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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

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Mick Marchington and his contributions to human resource management

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Abstract

Mick Marchington's contributions to the field of human resource management (HRM) was considerable through his leadership, teaching and research. In the research arena he made significant contributions to the topics of employee voice, participation, and involvement as well as the future of work. A common thread to his research concerned humanising management and HRM through a pluralist value system. In this article we summarise his key contributions.

KEYWORDS
employee involvement, employee participation, employee voice, pluralism

We are pleased to have this special issue to recognise and honour the work of Mick Marchington who died in 2021. Mick was Emeritus Professor of Human Resource Management at the University of Manchester where he spent most of his career and indeed also studied there. He also worked at Aston University and Preston Polytechnic prior to Manchester and had a part-time Professorship at Strathclyde after his retirement from Manchester as well as several Visiting Positions.

Our focus here is very much on his research contributions to the field of HRM but we do also acknowledge a distinguished record of service to the University where he worked for 25 years both as a manager and educator which included establishing HRM as a core subject in the curriculum. Mick was a passionate teacher and instilled his own enthusiasm in students but at the same time everything was taught in a clear way. As a mentor, he was always patient and supportive, giving whatever time one needed with a personal style but combining this with setting high standards and instilling the unusual academic virtue of meeting deadlines. Many UMIST (University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology) staff who experienced their first academic job at UMIST went on to successful careers of their own and used Mick as a role model.

Mick's first degree was in Chemical Engineering at UMIST, and he then followed this with a move to management with a Master's in Management Sciences also at the UMIST. After working at Aston and Preston Polytechnic, he was appointed a Lecturer in HRM at UMIST in 1986, his PhD was completed in 1988 and he then became a Professor of HRM at the University in 1995 and continued in that role at Manchester Business School after the merger with the UMIST until his retirement in 2011. He played a major management role as Dean of Manchester School of Management, UMIST. He was a significant researcher in the field of HRM especially in relation to employee participation and employee voice, and led a major ESRC project on the Future of Work (see Grimshaw et al., 2022). The latter showcased his interest in interdisciplinary work and his considerable motivational and organisational skills.

Mick's work was influential in several different research areas in HRM as this issue shows and he also played a wider role in the academic community as an editor of two journals including this one (2005–2010) as well as *Employee Relations* and in the HRM practitioner community through work with the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). He was lead author for the standard textbook for budding HR professionals—*Human Resource Management at Work*, the first edition being produced in 1996 and the 7th edition published in 2020 some years after official retirement and joint editor with Paul Thompson and Gibson Burrell for the Palgrave series, *Management, Work and Organisations*, and later *Critical Studies in Management*. He produced 12 books and over 100 journal articles over his career.

His ideas were influenced by the *Organisation and Employment Studies* (OES) group at UMIST which was an unusual mix of scholars and disciplines reflecting the School of Management's (SOM) mission to study Management from a critical social science perspective. SOM was not a Business School, though the OES group brought together Labour Historians, Lawyers, Sociologists, Labour Process theorists, Economic Historians as well as those interested in Personnel practice and Industrial Relations. These critical social science traditions carried over to the HRM, Employment Relations and Law group at the Alliance Manchester Business School after the merger (Rubery & Dundon, 2021).

Like many HRM scholars of the late 80 and 90s, Mick came from a background in Industrial Relations (IR) and established an early interest in employee participation with his first book *Responses to Participation at Work* (Marchington, 1980) being a study of employees, shop stewards, and managers and a second textbook on IR - *Managing Industrial Relations* published in 1992 (Marchington 1992). He saw the management of IR relations very much within its corporate context, explicitly acknowledging that control over the labour process is not the sole or prime concern of employers but is generally subsidiary to the achievement of broader company goals. The importance of this wider context of IR was evident in his PhD, and the book published from this, *Changing Patterns of Employee Relations* (Marchington & Parker, 1990), which looked at case studies of four multi-plant private sector organizations, to further theorize the links between markets and the management of IR. In such work he criticized the view that the product market determines managerial style and highlighted the importance of managerial agency (see Budd et al., 2022). His interest in employee participation, involvement and voice saw a book entitled: *Managing the Team: A Guide to Successful Employee Involvement* (Marchington, 1992) and the major *Employment Department* funded project (Marchington et al., 1992, 1993) which reported on the significant increase in management-initiated employment involvement (EI) schemes such as team briefing, quality circles and team working as well as a CIPD funded project on *Management Choice and Employee Voice* (Dundon et al., 2004; Marchington et al., 2001) which examined management strategy concerning voice and which included a sub-sample of seven companies revisited from the Employment Department study reported above. The latter study noted the dynamic nature of employee voice arrangements and that managers were more comfortable with voice as adding value rather than rights-based views of employee voice (Dundon et al., 2022). Subsequent work Cox et al. (2006, 2007) used the concept of embeddedness to assess how individual voice and participation practices and the system as a whole are configured within organisations and the concept was developed to analyse the breadth and depth of EIP (employee involvement and participation).

EIP and voice brought together both the IR and HRM traditions and Mick was comfortable with both, editing both IR and HR journals and an edited book on employee participation (Wilkinson et al., 2010) and he was also

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co-ordinator of the HRM section of the International Labour and Employment Relations Association and President of the Manchester Industrial Relations Society.

As well as his specific research projects, Mick was also an important player in the UK in the development of HRM and taking the UK down a different path to that in the USA. In the UK, IR had neglected personnel management (see Flanders & Clegg, 1954) and management activity outside collective bargaining (including non-union companies) had been of limited interest to IR leaving some conceptually 'empty' areas to be colonised by HRM and OB (Ackers & Wilkinson, 2003). As Bach and Sisson (2000, p. 3) note:

> it is easy to forget in the current avalanche of literature that, as late as 1989, there was very little analysis of and information about personnel management in practice.

With Thatcherism and the economic and social changes in its train dissolving the 'labour problem', marginalising trade unions and manufacturing industry, and management more clearly back in the saddle, there was caution from the IR community that did not want to legitimise the new HRM which was seen as a threat to unions. So, with the importation of US HRM in the late 80s, some scholars were virulently opposed to what they saw as an invasion of neo-unitarist ideas and managerialism. There was no doubt that HRM placed greater emphasis on efficiency and competitiveness. But others felt that it did not necessarily mean neo-unitarism but could incorporate both the common and the divergent interests of workers and organisations. It was thus possible to take HRM seriously and examine efficiency and co-operation without having a managerial intellectual agenda (Ackers & Wilkinson, 2003, pp. 12–17). In this spirit, Mick conducted detailed research into complex realities on the ground and Mick's preference for detailed case study work interviewing multiple stakeholders was exemplified in the Employment Department research project. This project questioned conventional industrial relations wisdom pointing out that the cycles of control analysis (Ramsay, 1976) could not fully explain the multiple schemes developed at the firm-level during the 1980s when organised labour was in retreat (Ackers et al., 1992, 2019). This was about doing research by talking to those affected and not just workers but line managers as well as CEOs.

This approach to HRM took the view that doing management well could do a lot of good but did not mean being starry eyed about the possibilities either. So, HRM ideas were very much domesticated through a pluralist IR lens asking about the interests of the workers. Later, the next generation HRM bandwagon forgot these cautionary tales and coalesced around an agenda of high performance and efficiency while largely ignoring workers and it took another pluralist, David Guest, to try to correct this (Farndale et al., 2020; Guest, 2017).

Mick's work provided a finely grained body of empirical evidence that both served to correct theoretical fallacies and serve as a basis for further theoretical development and extensions around conceptualising HRM from a pluralist perspective. However, it would be wrong to conclude that Mick's work was atheoretical. Rather, it had implicit theoretical depth, in that underlying it was understanding of what could be taken for granted in understanding modern workplace dynamics; the modern firm represents a complex collective project with multiple directions, and with multiple interests to be accommodated. At a simplest level, this would explain why, despite all the extortations in the world, employees would be unlikely to 'thrive' let alone be fully aligned behind the managerial project, without a real say in what goes on, and with a reasonably fair share of the value generated. Ultimately, people work for wages and desire some degree of responsible autonomy. Denying these fundamentals may endear the researcher to more predatory managers and organizations, but at the same time, renders any project irrelevant to the needs of stakeholders, and, indeed, the sustainability of the organization itself. In turn, this makes the case of implicit theorizing, drawing on long and composite theoretical traditions, as adverse to narrow, concept centred theorizing, that simply seeks to dissect one or other presumed repeated—or desired—pattern of human behaviour in order to present a marginally improved understanding of the same.

Ackers and Wilkinson ([2003](#)) noted the importance of the IR tradition that contributed to the development of HRM through six main features:

1. A focus on the *employment relationship*, as a human and social relationship, involving values as well as interests, ethics as well as economics.
2. An emphasis on *neo-institutional regulation* through unions, bodies, teams, work groups, committees, procedures and as mean of making rules governing the social relations of work.
3. The production of *critical but useful knowledge* for society, business and all its stakeholders, which informs public policy and contributes to the effectiveness of organisations but avoids a 'servants of power' managerialism.
4. An *empirical research tradition* which develops theory in relation to evidence.
5. An *interdisciplinary openness* that distrusts the tight, closed paradigms found in more dogmatic social sciences.
6. A concern with *practical procedural and distributive justice*, to improve wages and conditions for ordinary employees linked to feasible policy reforms, not only through trade unions but also via other rule-making mechanisms.

These all reflect the values and strengths of Mick's work. Of course, unusually Mick had an important practical role in developing HRM through the practitioner body - the CIPD. He was one of very few academics to be made a companion of the CIPD. He was, for many years the chief examiner and later chief moderator and was also involved in draughting standards for the CIPD. This role was important to generations of HR practitioners (see Timming & Macneil, [2023](#)).

Mick's work can genuinely be seen as leading a broader scholarly movement around the world. In the case of Australia, his own work (Marchington, [1992b](#)) pointed to the co-existence of two currents of consultative practices at the workplace, the one characterized by significant union presence and the other not; this highlighted the continued relevance of organized labour even in terms of practices that are top down and managerially directed. He further concluded, owing to less comprehensive employment protection legislation (Marchington, [1992c](#)) in Australia there was greater fluidity in the nature of employee involvement observing a growth in direct involvement schemes even in workplaces where unions have traditionally been well organised. At the same time, and in common with New Zealand, he noted that semi-autonomous state institutions helped facilitate employee involvement and participation (Marchington, [2015a](#)). By the mid-2010s, Mick was working on comparative studies of the liberal markets; a key conclusion here was that even hard regulation may be of limited effect if treated half-heartedly by employers (Marchington, [2015c](#), [2015b](#); Marchington & Dundon, [2017](#)). His work on New Zealand highlighted differences to the UK given the smaller number of large employers, and (pre-Brexit) the lack of coverage by European law (Haynes et al., [2006](#)). Although his comparative work never stretched as far as South Africa, it is interesting to reflect the influence of the broad scholarly project of pluralistic HRM, as a development of industrial relations (Dibben et al., [2022](#)). In the 1980s, South Africa was characterised by a highly adversarial workplace environment; this led some to argue that even the term "industrial relations" brooked of compromise with the apartheid order. By the early 1990s, political change led to much interest by prominent South Africa industrial relations scholars in the possibility of developing more cooperative forms of workplace organization, leading to an upsurge of interest in HRM and HRD (Adler & Webster, [1999](#); Hirschohn et al., [2000](#); Maree, [1995](#)).

The papers in this collection bear out humanising management and HRM through a pluralist value system, which is critical to understanding his contributions. In one of his final pieces of writing (Marchington, [2015b](#)), he reflected on the drift of HRM away from pluralism. He noted that HRM has always been located at the interface of potentially conflicting forces within organisations but that in its search for status and legitimacy, HRM has tended primarily to look up the hierarchy and focus on narrow performance goals, so neglecting other long-standing values and stakeholders (Wilkinson, [2022](#)). But looking after shareholders and executives has led to the neglect of other stakeholders to the detriment of the long-term sustainability of HRM and the role that employers could play in society. He also commented that the obsession with (top) talent, could be counter-productive if workers felt under-valued and he also drew attention to HRM in suppliers and sub-contractors.

But Mick was always pragmatic and fair and commented that it is not that HRM has got everything wrong (2015c, p183), but that HRM needs to create a more sustainable, long-term contribution underpinned by an emphasis on inclusivity, as opposed to aiming primarily to satisfy the goals of shareholders and senior executives. That is some legacy to build on and a responsibility to those of in the field to continue to fight the good fight. Finally, any review of Mick's works would be incomplete without mentioning perhaps his most important contribution of all; his boundless time and interest in the work of early career scholars and encouragement in their endeavours to get published.

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