuring the review process into three phases: planning the review, conducting the review, and reporting and dissemination. We reflect on all three stages below in the description of our methodological steps, and explain how they contributed to conducting a systematic review.

2.1. Planning the review

The planning phase consists of three steps: first, identifying the need for a review; second, preparing a proposal for the review; and third, developing the review protocol. To start with, Tranfield et al. (2003) suggest organizing a panel of experts to determine the need for the review and to discuss the inclusion and exclusion of articles and results along the way. In response, all four authors of this article functioned as a review panel by being actively involved throughout the review. Furthermore, at the beginning of the process, we consulted experts in the HRM field to justify the need for a review, to discuss an approach, and to select methods.

Later, we discussed our preliminary findings with other HRM scholars in our network by presenting an initial overview of the review at a cross-departmental research and paper development workshop. This had the dual purpose of ensuring that our findings not only resonated with their understanding of the field but also that they would be useful for future work. The fact that we four authors have been involved in the entire process and that we have used our network as a review board qualifies the research and strengthens the systematic aspects of—while minimizing personal bias in—the review procedure. The number of people involved emphasized the need for a specific review protocol, which guided all our decisions throughout. As we explain below, this also involved a rigid review coding sheet, which guided the way articles were selected and coded for information.

2.2. Conducting the review

[Tranfield et al. \(2003\)](#) highlight that conducting a review along systematic rigorous steps is one of the most important elements of conducting a systematic rather than a narrative review. Systematic reviews provide a full overview of the field and, thus, the body of research. Narrative reviews position a research question within an empirical article and lay the ground for further empirical articles rather than making their own contribution. As mentioned, we follow the protocol for a systematic review, discussed in more detail below.

2.2.1. Identification and selection of studies

The first two steps in the review phase are to identify the area of research and select relevant studies. Articles dealing with norms were identified using a two-step method. First, the 54 journals listed under the HRM theme in the ABS journal ranking list were selected as the basis for the review. Here, an initial search was performed for articles with the word “norm” in the title, abstract, or keywords. Articles published in languages other than English were excluded. Second, one of the authors read all the abstracts and excluded articles that only used the term norm colloquially, such as “it is the norm for researchers to...” Articles that addressed norms purely from a methodological perspective or did not address work or organizations were also excluded. After this two-step selection process, which ended in July 2020, the sample comprised 436 unique articles for review. No articles published after that date were included.

2.2.2. Quality assessment, data extraction, and monitoring progress

The third step is to conduct a quality assessment. As explained by [Tranfield et al. \(2003\)](#), this is important to minimize bias in the coding and thematization of the selected articles. Here, our research protocol, that is, our coding sheet, was crucial in that our assessment of study quality was not a single step but rather continual throughout the process. We explain below how we managed to maintain focus on quality assessment throughout the coding procedure.

Data extraction and monitoring progress represent the fourth step. Here, the coding and thematization process was iterative. Thematization began with the first author's reading of the abstracts and identification of an initial list of 13 themes (ideal worker, cross-cultural comparisons, gender, age, diversity, work–life balance, dirty work, on-boarding, solidarity, building organizational cultures, labor market relations, unions, technology). We then met to discuss themes and possible subthemes in relation to our own knowledge of the field: Well-being/flexibility/stress, organizational change, and human resource development/organizational development were added as themes, and body type, racialization, sexuality, bodily capability, and class were added as subthemes to diversity.

The remaining authors now read a third of the articles each, beginning with 10 random articles per person, extracted phrases containing the word “norm,” and identified if norms were implied elsewhere in the text and the context in which they were used. All four authors subsequently reconvened to discuss whether the codes made sense, if some could be collated or removed, or more themes should be added.

Three themes were deleted (dirty work, on-boarding, technology) and several were combined (e.g., age, gender, and diversity; ideal worker, well-being/flexibility/stress, and work–life balance; labor market relations, solidarity, unions, etc.). This process left four thematic codes (culture, diversity, labor market, and work–life), and we added an open theme to capture anything else.

In addition, six descriptive codes were recorded: year of publication; methodology (quantitative or qualitative, or mixed if both); study approach (empirical and/or theoretical); level of analysis (society, profession, organization, individual); sector (public, private, civil); analytic approach (descriptive, prescriptive, critical). Moreover, we noted any explicit mention of secondary theories to review which theoretical perspectives accompanied research on norms. Open fields afforded collection of exemplary quotes for each theme. Lastly, an extra field was created in which the coder could highlight any particularly interesting quotes. All 436 articles were coded systematically in accordance with this coding sheet. The articles were divided randomly among the three coding authors who—together with the fourth researcher—were in continuous contact to discuss the process, resolve problems, and verify that the coding progressed uniformly. Halfway through, the authors met to calibrate their method and consult with the fourth author, who had read all the abstracts.

2.3. Reporting and dissemination

Step five is data synthesis, that is, how the extracted data is presented for this article. As [Tranfield et al. \(2003\)](#) suggest in their third phase on reporting and dissemination, we have chosen to report a quantified synthesis of the overall characteristics of the selected articles as well as the thematic analysis, as described in the coding process above. The purpose of supplementing systematic qualitative analysis with quantitative data extraction is to reduce human error ([Tranfield et al., 2003](#)). Here, we produced tables to capture the composition and descriptive characteristics of the dataset and to inform the figures in this article. Cross-checking table results and the

total article count against each coder's work, together with regular discussions among us, led us to regularly verify our results and ensure overall coherence.

3. Findings

3.1. Overview

The methodological approach described above resulted in a sample of 436 articles relevant for analysis. In this section, we provide an overview of the most important descriptive signifiers identified in the analysis, namely year of publication, methodology, level of analysis, sector, and analytic approach. Moreover, we outline the explicit and implicit definitions of norms identified in the reviewed studies, highlighting a lack of conceptual work underpinning the usage of norms.

As depicted in Fig. 1, the selected articles were published between 1967 and 2020, with most articles published after 2010. After carefully screening all articles, 43 were excluded because they did not engage with the concept of norms.

3.2. Study approach and methodology

A majority² (53%) of the remaining 393 articles present empirical work, 20% feature theoretical work, 22% combine both, and 3% present ideas without empirical or theoretical inquiry. As illustrated in Fig. 2, the empirical research builds on qualitative methods in 51% of the cases and on quantitative methods in 37% of the cases. Some 4% of the articles utilize a mixed method approach and 7% fall outside of this categorization.

3.3. Sector

We identified the sectors the research articles focus on, and differentiated between the private, public, and civic sectors. This was not always possible, as 239 (61%) of the articles did not provide sufficient information. For example, some organizations, such as hospitals, could be both public and private sector depending on the context in which the study took place. For the remaining 154 articles, 26% focused on the private sector, 8% concerned the public sector, 4% focused on an intersection between public and private sectors, and 1% were conducted in the civic sector.

3.4. Level of analysis

Finally, where possible, we identified the level of analysis of each article, differentiating between societal, professional, organizational, and individual. Multiple mentions were possible (and frequent), for example, when an article discussed both a case firm (organizational) and national culture (societal). While we considered the majority of articles to be organizational-level analyses, it was hardly surprising in the field of HRM research to also identify societal- and individual-level analyses. Only a minority of articles were explicitly professional-level analyses (see Fig. 3).

3.5. Definitions of norms

We find that, despite the broad reference to norms in the research, only a few studies provide a definition. Some 192 articles engage explicitly or implicitly with norms as a concept, meaning that they define or otherwise conceptualize norms.

3.5.1. Explicit definitions of norms

Explicit conceptualizations primarily rely on theoretical foundations, such as the theory of planned behavior by Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) and Ajzen (1991), which have guided a sizable amount of research (Altmann & Kröll, 2018; Boon, Paauwe, Boselie, & Den Hartog, 2009; Dodoiu, 2015; Hill, 1974; Kashif, Zarkada, & Thurasamy, 2017; Otto & Dalbert, 2010; Thi & Ho, 2015). The theory of planned behavior aims to predict intention to engage in a specific behavior, arguing that behavioral intention precedes actual engagement in a behavior. Social norms are conceptualized as “an important determinant of the intention to perform a specific behavior,” as they “describe the expectations of the social environment toward a particular behavior” (Otto & Dalbert, 2012, p. 171).

Similarly influential is the conceptualization of *normative isomorphic pressures*, as discussed in the institutional theory of DiMaggio and Powell (1983), which was also found across a breadth of the literature (Behrens & Helfen, 2016, p. 336; Kulkarni & Ramamoorthy, 2011; Svalund, 2015, p. 101). Here, the focus lies on identifying external pressures that lead to isomorphic behavior of organizations and individual organizational members, such as managers, when entering a new environment. “Socially constructed systems of norms” are understood as creating pressures of desirability and conformity which must be met to remain legitimate (Kulkarni & Ramamoorthy, 2011).

Another important influence is Blau's (1964) work on social exchange theory, which builds upon the general idea that if one person does another a favor, there is a general yet undetermined expectation of reciprocity. Blau (1964) understands norms as creating shared

² Percentages are rounded; exact numbers are provided in Figure 2.

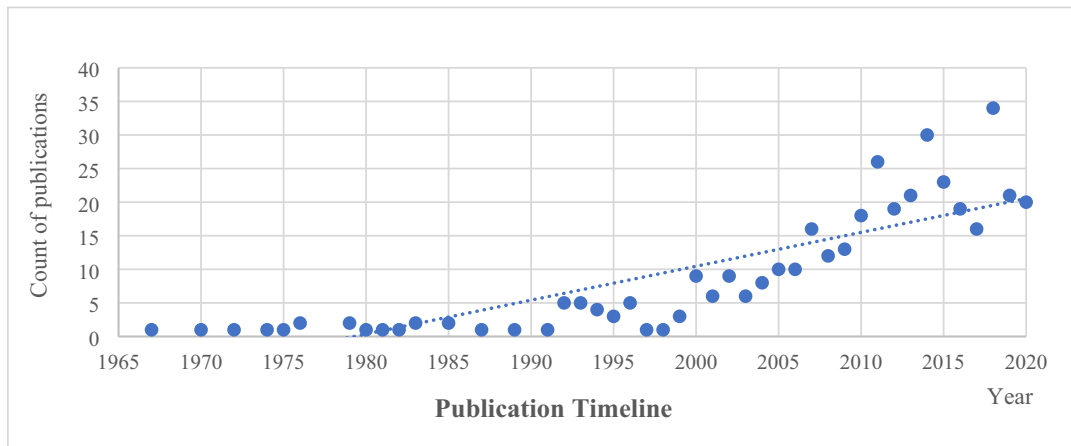


Fig. 1. Scatterplot and trend of the selected articles.

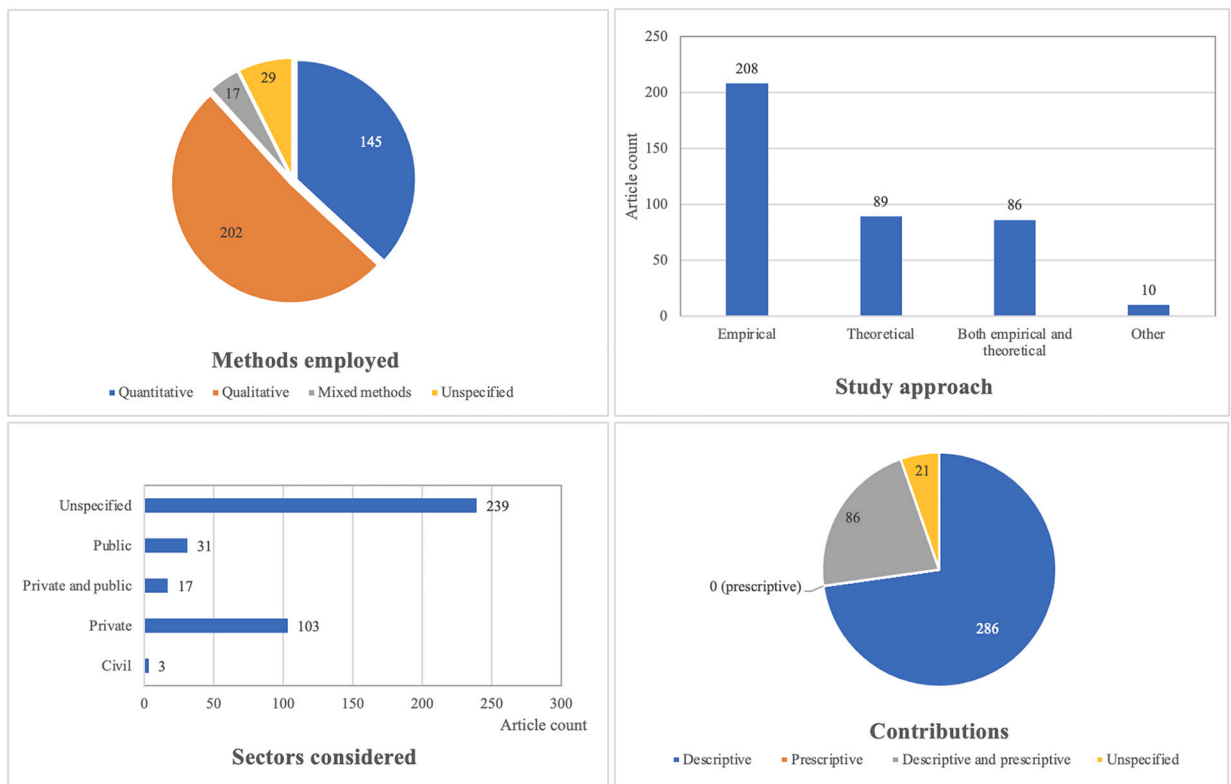


Fig. 2. Dataset characteristics.

expectations within a group. In turn, this leads to obligations for group members, which is why his theory remains relevant in discussions around norms (Ahmad, 2018; Chaudhuri & Ghosh, 2012; Coyle-Shapiro & Shore, 2007; Feierabend & Staffelback, 2016, p. 775; Jungbauer, Loewenbrück, Reichmann, Wendsche, & Wegge, 2018; Mignonac & Richebé, 2013, p. 75; Quratulain, Khan, Crawshaw, Arain, & Hameed, 2018). Such theory-based explicit definitions of norms are primarily—yet not exclusively—utilized to operationalize norms in quantitative studies. Nonetheless, it *cannot* be argued that quantitative research relies on explicit delineations while qualitative studies assume implicit definitions.

3.5.2. Implicit definitions of norms

Several theoretical, empirical, qualitative, and quantitative articles define norms implicitly by, for instance, equating or subsuming norms as part of organizational or national culture (Ferner, Almond, Colling, & Edwards, 2005; Foucreault, Ollier-Malaterre, &

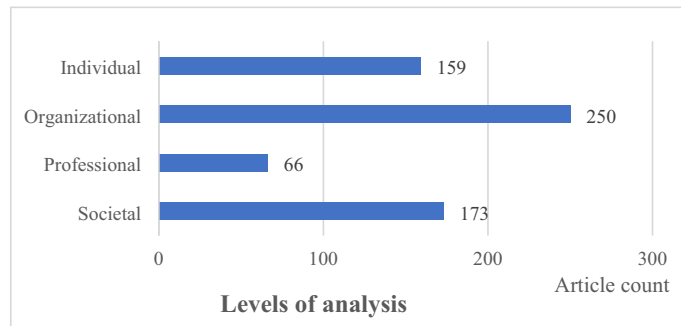


Fig. 3. Levels of analysis.

Ménard, 2018; Hofstetter & Harpaz, 2015; Kragh, 2012; Martin, 2010; Zolotoy, O'Sullivan, & Martin, 2018) in combination with related concepts, such as values, beliefs, and shared assumptions (Chen et al., 2008; Kessler, Bach, & Nath, 2019; Kwon & Farndale, 2020; Winter & Jackson, 2016). Many of these studies draw on the cross-cultural studies of Hofstede where norms and values at a national level are understood to influence organizational behavior (Ali et al., 1993; Ma, Liang, Erkus, & Tabak, 2012; Yaghi & Bates, 2020). For example, Kessler et al. (2019, p. 163) build upon Smircich's (1983a) definition of organizational culture: "OC [organizational culture] is defined as key assumptions, beliefs, norms, and values shared continuously by members of an organization." The authors use norms thereafter as a constituting element of organizational culture, undifferentiated from the other terms mentioned (assumptions, beliefs, and values). We identified 192 such explicit and implicit definitions, leaving 244 articles in which there was no conceptualization, definition, or explication of how norms were understood.

In sum, norms are used in a variety of studies that focus on different sectors, position their analysis at societal, organizational, or individual levels, and employ a plethora of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Moreover, researchers work with norms theoretically as well as empirically. We also identified a lack of conceptual work underpinning the actual *usage* of norms. Although norms are referenced throughout research, few studies define what they mean, relying instead on assumptions and implications despite the fact that norms form an integral part of the research base upon which the studies are founded. This underlines the relevance of investigating what we mean when discussing norms in HRM and how norms are used, and points to a need for scrutinizing how norms are theorized, applied, and operationalized.

4. Similarities in the use of norms

As definitions of norms are scarce, we identified the most salient similarities and differences in the use of norms in the reviewed studies and developed a typology for them (see Table 1).

We identified, and conceptualize below, four important similarities in how norms are used and understood.

4.1. Norms influence behavior (and expectations)

First, there is a consensus that norms influence behavior. Some studies link norms directly with individual behavior (Parnell & Sullivan, 1992; Ravid, Rafaeli, & Grandey, 2010), while others claim that norms influence (perceived) expectations, which in turn influence behavior (Arifeen & Syed, 2019; Dencker, Joshi, & Martocchio, 2007). For instance, one study suggests that gender and leadership norms influence expectations of who can be a leader, which in turn influence leadership behavior: "Our findings suggest that the informal nature and characteristics of many SMEs [small and medium-sized enterprises] may exacerbate gendered stereotypes and norms, which ultimately constrains women's leadership learning and aspirations. [...] At the organizational and societal level, women successors' disruption of the leadership norm challenges others' expectations of who can be a legitimate leader" (Mustafa, Elliott, & Zhou, 2019, p. 518).

Furthermore, studies have argued that gender norms encourage women to take on specific work tasks: "both paid and unpaid caring work has historically been linked to notions of appropriate 'womanhood' and femininity. This being the case, individual decisions to undertake caring roles, whether in the private sphere or in the public world of work may reflect sensitivity to the 'meaning' associated with deviating from the norm that women are 'natural carers'. That is, for a woman to choose not to be primary carer may be

Table 1
Similarities in the use of norms.

	Effects	Causes
Individual	4.1. Norms influence behavior (and expectations)	4.2. Norms are enforced by (the threat of) repercussions for those who deviate
Collective	4.3. Norms become salient in interactions where they regulate belonging and exclusion	4.4. Norms achieve stability over time by being repeated, formally and informally, between people

interpreted as not ‘womanly’” (Kaine, 2012, p. 326). Similarly, another study highlights that class intersects with norms and expectations about manhood as breadwinning in constituting the meaning of work (Murphy, 2002). Yet another study investigates age norms: “Specifically, people observe the ‘typical ages’ of employees within an organization or profession, judge that they are outside of the norm, and establish expectations about the difficulty of joining such organizations or professions” (Slay Ferraro, Prussia, & Mehrotra, 2018, p. 214). Here, the authors build on the influence of norms on expectation to argue that this infers employees’ (lack of) career transitions.

Another example of how norms influence individual behavior by establishing normative expectations is found in literature that deals with the “full-time norm” (referencing hours of work). Others (Baird & Charlesworth, 2007) link notions of the “ideal worker” with underlying norms and practices associated with the organization of work, specifically hours of work—the full-time norm expectation—that is found to be resilient and, thus, difficult to overcome despite an emerging new norm around part-time working for women returning from maternity leave. Such notions of the ideal worker, which come with certain normative expectations, are found to push (in this case academic) workers to “prioritize work, have few outside interests and responsibilities, and pursue research single-mindedly” (K. Sang, Powell, Finkel, & Richards, 2015, p. 239). Similarly, Boiarintseva and Richardson (2019) consider how industry expectations and norms of behavior are found to make it difficult, if not impossible, for male lawyers to achieve work–life balance because the extant norm in the legal profession to put work first is often disconnected from or even incompatible with individual desires to put family first. This not least because norms that are taken for granted become everyday informal practices, according to Arifeen and Syed (2019) who situate norms within dominant organizational structures that generate expectations of “being a man,” “knowing white behavior,” and “work-related socializing” (p. 1195).

4.2. Norms are enforced by (the threat of) repercussions for those who deviate

Second, the reviewed studies tend to agree that norms are enforced through the threat of repercussions for norm breaking (Fine, Horowitz, Weigler, & Basis, 2010; Hoffmann, 2006; Thacker, 2015; Wolcott, 2008), including loss of group membership, losing access to privileges, or risking legitimacy for non-norm-confirming behavior. It should be noted that exceptions exist, for instance, in the case of highly employable workers who may not feel bound by organizational and interpersonal norms (De Cuyper et al., 2014), in which case counterproductive, that is, norm-violating, behavior can be expected. However, these exceptional behaviors are not how norms are commonly adhered to. Bergenhenegouwen (1996, p. 23) understands norms to be “rules of conduct directly related to concrete action” and further distinguishes between implicit and explicit norms, where the former is a “formal rule or procedure” and the latter “works informally among several individuals.”

Similar differentiations between formal and informal norms can be found in other studies. In general, we observed a distinction between norms as rather fixed formal laws, more mutable rules that are negotiated collectively in a given organization or at group level rather than imposed externally, and norms as informal conventions or “unwritten rules governing behavior” (Bischoff & Wood, 2013, p. 372; see also Korte, 2009, p. 285). However, these categorizations are not necessarily viewed as oppositional, mutually exclusive, or hierarchically ordered. For instance, studies use the term “open norms” (Kun, 2018) to suggest that legal statutes are open to ongoing reinterpretation such that related norms can be reshaped over time (see also Deakin & Sarkar, 2011). As such, open norms affect corporate behavior by filling a gap where mandatory legislation is missing.

One study uses the lack of traffic lights and police in Mumbai to exemplify how social norms of precedence kick in where there is no formal law (Dixit, 2009). Another study (Heap et al., 2018) points to how formal regulations, such as anti-discrimination laws on the basis of gender, may be insufficient to change workplace norms, meaning there can be a situation of *de jure* equality with *de facto* inequality. As the authors reflect, the translation of policy intentions into practice is always going to be imperfect: “There is never a guarantee that the inclusive behaviors that legislation seeks to encourage will emerge to alter the norms governing day-to-day interactions” (Heap et al., 2018, p. 124). In which case, the social norm that dominates in the workplace will maintain the status quo.

These distinctions mean that violations of norms also come with dissimilar consequences. While breaking a formal norm, such as an official rule, might be punishable by formal measure, violation of an implicit norm might be “punishable” by experiencing social pressure, harassment, or the threat of appearing foolish in the eyes of peers or superiors. A study investigating job change in Japan, for instance, argues that workers who are perceived as breaking a norm of loyalty toward an employer pay “a price of deviance” (Holbrow, 2015, p. 164) when applying for future jobs, as their position as good employees is delegitimized and their access to networks that could provide search assistance is limited due to their deviant behavior. Norm following is thus “reinforced by the risk of social and economic sanctions” (Alvesson & Einola, 2018, p. 287).

But such sanctions can also be perceived as unfair, especially when they upset the norm of reciprocity by administering severe punishments for what may be perceived as minor infringements. In this regard, Charness and Levine (2000) examined the outcomes of employee suggestions that led to the employee’s layoff instead of an anticipated reward. In short, established norms are considered difficult to deviate from, not least because following norms is thought to be a key driver for people, given that most like to feel “normal” in the sense of not deviating from their reference group.

4.3. Norms become salient in interactions where they regulate belonging and exclusion

A third important similarity states that norms are salient only in interaction. This means that norms cannot be reproduced individually, that is, in isolation (of a social group or another person). Linking back to the prior point, studies explain that norms are enforced through repercussions. These repercussions must first be enforced by a social group and, second, most commonly imply group belonging and exclusion. Following norms thus secures belonging to a group while deviation leads to exclusion.

Some studies speak of “subjective norms” rather than objectively existing norms to highlight that what is perceived as norm following and norm breaking relies on the individual's subjective perception of what is expected to be norm-abiding behavior (Altmann & Kröll, 2018; Arshad, Farooq, Sultana, & Farooq, 2016; Chen et al., 2008; Huang, 2011; Lu, 2012; Moore & Burrus, 2019; Otto & Dalbert, 2012; T. H. Stone, Jawahar, & Kisamore, 2009; Thi & Ho, 2015). Nonetheless, this understanding of norms still implies the existence of a group (or at least another person) whose expectations are anticipated and that appears as a perceived significant other.

Relying on an extended theory of planned behavior (where, as mentioned, attitudes and norms are taken as predictors of behavioral intentions), De Cuyper et al. (2014, p. 433) point out that “subjective norms are internalizations of external influences,” unlike moral norms, for example, which are “intrinsic to the individual” and “reflect people's reaction to higher order principles that determine what is seen as essentially right and wrong.” The point here is that the idea of subjective norms is premised on a perception of whether significant others, such as peers or superiors, will endorse a given behavior (Altmann & Kröll, 2018; Wiethoff, 2004; Yizhong et al., 2017).

4.4. Norms achieve stability over time by being repeated, formally and informally, between people

Finally, norms are understood as stable over time so that individuals can anticipate how their desires align with what is commonly considered to be “right and good” and, in turn, adjust how they act on their desires to avoid the punishments discussed above. Norms achieve their stability through formal and informal repetition. For instance, they are repeated *formally* through a set of public and official policies (Mishra & Smyth, 2013) and personnel handbooks (Redman & Mathews, 1994) or contracts (Rosenkranz, 2019); they are repeated *informally* through individual norm-adhering behavior (Korte, 2009; Spence et al., 2016; Zolotoy et al., 2018), thereby stabilizing the repeated norms over time.

However, despite their stabilizing effect on organizational functioning, norms are also found to be mutable if rendered the object of change processes, if given enough time, and if the new norm is taken up by the very people whose behavior it is supposed to influence (Ottaway, 1976). For instance, a study (Axtell, Moser, & McGoldrick, 2019) of norms for email communication illustrates the temporality of norms, that is, how they hold the dual property of being both fluid and stable over time. The case study examines how status group membership and status perception shape behavioral expectations and norm perceptions of what is appropriate. The authors show that email norms are not yet established because this form of communication is still relatively new compared to letters, implying that norms take time to crystalize or normalize.

Another insight from this piece of research is that norms of formality and appropriateness are open to interpretation and thereby potential change. Similarly, Mishra and Smyth (2013) highlight the potential reinterpretation of existing norms, such as the ideal worker norm. Claiming that “the proportion of female staff and proportion of migrant workers that the firm employs is likely to have a significant impact on the organizational culture of the firm and underlying norms governing employer expectations of hours worked” (Mishra & Smyth, 2013, p. 62), the authors argue that an ideal worker norm persists, yet its meaning changes and is reinterpreted over time. Norms are thus considered stable but not static.

5. Differences in the use of norms

Beyond the similarities outlined in the previous section, our review identifies substantial differences in how norms are theorized, applied, and operationalized. The differences can be grouped into four categories (see Table 2).

5.1. Using norms to explain the object of study

Many studies use norms to *explain* the object of inquiry. The objects of study derive from a variety of fields, as do the norms mobilized to explain them. Such studies build their analyses upon established norms to explain the outcome of their empirical results. Studies that use a conceptualization of a “solidarity norm” and a “free-rider punishment norm” to explain social relations during and after strike situations (Peetz, 2006; Thommes, Akkerman, Torenvlied, & Born, 2014) exemplify this.

Other scholars investigate, for instance: how age norms influence perceived employability (Dello Russo et al., 2020; Dencker et al., 2007; Warren & Kelloway, 2010); how subjective norms predict intentions to engage in post-retirement work (Otto & Dalbert, 2012); how wage norms are implemented through mechanisms such as coordinated central bargaining (Hansen & Seip, 2018); how national cultural norms affect management and leadership practices (Bealer & Bhanugopan, 2014); or how organizational norms anchored within the organizational culture influence the reactions to and acceptance of organizational development initiatives (Lee & Rees, 2020). In these studies, the norm itself is not explicitly investigated but rather drawn upon as an implicating factor that explains the empirical outcomes. Examples include when group norm theory is used to explain development of prejudicial norms toward

Table 2
Differences in the use of norms.

	Explanatory	Exploratory
Descriptive	5.1. Norms are used to <i>explain</i> the object of study, so that empirical findings can be justified by norms as an implicating factor	5.2. Norms are <i>explored</i> as the object of study, investigating which norms prevail in an empirical setting
Reflexive	5.3. Norms are used to <i>criticize</i> the empirical findings, so that the effects of norms come into focus	5.4. The identified norms themselves are critiqued in what can be called a <i>norm-critical</i> approach to research

stigmatized individuals (Miller, Nicols, & Eure, 2009), when the feminization of employment norms is taken to explain change in employment relationships (Cranford, Vosko, & Zukewich, 2003), or when norms as one among other factors can tell us why informal networks in organizations disintegrate (Bala Subramanian & Mehta, 2013). Norms are thus not questioned but rather taken for granted as existing and affecting expectations and behavior in predefined or presupposed ways.

5.2. Exploring norms as the object of study

A second group of studies aims at *exploring* norms as the object of study. In contrast to the research outlined in the previous section, these studies do not take established norms for granted but instead question and investigate which norms are prevailing in their empirical setting and how these norms are established and reproduced. This is exemplified in a study that explores how the restructuring of an organization led to sex resegregation (Skuratowicz & Hunter, 2004). The authors outline four factors that explain how gender norms affect sex segregation while becoming reinforced through the sex segregation process, thereby scrutinizing the process through which gender norms emerge and examining which gender norms manifest in the organization.

A different study that explores, rather than presumes, employment contract norms finds that de facto norms differ from what is prescribed de jure, and identifies a shift in employment contract norms toward more flexible employment norms (Stone, 2007). Another study investigates how sociological and industrial relations literature treats normatively legitimized authority (Hill, 1974). Yet another study (McCann, Granter, Hassard, & Hyde, 2015) explores the norms of patient engagement in the British National Health Service, investigating how the socially desirable professional norms of good patient care are undermined by the norms of business utility that demand faster and less caring patient engagement.

With norms becoming the object of study, the research in this second category establishes conceptualizations of specific norms and their implications. In short, while having the exploration of norms in common, various studies approach the task in different ways ranging from exploring formal law and informal norms (Bischoff & Wood, 2013) and norms in everyday practices (Arifeen & Syed, 2019) to norms as a matter of measuring modal patterns in labor market participation (Carney & Junor, 2014). The main contribution from these investigations is thus a closer and more nuanced engagement with, and assessment of the impacts of, the prevailing norms in the respective empirical settings rather than taking their existence and effects for granted.

5.3. Criticizing the effects of norms

A third field of studies uses their exploration of norms to *criticize* aspects of the status quo in their research setting as an outcome of, or as implied by, the identified norms. This can be seen primarily in the field of diversity research where scholars explore and criticize the detrimental effects of gendered norms. For instance, one study outlines how divorced women experience an increased risk of harassment at the workplace due to the norms relating to the intersection of marital status and gender (Adikaram, 2018). Likewise, a study of the under-recording and under-reporting of women's work in Malaysia represents a critique of the outcomes of gendered norms (Franck & Olsson, 2014). Opposing the view of women as passive recipients, the study shows how women function as active agents in shaping and possibly changing how they are affected by the permeating gendered norms. According to the authors: "women may strategically label their activities as 'housework' as a means of gaining access to work in public places while appearing to comply with the norm that their actual place is in the home or that the man is the family breadwinner" (Franck & Olsson, 2014, p. 219).

Other examples come from studies that engage with the ideal worker norm. One study finds that only two in five managers believe that depression is an appropriate topic to talk about at the workplace, which the authors identify as implied by organizational norms that impede open disclosure of depression and engagement with the topic (Martin, 2010, p. 664). Another example is a historical analysis of the development of the ideal worker norm since the beginning of the 20th century. The study offers a critique of gendered and racialized aspects in the development of the norm that reinforce an unequal separation of work and family responsibilities (Davies & Frink, 2014). There are also examples of studies criticizing the normative foundation of extant literature, for instance, when an existing working time regime is taken as the norm (Blagoev et al., 2018) or when it is questioned whether the standard employment relationship is still the norm (Kullmann, 2018).

The key difference between the prior categories and this category is thus, arguably, a shift in the research aim and overall aspiration. While studies in the first two categories aim to describe and explain the mechanisms they identify in their research, either with norms as explanatory factors or as objects of study, the research in this category aspires to utilize norms as a basis for the critique of their effects as, for instance, when moving from institutional economics to Marxist and feminist theory to analyze gendered relations (Badgett & Folbre, 1999). Here, the criticality lies in the shift made from a functional interpretation of norms as benign devices for solving organizational or societal problems to conceiving norms as "tools of collective domination" and as "gendered structures of constraint" (Badgett & Folbre, 1999, pp. 314–315) to criticize the adverse outcomes of such norms. The existence of norms as such is acknowledged and empirically established, but the effects of individual norms are critically framed as explicit challenges.

5.4. Norm critique

Finally, a few studies engage critically with norms. The studies do not solely and primarily criticize the adverse outcomes of norms but instead engage in a critique of the identified norms. These studies move in the direction of working norm-critically by questioning the legitimacy of the prevailing norms that structure social and organizational relations, standards, and expectations, and suggesting not only that they could, but also that they should, be otherwise. Staying with the example of the ideal worker norm, some studies suggest that, to prevent unfair treatment in the workplace and improve working conditions, we need to change not only the norm of

what it means to be an ideal worker (Kmec, O'Connor, & Schieman, 2014) but also the expectations associated with the full-time norm, that is, long work-hour norms (Mishra & Smyth, 2013).

Another study criticizes that women in the science, engineering, and technology field suffer from male-favoring norms that create “feelings of marginalization, isolation and over extension for women” in these career fields (Servon & Visser, 2011, p. 281). Writing about feminization of employment norms, understood as the erosion of the standard employment relationship as a norm in Canada, Cranford et al. (2003) testify not only how non-standard forms of employment spread but also how they bring about employment precarity for women. This causes the authors to criticize the normalization of standard employment relationships (SERs): “The heterogeneity among forms of employment that fall outside the SER makes it necessary to question what have come to be normalized descriptive concepts—terms such as ‘non-standard employment’” (Cranford et al., 2003, p. 456). In contrast to studies in the previous category, the primary focus of these studies is not the detrimental impact that exclusionary norms can have but the norm itself.

Nonetheless, the implications of following or breaking norms are an elemental part of this research as they provide the basis upon

Table 3

Overview of the “culture” theme.

Theme	Theory	Journals	Representative studies	Quotations
The role of norms in national, cross-national, and regional cultures (Culture)	Sociological perspectives on industrialization from Weber (for example 1978), Marx, Durkheim, and Tönnies; The theory of social distance and reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960; Sahlins, 2004)	<i>International Journal of Human Resource Management</i> , <i>Career Development</i> , <i>International, Human Resource Management Review</i> , <i>Human Resource Management</i> (USA), <i>Human Resource Planning</i> , <i>South Asian Journal of Human Resources Management</i>	Feierabend and Staffelback (2016); Groen et al. (2017); Coyle-Shapiro and Shore (2007); Thacker (2015); Nolan (2011); Bealer and Bhanugopan (2014); Rodgers and Wong (1996); Amante (1995); Mihelić (2014)	“The study argues that the interaction between Western and domestic managers is guided by a process of ‘bricolage’ where key actors creatively re-interpret the existing cultural norms in such a way as to justify the use of certain kind of relationship-building strategies with officials in China.” (Nolan, 2011, p. 3358) “Due to the divergence in norms and values surrounding the employment relationship between Japanese firms and the Singaporean work-force, Japanese MNCs with operations in Singapore are not able to transfer all aspects of their home country HRM practices easily or effectively.” (Rodgers & Wong, 1996, pp. 467–468) “They are torn between the rational, and traditional norms and practices insisted upon by their Confucian-oriented elders, and the demand of a competitive and ever-changing technology and economy.” (Amante, 1995, p. 654) “The major presenting challenge to OD [organizational development] was found to be the influence of the prevailing norms and practices, which can be classified broadly into three categories: a hierarchy-based Confucian culture, an excessively result-oriented tendency based on short-termism, and the tendency of leaders to adhere to their opinions.” (Lee & Rees, 2020, pp. 251–252) “OC [organizational culture] is defined as key assumptions, beliefs, norms, and values shared continuously by members of an organization (Smircich, 1983b).” (Lau et al., 2017, p. 163)
Norms as part of organizational culture (Culture)	Organizational culture (Smircich, 1983b)	<i>International Journal of Human Resource Management</i> , <i>Human Resource Development International</i>	Foucreault et al. (2018); Lee and Rees (2020); Lau et al. (2017)(Lau et al., 2017)	

which a critical claim can be formulated. The key difference lies in the question of whether the effects should be critiqued and changed, as argued in the previous category, or whether the research points to the potential of norm critique to transform existing norms, as argued in this category.

6. Four main themes

In this section, we give an overview of the four main thematic fields that we identified in the articles in which norms are employed: culture, diversity, labor market, and work–life. We categorized all reviewed articles within at least one of these core themes, but also found overlaps between them: For instance, an article might study gendered implications of the ideal worker norm, in which case the study would be coded under both “diversity” and “work–life.”

Here, we describe how studies use norms in each of the thematic fields and provide examples. An associated table for each theme summarizes some of these exemplary studies, including an overview of the main theories employed, journals in which studies on this theme are published, and some quotations. This thorough overview, in text and accompanying tables, highlights the importance and applicability of norms in areas relevant to the study of HRM while showcasing the explained inconsistency in the use of norms in the reviewed studies.

6.1. Culture

6.1.1. The role of norms in national, cross-national, and regional cultures

Many of the studies identified in this thematic field use norms in relation to national, cross-national, or regional culture (Al Harbi, Thursfield, & Bright, 2017; Ali et al., 1993; Amante, 1995; Cooke & Xiao, 2014; Endres & Rhoad, 2016; Kemp & Zhao, 2016; Kragh, 2012; Marks & Mirvis, 2011; Martin, 2010; Mihelič, 2014; Nolan, 2011; Ordine, Rose, & Vella, 2017; Rodgers & Wong, 1996; Schmitt & Sadowski, 2003) (see Table 3).

Cultural theories, such as Hofstede's cultural taxonomy, suggest differences in cultural norms between countries or regions of the world. Authors argue that such norms influence the objects of study they explore in their research, as when making the claim that cultural norms and values at a national level influence career attitudes among students (Kemp & Zhao, 2016). Other studies refer to Hofstede (2001) work on how organizations from the same national culture tend to differ more in the norms they follow than in the values they share (Cabrera & Bonache, 1999). The authors note the implication here that, while values are difficult to change, norms are more malleable: “In fact, the whole notion of human resource management rests on the assumption that human behavior can be driven by management practices” (Cabrera & Bonache, 1999, p. 55). The same assumption that national culture (understood broadly as based on norms and values) affects how organizational members behave is also found in the human resource development literature (Yaghi & Bates, 2020).

Some studies choose to investigate one cultural domain in depth, such as Chinese (Cooke & Xiao, 2014) and Malaysian culture (Franck & Olsson, 2014). Similarly, in a study of Sri Lankan women's interpretation of sexual harassment at the workplace, others (Adikaram, 2014) understand that whether the workplace conduct of exhibiting certain behaviors and feelings is deemed appropriate depends on the values and norms of the national culture in which the workplace is situated. In other words, what counts as sexual harassment differs across cultures. According to the author, in many patriarchal and hierarchical cultures “sexual behaviors are condoned, and sexual harassment is considered normal, as in these cultures it is considered an entitlement for men to make sexual advances towards women” (Adikaram, 2014, p. 48). Other studies compare cultural norms in different contexts (Rodgers & Wong, 1996) by, for instance: comparing organizational practices in several locations of multinational corporations (Schmitt & Sadowski, 2003); investigating changes in practices and behaviors in situations of expatriation (Nolan, 2011); or contrasting specific behavioral ideals, such as leadership ideals, in several geographical settings. Regarding behavioral ideals, one exemplary study compares the leadership behavior and practices of expatriate and national managers to highlight differences in leadership norms in the United Arab Emirates/Middle East compared to the United States and Europe (Bealer & Bhanugopan, 2014).

6.1.2. Norms as part of organizational culture

A second group of studies identified in the culture theme engage with the notion of organizational culture to investigate different norms in organizational practices and behavior (Foucreault et al., 2018; Jacobson, Callahan, & Ghosh, 2015; Lau, McLean, Hsu, & Lien, 2017; Lee & Rees, 2020; O'Brien & O'Donnell, 2000). These studies typically understand norms as inscribed within organizational cultures, and define norms as either “enduring modes of behavior that the organization encourages, as well as the desired ones. The way of ‘doing things’ in the organization is both an output of internalized specific rules, norms and values and an output of newer expectations reflecting change” (Hofstetter & Harpaz, 2015, pp. 446–447) or similar, or simply as “unwritten rules assumed by all” (Ottaway, 1976, p. 14).

Organizational culture is thus understood both as shaping and as being shaped by norms, in combination with values and rules. A good example is a study that investigates how organizational development initiatives are received, suggesting that prevailing norms within the organizational culture influence employee identity. Hence, the prevailing norms should be understood when attempting to implement organizational development that seeks to change the organizational culture (Lee & Rees, 2020). Yet, organizational culture can also be at odds with norms, as described by one article that investigates the accountancy norm that French unions should disclose their finances, where the prevalent organizational culture lacks the resources and the means of legitimization to meet this obligation (Bourguignon & Yon, 2018).

Research conducted at this level of analysis has an interest in changing organizational culture. However, Ottaway (1976) points to

Table 4

Overview of the “diversity” theme.

Theme	Theory	Journals	Representative studies	Quotations
Gender norms in organizations (Diversity)	Institutional theory (Scott, 2001, 2005); Hofstede's cultural taxonomy (2001); Control and commitment in HRM theory (Rubery, Cooke, Earnshaw, & Marchinston, 2003); Emerging actors (Bellemare, 2000; Heery & Frege, 2006); Organizational norms or ‘rules’ (Mills, 2006)	<i>Human Resource Development International, Employee Relations, Work and Occupations, Human Resource Management Review, British Journal of Industrial Relations</i>	Ferner et al. (2005); Zolotoy et al. (2018); Skuratowicz and Hunter (2004); Tlaiss (2015); Mustafa et al. (2019)	<p>“Our findings suggest that the informal nature and characteristics of many SMEs may exacerbate gendered stereotypes and norms, which ultimately constrains women's leadership learning and aspirations. [...] At the organizational and societal level, women successors' disruption of the leadership norm challenges others' expectations of who can be a legitimate leader.” (Mustafa et al., 2019, p. 518)</p> <p>“The cultural norms, values, and stereotypes deeply rooted in patriarchal traditions that promote male privilege constitute the most fundamental barrier to women's career advancement.” (Tlaiss, 2015, p. 527)</p> <p>“Employers, employees, and customers draw on gender norms—the shared cultural understandings of gender—to imbue occupational positions with qualities associated with masculinity and femininity, thus reinforcing specific jobs as gendered and perpetuating sex segregation.” (Skuratowicz & Hunter, 2004, p. 75)</p>
The influence of age norms on workplace practices and interactions (Diversity)	Social norms (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1972); Age norms/organizational age theory (Lawrence, 1988); Social exchange theory/norm of reciprocity (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960)	<i>International Journal of Human Resource Management, Career Development International, Human Resource Development Quarterly, Human Resource Management Review, Human Resource Management Journal (UK)</i>	Mignonac and Richebé (2013); Coyle-Shapiro & Shore, 2007; Dello Russo et al. (2020); Slay Ferraro et al. (2018); Collins et al. (2009); Chaudhuri and Ghosh (2012)	<p>“Specifically, people observe the ‘typical ages’ of employees within an organization or profession, judge that they are outside of the norm, and establish expectations about the difficulty of joining such organizations or professions.” (Slay Ferraro et al., 2018, p. 214)</p> <p>“In later career stages individuals are faced with age stereotypes and discrimination, which employees may internalize into their appraisal of employment opportunities – thus leaving them to perceive lower external employability.” (Dello Russo et al., 2020, p. 1183)</p> <p>“Expectations can be violated if a certain individual is not in sync with the age norm associated with an organizational role. Thus, in the context of mentoring, there might be normative expectations about what age is suited for the roles of mentor and protégé. [...] Reverse mentoring clearly violates any such normative expectations by putting the senior, older employee in the role of a protégé. [...] They [boomers]</p>

(continued on next page)

Table 4 (continued)

Theme	Theory	Journals	Representative studies	Quotations
				might avoid sharing their developmental needs with their younger counterparts as they may perceive such acts as 'being behind schedule' in their careers." (Chaudhuri & Ghosh, 2012, pp. 63–64)

the difficulty in evoking organization-wide change when the old norms preclude any attempt at change. Ottaway views norms both as variables that can be tampered with (an instrumental and positivist approach) and as a sociological phenomenon that is dynamic, fluid, and situated between people and their practices. Ottaway argues that people will find any change in norms easier to accept if presented as a change in "way of life," pointing back to the cultural aspect.

6.2. Diversity

6.2.1. Gender norms in organizations

Another group of studies engages with norms within the field of diversity research (see Table 4). These studies find that norms are linked to specific gendered ideals, usually conceptualized in a gender binary that contrasts male and female gender norms. The studies outline how divergent expectations are linked to people based on their gender, for instance, revealing how sex segregation within an organization mutually reinforces gender norms (Skuratowicz & Hunter, 2004), how homosexual staff navigate disclosure of their sexuality in strongly heteronormative workplaces (Rumens & Broomfield, 2012), or how the risk of experiencing workplace harassment is linked to gendered norms of intra-gender relations (Adikaram, 2018).

Other studies describe how workplaces are unsupportive of female employees and "shaped by norms of behavior and a process of professionalization in which women feel excluded" (Servon & Visser, 2011, p. 276). Diversity as an enhancing factor of effectiveness in teams is another topic covered in the literature (Eisele, 2015), which, in addition to diversity resistance (Wiggins-Romesburg & Githens, 2018), makes it difficult for trainers to incorporate diversity into organizations because of deeply entrenched assumptions in a culture that favors sameness over difference (Kissack, 2010).

6.2.2. The influence of age norms on workplace practices and interactions

A second subfield of diversity research in which norms are commonly invoked relates to age norms. These are described as normative ideals of appropriate behavior and functions in relation to a person's age (Collins, Hair, & Rocco, 2009; Slay Ferraro et al., 2018). Some studies also refer to generational differences in relation to age norms (Chaudhuri & Ghosh, 2012). Studies typically investigate the influence of age norms on workplace practices and interactions (Riach, 2009) as well as labor market access, such as perceived employability (Dello Russo et al., 2020) and decisions about retirement. Warren and Kelloway's (2010) study, which has implications for retention of older workers, views age norms as factors external to the organization that affect employees' decisions about when to retire. Another article engages somewhat critically with these norms, finding that ageist, classist, and sexist attitudes influence retirement norms, stating that "for women more so than for men, age norms represent a legacy of the past" (Stam, Sieben, Verbakel, & de Graaf, 2016, p. 769). That said, such critique that addresses prevailing age norms themselves is rare.

6.3. Labor market

6.3.1. Standard employment relations and employment norms

Studies engaging with the labor market commonly use norms that determine expectations about relations between employers and employees to investigate standard employment relations (see Table 5). Examining the effects of employment norms in ruling, gendering, and, at times, exploiting workers, scholars examine not only the prevailing employment norms in the labor market but also how these norms change over time (Corby, Burgess, Höland, Michel, & Willemez, 2020; Grimshaw & Carroll, 2006). One study, for instance, investigates the differences between de jure and de facto employment contract norms in the United States. It finds that de facto employment contract norms promising job security and promotional opportunity have shifted toward more flexible and insecure employment norms (Stone, 2007). A different study investigates how HRM practices—such as interviewing, induction, and performance appraisal processes—shape students' expectations of and adherence to specific employment norms (Handley, 2018). Scandinavia's weak norms governing intergenerational obligations are the object of another study, which finds that they have a positive effect on women's attachment to the labor market (Naldini, Pavolini, & Solera, 2016).

6.3.2. Organizational norms in strike situations

Another significant study area in the field of labor market research investigates norms in relation to collective bargaining and strike situations (Akkerman, Born, & Torenvlied, 2013; Blandy, 1988). While this might seem like a very specific theme to highlight, it arose, interestingly, as a relevant and prevailing topic in the thematic coding we conducted. Here, studies tend to reference specific norms to explain collective bargaining and strike participation behavior, such as a "solidarity norm," which renders it socially unacceptable to

Table 5

Overview of the “labor market” theme.

Theme	Theory	Journals	Representative studies	Quotations
Standard employment relations and employment norms (Labor market)	Theories of differential power: Status characteristics theory (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972); Bourdieu's sociology of the juridical field	<i>Industrial Law Journal</i> , <i>Industrial Relations Journal</i> , <i>Human Resource Management Journal</i> (UK)	Corby et al. (2020); Charlesworth and Heron (2012); Mignonac and Richebé (2013); Vosko (2007); Kullmann (2018)	“Our findings then suggest that the less a given support is perceived as interested, the more benefit it will finally produce. As Gouldner (1973: 277) and Bourdieu (1980) remind us, this is probably one of the profound paradoxes of the ‘free’ gift, that is, the gift perceived to be given with no strings attached: ‘the most profitable strategies are usually those produced without any calculation, and in the illusion of the most absolute ‘sincerity’’. ” (Mignonac & Richebé, 2013, p. 81) “...both workers and employers accept certain legal concepts and ways of thinking which are applied, for instance, in disciplinary proceedings in the workplace, so law and industrial relations norms interpenetrate.” (Corby et al., 2020, p. 238)
Organizational norms in strike situations (Labor market)		<i>Industrial Relations Journal</i> , <i>Work and Occupations</i>	Thommes et al. (2014); Akkerman et al. (2013)	“Factor analysis reveals that a strike-related solidarity norm and a free rider punishment norm exist. [...] Whereas adherence to the solidarity norm significantly reduces the anticipated severity of conflict after a strike, adherence to the free rider punishment norm significantly increases the anticipated severity of conflict after a strike.” (Thommes et al., 2014, p. 363) “Our findings show that union members' willingness to participate in a strike is indeed influenced by participation norms.” (Akkerman et al., 2013, p. 271)

free ride and do the job of a colleague on strike (Thommes et al., 2014), or a “reciprocity norm,” which ensures that unions can mobilize workers in times of need after a period of calm (Johnson & Jarley, 2005). Studies examining strike situations also reference a “free-rider punishment norm,” suggesting that both strike-related norms above influence social relations after a strike (Thommes et al., 2014). In other words, normative expectations to act in solidarity with the threat of punishment for free riding serve as a way for collectives like unions to encourage strike participation (Peetz, 2006). These studies thus emphasize how norms are enforced through the threat of repercussions for those who deviate. Norms, understood as guiding the development of appropriate behaviors, thereby become an alternative to laws and institutions, although there will doubtless be overlaps and potential contradictions between rule-abiding (i.e., staying at your workplace) and norm-abiding (i.e., showing solidarity with the strikers) behavior.

6.4. Work–life

6.4.1. Normative work–life cycle expectations and practices

Various studies scrutinize norms in relation to work–life topics, such as work–family balance, drinking, retirement, sickness, sabbaticals, or other leaves of absence (Carraher, Crocitto, & Sullivan, 2014; Gorsuch, 2019; Liu & Wang, 2011; Lu, 2012; Otto & Dalbert, 2012; Sanséau & Smith, 2012) (see Table 6). In these studies, norms are commonly invoked to explain expectations and practices within the realm of the work–life cycle. One example is research on post-retirement work, which suggests that norms—understood as subjective perception of the extent to which significant others engage in and support the relevant behavior—influence older employees' intentions to engage in post-retirement work (Otto & Dalbert, 2012). Another study considers the work–life interface of adult part-time students in India. It reveals that much of the literature on work–life issues treats the nuclear family as the norm and neglects societal contexts where extended families are the norm (Kumar, Chakraborty, & Kumar, 2020). Boiarintseva and Richardson (2019) feature gendered aspects in their study, finding that industry expectations and norms of behavior make it difficult if not impossible for male lawyers to achieve work–life balance because the extant norm in the legal profession to put work first prevails over individual desires to put family first.

Table 6
Overview of the “work–life” theme.

Theme	Theory	Journals	Representative studies	Quotations
Normative work–life cycle expectations and practices (Work–life)	Theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991); Norm of reciprocity/social exchange theory (Evans & Davis, 2005)	<i>Career Development International</i> , <i>International Journal of Human Resource Management</i> , <i>Human Resource Management Review</i>	Murray and Gerhart (2000); Liu and Wang (2011); Otto and Dalbert (2012); Lu (2012); Carraher et al. (2014)	<p>“subjective norm regarding the encouragement of employment of older adults contributed to behavioral intentions to continue working beyond 60.” (Lu, 2012, p. 94)</p> <p>“Women faculty members will perceive sabbaticals as less feasible than men. [...] A country’s legislation and social norms will moderate the relationship between gender and sabbatical feasibility.” (Carraher et al., 2014, p. 302)</p>
Ideal worker norms (Work–life)		<i>Industrial Relations Journal</i> , <i>Work and Occupations</i>	Mishra and Smyth (2013); Damaske et al. (2014); Kmec et al. (2014); Davies and Frink (2014); Cech and Blair-Loy (2014); Mun and Brinton (2015)	<p>“Yet, the predominance of traditional men among the full professors in our study suggests that the ideal worker norm may continue to have lasting power and to provide extensive benefit to those who follow it. The traditional men at the top continue to have significant power in the university system, and their expectations about the division of labor at the home are likely a detriment to both female scientists and egalitarian-minded male scientists. This may mean that younger traditional male scientists may be more likely to advance their careers within the current structure, suggesting that change may be slow in coming.” (Damaske et al., 2014, p. 501)</p> <p>“Our findings that men do not perceive unfair treatment upon breaking ideal-worker norms suggest something unique about the ways in which men may internalize these norms. [...] As a result, men who break ideal-worker norms may view their decision to do so as a personal failure—both as a man and as a good worker—and feel as though they deserve mistreatment.” (Kmec et al., 2014, p. 78)</p> <p>“We find that one reason for the persistence of the ideal-worker norm is the deep attachment to cultural ideas about gender, work, and family.” (Davies & Frink, 2014, p. 21)</p> <p>“Many women realized that the ideal-worker norm, which required the separation of work time from home time, was incompatible with family responsibilities.” (Davies & Frink, 2014, p. 31)</p> <p>This study is “lending empirical support to the theoretical argument that work–life policy use is penalized because parents are assumed to violate norms of work devotion.” (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014, pp. 90–91)</p> <p>“Scholars use the term flexibility stigma to describe negative sanctions toward workers who appear to violate this ideal-worker norm by seeking or being assumed by others to need workplace accommodations to attend to their personal responsibilities (Williams, 2000). [...] Finally, our results illustrate several consequences of being employed within a work environment in which one perceives flexibility stigma: those who report this stigma are more likely to want to leave for industry, less likely to want to remain at their university long term, feel less work–life balance, and are less satisfied with their work overall.” (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014, p. 87,104)</p>

6.4.2. Ideal worker norm

Another significant invocation of norms takes place in studies that investigate the ideal worker norm (Baird & Charlesworth, 2007; Blagoev et al., 2018; Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014; Charlesworth, 2010; Damaske, Ecklund, Lincoln, & White, 2014; Dreyfus, 2013; Kmec et al., 2014; Mun & Brinton, 2015). One article summarizes its historical development: “The ideal-worker norm emerged at the beginning of the 20th century, and [...] relied on an idealized gendered and racialized separation of home and work. [...] [Even though] this ideal does not match the realities of our current workforce [...] both the ideal worker and the separation of work and home remain largely unchallenged as cultural norms” (Davies & Frink, 2014, p. 34).

The ideal worker norm is common in the middle class, where it is perpetuated by managers and other professionals who demand high levels of dedication (Drago, Wooden, & Black, 2009). Studies examine this norm in relation to (its impact on) working hours and working conditions (Mishra & Smyth, 2013) as well as gendered workplace differences (Charlesworth, 2010; Davies & Frink, 2014). One study suggests that there is a gendered norm for who can and cannot be an ideal worker, given that it—the ideal worker norm—assumes a male breadwinner and female caregiver, echoing the heteronormative model referred to as “the harvester family” (Vosko, 2007). Deviating from this norm has consequences: “Gay men and lesbian women have labor market outcomes that differ from those of similarly educated heterosexual people: Gay men earn less than heterosexual men, and lesbians earn more than heterosexual women” (Gorsuch, 2019, p. 950).

Other articles consider pressures on workers to develop their skills and achieve tangible success where norms encourage competitive behaviors among employees to outperform one another, something that is exacerbated by performance-based reward systems (Murray & Gerhart, 2000). Some studies attribute this to the norm of reciprocity, where employees hope for reciprocation of the benefits that they create for their organization (Coyle-Shapiro & Shore, 2007).

Yet another branch of studies investigates the consequences of ideal worker norm violation and deviation, for instance, in relation to unfair treatment (Kmec et al., 2014). One counterpoint to the ideal worker norm is the stigma that unemployed people bear, even if the reason for losing their job was beyond their control (Buffel, Missinne, & Bracke, 2017). We also see in academia the contours of an ideal worker through “unspoken norms” that academics feel obliged to fulfill (K. Sang et al., 2015). In stating that there are “particular norms in terms of securing research funding and the nature of publications which were used as metrics for promotion” (K. Sang et al., 2015, p. 242), the authors effectively describe how they think the ideal worker spends their time, which—as the authors discuss—comes with a career penalty (or, at least, a lack of reward) for academics who cannot or choose not to meet normative expectations.

7. Discussion

In this article, we set out to investigate how norms are theorized, applied, and operationalized in HRM research, and to identify which avenues future research should investigate. We show that, while the concept of norms is ubiquitous in HRM research, most articles mobilize the term colloquially, uncritically, and unreflectively, often without any clear definition. We argue that this is because of an *assumed* consensus in HRM research on what norms mean, what we call a norm of norms. However, we show that such a norm of norms does not exist, explain how this is problematic, and, in what follows, discuss new avenues for future research that may address the problem. In so doing, we advance the current understanding, theorizing, and management of human behavior and so contribute to the HRM field.

7.1. Contributions to research and practice

We make four important contributions to HRM research and practice. First, we document the pervasive role of norms in HRM research (Afota et al., 2019; Thacker, 2015) and show the absence of a shared *explicit* consensus of what these norms are and what they do in practice. We argue that assuming a norm of norms is misguided because it may lead to misinterpretation of study results that reference norms as explanatory factors (Hofstetter & Harpaz, 2015). In turn, this impedes moving beyond the established understanding *that* norms influence the management and organization of human resources (Mustafa et al., 2019; Ravid et al., 2010) to learning *how* norms influence HRM. Furthermore, it inhibits more critical and nuanced reflections on the legitimacy of norms, as well as their impact and potential malleability in practice (Stone, 2007).

Second, our typology of similarities and differences in how norms are currently used in HRM research helps to define norms and their latency, and represents a guide for researchers to reference when explicating their own assumptions of norms (Vosko, 2007). We do not seek to stifle research by defining “the” norm of norms. Rather, we hope that researchers can employ our typology to delineate how they theorize, apply, and operationalize norms in their own studies. This will bring more clarity, allow for better comparability between study results, and prevent misinterpretation.

Third, our typology makes explicit the need to investigate norms as the object of study (Hill, 1974), something that we have found wanting in current HRM debate. Focusing on norms as explanandum rather than explanans produces much-needed insights on *how* norms influence the management and organization of human resources. To this end, we identify four similarities in the way norms are used to address: how identified norms influence behavior and expectations; how said norms are enforced and which (threats of) repercussions are used against those who do not conform; how belonging and exclusion are regulated via the salience of norms; and how the investigated norms are shared, reproduced, and achieve stability over time. We thus highlight the need and potential for more comprehensive research on how norms influence HRM across a variety of research settings. Moreover, we call for a better understanding of the effects of norms (Askenazy & Caroli, 2010) as well as their validity and potency (Radl, 2012). With our typology of differences, particularly in terms of the reflexive categories, we describe what such (norm-)critical HRM research could look like.

Fourth, our review provides new insights for practice by critiquing the assumed unchangeability, or at least unassailability, of norms (McCann et al., 2015). Managers, leaders, and consultants working on HRM topics could benefit from more critical reflection on current norms, their legitimacy, and outcomes when planning and implementing interventions. Practitioners can use our typology to identify the salient norms in their organizational setting, critically interrogate the outcomes these norms create, and adjust their HRM practices to orient normative pressures toward, for example, more inclusive workplaces or explicit organizational goals and values.

7.2. Avenues for future research

This section outlines three novel and promising avenues for future research, which together represent a call for a norm-critical approach within the HRM domain and can, as such, be considered an extension of rubric 5.4 in Table 2. By norm-critical, we mean research that considers norms as the object of study to critically attend to normative practices for organizing (Arifeen & Syed, 2019; Blagoev et al., 2018; Martin, 2010; Mishra & Smyth, 2013) and questioning the legitimacy and malleability of prevailing norms that structure social and organizational relations, standards, and expectations. We detail below what these three research avenues could entail. As mentioned, our aim is not to provide one binding norm of norms but to encourage future research to be more reflexive, transparent, and critical in its investigation of norms within HRM.

It is important that any norm-critical approach makes norms the object of study, where many studies treat norms as explanans rather than explanandum. Taking the theme of culture as an example, we identify a lack of focus on the workings of local, regional, or national norms. Instead, most research presupposes that cultural norms in the country or region underlie the phenomenon under study (Hofstetter & Harpaz, 2015). Such approaches remain prevalent in the HRM literature, which risks uncritical reproduction of potentially outdated and problematic differentiations, such as between the Global North and South or East and West, let alone making ecological fallacies. Investigating how, on which levels, and to what extent cultural norms are reproduced (or adapted) would provide novel and more nuanced insights into the challenges many of these studies investigate, such as cooperation, mergers, or employee relocation between multinational organizations. Therefore, treating norms as the object of study can offer new and original insights. A first norm-critical avenue is thus to inquire differently. We have constructed three example questions to inspire further enquiry:

- (1) What leadership norms permeate multinational organizations, and how do they influence expectations of managers?
- (2) What gender/age/racial/class/... norms shape organizational behavior in private sector organizations in (country), and how do these norms intersect?
- (3) How are professional norms established in public sector organizations, and what effect do they have on work–life cycle decisions (parental leave, retirement, sabbaticals, etc.)?

Next, we encourage future studies to go beyond showing that norms affect organizational behavior and HRM research and practice. While we agree that this could represent useful critique (Badgett & Folbre, 1999), there is a clear difference between studies that evaluate the adverse outcomes of following or breaking norms (focus on outcomes) and studies that question the legitimacy of such norms (as the shaping force). It is the latter type of studies that provide the levels of reflexivity that we call for in a norm-critical approach.

For example, we observed a tendency in the literature to utilize norms to describe behavior in situations marked by social inequality between minority and majority groups, such as women in male-dominated domains like architecture (Sang, Dainty, & Ison, 2014), divorced women in Sri Lankan workplaces (Adikaram, 2018), or homosexual men in the police force (Rumens & Broomfield, 2012). A norm-critical approach would address such inequalities by challenging the legitimacy of existing norms that enforce the “right” way to be an architect, to be an employee in Sri Lanka, or to be a police officer. We therefore suggest asking, for instance:

- (1) How are gender norms that create heteronormative male dominance and unequal career opportunities legitimized at (organization)?
- (2) How is behavior motivated by self-interest normalized and justified vis-à-vis ideals of solidarity and reciprocity within organizations with high staff turnover?
- (3) How do ideal worker norms, which idealize flexible and precarious work, manifest in industries shaped by high levels of innovation?

As a third research avenue, we encourage more action- and intervention-based studies to investigate the malleability of norms and suggest how norms can be deliberately changed or replaced. Different from the other research avenues, yet with equally novel research potential, is studying organizations and practices that directly challenge and offer alternatives to established norms in HRM. For example, our review shows that female workers bear the majority of private care work, such as for children or elderly relatives, and often reduce their out-of-home workload as a result (Ford et al., 2021; Kaine, 2012). Men, however, find it disproportionately harder to access such arrangements and even face redundancy if they attempt to work less (Sang et al., 2014). Here, action-oriented approaches could give important insights into how access to and acceptance of flexible work arrangements could be normalized across genders. In addition, we encourage greater interest in the civil sector, which is markedly understudied compared to the private and public sectors. This could evoke questions like:

- (1) How can norm-critical interventions help to address gendered and/or racialized inequalities within civil sector organizations?

- (2) How do repeated transgressions of gender and/or age norms delegitimize the repercussions feared and experienced by those who deviate from established societal norms?
- (3) What practices of alternative organizing come about in technology start-ups, and how are they reproduced and changed as organizational norms throughout the life of the start-up?

Overall, we hope that the avenues outlined above will inspire future studies to explore these and other norm-centric research questions and thereby help to develop and establish norm-critical approaches to HRM research.

7.3. Limitations of the review

We acknowledge that our study has clear limitations. First, the initial selection of journals limits the scope of this review. We selected 54 journals listed under the theme of HRM in the ABS journal ranking list, which means that other journals not listed under this theme but publishing HRM research were not included. For future studies interested in extending our review, we suggest as interesting additional data sources the *Academy of Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Journal of International Business Studies* and *Journal of World Business*.

Second, the field of HRM encompasses a wide variety of relevant subfields, which makes it challenging to provide a comprehensive, accurate, but usable overview of relevant norm-related themes. We highlight in our review four themes each with two subthemes to provide a comprehensive but relevant overview. We encourage future research to investigate the use of norms in other subfields, perhaps relating to the three themes that we identified but ultimately discarded (“technologies and digitalization,” “occupational health and well-being,” and “intersectionality” as an additional subfield to “diversity”) to avoid overcomplication and to maintain comparability across research topics and approaches.

Lastly, the scope of this study did not allow to extend the field beyond HRM or the chosen timeframe. However, we are aware that similar investigations in, for example, management and organization studies (MOS), business ethics, or critical management studies (CMS) and with different time spans could compare and discuss the theorization, application, and operationalization of norms more broadly.

8. Conclusion

In this review, we investigate how norms are theorized, applied, and operationalized in HRM research and suggest avenues for future research. By revealing that norms are used extensively in HRM research but are seldomly defined or investigated in their own right (Hill, 1974), the article shows that an assumed norm of norms is in fact nonexistent in HRM research. Based on this, we argue that the uncritical assumption of a shared understanding of norms in HRM not only risks misinterpretation of study results but also inhibits reflexive and critical engagement with norms as the object of study.

The article outlines a norm-critical research agenda for HRM to advance the reviewed field of research. The article makes three main contributions: (1) revealing that assuming a norm of norms is erroneous; (2) offering a typology of similarities and differences in how norms are used in HRM research as a basis for more critical reflection of norms in HRM; and (3) suggesting a norm-critical approach to HRM research as a relevant research avenue, which we hope will inspire and inform future studies.

Declaration of interest

None.

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