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ETHICAL OR UNETHICAL HRM? THE STORY OF TWO COOPERATIVE INQUIRY PROJECTS WITH HRM PROFESSIONALS

Summary. Ethical or unethical HRM? What does 'being ethical' mean in relation to the human resources function? In my paper I would like draw attention to the emerging significance of HRM ethics. I wish to demonstrate how the democratic methodology of co-operative inquiry (based on participatory paradigms and practice) relates to HRM research. My intention is twofold: first, I wish to share some interpretations of the participants concerning their own definition of ethics, their interpretations of role morality and moral muteness. Second, I want to show that a co-operative methodology can be a novel way of exploring ethical dilemmas and it can also facilitate more ethical action.

Keywords: human resource management, HRM ethics, cooperative inquiry

ETYCZNE CZY NIEETYCZNE ZZL? HISTORIA DWÓCH WSPÓLNYCH PROJEKTÓW POZNAWCZYCH REALIZOWANYCH WŚRÓD SPECJALISTÓW ZZL

Streszczenie. Etyczne lub nieetyczne ZZL? Co oznacza "bycie etycznym" w odniesieniu do zarządzania zasobami ludzkimi? W niniejszej pracy zwracam uwagę na coraz większą rolę i znaczenie etyki w zarządzaniu zasobami ludzkimi. Chciałabym pokazać, jak demokratyczna metodologia wspólnych badań poznawczych (opartych na paradygmatach uczestniczących i praktyce) odnosi się do badań w zakresie ZZL. Moja intencja jest dwojaka: po pierwsze, pragnę podzielić się interpretacją uczestników badań dotyczącą ich własnej definicji etyki, ich interpretacją na temat roli moralności i moralnego milczenia. Po drugie, chcę pokazać, że metodologia wspólnych badań poznawczych może być nowym sposobem odkrywania dylematów etycznych i może również ułatwić bardziej etyczne działania.

Słowa kluczowe: zarządzanie zasobami ludzkimi, etyka w ZZL, wspólne badania poznawcze

1. Introduction

Human or inhuman resource management? – is the (hypothetical) question asked by Stayaert and Janssens (1999) on the pages of 'Organization' referring to one of the basic dilemmas of human resource management in modern day organisations i.e. the degrading of human beings into 'resources' and the aspect of human dignity. As a related issue, we can form a question: is it possible to manage human 'resources' in an ethical way? What does 'being ethical' mean in relation to the human resources function? In my paper I would like to argue that HRM professionals are key players in the development of the ethical or unethical nature of HRM, thus inviting them as research partners would offer a unique opportunity to form one (possible) answer to this question.

In the first part of my paper I would like draw attention to the emerging significance of HRM ethics. In the last two decades, there has been a 'modest growth of interest' in the field of ethics and HRM (Pinnington, et al. 2007:2): books and collections of essays have been published on the subject (e.g. Parker, 1998; Deckop, 2006; Johnson, 2007; Pinnington, et al. 2007; Boulton and Houlihan, 2007) and theoretical articles have appeared in leading business ethics' and HRM journals (e.g. Journal of Business Ethics, Personnel Review, Human Resource Management Review). However, the number of research efforts explicitly focusing on this field is rather low, considering its importance (Toffler, 1986, Wiley, 1998, Wooten, 2001, Greenwood, 2012). In my paper I would like to contribute to the filling of this gap, and show the possibilities of cooperative inquiry methodology (Heron, 1996, Heron and Reason 1997, 2001, Reason, 1988, 1994, 1999) in the field of researching HRM ethics. I wish to show that cooperative inquiry could be an exciting and novel way of exploring the meaning and practice of ethical HRM.

In the second part of my paper, after introducing practical details pertaining to the two cooperative projects (in group A I worked with members of the HRM department of a bank as co-researchers; for group B I invited along HRM professionals from different companies), I would like to share interpretations. First, some learning points of the co-researchers were focussed on themselves, as HRM professionals (e.g. their own understanding of ethics, facing with ethical diversity) and their direct corporate context. Second, the co-researchers identified some learning points (in a sense generalizations) about the HRM profession as a whole e.g. as the nature of the role morality of HRM professionals and the moral muteness of the professional community.

2. Dilemmas when investigating HRM ethics

Ethical dilemmas connected to the employment and management of people have been part of business-ethical discussions right from the start (Bowie, 1998; Werhane, Radin, and Bowie, 2004; Crane and Matten, 2007). However, it is only in the last two decades that the issue has made more headlines, as there has been a surge of interest concerning ethical issues from HRM academics and practitioners (Parker, 1998; Deckop, 2006; Johnson, 2007; Pinnington, Macklin and Cambell, 2007; Bolton and Houlihan, 2007; Greenwood, 2002, 2012). Although there is a growing body of theoretical literature here, the number of empirical studies explicitly focusing on the area is still rather low, especially considering the growing importance of human resources as a critical organisational resource as well as the increased strategic significance of HRM as a function (Legge, 2005; Greenwood, 2012). Neither the HRM profession in itself nor workplace ethics literature have enjoyed any major focus – in contrast to, for example, the medical profession, the police or management activities and roles.

One reason behind the modestly growing interest in the ethical aspects of HRM may be the major international corporate scandals over the last fifteen years (Tyco, Enron, etc.). Here we can pose the question: what kind of ethical principles (if any) were behind the unethical practices of these fallen corporations? From our viewpoint, what did HRM departments have to do with such failures – and what was their part in the fall? It is easy to see that it involved organizational cultures and HRM systems (e.g. performance appraisal and compensation systems or internal communication) in the background may have contributed to ethical failure or at any rate could not prevent a moral ‘fiasco’ from occurring. Were HRM practitioners responsible? What might ethical and responsible HRM mean in theory – and more importantly, in practice?!

This question leads to one of the basic dilemmas when one is researching business ethics and HRM ethics: the relationship between ethical theory/thinking and actual action taken. One side of the dilemma is: how can one explore and understand the whole of the “ethical process”, ethical principles and ethical actions *simultaneously*? The problem arises first at an individual level: how can one investigate and make sense of individual ethical thinking and values, ethical sensibilities, decision-making procedures, actual acts undertaken and ethical reflections (or justification/rationalization processes) all together? On a corporate level of investigation, how might one explore declared principles and values, and then the actual actions/output of the company at the same time? Even though some research methods do offer some chance of grabbing some “wholeness” (e.g. one can ask people to solve ethically problematic situations, or one can make case studies on specific corporate situations), they usually get hold of one part of the process – and not its complexity.

The other side of the theory-practice dilemma is: how can the academic researcher produce theoretically and practically relevant results within the field of HRM ethics? Business ethics' theories are very often said to be overly philosophical or theoretical, and generally alien to actual practice. So how can one find the most relevant questions – and produce answers – that are important to practitioners? And what might help persons here make more ethical decisions and take better action? Although there are some important empirical studies focussing on HRM professionals and how they relate to ethics (e.g. Toffler, 1986; Wiley,1998; Wooten, 2001), researchers in most cases have an outsider's role (i.e. are objective observers), so they are not able to support people *directly* in being able to manage such situations more successfully or easily (indeed, this is not included in their goals). At the same time, the object or subject of research (in most cases HRM professionals) has limited opportunities to influence the goals and processes of the research – or to reflect on results. I would like to argue that such a topic – the ethical aspects of HRM activity – may be understood, and processes can be analysed more deeply *from the inside* – that is, in a cooperative manner – via the provision of genuine support being given to people, and by all concerned, to have an integrating of theory, action and reflection.

The other basic dilemma of HRM ethics research connects with the meaning of ethics (and ownership of the definition of ethics). For a definition of 'ethics' and an interpretation of 'ethical conduct,' several moral frameworks can be applied. Traditionally, an ethical analysis of HRM has been linked to the rights and duties of employees and employers, justice and fairness perspectives or to religious teachings (Greenwood, 2002, 2007; Alford and Naughton, 2004). More recently (and in addition to the previously mentioned frameworks) research work has been characterized by 'traditional' universal frameworks, e.g. utilitarian ethics, Kantian ethics, the virtue-ethics of Aristotle, Rawls' distributive justice or care ethics (Legge, 1998, 1999). It is vital – as Greenwood proposes (2002) – that link ethics and HRM to make the ethical stance explicit, since in each given framework the modern organization or basic HRM propositions are assessed along the lines of different logics and differing results. Yet how does one choose among frameworks – and who decides which is best?

In studies, the researcher is usually the "owner" of the ethics, he/she has the "privilege" of deciding about the framework(s) on whose basis the principles and actions of "research subjects" are to be understood or evaluated; and she/he is the "evaluator" as well. The reader is usually informed about the framework (though, according to Greenwood [2002], again, some of the studies fail to actually say what it is). Yet, as a researcher, is it "ethical" to expropriate for yourself a definition of ethics?

One way out of this 'trap of ownership' might be an acceptance and application of moral pluralism (Goodpaster, 2007; Radácsi, 2000) as a framework. Theoretically, moral pluralism means accepting the existence of different ethical doctrines. Moral pluralism is built on the

belief that using various ethical philosophies and arguments help one interpret specific problems and situations, facilitate a better understanding of stakeholders' ways of thinking and arguments, and thus help in the creation of consensus and common understanding. In research practice, a study based on moral pluralism does not build itself up on a single ethical framework – it tries to include several viewpoints and frameworks, based on different views; and it encourages the creation of a common framework while accepting a multi-coloured or – faceted environment (Greenwood, 2007, 571). Moral pluralism in a research group could mean that researchers do not want to dominate the group with their ethical principles; instead, they are struggling to create to a common, pluralistic framework.

3. Co-operative inquiry methodology

Co-operative inquiry (sometimes referred to as *collaborative inquiry)* has diverse roots: its theory and practice is built, inter alia, on Lewin's research on theory and methodology for experience learning and action research based on participation and democracy (Lewin, 1946). It is also supported, primarily in the area of humanistic psychology, by the thoughts of Maslow (2003) and Rogers (2004) on the individual who is able to act freely and under self-direction and for self-development, and to decide how they would like to live their life. Thinkers of the critical school also had a major effect on the evolution of the co-operative school. The thoughts of Freire (1982) must be emphasised in this context, too – especially the concept of '*consciencisation*', i.e. the phenomenon of sensitivity and conscience development related to social, political and economic injustice; or there is also Habermas' work on the theory of communicative action (the importance of the evolution of agreement that is free of violence and which has consensus and communicative) as well as the significance of emancipation (Habermas, 2001).

Bringing researchers into a co-operative inquiry does not involve inviting along research objects, but rather co-researchers who are interested in and committed to the research while participating in the research work itself (with topics being within their field of interest). Consistent with the participatory paradigm (Reason and Bradbury, 2001), research participants are partners having equal rights (and are not passive, experimental objects), being persons who are democratically involved in and can participate in every phase of the research (in content and procedure, planning, data collection and interpretation). This equal standing and the wide 'decision-making authority' offered to research participants is also to be deemed quite radical even within the participatory paradigm.

Co-operative inquiry includes four phases of reflection and action (Heron and Reason, 2001). In the first phase, the group of research partners (generally 6-12 researchers) meet,

agree to the research's focus, prepare a list of questions or issues they wish to look into, make a research plan, and agree on research norms and rules that are acceptable to all of them. In the second phase, the research partners themselves become objects and carry out actions (individually, in smaller groups or collectively-together), observe themselves and each other, and finally record their results. In the third phase they go more deeply into the area of experience – and are fully involved in the action taking place; and new interpretations arise in connection with issues that are the focal point of the research. In the fourth phase, research partners meet again to share their experiences and interpretations, new thoughts and ideas are elaborated upon, or original thoughts are re-framed; and decisions are adopted based on new scopes of action. Each research typically contains 5-8 research cycles, which can vary in duration between a couple of days and several years: in some research projects, work is done with there being intense cooperation within a couple of days during which persons are together; in other cases meetings are held with a given frequency (weekly, bi-weekly, monthly, semi-annually).

4. What can co-operative inquiry offer HRM ethics?

My argument is that with co-operative inquiry to investigate HRM ethics there is a novel and useful way of proceeding. This argument has three motives. Primarily, I believe that the deep roots of the persons' ethical behaviour cannot be seen, explored or understood when one is an objective outsider; thus, only as a deeply involved participant in a research process – with people who are fully involved as partners and co-researchers – can such roots be identified; that is, instead of there being research 'on' people (i.e. who are only passive subjects within observation or experiments) (Heron, 1996). I agree with Brinkmann (2009) that moral criticism should be empathetic and constructive; for listening and understanding, encouraging self-reflection and self-criticism are a vital part of ethical studies.

Secondly, I wish to give an answer to the theory-practice challenge of ethical research – I seek to integrate theory and practice and to facilitate individual and group-level learning through an experiential learning process (Kolb, 1984).

Thirdly, the subjective-objective ontological position of co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996) harmonizes with moral pluralism, where various ethical mentalities and arguments can help interpretations of all problems and situations, and in understanding stakeholders' ways of thinking and arguments, where consensus and a common understanding might thus be reached (Radácsi, 2000; Palazzo, 2002). Based on this research methodology, an opportunity could arise for getting a comprehensive and common interpretation of ethical concepts, where

there is a detailed analysis of each action; as a result, there will be better understanding of participants.

5. Methodology and practical details of the research projects

Invitation and group forming

Sample selection and group-forming in a co-operative inquiry is an exciting issue in several respects: first, taking part in the research requires a serious, regular and long-term commitment, also energy investment and a real, deliberate commitment from participants (in contrast with, let's say, someone's merely filling in a questionnaire or giving an interview). Secondly, based on Reason's idea (1999), the level of sampling is also open to question – the initiating researcher may look for an already-existing group as its research group, or may him/herself start up a new group for the given research topic. After considering the potential benefits and disadvantages of both cases, I decided to initiate two groups: to form group A, I looked for an existing group, members of the HRM department of a company as co-researchers; and for group B I invited HRM professionals from different companies to do some research. I distributed my detailed invitation letter via mail groups and social media.

In the end, members of the HRM department of a bank (employing 600 people) volunteered and committed themselves to forming research group A. This group required a multi-level commitment – that of the organization itself and, within this, the commitment of the HR director was necessary to begin the research; for the research could be done only with the members' (co-researchers') voluntary and committed participation and perseverance. We then formulated research group B with HRM professionals from different organisations, i.e. persons who were interested and engaged/interested in this topic and methodology.

The two research groups consisted of 7 persons each. Participants, without exception, were university graduates, and had been active for several years in the field of HR management (and were 'experts' in living in Budapest). Regarding age, Group A (and with the exception of a 50+ year-old HR director) consisted of women aged between 30 and 40 years; while in group B there were two participants aged under 30 years (and others were between 30 and 40), with one male participant, too. This sort of homogeneity might reflect, on one hand, my background and acquaintance circle (university lecturer, women, aged between 30 and 40, living in Budapest); on the other hand, it could refer to a 'feminization' of the HR profession in Hungary. The phenomena may thus influence interpretations of research results to some extent.

Research cycles

In the first meetings of both groups, all co-researchers shared their motivations and expectations concerning the research aims and output – and we then considered individual objectives and decided about common group aims. Also, during this meeting we discussed the co-operative inquiry method, agreed on the number of cycles, on the types of action to be taken, and we additionally discussed our shared norms.

At the following meetings, we had the same structure. First, we reflected on the latest actions, following Kolb's (1984) learning cycle, and decided on the following ones: focus, time and locations, and special tasks. (In Table 1, I have introduced details of the two research projects and also activities to be undertaken.)

Table 1

Characteristics of the two research groups

Characteristics of the group	Research group A	Research group B
Forming the research group	Existing group – HR department of a Hungarian bank of 600 employees	New research group formulated for this research: committed HR professionals who are interested in HR ethics, with various company backgrounds and experiences
Number of participants	7+1 persons	7+1 persons
Date of research	May- December 2011 (7 months)	October 2011 - April 2012 (6 months)
Number of research cycles	7	6
Age and gender profile of the group	HR manager (50+), other participants were women with a university degree (30-40 years old)	Two participants were women aged under 30, others were women with a university degree (30-40 years old); + one man with a university degree
Location of discussions	Corporate site, during working hours (usually 2-4 p.m.)	University rooms, usually in the evening (5-9 p.m.)
Duration of cycles	2-5 weeks	2-5 weeks
Place	Company, other sites	Everybody's own company, other sites
Nature of activity/action	Common, individual, paired	Individual
Examples of actions (with the number of the cycle)	2. Watching a movie together. 3., 4. Having an interview with a person involved in an ethically interesting case. 5. Participation in/observation of ethical code workshops. 3., 4., 5. Carrying out activities laid out in a case analysis. 6. Analysis of Loyalty Regulations on the basis of previously agreed aspects.	2. Having an interview with a person involved in an ethically interesting case 3., 4. Mini research: on the basis of two hypothetical cases, everybody does an interview with 3 people within the same organization 5. Analysis of research data 6. Analysis of the Hungarian New Code of Labour

Data collection and analysis

In my preliminary analysis and interpretations I relied on the following data:

– Word-for-word transcripts of meetings: during reflection phases, group members reflected and debated issues – and we recorded these discussions.

- Other materials connected with reflection, conversations (drawings, lists created during meetings).
- Documents, interview protocols and accounts born in the action phases of research cycles.
- My own research diary: here I wrote down my plans, emotions, thoughts and experiences related to specific meetings in greater detail, and in chronological order.
- Our e-mail communication during the research.
- Discussions of my analyses: group members received my analyses, and we discussed them in detail.

In order to help interpret the texts, I first of all carried out a *meaning categorization*, which means building up a category system and systematically coding texts (Kvale, 1996; Gelei, 2002). In doing so, I relied on the help of 'Nvivo' software. Even though on the basis of codes/sub-codes there were connections and contradictions and some patterns were being formed, I didn't feel they were sufficient – so as another leg of my analysis I searched for background patterns and interpretations spanning a number of codes that went beyond the existing texts, including my own impressions and changes of mind, too. To help with the transparency of such inter-relationships (according to a particular script) I outlined thoughts arising in meetings – that is, how particular questions and lines of thought were interweaving and shaping one another. This should be seen as a sort of *meaning-compression* (Gelei, 2002).

In accordance with the original texts, structured by the codes, and also condensed by them, I made interpretations of meaning. I approached the texts with an *understanding orientation*: I firstly strove for true-to-text interpretations, rendering up the individual and shared interpretations of specific co-researchers; secondly, I sought out critical interpretations of hidden meanings. The two interpretations were interwoven and framed by continual critical reflection – so the research group reflected on *its own* functions and we co-researchers reflected on *our own* individual functions.

Thinking about the validity of the research

Maxwell (2005, 86) defines the validity of qualitative research as the correctness of descriptions, explanations, interpretations, conclusions and results of any research. The issue of validity is re-defined somewhat with the co-operative inquiry methodology – i.e. how can such frameworks evolve where research partners do not misinterpret their individual or collective experiences? To ensure the validity of results, I built on Heron and Reason's (2001) recommendations: (1) the intensive presence of the researcher and long-term contact with the subjects of the research, (2) richness of data, and (3) feedback from research 'subjects'.

(1) The intensive presence of the researcher and his/her long-term relationship with research participants facilitates its validity because it helps participants 'loosen up' and to sincerely open up – and this supports the researcher in stepping beyond his/her own incorrect presuppositions so that he/she can thus understand participants.

Both research projects involved a several-month-long commitment to common work, i.e. many hours being spent together (in both research projects, each more than 25 hours) and also a common experience during which group members revealed themselves and got to know one another – thus by the end of the research persons had really become relaxed and open. In my assessment, 6 or 7 cycles proved to be a suitable amount – and in this process experiential knowledge and reflection appeared in parallel, strengthening each other. Participants in both of the research projects sensed the learning points. Altogether, we created a power-free communicative space and experienced the power of discourse therein (which I will discuss later).

In every cycle I asked for content-related and methodological feedback, and about whether co-researchers felt the research was going in the right direction or not – and then, what we could change. In group A there were few direct observations, though the group did hint, for example, that they wouldn't like to keep a research diary – which I accepted. In group B, there were more observations and comments, some of which even probed the frameworks of the research – yet their being revealed openly helped strengthen the community. (For example, in the 4th cycle several people refused to carry out the action – and it was useful that we could roll up and clear the background.) After specific cycles I referred back to the group the main content-concerned and methodological dilemmas, and asked the people to reflect on them; and we gave and got feedback on interpretations taking shape within the group, in the time period between two cycles (usually 2-3 weeks; perhaps 1 month, though rarely).

(2) Richness of data: the detailed quality, accuracy and concreteness of research data can provide a suitable basis for giving shape to clear, valid interpretations.

In the two research projects different situations occurred where both theory and practice had made appearances; and emerging research work turned out to be many-faceted. During the research we recorded reflective conversations on a dictaphone and made a word-for-word transcript of them. I myself kept a research diary into which I put down my emotions, thoughts and experiences in as much detail as possible, in chronological order. Unfortunately, I couldn't get the majority of co-researchers to do so. In the wording of one co-worker: *'I thought you wanted us to keep a learning diary, like at school...we couldn't do that. In the business sphere writing is restricted to an evaluation of candidates...' (Zita)*

(3) Asking for co-researchers' feedback on recorded data and about research results, misunderstandings and misinterpretations by the researcher might be lessened.

We looked at the research issues and norms and made a research plan together, and during the research we continually reflected upon them; and with general consent they took shape in the process. In the research cycles, reflections were had by all, and were continual in relation to action, emotion, thoughts and theories.

The created research data was at everyone's disposal. (In group B we set up a 'dropbox' for all, in which we stored all common documents.) Co-researchers received my report and both groups reflected on my interpretations, not only in writing – persons discussed the analyses together: *'Almost all of us read through the chapters of the study you sent to us, and we'd not only write down but openly give our opinions – and we had, in part, coordinated our views on them amongst ourselves...' (Zsófi, A)* For co-researchers, this opportunity – open discussion – was an exciting experience as regards there being both emotional and conceptual reactions from people. An e-mail of a co-researcher: *'I am just reading the study made from our research, the interviews, transcripts…I am writing because I must say it's a brilliant achievement that is coming together here...I adore it also because it just came into being. I request that you make it public, as it is incredibly valuable!' (Zsóka, B).* Such reactions and opinions were later, in different ways, built into my own analyses.

It was important for me that the co-researchers should face up to critical readings too, and that they had a chance to react to points that were in doubt and to formulate different interpretations from ones I had come up with. It was also of fundamental importance that they shouldn't feel either offended or misunderstood. These occasions were interesting also because, especially in group A, three months after the research's conclusions the participants were able to give accounts of *real change*, i.e. which had not been sensed at the close of the research (for example, in one of the cases together, we found a solution to an issue that became a 'success story' at the bank).

6. Interpretations

In my paper I would like to share some learning points of the research. First, some interpretations given by the co-researchers were focussed on themselves, as HRM professionals, (e.g. their own understanding of ethics, their experience about the ethical diversity of the group) and on their direct corporate context. Second, co-researchers identified some learning points (in a sense "generalizations") about the HRM profession as a whole (e.g. as the nature of role morality of HRM professionals and moral muteness of the professional community).

Difficulties in formulating an ethical framework

Formulation of a concept of ethics – or, more specifically, *HRM ethics – involved a taxing and lengthy process with both groups;* yet the participants themselves were aware of and emphasized its fundamental *importance and indispensability*. The incomprehensibility of ethical or unethical behaviour, repeated efforts to produce definitions together, and the research's creative process all reflected (were analogous to) the story in 'The Little Prince' (Saint-Exupéry, 2011) as cited by Levinas (1999). Levinas refers to the scene where the pilot draws for the Little Prince a lamb enclosed in a box. The participants came from various backgrounds and represented different set of values. Therefore, it was rather difficult to precisely define ethical terms either individually or as group members – or to see what we would like to uncover exactly (i.e. one doesn't know for sure what is inside the box one is leaning over). Nevertheless, we were confident that during this process of thinking in concert and carrying out actions together, in this 'leaning over', we might eventually forge a community and could make advances in unison; we could get to comprehend and experience things that individuals or outsiders simply couldn't. The trust we had in one another, and the research project as a cooperative achievement and learning process had all become the essential element in the process. This kind of experience also became apparent in Imre's reflection on the research: *'I think we're creating value as we go along, even if we don't concentrate on one specific value. We're just doing it, and by this process alone we are creating value...Goal-oriented, performance-focused operations can no longer make sense at all.' (Imre, B)* The process itself and the road we were taking, with all its burdens and difficulties, had become as important as the goal we were heading towards – which echoes findings made by other authors (e.g. Reason and Marshall, 2001) dealing with co-operative inquiry.

The challenge of *tackling ethical diversity* was a dilemma for both groups. As one learning point, Group A saw that diversity in our own way of thinking is not necessarily a symptom of weakness or unethical behavior (so there is no need to deny it or hide it behind a seemingly homogenous stance); rather, it might bring about a new opportunity to produce real ethical solutions to problems (after giving them thorough consideration in several respects). Group A co-researchers realized that if they consciously accept undeclared but existing roles, special views (employer vs. employee centeredness or a rational vs. emotional attitude), differences in ethical definition (e.g. rule ethics vs. consequence ethics) and various moral arguments, (e.g. relying on rules or cases) they might attain a higher level of ethical sensitivity, which could then help in interpretations of specific cases too. This way, the individuals could also cultivate one another and contribute to the advancement of the group as a whole. Another significant factor is that the co-researchers faced and critically reacted to the other people's roles and views – so their aptitude for critical reflection was also

improved. It would seem that putting critical reflection into practice may in itself get people closer to more ethical ways of operating both on individual and organisational levels.

The creation of a universally accepted definition of ethics, both at group or organisational levels, represented an important learning point for both groups. *The resulting shared interpretations, along with efforts made in common in processes, common construction, and participation and involvement all became of equal importance***.** In light of this, conscious organisational development and value-centered (or commonly accepted ethics-based) organisational culture development processes may have a major significance (Orlitzky and Swanson, 2006). It remains to be seen how HRM sees its own role, or how much they are willing to take on corporate conscience (Wiley, 1998, Ulrich and Beatty, 2001) or moral champion roles (Greenwood, 2007).

Problems were mostly dealt with at the *micro and meso levels***.** In the Group A research, in accordance with the expectations of co-researchers we focused on a given organization, on problems that might be encountered there, and on relevant individual perceptions and concerns. Here, macro level thinking appeared in 'flashes' – while making hints at the role played by business higher education and reflections on people's responsibility in the reproduction of moral-free organisational operations. In the Group B research, the main focus was also at the level of individual perceptions and decision-making, and interactions between the individual and the organization – though the issue of the present and future sustainability of HRM (with direct reference to the current economic set-up) had appeared at the stage of research questions. Such a difference may also be due to the composition of groups (individuals vs. members of a given organisation). A surpassing of individual, micro level observations was important for two reasons. In accordance with the opinion of Wray-Bliss (2007), co-researchers declared that ethical considerations had their relevance in economic organisations at micro, meso and macro levels – and with this we had taken a big step towards a genuine integration of ethical concerns. On the other hand, in both groups we experienced an interlocking of different levels, and it became clear that (though to different extents) everybody is in a decision-making position at his/her own level.

Breaking moral muteness

On the basis of co-researchers' personal experiences and perceptions, moral muteness is a characteristic feature of both their own organisations and the HRM profession as a whole – and its being broken will not be easy (as our own later experiences confirm). In both projects we gradually got to the stage where participants ventured to do tasks (e.g. made interviews) outside the group. This meant that – openly or less openly – they conducted interviews on ethical issues with other involved parties in the company, or they launched programs that had ethical overtones. This 'moving out' was not easy: even interested and committed

co-researchers saw it as dangerous and risky to expose ethical concerns in an organisational environment and to ask people direct questions about ethics. In order to act confidently, they needed some previous absorption in the topic, a common interpretation of concepts, a secure background and a shared commitment, and mutual support; and they needed to build up a daring attitude so as to break down moral muteness (which occurred to differing extents and with different forcefulness.) *Moral courage* (Trevino and Weaver, 2003), leading to a breaking of moral muteness, has clearly-drawn steps: (1) start talks and discussions in *a high-quality communicative space* within the group (Pataki, et al., 2001), (2) undertake action with group members, with immediate/off-line reflections, (3) start talks outside the group, either in the organisation or at professional forums, (4) initiate activity outside the group. It should be possible to create a secure communication background within an organisation's HRM department – and using this as a starting point it may be possible to formulate and develop ethical discourse and to integrate results, in practice, on an organisational level.

An individual's ethical behaviour is basically influenced by the *moral reference group*, in which the individual seeks moral reassurance. The opinion of Jones and Ryan (1998) is that the individual forms his/her own responsibility level in light of the expectations via the reference group. Although both research groups had critical comments relating to Hungarian HRM communities, they were identified as potential reference points or reference groups. In the aftermath of our research projects, one might see the viability of a professional community i.e. a communicative environment where HRM professionals would be able to critically react to situations and get a deeper understanding of ethical problems and their roots. Consequently, they would also be able to throw into question current conditions. Building on understanding and a willingness to change, they could shape their closer and wider environment in a learning process that integrates theory and practice and makes use of their own ethical framework. This reform process must start within the HRM profession and can only be successful with the voluntary and committed participation of the involved parties. It remains to be seen whether the representatives of HRM in today's Hungary have this kind of interest and commitment, though. Another intriguing question concerns the role and responsibility of the academic sphere, of HRM teachers dealing with reform procedures. Ghoshal (2005) says that today's higher education reproduces moral-free and opportunistic behaviours, and it frees students from moral ties. The question arises: how can this situation be changed in the medium- and long-term? How might professionals obtain theoretical and practical help? A starting point for responsible HRM education would be the launching of graduate and post-graduate programs with a more thorough integration of ethical factors and ethically questionable case studies. One practical way of using the outputs of research could be the application of more than 40 specific cases for educational purposes (with the

permission of participants). Education could also have an important role to play in establishing a 'lingua franca' which would link allegedly abstract ethical concepts and terms with specific company practices (Wray-Bliss, 2007).

Some of the organisations involved in the research had ethics-related concepts for use in everyday practice and ethics-related values in their organisational culture. These concepts might be used as a starting point for ethical discourse within an organisation. As experience proved in both research projects, *even these currently used and accepted concepts may become empty and lose their meaning* (e.g. see the concepts of sincerity and equal opportunity in mini Research Group B). *In extreme cases these ethical concepts even legitimatize unethical ways of operating at the individual or organisational level.* This, again, draws attention to the ethical role of HRM – i.e. it has a far greater significance than just being a factor in shaping systems and sets of values. Major importance should be given to continual reflection, common interpretations, redefinitions and development.

Yet how can we involve organisational members in reinterpretation processes pertaining to ethical concepts? One potential obstacle might be this moral muteness; another problem might be that the created common ethical framework – one arrived at with difficulty – might go against the 'performance-centered approach' of an organisation. There is a great risk that, instead of genuine involvement, a handful of appointed representatives (say, management and a few opinion-leader employees), with a need for quick results and efficiency, will come up with ethical definitions and pass them on to others as ready-made products. *This, however, may contribute to a 'culture of silence'* (Reason, 1994) in both the medium- and long-terms, while alienating people from the accumulation of knowledge (in this case from a critical interpretation of the concept of ethical behaviour) and, in a wider sense, from autonomy. Such a finding was further confirmed by thought-provoking experiences in our A group study, concerned with the revision of the ethical code of an organisation (fifth and sixth cycles).

A significant number of employees of the given company did not really want to have a say in the reinterpretation of the code, had no serious comments to make and did not take part in procedures. Few of them felt it was a responsibility to make use of a genuine opportunity to participate, and did not want to sacrifice time and energy to it; few saw it as their own business, that this code would be a creation coming from *their cooperation*. How does one address and really involve silenced and alienated groups? A so-called 'alienation from knowledge' was also conspicuous in our research – we experienced it for ourselves, for at the start our co-researchers backed off from the researcher's role; it was difficult to convince them that they had 'valuable' inputs that would be of use in each phase of the process.

Genuine participation in interpretation creation is important for another reason: with a lack of open discourse, stakeholders will be able to get little information regarding mutual expectations. A recurrent theme in the B group research was that involved stakeholders (including HRM) may only have a vague picture of others' ethical expectations in any specific or more general situation; then they either want to – or don't want to – respond to these imaginary or construed expectations.

A 'paradox of credibility and incredibility' was also identified in the research. From the beginning of the projects, co-researchers had great confidence in one another, in both groups. (In the A group research, such confidence was underlined by permission having been gained from company management to take part in research that would probably entail novel and unpredictable lesson learning via cooperative effort; or where Research Group B participants had sacrificed their free evenings to do such activity.) We shared many experiences, presented dilemmas, saw private life situations and played political or organisational games. However, in perceptions of and in reflections on the outside world – and especially in discourses related to the operations of today's Hungarian companies, and social and economic processes – the most marked theme was non-credibility and a lack of trust. Our research group (who 'trusted one another and wanted to make a better world') and 'present-day Hungarian reality' ('where individualism, egoism and unethical behaviour rules') contrasted drastically with each other. How could one break down that wall of silence and non-credibility? How could one expand the borders of credibility and trust, and create a higher level of credibility (and a high level communication space) in a business organization? These may be key issues for ethically-grounded social reforms, too. The same question arises once more: what might be the role of the academic sphere in this process?

HRM roles

Emerging as one of the important learning points is that there is no such thing as a minimum level of responsibility in HRM ethics or in the ethical nature of HRM operations: each and every HRM professional has to make ethical decisions. The 'nature' of experienced dilemmas may vary depending on positions held in the hierarchy, the organisation itself or the kind of industry involved. We experienced a diversity of industry-based backgrounds – the persons had had experience from FMCG, the media, energy, transport, and telecom; and from such 'stigmatized' areas as tobacco production or that of alcoholic beverages. Yet in each situation and at each level, HRM operations do have to face up to ethical issues and decision-making requiring short- and long-distance 'solutions'. Our job here is for people to take responsibility for the provision of ethical ways of working, everybody at their own level and in their own area. In the phase of making subsequent reflections on the research,

someone from Research Group A put it like this: ‘I think everyone is an (ethical) flagship in their own right – but with a different composition...’ (Zsofi, A)

However, the role of an 'ethical compass' and a 'moral champion' is neither simple nor rewarding – and this proved to be a basic finding in both groups. The dilemma may be interpreted at several levels: does this kind of responsibility really exist and, if so, where is the source of such expectations? Society increasingly wants HRM to meet ethical requirements – though the same kind of expectations and requirements from organisational stakeholders are not so definite or structured.

Secondly, the question may arise: If HRM does not adopt the role of 'moral champion' – who will? Let us see a tough opinion on this: ‘In a company context it is only HRM which is able to represent ‘humanity’ and ‘ethics’. Several managers give it a right to do this... But whether the manager has to take this factor into account – and how openly is it declared – is another question! It's not HRM’s task to make a manager's wishes accepted – instead, it has to be prepared to fight, because if you bring in ethical aspects, you'll get conflict situations and clashes... HRM should be able to have courage... This should be declared institutionally – it needs to say that its mission is to bring in the ethical considerations...’ (Zsofi, A)

Thirdly, what might this role mean? On one hand, HRM may adopt the role of the moral champion who plays with open, revealed cards, trying to directly represent and legitimize this aspect. Though it might take on the role of orientating compass, one which exerts influence in the background, where it has the talent to 'sell' ethics (under the label of economic necessity, investing in the future, employee branding, lawfulness, humanity) and where, in an indirect and continual way, it can get more and more ethical operations being born within the organisation. A similar pattern (champion vs. 'éminence grise', see Bokor, et al., 2005 and 2010) appears in an HRM general role concept too, though it is especially clear in connection with ethical issues. Even people who are unsure about practical implementations attach great importance to such roles.

Tense, complex ethical controversies are also reflected in the *employee champion role*. In larger-sized organisations, working with a business partner model, ethical dilemmas might be generated if an HRM professional is 'loyal' first and foremost to his/her own HRM unit. Such dilemmas will usually come interwoven with a political bias – and are created by conflicts of interest caused by power games with an organisational background. Yet, interestingly, HRM (in its own perceptions) is often regarded as a means, a 'counter-weight' or 'a pawn on the chess board'; and it gets involved in such power games. Ways of operating utilised in the research, critical reflection, and the developing of moral imagination all helped, in both groups, to reveal power games from ethical perspectives, so that the people could evaluate them – and try to find fresh solutions to issues.

The most characteristic question, however, concerned the *extent and intensity of employee representation.* One emerging pattern is *'keeping employees in check',* which means laying them off, avoiding responsibility, (the occasional 'demonization' of employees) and the general notion that employees are tricksters, think only about themselves, ‘put on a show’, etc. This concept partly reflects the image found in 'The Human Mirror' (Bokor, et al., 2005), where there is a manly combative, assertive approach – but with a difference: here, HRM acts as an outsider, playing the role of a kind of referee, who blows his/her whistle when there is foul play, ‘sends off’ serious offenders – in short, who monitors the 'fairness' of the game. This interpretation confirmed the presence of the *conscience role* (see Ulrich and Beatty, 2001). Such a role is not popular in the eyes of employees, however – and if HRM adopts the same stance towards management, it will not be popular for them either. A recurrent and relevant question is whether employees accept the ‘referee's judgments’? How ethical do they think HRM decisions are? Supposing HRM defines this role for itself: how will *it* react if its 'judgments' are considered unethical? Another dilemma in this role concept is how much HRM regards itself as pro-active and future-oriented – and in what ways does it create linked ethical systems and frameworks? Or does it confine itself to the strictly reactive role (i.e. trying to find solutions to specific case-related problems only)?

The other general pattern with the employee-champion role comes with the *supportive, coach*-role conception. Here, HRM is 'at one’s service', giving help to those who ask for it or who fall within its scope, be it manager or employee. (This may partly go in parallel with the feminine interest-harmonizing role as identified by Bokor, et al., 2005.) But what happens to those who do not dare, are unable to or are unwilling to ask for help? Or to those who are not in key positions or do not have any personal contact with HRM staff? How can we 'weave a cobweb' with which anyone who needs support *will get* support? For people in both groups, 'upward' communication channels in the majority of organisations work with low efficiency – if they work at all! Also, there are serious problems with the interest representation competence of trade unions (and with trade unions in general). A solution here might be an existing practice at company A, where opinions are directly 'channelled in' through regular social consultations. This way, communicative spaces among HRM professionals, workers and employees, and management are created. Although it is not altogether free from the exercising of power and dominance, at least such a thing exists!

At a crossroads between role morality and moral integrity (at present and in the future)

Group members drew a sad picture of amorality in present-day workplaces and of the defencelessness of employees. Seen like this, HRM representatives are – like other employees – victims. In interpretations of situations related to HRM tasks, a dilemma of classic moral consistency can be identified (Whyte, 2002): are we able to harmonize our

principles and actions in specific situations so as to attain a *dynamic consistency*? Is it important that our moral sensitivity, the process and result of moral decision-making and our actual deeds should strictly cover or harmonize with each other (Rest, 1986)? Especially in Research Group A there was a distinct division between those who stressed the importance of consistency and those who accepted a lack of it. Yet *role morality and moral integrity* issues did appear (Goodpaster, 2007); so do we deem it acceptable or legitimate to act differently in a HRM role in comparison with how we would act in our private lives? Or do we believe in the feasibility of a moral integrity which does not differentiate between public or private roles? Interaction between the two concepts is shown in Table 2. (Practical relationships between the two concepts still need further clarification.)

Our co-researchers put forth diverse ways in which to tackle the above dilemmas. Some pointed to HRM's buffer role and defenceless position when seeking to justify (permanent or occasional) differences between their principles and actions, also a lack of consistency that legitimizes the HRM-related role morality. Here, 'naturalization' of the phenomenon of role morality is conspicuous; some of the group members simply accepted role morality as a fact, and saw it as natural – while others saw it as a struggle and a type of ‘pain’. Openly declaring the above issue became an important turning point in both groups, i.e. when participants actually questioned the *‘inalterability of conditions’* (and also the lack of consistency and the 'embeddedness' of role morality). To our astonishment, we realized how 'imprisoned' we had become in our own misconceptions and stereotypes (in relation to amoral managers, selfish employees, good-for-nothing trade union reps. etc.) instead of being able to think over current, specific cases (and make use of our own powers of moral imagination).

Table 2

Moral consistency and role morality

	Same principles in private life and with a HRM role (moral integrity)	**Different principles in private life from the HRM role (role morality, a lack of moral integrity)**
Moral principles, arguments, logic and activity harmonize (consistency)	Full moral harmony	Consequent role morality
Moral principles and actions do not harmonize (lack of consistency)	Disharmony of principles and actions	Moral chameleon

Role morality and a lack of consistency are worth mentioning not only because they are justified and well-grounded but also because of their individual and organisational effects. Especially in Research Group B we saw, on the basis of personal and shared examples, what this kind of dissonance may require. Given an unremitting inner tension, some individuals may be forced to resort to constant self-justification – and this may lead to moral burn-out

and an erosion of responsibility-taking (Baumann, 1993). Indeed, consistent stress may force some people to quit a given organisation or give up a career in HRM altogether. On an organisational level, however, individuals may support one another by mutual justification of role morality and via their giving up on moral integrity. The moral reference group may play an important role in this perspective, too. When HRM experts encounter role morality questions, one might ask: can they reasonably expect 'moral impulses' from their own professional reference group or another organisational party?

The issue of moral integrity (Goodpaster, 2007) surfaced in research studies at two levels. Firstly (as has been said before), *HRM experts themselves struggle with contradictions between professed and followed principles – that is, there is a tension between principles and action.* Formulation of a definition of 'ethics' has played a significant part in any realization of the above notion – or rather, discussions about whether 'ethics' are defined by principles, sets of values and/or activity). Whereas all-round examination of the general, theoretical concept helps a great deal too – something that was complemented with case ‘solutions’ (where principles were declared again but were now linked to actions/consequences) and with concrete activity taken (where one faces the consequences of activity and can reflect on definitions). The presence or lack of moral integrity surfaced in other organisational groups too. During the mini-research activity with Group B it was amazing to see how often *interviewees went against their own professed ethical principles in practice (within the same case) or how inconsistently they behaved (between cases).*

7. Conclusion: this is the end or the beginning?

What does it mean to be ‘ethical’ in the HRM role? In my paper I wished to demonstrate how the democratic methodology of co-operative inquiry (based on participatory paradigms and practice) relates to HRM research. My intention has been threefold: first, I wished to share some interpretations of the participants concerning their own definition of ethics, their interpretations of role morality and moral muteness. Second, I wanted to show that a co-operative methodology can be a novel way of exploring ethical dilemmas and it can also facilitate more ethical action.

What about the practical influence of the research projects discussed? In their own evaluations, the two research groups had gone a long way during the seven cycles. After the initial phase of showing cautious personal interest, the individuals eventually realized that ethical factors are important and legitimate – and co-researchers wanted to integrate them into their daily and strategic operations. “*These talks we've had send out, in essence, the great, big, all-important message that we should make this aspect real in our everyday*

operations. And one should take responsibility, should make a representation of these things – and, yes, the issues are rather complex...' (Zsofi). Of course, the persons had only taken their first steps in a 'Marathon' distance, for change may be seen in an individual's way of thinking and also on an organisational level; yet it remains to be seen whether these practices and acquired empirical knowledge will have a permanent or a quickly fading effect in everyday life and be for the medium- or longer-term. How much are people willing or able to support and cultivate one another and one's organization, moving others in the right direction? That is a secret for the future.

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