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Populism in HRM: transcending a toxic trend with engaged scholarship

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Social movements such as #blacklivesmatter, #metoo, #geziparkmovement, #womenlifefreedom, #arabspring and pride marches have long called for greater equality and justice (Ozbilgin and Erbil 2021). Yet, the road to such progress is paved with backlash, setbacks, reactionary movements, and political instability that manifests as attacks on social, cultural, and legal frameworks, institutions and professionals of equality, diversity and inclusion (Saba et al. 2020). The resurgence of alt-right, racist, sexist, anti-LGBT+ and fascist movements is evident not only in the global north but also in the global south (Ozbilgin 2024). There is polarization of social opinion for and against progress towards human rights and (Equity, Diversity and Inclusion) EDI practices at work.

On the one hand, gender, ethnicity and disability are enshrined in UN conventions on human rights and over 150 countries have signed up to prevent discrimination on these three grounds internationally and many other categories of diversity and inclusion at the national levels (Fitzsimmons et al., 2023). On the other hand, there is widespread contestation of gender equality issues such as women's reproductive rights, and the emergence of inter and intra-racial, ethnic, religious and confessional conflicts that undermine inclusion. Many countries and regions have repealed progressive human rights legislation, setting their progress onto slow or regressive paths (Mills et al., 2023). The backlash against EDI takes multi-level forms. At the macro level there are attacks on international and supranational conventions on human rights. For example, more than 60 countries continue to criminalise LGBT+ inclusion at work and some of the progressive countries experience political and cultural backlash against recently earned LGBT+ rights at work and life (Roell et al., 2024). At the meso level, there are attacks on regulatory frameworks, legal arrangements, regulatory bodies and institutional arrangements (Ozbilgin, 2024). At the micro level, there are attacks on EDI professionals, questioning and undermining their work and employee resistance to EDI (McGowan & Ng, 2018).

This contrasting and patchy picture of progress and backlash against EDI has far-reaching implications for the HR profession. HR professionals may serve as agents of progress supporting EDI structures and policies by accepting organisational responsibility or become handmaidens of tradition and dogma, supporting the populist backlash against EDI by individualising responsibility (Vincent et al., 2024). In this brief paper, I explore populism in HRM, as it emerges as a pathway for HR professionals that undermine evidence-based, informed and learned tradition in HR. Populism is the

political approach which appeals to the widely held thoughts and beliefs of the general public. Populism often leads to a pooling of public ignorance. HRM is at a critical juncture between supporting demands for EDI and upholding the populist stance of the status quo(Erbil & Ozbilgin 2021).

Populist views of EDI reflect fears of loss of privilege and resources by the general public, giving an opportunity to those who feel that EDI has disadvantaged them and taken something from them. Populism feeds unfounded beliefs and fears about migrants taking jobs away (Vassilopoulou et al. 2022). For example, the failure of the Voice referendum that sought to give political power to indigenous population led to increased racism against Indigenous peoples fuelled by populist fears and beliefs (Graham, 2023).

Graham, T. (2023). Understanding misinformation and media manipulation on Twitter during the Voice to Parliament referendum.

Piere Bourdieu (1997/2000 frames historical moments when embodied demands of disadvantaged groups for social justice meet resistance due to traditionalism and dogma, driven by vested interests of the dominant group in retaining and sustaining the status quo as hysteresis. Overcoming the hysteresis has much to do with the strength of the transformative potential of otherwise isolated social movements, and HR professionals within organisations. The success of HR professionals in breaking the impasse of hysteresis towards EDI rests on their ability to secure intersectional solidarity to achieve buy-in and critical mass to foster EDI-led transformation (Tinay et al., 2024). Yet, EDI and HR-related functions often lack the power and resources to play such transformative roles, which makes them vulnerable to backlash.

In this moment of EDI hysteresis, we know more about how evidence-based HR promotes EDI (Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018) and little about how populism-based HR undermines EDI (Vassilopoulou et al., 2023). Populism as an ideational approach makes an appeal based on the general opinion of the majority, assuming that the public is homogenous and virtuous and their views are valid without scrutiny. Therefore, populism manifests in social settings, where racist, sexist, phobic and dogmatic views against EDI are commonly held, as a backlash against evidence-based, scientific and inclusive approaches that uphold EDI (Pease, 2020). In this paper, I make a distinction between HR driven by interdisciplinary evidence versus HR driven by alt-right, racist, classist, sexist and anti-LGBT+ populism. To explore how populism manifests in HRM, I turn to the literature on the sociology of ignorance and how even in disciplines of science ignorance manifests as siloed approaches that ignore interdisciplinary insights(McGoey 2019; Ozbilgin, 2024). As populist HR contradicts evidence-based HR, we may explore ignorance as a populist act to explicate how populist backlash informs, shapes and manifests in HRM. McGoey (2019) identifies two forms of ignorance i,e., not knowing and strategically ignoring, The general public may ignore the human rights

demands of minoritised and disadvantaged groups. As a result, strategic ignorance becomes a powerful tool for populist backlash and manifests as populism in science that pushes away critical insights of the outsiders within. In fact, an OECD survey (2020) showed that indifference (acts of ignoring and ignorance) is the main barrier to EDI interventions.

Why does HR have dual and polarised pathways to shaping its EDI approaches? The interdisciplinary evidence-based pathway supports and promotes EDI (Fitzsimmons et al. 2023), while the populist pathway resists, undermines and denigrates EDI structures and interventions. Fitzsimmons et al, (2023) suggest that understanding EDI in the context of international business requires an understanding of uneven relations of power in the status quo and vested interests to retain the tradition against demands of the changing moral landscape of social justice. HRM has a role in translating the demands of shareholders, stakeholders, and legal and social demands on employment policies and practices at work. HRM draws on two forms of inspiration and evidence. One is based on populism and self-interest, ie based on demands of shareholders for increased productivity, performance, and profitability. Populism manifests as a particular HR approach that uses and manipulates general public fears, hopes and anxieties to shape HR policies and decisions. HR decisions based on not knowing or strategic ignorance are often based on populist manipulations that pool pluralistic ignorance (Prentice and Miller 1996) to serve a narrow set of corporate interests.

Social unknowns and fears could be manipulated as populism in HRM. Yet a more sinister form of populism is through ignoring the embodied appeals for EDI. McGoey (2019) notes that ignorance is a major unearned privilege where only the dominant groups have the power to ignore appeals for justice and equality. For example, individuals who benefit from gender, ethnic and class discrimination may ignore appeals for greater equality. Ignorance does not only manifest in ignorant settings. Even scientists could use narrow evidence to perpetuate ignorance in science (Firestein 2012). The evidence-based approach could take narrow or interdisciplinary forms. The narrow definitions of scientific evidence could still perpetuate ignorance in science. For example, Thomason et al., (2023) explain that anti-woke science used narrow evidence and populist sentiments to resist social justice arguments.

The scientific path to HRM design is through an interdisciplinary evidence base that underlines the importance of inclusion, equality and diversity at work for worker welfare and safety. HR policies and practices are at the cusp of the duality of populism and interdisciplinary science. In order to promote HR based on interdisciplinary evidence, HR practitioners should combat populist beliefs and achieve buy-in and intersectional solidarity from across categories of social diversity and their organisational structure.

HR policies and practices need to promote the value and benefits of EDI for all ie transparency of decision making, and inclusion of diverse voices. HR also has a significant role in calling out and tacking rising waves of discrimination, bullying and harassment based on populist backlash. In practical terms this require HR to build employee resource groups, allyship for promoting inclusion and developing and educating leaders and workers against rising populist hate and exclusionary sentiments.

Future research could explore counter-narratives and interdisciplinary evidence that transcends the pluralistic ignorance induced by populism. Populism presents a grave challenge to evidence based HR and EDI policies. Future research can explore how populism and science informs HR policy and how populism can be mitigated.

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