A critical study of HRM models in the associative environment through the lens of the psychological contract

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Abstract :

The objective of this article is to conduct a comparative study of the different approaches to HRM in an associational context; indeed, based on thoughtful theoretical foundations, this comparison lies at the crossroads of organizational practices in HRM in "associational" type organizations, which derive their legitimacy from several theoretical bodies. Thus, the objective is to determine the points of convergence, but also of the divergence between the different management models with regard to the theoretical corpus of the psychological contract, now considered as a theory of employment in its own right.

Consequently, we will review all the possible reading grids in associations, highlighting both their advantages and their limitations, before drawing up a comparative table that provides information on the depth and exhaustiveness of the analysis.

Keywords : Human resources management models; Association context; Associative actors; Psychological contract, unwritten agreements

1. Introduction

The human resource management practices in the associative sector have been the focal point for a range of research. These studies have primarily an interest in people as actors within associations, whether employees or volunteers. Common throughout these works is the contextualization of human resource practices explaining the characteristics of associations, which essentially differ from the very nature of human resource practices in other types of organizations. Concepts such as "militancy" (Boncler & Valéau, 2010) and "communitarianism" (Laville & Sainsaulieu, 1997) tend to be particularly prominent in the majority of associations, whether profit-driven or non-profit.

However, with this focus on the distinctiveness of the associative sector, diverging perspectives start to emerge among researchers regarding the human resource management approaches most suitable for associations. Indeed, some, like Brudney (1994) and Herman (1994), champion classical human resource management tools such as job descriptions, evaluation frameworks, and motivation systems. On the other hand, others who consider it from a sociological perspective criticize the over-formalization of human resource practices in associations, which is alleged to stifle people's involvement and the sense of community that connects them around common goals. As Chauviére (2007) warns, "too much management risks killing the associative dynamic."

2. The Management of Human Resources in Relation to the Characteristics of the Associative Sector.

The existing literature on human resource management practices carried out by other associations is immeasurable. However, the above-mentioned studies seem, for the most part, to be based on classical HR models that treat staff, wages, motivation, career-growth management, job-and-skills forecasting (GPEC), among other things, as subject matters. These researchers are called to check if the processes are tuned into the associations' managerial practices, of course, the cultural specifics. Such peculiarities were pointed out by Boltanski and Thévenot (1991), who particularly noted that in associative setups, human resources get considered differently as a feature of the players keeping an activist commitment or a volunteer conviction: "To consider men as resources places them in the instrumental perspective that implicitly resorts to the language of industrial city, whereas in the associative sphere, the actors are rather driven by commitment and volunteering."

Additionally, it is important to emphasize that employment in associations is invariably

embedded in the associative project (CPCA, 2004); this makes it impossible to establish a standard scheme of management due to plural, or at least multiple, projects inside a single association. Indeed, the human resource management within the associative sector can be regarded as unique considering the coexistence of salaried and voluntary work within the same institution. Added upon that, associations relate to the economic role they perform, thus needing to provide for the existence and institution of monitoring and evaluation systems more formal than in other organizational types.

3. The Psychological Contract as a Framework for Analyzing Contractual Relations.

Understanding an individual's psychological contract within a community is complex. This complexity arises from the necessity to consider its temporal dimension, all direct and indirect factors-both interorganizational and intraorganizational-and the influence of external actors on the organization. Consequently, it is essential to analyze not only the characteristics of the psychological contract but also its evolution over time, which is shaped by processes, learning experiences, and the lived experiences of individuals within the organization.

To better comprehend the psychological contract, it is crucial to examine the organization's history since its inception, identifying key milestones, events, and artifacts that have marked its journey. This approach enables a cross-analysis of the perceptions and opinions of organizational actors to distinguish the unifying elements of the normative psychological contract from the individualized aspects of the psychological contract.

Equally important is an analysis of extra-organizational factors, particularly the organization's ecosystem-in this case, the associative sector. This includes considerations such as the organization's positioning and employer branding within the market, both of which are critical to preserving its reputation. Maintaining this position requires continuous and sustained engagement with external stakeholders, alongside internal ones, within the framework of what Rousseau et al. (2013) describe as the "quasi-contract." This concept reflects the influence of external actors, including the association's brand image, media, regulatory frameworks, and competing organizations. These external signals are interpreted differently by internal actors, shaping their perceptions and expectations.

Contractual relations within any organization are influenced by a multitude of individual factors, including perceptions, beliefs, convictions, and mental models. This highlights the role of cohabitation as a driver of socialization within organizations. These dynamics are governed by unwritten rules of social interaction, commonly referred to as the "social contract," as

conceptualized by J. J. Rousseau (1762).

Similarly, the perception of the psychological contract significantly affects individual behavior. Diverging perceptions between managers and employees can become a source of organizational conflict. For example, the adage "the customer is always right" illustrates the psychological nature of a contract between a customer and the organization's representative. This contract lies at the intersection of two distinct interpretations: one assumes that the customer receives what they believe the company has promised, while the other assumes what the representative believes they have promised the customer. This divergence occurs on both psychological and cognitive levels. At the organizational level, discrepancies in interpreting the psychological contract between managers and employees can have profound implications for the organization.

In analyzing the psychological contract, one of its strengths is its ability to classify relationships into four categories, which help characterize and understand the mental models of organizational actors. These categories also allow for the anticipation of potential contract ruptures, whether at the individual (idiosyncratic) or collective (normative) level. The four fundamental forms of psychological contracts are:

- **The psychological contract**: it is an individual contract, dependent on the individual's perception of the contract that binds him to others; this perception is a function of all the experiences and facts lived by the individual. He has a power of self-fulfilling prophecy, having the power of anticipation about future actions. If the contract is considered as a guarantee that each party keeps its promise, it is not certain that both parties understood the same thing about the object of the contract. The psychological contract is therefore idiosyncratic and specific to the person who accepts it.

- **The normative contract**: it is a group contract, where a set of individuals sharing the same values and beliefs build a common perception of the contract. They act according to this perception, and influence new members. The members of the group identify with a common psychological contract to which they are attached, and experience as a violation of the contract any modification that affects the contract of one of the members of the group. This is how the beliefs shared by the group end up institutionalizing contracts to become an integral part of the organizational culture.

- **The quasi-contract**: it is a contract originating from the perceptions that are built by the third parties who are in general the external observers. These perceptions are usually impacted by the less detailed information they hold as external observers.

- **The social contract**: it is a contract shared between the members of a society. It is a set of omnipresent and shared beliefs about what collective obligations should be. The stronger the feeling of identification and belonging to a community, the more important the belief in one's obligations. This type of contract is not specific to an organization or a particular contractual relationship, because it also encompasses other forms of contract.

4. Activism as a Unifying Value for Associative Actors

According to the National Library of France, activism is defined as "the essential role played by the individual who, having then joined the group (trade union, political party, association), is not content with a simple membership, but participates in an action of which he is generally not the initiator, but the executor." In the context of associations, this definition highlights the existence of a collective project created and shared within a group. This project inspires individuals to adhere and identify unconditionally with a shared cause, whether it is social, political, economic, humanitarian, or otherwise.

For Laville and Sainsaulieu (1997), the institutionalization of shared values, coupled with the development of a strong sense of belonging, forms the foundation of activism around a collective project. However, the assumption that a collective project lies at the heart of engagement is not without debate. Eme (2001) offers a contrasting perspective, arguing that a collective project is not necessarily the driving force behind commitment. According to Eme, social actors are primarily motivated by "the realization of their individual projects and the development of their person." The author further asserts that "it is from their personal projects that individuals engage in associations, where their involvement tends to be more precarious and more sporadic than in the past."

This perspective creates a dichotomy between the individual project and the collective project, raising a critical question about the nature of actors' commitment within associations. This question invites us to explore an alternative model for understanding organizational behavior in the associative sector.

5. Associative Commitment as an Engine of Collective Commitment in the Associative Environment.

The majority of studies carried out on associations, often qualitative in nature and based on semi-structured interviews, focus on the organizational practices of associative actors. In their research on the sociology of associations, Laville & Sainsaulieu (1997) emphasize the concept of commitment within associations as a crucial factor for motivating actors and

achieving objectives that initially appear unattainable. According to the authors, the goal is to establish a human resources management policy centered around an institutionalized collective commitment, considering the diversity of stakeholders (employees or volunteers). This approach would allow for moving beyond the individual role of the organization's leader as a "mediator" of personal production commitments.

6. Arbitration processes as a factor of commitment of associative actors

Among the various ways of managing associations, Valéau (2003) highlights the process of involvement through which actors are connected to the associations to which they belong. According to the author, arbitration is omnipresent among the actors (associative agents), as they must either accept or identify with the values conveyed by the leaders. Indeed, the concept of arbitration implicitly refers to the uncertainties faced by the actors, as discussed by Crozier and Friedberg (1977). For Valéau (1998), these uncertainties push each actor to confront their personal and idiosyncratic views with the collective or, at least, official dynamics. This confrontation occurs when the leaders' vision represents just one perspective among many, which the actor then executes, modifies, or adapts as necessary (Valéau, 1998).

This situation points to classic issues of human resource management, namely coordination, autonomy, and power. For managers, the critical question becomes how to plan and implement a management project that unites all the actors. According to Valéau (1998), planning and implementation can only succeed if the association has genuine control over its human resources—control that stems from the dependence of the actors on the association. This would only be feasible if the autonomy of the actors is somewhat limited. Thus, we are confronted with a classic problem in human resource management, one that is closely tied to the notion of power within organizations.

In light of these points, we will now turn to the development of two major models commonly adopted in human resource management within associations: the theory of organizational justice and the value model of human resource management.

7. Organizational justice as a motivating factor within associations.

The theory of organizational justice aims to provide answers to the issue of motivating actors within organizations. Based on the concept of fairness, the organizational justice approach suggests that an individual is more motivated in their work when they perceive their

situation as fair in comparison to that of their collaborators, often referred to as "significant others." This raises the question of how fairness or justice might influence the motivation of agents within an association.

The work of Adams (1963) placed a significant emphasis on equity in the theoretical development of motivation in organizations. According to Adams, every individual within an organization observes their environment to assess whether the treatment they receive is fair or not (Adams, 1963). This comparison involves balancing the benefits (Outcomes) derived from their work, which could include salary, promotions, recognition, or simply working conditions, with their contributions (Inputs) to the organization, such as qualifications, skills, experiences, or performance. The individual systematically compares the ratio between their Outcomes and Inputs with those of their "significant others," which results in three possible scenarios: a) a situation of overequity, where the individual perceives themselves as being overpaid compared to others; b) a situation of fairness, where the individual feels they are treated equally to their peers; or c) a situation of underequity, where the individual feels underpaid compared to others in relation to their Inputs.

8. From equity to organizational justice; an adaptation for the associative world

The theoretical extensions of Adams' (1963) concept of equity across various fields of organizational management have given rise to what is commonly referred to as organizational justice. The initial developments in organizational justice focused primarily on distributive justice, a concept derived from equity theory. It was not until Greenberg (1987) that the notion of procedural justice emerged as a key component of fairness theory. Procedural justice, as defined, refers to the fairness of the processes, methods, procedures, and means implemented by organizations to ensure a more equitable allocation of resources and to establish a fair system of rewards. These processes include evaluation methods, skill and career management, motivation, remuneration, training, and more.

Another version of organizational justice was developed by Bies and Moag (1986), who emphasized the interactional aspect. According to these authors, it is crucial to pay close attention to the behaviors and attitudes of managers toward their employees, as these interactions form the foundation of how justice is perceived by employees. In fact, Bies and Moag (1986) distinguish interactional justice from informational justice, which aims to improve the flow of information and consider the opinions of employees to avoid the issue of

information withholding—a phenomenon that Crosier and Friedberg (1977) describe as "unjustified power." Regarding interactional justice, the authors stress the importance of treating individuals (whether employees or volunteers) with respect and dignity. This treatment generally fulfills their need for justice and aligns with their expectations in terms of motivation.

9. The limits of organizational justice as a grid of analysis.

In the associative context, the theory of organizational justice carries clear extensions and implications, especially given its depth in addressing equity and fairness among the actors within any association. Several studies conducted on associations (such as NGOs) have examined how different methods of treating employees and volunteers reveal the significance of this theory. The concept of organizational justice, in particular, brings to the forefront the idea of distributive justice, which often leads to either underpayment or overpayment in relation to the efforts of the actors as compensation. As such, the question of fair treatment among associative actors is addressed, implicitly, within this framework, particularly in its procedural form. This encourages managers to offer clearer explanations for the differences in treatment that might exist between employees (procedural justice).

During our research, especially in the observation phase, the leaders of the association informed us that the human resources policy implemented after the organizational changes was designed to address the gaps that had arisen from the previous structure. As part of this, a new system of remuneration and motivation was introduced, alongside skill evaluations and the development of an intermediate management system to improve the flow of information. However, despite these adjustments, perceptions of equity among the actors remain inconsistent (Lakhdar, 2018), particularly regarding career development and the remuneration system. This led us to conclude that the issue runs deeper and that its resolution requires more than simply applying standard human resources practices. Therefore, while the organizational justice approach is important, it alone will not uncover all the facets tied to the commitment and involvement of associative actors, whether employees or volunteers.

10. The "value" model of human resources management in the associative environment.

Recognizing the challenges of adopting a traditional human resources policy in non-governmental organizations, Pichault and Nizet (2000) highlight the organization's mission and

values as the driving forces behind motivating actors. According to these authors, aligning with the organizational mission forms the foundation for various human resource management practices, including recruitment and motivation.

In their view, the value model suggests that issues such as recruitment, remuneration, promotion, and working hours do not seem particularly relevant or worthy of focus, given the importance of the values meant to inspire the members of the organization. As such, an implicit foundational value within the association, like "self-giving," becomes a non-negotiable condition without which human resource management would simply be unfeasible.

When it comes to human resources practices like compensation, career management, promotion, evaluation, or training, the application of these practices is undeniably essential to the involvement and commitment of organizational actors. However, they do not serve as an end in themselves within the associative environment, just as they do not in other organizational types. Pichault and Nizet (1998) further explain that the implicit nature of the value model requires these practices to be closely tied to "dedication and adherence to values," which are continually and tacitly agreed upon by all members of the organization.

11. Discussion and conclusion:

The purpose of this comparative study on the different human resource management (HRM) models in associations is to highlight their limitations when viewed through the lens of the psychological contract. While these models offer structured approaches to managing people, they often fall short in addressing the unique and deeply human dynamics of the associative environment. The psychological contract, on the other hand, provides a more flexible and relational perspective, capturing the often unspoken expectations and mutual commitments that naturally arise between individuals and their organizations—an especially critical factor in associations.

Each HRM model we've explored has the same ultimate goal: to identify and prevent potential challenges within the organization. For example, the value-driven HRM model focuses on aligning organizational practices with the association's mission and values, emphasizing the motivational power of shared beliefs. Meanwhile, the organizational justice model highlights the importance of perceived fairness in everything from resource distribution to decision-making and interpersonal treatment. While both approaches address key organizational issues, they often do so within the constraints of traditional management

frameworks, which don't always align with the more fluid, mission-centered nature of associations.

Associations, by their nature, are distinct from traditional organizations. They thrive on the passion and commitment of their members, who are often driven by a blend of personal motivations and a desire to contribute to a shared cause. This dynamic can result in both extraordinary dedication and unique challenges, particularly when individual expectations and collective goals diverge. Limited resources, varying levels of engagement, and decentralized leadership structures further complicate the management of associative actors, making it clear that standard HRM practices aren't always enough.

The psychological contract offers a compelling alternative by emphasizing the unwritten, often emotional agreements between individuals and their organizations. These agreements are shaped by shared values, personal aspirations, and the day-to-day experiences of being part of an association. By adopting this perspective, associations can address not only practical issues like engagement and motivation but also the deeper emotional bonds that connect people to their mission.

To synthesize these insights, we've created a comparative table that contrasts the key features of the HRM models discussed with the psychological contract framework. This table illustrates not only the strengths and weaknesses of each model but also the unique potential of the psychological contract as a human-centered approach to HRM in associations.

Criteria / Approaches	Targets	Objectives	Tools	Depth of analysis
Associative commitment	All the actors of the association (employees and volunteers)	• Ensure a collective commitment • Go beyond the mediation of the manager in achieving the objectives	• HR policy focused on collective commitment instead of personal commitment	Specificity: No Completeness: Yes
The arbitration processes	Actors at the individual level	• Unique vision that represents the values conveyed by the leaders • Reduction of uncertainties	• Unifying HR management project • Exercise of real power over HR • Reduced HR autonomy	Specificity: Yes Completeness: No
Organizational justice approach	Actors of the association at the individual level	• A climate of fairness and justice between the actor and the "significant others"	• Avoid situations of underpayment by improving the benefit / contribution ratio • Mastering in leaders the behaviors that do or do not do justice	Specificity: Yes Completeness: No
The valoriel model	The actors at the collective level	• Implementation of mobilizing values based on self-giving • Abandonment of personal values in favor of collective values	• Communication on the values and missions of the association • Advocating the logic of "self-giving"	Specificity: No Completeness: Yes
The psychological contract	Actors at the individual and collective level Human and non-human contractors	• Determine the components of the individual or normative psychological contract that binds the actors to the association • In-depth analysis of the factors of commitment or non-commitment within the association. • Determine and prevent incidents of contractual violation.	• Determination of the nature of the employment relationship • Transition from the individual level to the collective level and vice versa • Consideration of changes in employment contracts • Consideration of interactions between human and non-human contractors.	Specificity: Yes Completeness: Yes

Table 1: A Comparative Analysis of the Psychological Contract and Human Resource Management Approaches in Associations – A Synthesis of Theoretical Developments.

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