June 1st, 2015

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Building Better Practice.
A Theoretical Discussion on Reframing Strategic Human Resources Management under the Strategy-as-Practice Lens

Number of characters (excluding spaces): 115 122
Abstract

The goal of this master thesis is to enrich and reinvigorate the theoretical framework of strategic human resource management (SHRM), by reflecting upon its basic theories and models from the perspective of Strategy-as-Practice. (S-as-P). Therefore, S-as-P is used as an alternative lens for scrutinizing SHRM, eventually generating new theoretical directions within this field of research, with potential for applicability in practice.

The rationale behind juxtaposing SHRM and S-as-P is based upon several reasons. First, SHRM and S-as-P are connected by “strategy” and both can be seen as sub-fields of strategic management, potentially influencing each other. In this case, it is under discussion the influence S-as-P can have on SHRM and this is where the second reason arises from. S-as-P, as a modern alternative to mainstream strategy research, can act as a springboard in moving SHRM forward, by infusing its focus on practice onto SHRM. Finally, aligning it to the practice turn, SHRM would join a current trend in management studies.

This juxtaposition, intertwined with the research question of the study, is translated into the following equation: $SHRM + S\text{-}a\text{-}P = x$, where $x$ results in an elaborated answer, built on the foundation of current SHRM models and theories (emergence, conceptualization, contingency – “hard” SHRM, universalism – “soft” SHRM, best-fit models, best-practice models), combined with two important components of S-as-P as field of research: core concepts (strategy, practice, praxis, practitioners, micro/meso/macro levels of analysis), and grounded theories (the practice turn, pragmatism, structuration theory, actor-network theory, situated learning, institutional theories, communication).

For structuring the discussion, three levels of implications were introduced. First, it was reflected on how the S-as-P perspective would adjust the SHRM research directions and which new methodologies would be required. The results suggest that further SHRM research could move from investigating strategy as concept towards scrutinizing strategy as process, where a micro-level analysis would be predominant. Secondly, the reflection theme was based on how the S-as-P standpoint might help in redefining SHRM, after reconsidering concepts such as strategy, human capital and ultimate objective of the organizations. At this level of discussion, it is suggested that building better practice is a more realistic organizational objective, rather than
reaching financial performance. Finally, one specific *best-fit* SHRM model is reshaped, as well as a *best-practice* SHRM theory.

The study adds value to the existing SHRM literature, as it introduces a new direction for reflection, both for researchers and practitioners, articulated as *SHRM as practice*.

**Key words:** strategic human resource management – Strategy-as-Practice – practice turn – practice – praxis – practitioners – SHRM as practice
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Introduction

The link between Human Resources (HR) and strategy became explicit about two decades ago, when Human Resources Management (HRM) studies and the resource-based view on the firm (RBV) started to be simultaneously addressed in the same context. (Lengnick-Hall & Lengnick-Hall, 1988; Wright & McMahan, 1992; Boxall, 1998; Boxall & Purcell, 2000). This is when the new concept of strategic human resources management (SHRM) has emerged. Since then, the HRM and strategy convergence continues and is further explored. Strategy is now a core element when exploring SHRM and all SHRM theories and models are built having as starting point different approaches on strategy. However, main SHRM literature is built upon a traditionalistic or functionalistic view of strategy (Boxall & Purcell, 2011) and, while the strategy research agenda is continuously expanding (Ruleau, 2013; Seidl & Whittington, 2014), the SHRM field of study needs a refresh. (Boxall & Purcell 2011; Truss, Mankin & Kelliher, 2012).

Therefore, this is the main purpose of the current study, to reinvigorate and enrich the SHRM theoretical framework by analyzing it with a new lens. This new lens takes the form of Strategy-as-Practice (S-as-P), a modern and complex approach on strategy studies. How would S-as-P ideas and theoretical resources adjust current SHRM theories and which new theoretical frameworks could be built upon an analysis based on S-as-P selected criteria? This is what the paper aims to discuss and eventually answer.

Since SHRM has emerged as a field of research, its theories and models have been polarizing around two major clusters: the universalism and contingency. These two directions, corresponding to the best-practice, respectively the best-fit schools of thought, are encapsulating various models which, implicitly or explicitly, are addressing strategy. As a variable in these equations, the view on strategy is definitely playing a decisive role in shaping these models. So, in the attempt of refreshing SHRM theoretical framework, an up-to-date perspective on strategy is a must. Consequently, S-as-P, a modern research approach on strategy, established as a sub-field of strategy research around one decade ago, was chosen as tool of analysis. Moreover, S-as-P grounded theories are brought into discussion for more complexity and reliability of the study results.
Thus, having the SHRM existing literature as object of analysis and the S-as-P concepts and grounded theories as instruments of analysis, I will seek to contribute to the expansion of strategic human resource management literature. The object of analysis is extensively presented in the first part of this paper, by reviewing the existing literature on SHRM and deconstructing the mentioned theories and models. The second part of the thesis is presenting S-as-P concepts and grounded theories as tools used in the third section, where new insights on SHRM research directions are given. More specifically, in the third part of the paper, the theories and models included in the first part are reconstructed and discussed by infusing the newly gained input provided by S-as-P. Finally, these new insights are discussed in terms of their implications for both theory and practice.

The reason for theoretically addressing this subject matter is the necessity for setting a generic common ground between SHRM and S-as-P as topics of research which haven’t been juxtaposed before. The results of the study, though theoretically oriented, might serve as a starting point in further empirical research, with potential contribution for both SHRM and S-as-P.

1. Human Resources Management, a look back from the emergence of the concept to current approaches

1.1. Defining Human Resources Management

There is no universally agreed definition of HRM and in the attempt of defining the concept theoreticians go from the broadest sense, generally referring at HRM as the management of people, towards more elaborated approaches including the methods of managing people together with the desired outcomes. (Beardwell & Thompson, 2014). Watson even suggests that “a rather messy situation currently exists whereby the term HRM is used in a confusing variety of ways.” (as cited in Beardwell & Thompson 2014, p. 4) This messy situation is caused by the fact that HRM theoreticians place the concept in two rather distinct positions. On one hand, HRM has a strategic role, thus its practices are designed to support the overall business strategy. On the other hand, HRM scope is to create an organizational climate in which the degree of employees’ motivation and commitment is high enough to generate cooperation with management in achieving the organizational objectives. (Beardwell & Thompson, 2014). These two directions took the name of hard and, respectively, soft HRM, where hard HRM is used to describe the focus on strategy where human resources are used in the organization as any other resources, with the final aim of reaching business objectives, and soft HRM is describing a rather contrasting view on human resources, focusing on methods aimed to strengthen employees commitment, flexibility and quality. In other words, hard HRM deals with people as resources, while soft HRM deals with people as human beings. (Truss, Gratton, Hope-Hailey, McGovern & Stiles, 1997).

A head start in understanding HRM is the definition of Boxall and Purcell who define the concept as “the management of work and people towards desired ends.” (Boxall, Purcell & Wright, 2007, p. 1). Beardwell & Thompson (2014) try to enumerate the activities that are underpinning SHRM, including on their list: recruitment, selection, learning and development,
reward, communication, team work and performance management. However, the authors are aware that this list is still generating debate and even disagreement, but they present it as a starting point in mapping the field of SHRM, and not as an exhaustive inventory.

If Boxall et al.’s (2007) definition is not placing HRM in any of the “hard’ or “soft” cluster, Storey is one of the theoreticians with a softer look on HRM, summing it up as “a distinctive approach to employment which seeks to achieve competitive advantage through the strategic deployment of a highly committed and capable workforce, using an array of cultural, structural and personnel techniques”. (as cited in Beardwell & Thompson, 2014, p. 5)

An important mention regarding soft and hard HRM, is that, while in theory they are presented as two diametrically opposed views, empirical studies show that no pure sort of either form exists within an organization. In a study conducted in 1997, Truss et al. concluded that if the soft HRM is predominantly identified in the rhetoric of an organization, the reality employees are confronting is more related to strategic control, enlisted by the hard model of HRM. Though there seems to be a gap between theory and practice and the numerous interpretations of HRM shed a confusing light on this research domain, Storey argues that this ensures “the domain remains lively, vibrant and contested.” (as cited in Bearwell & Thompson, 2014, p. 25). However, for a better understanding of the concept it might prove relevant to discuss its origins.

1.2 The origins of Human Resource Management

During the 1920s-1930s, a certain type of employer was emerging in the USA: the welfare capitalist. These employers were opposing to the unionization and collective employment relations, sharing an ideology according to which the organization should be in charge with the security and welfare of the employees, and not a third party such as the trade unions or the state. After 1933, when President Roosevelt introduced the New Deal program, progressive companies started to implement a model of employment regulations which can be identified as pioneering the actual HRM. They started to pay good wages, introduced healthcare insurance and pension plans. Moreover, in order to secure long-term employment and to increase employees’ commitment, the welfare capitalists were regularly conducting surveys to keep under observation
the workforce perceptions on their own working conditions and environment. As Kauffman asserts, this “small, but visibly elite group of employers in this time period sought to replace the traditional commodity/command and control system of management with a different approach that emphasized competitive advantage through unity of interest, cooperation, and investment in labor as a human resource.” (as cited in Lengnick-Hall, M., Lengnick-Hall, C., Andrade & Drake, 2009, p. 64). Relevant to mention is the fact that this new employment regulation system was being implemented under favorable external conditions: “stable product markets and the absence of market business cycles”. (Beardwell & Thompson, 2014, p. 7).

However, the system gained external recognition from both theoreticians and practitioners only after 1980s and this happened for several reasons. Firstly, the recession of 1980-1982 in the USA has generated a high pressure on product markets. Secondly, there was a decreasing influence from trade unions, and finally, the USA economy started to be challenged by overseas competitors, especially Japan. In the UK, one more specific reason is added to the above mentioned, i.e. the governmental plan “to reform and reshape the conventional model of industrial relations” (Beardwell & Thompson, 2014, p. 7). As Hendry and Pettigrew argue, in the UK, the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher “encouraged firms to introduce new labor practices and to reorder their collective bargaining arrangements” (Beardwell & Thompson, 2014, p. 8).

Besides these external factors influencing the emergence of the early forms of HRM, the management literature published in the 1980s had its own role. Peters and Waterman, as well as Kanter identified and suggested a cause-effect link between “the success of leading edge companies” and the motivation of employees. They also introduced the concepts of employee commitment and empowerment as related to management practices. (as cited in Beardwell & Thompson, 2014, p. 8).

1.3 Main Human Resources Management models

HRM, as research domain, was divided by Boxall, Purcell & Wright (2007) into three major sub-fields: micro HRM (MHRM), strategic HRM (SHRM), and international HRM (IHRM). Micro
HRM deals with the sub-functions of HR policy and practice and is divided into two other categories: one related to managing individuals and small groups through the processes of recruitment, selection, induction, training and development, performance management and remuneration, and the other related to managing work organization and employee voice systems. Strategic HRM approaches the overall HR strategies adopted by business units and companies and tries to measure their impacts on performance. Within this sub-domain both strategy creation and implementation issues are investigated. International HRM discusses HRM in multinational companies (MNCs). These three sub-categories of HRM are not excluding one another, as they might overlap. For example, SHRM issues can be discussed in international companies, as well as micro HRM practices can relate to SHRM.

When it comes to conceptualizing HRM, two generic models have proved to be extremely influential and broadly mentioned in specific HRM literature. These two models were emerging from two schools of thought called contingency and universalism.

The contingency school of thought, conceptualized through the matching model of HRM (Fig. 1), also called the best-fit approach of HRM, foregrounds the idea that there has to be an alignment between overall business strategy and HRM policies. The model was developed in 1984 at the Michigan Business School and it is associated with the hard HRM as it suggests employment of people as a resource in achieving the organization goals. As Beardwell & Thompson (2014) draw attention on, the matching model of HRM is built under two premises: first, that managing people effectively is not a panacea but differs from each organization and its external context, and second, that equivocate and conflicting views cannot exist within an organization, as all its members are sharing the same goal, i.e. the financial performance of the organization.
The universalism school of thought, conceptualized through model called “the map of the HRM territory” (Fig. 2), also called the best-practice approach on HRM, foregrounds the idea that in the creation of HRM strategies, the HRM practitioner has to be aware of the numerous stakeholders that gravitates around the organization and their interest. The model was developed in 1984 at Harvard University.

Fig. 2, The map of HRM territory, (as adapted in Beardwell & Thompson, 2014, p. 10)
The *best-practice model* is built upon the assumptions that the right set of practices based on high commitment and high performance would be generally valid for the effectiveness of any organization, regardless of the external factors. (Beardwell & Thompson, 2014) Though there is still no consensus on a list of such practices as essential to effective HRM, empirical researchers identified some areas as common ground. By reviewing a number of 25 studies, Wall and Wood found that “they typically cover a substantial range of the following: sophisticated selection, appraisal, training, teamwork, communication, job design, empowerment, participation, performance-related pay, harmonization and employment security.” (as cited in Beardwell & Thompson, 2014, p. 11). In a more extended study, reviewing 104 articles, Boselie et al. identified in 2005 the first four *best practices* of HRM: “training and development, contingent pay and reward schemes, performance management (including appraisal) and careful recruitment and selection.” (as cited in Beardwell & Thompson, 2014, p. 11).

2. **A discussion on the interchangeability of the HRM and SHRM terms**

Since its emergence as a management trend introduced by welfare capitalists in the 1920s and, more predominantly, since the 1980s, when the scholars interest on the topic transformed it into a research domain, HRM is still under debate in terms of its nature and role within organizations. When the best-fit model was first published in 1984, the idea of aligning HRM policies with the overall strategy of the firm was widely embraced and still it is today. The best-fit model came as a strong argument for legitimizing the existence of HRM in the organizational context and for a better understanding of its role. The best-fit theory, also called the matching model, came together with a new concept in the field of HRM, i.e. strategy. Since then, a strong emphasis was put on the strategic role of HRM inside the firm. (Beardwell & Thompson, 2014). As a consequence, “literature rarely differentiates between HRM and SHRM”. (Beardwell & Thompson, 2014, p. 33). However, Boxall, Purcell & Wright (2007) make a clear distinction between the two, placing SHRM as one of the three sub-fields of HRM, together with micro HRM and international HRM (IHRM). From their categorization, it can be concluded that “out there”, on the practice field, there is no such form of pure HRM, but one of, or a combination between the three forms previously presented. When SHRM gained scholars and practitioners’
attention, some changes occurred in the approach of HRM. The HRM research ideas split into two directions: the best-fit and the best-practice. The first one was foregrounding the use of human resources for strategy alignment and had a direct orientation towards business goals. The second one related HRM with the means of gaining commitment and employee welfare, as a precondition for business performance. These two directions can also be associated with the hard and soft HRM. Though the involvement of strategy is clearly articulated in the case of hard HRM, on a deeper look, we might argue that strategy is also present in the soft HRM approach.

Hard HRM uses strategy as the unit of measurement, a guiding tool, the compass that guides the whole company towards its objective, i.e. effective financial results. Soft HRM, on the other hand, is not making use of strategy, but strategy makes use of soft HRM policies as tools to reach financial performance. So, when discussing SHRM, both hard and soft HRM can be relevant part of the debate, as well as the best-fit and best-practice approaches. Yet, it has to be kept in mind that the role and use of strategy on each view of HRM is different, as presented in Table A.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of SHRM</th>
<th>View on human capital</th>
<th>Ultimate organizational objective</th>
<th>Means of reaching the organizational objective</th>
<th>View on and role of strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hard SHRM (best-fit/contingency) (Beardwell &amp; Thompson, 2014)</td>
<td>as resources</td>
<td>Financial performance</td>
<td>Alignment between SHRM policies and overall business strategy (best-fit)</td>
<td>Strategy is directly involved in the alignment process, is pre-existent and used as guiding tool for reaching the organizational objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft SHRM (best-practice/universalism) (Beardwell &amp; Thompson, 2014)</td>
<td>as humans</td>
<td>Financial performance</td>
<td>Enhancing employee commitment (best-practice)</td>
<td>Strategy is positioned outside the process, soft SHRM policies representing the strategy choice, a part of strategy content</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table A, Current perspectives on SHRM

In a more recent work on delimitating HRM and SHRM, Kramar (2014) also admits that there are semantic difficulties between the two concepts, and in making the distinction between the two, we first have to reflect on how the perception on HRM has been enlarged. Kramar finds that recently, the understanding of HRM has been expanded since 2007, when Boxall, Purcell & Wright defined it in terms of activities linked to the management of employees. In 2012, the Australian Council of Trade Unions extended the scope of HRM towards managing people, and not only employees, but also sub-contractors, consultants, and partners. This broadening of the term brings substantial changes in approaching HRM, and might blur the line between the two existent schools of thought: the best-fit and the best-practice. Enlarging the scope of HRM
towards people and not exclusively employees, emphasizes the existence of a plurality of stakeholders, representative for the best-practice school of thought, but might also have as follow-up the need of alignment to a coherent strategy, in order to successfully accomplish the interaction with all this relevant stakeholders.

Summing up, there is a very strong link between HRM and SHRM. On one hand, HRM is seen as the parent of SHRM, the latter being a sub-division of the first, together with micro HRM and international HRM. On the other hand, some authors argue that SHRM is the more generic term, and incorporates HRM policies. Chronologically, though, HRM emergence in the practice field and literature has been prior to the articulation of SHRM. Nowadays, the understanding of the two suggests a large overlapping, mostly because strategy became a key concept in both theorizing and implementing HRM and not only SHRM, which was, from its emergence, related to strategy. With the above in mind, further in this study, SHRM will be used as main concept put under analysis because of its unchallengeable connection with strategy.

3. Focus on Strategic Human Resources Management. Approaches and definitions of the concept, as it was developing in the last three decades

SHRM must be understood as more than traditional HRM prefixed with the word “strategic”. (Beardwell & Thompson, 2014). The strategic dimension adds complexity not only in understanding and framing the concept, but also in further enlargement of its scope, applicability, role within the organization and legitimacy in the business and academic worlds. (Devanna, Fombrun & Tichy, 1981; Wright & McMahan, 1992; Delery & Doty, 1996; Salaman, Storey & Billsbery, 2005; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2009; Truss et al., 2012; Jiang, Takeuchi & Lepak, 2013; Beardwell & Thompson, 2014). Though not directly articulated in the literature, SHRM traces are going back until the 1920s, when, as also mentioned in the origins of HRM, a group of progressive and evolutionary employers started to see the workforce as human resources, and began to manage this resource accordingly with the overall business objective. Only after sixty years, in the 1980s, specific SHRM literature was firstly published. The emergence of SHRM as academic concept coincided with the introduction of the strategic management approach called the resource-based view of the firm (RBV). (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2009).
From its emergence, SHRM was confusing theoreticians in their attempt to define the new concept. Some even still say that it is impossible to define it due to its complexity and plurality of approaches. However, some authors proved brave enough and formulated some guiding SHRM meaning statements. After almost ten years of theoretical crystallization Wright and McMahan saw SHRM as “the pattern of planned human resource deployments and activities intended to enable an organization in achieving its goals.” (Wright & McMahan, 1992, p. 298).

In 2012, so after 20 years since Wright and McMahan’s definition, Truss et al. suggested a slightly changed articulation. In their view, “SHRM sees close alignment between corporate strategy and HR strategy with the aim of achieving a higher level of organizational performance. It closely links together component HR strategies, covering rewards, organizational development and performance management example. It focuses on configuring HR practices to best link with organizational performance.” (Truss et al, 2012, p. 6).

Though separated by two decades of consistent empirical and theoretical study of the SHRM field, both definitions are built upon the same pillars: planned HR practices, aligned with the overall business objective, with the scope of achieving organizational performance.

In 2009, Lengnick-Hall et al, used a different method for enhancing the understanding of SHRM, by mapping its research territory. The authors took a chronologic, evolutionary perspective on SHRM literature and their study resulted in a seven theme-based categorization of thirty years of SHRM research. The seven themes they identified across SHRM literature are the following: (1) explaining contingency perspectives and fit, (2) shifting from a focus on managing people to creating strategic contributions, (3) elaborating HR system components and structure, (4) expanding the scope of SHRM, (5) achieving HR implementation and execution, (6) measuring outcomes of SHRM, and (7) evaluating methodological issues. According to the authors, each theme played an important role in the evolution of the field.

The first theme identified by Lengnick-Hall et al. (2009), explaining contingency perspectives and fit proved very productive and is still under discussion in current SHRM research. Major questions within this broad theme are related to investigating the nature of components to be aligned, i.e. HR practices and business strategy, methods of alignment, and the necessity of fit, i.e. exploring the outcomes in case of fit. Two sub-themes were identified in the same study:
identifying and analyzing different settings as contingencies, and comparing competing frameworks (contingency versus universalism and the configurational model).

The second theme, shifting from a focus on managing people to creating strategic contribution, was also under debate from the inaugural studies of SHRM. In Tichy, Fombrun, and Devanna’s study from 1982, which is considered one of the first published SHRM paper, the authors foreground the link between human resource management and organizational performance. They state that business strategy and human resource management can no longer be separately discussed. (as cited in Lengnick-Hall et al., 2009, p. 69) Under this broad theme, Lengnick-Hall et al. (2009) also identify four other relevant concepts drawn in relation to strategic contribution: the resource-based view, HR practices, human capital and social capital.

The third theme, as established by Lengnick-Hall et al. (2009), incorporates the elaboration of HR system components and structure. Schuler had an early seminal work on examining the inner parts and functioning of an HR system. (as cited in Lengnick-Hall et al., 2009, p. 72). He identified the parts that compound it as: philosophy, policies, programs, practices, and processes. The philosophy refers to how the organization views its human resources and what is the role they play in the achievement of business objectives. HR policies are the guidelines provided for further implementation of HR programs and practices. As Schuler sees it, while HR programs are the coordinated efforts designed and put into practice in order to sustain the strategic business needs, HR practices represent the customary behaviors that support the same strategic requirements. Eventually, HR processes is the “how” in the whole way from policies, programs and practices formulation until implementation.

In the fourth theme, expanding the scope of SHRM, the authors identified two sub-themes: SHRM outside the organization and SHRM in international context. The first one is covered by studies claiming that SHRM shouldn’t be discussed within the walls of the organization, but should be taken out and applied on the whole supply-chain, involving both upstream and downstream stakeholders. This idea was first suggested by Lengnick-Hall & Lengnick-Hall, but was eventually widely adopted and further disseminated. (as cited in Lengnick-Hall et al., 2009, p. 74). The second, sub-theme, SHRM in international context was introduced by Milliman in 1992 and short after, Schuler, Dowling, and DeCieri initiated the international SHRM (ISHRM)
approach. They argue that in a world of MNCs, the SHRM should be adapted and prepared to face the cultural differences. (as cited in Lengnick-Hall et al., 2009, p. 75).

The fifth theme, achieving HR implementation and execution, is comprised in studies which are emphasizing the gap between planned HRM strategy and implemented HRM strategy. In 1994, Truss & Gratton were first initiating this idea and mentioned that specific factors, mostly external, are affecting the perfect match between strategy projection and actual enactment. Further empirical papers following this idea identified the diversity of such factors. (as cited in Lengnick-Hall et al., 2009, p. 75).

The sixth theme, measuring outcomes of SHRM, was identified by Lengnick-Hall et al., (2009) in studies published after almost twenty years since the emergence of SHRM. Though in early studies the concerns with quantifiable outcomes were mentioned, there was no deep investigation of this. Then, when performance became a key-term used in SHRM literature, there was also a turn in measuring the effects of SHRM on performance, and indirectly defining its legitimacy.

Finally, the seventh theme identified by Lengnick-Hall et al., (2009), i.e. evaluating methodological issue, incorporates studies questioning the methods used or to be used in further SHRM research. This theme is not extensively covered, but it started to be approached in the last 15 years of SHRM research, after the field matured and some of its core concepts and models were fully established.

Another way of mapping and theorizing SHRM has been recently presented by Jiang et al. (2013) and incorporates a multi-level view on investigating the field. Though the study specifically analyzes what is the trend in research linking SHRM with organizational performance, (the sixth SHRM research theme identified by Lengnick-Hall et al. in 2009), its results have a good potential to be extrapolated for generic SHRM research. Jiang et al. (2013) distinguish between three levels of analysis when discussing the connection between SHRM and performance: individual level, unit/team level, and cross level. After an extensive literature review, the authors discovered that the unit/organizational level is predominant throughout two decades of SHRM research, and that the cross-level of analysis started to be included in studies only after 2009. They also introduce with their model (Fig. 3) the idea that when investigating SHRM, a multi-level look might result richer in answers. Even if the study is focused on
connecting SHRM with business performance, another idea with expanding potential is initiated. Jiang et al., (2013) use the terms micro and macro SHRM research, associating the micro SHRM research with the individual-level research, and the macro SHRM approaches with the cross-level studies. They also argue that there is a distinction between micro HR research and micro SHRM research by saying that “different from traditional micro-HR research, strategic HRM research at the individual level focuses on the influence of HR systems rather than a single HR practice on individual outcomes”. (Jiang et al., 2013, p. 1453). Bringing together Jiang et al.’s micro-macro perspective on SHRM research with Lengnick-Hall et al.’s (2009) suggestion that there is a trend in analyzing SHRM outside the organization, it can be added a fourth dimension to Jiang et al.’s model. While they associate the macro-level of analysis with the cross-level, so, still inside the organization, other researchers suggest that SHRM has already crossed the borders set by the walls of the organization, its link with strategic performance expanding SHRM scope towards external actors and factors, thus, in a more than macro perspective.

Fig. 3, Multilevel model of SHRM. (Jiang et al., 2013, p. 1461)
3.1 Main theories underpinning strategic human resources management

Initially, SHRM resulted from the clash between HRM and strategic management. After almost four decades since its emergence, this research domain still seems very young and open to further discussions. But before generating a new discussion on SHRM, we draw a line and try to understand where SHRM stands now and identify which are the main theoretical sources of its continuous growth. The core theoretical bricks on which SHRM literature stands were identified as being: the best-fit school of thought (contingency), the best-practice school of thought (universalism) and the resource based view on the firm. These three key components are going to be detailed in the following pages, with the scope of paving the ground for a new theoretical boost of SHRM.

3.1.1 Contingency and the best-fit school of thought in SHRM

The best-fit school of thought, also called the contingency school, gathers under the same umbrella all the studies related to the link between business strategy and HR practices. More precisely, HRM and SHRM researchers adopting this direction are investigating the extent to which there is vertical integration between an organization overall strategy and the HRM adopted policies. (Lengnwick-Hall et al., 2009; Boxall et al. 2007; Truss et al., 2012; Beardwell & Thompson, 2014). The vertical integration between business objective and organizational, team and individual practices and performance is basic to numerous models of SHRM. (Beardwell & Thompson, 2014). Wright and Snell add that deep-rooted in this fit perspective is the premise that organizations achieve a better performance in the presence of fit than in its absence. (as cited in Beardwell & Thompson, 2014, p. 41).

In spite of its wide recognition and mention in other papers, the contingency school of thought doesn’t lack criticism and limitations. Legge (2005) forwards the idea that a processual view on strategy when discussing the best-fit model might result in models with a higher potential for applicability in practice. He adds that “integrating HRM and business strategy is a highly complex and iterative process, much dependent on the interplay and resources of different stakeholders” (Legge, 2005, p. 153). Tyson’s (1997) critique on the best-fit models is based on
the idea that for better organizational performance, the vertical fit is not enough. He complements the vertical-integration with horizontal integration, seen as the alignment between HR practices and line managers.

Among the most spread best-fit models of SHRM are the lifecycle models and competitive advantage models, both adapted from strategic management research. (Beardwell & Thompson, 2014; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2009). The organizational life cycle was first identified by strategy researchers and consisted of four stages: start-up, growth, maturity and decline. In adapting the model for SHRM, for each life stage of an organization, certain HR policies should be implemented. Researchers associate, for example, the start-up stage with flexibility in HR policies. In the growth stage, there are recommended more formal and settled HR policies. When the organization faces its maturity stage, the HR policies should adjust towards a cost-control direction, thus a harder SHRM. Finally, for the decline stage, HR practices might probably face rationalizations and downsizing. The SHRM theoretical and empirical contribution based on life-cycle models is not lacking its critique, as some authors say that this generic proposals don’t have potential to differentiate the companies within they are applied, thus, the risk of losing the competitive advantage is high. (Beardwell & Thompson, 2014).

As a consequence, there have been developed the SHRM models based on the competitive advantage principles, first applied in strategic management. The attempt of reframing SHRM under the competitive advantage models took as starting point Porter’s key directions of achieving competitive advantage: cost leadership, differentiation through quality and service and focus on niche markets. (as cited in Beardwell & Thompson, 2014, p. 43). Schuler and Jackson built on Porter’s theory and focused on the fit between HR policies and the three generic strategies designed to enhance competitive advantage. (as cited in Beardwell & Thompson, p. 43). They argue that one of the above strategies is normally selected and consistently articulated, thus, the HR practice should be also aligned to it. This alignment is translated by a specific set of HR practices, associated with the chosen strategy. Following a logical path, the cost-reduction strategy would bring along “hard” HR policies such as: narrowly designed jobs, short-term result orientation, minimal levels of employee training and development. On the other hand, the other two strategies, quality enhancement and focus on niche market, are probable to bring along “softer” HR practices: extensive and continuous training and development of employees, broad
career paths to enhance the development of various skills, flexibility in job descriptions, high level of employee interaction with management, etc. (as cited in Beardwell & Thompson, 2014, p. 44).

One of the oldest theories of strategic management used as basis for further exploration of the “best-fit” in SHRM is the one suggested by Miles and Snow in 1978. (Beardwell & Thompson, 2014; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2009). They identified other four types of organizational strategic behaviour: defenders, prospectors, analyzers and reactors, and later on, theirs model was adapted in SHRM literature by associating specific HR practices to each type of strategic behaviour. This model is considers by some SHRM authors as a relevant work in paving the ground for further “best-fit” research within SHRM. (Beardwell & Thompson, 2014; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2009).

Another specific work which is integrated in the “best-fit” school of SHRM research is Torrington et al.’s five model of vertical integration. (as cited in Beardwell & Thompson, 2014, p. 47). He suggests that the five levels of integration between business strategy and HR strategy are: separation, fit, dialogue, holistic, and HR driven. (Fig. 4) The separation level shows there might be no integration between the two strategies, so they might be separately formulated and implemented. The “fit” level of integration imply a one way, top-down direction of alignment, while the dialogue level suggests a bi-directional relation between organizational strategy and HR strategy. At this level, HR policies are designed not only for implementing the organizational strategy, but might also have a relevance in overall strategy formulation. The fourth level of vertical integration suggests a complete overlap between both organizational and HR strategy. Finally, the fifth level of vertical integration positions HR as a key strategic partener, with major implication in both formulating and implementing strategy. (Beardwell & Thompson, 2014, p. 47).
As mentioned above, the “best-fit” school of thought of SHRM and its underpinning models and theories have been criticized both for their “over-simplified” theoretical assumptions and also for their limited applicability inside the organizations. Researchers have seen limitations in the fact that the best-fit models of vertical integration neglect the external environment, assume a linear and non-problematic integration, in spite of the multiple groups of stakeholders involved. In response for these critics, it has been developed a tangential direction of SHRM research, gathering configurational SHRM models. (Beardwell & Thompson, 2014; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2009, Delery & Doty, 1996). The configurational approach is a relevant variation of the “best-fit” view of SHRM as it adds complexity by suggesting that vertical fit is not enough for achieving “maximum performance”, but it also required a horizontal fit. As Marchington and Wilkinson add, “the key point about the configurational perspective is that it identifies an internally consistent set of HR practices that maximizes horizontal integration and then links these alternative strategic configurations in order to maximize vertical integration”. (as cited in Beardwell & Thompson, 2014, p. 45).

In spite of the criticism and limitations, the “best-fit” approach of SHRM was identified as the first and most fruitful theme researched in SHRM. (Legnick-Hall et al., 2009). The research
domain, though, was also investigated from a different perspective, called the “best-practice” school of thought, or the universalism in SHRM.

### 3.1.2 Universalism and the best-practice school of thought in SHRM

Another productive research direction in SHRM literature is defined by the best-practice school of thought, also called, the universalism. What builds the foundation of the best-practice view of SHRM is the idea that a certain set of best HR practices is required in order for the organization to achieve competitive advantage, thus, financial performance. (Beer, Spector, Lawrence, Quin Mills & Walton, 1984; Guest, 1987; Pfeffer, 1998; Husselid, 1995; Delery & Doty, 1996; Luthans & Sommer, 2005). Beer et al. (1984) and Guest (1987) have initiated this research trend in SHRM and since then, a lot of effort was put by other SHRM researchers to identify this important set of sine-qua-non HR practices, designed to improve organizational performance. (Beardwell & Thompson, 2014). The models of best-practice are various and do not follow the same pattern. As Beardwell and Thompson (2014) identify, the focus and outcomes might be slightly different. Existent research has approached by now the following sub-themes: the universal set of practices valid for all organizations, high-commitment models, human capital-enhancing practices, high-involvement practices, high-performance work practices/systems. All these studies assume that high-commitment, high-involvement and high performance work systems are indispensable in a successful organization. However, though extensive research interest was put on identifying and forwarding these best practices, less has been done for unequivocally showing if there is really a link between the adoption and implementation of these practices and firm performance. (Guest, 2011).

One of the most recognized and commonly cited model of best-practice SHRM it has been elaborated by Pfeffer in 1998. He identified, in a European organizational context, a set of seven best-practices: employment security, selective hiring, self-managed teams and team working, high pay contingent on organizational performance, training, reduction of status differentials and sharing information. Since the publication of Pfeffer’s model, there have been numerous variations of the list. Even now, there is no agreement on a single extensive set of universal, ideal HR practices. As Beardwell and Thompson (2014) observe, this lack of consensus is one of the
challenges of the best-practice school of SHRM. Capeli and Crocker-Hefter go further with the criticism and argue that “a single set of best-practices might be overstated”. (as cited in Beardwell & Thompson, 2014, p. 56). The same authors add that the universalism of a single set of practices is rejecting the idea of differentiation and uniqueness, which might have negative effects on reaching a sustainable competitive advantage. The authors of the best-practice models accept the idea that might be utopic for organizations to successfully integrate all the practices suggested as indispensable for organizational performance. Some of them admit that their models are aspirational, seen as the ideal case, the role of HR being to “score” as many practices as possible, by convincing both management and employees to implement them.

Another key-idea emerged within the universalist research of SHRM, proposed by Storey and later by Guest, is that an individual practice, if implemented in isolation, might prove less effective than if it would be applied within a “bundle’ of practices. (as cited in Beardwell & Thompson, 2014, p. 56). The best-practice “bundles” approach, as Beardwell & Thompson call it, moves towards a more realistic view, as accepts that organizational performance might still be enhanced if a core of integrated best-practices is implemented, the other practices on the list remaining optional.

3.1.3 The resource–based view on the firm as SHRM grounded theory

The RBV is an important integral part in the development of SHRM literature, on both theoretical and empirical directions. The RBV played a significant role in expanding SHRM research, in understanding its role and legitimacy as field of research. (Wright, Dunford & Snell, 2001; Boxall Purcell & Wright, 2007; Beardwell & Thompson, 2014). Developed as a strategic management theory, the RBV suggested a shift from the external towards an internal organizational focus. More specific, the RBV shows how internal resources of the company (both physical and intelectual) can be explored in order to achieve competitive advantage. (Boxal, Purcell & Wright, 2007). Though incipient ideas of the RBV were introduced back in the 1950s by Penrose and later on by Wernerfelt in the 1980s, in 1991, Barney clearly established his contribution by providing a tool of analysis within the RBV. (Beardwell & Thompson, 2014). He introduced the VRIO framework, claiming that, in order to secure a strategic competitive advantage, the internal resources of the organizations should have the following characteristics:
value, rarity, inimitability and organization. (as cited in Beardwell & Thompson, 2014, p. 50). Barney frames these characteristics as follows: value is the characteristic of a specific resource to “exploit opportunities or to neutralize threats.” Rarity defines those resources that are not broadly present and easily achievable by competitors. Inimitability defines the resources difficult or impossible to replicate in contexts outside the specific organization. (as cited in Boxall, Purcell & Weight, 2007, p. 90). Additionally, the fourth characteristic refers to the necessity of all the previous three to be managed and integrated in a coherent system of strategic practices. (Beardwell & Thompson, 2014). On analyzing the applicability of the RBV (as generic strategic management theory) on SHRM, it should be taken into consideration a narrower view, i.e. limiting the understanding of resources to human capital.

The growing acceptance of the strategic management idea that internal resources of an organization are the key to competitive advantage turned the attention towards the human capital and added legitimacy to HRM idea that people inside the organization have strategic potential. Thus, the introduction of the RBV in strategic management research not only generated a mass of SHRM research, but this SHRM research also enhanced investigation of the RBV, now integrated in strategic management literature. (Wright et al., 2001).

Wright & McMahan identified, in 1992, the RBV as one of the theoretical perspectives applied to SHRM and suggested that this perspective explained the rationale behind SHRM focus on human capital as source for competitive advantage. (Wright et al., 2001). In the same year, also building on the link between the RBV and SHRM, Capelli and Singh further explored the “best-fit” view and observed that most of existing literature argued that the fit should happen in one direction, i.e. the HRM practices should be aligned to the overall strategy and not vice-versa. They suggested that the RBV provided a strong theoretical support for proposing the reverse of the fit relation, where the HR practices “have a word” in strategy formulation, and not only in strategy implementation. (Wright et al., 2001, p. 703). A few years later, Wright et al. (2001) rejected the idea that HR practices can be seen as source for competitive advantage, as they were resources on which the VRIO framework couldn’t be applied. The authors argued that the inimitability characteristic is not valid in the case of HR practices as any individual practice can be replicated by competitors. The authors reached this conclusion after splitting HRM into human capital and HR practices. In their opinion, only the human capital has strategic potential
for competitive advantage, and not the HR practices. (as cited in Wright et al., 2001, p. 703). Lado and Wilson agree with Wright et al.’s idea, but add that though HR practices are not a source for competitive advantage as they can be easily imitated, the HR systems, as opposed to individual practices and comprising all complementarities and interdependencies between individual HR practices, have a good potential for playing a relevant role in strategy formulation and implementation (as cited in Wright et al., 2001, p. 703) Boxall and Purcells also built on the RBV/SHRM paradigm and argued that there might be indeed a human resource advantage for the business objective, but this advantage is reached only if there is a successful interwoven between the human capital advantage (i.e. exceptionally skilled and talented work force) and the human process advantage (i.e. the HRM efforts to achieve alignment of interests) (as cited in Wright et al., 2001, p. 703).

It is clear that “the theoretical application of the RBV has been successful in stimulating a substantial amount of activity in the SHRM arena”. (Wright et al., 2001, p. 706). However, the RBV has its own limitations and consequently received its criticism. Priem and Butler foreground some of the critiques. One relates to the conceptualization of the RBV and states that its definition is tautological. Other questions the legitimacy of the RBV as theory, as it doesn’t have a required characteristic, “falsifiability”, i.e. the possibility to test it. (as cited in Boxall, Purcell & Wright, 2007, p. 90). Regarding the RBV limitations, Porter, Miller & Shamsie argue that the shift towards an internal view on building competitive advantage might prove relevant only when the external environment is less predictable. (as cited in Beardweel & Thompson, 2014, p. 54.). In spite of the criticism and limitations, the RBV has been broadly cited and used in strategic management research, and has obviously made its contribution visible in SHRM research. (Wright et al., 2001).

3.2 Strategy, the core of SHRM

Strategy is a core concept in SHRM. It is the component that draws a demarcation line between SHRM and HRM and the detail that forced SHRM to enlarge its scope. An organization approach on strategy has deep implications for the understanding and implementation of SHRM within that specific organization, thus, to add the final brick in framing SHRM, a deeper look into strategy (as content, process and research domain) is taken in the next section.
Boxall argued that “any credible attempt at model-building in strategic HRM involves taking a position on the difficult questions: what is strategy (content) and how is strategy formed? (process).” (as cited in Beardwell & Thompson, 2014, p. 34).

In our attempt to frame strategy in relation to SHRM, Whittington (2001) gives us a “from-the-above” view on understanding the concept. He identifies four approaches on strategy: classical, evolutionary, systemic and processual.

The classical approach, also called the rational, suggests that strategy is formed through a rational and prescriptive process. Within this approach, profitability is seen as the ultimate objective of the firm, and strategy is the tool to reach it. From a classical approach, strategy is seen by Chandler as “the determination of the basic, long-term goals and objectives an enterprise, and the adoption of courses of action and the allocation of resources necessary for those goals.” (as cited in Beardwell & Thompson, 2014, p. 36). Followers of this view are tending to separate the operational practices from higher-level strategic planning, but Boxall and Purcell (2011) and also Whittington (2001) argue that such a separation is no longer valid in an era where operational knowledge can be a valuable competitive advantage. The second approach on strategy, the evolutionary, foregrounds the idea that on the market only the fittest survive, as the jungle law also demonstrates, and the market external conditions are deciding the prevailing strategies an organization is following. Whittington (2001). The third approach identified by Whittington, the systemic, suggests that “strategy is shaped by the social system within which operates and thus, organizations differ according to the social and economic systems in which they are embedded.” (as cited in Beardwell & Thompson, 2014, p. 39). The fourth approach, the processual, underpins the idea that “strategies emerge with much confusion and with small steps”. (Whittington, 2001, p. 21). Also Quinn admits that “in practice, strategy formation tends to be fragmented, evolutionary and largely intuitive.” (as cited in Beardwell & Thompson, 2014, p. 38). Mintzberg finds that planned strategies are not always the implemented strategies and March argues that strategy is discovered in action. (as cited in Beardwell & Thompson, 2014, p. 38). Strategy-as-Practice, a consistent research direction adopting this view on strategy has been emerging for the last few decades and it is going to be developed further in this study.
Part II Strategy as Practice – mapping the field, main concepts, and grounded theories

4. Strategy as Practice, a modern shift within strategy research

Metaphorically seen as “the black box of strategy work”, Strategy as Practice represents a new, modern approach on understanding and researching strategy, with a specific focus on the strategy making process. (Johnson, Langley, Melin & Whittington, 2007; Golsorkhi, Rouleau, Seidl & Vaara, 2010, p. 1).

Golsorkhi et al. defined S-as-P as “an alternative to the mainstream strategy research via its attempt to shift attention away from merely a focus on the effects of strategies on performance alone to a more comprehensive, in-depth analysis of what actually takes place in strategic planning, strategy implementation and other activities that deal with strategy.” (Golsorkhi et al., 2010, p. 1). Johnson et al. synthetize S-as-P as “a concern with what people do in relation to strategy and how this is influenced by and influences their organizational and institutional context.” (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 7). Both definitions are clearly showing a shift in strategy approach, from a functionalistic outlook, towards a processual view. (Whittington et al., 2001).

S-as-P is an emergent research approach on strategy, established as a sub-field of strategy research around one decade ago, and now it enters in the second decade. (Golsorkhi et al., 2010; Rouleau, 2013; Seidl & Whittington, 2014). Johnson, Melin & Whittington (2003) defined the first research agenda of S-as-P and since then, several authors have approached the topic in journal articles, numerous extensive studies and four complex books: Jarzabkowski, 2005; Golsorkhi, 2006; Johnson, Langley, Melin & Whittington, 2007; Golsorkhi, Rouleau, Seidl & Vaara, 2010. According to www.s-as-p.org, the official website hosting and centralizing S-as-P research resources, there are currently 319 S-as-P work references, uploaded by S-as-P scholars on the centralized bibliograhpy. (as on April 2015).

An important component of S-as-P is practice, which is not coming from anywhere else but from a contemporary increased interest in human practices in social sciences, and more recently, in organizational and management research. (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina & von Savigny, 2001;
Nicolini, 2012). As Brown & Duguid suggest, practice, in strategy research, is seen as “the internal life of process”. (as cited in Johnson et al., 2007, p. 35). Or, from a slightly different angle, practice in strategy research puts an emphasis on “dirty hands”, leaving behind the “clean models”. (Friedman, 1987). On a recent study, Rouleau (2013) identifies five ways of understanding practice in strategy research. According to her, S-as-P scholars have been emphasizing practice as: managerial action, set of tools, knowledge, organizational resources and as global discourse.

In S-as-P research, **praxis, practice and practitioners** are the three broad parameters used as guiding concepts. Praxis represents the precise activity of doing strategy, the flow of activity in which strategy is accomplished, while practices are routinized types of behavior related to “strategizing”, the social, symbolic and material tools through which strategy work is done. (Jarzabowsky, 2005). Jarzabkowsky & Spee (2009) propose three categories of practices: administrative (planning mechanisms, budget, etc.), discursive (discourse of strategy, strategy techniques and tools that present a strategy language), and episodic (meetings, workshops, away days, etc.). Practitioners are those that do, create and implement strategies, actors inside and outside the organization. These three “bricks” of S-as-P research contribute as guiding concepts in analyzing organizations not as reified entities, but as “grounded in action”. (Putnam, Nicotera & McPhee, 2009).

The processual view on strategy and the “grounded in action” principle are elements that are reinforcing the fact that S-as-P is built on a constructionist ontology. Epistemologically, the knowledge that S-as-P aims to deliver is resulted from investigating actual organizational action. It is argued that “knowledge was not an intellectual search for absolute truths, but was discovered in practical activity; its value was not established against abstract standards, but derived from its usefulness in guiding subsequent activity. Activity is at the same time the producer of knowledge and its measure.” (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 32). Regarding the aim of strategy research, the same authors mention that creating abstract generalizations is not a goal, but the final purpose is to get as close as possible to practitioners and their activities in order to help them be more effective. (Johnson et al., 2007)
In the attempt of mapping the S-as-P research directions, Johnson et al. (2007) designed a model (Fig. 5) which is offering a both back and forward perspective on what was and can be asked within the S-as-P empirical and theoretical investigating arena. As the figure below shows, the understanding of strategy is tentatively split into strategy as content and strategy as process. Vertically, the possible research interest can be focused on one of the three distinct levels or on the link between any two of the following: activities/praxis, organizational actions and institutional field practices. This links are represented by the vertical arrows in the model below and are, in fact, important guides in positioning S-as-P research and accurately formulating relevant research questions. The horizontal arrows shows that in the S-as-P research field, questioning the nature of strategy (either as content or as process) is still pertinent because the line between the two ways of understanding strategy becomes untraceable in some of the existing studies.

![Fig. 5, An exploded map of strategic management (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 18)](image)

In order to prove its relevance as field of research, S-as-P needs to enlarge its investigating agenda. The progress can be done by expanding the scope of the researched topic, either by going taller or flatter (Rouleau, 2013; Seidl & Whittington, 2014). Seidl and Whittington define tall ontologies as where “micro-level strategizing praxis depends hierarchically on larger macro structures or systems”, and flat ontologies as “in which the large is what stretches out sideways in a network of relationships.” (Seidl & Whittington, 2014, p. 408).
According to www.S-as-P.org, S-as-P research is “open to a variety of research methodologies and methods to the study of strategic practices, inviting scholars from various disciplinary backgrounds to contribute to the understanding of the actions and routines that constitute strategizing.”

5. The practice turn, the “Big Bang” in the emergence and evolution of Strategy as Practice

Practice theory is definitely embedded in the S-as-P approach. Thus, for a better understanding of S-as-P, it is required a deeper investigation of practice, as concept, and of the practice turn, as research trend in sociology, philosophy and, specifically, in organizational studies. (Schatzki et al., 2001).

The increased interest on practice in management studies and, specifically, in the field of strategy research, it is no accident. This trend is aligned to a larger intellectual movement called the practice turn (Orlikowski, 2010; Schatzki et al., 2001, Nicolini, 2012). The practice turn started in the social theory, with a large array of approaches, all of them meeting a common concern: what people actually do. (Schatzki et al., 2001)

Going back, on the practice track, Schatzki et al. (2001) take an in depth look on how practice is conceptualized in different areas of research. For instance, philosophical practice thinkers such as Wittgenstein (1958), Dreyfus (1991), and Taylor (1985) assert that “practices at once underlie subjects and objects, highlight non propositional knowledge, and illuminate the conditions of intelligibility”. (Schatzki et al., 2001, p. 10). For their peers studying practice in social theories, (Bourdieu (1977, 1990), Giddens (1979, 1984), and the ethnomethodology researchers), practice is seen as a way “to free activity from the determining grasp of objectified social structures and systems, to question individual actions and their status as the building-blocks of social phenomena, and to transcend rigid action-structure oppositions” (Schatzki et al., 2001, p. 10).

For cultural practice theorists (Foucault (e.g., 1976, 1980); Lyotard (1984, 1988), speaking about practice means “to depict language as discursive activity in opposition to structuralist, semiotic, and poststructuralist conceptions of it as structure, system, or abstract discourse.” (Schatzki et al., 2001, p. 10). Given the above as the starting point in understanding the broad array of interpretations, it is important to include Schatzki’s mention according to which the notion of
practice it is closely linked to “its framing and orienting of research”. (as cited in Golshorki et al., 2010, p. 23).

Orlikowski (2010) suggests three modes of engaging practice in research. She identifies these three approaches as different ways of framing practice in management research (including S-as-P literature). Having as criteria the researchers focus and purpose of their inquiry, Orlikowski finds practice framed as: phenomenon, perspective and philosophy.

Analysed as phenomenon, practice is concerned with what practitioners actually do, so it is framed as “practical activity and direct experience.” In this view, there is a clear distinction between practice and theory, or, more specifically, it is emphasized the difference between what actually happens, in contrast with what researchers say it happens by the use of their models, frameworks and theoretical representations.

Studied as perspective, practice becomes the lens through which are investigated particular phenomena, on a micro level. Studies using practice as perspective are not only focusing on analysing the “practical activity and direct experience”, but involve a theoretically rooted understanding of the repetitive interaction among people, activities, artefacts and contexts. (Orlikowski, 2010, p. 25). As such, a practice perspective proves to be highly recommended when addressing organizational phenomena, that are relational and dynamic.

As philosophy, practice is highlighted as a constitutive part of reality. As such, it is believed that practice is socially constructing reality. Summarizing the ontologies grounded in the three mode of engaging practice in research, linking practice with social reality, it can be argued that in the first perspective, practice as phenomena, the subliminal message is that practice matters, therefore it is in depth investigated. From the second mode, practice as perspective, in might result that practice shapes reality. Finally, the third mode, according to which practice is seen as philosophy, results in the following equivalence: “practice is reality”. (Orlikowski, 2010, p. 27)

Why studying practice? This is the first question Nicolini addresses in his book (2012) and the possible answer is highly relevant for the motivation and objective of the current study. One of the reasons for studying practice is articulated by Schatzki et al., as follows: “phenomena such as knowledge, meaning, human activity, science power, language, social institutions and human transformation occur within and are aspects or components of the field of practices” (Schatzki et
Therefore, practice is, in the first instance, the lens through which it is closely observed the construction of reality. A second reason is presented by Nicolini (2012) who states that the practice-approach gives an opportunity to come up with solutions for problems left unsolved by other polarizing traditions. Fueled by social constructionist ontology and an interpretive epistemology, practice research draws on nuances and shades of grey on a black-and-white canvas.

Regarding the practice research, Orlikowski (2010) identifies two generations of practice theorists. The first generation, represented by Bourdieu, de Certeau, Foucault, Garfinkel, Giddens and Taylor built the foundation on which the second generation of scholars (Ortner, Pickering, Reckwitz, Rousse and Schatzki) managed to elaborate and extend. The first generation pointed out the main concepts within the practice turn, emphasizing the actions and interactions of agents and how these produce, reproduce and transform social reality with their recurrence. The second generation came up with new concepts and also new understandings of the early ones. Schatzki, in his seminal book, The Practice Turn, articulated his new understanding on practices as “embodied materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understandings.” (Schatzki et al., 2001, p. 2) This definition was accounted and used by researchers from various field of research. Thus, Schatzki’s extensive work on exploring practice represents, perhaps, a first step to a further generation of practice research, as it was catalysing the transition from practice theorizing towards a practice turn in numerous research domains, including organizational studies.

6. Strategy as Practice grounded theories

As Johnson (2007) states in his book, S-as-P research is defined by an important characteristic: plurality. He mentions the plurality of analysis levels, plurality of actors, plurality of dependant variables and the plurality of theories involved. The need for employing a variety of theories comes as a consequence of the S-as-P broad scope. S-as-P researchers do not rely only on traditional strategy theories and models, but have been looking more in depth and identified “theories that better address practice and action.” (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 15). Among others, they have been using the following as multiple theoretical lenses: pragmatism, structuration
theory, actor-network theory, situated learning, institutionalist theories. This list is not trying to establish what is "in" or "out" in S-as-P research, as the field may fit with a larger range of disciplines, but the above have been selected as relevant for the purpose of the current study, i.e. investigating and developing the applicability of S-as-P as new theoretical lens for SHRM. All these are being set forth in the upcoming section of this paper.

6.1 Pragmatism

Pragmatism is situated among a family of non-essentialist philosophies built by Derrida, Latour, Foucault and Wittgenstein. (Johnson et al., 2007). Initiated as new philosophical current in the second half of the 19th century, pragmatism, also called pragmaticism, has Charles Sanders Pierce, William James and John Dewey as founders. Until the late 20th century, pragmatism was submerged by other philosophical trends such as positivism and analytical philosophy, but Putnam and Rorty managed to revive it. (Johnson et al., 2007). Late and more recent pragmatists built on the common idea that “knowledge was not an intellectual search for absolute truths, but was discovered in practical activity; its value was not established against abstract standards, but derived from its usefulness in guiding subsequent activity” (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 32). In the center of pragmatism, as philosophical direction, stands activity. Activity, according to pragmatists is in the same time producing knowledge, while being also the unit for measuring the knowledge it creates. More than presenting activity as central notion of study, pragmatism relies on concrete action. In other words, “the micro-activity takes the foreground.” (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 32). As a logical consequence, people are getting a main role in the analysis and their role as “agents”, i.e. making a difference, becomes obvious.

The understanding of knowledge in pragmatism is worth being mentioned here, as it would further help understand epistemological directions of S-as-P and, even more extensively, it might be a good argument in answering the main question of the current study. Thus, according to Rorty (as cited in Johnson, et al., 2007), knowledge is not produced in the attempt to unveil absolute truths, but with the aim of improving everyday life and of sustaining a better scientific dialogue. So, as Rorty summarizes it, “the pragmatist’s criterion for knowledge is practical utility rather than ontological reality.” (Rorty 1998, p. 45)
Organizational management theorists such as Powel build on this idea and add that “our truth is not correspondent, but instrumental – the better theory is the one that stimulates better research, better teaching, better learning, better practice”. (as cited in Johnson et al., p. 33). If the implications of better are clear in relation with research, teaching and learning, the use of the term better practice rises further questions, as we might ask ourselves what better means in different contexts and, organizationally related, how can better practice be generalized when we discuss a variety of stakes and stakeholders? In answering this, Johnson suggests that creating generalizations is not the aim of strategy research from a pragmatist perspective. The objective is, according to him, getting close enough to practitioners in their various fields of practice, helping them to increase effectiveness in the field they are activating.

6.2 Structuration theory

A leading practice theorist alongside Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, Anthony Giddens is the author of the structuration theory, widely mentioned as paving the ground for S-as-P research. The first reason for linking the structuration theory with S-as-P research is based on the fact that Giddens, revolutionary sociologist, finds the main purpose of social analysis in the understanding of human’s activity, thus, closely connected to practice. (Whittington 2010). Secondly, he introduced the concepts of agency, structure and structuration, which “have intrinsic importance to practice research.” (Whittington, 2010, p. 109).

Developing on the link between Giddens’s structuration theory and practice, he makes it clear from the beginning of his seminal work, The Constitution of Society (1984, p. 2): “The basic domain of the social sciences according to the theory of structuration, is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor any form of societal totality, but social practices ordered through time and space.” Thus, breaking the duality individualism-totality, he introduces, as “conciliatory third way”, the practice. (Whittington, 2010, p. 110). So, in the structuration theory, practice is what connects the individual level with totality, the micro with the macro.

Digging deeper in understanding the core concepts Giddens introduces along with his structuration theory, agency, structure and structuration needs to be clarified. From Giddens’s perspective, human agency is what makes human’s activity worth close observation. Agency is
seen as the human capacity of following a system of practices in the detriment of another, translated into reality as the power of people to make a real change in society. However, agency exceeds the human will and ability to do something. For Giddens, “agency is enhanced by control over resources, exercised through the following, or rejection, of rules.” (Whittington, 2010, p. 111). The resources, as used in the structuration theory, are of two types: allocative and authoritative. The difference between the two is in the command over material things, in the case of allocative resources, and, respectively, command over people in the case of authoritative resources. Both types can be brought into discussion when talking strategy.

*Structures*, the second key concept of the structuration theory, is defined as “relatively enduring and general principles of system ordering.” (Whittington, 2010, p. 111). *Structuration* is a modern way of reframing *structure*, the new term trying to embed the idea that it defines an active, dynamic process. (Whittington, 2010, p. 112).

As Giddens suggests in his model, the building of structures (the structuration) is done through interaction. He also distinguishes between three types of interaction: communication, the exercise of power and sanction. (Figure 6). These forms of interaction are associated in Giddens’s model with three corresponding structural dimension of social systems: signification, domination and legitimation. Signification refers to the process of attributing meaning to communication, through language and symbols. Legitimation denotes the tacit and articulated norms and regulations which apply within a social system (a nation, an organization, a department, a team, etc.) The third dimension, the domination, calls attention to resources (authoritative and allocative), seen as the mean through which domination can be reached. As seen in Figure 6, Giddens draws also on an intermediary level between the types of interaction and structural dimensions: the modality. Here, modality is seen as the set of methods, the means by which structural dimensions are represented in action. For example, for attributing signification to communication, people make use of *interpretive schemes*. For reaching domination through power, facilities are the modality. And finally, in sanctioning, the *norms* represent the modality of attaining legitimation.
Fig 6, Forms of interaction in the structuration theory, (Giddens, 1984, Figure 2, p. 29)

Besides the obvious link to practice, to the duality of micro-macro levels of analysis, and to agency, this specific part of the structuration theory, i.e. the types of interaction, represents another strong bridge between Giddens’s theory and Strategy as Practice. He makes clear references to organizations as social systems, and social systems are the general frame within which the premises of the structuration theory are applied.

6.3 The Actor-Network Theory

The Actor-Network Theory (ANT) was introduced by the French philosopher and sociologist Bruno Latour, concentrated on investigating and explaining the relationship between human and non-human actors. ANT criticizes the idea that social phenomena are things and instead, introduces the paradigm according to which these social phenomena emerge as a result of human orientation towards them, by relating to them, talking about them, etc. (Johnson et al., 2007). Applying ANT on the specific field of strategy, the shift of paradigm takes the following form: strategy is always in the making and cease to exist when the actors (human or non-human) stop doing their work of crafting strategy. The ‘always in the making” term suggests the ANT interest on process, rather than on content. The actors have the ability to produce a change, to make things happen, thus they are the agents and have this characteristic called agency. (Johnson et al., 2007).
Though it was initially applied on investigating the way scientific and technical knowledge is produced, ANT’s area of applicability was expanded, for example, towards management studies, and the own proponents of the theory have directly linked it to strategy. (Johnson et al., 2007). In a study published in 2002, Akrch, Callon and Latour investigated innovation from an ANT perspective, “as an art involving the assembly of a network of human and non-human actors, whose elements are being continuously tested and reconfigured.” (as cited in Johnson et al., 2007, p. 46). Another study linking strategy and ANT was published in 1997 by Callon and Law, and was again emphasizing the importance of human and non-human actors in building strategy and generating action:

It is tempting to say that ‘Andrew is a strategist’. But this is a shorthand that is dangerously misleading. For like all the other actors we have described, Andrew-the strategist is a heterogeneous network: Andrew + fax + fellow managers + secretary + head office + trains to London + his PC + the work of scientists and engineers + the memos that circulate + the time slips filled in by employees – it is this combination that creates the possibility of strategic action. (as cited in Johnson et al., 2007, p. 46)

If ANT studies the actors, the S-as-P studies a narrowed group of actors, the strategy practitioners. As Latour, Law and Callon themselves promote as main ANT methodological principle “follow the actor”, in S-as-P this principles can be translated into “follow the strategy practitioner”. The objective of this following is a better understanding of his/her/its way of strategy making, within a heterogeneous system involving both human and non-human components.

6.4 Situated Learning

Though it is not obviously linked to strategy research, the Situated Learning tradition is highly suggestive in terms of theoretical constructs, empirical methods and even some of the core concepts of strategy.” (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 39). Established as research tradition at the beginning of the ‘90s, the Situated Learning is derived from practice and pragmatism and focuses on the way learning is an everyday process, happening in everyday activities. The “situated” approach in Situated Learning denotes a contextual view and directs the research
towards ordinary moments of people’s life, and not into the formal educational context. (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 39). As the ANT emphasizes the importance of the system consisting in human and non-human agents, the Situated Learning foregrounds exclusively the system of people, together making the learning happen. Lave and Wenger suggest that “learning is done by people not as individuals, but as people –in-the-world.” (as cited in Johnson et al., 2007, p. 39). The Situated Learning also brings into attention the concepts of “communities of practice”, as collective body where learning happens through interaction and shared experience. In these communities of practice, the learning does not only rely on cognition, but also on legitimacy. Thus, the members should have validity as part of the community, i.e. experience to share and the will to offer and apprehend new information. This social and systemic character of the communities of practice indicates that, in the case of an organization, the horizontal relations are as important as the hierarchical ones. The learning is not only happening in a top-down direction, but mostly on a “flat” ground, and in a bi-directional way, in a continuous give-and-take relationship.

The connection between Situated Learning and S-as-P research is found on both theoretical and empirical dimensions. On theoretical level, the first link is with the concern on the micro level. The Situated Learning searches for knowledge creation, thus learning, in the “minutiae of everyday life”, as S-as-P is looking for strategy practice, praxis and practices in the mundane organizational activity. Secondly, the tacit input is relevant for both research directions. In S-as-P, the strategy is emerging not only from obvious strategically-linked activities, but also from implicit ones (for example practices, which are derived from the recurrence of specific actions). On a more general level, the tacit knowledge is a link between Situated Learning and the resource-based-view on the organization, which, on a certain extent, relies on competencies which are not spelled out, but inferred. Overall, the Situated Learning is pushing out the idea that knowledge is not statically approached, but emerges through activities, within communities of practice. Similarly, in the S-as-P perspective, strategy is not seen as a concept anymore, but as a continuous process, unfolded by investigating the practitioners and their knowledge, translated into praxis, practice and practices.
6.5 Institutional theory

As Meyer and Rowan state, institutional theory foregrounds the institutional rules and cultural norms in a broad context, defining the archetypal organization. (as cited in Johnson et al., 2007, p. 43). Elaborating on one of the main objective of institutional theory, i.e. identifying institutional rules and norms, Nelson & Winter and Knights & Morgan found that one of the strongest organizational norms nowadays is that organizations have to be strategic. Thus, strategy is institutionalized, becoming a prerequisite when conceptualizing an organization. (as cited in Johnson et al., 2007, p. 44). Put in contrast with the S-as-P focus on the micro-level activity, institutional theory gravitates around the macro-level. Though at a first glance these two theoretical directions might seem divergent, a closer look can reveal their complementarity. Predominantly, the institutional theory scholars have studied the phenomena they had in focus by quantitative methodologies such as databases and surveys. Their result might prove very useful for S-as-P studies interpretations: the generalizations resulted in institutional research, i.e. knowing what people typically do, can be used as relevant background in analysing and understanding specific interactions. So far, the institutional theory has been based upon aggregation and generalization, thus details are hidden and the role of agency is set aside. However, these macro-level insights resulted from institutional research serve as starting point in S-as-P micro-level interpretations. As Johnson sums up, the task of of the institutionalists is “to inform the strategy researcher of the suitability and usefulness of applying generic practices and strategy conventions in specific contexts”. (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 44).

7. Communication and Strategy as Practice research

So far, as theoretical concept, communication is not explicitly included among Strategy as Practice supporting theories. One reason is the lack of a meeting point between S-as-P and communication scholars. However, seen as “the means by which human beings coordinate actions and maintain organizations”, it might be argued that communication is, implicitly, part of S-as-P research, as strategy represents one of the processes purposely designed to maintain organizations. (Putnam, Nicotera & McPhee, 2009, p. 1). Though it is not clearly articulated in current S-as-P literature, the link between communication and S-as-P research can be identified by taking a closer look into S-as-P ontology and methodologies. On ontological level, under S-
as-P research, organizations are seen as social phenomena in a “perpetual state of becoming” and strategy is the permanent process fueling this state of becoming. (Putnam, Nicotera & McPhee, 2009). Communication (seen as discourse) is undoubtedly embedded in the process of strategy: through discourse, strategy practitioners are shaping practices and generating praxis with the objective of moving the organization forward. Secondly, the link between communication and S-as-P is perceived again if a closer look into S-as-P methodologies is taken. Strategy as process is investigated by the use of research methods that have in focus language and discourse, thus, involve communication. Among other methods, S-as-P authors make use of conversation analysis, discourse analysis and narrative analysis, to explore the strategy process.

Based on the above, it is showed that two relevant paths are coming along and are meeting in the same point, demonstrating the implicit presence of communication, both on theoretical and empirical level, on the S-as-P recent research. On theoretical level, the link between S-as-P and communication can be further explored using as guiding ideas the CCO models and theories. (Putnam, Nicotera & McPhee, 2009). On empirical level, through various methodologies such as (critical) discourse analysis (Vaara 2010; Mantere & Vaara, 2008; Vaara, Sorsa & Palli, 2010), conversation analysis and narrative analysis (de la Ville & Mounoud, 2010; Rouleau, 2010), communication is taking its rise in S-as-P research.

Next on this section, these two links will be further discussed with the objective of identifying how communication is making its presence visible in S-as-P literature and which is its role on current and further S-as-P research.

7.1 Communication Constitutes Organization, a guiding set of ideas designed to understand the relation between communication and organization

About three decades ago, questioning the nature and components of organizations, researchers in organizational studies adopted the lens of social constructivism and came with the idea that organizations are emanating from communication. The understanding of communication was no longer limited to the transmission of information, but expanded to an action and practice tool, as “it created and recreated the social structures that formed the crux of organizing.” (Putnam et al.,
These new insights took the shape of the CCO set of ideas. It is important to mention that CCO is not seen as a unified paradigm, but as a “heterogeneous theoretical endeavor”, basically driven by three schools of thought: the Montreal School of Organizational Communication, the Four Flows model (based on Giddens’s structuration theory), and Luhmann’s Theory of Social systems (Schoeneborn & Blaschke, 2014, p. 285). The major differences between the three directions are given by four criteria, as identified by Schoeneborn & Blaschke (2014), in their recent study. These criteria are: epistemology and ontology, notion of communication, the relation between communication and organization, and finally, the role of non-human agency. The second and third criteria are of high relevance for reaching the objective of this section, i.e. understanding the role of communication in S-as-P research, thus, these two are additionally detailed. First, the notion of communication is slightly different according to each of the three identified schools of thought. If the Montreal School of CCO describes communication as “the transactional relation between human, as well as non-human actors”, the Four-Flows Model school of thought defines it “as active mutual orientation in symbolic interaction between actors, thus leading to the fused emergence of meaning, power, and its bases, that is, normative force, and socially/materially constituted systems and contexts.” (Schoeneborn & Blaschke, 2014, p. 307, Table 1). Based on the Theory of Social Systems, CCO builds on communication “as self-reproducing process of meaning negotiation, the synthesis of three selections: information, utterance and understanding.” (Schoeneborn & Blaschke, 2014, p. 307, Table 1). According to the second criteria, i.e. the relation between organization and communication, each school of thought presents distinct perspectives. While the Montreal School states that all communication has organizing properties and transform organization into a “transactional entity” and “an imbricated process”, the Theory of Social Systems states that “only decision-oriented communication has the capacity to let organizations emerge.” (Schoeneborn & Blaschke, 2014, p. 308, Table 1). The role of communication as constituent of organization is even more specific under the Four-Flows Model of CCO. According to this, organization is collectively constructed by four communication flows: reflexive self-structuring, membership negotiation, activity coordination and institutional positioning. Based on Giddens’s structuration theory, the Four-Flows Model of CCO is sharing a common ground with S-as-P as the structuration theory is, also previously mentioned in this part of the
paper, one of the grounded S-as-P theories. This is why, further in this section, the Four Flows Model is selected to be discussed in more detail, as the first link between CCO and S-as-P.

The second link between CCO and S-as-P lies deeper and refers to the core components of each. In the attempt to identify what constitutes an organization, Putnam et al. (2009) identified three overarching elements: the material (composition of elements, the organization historical emergence and its contemporary reproduction), the formal (practices of organizing and participating, a body of knowledge about organizing) and the efficient causes (principles, rules of organizing, what makes the organization a reified thing). Similarly, though specifically related to strategy creation, but closely connected to the existence of the organization, Jarzabowsky & Spee (2009) suggested that practice, praxis and the practitioners represents the three main bricks of building strategy, and implicitly an organization. Praxis, as the precise activity of doing strategy, can be included within the formal components of organization, as identified by Putnam. Following the same reasoning, practices, as routinized types of behavior related to “strategizing”, can fall under the efficient causes.

A third relatedness between S-as-P and the CCO paradigm, on a theoretical level, is connected to two key concepts around which both are gravitating: *practice* and *action*. A seminal study on the relationship between communication and organization was published by Ruth Smith in 1993, and she identified three types of potential connections between the two: containment, production and equivalence. (as cited in Putnam et al., 2009, p. 6). According to the containment model, the organization is a pre-reified entity within which communication takes place. The production model breaks into three sub-categories: organization produces communication, communication produces organization and the two co-produce each other. Finally, the equivalence approach suggests that communication and organization are the same phenomenon, so the terms can be interchangeably used. Building on Smith’s model, Putnam & Fairhurst (2004), suggest three similar, but more comprehensive approaches for understanding how communication constitutes organizations. They see organization as objects, as perpetual states of becoming, and as grounded in *action*. This latter perspective, according to which organizations are built and explained through actual practices and praxis (action, specific activities), is deductively linked to S-as-P. Both approaches are exploring the “doing” and not the “being” of an organization.
Further in their findings within the paradigm “organizations as grounded in action”, Fairhust & Putnam (2004) identify four communication flows, each associated to a different target group. These flows are conceptualized as follows: membership negotiation (internal focus, targeted towards employees), self-structuring (internal focus, organizationally self-reflexive), activity coordination (both internal and external focus, referring to specific work situations and activities), and institutional positioning (external focus, referring to the external social focus). As the authors mention, all four communication flows have to happen in order to make an organization truly function and exist.

7.2 Strategy as Practice methodologies: considering communication when exploring strategy

Recent methodological choices in S-as-P research are putting communication in a central position by employing communicatively related data analysis methods: (critical) discourse analysis (Vaara, 2010; Mantere & Vaara, 2008; Vaara, Sorsa & Palli, 2010), conversation analysis (Samra-Fredericks, 2010) and narrative analysis (de La Ville & Mounoud, 2010; Rouleau, 2010).

Recently, the discursive aspects of strategizing have started to gain attention from strategy scholars, as a result of the fact that little is known about the role of language in strategy and strategizing. (Vaara, 2010). Several strategy studies explicitly drawing on critical discourse analysis (CDA) have been published in the last decade, however, “there is a need to spell out in a concrete manner what exactly CDA can mean and tease out in terms of a better understanding of social and discursive practices constituting strategy and strategizing in and around contemporary organizations.” (Vaara, 2010, p. 217). As a response to the above statement, Vaara also suggest that CDA can advance our understanding of: the main role of strategy texts, the discursive construction of conceptions of strategy and subjectivity in organizational strategizing, the process of legitimation in and through strategy discourse, and “the ideological underpinnings of strategy as a body of knowledge and praxis”. (Vaara, 2010, p. 217).

CDA is one, but not the only methodology that can guide in getting a better understanding of the central discourses and practices employed in strategy practice. Conversation analysis (CA) is
another one. Also called “talk-in-interaction”, CA has as core object of investigation the dialogue, thus the two-way model of communication serves as starting point. (Samra-Fredericks, 2010).

Narrative analysis is also added to the list of communicatively related methodologies in S-as-P research. As de La Ville & Mounoud state, since the work published in 1997 by Barry and Elmes on the narrative aspects of strategic discourses, it has been broadly accepted that strategy (as practice and theory), consists of “stories told by key people, generally leaders, to other people such as shareholders, members of the organization and other stakeholders.” (de La Ville & Mounoud, 2010, p. 184). The authors add that these stories give meaning to daily experiences and enable cooperation. In a more specific way of integrating narratives into strategy research, Rouleau, inspired by Bertaux introduces the concept of “narratives of practice”, as specific life stories that focus on work experience and professional trajectories. (as cited in Rouleau, 2010, p. 259). The purpose of using narratives of practice as data in strategy research is to clarify the way managers draw on their tacit and explicit knowledge in the process of strategizing. In other words, this is a new way of approaching practitioners, making sense of their strategic decisions by linking them with the professional and personal background of the strategy-maker.

Summing up, by connecting S-as-P research to the CCO paradigm, on a theoretical level, and with several methodologies such as discourse analysis, conversation analysis and narrative analysis, one might argue that, though communication is not yet taking a forefront position in S-as-P literature, it is always somewhere in the background, tacit and unchallengeable. Whether it is exploring the role of strategic words in performance appraisal interviews (Sorsa, Palli & Mikkola, 2014), the implication of ambiguity in developing strategies (Abdallah & Langley, 2014; Aggerholm, Asmuß & Thomsen, 2012), the structure of strategic conversations in top team meetings (Liu & Maitlis, 2013), or the causes of entrepreneurial failure identified by narrative attribution (Mantere, Aula, Schildt & Vaara, 2013), S-as-P research is, articulated or not, investigating communication. Though until now communication was taken for granted in S-as-P research, future strategy and practice theoretical and empirical exploration might benefit of expanding the research agenda by explicitly employing existing communication models and organizational communication theories.
Part III Discussing SHRM under the S-as-P lens

8. Why discussing SHRM under the S-as-P lens

As field of research, SHRM was “born” about three decades ago, by integrating strategic management ideas into HRM existing literature. During its emergence and consolidation as field of research, SHRM has been continuously assimilating strategic management concepts and models (the resource-based view, the business life cycle, the competitive advantage), resulting in its theoretical and empirical expansion. S-as-P can be seen as a recent direction of researching strategy and more specifically, strategic management. Thus, applying the S-as-P approach on SHRM is nothing but a natural next step in moving SHRM forward.

According to Boxall, Purcell & Wright (2007), future SHRM research should focus on expanding or broadening what is considered SHRM. This extension would encompass both other resources and other theories currently studied in strategic management research. Such theoretical resources are provided by S-as-P, a modern research approach on strategy, established as a sub-field of strategy research around one decade ago, now experiencing its own crystallizing stage. (Golshorki, 2010; Rouleau, 2013)

SHRM link to strategy is mentioned explicitly and implicitly in all its defining statements. (Wright and McMahan, 1992; Boxall, 1998; Boxall and Purcell, 2000; Boxall and Purcell, 2011; Truss et al., 2012). Therefore, it is an understandable consequence that SHRM and strategy research findings would shape these two fields on both their separate and mutual conceptualization. Adopting a systemic stance, when one of the components comes up with new theoretical perspectives, the other one would naturally adopt those components, adjusting itself. Following the focus of this paper, it can be argued that the strategy research field, through S-as-P, has a more dynamic rhythm of expanding, compared to SHRM research. Consequently, these recently gained insights about strategy have a high potential in reframing the overall SHRM theories and models.

In 2007, Boxall and Purcell stated that “a shift in strategic management thinking would be required to open the door for further development of the SHRM literature.” (Boxal, Purcell & Wright, 2007, p. 91) Just a few years before, in 2003, Whittington was introducing the concept
of S-as-P and its research agenda, providing this shift in strategic management thinking, required for further development of SHRM.

9. Structuring the discussion: levels of implication on analyzing SHRM under the S-as-P lens

The third section of the paper is an incipient attempt of theoretically discussing SHRM and S-as-P in the same equation. Using a basic mathematical language, this attempt might be translated into $SHRM + S-as-P = x$, where $x$ proves to be a complex answer, built on the foundation of current SHRM models & theories (as presented in Part I) combined with two important components of S-as-P as field of research: core concepts and grounded theories (as presented in Part II).

So, the pillars for the following discussion are:

1. **SHRM**: emergence, conceptualization, schools of thought (contingency – hard SHRM, universalism – soft SHRM), best-fit models, best-practice models;
2. **S-as-P core concepts**: strategy, practice, praxis, practitioners, micro/meso/macro levels of analysis;
3. **S-as-P grounded theories**: the practice turn, pragmatism, structuration theory, Actor-Network Theory, situated learning, institutional theories, communication.

Building on the above variables, the discussion is structured on three levels, starting from the broadest approach and moving towards more specific implications. So, first, are put under discussion the implications of applying the S-as-P lens on the theoretical directions and SHRM methodologies. Second, are investigated the implications of applying S-as-P variables on (re)conceptualizing SHRM. Finally, for a better understanding of how the S-as-P lens would adjust specific SHRM theoretical representations, two of the most discussed SHRM models are put under eye-glass. Each of the two models is representing the basic work under the contingency school of thought, respectively the universalism. At this level of discussion, the juxtaposition of SHRM and S-as-P could be extended towards any particular SHRM model, but because of space limitations and relevance reasons, only two were selected. The selection was
not randomly done, but the two models were chosen as being the ground models representing each school of thought underpinning SHRM: the contingency and universalism.

9.1. Implications on SHRM research directions and methodologies

Following the purpose of this paper, i.e. to expand and reinvigorate SHRM research by shifting the angle of analysis, the first level of analyzing SHRM through the S-as-P lens puts focus on how SHRM research directions would be adjusted and which alternative methodologies would be required in order to answer the new raised questions.

Lengnick-Hall et al. (2009) provide relevant information on the current status of discussing methodological issues in SHRM research. In their study, among the other six themes of research they identified, the most recent one is evaluating methodological issues. (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2009, p. 7) However, their observations concerning this theme are limited to the methods used to link and measure SHRM with organizational performance, as a way of confirming SHRM legitimacy in theory and practice. One of the main contributions a S-as-P perspective would add to SHRM research is broadening this view, expanding the scope of SHRM without linking it to firm performance, but finding its legitimacy in something different, such as successful practice (through interaction), where the term successful is not necessarily having financial connotation, but more social and relational meaning.

The undeniable link between strategy and SHRM has already been discussed in the first part of this paper. Thus, the comprehension and view on strategy is paramount for SHRM. The approach on strategy influences the way SHRM is conceptualized, researched, theorized and applied in practice.

Throughout this analysis, the S-as-P perspective provides the background for understanding strategy, which is seen as “something organizations do” and no longer as “something organizations have.” (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 3) So, one of the main contributions of S-as-P is reorienting the strategy researchers and strategic management practitioners towards strategy as process and not only towards strategy as content. Another important contribution of S-as-P research is answering the “how” and “who” questions, in relation to strategy formulation and
implementation. The “how” in researching strategy aims to identify strategy practices and praxis, i.e. the specific activities of *strategizing*. The “who” questions focus on practitioners, i.e. on strategic actors. This predominant S-as-P questions show a shift from investigating strategy on the macro (institutional field practices) and meso (organizational actions) level, to scrutinize strategy on the micro level (praxis). All these key components in strategy research were integrated by Johnson et al. (2007) in the exploded map of strategic management. (Fig. 5). Using their model as tool for structuring this level of my discussion, I have identified two directions of expanding SHRM research: horizontally, towards investigating SHRM as process, and vertically, towards questioning the SHRM praxis, on the micro level, but always positioning this micro-research under the broader umbrella of meso and/or macro levels. These conclusions are graphically represented in the figure below. (Fig. 7).

**Fig. 7, Potential in expanding SHRM research directions**

In scrutinizing SHRM as process, on the micro level, it must be made the important mention that this comes together with ontological and epistemological changes. Ontologically, the organizations become social phenomena, rather than social entities. More specifically, they are
not pre-existent, but constantly produced in the process of interaction between human and non-human agents. As part of the organization, strategy is no longer static and pre-given, but born and reborn in the constant process of strategizing. Epistemologically, the objective of generating knowledge in SHRM research is no longer to improve organizational financial performance, but to achieve better practice, foregrounding the actors and their interaction, rather than the organization as abstract social body.

As derived from the ontological and epistemological choices, a shift in methodologies it is also supposed to occur when investigating SHRM from the processual perspective provided by S-as-P. Asking the “how” and “who” requires specific methods of analysis, designed to find relevant answers. S-as-P research has already paved the ground in exploring new methodologies for the “practice research”, so the indications it provides are extremely valuable. First, as it focuses on the every-day activities related to strategy formulation and implementation, on the mundane and not on the generic, and also as it closely follows the actors and their interactions, S-as-P research extensively builds on ethnomethodology. Ethnography is broadly used in S-as-P empirical studies, as the method which can bring a major contribution in unveiling the “everyday” in strategy practice. Applied on SHRM research, ethnographies could focus on how exponents of the organizational human capital are creating strategic contribution in specific contexts. Ethnomethodology requires alternative methods of analysis, according to the research questions and purpose of each study. Recently, S-as-P researchers are extensively using methods such as discourse analysis, conversation analysis, narrative analysis, all of them distinctly analyzing communication, with different objectives and outcomes. Consequently, SHRM research, from this new perspective, might see a great potential in adopting these methods of data analysis. If a specific SHRM activity is selected to be analyzed at the micro level, for example recruitment, each method of data analysis would provide different insights. Conducting a discourse analysis on a job advert with the scope of identifying strategic alignment with the business strategy will provide a different breadth of view than if we would carry a conversation analysis on the interaction between HR responsible and line manager while trying to formulate the same job advert. Practice is based on interaction, and, as Giddens’s structuration theory shows, interaction has three forms: communication, the exercise of power and sanction. Communication, thus, has a double role in understanding and improving practice. It is in the same time a practice generator
and practice analyzer. So, communication generates practice but is can be also a relevant tool for analyzing it.

9.2. Implications towards a new understanding of SHRM. Introducing SHRM as practice

There are currently two broad ways of framing SHRM: under the best-fit or the best-practice approach. Both perspectives are subordinated to an even wider research direction in SHRM, the one that suggests the connection with the resource-based view on the firm. These two schools of thought differ in terms of understanding and employing strategy and human capital.

The RBV, integrated in SHRM research, has generated the first line of reasoning SHRM legitimacy in theory and practice. Born as revolutionary idea in strategic management, as it shifted the management’s attention from the external factors to internal resources (human and non-human), the RBV was easily adopted by SHRM researchers as they saw it as solid argument for investigating the management of human capital with the objective of achieving sustainable competitive advantage. So, according to the RBV, employees are not only seen as work force, but as human capital with potential for strategic contribution. From this view, two main directions emerged in SHRM: the best-fit (the contingency school) and the best-practice (the universalism school). These two directions were associated with hard SHRM, respectively soft SHRM, where hard SHRM integrates those strategic decisions according to which human capital is used in the organization as any other non-human resource, with the final aim of reaching the ultimate business objective, i.e. financial performance, and soft SHRM describes a rather contrasting view on human resources, focusing on methods aimed to strengthen employees commitment, flexibility and quality, seen as mediators in reaching financial performance. (Truss et al., 1997). These two directions are summarized in Table B, emphasizing the differences of perspective on human capital and strategy. However, though these are presented as two completely divergent directions, Truss et al. (1997) showed in an empirical study that they don’t exist in pure form in any of the investigated organizations. Their study concludes that while the soft SHRM is mostly present in the organizational rhetoric, the hard SHRM practices seem to be more widely used in practice.
Reflecting on these two schools of thought as current SHRM directions, and integrating the S-as-P concepts and grounded ideas, I have suggested, and included in Table B, a new perspective on SHRM, *SHRM as practice*, which includes a distinct approach on the human capital, on the organizational objective together with the means of achieving it, and on strategy. Thus, under the *SHRM as practice* perspective, the employees are seen as strategic actors, with a role in both formulating and implementing strategy, so they have strategic contribution. *SHRM as practice* aligns its objective with the ultimate organizational objective, i.e. better practice, without emphasis on financial results. The better practice, a concept borrowed from pragmatism and from the Situated Learning, as some of the grounded S-as-P theories, refers to practice as social interaction with the scope of creating knowledge, so it has epistemological implications. In terms of organizational aims, under the *SHRM as practice* perspective, the unmeasurable quality of practice as social interaction surpasses the quantifiable financial business performance. Here, better practice means meaningful communication and good synergy in creating valuable knowledge. The use of “better” in this collocation denotes a continuous strive for improvement, rather than setting a final born, which, when not reached, it non-equivocally states failure.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of SHRM</th>
<th>View on human capital</th>
<th>Ultimate organizational objective</th>
<th>Means of reaching the organizational objective</th>
<th>View on and role of strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hard SHRM (best-fit/contingency) (Beardwell &amp; Thompson, 2014)</td>
<td>as resources</td>
<td>Financial performance</td>
<td>Alignment between SHRM policies and overall business strategy (best-fit)</td>
<td>Strategy is directly involved in the alignment process, is pre-existent and used as guiding tool for reaching the organizational objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft SHRM (best-practice/universalism) (Beardwell &amp; Thompson, 2014)</td>
<td>as individuals</td>
<td>Financial performance</td>
<td>Enhancing employee commitment (best-practice)</td>
<td>Strategy is positioned outside the process, soft SHRM policies representing the strategy choice, a part of strategy content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHRM as practice</td>
<td>as (strategic) actors</td>
<td>Better practice</td>
<td>Active observation and continuous adjustments of SHRM practices and praxis (by the implication of practitioners)</td>
<td>Strategy is not pre-defined, but continuously co-created; SHRM objective is to create strategic contribution, with implication on both strategy formulation and implementation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table. B, Introducing *SHRM as practice*, in contrast with *soft* and *hard* SHRM
In conclusion, with the previous discussion used as point of departure, below it is summarized a new conceptualization of SHRM, *SHRM as practice*, seen as the *continuous process of creating strategic contribution in an organization by managing its human capital, with the scope of generating better practice*.

### 9.3. Implications on SHRM specific models and theories

After discussing the implications of applying the S-as-P lens on SHRM on methodological and conceptual level, the analysis goes more in depth with reflecting over the integration of S-as-P concepts on two specific models of SHRM. Though, at this level, the analysis could have made use of any of the current SHRM models, the two were chosen for exemplification, without trying to cover this area exhaustively. The choice was not randomly made, but two selection criteria were used: their relevance and use in literature and practice, and their representation for one of the two schools of thought underpinning SHRM: contingency (best-fit) and universalism (best-practice). Thus, as representing the contingency school of thought was selected Torrington et al.’s (1998) model showing the five levels of vertical integration between organization strategy and HR strategy, while, under the universalism school, it is analyzed Pfeffer’s (1998) list of SHRM best-practices.

#### 9.3.1. The **best-fit** school of thought in SHRM meeting the S-as-P core concepts and grounded theories

The contingency school of thought in SHRM, covering the *best-fit* approaches, is built on the main idea that in order to achieve financial performance, organizations should work on aligning the HR strategy with the overall business strategy. On theory, this alignment seems linear and easy to grasp, but in practice, things tend to be more elaborated. In order to understand better what this vertical alignment process might mean inside the organizations, Torrington et al. (1998) suggested five variations of the *fit* between the *business strategy* and *HR strategy*. (Fig. 8). The model is designed from the perspective of the management of an organization and the way its representatives understand the role of HR and strategy. Using these two variables, the
authors suggest that when discussing business strategy and HR strategy there might be: separation, fit, dialogue, a holistic view on both, or a down-to-top approach, where business strategy is HR driven. On the separation level it is made clear that there is no integration of business strategy in HR policies, and within this view, the HR responsibility in the organization is drastically minimized. The second level of integration, the fit, linearly shows how the integration happens in a top-down direction, and is built on the classical view on strategy (Whittington, 2001). On the dialogue level, the management admits the potential role of HR in helping to make strategic decisions. On this level, it is taken a processual stance on understanding strategy. Under the holistic level of integration, the employees are seen as source of competitive advantage and not just a mechanism used to implement the organization strategy. The HR driven level of integration shows that HR is a strategic partner in full rights.

Fig. 4, Torrington et al.’s five levels of vertical integration, (as adapted in Beardwell & Thompson, 2014, p. 47).

When reflecting on this model using the S-as-P insights, the first thing to take into account is the view on strategy. S-as-P promotes a processual approach, where strategy is seen as continuous process and no longer as content. So, as the first two levels of vertical integration are adopting
the traditional approach on strategy, they will not be included in the re-shaping of Torrington et al.’s model.

Under the S-as-P lens, SHRM is no longer about the fit between organizational strategy and HR strategy, but the co-creation of better practice (as pragmatism and the Situated Learning theory suggest). There is no fragmentation between organizational strategy and HR strategy, but a unitary concept of strategy within the organization. Actors (human and non-human) are brought on the scene, as directly involved in the process of co-creating better practice through interaction, i.e. through communication, power and sanctions. (Giddens, 1984). As stated in the Situated Learning theory, this interactions might be seen as gaining and sharing knowledge not as individuals but in communities of practice. Based on the above, a new model showing the relationship between SHRM and organizational strategy can be graphically summarized as below. (Fig. 9)

![Fig. 8, SHRM strategic contribution on building better practice](image)

In Figure 9, the circle represents the strategy, as continuous process, shaped internally and externally by the interaction between strategic actors (human and non-human). SHRM is one of the components that may bring strategic contribution to the organization, with the final objective of creating better practice. The other external arrows show that the strategic contribution is not
exclusively arising from SHRM, but other organizational components can have their role in strategy formulation and implementation. The new presented model doesn’t include anymore the *fit* or *alignment* concepts, as they cannot co-exist with the new processual perspective on strategy.

9.3.2. The best-practice school of thought in SHRM meeting the S-as-P core concepts and grounded theories

As mentioned in Part II of this paper, the universalist or *best-practice* SHRM research draws on the idea that, with the aim of reaching financial performance, any organization should follow a set of *sine-qua-non* practices in regard to the strategic management of its human capital. This main view, however, is represented in literature by several sub-themes: identifying the universal set of practices valid for all organizations, building high-commitment models, suggesting human capital-enhancing practices and high-involvement practices, establish high-performance work practices/systems. All these studies starts form the assumption that high-commitment, high-involvement and high performance work systems are requisite in a successful organization. Another assumption of the universalist researchers is that the financial performance of the organization is a consequence of the implementation of a set of best practices. While some scholars are still working on identifying these universally applicable practices designed for ‘guaranteed’ success, others are working on criticizing this approach from various stances; there are critics regarding the validity of the employed methodologies in investigating this issue, the lack of relevant theoretical support, or the inconsistencies of the current *best-practice* models.

Pfeffer’s model (1998) was chosen to be put under the S-as-P lens at this point of the discussion, as being one of the most widely cited best-practice list. The author identified, in a European organizational context, a set of seven SHRM best-practices, as follows: employment security, selective hiring, self-managed teams and team working, high pay contingent on organizational performance, training, reduction of status differentials and sharing information. These practices, he argues, if implemented, are bringing along firm performance. So, at a first glance, at least two aspects of his argument are not aligned to the *SHRM as practice* approach, as suggested
previously in this paper. These two aspects are: the view on strategy and the objective of the organization.

Firstly taking into discussion the strategy approach in Pfeffer’s best-practice model, it is evident that he is adopting a prescriptive view (Lynch, 2012). He is recommending the seven best-practices as panacea, as a universal cure for all the organizations struggling to be successful. These practices, thus, are part of a fixed strategy aiming to attain organizational financial performance. Strategy, in this case, is clearly understood as static content, and not as a continuous process, as the S-as-P view suggests. Moreover, if the best-practice school research is mostly limited to strategy formulation by suggesting what to do for financial performance, under the SHRM as practice perspective, the research would be extended to how is done. This extension of the best-practice school could also answer to one of the major criticism targeting universalist SHRM, according to which, the chances for building sustainable competitive advantage by differentiation and unique practices are annihilated by the universal best-practices.

Secondly, discussing the aim of SHRM under the best-practice school in contrast with the purpose of SHRM as practice, we can see a clash between achieving financial performance versus building better practice. Universalist researchers recommend the list of best-practices only in relation to firm performance, while SHRM as practice, is not exclusively aiming better financial results, but building better practice. Building better practice, here, is understood as an ongoing process for improving interaction, which might also lead, among others, to good financial results, but more importantly to creating applicable knowledge and meaningful communication. A relevant study supports the SHRM as practice argument according to which an organization’s ultimate goal should no longer be exclusively financially-related. The research conducted by Ernst & Young in 1997 and cited by Armstrong and Baron in 2002, found that more than a third of the data used by financial analysts before making investment decisions was non-financial, and moreover, business decisions based on non-financial factors (the quality of strategy, innovativeness, ability to attract talented people, and management credibility) proved to be more efficient in terms of investment. (as cited in Beardwell & Thompson, 2014, p. 63).

In conclusion, the universalist view on SHRM and research in this direction can be extended if the SHRM as practice basic assumptions would be integrated. Both in terms of understanding strategy and adjusting the aim of SHRM, the SHRM as practice can be seen as an extension of
the best-practice school of thought. Previous universalist SHRM research can be used as starting point, as institutionalist theory, for further *SHRM as practice* investigation. This type of investigation might aim to unveil how the recommended best-practices are implemented by specific organizations, on micro-level, answering the critique according to which the adoption of a list of universal best practices neutralizes the uniqueness of each organization. *SHRM as practice* research might show how, during the implementation, differences can be made.

10. **The practice turn in strategic human resources management**

In my attempt of re-conceptualizing SHRM using the S-as-P lens, it has been concluded that besides the two major current SHRM directions, hard and soft SHRM, a third direction can be added: *SHRM as practice*. This new suggested orientation of SHRM differs from the other two in terms of strategy perspective, view on human capital, ultimate organizational objective and means for reaching this objective. These variables were reflected upon by making use of S-as-P concepts and grounded theories. As practice is the key concept within S-as-P, my analysis tool, it deserves a separate discussion when integrating it into SHRM.

As mentioned in the second part of the paper, the practice turn in social sciences and, more recently, in organizational and management research becomes broadly embraced. (Schatzki et al., 2001; Nicolini, 2012). As Schatzki argues, the reason for increasingly investigating practice is based on the fact that “phenomena such as knowledge, meaning, human activity, science power, language, social institutions and human transformation occur within and are aspects or components of the field of practices” (Schatzki et al., 2001, p. 2). So, only by investigating practices on a micro level, there can be reached detailed and genuine answers, non-altered by generalizations.

After the practice turn was being adopted in strategy research, the Strategy-as-Practice started to take shape and now, after two decades of reflections in this direction, S-as-P has its own established concepts and theories. Thus, the practice turn in SHRM, as a sub-field of strategic management, it is a natural occurrence. What the practice turn would bring new in SHRM? Overall, the practice turn in SHRM would shift the attention on the micro level, on SHRM processes, as practice represents, as Brown and Duguid puts it, the ”internal life of process.” (as
cited in Johnson et al., 2007, p. 35). From this general focus, more specific ones would arise. Theoretically, new research questions would generate new insights. Empirically, SHRM practice could be observed and investigated as: managerial action, set of tools, knowledge, organizational resources and as discourse, expanding its scope and consequently its objective. (Rouleau, 2013).

So, *SHRM as practice* can be seen as an extension and alternative to mainstream SHRM research, extending its scope from merely investigating the effects of SHRM practices on firm performance to a more in depth analysis of what actually takes place in SHRM planning, implementing and any other activity dealing with the management of human capital.

11. **Summarizing the theoretical implications S-as-P has on SHRM and discuss their potential for applicability in practice**

As theoretically discussed throughout Part III of the paper, applying a S-as-P perspective when reflecting about SHRM resulted in a complex answer, structured on three levels, from broad to specific, as follows: general implications for further SHRM research and methodologies, implications on re-conceptualizing SHRM and finally, implications on specific SHRM models underpinning current schools of thought adopted in SHRM literature. My theoretical conclusions, however, require a separate discussion regarding their potential for applicability in practice. Though only further extensive empirical investigation could strengthen these findings, at this point, they can act as a stepping stone in broadening and enriching SHRM research. Below, their potential for applicability in practice is furtherly discussed.

Before specifically going in depth with the results of the analysis and their applicability, a relevant point, inspired by Johnson et al.’s (2007) work about “The need for Strategy as Practice” is made. Due to the close connection between S-as-P and SHRM, their comments can be extrapolated and adapted to *SHRM as practice*. Briefly, Johnson argues that there are economic, theoretical and empirical reasons for starting to account practice, i.e. what people actually do.

Economic reasons such as markets are more open and easier to enter, resources are more tradable, information more readily available and labor more mobile, make it more difficult for organizations to find and keep a sustainable competitive advantage. All this are external factors,
equally affecting any organization, but, what nowadays has a higher potential to make a difference, in terms of firm performance, is represented by the “interactive behaviors of people in organizations”. (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 7) These interactive behaviors can be identified and analyzed from a practice perspective.

Theoretically, the need for an in depth analysis of what people actually do comes as a response to the critics of mainstream institutional theories, which in their attempt to generalize and simplify the knowledge created, are leaving behind the details, which in various situations are the ones that actually make the difference. Institutional theories deal with the recurrent activities, with generic patterns, but what happen with the exceptions, the anomalies? This is, again, something that can be revealed from a practice standpoint.

Finally, the empirical factors have to do with the plethora of empirical studies which are not extensively accounting for what people do, but for what it is recommended to do in order to improve the organizational performance. So, traditional strategy researchers tend to make recommendations for an ideal and rather utopic organization, rather than accepting the reality and focus on unveiling and building the tools for a better understanding of this reality.

All the above can be also used as arguments strengthening the need for adopting a practice standpoint in SHRM, both on theoretical and empirical level. The introduction of SHRM as practice in SHRM literature is generating numerous changes theoretically, as shown throughout the discussion conducted in the analysis part of this paper. Research directions are changing, different methodologies have to be adopted, the conceptualization of SHRM is slightly different, and finally, the current SHRM models and theories are adjusted. The rough potential for generating empirical changes lies in the new understanding of SHRM. Seen as the continuous process of creating strategic contribution in an organization by managing its human capital, with the scope of generating better practice, this new comprehension of SHRM can determine practitioners to adjust their practices. For example, a major difference can be made by the new understanding of human capital, which is no longer seen as resource (as in hard SHRM) or as individuals (as in soft SHRM), but as strategic actors working in communities of practice (as in SHRM as practice). The human capital becomes a long-term partner in the continuous process of formulating and implementing strategy. This can influence the processes of recruitment and selection, during which the SHRM objective might change from getting the best fit between the
new employees’ competencies and company need (aligned with the overall business strategy), to identifying and selecting the individuals with the highest potential in creating strategic change and building better practice. A specific example of what might happen on the field is that the strength’s based approach on recruitment might gain advantage in front of the competencies based approach, broadly used nowadays. (Garcea, Harrison & Linley, 2014). Put in contrast with the competencies based approach on recruitment and selection, built on the fit between the candidates competencies and company needs, the strengths-based approach pursues to identify the natural strengths of human beings and creating the context for them to use these strengths. (Garcea et al., 2014).

Reflecting on the potential for applicability in practice of the findings regarding the new directions of SHRM research, it can be argued that changes may occur inside organizations. One trend in SHRM as practice research is deeper investigation on the micro level. The focus on the micro level, together with the methodologies evaluated by many as being intrusive, are still representing a limitation in research from a practice perspective. Organizations are basically reticent to accept invasive examinations. The researchers challenge is to convince practitioners that there is a need to ask different questions or to ask questions differently in order to provide pertinent observations and, consequently, relevant solutions. Once this barrier is trespassed, a richer organizational world would become accessible and, thus, more understandable, for both practitioners and researchers.

A third level of possible empirical implications refers to the new articulated objective of SHRM, i.e. building better practice. Moving aside from the omnipresent link between SHRM and financial performance, SHRM as practice aims to generate insights about meaningful communication, valuable knowledge and interaction which has strategic contribution. On the field, inside the organizations, with this new objective in mind, the employee evaluation processes might suffer significant modifications. Under this new perspective, the evaluation criteria might be represented by the unmeasurable quality of practice as social interaction, rather than the quantifiable contribution for rising the firm financial performance. While after almost three decades of continuous investigation, SHRM research failed to unequivocally link SHRM to business performance, this new perspective seems to be a more realistic standpoint in understanding and positioning SHRM in relation to its role within organizations.
Concluding comments

Lewin used to say that “nothing is so practical than a good theory.” (as cited in Golshorki et al., 2010, p. 9). Thus, the overall aim of this thesis was to generate a good and practical theory. More specific, the purpose of the current study, as stated in the introductory part, is to reinvigorate and enrich the SHRM theoretical framework by analyzing it with a new lens. For relevant reasons, mentioned at the beginning of Part III of the paper, this new lens was chosen to be Strategy-as-Practice (S-as-P), a new direction within strategy studies, seen also as an alternative to mainstream strategic management research. In order to reach this purpose, the following specific research question needed to be answered: how would S-as-P principles and theoretical resources adjust current SHRM theories and which new theoretical frameworks could be built upon an analysis based on S-as-P selected criteria?

Simply put, the following equation needed to be solved: \( SHRM + S-as-P = x \). The result of this juxtaposition of SHRM and S-as-P, the \( x \), resulted in an elaborated answer, built on the foundation of current SHRM models & theories (as presented in Part I) combined with two important components of S-as-P as field of research: core concepts and grounded theories (as presented in Part II). Therefore, the “method” of research was to reflect on SHRM current conceptualization, theories and models form a S-as-P standpoint.

For structuring the discussion, three levels of implications were introduced. First it was reflected on how the S-as-P perspective would adjust the SHRM research directions and which new methodologies would be required. Secondly, the reflection theme was based on how the S-as-P standpoint might help in redefining SHRM, in terms of re-understanding the strategy, the human capital, the ultimate objective of the organizations and the means to reach this objective. Finally, two specific SHRM theories were reshaped using the S-as-P view.

Following each of these three levels of discussion, the following can be concluded. First, regarding the implication on new SHRM research trends and the introduction of new methodologies, it has been found that, SHRM investigation can expand on two direction: horizontally, towards understanding strategy as process and no longer as concept, and vertically, towards examining the micro level, i.e. what people actually do in regards with SHRM.
Secondly, related to the re-conceptualization of SHRM, the *SHRM as practice* concept was introduced, positioned between to polarizing SHRM directions: the hard and soft SHRM. Defined in terms of strategy perspective, understanding of human capital, articulation of organizational final purpose and the means of reaching this purpose, SHRM as practice was dearticulated as *the continuous process of creating strategic contribution in an organization by managing its human capital, with the scope of generating better practice.*

Finally, when reflecting on two of the most widely mentioned models in SHRM, each being representative for one of the SHRM schools of thought, contingency and universalism, it has been concluded the following. In relation to the contingency school of thought, discussing the Torrington et al.’s model of the five levels of vertical integration, it was eventually suggested that *SHRM as practice* supports a view where strategy is a unitary concept, no longer fragmented as organizational strategy and HR strategy. Moreover, the *fit* between the two types of strategy proved no longer applicable, as strategy is one single flow, where different components are infusing strategic contribution, SHRM being one of these components. Then, bringing into discussion the *best-practice* school of thought in SHRM, it was suggested that *SHRM as practice* can be seen as an extension of this perspective, building on existing best-practices, but investigating them more in depth, aiming to unveil where and how the difference is created.

Though the study solely reveals theoretical conclusions, a theory, if accurate, can fulfil the objective of prediction or the one of understanding. (Wright & McMahann, 1992, p. 296). In this case, the objective of the new foregrounded pieces of theory is a better understanding, which can be tested by both researchers and practitioners. Researchers might want to further reflect on and test it empirically, while practitioners, on the other hand, can make use of these findings as an alternative to comprehending and implementing SHRM. The usefulness of the models and theoretical suggestions presented as conclusions of this paper can be evaluated either by their influence for further research, or by their adoption among practitioners.
References


www.s-as-p.org