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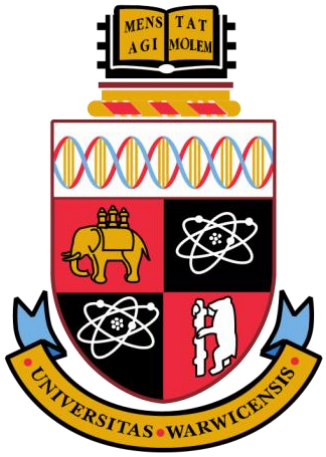

The HR Occupation: The Gendered Nature of its Legitimacy

by

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ABSTRACT

This research explores perceptions of legitimacy and professionalisation within HR and the extent to which these are underpinned by gendered assumptions. In understanding legitimacy and professionalisation as gendered concepts, consideration is given as to how this impacts the HR occupation.

Through 55 semi-structured interviews with HR practitioners, this research explores how perceptions and experiences regarding legitimacy and gender have shaped understanding of the HR occupation. The thesis findings and discussion are structured around three key concepts: legitimacy, professionalisation, and gender. This research explores the pervasive legitimacy challenges within the HR occupation and the ways in which HR practitioners have largely/apparently embraced the rhetoric of HR as a commercial and strategic organisational function. HR is positioned in an uncertain space whereby professionalisation is indeed desired, but there are clear barriers to the achievement of occupational closure. The HR occupation is subject to gendering and HR practitioners are seeking to distance themselves from feminised constructions of the occupation. This research shows the way in which gender is interwoven with legitimacy and professionalisation in HR. With commerciality and strategy underpinned with notions of masculinity, legitimacy and gender in HR are seen as inextricable.

The findings of this research contribute to the relatively small stream of academic literature exploring gender in HR and how this may play into longstanding issues around legitimacy and professionalisation. This study offers a novel insight into the micro-level perceptions of gender in HR and how these shape understandings of the occupation. This research furthers our understanding as to the gendered tensions HR practitioners experience with regards to the credibility of the function, by showing how the dominant theme of commerciality in the HR occupation has the potential to valorise masculinity in HR whilst still masking the gendered underpinnings within the function.

Abstract i
Acknowledgements v
Declarations vi
List of Abbreviations vii
Chapter One - Introduction 1
1.1 The HR occupation 1
1.2 Gender and legitimacy 2
1.3 The legitimacy of HR - a historical perspective 3
1.3.1 Welfare work 4
1.3.2 From welfare to personnel management 6
1.3.3 From personnel to human resources 9
1.4 Approach to the thesis 12
1.5 Structure of the thesis 12
Chapter Two - Literature Review 15
2.1 Introduction 15
2.2 Theories of legitimacy 16
2.3 Professionalisation theories 21
2.4 Gender concentration 25
2.5 Gendered organisations 29
2.6 Professions and patriarchy 32
2.7 Current state of HR - Legitimacy and professionalisation 36
2.8 Feminisation of HR 40
2.8 Gaps and research aims 44
Chapter Three – Methodology 47
3.1 Introduction 47
3.2 Research philosophy 48
3.3 Rigour in qualitative research 52
3.4 Reflexivity 53
3.5 Research design 55
3.6 Research sites 57

3.7 Research strategies: Interviewee selection 58

3.8 Research strategies: Access 66

3.9 Research strategies: Interview arrangement 67

3.10 Transcriptions 68

3.11 Ethical considerations 68

3.12 Tools testing 69

3.13 Covid-19 and data collection 70

3.14 Data analysis 72

Chapter Four - Legitimacy and Professionalisation 75

4.1 Introduction 75

4.2 Caring vs. cost control, or "Tea and sympathy" 80

4.3 Specialist expertise vs. broad business knowledge, or "the technical knowledge you can pick up" 84

4.4 Strategic HR vs. operational work, or "the mythical status of strategic partner" 89

4.5 HR professional vs. organisational champion, or "Where do your loyalties lie?" 94

4.6 Occupational closure vs. commercial credibility, or "basically anyone can do HR" 103

4.7 Summary 112

Chapter Five – Gender and Legitimacy 115

5.1 Introduction 115

5.2 Diversity in HR, or "it's a load of women and the odd man" 115

5.3 The 'soft' side of management, or "she's just the people person" 125

5.4 Enacting gender, or "leave it to the fluffy people person" 129

5.5 Gender and seniority, or "you've got the token on the end" 133

5.6 Summary 140

Chapter Six – Discussion and Conclusion 143

6.1 Legitimacy 144

6.1.1 Understandings of legitimacy 144

6.1.2 Questioning strategic HRM 146

6.1.3 Horizontal moves to HR 147

6.2 Professionalisation....148
6.2.1 Perceptions of professionalisation....148
6.2.2 Professional identity....149
6.2.3 Occupational closure....150
6.2.4 The desire for professionalisation?....151
6.3 Gender....153
6.3.1 Gendered underpinnings of 'soft' and commercial HR....153
6.3.2 Men in HR....154
6.3.3 Enacting gender....156
6.3.4 Gender and seniority....157
6.4 Summary....158
6.5 Contribution....160
6.5.1 Implications for theory and research....160
6.5.2 Implications for practice....162
6.6 Limitations and further research....162
6.7 Conclusions....164
Reference List....166

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DECLARATIONS

This thesis is submitted to the University of Warwick in support of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. I confirm that I have not submitted the thesis for a degree at another university. All work contained in this thesis is my own.

List of Abbreviations

ACAS - Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service

BAME - Black Asian Minority Ethnic

CAQDAS - Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software

CEO - Chief Executive Officer

CIPD - Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

ER - Employment relations

FD - Finance Director

HR - Human Resources

HRD - Human Resources Director

HRM - Human Resource Management

SHRM Strategic Human Resource Management

CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

This research explores how legitimacy and gender are seen to shape the understanding of the human resource (HR) occupation. The study considers how perceptions and experiences of HR practitioners are shaped by gender and legitimacy and how this constructs the way in which they understand the occupation.

1.1 THE HR OCCUPATION

This research is focused on the UK context, where HR is a rising occupation that has seen increased numbers over the past decade. CIPD state that the HR occupation grew by 17% between 2009 and 2019, and HR practitioners now represent approximately 1.6% of the UK workforce (CIPD, 2021). The HR occupation has undergone many changes since it first originated. However, in the current day, there are various and often conflicting views as to the purpose and value of the HR occupation. Beer et al. (2015, p. 432) posit that 'there is little or no consensus within the HRM academic community about the topic of study.' This research does not seek to adopt a narrow definition of the HR occupation but instead considers some of the critical areas of interest regarding the function of HR. There are ongoing debates in academic literature regarding a number of aspects, namely, hard and soft human resource management (HRM), best fit and best practice, normative and critical approaches, and pluralist and unitarist perspectives. Within the context of this research, both hard and soft approaches to HR and pluralist and unitarist perspectives have relevance and, as such, should be defined.

The notion of hard and soft HRM originated in the US but has since become commonplace in academic literature in the UK (Gill, 1999; Truss et al., 1997). Hard and soft approaches to HR in organisations can be argued to place different focus on the two words' human resource'. Hard HRM places significant emphasis on the 'resource' aspect of HR and views employees as such (Gill, 1999). By viewing employees as mere resources, they become an unavoidable cost of doing business, and concern is given to how to maximise the return on this investment. Soft HR, on the other hand, places emphasis on the 'human' aspect of HR. As such, employees are seen as valued assets to an organisation and focus is given to their commitment, participation, and involvement (Gill, 1999). The unitarist and pluralist perspectives are less approaches to HR and more deeply-

rooted views of the employment relationship. A unitarist perspective views the employment relationship as harmonious, and stakeholders are aligned in their goals. Counter to this; the pluralist perspective recognises that stakeholders are pursuing differing aims and objectives and sees conflict as a natural result of this (Geare et al., 2006). The concepts of unitarism and pluralism have been widely discussed in understandings of the HR occupation, and it is now posited that the unitarist perspective dominates in HR functions (Keegan & Francis, 2010). This is significant in the context of this research, particularly when seeking to understand how legitimacy in HR is understood.

1.2 Gender and legitimacy

In recent years, increased attention has been given to gender and equality in organisations within management literature. The rise of feminist literature in academia has moved gender from merely a binary identity to a category of analysis within research (Acker, 1990). Organisations are a valuable context in which to analyse gender due to the way in which notions of gender are created and subsequently reproduced daily (Acker, 1990). Acker (1990) argues that to say an organisation, unit, or profession is 'gendered' means that there is some form of distinction between male and female (or masculine and feminine) with regards to advantage/disadvantage and meaning/identity in the workplace. The status and perceived legitimacy of occupations is one example of advantage/disadvantage affected by gendered assumptions. HR is a valuable setting to study the interplay between gender in organisations and perceptions of legitimacy and professionalisation. This is due to the extensive attention the HR occupation has received in both academic and practitioner literature regarding its value, status and credibility. Exploring the link between gender and the concepts of legitimacy and professionalisation will be the focus of this research.

Whilst recognised as a subjective concept, occupational legitimacy is often referred to as establishing that occupations produce valued results by justifying what occupations do and how they do it (Abbott, 1988). Whilst frequently addressed in the literature, the legitimacy of HR appears to have been subject to minimal research in combination with the concept of gendered organisations. As such, the influence gender has on the perceptions of legitimacy and professionalisation in HR is currently largely unknown. The lack of understanding regarding legitimacy, professionalisation, and gender in HR is a concern, given that this can potentially shape the experiences and actions of HR practitioners in organisations. It also poses the question of

whether the accusations against HR for being 'out of touch' with the commercial undertakings in organisations are a fair reflection or whether there are gendered underpinnings at play. Therefore, this research utilises the framework of Acker's gendered organisation and seeks to identify any potential underlying gendered assumptions of legitimacy and professionalisation that may shape understandings of the female concentrated, and arguably 'feminised', HR occupation.

In order to consider how legitimacy, professionalisation, and gender may shape the HR occupation, it is first essential to understand the context of the occupation and how it emerged. As HR's roots are in welfare work, a female concentrated and somewhat low-status role, the history of HR has relevance and importance in understanding the issues the occupation faces in the current day. The following section details the historical development of HR.

1.3 The legitimacy of HR - a historical perspective

As noted above, HR has been subject to numerous debates and criticisms regarding its role, value and status within companies. This is not a recent development, with the HR occupation being questioned on its legitimacy since its origination. HR, particularly within the UK, has undergone significant shifts over the years regarding its focus and role in organisations. Numerous external factors have contributed to these shifts, which will be discussed further in this section, including the World Wars, the influence of the union movement, and the changing nature of work. Whilst many of the shifts of the HR occupation have been due to external factors outside the occupation's control, it has been acknowledged that, for the association of HR and HR practitioners, there have often been hopes that these shifts would be accompanied by an increase in status and legitimacy (Legge, 1978; Hope-Hailey et al., 1997; Niven, 1967; Caldwell, 2003). Whilst the extent to which these hopes have been manifested is under question, it is widely accepted in HR literature that such shifts have shaped HR into its current role today (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2008; Caldwell, 2011). The following section details the development of HR, as it is now termed, over the past century.

The historical development of HR has significance in helping to understand how the role of HR in the current day has been shaped and the extent to which these shifts in role and focus have impacted the legitimacy of the occupation. However, there remains minimal literature providing a holistic account of HR in the UK from its origination as welfare work to the current day. An exception to this is the work of Niven (1967) which provides a detailed account of the occupation's professional

association from its establishment in 1913 up until 1967. Whilst Niven's work touches on the development of the HR role and how it has been incorporated and perceived in organisations, the focus is predominantly on the association's internal development, challenges, and affairs. There appears to be a consensus in the literature that the HR function, then referred to as 'welfare work', began to emerge in organisations between 1912-1915 (Niven, 1967). However, we must first consider its roots to understand how the function emerged in organisations. Whilst there is very little research documenting welfare work prior to the 1900s, it is noted that the role likely originated from caring activities taking place outside of, but related to, organisations (Niven, 1967). It is suggested that welfare work began voluntarily whereby business owners' wives, or female relatives, would visit employees when they were unwell. This initial form of welfare work progressed to a small number of organisations employing paid welfare workers from 1890 onwards (Niven, 1967). The first cases of employed welfare workers in organisations appeared to have a range of roles and responsibilities. This ranged from being a 'social secretary' and organising recreational activities for employees, carrying out internal inspections, and administrative duties such as maintaining employee accident and illness records (Evans, 2003). The gender composition of welfare work will be discussed further below; however, it is evident that many of the first welfare workers were women.

1913, when the professional association was formed, is typically documented as the formal beginning stages of the occupation (Niven, 1967; CIPD, 2021). The association was first named the Central Association of Welfare Workers in 1917, then the Welfare Workers' Institute (19191924), the Institute of Industrial Welfare Workers (1924-1931), the Institute of Labour Management (1931-1946), the Institute of Personnel Management (1946-1994), and finally the Institute of Personnel and Development in 1994 which gained chartered status in 2000 and became the CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development) (CIPD, 2021). The name changes of the professional association were not arbitrary. However, they reflected a statement being made by the association that there had been a shift with regards to the role and focus of the occupation, something that will be commented on further in the following section.

1.3.1 WELFARE WORK

The establishment of welfare work in the UK can be attributed, in part, to a small number of progressive firms such as Rowntree, Cadbury, Wills, and Jacobs, who initiated the idea of salaried

welfare workers. These firms also founded the professional association with particular support from Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree (Niven, 1967). There is little information regarding the exact details of the establishment of the professional association; however, it is understood that the association was formed during a conference in June 1913 in York on invitation by Rowntree (Labour Management, 1934). It is understood that only those engaged in welfare work were eligible for membership. The primary focus of the professional association, and welfare workers, at this time was on the working conditions of those in industry. In a conference held in 1918, the following definition was drawn up (Labour Management, 1934).

'Welfare Work is that part of the management of business and industrial enterprises concerned with the organisation of working conditions on such lines as will be acceptable to and provide for each individual worker': -

1) Physical comfort and wellbeing

2) The full opportunity for the use of his abilities by the exercise of care and discrimination in the allocation of his work and duties

3) The means for development of all his faculties

The professional association grew rapidly and went from 34 founding members in 1913 to 600 in 1918, with 13 local branches set up (Labour Management, 1934). It was, in part, the First World War between 1914-1918 that spurred the practice forward, and it became compulsory to employ welfare workers in organisations controlled by the Ministry of Munitions by 1916 (CIPD, 2021). During and shortly following the First World War, a series of factors led to organisations recognising the need for the function of welfare work, including labour shortages, increasing wages, and increased demand for production (Kochan, 2007). During this time, welfare work began to be seen as an occupation in its own right. Continuing from its roots, welfare work during this time focused significantly on working towards the needs of employees, with the notion that this would ultimately improve efficiency and organisational performance (Niven, 1967). Welfare work was already subject to significant criticism and questions surrounding its legitimacy in organisations. Such criticisms were primarily aimed at management failing to see any concrete improvement in workforce efficiency after employing welfare workers and the perception that

welfare workers placed an uneven focus on workers' priorities compared to organisational performance (Niven, 1967). It can be seen during these early years of the occupation that the professional association already had concerns surrounding the legitimacy of the function, stating in 1925 that 'there is one point in welfare work which deserves careful consideration on the part of the employer and of the welfare worker – the welfare workers perceived status' (Industrial Welfare Society, 1925).

As discussed, the HR occupation originated in the early 1900s. Whilst during this time, paid employment was predominantly male (Todd, 2004), the First World War brought a significant increase in the number of women employed in the labour force. Female employment increased by 50% during the war, and the most significant increase was seen in engineering workshops, where 800,000 women were recruited around 1915 (Evans, 2003). This was a significant change as it was a sector in which very few women had worked previously. This (relatively) sudden increase of women within workshops was, in part, what spurred the perceived need for welfare workers. It was viewed that women working within factories needed specialist workers to consider their care and to further recruit women into the factory roles (Evans, 2003).

As welfare work was initially introduced to predominantly care for female employees in factories, from the origin of the welfare work occupation, it was widely viewed as a space for women to work and employees in the function were referred to as 'welfare secretaries' (Legge, 1987; Gooch & Ledwith, 1996). As a result, women dominated the occupation of welfare work when it emerged, with 29 out of the 34 founding members of the professional association being female (Legge, 1987). This trend continued for some time, and in 1927 only 20 out of 420 members, less than 5%, of the Institute of Welfare Workers were male (Legge, 1987).

1.3.2 From welfare to personnel management

As noted, the early years of the occupation were focused mainly on employee welfare and priorities. However, from the early 1930s, welfare work experienced its first significant shift. The occupation moved to what Ulrich and Dulebohn (2015) termed as 'maintenance mode'. The predominant focus of the function shifted towards employment relations and managing the organisation's relationship with unions. This reflects the power of unions at this time, the increase in union membership, and rising strike action (Richardson & Nicholls, 2011). As the function dealt

less with people management and more with unions, it also responded to the criticism of its former years and became increasingly focused on 'scientific management' and increasing workplace efficiencies (Hong, 2016). Scientific management, first introduced by Frederick Taylor in 1911 (Taylor, 2004), is underpinned by four fundamental principles; detailed time and motion experiments to develop new methods to perform jobs, codify new methods into rules and teach them to all workers, select workers whose skills match the rules and motivate workers via performance-related pay. With factors such as training, recruitment and selection, and pay mainly being viewed as HR activities, it is clear how scientific management's introduction shaped the occupation. During this time, welfare work was rebranded as 'personnel' or 'personnel management' and employees in the occupation were referred to as 'personnel managers' or 'personnel executives' (Hillard, 2004). Whilst the term personnel management first emerged in the 1930s, it only gained widespread use after the professional association changed its title to the Institute of Personnel Management in 1946 (Evans, 2003). The personnel occupation continued to actively emphasise the importance of the work they were conducting and focused on the personnel manager's authority. This is evidenced by publications from the Institute of Personnel Management (now CIPD) in 1965 stating that 'the personnel manager ought to have, must have, and will have the same authority as the professional engineer and accountant; and like them will have the opportunity to rise to the heights of the industrial pyramid' (Institute Personnel Management, 1965).

As noted earlier, the HR occupation was predominantly a space for women to work when it first originated. However, the female domination of HR has not been consistent, and the occupation has been subject to ebbs and flows of female participation. As previously discussed, from the late 1920s, welfare work was increasingly involved in dealing with unions (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015). There was also an increased focus on industrial psychology and increasing workplace efficiencies (Hong, 2016). This was perceived as a more suitable role for men (Hong, 2016), and the occupation actively sought more men to engage in welfare work, as evidenced by Institute of Industrial Welfare Workers articles. One such article claims 'the employer] has often looked upon the lady supervisor as on a level with the domestic servant… The 'human problems of industry are baffling and intricate and need a highly developed mind… if the employer gets the right man, he will find any material expense incurred worth spending' (Welfare Work, 1920). This shows the desire for welfare work to shift away from a 'feminised' image and emphasises the difficulty and importance

of working in welfare work. It is important to note that at this time, those working in the HR occupation were still largely referred to as 'Welfare Workers'. However, in an article seeking to engage more men in the occupation, the claim was made that 'You can call him the social engineer' (Welfare Work, 1920). The term' social engineer' contrasts sharply with some of the feminised terms used to describe welfare work. As discussed, a term previously used for the predominantly female occupation of HR was 'welfare secretary' (Miles & Snow, 1984; Hong, 2016). The difference in the terminology used when trying to promote the occupation to men highlights how far back gendered constructions of HR date and the attempts to move away from feminised terms, which can be argued to have lowered the status of the occupation; this is perhaps unsurprising given the wider context of gendered society. During the welfare work era, a number of individuals (predominantly men) also emerged working as 'labour managers'. Whilst there is little literature addressing the role of labour managers, it is posited that they focused more on activities such as pay, recruitment, and dismissals. In contrast, welfare workers were focused primarily on more caring aspects and primarily worked to support women in employment (Evans, 2003). It is suggested that during the time of welfare work, labour managers sought to distance themselves and emphasise a clear distinction between the labour management and welfare work roles (Evans, 2003). However, although it is not clear why this was the case, during the 1930s, labour managers abandoned their desire to separate themselves from welfare work and joined the professional association in greater numbers (Niven, 1967).

This was also the time in which there was a rebranding of welfare work to 'personnel'. Following this shift to personnel, male employees did begin to increasingly dominate the personnel occupation between the 1930s and the 1970s, and it is stated that by 1970 80% of those within the Institute of Personnel Management were male (Legge, 1987). This significant reversal in gender concentration is likely due to the increase in men joining the occupation and the number of male labour managers embracing the association and abandoning the distinction between their work and the one of welfare/personnel.

Despite the push for authority, credibility and legitimacy from the professional association and the shifts in gender composition, research on the occupation at this time identified significant challenges restricting the level of influence the personnel function could hold. One example is Legge's (1978) work on the 'three vicious circles of personnel'. The three vicious circles refer to

challenges the personnel function faced in attempting to exert more power and achieve further legitimacy in organisations. The first circle refers to the non-involvement of personnel in decision-making at this time, resulting in little influence in planning personnel-related issues. As such, this resulted in a perception of poor effectiveness from personnel and justified further exclusion from central decision-making. The second circle refers to personnel's uncertainty about what denoted success for their function; there was, therefore, a lack of consensus on what should be given priority. This reinforced a view that personnel was engaged in a variety of what Drucker (1961) termed a 'hodge-podge of necessary chores' and further encouraged management to continue to pass such tasks onto the function. Finally, the third circle is that in part due to the issues above, 'brighter' and more ambitious managers tended to avoid entering the personnel function due to the lack of status, ultimately perpetuating the status and legitimacy issues and furthering claims regarding a lack of talent in the function. It is, therefore, apparent that despite the significant shift in the type of work personnel managers were engaged with compared to welfare workers, there remained a persistent question as to the value of the function.

1.3.3 From personnel to human resources

During the 1980s in the UK, what had previously been termed personnel began to shift to what is now referred to as human resource management. There is minimal literature on how this term originated, but it appears likely that the UK adoption of HRM came from the US, where the term was already widely used in the 1960s (Strauss, 2001). The shift was seen as somewhat of a 'rebranding' for the occupation, and practitioners began to increasingly abandon the term 'personnel'. The use of the term human resource management grew significantly in the 1990s. In 1993 only 9% of those in HR-related roles (in organisations greater than 1000 employees) were using the term HR, but by 1998 this had risen to 64% (Caldwell, 2002).

The move away from personnel and toward HR was not simply a change in terms but also represented a shift in focus for the occupation. This shift came alongside and was arguably contributed to by significant changes in industrial relations in the UK. During the 1980s, unions in the UK experienced a sustained attack from the government in power, ultimately curtailing trade unions and collective power (Longstreth, 1988). During this time, the rhetoric of the dismantlement of unions went alongside the rhetoric that employment relations could be managed individually. This shift from a previously pluralist stance of employment relations to an

increasingly unitarist view had a significant impact on the role of the HR occupation. There was a decreased focus on industrial relations for the occupation, and the function became increasingly managerialist and shifted towards a unitarist approach to employee relations (Hart, 1993; Machin & Wood, 2005). With the decline in industrial relations work, the HR function was also viewed as becoming an increasingly administrative function required to undertake significant amounts of legal compliance work on behalf of management (Faugoo, 2011). This 'administrative wave' did little for the status of the personnel occupation, and it was viewed mainly as supportive work (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015).

Whilst HR's day-to-day work has significantly shifted from previous years, the influence and perception of the function are argued to have seen little change. Caldwell (2002) states that whilst, for some, 'HR' denoted a significant change in the approach to managing people in organisations, for many others, the change to HR during the 1990s was merely a change of title. As discussed, Legge's (1978) work on the three vicious circles that limited the power of the personnel function was influential in academic literature at that time regarding identifying inherent personnel challenges. However, the work of Guest and King (2004), 25 years later, argued that many of the legitimacy issues facing the personnel function had remained despite the move to HR. Whilst the function may face different challenges than it has in previous years, the issues surrounding the involvement in decision making, unclear success criteria, and an undesirable function for talent remained pervasive (Guest & King, 2004).

The introduction of the label HR during the 1990s, which for some was a promise of further legitimacy, was also accompanied by further development of the professionalisation of HR. As noted above, the profession obtained chartered accreditation in 2000 (CIPD, 2021), supposedly furthering the professional status of HR (Gilmore & Williams, 2003). Royal Charters, dating from the 13th century, are granted by the sovereign on advice from the Privy Council. Gaining a charter involves a professional institution demonstrating three key criteria; pre-eminence, stability, and permanence in their field (Privy Council, 2022). For HR, gaining chartered status was of significant importance as it arguably demonstrated a level of professionalism. It also increased the expectation that HR practitioners be involved in the professional association to practice HR (Syrigou, 2018). However, this newly acquired professional status did little to fully establish HR as a credible business profession (Yerby, 2019). Bratton and Gold (2003) posit that the legitimacy

of HR appears to depend not on the professional recognition or efforts of the professional association but upon the acceptance of those outside the function, which may be more challenging to develop.

Regarding the gender composition of HR (as opposed to welfare work or personnel), the occupation has become increasingly female-dominated. The male concentration in personnel management did not continue, and from the late 1960s, women began to re-join the occupation. Faugoo (2011) posits that women re-joining was partly due to the occupation transitioning towards an administrative focus and away from employee relations and workplace efficiencies. Since women began to re-join the occupation in the 1960s, the level of horizontal segregation has continued to increase. From the 1990s, women were again the majority, with 57% of the Institute of Personnel and Development membership female by 1995 (Legge, 1987). Further studies have looked into the ongoing gender concentration in the occupation, with XpertHR Salary Surveys conducting a study of the gender segmentation in HR between 1997 and 2011. In 1997 63.8% of HR roles were held by women, which subsequently rose to 75.8% in 2011 (Carty, 2011). More recently, the HR occupation comprises 75.4% women (Carty, 2014). This current gender divide is also apparent within HR education. UCAS statistics show that in 2020, 940 men applied to study undergraduate Human Resource Management courses, compared to 2,115 women (UCAS, 2021). Whilst there are no apparent statistics regarding the gender split at the postgraduate level, it is suggested to be similarly pronounced, with an anecdotal estimate of 80% women in postgraduate HR courses (Burt, 2017). With regard to the diversity in HR in terms of ethnicity, CIPD research states that in 2019, 9% of HR practitioners were BAME in comparison to 12% in the total UK workforce (CIPD, 2021).

The above section has documented the transition of the HR function from welfare work to the current day and set out the context concerning the history of HR. The significant shifts the HR occupation has undergone regarding its role and focus, and its gender composition has been detailed. These historical developments are essential to understanding the occupation in the current day and how the past has shaped the occupation. The history of HR has left some pervasive ideas about the occupation, and these will be referred back to throughout the thesis.

1.4 Approach to the thesis

The account detailing the evolution of the HR occupation and highlighting the gender concentration sets the research within its context. Whilst legitimacy in HR has been an ongoing research subject; there is still a need to explore HR practitioner perceptions at the micro level. Gender in HR, however, has been subject to very little qualitative research, so it is an underdeveloped research area. As such, gender and legitimacy are the two key variables that stood out as worthy of further study. As discussed, despite undergoing many significant shifts, the occupation has been subject to persistent questioning and critique of its legitimacy and value in organisations. Much of the literature regarding the legitimacy of the HR occupation uses the term 'legitimacy' without a clear explanation of what this comprises. Other literature on the topic utilises proxies for legitimacy, whether these be allocation on the board of directors (Caldwell, 2011; Reichel et al., 2010), isomorphism of HR practices (Pohler & Willness, 2014) or professional association, credentials and training (Brewster et al., 2000). These studies provide a valuable understanding of the current status of HR concerning these aspects; however, as the majority of this research is quantitative in nature, the micro-level perceptions and experiences of HR practitioners with regard to legitimacy and gender are still largely unknown. As such, this research adopts a qualitative approach, utilising semi-structured interviews with HR practitioners to understand individual perceptions and experiences. Utilising a thematic analysis, this research will provide a picture of how legitimacy and gender interplay to shape the perceptions, experiences, and understandings of those working within the HR occupation.

1.5 Structure of the thesis

The above has set out the rationale behind this research and the historical context necessary to understand further the aspects focused on for this study. Chapter Two reviews the ideas, debates, and frameworks from existing literature. The chapter explores empirical and theoretical research which supports, frames, and challenges this study. The chapter continues from the development of the occupation detailed above by providing further context to the HR occupation in the current day and both the longstanding and novel challenges it faces. The literature on legitimacy and its links to professionalisation are then examined, with particular reference to the socially constructed nature of legitimacy. Research on gender in organisations, occupations, and professions is then reviewed, focusing on how these are inherently gendered. Finally, the links between legitimacy,

professionalisation, and gender are examined. Whilst this chapter spans several streams of literature, the core notion that HR, as an occupation, is shaped by the socially constructed concepts of legitimacy and gender links these sometimes distinct research areas together.

Chapter Three addresses how the critical questions of this study are explored and the ways in which the underpinning philosophical position influences this. This research is conducted from an interpretivist standpoint, and the reasons for this are discussed. The chapter will detail the research design and interviews with HR practitioners. The rationale behind interviewing HR practitioners across a range of organisations, roles, and sectors is explained, and the challenges are addressed. The undertaking of data collection is detailed, including the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic had upon this process. The chapter concludes with the approach taken to analysing the data; the decision to adopt thematic analysis is explained, and the process by which this was undertaken is addressed.

Chapter Four is the first chapter to detail the findings of this research. This chapter focuses on the findings concerning the legitimacy and professionalisation of HR. The chapter begins by broadly depicting HR practitioners' views on the legitimacy of HR and then goes on to address several tensions that were present in the findings with regard to legitimacy and professionalisation. These being; a) caring or cost control, b) specialist expertise or broad business knowledge, c) strategic HR or operational work, d) HR professional or organisational champion and e) occupational closure or commercial credibility.

Chapter Five is the second and final findings chapter of this thesis. This chapter details findings concerning gender and legitimacy/professionalisation in HR. The chapter begins by highlighting practitioner views on the gender imbalance in HR and proposed reasons why this is the case. Next, the chapter discusses the perception of HR as a 'soft' side of management and the gendered implications. Linked to this, participant accounts regarding the enactment of gender on a day-to-day basis are then shown. The chapter finally draws upon one of the key issues addressed in Chapter Four. It considers the link between gender and legitimacy at senior HR levels, particularly regarding those that make a horizontal move to the occupation.

Finally, Chapter Six reviews the empirical data and discussion of theoretical frameworks and, in doing so, draws together the issues that have been identified. This chapter includes a discussion of

key findings related to the literature on how the HR occupation is understood with regards to legitimacy and how professionalisation is seen to relate to the legitimacy of the HR occupation. Also included is a discussion on how the findings of this study relate to the theory of gendered organisations. The chapter considers the gendered underpinnings of legitimacy and professionalisation and how this has shaped how the HR occupation is understood by those working within it. The chapter concludes by detailing the contributions of this research, a discussion of the limitations of the study and consideration of areas for future research.

CHAPTER TWO - LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to explore and consider various analytical frameworks presented in the literature that are relevant to the research aims of exploring how the legitimacy of the HR occupation is understood, including any gendered underpinnings and how this ultimately impacts the day-to-day enactment of HR practitioners. The main bodies of literature considered are the occupation's legitimacy, the theoretical conceptualisations of legitimacy and professionalisation of occupations, the links between gender and established notions of legitimacy and professionalisation, and finally, the ways in which these gendered underpinnings have shaped the HR occupation. The debates in these bodies of literature provide the necessary context as to the current understanding of these issues. The key theoretical frame that this research is based upon is Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organisations. The theoretical frame is used to consider the notion that perceptions of legitimacy are inherently gendered, and this may shape the way in which HR practitioners understand their occupation.

First, the literature on legitimacy and professionalisation is considered. This focuses on the conceptualisations of legitimacy in the extant literature and considers how various theories of legitimacy shape the way in which the legitimacy of occupations is studied. Linked to this, ideas of professionalisation are explored, including how professionalisation is understood and how this is entangled with notions of occupational legitimacy. Ideas of gender and occupations are then addressed. This section details the current understanding of the ways in which gender concentration of occupations interplays with notions of legitimacy and professionalisation. Particular focus is paid to the gendered underpinnings of these concepts. The current state of HR regarding legitimacy and professionalisation will then be detailed. The ways in which gender may interplay with this are addressed, including the existing literature on the experiences of men and women in HR. Finally, a reiteration of the key bodies of literature is provided, and emphasis is given to the ways in which answering the key questions of this research is currently limited based on the extant literature.

2.2 THEORIES OF LEGITIMACY

The study of the perceived legitimacy of occupations is recognised as having significant importance in sociological and organisational literature. It is clear the extent to which occupations, companies, and organisational functions are dependent upon legitimacy. Legitimising roles and practices is paramount when engaging in institutional work (Goodrick & Reay, 2010). However, whilst the concept of legitimacy has been fully embedded into the literature on institutional theory, definitions of legitimacy have become increasingly diverse and, in some cases conflicting. This section utilises, in particular, the work of Suddaby et al. (2017) to understand how the conceptualisation of legitimacy has evolved since its early inception by Weber (1947).

Within the literature on legitimacy, the majority of work builds upon the early theory by Weber (1947). Weber's research focused on categorising types of legitimacy and, in doing so, identified three key types, these being traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal. The traditional category is seen to be met if legitimacy has persisted for a long time, charismatic if the legitimacy is based on collective trust, and rational-legal if legitimacy is based upon practical logic. Weber's research noted the shift in organisations away from more primitive authority approaches such as traditional and charismatic to one which is structured around bureaucracy, the rational-legal approach. Weber's work has been influential since it was one of the first to consider the notion of legitimacy in organisations. This work has also led to an ongoing assumption that the concept of legitimacy is able to be categorised and understood as distinct types.

In 2017, the Academy of Management Annals published a thematic review of legitimacy literature by Suddaby et al., which aimed to provide further conceptual clarity. The analysis of this review identified three core conceptualisations of legitimacy; legitimacy as an asset or property, legitimacy as an interactive process or legitimation, and legitimacy as a perception. These three notions of legitimacy are discussed in the following sections, including what legitimacy is seen to be, how it is understood to be created, how we can understand/measure legitimacy, and the critiques of these conceptualisations of legitimacy.

As noted earlier, a significant amount of research concerned with the conceptualisation of legitimacy credits Weber for introducing the early notion of organisational legitimacy (Suchman, 1995; Johnson et al., 2006; Ruef & Scott, 1998). Whilst Weber's research focused predominantly

on the aspects that make authority legitimate, his work was influential across the broader understanding of organisational legitimacy. In furthering our understanding of how authority becomes legitimate, Weber's (1947) research initiated the stream of work viewing legitimacy-as-property, an asset or something to own. This view essentially turns legitimacy into something tangible and able to be observed and measured in organisations (Suddaby et al., 2017). Legitimacy, in this sense, is a commodity that can be passed through different organisations and has the potential to 'spill over' to organisations linked to the legitimate institution (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999). As legitimacy is perceived as an asset, it is something that can easily be gained, lost, decreased, or increased (Suchman, 1995, Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975).

Whilst much of the later work on the conceptualisation of legitimacy takes the approach that legitimacy is something more subjective and takes into account individual perception, the work of legitimacy-as-property or an asset takes a more positivist approach and views that there are specific characteristics or 'traits' that makeup legitimacy in organisations (Suddaby et al., 2017). Weber's initial work was followed by various studies that categorised legitimacy in organisations into various aspects, whether this is cognitive (an organisation's practices and actions are desirable) (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994; Scott, 1995; Suchman, 1995), regulative (adhering to institutionalised laws and regulations) (Scott, 1995), or pragmatic (based on self-interested calculations by the organisation's audience as to whether the organisations actions are of value to them) (Suchman, 1995). Such categorisations enable the legitimacy of organisations and occupations to be studied and measured from a specific standpoint.

The view that legitimacy can be measured and it is something to be 'owned' does mean that proxies will be utilised to understand the concept (Suddaby et al., 2017). These proxies are typically aspects such as how widespread a practice or procedure is across organisations or occupations (often referred to as 'population density' (Hannan & Carrol, 1992)), the media accounts of an organisation or occupation, and regulatory authorities. Research on the legitimacy of HR is no exception to this perspective and utilises aspects such as the isomorphism of HR practices as an indicator of HR legitimacy.

Whilst this perspective on measurable legitimacy is still widely referenced in the current HR literature, it has also been subject to significant criticism. The critical limitation of this perspective

is that the 'characteristics' of legitimacy do not necessarily denote what the general population perceive as legitimate (Suddaby et al., 2017). As discussed, this approach largely uses proxies to determine legitimacy. However, there is a lack of clarity as to whether 'population density' or 'regulative authorities', for example, reflect perceptions of legitimacy on a more micro-level. Another key limitation of this perspective is that there is little limit to the 'characteristics' that can be argued to denote legitimacy. As Deephouse and Suchman (2008) posit, numerous characteristics are added to these lists by theorists without necessarily being tested empirically.

An alternative stream of literature focuses less on the properties and observable characteristics of legitimacy and more on the processes that construct and maintain legitimacy. This view of legitimacy can be characterised as a 'process by which cultural accounts from a larger social framework in which a social entity is nested are construed to explain and support the existence of that social entity, whether that entity is a group, a structure of inequality, a position of authority or a social practice' (Berger et al., 1998 p. 380). A fundamental underpinning of this perspective is the understanding that legitimacy is a socially constructed phenomenon and thus one that is negotiated continuously and is not static (Suddaby et al., 2017). Because of this, research adopting the process perspective typically refers to 'legitimation' or 'legitimising' as opposed to 'legitimacy', thus emphasising that legitimacy is a process rather than an object (Suddaby et al., 2017).

The fundamental understanding of legitimacy-as-process is that legitimacy starts from 'the ground' and is developed and built over time. It can then be argued that there is a 'tipping point' whereby legitimacy can be said to be achieved. However, it is primarily perceived as an ongoing negotiation and discursive strategy (Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002). As such, studies that adopt the perspective of legitimacy-as-process tend to utilise a staged model detailing how organisations, occupations and organisational practices become legitimised over time. Much of the legitimacy-as-process literature views legitimacy as developing through numerous interactions over time and emphasises the actors engaging in legitimation as having a high degree of agency (Tamm Hallström & Boström, 2010). However, this differs amongst the legitimacy-as-process literature, with the level of agency and awareness actors are seen to have in shaping legitimacy varying among researchers (Suddaby et al., 2017). Much of the research adopting this approach takes a pragmatic view and sees actors as having agency to negotiate legitimacy at the micro-level but posits that legitimacy at the organisational level is largely out of individuals' control (Suddaby et al., 2017).

A related line of research also looks at the notion of 'delegitimation'. Rather than there being an aspect or 'trait' missing, as is the view with legitimacy-as-property, this approach views delegitimation as a gradual process by which legitimacy is destroyed over time. This can be due to a series of events, actors' actions within an organisation, or through social processes (Maguire & Hardy, 2009). It is important to note that this process of delegitimation does not merely reduce an organisation or occupation to a neutral state of legitimacy, but this perspective posits that alongside delegitimation, there will be an element of stigma that is socially constructed (Maguire & Hardy, 2009). Despite adopting a more socially constructivist perspective towards legitimacy, this stance still somewhat neglects the notion of individual perception in legitimacy, taking the notions of legitimation and delegitimation as being viewed as a collective (Suddaby et al., 2017).

As discussed, some of the main critiques of the notions of legitimacy-as-property and legitimacy-as-process are that they place too much focus on the collective and subsequently neglect the diversity of individual perception. The conceptualisation of legitimacy-as-perception addresses these critiques and positions legitimacy as an intangible view individuals hold (Suddaby et al., 2017). Whilst this conceptualisation places focus on the individual, it does not seek to neglect the macro-level entirely. Instead, this notion posits that in individuals making their own judgements, their actions will reflect these judgements, ultimately leading to macro-level effects. Although it draws from other established disciplines such as cognitive psychology and micro-sociology, the notion of legitimacy-as-perception is a more recent conceptualisation compared to legitimacy-as-property. The basis of the concept comes from Sherif and Hovland (1961) and their advancement of the theory of social judgments, which was further extended by Zucker (1977). Whilst the perspective of legitimacy being inherently subjective can be argued to have been widely adopted in legitimacy research, much of this research is still said to adopt the stance of legitimacy as a collective. The difference between viewing legitimacy as subjective and fully embracing the legitimacy-as-perception concept is emphasised by Suddaby et al. (2017) in stating that legitimacy-as-perception places emphasis on the diversity of individual thought and seeks to avoid viewing legitimacy as a collective concept.

As the legitimacy-as-perception perspectives focus on how individuals form judgements, the way in which these perceptions are formed is important. As noted, the basis of legitimacy-as-perception has been developed from research on social judgements (Sherif & Hovland, 1961; Zucker, 1977).

As a result, it is challenging to fully disentangle the concepts of legitimacy-as-perception and status (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008). Sherif and Hovland (1961) discuss the notion that in making any form of judgement, a reference point is always required, thus making it, even subconsciously, a comparison. Such reference points are founded against individual social realities, allowing subjectivity and social influences to be present. In line with this, within much of the legitimacy-as-perception literature, the terms legitimacy and status are conflated or viewed as interchangeable (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Suddaby et al., 2017).

As noted, a significant underpinning of the legitimacy-as-perception perspective is that it considers the subjectivity of legitimacy. This is not exclusive to the legitimacy research adopting this approach; however, the legitimacy-as-perception literature addresses more so the individual as opposed to the collective view. This emphasis on the individual perception is important to note due to the ways in which organisations and occupations often struggle to meet various expectations from individuals at different levels and places (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990). Adopting a perspective of legitimacy-as-perception is, therefore, of value when exploring the HR occupation. As discussed, there is currently minimal consensus in academic and practitioner literature on how the legitimacy of the HR occupation is understood. Furthermore, given the varying demands on HR from management and employees, it is also understood that amongst those outside the HR function, there will likely be varying perceptions of how legitimacy is understood (Boselie et al., 2009).

However, this focus on individual perceptions has been critiqued due to the micro-level focus. Empirical research adopting this approach is argued to run the risk of losing the broader understanding of how the legitimacy of an organisation or occupation is conceptualised. Bitektine and Haack (2015), therefore, emphasise the importance of considering the cross-level nature of legitimacy between the micro-level and macro-level. This refers to the way in which individuals act upon the micro-level perceptions of legitimacy, thus producing macro-level effects (Bitektine & Haack, 2015).

The above section has addressed some of the most prominent understandings of legitimacy in organisations and occupations. However, it is argued that legitimacy concerns justifying not only the function of the occupation but also whom the individuals within the occupation represent. In

seeking to establish 'who they are' and gain increased legitimacy, it is argued that the constructs of the 'professional' and 'profession' often come into play (Abbott, 1988).

2.3 PROFESSIONALISATION THEORIES

As noted above, the professional and the profession come into play regarding understandings of occupational legitimacy, including that of HR. As this research is focused on the micro-level perceptions of legitimacy, there is a focus on how HR practitioners perceive the professionalisation of HR and the extent to which they view professionalisation as desirable for legitimacy. In order to understand this, the existing literature on professions must first be addressed. In a similar way to legitimacy, professionalisation is also challenging to define. The key sociological theories of professionalisation will be discussed here, namely the trait theory, the process theory, and the power theory. Following the power theory, the concept of occupational closure will also be addressed.

As highlighted through the historical overview of the occupation, HR's pursuit of professional status has been well documented. It is also argued that, compared to other management occupations, HR may have progressed further down the line regarding certain aspects of professionalisation, namely professional accreditation and education (Bolton & Muzio, 2008; Chillas, 2005). This is, however, not a universal view within the literature. Hallier and Summers (2011), for example, argue that whilst HR may be referred to as a profession, it is, in fact, a quasi-profession profession due to the extent it is subject to the 'whims' of management. Despite its long history, Elias and Purcell (2004) categorise HR as a 'new graduate occupation' due to the relatively recent increase in those undertaking a degree in the subject. Any claims to HR's professional status, or lack thereof, are contentious, as there is little common agreement as to what constitutes a profession as opposed to an occupation. There is a significant amount of research that remains absorbed by the issue of determining at what point an occupation can be classed as a profession. This section explores the key theoretical contributions to professionalisation. The literature on trait and stage approaches, in particular, will be reviewed with regard to how occupations are argued to become classed as professions.

Early research on professions has tended to focus on specific characteristics that define professions. The 'trait approach' was first widely introduced by Greenwood (1957) as a means to

find commonalities between established professions and understand how they became seen as such. It began by observing the 'original' professions of law and medicine and adopted a 'tick box' style approach to traits. The following five factors were deemed to be requisites of a profession; a systematic body of knowledge, a professional authority recognised by clients, community sanctions, a regulatory code of ethics, and a professional culture sustained by formal professional associations. However, over time, other attributes deemed requisites to professional status have been added by organisational scholars, such as the socialisation of entrants (Goode, 1957), high social status and prestige (Millerson, 1964), a long period of training (Leggatt, 1970), and a monopoly over activities (Turner & Hodge, 1970). This trait perspective is still widely used when referring to whether an occupation is viewed as a profession, including within HR. As noted, in literature debating the professional status of HR, aspects such as the CIPD (the professional association) and developments in education are often referenced as indicators of professionalisation (Chillas, 2005; Bolton & Muzio, 2008).

However, in more recent research, this approach has been critiqued extensively. One of the significant, increasingly extensive critiques that the trait approach has been subject to is that the 'traits' identified tended to incorporate professions' own views of themselves and their attributes (Johnson, 1972, p. 26; Abbott, 1988). As such, the approach is deemed to be overly idealistic. This is amplified by the majority of studies of this approach being case study based. As such, this provides findings specific to given professions but gives little understanding as to how applicable the traits are across a broader range of professions. In this sense, it can be argued that the overemphasis on the Anglo-American professions of medicine and law has not been helpful. A final notable limitation of this perspective is that it is a static approach. The trait approach turns 'profession' into a descriptive term in a specific space and time. As a result, there is little understanding as to whether professions exhibit the same 'traits' at varying times or situations (Johnson, 1972).

These critiques of the trait approach are, in part, what led to an alternative perspective of professionalisation to be put forward. Wilensky, the most prominent proponent of the stages approach, argues that professionalisation is a logical, even intentional process rather than a set of specific traits (Wilensky, 1964). Wilensky's work outlines seven stages typically followed in moving towards a profession. The stages are as follows: 1) a job becomes a full-time occupation;

2) establishing a training school; 3) establishing a university program; 4) founding a local professional association; 5) founding a national professional association; 6) creation of a state license; 7) creation of a code of ethics (Mieg, 2008 p. 42).

Wilensky (1964) recognises exceptions to this model but explains these as power struggles resulting in aspiring professions deviating from these stages. An example of this would be the profession of dentistry which formed a professional body prior to university training being introduced. This deviation from Wilensky's stages is argued to be, at least in part, due to a power struggle between the professions of dentistry and medicine. It is important to note that deviations from this process can also be seen in the HR occupation, highlighting the limitations of studying the occupation from this perspective. Niven (1967) states that the very first 'tutor' of welfare work was appointed into a university in the UK in 1917, several years after the professional association had been established, indicating that the occupation has not had a linear path towards professionalisation.

Despite Wilensky's stages approach being introduced, partly from the critiques of the trait approach, the stages perspective is also subject to significant limitations. Critiques of the stages or process approach are, in some aspects, similar to those of the trait approach. Wilensky's perspective is argued to be overly simplistic and prescriptive. Similar to the trait approach, the stages model holds numerous assumptions about professions. Additionally, with no set understanding of what constitutes a profession, there is little understanding of the 'end state' of the stages approach and at what point full professionalisation has been achieved. It is, however, important to note that Wilensky's stages approach was never designed to be a litmus test for professions, and there are professions which have missed stages or equally occupations that have gone through all stages and are still not widely considered a profession (Cummins, 2002).

Whilst the trait approach was heavily critiqued and began to be replaced by the stages approach, there is significant literature suggesting that both approaches are flawed in explaining professionalisation. Abbott (1988), for instance, questions why the traits and processes are frequently viewed as antecedents to professionalisation when they may be the outcomes. Furthermore, it has been argued that attempting to explain professionalisation through theoretical

approaches based on homogeneous traits and processes fails to recognise the subjectivity and heterogeneity of professions in practice.

The 'power approach' to professionalisation emerged in the 1970s in response to the trait and stages approach (Freidson, 1970; Johnson, 1972). This theoretical perspective focuses less on how occupations become classed as professions and more on how they achieve and maintain power. This power is then viewed as the distinguishing feature of professions. The power approach came about, in part, from Freidson's (1970) ethnographic study of the medical profession. Freidson argued that medicine, amongst other professions, is able to obtain and maintain power through 'protection and patronage'. The sanctioning of medicine by universities is viewed as one such example (Hermanowicz & Johnson, 2014). The work by Freidson exemplifies how power and control can be perpetuated. Once the medical profession secured control over technique, this was pushed out to delimit the work of accompanying occupations such as nursing or midwifery (Hermanowicz & Johnson, 2014). The gendered implications of power in legitimacy and professionalisation will be detailed later within the chapter; however, the above already provides a clear example of the link between gender and professional power with the prominence of men in the doctoring occupation and the dominance of women in nursing and midwifery. Ultimately, the power perspective has shifted the theorising of professions away from traits and processes and towards power and control. The perspective of power has prevailed within professions literature and has, to some extent, been incorporated within the ambit of neo-Weberian perspectives of professions. This leads us to discuss the neo-Weberian concept of occupational closure.

The notion of occupational closure is an incentive for gaining professional status that has been extensively studied in AngloAmerican approaches. Occupational closure is taken to mean the strategies occupational groups use to gain control over the market for their particular skills, define who could enter the occupational group, and establish a monopoly over the provision of particular skills and services (Witz, 1990; Klein, 2016). A question central to the understanding of professions is how occupational members engage in certain activities and compete with other occupational groups for exclusive claims to perform those activities (Anteby et al., 2016). As a result, occupational closure has been subject to extensive study in the field of professions and organisations. Obtaining and maintaining a professional claim to tasks is complex. Whilst job descriptions may demarcate professional boundaries, this is rarely as clearly defined in practice.

Abbott (1988) posits that occupational groups' jockey' for positions and make jurisdictional claims over activities. The notion of occupational closure has clear relevance to the HR occupation. Relatively recent developments in the HR occupation, such as the business partnering model, are argued to have created further challenges for the HR occupation in the ability to demarcate its role and expertise. This is something that will be discussed further in the sections below, bringing in also the influence of gender.

Whilst it can be argued that the above perspectives of professionalisation have influenced both the academic topic of professions and practice in organisations, Hughes' (1958) work recognises the differences between occupations and professions to be a difference in degree rather than in kind. The link between legitimacy and professionalisation is complex, but, as noted above, constructing an occupation as a profession creates an image which, in turn, has the potential to increase legitimacy (Abbott, 1988). The role of a professional body can also be argued to be key in enhancing the legitimacy of a field (Abbott, 1988). Savage and Witz (1992) argue that professionals and managers seek to increase their legitimacy in different ways. It is posited that hierarchy and knowledge relating to their organisation provide a sense of legitimacy for managers. In contrast, professionals having and demonstrating specific expertise in their area brings a sense of legitimacy. This inevitably calls into question where HR fits by this definition, which will be further addressed in this chapter.

Within the landscape of contributions from legitimacy to professionalisation, we feel the need to introduce a gender lens. Regarding the HR occupation, this has been underestimated until now, if not entirely neglected. Much of the above theories surrounding professionalisation can be argued to have clear gendered underpinnings. As discussed further in the chapter, the gendered exclusion of credentials, the inherently gendered underpinnings regarding power, and the ability to demarcate an occupation and achieve occupational closure are all aspects to be studied.

2.4 GENDER CONCENTRATION

The above discussions on legitimacy and professionalisation provide a foundation for understanding how the HR occupation is understood. However, the ideas of legitimacy and professionalisation have often been considered in a gender-neutral way. This gender-neutral approach means the way in which gender interplays with legitimacy and professionalisation is

overlooked. For a numerically female dominated occupation such as HR addressing the potential influence of gender is important. The HR occupation is a valuable context to study the interplay between legitimacy and gender as it is argued to have been influenced by its gendered workforce composition since its inception. As noted in Chapter One, from the 1960s onwards, the occupation has become increasingly female-concentrated. Such gender concentration can be attributed to a number of causes, and the next section briefly addresses explanatory theories of gender concentration. These theories are touched on to provide an understanding of how gender segregation of and within occupations may occur. However, the focus of this research remains on the impact of such gender segregation as opposed to the causes.

Occupational gender segregation has been discussed by many scholars, including Hakim (1979), Cockburn (1983), Walby (1990) and Crompton and Harris (1998b). Studies on occupational typically address horizontal gender segregation and vertical gender segregation. Horizontal gender segregation is defined as an unequal distribution of men and women across occupational sectors, and vertical segregation is defined as the gender disparity across seniority levels (Woodfield, 2007). Whilst writers have utilised various terms to distinguish between theories of gender segregation, the terms used by Evetts (2000) will be used within this literature review. Evetts (2000) argues that explanations for occupational gender segregation can typically be split into structural, action, and cultural dimensions. Structural dimensions refer to both the way in which domestic work is distributed amongst families and the ways in which labour is divided in organisations, including career paths and promotional opportunities (Evetts, 2000). Whilst structural and cultural dimensions are often addressed in literature as one factor, cultural dimensions focus more on the gendering of processes within work and gendered ideologies. Literature utilising action dimensions to explain occupational gender segregation posits that segregation results from women's choices regarding employment and that many women hold different preferences to those of men. As mentioned, this notion largely denies that structural and cultural barriers influence segregation and focuses on females having agency as decision-makers in their careers.

An instructive fundamental research debate across these approaches emerges from the work of Hakim (1995; 1996; 2002) and Crompton and Harris (1998a; 1998b). Hakim's research is based on what she terms the 'preference' approach, related to what Evetts terms the 'action' approach.

Hakim claims that occupational segregation and concentration result from women's preferences for specific professions/sectors and is rarely influenced by external social forces (Hakim, 1996). Crompton and Harris, however, dispute this and whilst their work does not seek to deny the premise that genders make choices as to the type of work they wish to pursue, they emphasise that these 'choices' have emerged as a result of constraints, including both structural and cultural factors (Crompton & Harris, 1998b). Hakim's research on preference theory largely denies the notion that there are structural or cultural constraints which contribute to horizontal segregation. Authors such as McBroom (1987) and Spence and Hahn (1997) complement this view and argue that constraints such as occupational gender stereotypes have diminished over the years and that attitudes towards gender and occupations are becoming increasingly egalitarian. However, the work of Hakim has been challenged continually within academia (Ginn et al., 1996; Crompton & Harris, 1998a, 1998b; Procter & Padfield, 1999). Hakim has been critiqued for neglecting the extent to which career choices are constrained, which in turn endorses existing sexist positions. A significant amount of key literature within the field of horizontal segregation disputes the work of Hakim and argues that structural and cultural dimensions hold significant weight in explaining segregation (Ginn et al., 1996; Walsh, 1999; Crompton & Harris, 1998b). However, Hakim's work has been studied from a post-feminist perspective, which has largely been overlooked in the previous criticisms of her work. Lewis and Smith (2016) posit that Hakim's work, through emphasising women's agency, demonstrates women's choice to engage with work, home and motherhood rather than the obligation. It is argued that Hakim's work contributes to the 'agentic choosing femininity' in which women are active choosers in their work and home lives (Lewis & Smith, 2016).

As mentioned, whilst Evetts (2000) presents structural and cultural dimensions as distinct factors, the reciprocal impact structural factors and cultural gender stereotypes have on one another should not be diminished. Whilst a number of literature streams explore how stereotypes are understood, the term can be referred to as social categories that aid individuals in sense-making about the environment (Six & Eckes, 1991). Structural dimensions, such as organisational structure or the division of domestic duties, play a crucial role in creating and perpetuating gender stereotypes. With gender concentration evident across organisations and occupations, individuals commonly view particular social groups working in particular roles. Consequently, the more individuals view a certain social group engaging in a particular role, the more likely individuals perceive that the necessary characteristics for that role are synonymous with that particular social group (Eagly &

Steffen, 1984). For example, suppose individuals continually observe men working in management positions. In that case, they are more likely to associate the attributes and commitments believed to be necessary for such a role, such as assertiveness and long working hours, as is typical of men. Gender concentration and the career decisions of men and women are based upon various factors, including preference, structural constraints, and cultural ideologies. However, in individuals observing men and women working in these careers and the enactment of their roles, cultural notions of gender stereotypes are reproduced continually.

As discussed above, the HR occupation, being female-dominated, is a clear example of gender segregation. The reasons behind this are likely multifaceted, although the historical ebbs and flows of female concentration have arguably often reflected what is seen as 'women's work' (the welfare stages) and 'men's work' (the 'labour engineers' and personnel management years) (Legge, 1978; Niven, 1967). There have also been numerous studies exploring the stereotypes, often gendered, of the HR occupation (Torrington & Hall, 2005; Gibb, 2000; Pichler et al., 2008; Hallier & Summers, 2011). These studies have identified an abundance of potential stereotypes in relation to the HR occupation, such as 'caring', 'professional', 'helpful', and 'responsible'. Identifying stereotypes of the occupation is beneficial in furthering our understanding of how HR is perceived and noting the gendered underpinnings in such stereotypes. However, based on extant literature, it would appear that these stereotypes of the occupation are now widely understood and acknowledged. As such, this research does not seek to focus extensively on the occupation's stereotypes, gendered or otherwise. Rather the research seeks to adopt a 'perspective of gender and bureaucracy which foregrounds gender relations as an embedded property of organisations rather than valorising gender differences as dichotomous sets of attributes or distinctive orientations and modes of action, which are simply 'brought to' organisations' (Savage & Witz, 1992, p. 26). In relation to this quote, this research focuses on the gendered underpinnings of concepts, such as legitimacy and professionalisation, in the context of the HR occupation, as opposed to focusing on gendered attributes associated with HR. The notion of gendered underpinnings of organisational concepts is discussed more in the following sections.

2.5 GENDERED ORGANISATIONS

As discussed above, gender segregation in organisations and occupations is prevalent and pervasive. The HR occupation is one example (that has become quantitively female-dominated). When female workers are concentrated in particular occupations or organisation functions, this can be seen as specific forms of female inclusion.

A significant amount of extant literature on gender, legitimacy, and professionalisation focuses on organisations and sectors where females are largely absent, i.e. senior levels of organisations and male-dominated occupations (Blackburn, 2009; Simpson, 2004). However, it is important to explore potential gendered disadvantages in occupations and professions where women are included or even numerically dominant (Davies, 1996; Dean, 2007). It is also important to understand, 'how are these particular forms of inclusion concealed within a deep-rooted gender discourse?' (Davies, 1996 p. 663). It is proposed that the rationale for the focus on female exclusion is that, in many cases, the presence of women in an occupation leads to the assumption that equality is present (Davies, 1996).

Professions have historically engaged in exclusionary tactics through recruitment and selection, entry requirements, and training. These have often been utilised to exclude on the basis of gender (Walby, 1990; Witz, 1992). However, where exclusion does not prevail, women are often found in particular types of roles or jobs, these roles typically being perceived as lower status (Savage & Witz, 1992). This gendered division of labour has been widely documented in academic literature (Walby, 1990; Acker, 1992; Cockburn, 1983; Witz, 1992). This study seeks to explore potential gendering at play in the predominantly female function of HR. It is important to understand the specific ways in which women are incorporated into organisations. It is argued by Anker and Melkas (1998) that the requirement for so-called feminine skills in certain roles may protect demand in these roles for females. However, it should be noted that, as mentioned, this creates a specific form of female inclusion in the workplace, thus perpetuating the gendering of occupations.

In addition to perpetuating gendering of occupations, forms of female inclusion also present barriers to the visibility of inequality. It is argued that the ability to reduce inequality in

organisations is dependent upon both the visibility and the perceived legitimacy of the inequality (Acker, 2006). As expected, if inequalities are visible to individuals and are perceived to be illegitimate, there is an increased likelihood of change and vice versa. When examining the literature on gender segregation and gender stereotyping of occupations, there is a clear awareness of the horizontal gender segregation present within the HR occupation (Bolton & Muzio, 2008; Reichel et al., 2010). Reichel et al. (2010) note that, on average, the HR function in Western European countries is three-quarters female. Whilst literature has focused on several male-dominated occupations and the impact of gender (Simpson, 2004), there has been comparatively little research addressing the gender imbalance in the HR occupation and the potential consequences. This gives support to the notion proposed by Davies (1996) that, in many cases, the inclusion of women in an occupation leads to the assumption that equality is present and is therefore overlooked.

As noted above, it is evident that the HR occupation is an exemplar of gender concentration and an occupation that has arguably become 'feminised'. However, it is important that research explores whether and in what ways deeper structures of gendered ideologies are present rather than take for granted this will be the case. The workings of gender in organisations are often more subtle and concealed than issues of gender segregation. The aims of this research are to explore the subtler, often hidden, notions of gender in organisations and organisational concepts that affect how HR is enacted and how the legitimacy of the function is understood. In order to theorise how a predominantly female function experiences work in often inherently masculinised organisations, the theory of gendered organisation will be examined (Acker, 1990).

The concept of 'gendered' organisations or jobs is referenced consistently throughout feminist literature (Britton, 2000; Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Whilst now used as a common term in feminist writing, the use of this is referencing back to the work of Acker. As discussed within Chapter One, to say an organisation or occupation is gendered means there is a distinction between masculine and feminine, resulting in gendered differences (Acker, 1990). Research adopting a gendered organisation approach recognises that not only are the actors in organisations gendered but so are the structures, practices, policies, and processes. As such, whilst the actors themselves are critical to understanding gender and organisations, it is not enough to discuss only the gender of those in organisations, but the gender of organisation practices and policies also needs to be addressed.

There are argued to be numerous ways in which organisations are inherently gendered, and the interplay between these various gendered assumptions, both formal and informal, creates differences and disadvantages based on gender (Anderson-Gough et al., 2005). For example, historically accepted views of organisations, and by extension occupations, as being connected to competition, leadership, merit, objectivity, and career generalism are inherently masculine (Anderson-Gough et al., 2005; Chappell, 2006). Wittman (2010) argues that the unquestioned acceptance that these norms are gender neutral creates significantly different experiences and outcomes for men and women in engaging with organisational practices, processes and structures.

Broadening the focus to explore the ways organisations themselves are gendered is also crucial as jobs, policies, structures, and processes cannot be removed from the actors that create and enact them (Acker, 1990; Pateman, 1988; Witz, 1992). It has long been argued that organisational structures are not gender neutral, as had often previously been assumed in literature (Morgan, 1981; Acker, 1990). Acker (1990) states that 'gender is difficult to see when only the masculine is present' (Acker, 1990, p. 142). This statement refers to the idea that until recently, the discourse surrounding organisations has presented them as gender neutral when organisational processes and structures are, in fact, in the male domain. When these structures and processes are presented as gender neutral, this separates the structures and processes from the individuals conducting them. As such, jobs in organisations become perceived as abstract concepts with no human bodies. Acker (1990) has argued against this notion, in that 'a job' only becomes tangible when a worker is present, thus making it an implicitly gendered concept.

In relation to this, Ridgeway (1997) argues how it is not possible for individuals to interact with one another without being aware of a gender ascribed to that individual. It is established throughout feminist literature that a 'gender-neutral' approach is often adopted regarding organisations, institutions and industrial relations (Acker, 1990; Greene, 2003). Despite this gender neutral approach, noticing gender in organisations is unavoidable; thus, attention should be given to how this impacts the enactment of daily practices, activities, and interactions in organisations. Employers and workers are not blind to gender, and as Cockburn (1991) argues, it is rare for women to enter the employment contract as homogenous, undifferentiated labour. Horizontal gender concentration, present across occupations, distinguishes 'men's work' from 'women's work' (Woodfield. 2007). To notice a majority gender within an occupation is unavoidable, thus

enforcing the idea that male or female concentrated occupations will be subject to a level of gendering. The section above has considered the ways in which gender inherently shapes organisational ideals. It is through the framework of Acker (1990) that we can consider that perceptions of legitimacy may be gendered in some way. However, it is not only legitimacy and ideas of success and merit in organisations that may be shaped by gender, but also the understanding of professions and the professional. The section below considers how professions and notions of the professional are inherently shaped by gender.

2.6 Professions and patriarchy

As noted above in the concept of the gendered organisation, organisational ideals were forged mainly at a time in history when the predominant actors in institutions were male. The professional ideal is no different; thus, one would expect gender relations to have a bearing on the concept of 'the professional'. It has been widely acknowledged in feminist literature that the inherent understanding of professionalism is male as opposed to gender neutral (Connell, 1987; Witz, 1992). To this end, to subscribe to the ideology of professionalism is to essentially 'do gender' (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Butler, 2004) and enact the masculine ideals associated. In appropriating these values, there is the potential to undermine one's own legitimacy (Bolton & Muzio, 2008). In addition, by doing this, one suppresses and devalues the supportive, the emotional, and the feminine (Bolton & Muzio, 2008). Witz is one of the most prominent authors to address the interplay between gender and professions and emphasises the importance of taking a gender-sensitive approach to understanding professions, one which recognises the patriarchal societies that underpin professions. Since Witz's influential work on 'Professions and Patriarchy,' there has been further research conducted on the gendered nature of professions (Davies, 1996; Sommerlad, 2002; Bolton & Muzio, 2008) and it is now widely acknowledged that highly female-concentrated and 'feminised' occupations have comparatively been disadvantaged in the professionalisation process. The following section details further the reasons why this has historically been the case and also how this phenomenon continues to be pervasive today.

As discussed, it is now well established in feminist research that gender has a significant part to play in terms of how professions are understood; however, until the work of Witz, the consideration of gender was absent from much of the literature on professions, including the predominant theories of professionalisation discussed in the earlier section. One of the key theories

of professionalisation discussed earlier was the trait approach. The trait approach is an example of how understandings of professionalisation, whilst presented as gender neutral, are often overlaid with gendered assumptions. Both Witz (1992) and Crompton (1987) argue that the very nature of credentials, a key aspect within the trait approach, has historically been entrenched with gendered exclusion. With women historically having less access to education, the roles they could enter were restricted, and female-dominated occupations typically were not comprised of individuals with established credentials (Witz, 1992). This, therefore, highlights again how female-dominated occupations have historically struggled to gain professional status.

The study by Bolton and Muzio (2008) utilises the occupations/professions of management, teaching, and law to understand the interplay between gender and professionalisation. This study notes the varying levels of professionalisation achieved, with law being viewed as an established profession, teaching seen as a semi-profession, and management perceived as an aspiring profession. Whilst this research poses feminisation as a clear barrier to the teaching occupation achieving full professionalisation; they posit professionalisation as an opportunity for the female-dominated aspects of management such as HR. The authors suggest that whilst feminisation is often perceived as a source of de-professionalisation, occupations that are highly female concentrated may perceive a greater appeal for accreditation and credentials as this pushes them further along the professionalisation path. This can be argued to be in part due to the exclusion previously faced by women in professions and the ways that accreditation and credentials can now be viewed as a tangible way to further the legitimacy and professionalisation of female-dominated occupations. It is, therefore, often feminised occupations with a lack of validation that actively pursue professionalisation in attempts to avoid the detrimental connotations of feminised work (Bolton & Muzio, 2008). This proposed gendered difference in the perceptions of professionalisation can, in part, be seen in the HR occupation itself. Ackah and Heaton (2003) conducted a study following the career progression of male and female HR practitioners. The findings from this study suggested that whilst men were the minority in the HR field, they were seen to benefit from this and gained more internal promotions than women did. Ackah and Heaton present the reasoning behind this as the men within the study having more confidence than the women and that women's lack of confidence was a career barrier. Within this study, more women also perceived a CIPD HR qualification as beneficial to their career compared to men. This emphasises the potential for differing perspectives regarding the importance of accreditation and

professionalisation, more broadly, between men and women and male-dominated and female-dominated occupations. This highlights the further need to explore the HR occupation and understand whether, and if so, for what reasons, the achievement of accreditation is perceived as an important aspect in their experiences of working within HR and also whether this denotes any gendered assumptions.

As discussed in the previous section, power and occupational closure are now viewed as key aspects in professionalising an occupation. However, again, this is not gender neutral and is subject to gendered underpinnings and assumptions. It is well documented in gender studies that the ways in which professions can enact occupational closure differ when female employees predominantly comprise the profession.

The act of occupational closure depends upon and demonstrates a level of control from the profession and the ability to obtain and maintain jurisdiction. Historically, feminised professions have struggled to exert power in the same form as male-dominated professions (Witz, 1992). This has led to struggles for feminised professions to obtain occupational closure. The work by Witz (1992) has explored how feminised professions have sought to enact the notion of occupational closure and demarcate boundaries against masculinised professions. Whilst it may be comparatively challenging for feminised professions to obtain jurisdictional claims over tasks, Witz (1992) argues that the appeal and perceived need for occupational closure may be even greater in female-dominated occupations. This is because women have historically been excluded from the workforce, and there is an argument that a feminised professional project will not have the same power as male-dominated professions but will seek to exclude others from their 'own space' as much as possible. In this sense, 'women have engaged in professional projects, attempting to be mistresses of their own fates, rather than fatefully acquiescing to the role of 'handmaiden' to male professionals' (Witz, 1990, p. 688).

Witz (1992) has identified four strategies of occupational closure that feminised professional projects may engage in, exclusion, inclusion (usurpation), demarcation and dual closure. Exclusion and demarcation are typically exerted by the dominant occupational or professional group, as they have the level of power to assert such actions. In contrast, inclusion or usurpation is exercised by the subordinate group in an attempt to gain power. A dual closure strategy involves a two-way

exercise of power in an upwards direction as a form of usurpation and a downwards direction as a form of exclusion. Witz (1992) uses the case study of the nursing profession to exemplify the dual closure strategy. It is discussed how nurses have sought to obtain and maintain control of nursing education and labour conditions. The study posits that the nursing profession aims to maintain as much autonomy as possible and seeks to avoid devolving control to the medical profession. The nursing profession is argued to employ exclusionary tactics of controlling entry to the profession, thereby maintaining an occupational monopoly. Witz (1992) argues that, in particular, 'caring professions' engage in the dual closure strategy of usurpation as a way to resist and challenge the dominance of other professions and exclusion strategies as a way to protect and demarcate the scope and the boundaries of their work and relative position in organisations. In essence, 'not to make midwives the servants of medical men, but to place them in a position analogous to the dentist who did not call the doctor to pull out a tooth' (Witz, 1990 p. 685).

In feminised and female-concentrated professions, men have the potential to be viewed as the 'other' (Pullen & Simpson, 2009). The way men navigate notions of masculinity and femininity in such professions has ramifications on their experiences, as well as the experiences of women within these professions. Simpson (2004) posits that men's entry into female-dominated occupations can be categorised into 'seekers' (those who actively choose the career), 'finders' (those who come across the occupation through other careers), and 'settlers' (those who try a number of male-dominated occupations or professions before settling in one that is female-dominated). Two key themes are referred to in the research on men in feminised occupations and professions. First, although women are often disadvantaged when in the quantitative minority of an occupation or profession (Woodfield, 2000), conversely, men may experience privilege and advantage when in the minority (Woodfield, 2007). It is posited that men are able to take their gendered power into feminised professions and benefit from this (Williams, 1993). Second, men will experience challenges, questions, and scrutiny over their 'masculinity' when working in feminised professions (Bagilhole & Cross, 2002; Lupton; 2000). The ways in which men are able to bring gendered power into feminised and female-dominated professions contribute to the way in which horizontal and vertical gender segregation occur concurrently. When men enter female-dominated professions, they are often able to use their 'token' status and rise to the top levels of the profession, thus reproducing a gendered hierarchy (Williams, 1993). The above section has considered the ways in which the professions and the professional are not gender-neutral, as is often presented.

This discussion has importance for the HR occupation that has long been in pursuit of professional status. There are numerous reasons put forward in the literature as to why HR may not have achieved full professional status, which will be discussed further below, however the importance of gender in this debate cannot be ignored.

2.7 Current state of HR - Legitimacy and professionalisation

Chapter One detailed the historical development of HR and the legitimacy challenges during this time. This section now turns to the current state of HR regarding its legitimacy and professionalisation. The HR occupation remains under scrutiny regarding its contribution and value to organisations, and there is an ongoing debate in academic literature as to how this may be remedied.

Despite personnel management transitioning to HR and promising a new position for the function within management, as noted, many of the issues with regard to the legitimacy of personnel seemed to follow the occupation into the most recent phase of its evolution. Many of the critiques surrounding the function failing to be viewed as a valued part of management and questioning the function's contribution to organisations were sustained in HR academic and practitioner literature (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015; Sheehan et al., 2014; Heizmann & Fox, 2019). This led to a number of prescriptive papers claiming ways in which the HR occupation could be transformed into a credible business function (Caldwell, 2001; Peacock, 2008; Ulrich, 1995). Ulrich, a prominent proponent of change for the HR occupation, has been candid in his criticism of the HR occupation over the past 20 years, known for his oft-quoted 'HR must give value or give notice'. One of the most influential pieces of work from Ulrich was the notion of the three-legged stool and strategic HR business partners (1995).

The novelty of Ulrich's propositions predominantly lies in his proposed organisation of the HR function and his propositions as to how this will legitimise the function. The 'Three Legged Stool' was proposed by Ulrich (1995) as a way of structuring the function. The three 'legs' refer to the HR function being divided into; an HR service centre, an HR centre of expertise, and HR business partners. The notion behind Ulrich's work is to create a close partnership between line management and HR. In order to accomplish this, an HR service centre is to be used to conduct the bulk of transactional and administrative activities, and the centre of expertise is used as a hub of specialist

HR knowledge. Ulrich places particular emphasis on the third 'leg', HR business partners. The business partnering role is often also referred to as an 'internal consultant', the basis being that an HR business partner is an internal advisor to line managers in a specific organisational department, team or function (Ulrich, 1995). The introduction of the business partner role shifts the responsibility of carrying out certain activities, such as disciplinaries and performance management, to line managers, which will then be supported and advised by their HR business partner (Pritchard, 2010). The premise is that this then allows HR business partners to become 'strategic partners' to the managers in organisations (Heizmann & Fox, 2019) and that it will free up time spent conducting transactional activities and allow HR to support line managers as masters of practice (Currie & Proctor, 2001). Furthermore, it is argued that this model means HR is able to shift towards being fully integrated within the business alongside line managers and ensure HR practices are aligned with business goals (Boglind et al., 2011). This is a significant shift from the origination of HR as welfare work, whereby the function's primary focus was on caring for employees with little involvement in any business objectives.

Deriving from Ulrich's work, the business partnering model has been widely adopted and has become commonplace in the UK. For example, a study conducted by the CIPD in 2013 reported that 40% of the organisations surveyed stated they had adopted the business partnering model (CIPD, 2013). Whilst it is recognised that the extent to which the adoption of the model can be understood is limited due to the terminology of 'business partner' being used to cover what may actually be very different HR roles with different levels of integration with management (Caldwell, 2008), there is broad consensus that the Ulrich model has become the dominant approach in structuring and organising HR work. In addition, the CIPD has championed the idea of business partnering for some time as a means of HR adding value (CIPD, 2020). It is also suggested that the business partner role has been enthusiastically hailed by HR practitioners in the UK, in the expectation that it may bring increased influence to the HR function (Kinsey, 2012).

Despite the apparent praise for the business partnering model in practice, Ulrich's work has been subject to significant criticism in academic literature. A key concern around the widespread adoption of the business partnering model is that focusing on the concerns and priorities of the organisation will result in neglecting the priorities and concerns of employees (Kochan, 2004). As discussed above, a key aspect of the business partner role is the need for HR business partners to

have a strong relationship with line management, one in which they are both working towards the overarching aim of improving organisational performance. This results in an increasingly unitarist perspective of employee relations. As a result, HR's responsibility for employee welfare, as had been emphasised in the early stages of the occupation's evolution, has the potential to diminish. Keegan and Francis posit that 'the business facing facets of HRM discursively swamp other concerns, notably about employee well-being and HR's role in and responsibility for securing it' (Keegan & Francis 2010, p. 874). There is concern that the 'employee champion' role, as termed by Ulrich, will essentially disappear in the focus of business issues. Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) addressed this challenge. However, they emphasised that the increased credibility HR will receive from the model will allow the function to better place importance on employee needs and priorities. However, the extent to which this can actually be achieved when the business partnering role places emphasis on the alignment of management and HR is questioned.

A further concern surrounding the widespread adoption of the business partnering model is based on the collective identity of HR. Caldwell and Storey (2007) posit that the HR function is already under threat with regard to its professional identity, and it can be argued that the business partnering model exacerbates this threat. This is argued to be due to the close alignment of business partners with management; thus, those in HR business partner roles are increasingly coming from diverse occupational backgrounds and seeing fewer requirements for HR education, knowledge, and experience (Wright, 2008). Wright (2008) has suggested that 'rather than acting as a form of occupational closure, the rhetoric of business partnership and internal consultancy appears to have further diluted occupational identity, reduced entry barriers and encouraged the entry of rival functional groups' (2008, p. 1083). The collective professional identity and the ability to enact occupational closure are argued to have significant importance in legitimacy and professionalisation, discussed later in this chapter, thus questioning the extent to which this model benefits or hinders the HR occupation.

As noted, one of the key appeals of the business partnering model for HR practitioners is the promise of greater involvement in strategy formulation and execution, suggesting that this will result in improved organisational legitimacy. The notion that HR should be moving towards increased strategic involvement has been well documented in both academic and practitioner literature. What is known as 'strategic human resource management' (SHRM) has seen increasing

attention in academic literature for the past three decades. Despite this, there remains little consensus on a clear definition of SHRM. Boxall & Purcell (2000) provide the broad notion that SHRM is concerned with the HR strategy in organisations and the extent to which this impacts performance. Barney and Wright (1998) take a similar approach and posit that, through the lens of resource-based value, HR will become a strategic partner by adding value and competitive advantage to the firm. Whilst most definitions of SHRM appear to emphasise business results; it is also argued that ensuring employees' well-being should be an enabler of SHRM as employees' satisfaction has significance on their abilities at work (Wright, 2008).

Jackson et al. (2014) posit that an expansive definition of SHRM should be taken to encourage further scholarship on the topic, stating that 'strategic HRM scholarship is the study of HRM systems and their interrelationships with other elements comprising an organisational system, including the organisation's external and internal environments, the multiple players who enact HRM systems, and the multiple stakeholders who evaluate the organisation's effectiveness and determine its long-term survival' (Jackson et al., 2014 p. 2). However, the authors argue that, in practice, HR practitioners typically use the term to refer to their belief that HR contributes to overall business effectiveness and performance, which is largely in line with the definitions noted above. The lack of clarity around strategic HR in practice has also been well documented, with practitioner literature suggesting some firms use the term to refer to the 'HR or People Plan' whereas some use the term to simply refer to the people elements within the overarching business plan (Brown et al., 2019). What is apparent regarding strategic HR in practice is that there is a clear disconnect between HR and management perceptions regarding the extent to which they perceive HR to contribute to the organisation on a strategic level. For example, a study conducted in 2016 by the CIPD found that, within the organisations surveyed, 72% of HR leaders perceived that the 'people strategy' would help the business achieve its priorities. In contrast, only 25% of non-HR leaders believed this to be the case (CIPD, 2016). This lack of clarity regarding how HR, as a dimension of business strategy, is understood in organisations, paired with and linked to the disconnect between management and HR as to how strategic HR contributes to organisational goals, highlights the need to explore further the perceptions regarding what we will refer to as strategic HR.

The legitimacy of HR has arguably been subject to more research than the professionalisation of the function. However, it is evident that professionalisation is high on the agenda of HR (Wright, 2008). As noted, HR has a chartered professional association (CIPD), and membership currently stands at over 160,000 worldwide (CIPD, 2021). The association also provides practitioners with the opportunity to gain specialist accreditation of varying levels. Gilmore and Williams (2007) posit that the professional association has been somewhat successful in creating a market expectation that HR practitioners will be accredited by CIPD. However, it remains the case that there is no license required to practice HR, and the requirement of CIPD accreditation is at the discretion of employers (Syrigou, 2018). Furthermore, the CIPD have no powers to regulate or sanction members based on their conduct in HR (Syrigou, 2018). As discussed earlier, there are various perspectives from which professionalisation can be understood. In taking a trait or stages approach to understanding professionalisation, it is clear that HR has elements of being a profession (such as an international professional body and specialist accreditation); however, it is lacking in others (such as a license to practice). As noted above, it is widely argued in the academic literature that a more accurate portrayal of HR may be as a quasi-profession (Hallier & Summers, 2011) or aspiring profession (Bolton & Muzio, 2008; Syrigou, 2018). As discussed previously, whilst there are a number of reasons resulting in the struggle for HR to be seen as a legitimate profession, gender cannot be overlooked in this debate. The current literature considering the ways in which gender may influence legitimacy and professionalisation in HR is addressed below.

2.8 Feminisation of HR

Despite notions of gendered organisation and masculinities indicating that the legitimacy of occupations and individuals is likely impacted by gender ideologies, there seems to be a lack of research exploring the interplay between occupational legitimacy and gender in the HR occupation. As noted in earlier sections, the legitimacy of HR has been widely problematised in both academic and practitioner literature; however, much of this research has not considered gender as a potential determining factor in the occupation's legitimacy.

Whilst there appears to be a limited amount of research addressing the interplay of legitimacy, gender, and HR, the small numbers of papers discussing this are from some time ago. As discussed in the earlier section, the gender concentration in HR has shifted over the years during different

phases of HR. However, the understanding that gender may potentially have an impact on the function has been recognised by a small number of researchers for some time.

As discussed previously, Legge's work on the legitimacy of 'personnel management', as it was referred to at that time, garnered significant attention. In addition to broader work on legitimacy, Legge (1987) also posits that the concentration of women in personnel management had an inverse relationship with the power of the function, i.e. the proportion of men in the function increased as the occupation was viewed as more central to management and vice versa.

The exception to the somewhat limited recent research on gender and legitimacy in HR is the various works of Brandl et al. (2007, 2008a, 2008b), Reichel et al. (2009, 2010, 2013), Reichel and Scheibmayr (2017) and Reichel et al. (2019). Much of the earlier work of Brandl et al. (2007, 2008a, 2008b) focuses on gender egalitarianism in various countries and whether this has a statistically significant effect on the strategic integration of male and female HR directors. The studies take an international comparative approach and largely support the hypotheses that increased gender egalitarianism is positively correlated with strategic integration for female HR directors, with the Nordic countries of Denmark and Sweden having the most enabling policies for integration. However, whilst gender egalitarian values are furthering in many countries, female HR directors are still argued to be comparatively disadvantaged with regard to integration at senior levels (Brandl et al., 2008b). However, this focus on the international comparison, whilst providing a wider understanding of gender and HR, does not allow for a nuanced perspective. It is, for example, plausible that within the UK, different sectors and industries will have a more gender-egalitarian culture than others.

Much of the work of Reichel et al. focuses on gender within the senior levels of HR as opposed to the broader function. Despite this, these studies do further our understanding of the perceived legitimacy of the HR function as a whole. For example, Reichel et al. (2019) explore the link between HRs' feminine' image and women on the board of directors. This quantitative study found that institutional pressures to have women on the board correspond to having the HR function represented at the board level. This study highlights what is already understood that women are more likely to be represented at senior levels in HR than in other managerial functions (Legge, 1987). However, this study also indicates that it may be pressures of gender egalitarianism at the

board level that leads to HR representation rather than a perception that HR is a valuable contributor at this level.

The 2010 paper of Reichel et al. focuses more on the direct link between gender in HR and legitimacy. This paper discusses that historically the gendered nature of the HR occupation has not been advantageous for its status, stating that 'the inclusion of women in HRM has accompanied the demise of the HRM profession or hindered its ability to gain full status' (Reichel et al., 2010). The study examined HR's involvement in strategy formulation and HR board membership between 1995-2005 across numerous countries. This study indicated that for many countries, an increase in women working in HR did not appear to reduce the occupation's 'legitimacy' in terms of board membership and if, or at what stage, they become involved in strategy formulation. However, in analysing the UK, the study found that HR's 'legitimacy' decreased as more women entered the occupation. Whilst the reasons for this decrease cannot be directly attributed to the gender structure, it does highlight a need for the HR occupation within the UK to be researched further on this topic. As previously mentioned, this paper utilises involvement in strategy formulation and board membership as indicators of legitimacy. Whilst this study sheds light on HR's involvement in senior decision-making and strategy, the extent to which it is clear whether these indicators are understood to be 'legitimacy' through the eyes of HR practitioners is limited.

The extensive work of Reichel, Brandl, Mayrhofer and Scheibmayr over the past decade has laid the groundwork for understanding the interplay of gender and legitimacy in the HR occupation. However, as noted above, these studies all utilise quantitative data to explore these issues. This is beneficial in evidencing that the phenomenon of gender impacting the legitimacy of the HR function and HR practitioners exists. However, it cannot go as far as to understand how this is experienced and perceived by those working within HR. As such, there is a potential space for qualitative research to explore these issues further and provide more of an understanding of the micro-level impacts this has on a day-to-day basis.

In addition to the literature discussed above, there are also a number of papers that, whilst not directly focusing on HR, gender and legitimacy, still provide insights into how these aspects may interplay. There are numerous pieces of literature exploring the feminisation of particular occupations and professions that note HR as one such occupation (England & Boyer, 2009; Bolton

& Muzio, 2008; Dipboye et al., 1987). The study previously noted, conducted by Bolton and Muzio (2008), researches the feminisation of several professions, including management. Whilst the paper focuses on management as a broader term; it highlights HRM as a component of management that is traditionally associated with 'feminine skills' such as communication, empathy and 'people skills'. The paper states that 'as expected' females are increasingly dominating the HR profession (Bolton & Muzio, 2008). This highlights that although the literature regarding HR, gendered perceptions, and gender segregation are minimal, the idea that HR is a potentially 'feminised' space within management appears to be acknowledged.

Within research on the skills involved in HR and how these are adapting, there is also a consideration as to the potential influence of gender. The study by Hong (2016) explores the gender discourse within the HR occupation with regards to 'soft skills' and 'hard numbers'. As discussed, the HR occupation has undergone significant shifts over the years, and the necessary skills are said to be still changing. Hong (2016) discusses that the HR occupation has often been viewed as the 'softer' side of management, and subsequently, soft skills have often been emphasised as important for those in the role. However, with the rise of 'big data' and the increasing need for quantitative skills, this has potentially created a challenge, or arguably an opportunity, for the HR occupation whereby both soft or so-called 'feminine' skills and numerical/hard or so-called 'masculine' skills are required.

Finally, studies such as Kinsey (2012) and Syrigou (2018) have explored the legitimacy of the HR profession with a broader focus but noted gender as a potential contributing factor. Kinsey (2012) conducted qualitative research with HR practitioners in UK local government, exploring the ways in which HR practitioners discursively construct their identity. This research did not set out with a gendered lens, but the experiences of many female HR practitioners noted gendered discourses as a perceived influence on their identity as HR practitioners. Such papers further emphasise the importance of taking a gender-sensitive approach to exploring the occupation and understanding perceptions of legitimacy.

It is also interesting to note that an acknowledgement of the 'feminisation' of HR is not restricted to academic research and has been noted, albeit infrequently, in practitioner literature. For example, the front page of the People Management magazine (produced by the CIPD) in

September 2017 posed the question 'does HR have a problem with men?'. Similarly, an article published in HR magazine in May 2016 was titled 'how can we attract more men into HR?' (HR Magazine, 2016). Both articles took the approach of discussing pervasive stereotypes in HR, with it being perceived as a 'soft' side of management which, therefore, attracted more women than men to the occupation. What was apparent from both practitioner articles was that the female concentration in HR was viewed as a problem that needed a solution. This solution in both articles was predominantly that the so-called 'feminine' stereotypes of HR need to be eradicated and emphasis on the 'management', 'commercial', 'analytical' and 'economic success' aspects of HR should be furthered in order to attract men to the function. The stance that practitioner literature has taken with regards to the feminisation of HR has repercussions on the occupation. By positing that HR will attract more men by becoming more 'commercial', this perpetuates gendered views that men are naturally associated with these characteristics. As noted, both these articles viewed the lack of men in HR as a negative and the association of HR with soft skills as a negative. This does, therefore, also pose the risk of downplaying any welfare element to the HR occupation.

2.8 Gaps and research aims

Utilising the extant literature, this chapter has considered the debates, discourses and conceptualisations in legitimacy, professionalisation, gender, and HR research. This chapter has largely focused on the following ideas; that organisations are inherently gendered contexts, that perceptions of legitimacy and professions contain gendered underpinnings and assumptions, and that the HR occupation is a valuable context to explore these issues due to the ongoing focus on its legitimacy and the evident gender imbalance in the occupation. This thread establishes the analytical path that will be taken to achieve the aims of this research.

The dominant conceptualisations of the notion of legitimacy and how this has evolved were discussed and related to the rhetoric on the HR occupation. The subjectivity of legitimacy has been emphasised with regard to the HR occupation, with existing research indicating that there is a lack of consensus in both academic and practitioner communities regarding how the legitimacy of HR is understood. This demonstrates the importance of research that explores individual perceptions of legitimacy in HR, as opposed to using proxies such as board membership and involvement in strategy to mean legitimacy, as it provides a micro-level understanding as to how HR practitioners see and experience their own legitimacy and how this shapes the occupation.

The framework of Acker's (1990) gendered organisation and related literature has been reviewed to analyse the perceived gender neutrality of organisations and organisational concepts. Acker's notion that organisations are inherently within the male domain provides a framework for exploring the gendered assumptions within the notions of occupational legitimacy and professionalisation. Witz's (1992) framework of patriarchy and professions has also been explored to review our existing understanding of the differences in professionalisation in feminised occupations. As discussed, it has widely been accepted that female-dominated and 'feminised' occupations have historically struggled with professionalisation compared to male-dominated occupations. However, Witz and other authors posit that 'feminised' occupations may have a greater desire for professionalisation and, as a result, engage in strategies to both include their occupations in the dominant group and demarcate their occupation from others. This proposes a potential challenge for HR, and research has been critical of the idea that HR is fully integrated with senior levels and decision making, which may lead HR to struggle to be included within the dominant occupational groups. Furthermore, management positions, such as line managers, often engage in HR activities which presents difficulties for HR in demarcating their occupation and tasks from others. Therefore, this calls for further research on how HR practitioners perceive efforts to professionalise their occupation. As discussed within this chapter, a number of studies have explored the legitimacy of HR, but conducting these studies with a gender-sensitive approach has been somewhat limited.

The minimal existing research on the legitimacy of HR and the interplay with gender highlights the importance of further studies on this topic. As discussed, Brandl et al. and Reichel et al. have conducted extensive quantitative research on gender, HR, and legitimacy. This quantitative research demonstrates that links between gender and HR exist. However, it lacks the ability to explore this on a more micro-level and understand if and how this shapes HR practitioners' perceptions, experiences, and understandings.

This literature review shows that there are potentially underlying but unexplored gendered assumptions underpinning organisational concepts such as legitimacy and professionalisation that have currently been subject to minimal research in the HR occupation. Currently, there is a lack of understanding as to how the HR occupation, and those working within it, are impacted by being a feminised function with arguably inherently masculine organisations. Given the gender

concentration within the HR occupation and the significant attention surrounding the legitimacy of the occupation in academia and industry, it is important to explore how these two issues interplay. The struggle for legitimacy in HR has been noted since its inception and has been subject to numerous prescriptive literature, but as these studies are largely missing a gender-sensitive approach, there is a gap in our understanding as to how gender may be impacting perceptions of HR legitimacy and professionalisation.

As highlighted above, the literature review chapter has identified gaps within our existing understanding of gender and legitimacy within the HR occupation. It is through the identification of these gaps that the research questions were considered. The intent with regards to the research questions was to ensure they were broad enough to retain an open position to the findings, in line with the philosophical standpoint of the thesis. As discussed in the chapter above, much of the existing research on gender and legitimacy in HR takes a macro-level approach. As such, it was important for this research to take into consideration the individual perceptions and experiences of those working within the HR occupation. It was through this standpoint that the second research question of the thesis was developed. The first research question of the thesis looks at the general understanding of the occupation itself by those who work within it. This question also seeks to explore how concepts of legitimacy, this referring to how HR practitioners understand the legitimacy of the occupation, and gender may shape this understanding. The two research questions detailed are considered distinct questions; however, it is acknowledged that the second question will likely feed into the broader first question.

How do the concepts of legitimacy and gender shape understanding of the HR occupation?

In what ways are the perceptions and lived experiences of HR practitioners shaped by legitimacy and gender?

The forthcoming chapter explores the philosophical debates and underpinnings of this research. The chapter then provides a detailed account of the method adopted to operationalise the above research questions. This chapter details the research strategies, the research sites, the analytical approach and finally, the limitations and challenges of the method.

CHAPTER THREE – METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter identified that the rhetoric surrounding the value of HR as a profession and organisational function has been longstanding. There have been many attempts in academic and practitioner literature to understand the reasons behind this and also to suggest approaches to improve the legitimacy of HR. In reviewing the extant literature, it has also been identified that perceptions of HR are inherently socially constructed, and that gendering may play a part in this. Whilst the previous chapter has shed light on many of these issues, there remains a lack of clear understanding as to how the perceptions of and experiences of HR are shaped by notions of legitimacy and gender and how this subsequently shapes their understanding of the occupation. As discussed above, this lack of understanding comes partly from the fact that much of the previous research on perceptions of HR, particularly linking to notions of gender, has been quantitative. This quantitative research tries and measures these perceptions and their extent but does not go as far as to show how these perceptions have been constructed and how they shape the understanding of the occupation. As noted above, the research questions consider how concepts of legitimacy and gender shape understanding of the HR occupation and in what ways are the perceptions and lived experiences of HR practitioners shaped by legitimacy and gender.

As the research questions focus on subjective perceptions, the extent to which these questions can be answered by the extant literature is limited. As such, this research carries out a qualitative methodology to further understand these issues. This chapter details the philosophical stance of the research as well as the methods chosen.

The chapter will begin by considering the philosophical standpoints of the existing research before moving on to the ontological and epistemological position of this thesis. The chapter will then go on to detail the research design and the rationale for adopting this design. The process of data collection will then be covered, including the challenges that were encountered. Finally, the chapter will conclude by detailing the data analysis approach.

3.2 RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY

The research questions indicate and, in part, shape the ontological and epistemological standpoints of this research. Such philosophical standpoints then influence the chosen methods for data collection and analysis. Philosophical standpoints can be expressed through a research paradigm. Lincoln and Guba (2013) define a paradigm as 'comprised of and determined by the research ontology, epistemology and methodology' (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 107).

The ontology, how we understand the nature of reality, and the epistemology, how we understand what constitutes knowledge, are inherently shaped by the questions this research seeks to answer, and this subsequently shapes the chosen methods. Various schools of thought have been developed, including post-positivism, interpretivism, and constructionism (Saunders, 2014). The post-positivist paradigm accepts that truth and universal laws exist, but the discovery of these truths is near impossible. Those adopting this paradigm expect to progress closer to the truth while recognising that discoveries are only partial segments or approximations of truth. The interpretive paradigm, which this research is based upon, differs significantly from the post-positivist paradigm by aiming to develop an understanding of the social world, which is perceived to be naturally influenced by subjective experiences. In the interpretive paradigm, knowledge is relative to particular circumstances, whether these be historical or cultural. Finally, the constructionist paradigm is conceptualised as having aspects of both the post-positivist and interpretivist paradigms (Levers, 2013). The constructionist paradigm adopts a stance of ontological critical realism with epistemological subjectivism. The interaction of the interpreter and those being interpreted is how meaning is created (Crotty, 1998).

Prior to outlining the ontological and epistemological standpoints of this research, it is worthwhile to consider the philosophical positions of the extant research from which this thesis developed its key questions. Understanding the philosophical standpoints of existing research in the fields of legitimacy, HRM, and gender are of importance as the way in which the research has been approached has shaped the current understanding available of the phenomena. As addressed in Chapter Two, the foundations of this research rest on the extant literature on legitimacy and professionalisation, gender in organisations, and HRM.

It was addressed in Chapter Two that much of the legitimacy and professionalisation research comes from an essentialist viewpoint. The trait and stages theories of professionalisation and the property theory of legitimacy all take the stance that legitimacy and professionalisation are objective concepts that can be clearly measured or documented in stages. This positivist stance restricts legitimacy and professionalisation to an objective concept that is independent of social structures and social actors. Suddaby et al. posit that 'researchers are adopting an essentialist view of a construct that is inherently phenomenological' (Suddaby et al., 2017, p. 458) and that this approach reduces legitimacy to an abstract construct that merely explains other organisational outcomes rather than a phenomenon in its own right. The positivist viewpoint of much of the research in this field also sheds light on why gender has previously been somewhat overlooked in debates on legitimacy and professionalisation. If legitimacy and professionalisation are viewed independently of social actors, this provides little space to consider the ways in which the gender of those engaging with these concepts may have an influence. However, as addressed in Chapter Two, there is a stream of research viewing legitimacy and professionalisation as socially constructed concepts, thus arguing that a positivist stance cannot fully explain the phenomena. This approach, particularly in exploring legitimacy-as-perception, is the focus of this research.

Adopting a gender-sensitive approach to exploring issues of legitimacy and professionalisation in HR indicates a certain philosophical standpoint. Research on gender in organisations differs in that qualitative, post-positivist research has been well established, and positivist, quantitative research is often neglected on the grounds of over-generalisation and marginalising women's voices. This is shown in that the core gender in organisations research discussed in Chapter Two emphasises the socially constructed nature of gender, occupational legitimacy, and professionalisation. However, this is not to dismiss the value of positivist quantitative research in this field, as positivist research can identify the extent of many of the issues with regard to gender and organisations. As addressed in Chapter Two, extant quantitative research highlights, for example, the female concentration in HR and the detrimental effect this has on legitimacy (Reichel et al., 2010; 2019), thus providing a foundation for this research.

The philosophical standpoints taken when researching the HR occupation itself have been subject to debate (Watson, 2004; Bonache & Festing, 2020). Much of the US mainstream literature has been dominated by a positivist perspective, in which HRM operates independently of the actors

carrying it out or experiencing it. HRM literature is replete with criteria argued to make HR more effective and causal relationships between practice and outcome. The discussion in Chapter Two surrounding the hegemony of strategic HR in academia and practice is just one example of this. Nevertheless, interpretivism is present in HRM research, and this stream of research has been well established. It can be argued that the early work of Legge (1978) was the catalyst for this in that it recognised the importance of studying the HR occupation from a social science perspective. The interpretivist HRM research places more emphasis on the interdependence of social actors and the enactment of HRM practice. This stream of research notes the importance of socially constructed aspects in understanding the formation of HR practice, in that 'it is impossible to see how this can be done without relating HRM to broader patterns of culture, power and inequality' (Watson 2004, p. 450).

It is through both the researcher's personal ontological and epistemological beliefs and consideration as to how best the research questions can be answered that an interpretivist stance is taken. The ontological standpoint is relativist in nature in the sense that ‘there is no single, tangible reality, instead there are only the complex, multiple realities of the individual’ (Flick, 2015). This ontological stance emphasises the importance of acknowledging multiple realities and also that these realities are embedded within a certain context. The focus on the inextricable interplay between social structures and social actors and their activities is key to this research. As emphasised within Chapter Two, organisational and professional structures are inherently shaped by actors and their actions within them and vice versa; thus, this philosophical standpoint that they cannot be viewed independently of one another is important. With regard to the epistemological standpoint of the interpretivist paradigm, it is understood that knowledge is created through the interaction between ‘known and knower’ (Pickard, 2007). As addressed previously, the interpretivist paradigm considers context importance in terms of both ontology and epistemology. Positivist research is often critiqued for being ahistorical, as such the interpretivist paradigm aligns more so with this research and the historical context it provides. Whilst, historical research was not a core method of this research, it is well documented in Chapter Two that the origins of HR and how the occupation has progressed over the past century have arguably shaped the current occupation and the associated perceptions of it. It is, therefore, important not to neglect the historical context when understanding the perceptions of HR in the current day.

As noted, adopting a stance of interpretivism does not mean that understandings of reality are entirely reduced to the interpretations and meanings of social actors. However, these interpretations are still seen as important in shaping this understanding.

Key to the research aims of this study, and key to the interpretivist paradigm, is the concept of *Verstehen*, a concept most notably used by Weber (1949). *Verstehen* is typically translated as 'understanding' and, in qualitative research, refers to understanding the 'internal logic of human action' (Johnson & Duberly, 2000, p. 34). *Verstehen* can be categorised into multiple viewpoints. Weber distinguishes between two types of *Verstehen*. 'Direct observational understanding' is the first type which refers to understanding' behaviour'; this 'behaviour' can be 'thin', 'surface' or 'descriptive'. The second type refers to 'explanatory understanding', which is in reference to understanding the meaning that is behind a behaviour. Lee (1991) similarly breaks down *Verstehen* into three levels of understanding. First level understanding refers to the social actors themselves and the common sense and meanings created on a day-to-day basis which in turn leads to the behaviour enacted in social institutions. Second level understanding refers to how the researcher interprets the everyday understanding of actors. The third level of understanding also relates to the researcher, although this level refers to the understanding the researcher creates and subsequently tests. Whilst Lee (1991) uses the term 'test' for the third level of understanding, for this research, the third level of understanding does not refer to theory testing or hypotheses but rather the consideration of findings in relation to the key concepts set out within Chapter Two. In this sense, the research focuses more on theory building than theory testing (George & Bennett, 2005). These levels of understanding provide a clear map of the data collection and analysis process of this research. During data collection, the participants interviewed directly shared their perceptions and experiences, thus relating to the first level of understanding.

Through the researcher's analysis, the second level of understanding is addressed via the interpretation of participant responses. Finally, the third level of understanding is developed by considering these interpretations alongside the existing literature. These later stages of analysis and consideration alongside the literature can also be seen as Weber's explanatory understanding.

3.3 RIGOUR IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

It is recognised that demonstrating how reliability and validity are built into the research process (Seale and Silverman, 1997) can be more challenging in qualitative research than in quantitative. The methodological concepts of reliability and validity are of importance as these terms are often used to justify the academic rigour of research. Whilst these concepts have been subject to numerous definitions; reliability is broadly taken to mean the stability of findings and validity of the truthfulness of findings (Altheide & Johnson, 1994). However, the concepts of reliability and validity are typically seen as having more relevance to quantitative research, and the importance of these concepts for qualitative studies is questioned when a level of subjectivity and creativity is needed (Golafshani, 2003; Noble & Smith, 2015; Whittmore et al., 2001). As this research is looking at perceptions and lived experiences of those within the HR occupation, the data is essentially what the participant says it is; therefore, to demonstrate reliability and validity in the same way as quantitative research would not be possible. As such, we prefer to use the concepts detailed by (Noble & Smith, 2015) of 'truth value', 'consistency' and 'applicability'. Truth value can be seen as an alternative term to validity and one which recognises multiple realities and the inherent bias in qualitative research whilst also emphasising the importance of clearly and accurately portraying participant responses. Consistency, rather than reliability, refers to the way in which the methods have been used and the transparency of the researcher's decisions. Finally, applicability, which can be viewed as an alternative to generalisability, shows that some consideration is given as to whether the findings may apply to other settings.

There are a number of ways in which truth value can be demonstrated within qualitative research and this study in particular. This research utilised semi-structured, recorded interviews. This allowed for the repeated return to interviews during and after analysis to ensure that participant responses were being portrayed accurately. This research also placed the participant voices centrally by using significant amounts of verbatim quotes, thus reducing the risk of manipulating the participant's intended meaning. Data saturation is one key way by which truthfulness can be considered. O'Reilly and Parker (2013) refer to data saturation as a point whereby enough data have been collected to detail and range of experiences but that the amount of data is not so great that it becomes repetitious. By this definition, the sample size of this research does reach a level of saturation. Whilst the research does not necessarily reach saturation at the level of individual

quotes, as the coding process developed from primary to secondary to tertiary coding, there are multiple, clear examples of the same concepts. However, this is not to discard any 'outliers' or 'divergent views' as I would prefer to refer to them from the research. Whilst there may be a rationale for excluding outliers in quantitative, statistical research, divergent views in qualitative research cannot and should not be ignored. Bazeley (2009) posits that divergent views should not only be incorporated into theorising but may also provide indications as to the phenomena in the wider sample. As such, differing perceptions and experiences are incorporated into the coding process and are viewed as an area of interest whereby the potential reasons for the difference can be considered.

As noted above, consistency concerns the researcher themselves and the way in which they went about their methods and analysis. A level of consistency can be demonstrated within this research by keeping an audit trail. Throughout the coding process, I ensured I was taking memos and providing a rationale as to why I coded something the way I did. This provides a paper trail as to my thought process during coding.

With transferability generally seen as a focus for quantitative research, this is not necessarily a primary aim of this study. However, Noble and Smith (2015) encourage considering the applicability of the research to other settings. It is not unreasonable to expect that some findings may be applicable to others in the HR occupation. As discussed above, this research has reached a level of saturation in terms of broader findings which demonstrates that some perceptions are potentially indicative of a wider view in HR.

3.4 Reflexivity

In consideration of these ontological and epistemological standpoints, it is also important to have an awareness of the ways in which my personal views, knowledge, and biases may shape the research. It can be argued that my position as researcher has an impact on the data collection and analysis process. With regards to this, the concept of positional reflexivity is useful methodologically. Positional reflexivity refers to the acknowledgement of the ways in which a researcher's biography, experiences, and positioning shapes the research process (Corlett & Mavin, 2018). Maintaining the position of an unbiased, objective researcher is challenging, and I am aware that complete objectivity may not have been achieved throughout the research process. Whilst I

do not have extensive industry experience within HR, my brief experience as a White British woman working within the occupation initially generated my interest in the research topic.

My interest in this research developed during my time studying HR and my short experience working within an HR function. During 2015 I spent four months interning within the Organisational Design and Change team in the HR Centre of Excellence at a global oil and gas company. Prior to this experience, the extent of my understanding of HR was limited to one university module. The internship focused on an aspect that the team was looking to focus on more in the coming years; strategic workforce planning.

It is recognised that this exposure to HR was limited to a particular context, this being a global private organisation with a large and seemingly well-established HR function. Therefore, this experience naturally gave me a perception of HR that is likely very different from other organisations. However, it was this short experience in HR that, in part, led to my interest in how the gender composition of HR may shape the occupation. In keeping with the gender composition of HR in the UK, the significant majority of those in the HR Centre of Excellence I was based in were women. During my time at the organisation, I chose to attend sessions on gender diversity in the oil and gas industry. These were, perhaps expectedly, focused on the lack of women in engineering roles and how this could be addressed. It was through attending these sessions that it occurred to me that the lack of gender diversity in the HR function did not seem to be something that was acknowledged.

In 2016 I then went on to complete a Master's degree in HRM and chose to focus my dissertation on the gender composition in HR. This research focused on the skills perceived to be needed for a career in HR and the ways in which these skills were gendered and devalued. From the small sample of both HR and Management postgraduate students that were interviewed as part of the research, it was evident that HR was seen to be a 'feminised' occupation and that it was also viewed as a lower status and less respected function than many other areas of management. It was, therefore, this study that partly furthered my view that this topic was worthy of investigation.

As such, it can be argued that my own views may have shaped the research and data collection process. This is not to argue that complete objectivity is the desired position for myself as a researcher, and my, albeit brief, previous experiences in HR have provided a rapport with some

interviewees that may not otherwise have emerged. It is, however, important to ensure mechanisms are in place to reduce the extent to which my personal position would yield different results from both data collection and analysis. Therefore, it is only through my awareness of my position and ongoing attempts at self-reflexivity that this impact can be reduced.

How I portrayed myself was important to the way in which the interviews were undertaken. Berger (2015) notes that researchers are able to position themselves in different ways; examples of this can be positioning oneself as an expert in the topic or positioning oneself as a novice seeking to learn about the topic. With the interviewees, I largely positioned myself as simply wanting to learn about their perceptions and experiences, given that they have direct experience of the topics being discussed. For the majority of interviews, I experienced no significant issues in maintaining this position. There were, however, a few interviewees that asked directly for my opinions on a particular topic or asked whether I had previously worked in HR or was planning to in the future. Almost all of these conversations happened once the interview had been completed; therefore, this did not have an impact on interviewee responses. However, it is important to be aware that interviewees likely form assumptions about the researcher prior to and during being interviewed, which may shape responses (Wickins and Crossley, 2016). The only other occasions where my position may have been questioned was when a small number of interviewees commented that their views 'may not be of much help' to the research or, particularly with questions surrounding how they perceived strategic HR, that they might not have the 'correct answer' or the 'academic answer'. When these situations occurred, I ensured that the positioning of myself wanting to learn from those with practical experience in HR was re-emphasised.

3.5 Research design

In the same way, that the research questions shape the ontological and epistemological standpoints of this research, the questions also shape the research design. The research design can be seen as a framework that links the research questions to the data and to the conclusions (White, 2009). The research design process can be an iterative process, which was the case with this thesis. The research questions and the data collection process were progressively refined throughout.

As previously emphasised, a key aspect of the interpretivist research philosophy is considering the context in which realities and knowledge are created. This aligns with this research and the

historical aspect that is considered. As discussed in Chapter Two, current research on the legitimacy of the HR occupation continues to make reference to the past focus and perceptions of the occupation. It is, therefore, deemed that to fully understand the issues surrounding gender, legitimacy, and professionalisation in HR, a study on the occupation's past was needed. This was done by reviewing the historical data from the monthly publications of the professional body of HR, the CIPD (the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development).

The historical publications are listed under the CIPD's former titles: the Central Association of Welfare Workers (1917-1919), the Welfare Workers' Institute (1919-1924), the Institute of Industrial Welfare Workers (1924-1931), the Institute of Labour Management (1931-1946) and the Institute of Personnel Management (1946-1994). These publications are sourced from the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick.

Whilst there are a number of sources which may have relevance, for the scope and time constraints of this research, the monthly publications from the professional body were used. These date from 1920 to the current day, with each annual book containing 12 monthly publications. Search terms were inputted into the archival catalogue to locate specific monthly articles that may be of use. These search terms incorporated the key areas of interest for this research; examples include but are not limited to; status, legitimacy, position, value, gender, men, women, qualifications, skill, power, and authority. These sources were then reviewed, and photographs of articles of interest were taken. A spreadsheet was also utilised to manage which documents had been reviewed and whether they provided content of value to this research. As discussed, the rationale for using this supplementary data is to be able to set the HR occupation in its historical context and to explore whether any of the challenges to the function's legitimacy are ongoing or have ebbed and flowed with changes to the occupation. This process was valuable in considering the historical context of HR and could be a research direction on its own. However, for this research, it was used as a preliminary process to the main empirical work of interviews with HR practitioners themselves.

With consideration of the research aims, these being to understand how the legitimacy and professionalisation of HR are conceptualised, whether these are gendered, and also how these conceptualisations shape HR practitioners' understandings of their occupation, it was determined that interviews would be most conducive in answering these aims. The purpose of these interviews

was to gain an in-depth understanding of HR practitioners' perceptions and lived experiences. The research intended to remain open to interviewee views on the topics; therefore, a semi-structured approach was utilised. Saunders (2014) argues that semi-structured interviews, which allow flexibility, are particularly important when exploring social phenomena and the meanings individuals attach to them. As such, there were broad topics to address within the interviews, but I refrained from adhering to specific, structured questions. This allowed participants to discuss aspects they felt most interested in and allowed me, as the researcher, to slightly guide the interview when required and to ask follow-up questions when further clarification or information was needed. This process of interviewing and listening to HR practitioners' perceptions and lived experiences can be seen as the first level of *Verstehen*.

The interviews aimed to largely give participants free rein in discussing the issues they believe most pertinent to the perceptions and legitimacy of HR. The interview guide was not strictly adhered to, and when participants mentioned something of potential interest, this was followed up on, regardless of whether the topic was present in the interview guide. However, it cannot be said that the interviews were entirely open-ended, as the initial searches of literature led the questioning to focus on certain aspects. Follow-up questions and prompts were also included in the interview guide to assist the research; whether these were used or not was very much dependent on the participant and how forthcoming they were in their responses. As the interviews progressed, it was also possible to gain an idea of which questions tended to elicit more of a response and learn which questions were potentially more relevant for participants from certain sectors or a certain organisational size. Whilst the general interview topics have remained the same throughout, the experience of interviewing led to some questions being altered during the process, which will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

3.6 Research sites

As noted, the semi-structured interviews were conducted with HR practitioners. It is recognised that this research could have taken the approach of interviewing HR practitioners within a specific organisation, undertaken a case study approach with multiple organisations, or narrowed down the research sites to a specific sector or industry. However, with the nature of this research, trying to gain an understanding of the occupation itself, it was determined that interviewing HR

practitioners from a wide range of organisations and sectors was beneficial. It is important to note the challenges that come with this, primarily that what is viewed as a

'HR role' may differ across organisations. Whilst this could be a drawback, it also gave the chance to understand the extent to which the HR occupation has a clear identity and also gave the opportunity to identify findings that may be specific to a certain sector, organisational size, or industry. As such, the HR practitioners interviewed are from numerous organisations in various sectors, including; higher education, charities, manufacturing, financial services, transportation and retail.

3.7 Research strategies: Interviewee selection

The decision to interview HR practitioners from a wide range of organisations means that there was a relatively large pool of potential participants. Nevertheless, there were still considerations to be made regarding the type of HR roles to be incorporated and the level of seniority to be incorporated in the interviews. The decision as to which HR seniority level of participants to include within the interviews posed challenges as there is the potential for significant differences in the perceptions of the HR function between an entry-level HR administrator and an HR director. In the initial stages of data collection, HR practitioners from varying seniority levels were contacted to participate. This ranged from HR assistants to HR directors. However, as the data collection process continued, it became apparent that certain interview questions were more appropriate for HR practitioners at mid to senior levels.

Questions surrounding strategic HR, HR's involvement in organisational decision making, and HR's interactions with management, perhaps to be expected, drew more in-depth responses from those at more senior levels. Whilst those at entry-level had valuable insights into the value of the HR function, it was apparent that the interview guide would need to be adapted if I continued to interview those in entry-level positions. As the aspects of strategic HR and HR's relationship with management are core to my research, it was deemed appropriate to continue to centre the interview guide around these topics. As such, whilst there was no conscious decision to begin interviewing only HR practitioners from a specific level of seniority, the majority of interviews going forward were conducted with HR business partners, HR managers, Heads of HR, and HR directors.

In total, 55 HR practitioners were interviewed from various organisations and sectors. As mentioned, the seniority levels of participants vary, but the majority are HR business partner level and above. The table below shows the breakdown of participants, including organisation size, the industry and sector in which they work, and their level of seniority. The table also provides context as to whether they progressed into HR from other careers and whether their entry to HR was an intentional path. The table below shows that 11 participants are male and 44 are female. This gender imbalance reflects the gender imbalance within HR itself and thus the responses to calls for participation. Participant age ranged widely from early 20s to 60s, as did tenure from the first year in HR to over 40 years in the occupation. The significant majority of those interviewed were White; again, this reflected those who responded to calls for participation. This also reflects the ethnicity segmentation in the HR occupation, with just 9% of the HR occupation in the UK being BAME (CIPD, 2021).

Interviewee code	Organisation	Private/Public/ Voluntary	Organisation size (no. of employees)	Gender	Specialist/ Generalist	Seniority	Career path into HR	Career portion in HR
1, female, entry level, HR generalist	Transportation 1	Private	Small	F	Generalist	Entry level	Conscious	Entire career
2, female, senior, HR specialist	Telecommunications 1	Private	Large	F	Specialist	Senior	Conscious	Entire career
3, female, freelance, HR specialist	Freelance 1	Private	Self Employed	F	Specialist	Freelance	Drifted	Part career
4, female, senior, HR generalist	Technology 1	Private	Medium	F	Generalist	Senior	Drifted	Part career
5, female, mid-level, HR generalist	Manufacturing 1	Private	Large	F	Generalist	Mid-level	Drifted	Part career
6, female, senior, HR generalist	Automotive 1	Private	Large	F	Generalist	Senior	Drifted	Part career
7, male, senior, HR generalist	Automotive 2	Private	Large	M	Generalist	Senior	Conscious	Entire career
8, female, senior, HR generalist	Charity 1	Voluntary	Medium	F	Generalist	Senior	Drifted	Entire career

9, female, mid-level, HR generalist	Higher Education 1	Public	Large	F	Generalist	Mid-level	Conscious	Entire career
10, female, entry level, HR generalist	Higher Education 1	Public	Large	F	Generalist	Entry level	Drifted	Part career
11, male, entry level, HR generalist	Charity 2	Voluntary	Large	M	Generalist	Entry level	Conscious/ drifted	Entire career [1]
12, female, senior, HR generalist	Charity 3	Voluntary	Large	F	Generalist	Senior	Conscious	Entire career
13, female, senior, HR specialist	Higher Education 2	Public	Large	F	Specialist	Senior	Drifted	Part career

14, female, mid-level, HR generalist	Automotive 3	Private	Large	F	Generalist	Mid-level	Conscious	Entire career
15, male, freelance, HR generalist	Freelance 2	Private	Self Employed	M	Generalist	Freelance	Conscious	Part career
16, female, mid-level, HR generalist	Legal 1	Voluntary	Large	F	Generalist	Mid-level	Drifted	Part career

[1] Organisation size (no. of employees): Small: >50 Medium: 50 – 249 Large: <250

Seniority: Entry level: HR assistant, HR administrator Mid-level: HR business partner, HR manager Senior: head of HR, HR director

17, female, mid-level, HR generalist	Legal 2	Voluntary	Large	F	Generalist	Mid-level	Conscious	Part career
18, female, mid-level, HR specialist	Emergency Services	Public	Large	F	Specialist	Mid-level	Conscious	Entire career
19, male, senior, HR generalist	Financial Services 1	Private	Medium	M	Generalist	Senior	Conscious	Part career
20, female, mid-level, HR specialist	Legal 3	Private	Large	F	Specialist	Mid-level	Conscious	Entire career
21, female, consultant, HR generalist	Freelance 3	Private	Self Employed	F	Generalist	Freelance	Conscious	Entire career
22, female, senior, HR generalist	Transport and Security	Private	Large	F	Generalist	Senior	Conscious	Part career
23, female, mid-level, HR generalist	Council	Public	Large	F	Generalist	Mid-level	Conscious	Entire career
24, female, senior, HR generalist	Transportation 2	Private	Large	F	Generalist	Senior	Conscious/ drifted	Part career
25, male, senior, HR generalist	Property 1	Private	Large	M	Generalist	Senior	Conscious	Part career
26, female, senior, HR generalist	Transportation 3	Private	Large	F	Generalist	Senior	Conscious	Part career
27, female, mid-level, HR generalist	Manufacturing 2	Private	Large	F	Generalist	Mid-level	Conscious	Entire career

28, male, senior, HR generalist	Financial Services 2	Private	Large	M	Generalist	Senior	Conscious	Part career

29, female, senior, HR generalist	Technology 2	Private	Medium	F	Generalist	Senior	Conscious	Part career
30, male, freelance, HR generalist	Freelance 4	Private	Self Employed	M	Generalist	Freelance	Conscious	Part career
31, female, freelance, HR specialist	Freelance 5	Private	Self Employed	F	Specialist	Freelance	Conscious	Part career
32, female, mid-level, HR generalist	Further Education	Private	Medium	F	Generalist	Mid-level	Drifted	Part career
33, female, senior, HR generalist	Financial Services 3	Private	Large	F	Generalist	Senior	Conscious	Entire career
34, female, mid-level, HR generalist	Property 2	Private	Medium	F	Generalist	Mid-level	Drifted	Part career
35, female, consultant, HR generalist	Freelance 6	Private	Self Employed	F	Generalist	Freelance	Conscious	Part career
36, male, mid-level, HR generalist	Retail	Private	Large	M	Generalist	Mid-level	Conscious	Entire career
37, female, mid-level, HR generalist	Transportation 4	Private	Large	F	Generalist	Mid-level	Drifted	Part career

38, female, mid-level, HR generalist	Manufacturing 3	Private	Medium	F	Generalist	Mid-level	Drifted	Part career
39, female, senior, HR generalist	Legal 4	Private	Small	F	Generalist	Senior	Conscious	Entire career
40, female, mid-level, HR generalist	Property 3	Private	Medium	F	Generalist	Mid-level	Drifted	Part career
41, female, mid-level, HR generalist	Charity 4	Voluntary	Large	F	Generalist	Mid-level	Drifted	Part career
42, female, mid-level, HR generalist	Higher Education 3	Voluntary	Large	F	Generalist	Mid-level	Conscious	Part career
43, female, consultant, HR generalist	Freelance 7	Private	Self Employed	F	Generalist	Freelance	Conscious	Part career

44, female, entry level, HR specialist	Utilities	Private	Large	F	Specialist	Entry level	Drifted	Part career
45, female, senior, HR generalist	Financial Services 4	Private	Large	F	Generalist	Senior	Conscious/ drifted	Part career
46, female, senior, HR generalist	Property	Private	Large	F	Generalist	Senior	Conscious	Part career
47, female, senior, HR generalist	Charity 5	Voluntary	Medium	F	Generalist	Senior	Conscious	Entire career

48, female, mid-level, HR generalist	Higher Education 2	Public	Large	F	Generalist	Mid-level	Conscious	Entire career
49, female, mid-level, HR generalist	Charity 6	Voluntary	Medium	F	Generalist	Mid-level	Drifted	Part career
50, female, mid-level, HR generalist	Automotive 5	Private	Large	F	Generalist	Mid-level	Drifted	Part career
51, female, senior, HR generalist	Financial Services 5	Private	Medium	F	Generalist	Senior	Conscious	Entire career
52, male, senior, HR generalist	Financial Services 1	Private	Medium	M	Generalist	Senior	Conscious	Entire career
53, male, Freelance, HR generalist	Freelance 8	Private	Self Employed	M	Generalist	Freelance	Conscious	Part career
54, male, Entry level, HR generalist	Charity 7	Voluntary	Large	M	Generalist	Entry level	Conscious	Entire career
55, female, mid-level, HR generalist	Legal 4	Private	Medium	F	Generalist	Mid-level	Drifted	Part career

3.8 Research strategies: Access

Prior to beginning this research, I was aware of a small number of HR networks that could potentially be utilised. This included formal networks, such as the CIPD, and more informal HR networks via social media. In the early stages of data collection, I posted a brief overview of the research on the members' forum of the CIPD. In addition to this, I was able to get a brief of the research and call for participation placed in the monthly newsletter for the Employers Network for Diversity and Inclusion. Both these approaches proved beneficial, and I was contacted by a number of HR practitioners expressing their interest in participating. The participants sourced this way often appeared to have a strong interest in the topic and, in turn, provided in-depth responses to questions. Whilst my awareness of these groups gave me an initial starting point for accessing participants, it became apparent from the first few interviews that snowball sampling would be a conducive way to move forward. Snowball sampling refers to the way in which identified members of the population are asked to identify other members and so on, thus leading to an ongoing sample (Naderifar et al., 2017).

As such, the significant majority of further participants were sourced from snowball sampling. At the end of each interview, I mentioned to participants that I was actively seeking more HR practitioners to be interviewed. This was also noted when I sent a follow-up thank you email after each interview. As a result, many participants recommended colleagues or contacts of theirs who may be interested in participating. The approach to this ranged from participants mentioning the name of a contact and suggesting I get in touch with them via LinkedIn to some participants actively putting me in touch with their contact and even attempting to help schedule an interview. Some interviewees also suggested different forums or groups where I may be able to source participants. A particularly beneficial example of this was when an interviewee suggested I request to join a specific HR group on Facebook and post about my research. After posting in this group, I was contacted by 17 HR practitioners expressing their interest in participating, 13 of which transpired into interviews.

A small number of personal networks were also utilised to gain further participants. These included previous colleagues and colleagues of friends and family. However, it is important to note the

drawbacks that may have come of this. Potter and Hepburn (2005) discuss how the way in which participants are recruited can significantly influence the interview process. In the case of my research, negotiating access with my networks was relatively simple. However, this did not necessarily mean that the participants had a particular interest in the research topic, which differed from the participants recruited through other methods. Building rapport with the participants from personal networks was also relatively easy due to having had previous contact or mutual connections with these interviewees. However, my experience was that these participants appeared more concerned about being of benefit to the study and giving the 'right information' than many other participants. I, therefore, had to be more conscious about emphasising my intent to seek their personal views and experiences, given that they were engaged in HR on a day-to-day basis.

3.9 Research strategies: Interview arrangement

Prior to the interviews, participants were emailed a document which provided a broad overview of the research aim, interview details (i.e. expected duration, location), interview themes, and intended research contribution for practitioners. The majority of participants scheduled an interview date/time after receiving this document. However, a small number requested an initial phone call to discuss their involvement further. These preliminary calls were all less than 10 minutes in duration, and an interview was scheduled after each one. A very small number of participants also requested a copy of the interview questions prior to the interview. When requested, the interview guide was emailed to participants, but the majority of participants did not see this in advance. The interview duration was between 30 minutes and 90 minutes, with most interviews lasting 1 hour in length. At least half of the interviews took place at the participant's place of work. A small number of interviews took place in public spaces, such as cafes, at the participant's request. Remote interviews were minimal during the early-mid stage of data collection. Online interviewing was intentionally kept to a minimum during these stages as, whilst conducting interviews online produced some benefits such as reducing commuting time and making the scheduling of interviewing simpler, there were significant drawbacks regarding rapport, subtle communication, and depth of responses (Irvine, 2011). However, as will be discussed further in this chapter, from mid-March 2020 onwards, all remaining interviews needed to be conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams, Zoom, phone, or Skype. The challenges that arose from this are detailed further in this chapter when discussing Covid-19 and data collection.

3.10 TRANSCRIPTIONS

With the exception of three participants who did not wish to be recorded, all other participants were audio-recorded for the entirety of the interview. These audio recordings were then transcribed verbatim by myself. This provided an additional opportunity to gain an overall picture of the interview prior to beginning the analysis. I also found the process of transcribing to be enlightening with regard to the interview style. When listening to the interviews, any issues with the interview technique became more apparent and could be worked on for future interviews. Whilst transcribing, it was clear that, for almost all interviews, the significant majority of the transcript was the interviewee speaking which was my aim and something the literature encourages (Roulston, 2010). However, when transcribing, issues such as moments where further clarification or follow-up questions should have been asked became more apparent. Interview transcriptions are verbatim with identification of the change of speaker. However, identification of pauses, hesitations and intonation was not deemed necessary since analysis is based on themes rather than discourse, meaning the same level of detail is not required (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For the three participants who did not wish to be recorded, notes were taken whilst the interview was being conducted. This presented significant challenges regarding the necessary speed of note-taking in order to capture the main aspects of the interviews. The result was that the general themes and perceptions from the interviews were largely able to be captured, but there are no direct quotes from these three interviews.

3.11 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As with any research involving working with people, there are ethical considerations. As noted, prior to the interviews, participants were emailed a document which provided a broad overview of the research aim, interview details (i.e., expected duration, location), interview themes, and intended research contribution for practitioners. A consent form was then provided as a hard copy (if the interview was face-to-face), and the participant had time to go through this and provide written consent. Participants were also given the option to only consent to certain aspects, for example, consent to being interviewed, but not consent to be audio recorded. For the later interviews that were conducted remotely, the consent form was sent via email at least 48hrs prior to the interview, and the interview went ahead once this had been received back from the participant.

The interviews were audio recorded, provided the participants gave written consent. Audio recordings were taken of the full interview on the researcher's Dictaphone. Following the interview, this was removed from the Dictaphone to the researcher's password-protected laptop. Once data collection had been completed, and interviews had been transcribed, the audio recordings were deleted from the researcher's laptop in line with University of Warwick guidelines.

The nature of the questions for the qualitative semi-structured interviews was also considered regarding any ethical issues. During the data collection process, I did not experience any significant issues concerning the interview questions, and the questions were not deemed, by the interviewees themselves, to have any ethical concerns. Throughout the interviewing process, no participants shared any concerns about particular questions, nor did any participants request to omit any questions. There was a case whereby a participant asked for a certain statement not to be directly quoted but stated that they had no issue with the 'gist' of the comment being included. To accommodate this request, a note was made during the transcription process not to quote that statement directly. Aside from this minor issue, the questions and responses did not appear to cause any ethical challenges.

3.12 TOOLS TESTING

The research design is an iterative process that is open to change and adaptation. There were few significant changes to the research design or research strategies in the early stages of data collection; however, there were a small number of minor adaptations. As there was no official pilot stage to this research, the initial interviews were used to consider how the interview guide worked and whether these initial interviews were producing areas of interest in light of the research questions. As discussed above, through these early interviews, it became apparent that the interview guide and topics of discussion were perhaps more appropriate for those in mid-level seniority and above. This then shaped which participants were recruited in future interviews. It was also determined that the wording of certain questions might not be as beneficial as it could be in garnering in-depth responses. As such, there were some minor changes to the interview guide following the initial interviews, mainly altering the wording of questions to be more open-ended to allow participants greater free reign in their understanding of the questions.

3.13 COVID-19 AND DATA COLLECTION

Whilst there were few significant changes or obstacles to data collection during the first year, the main challenge came from the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent changes to work. The Covid-19 pandemic significantly impacted many people's work and personal lives. The following section details how the Covid-19 pandemic influenced this research, the challenges that occurred, and the adaptations that needed to be made.

In an attempt to reduce the spread of Coronavirus, the UK government introduced a national lockdown on the 23rd of March 2020. Included within this lockdown was that all those who were able to work from home should do so, and there was also the closure of schools, non-essential shops, hospitality, and entertainment. As a result of these closures, many workers were placed on furlough for the coming months. This inevitably impacted the HR function whose representatives I had planned to continue interviewing. A study by People Management in April 2020 stated that most HR practitioners had avoided being furloughed at this point, with many of those in HR experiencing increased workload (Churchill, 2020). The exception to this has been some specialist functions within HR. The study conducted by People Management noted that those working with recruitment and those within learning and development had been furloughed at higher rates than more generalist HR practitioners. However, with the majority of HR practitioners still active in their roles and experiencing increased workload, this created challenges with the continuation of data collection. After having HR practitioners cancel their upcoming interviews and becoming aware of the intensity of work for HR at this time through personal and professional networks, it became apparent that continuing with data collection during this time was going to be challenging due to the unavailability of HR practitioners. There were also some ethical questions surrounding whether data collection should be continued during this time which is addressed further below.

In addition to the challenges of interview availability, conducting face-to-face interviews was no longer an option. Whilst platforms such as Skype, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams allow for virtual interviewing, considerations needed to be made as to how this may affect the rapport and flow of the interview. It is recognised that, in conducting interviews online, subtle cues such as body language, hesitations and slight changes in tone are often harder to pick up than in face-to-face interviewing (Irvine, 2011). It can also be more challenging to tell if a participant is pausing to think or has finished their response. To alleviate these challenges, I ensured that, assuming the

participant consented, both the interviewer and the interviewee had the video on throughout the interview duration. This enabled the interviewer to pick up on more subtle cues than with solely audio, but this also allowed the participant to see the interviewer, which may build rapport easier and allow participants to be more open in their responses (Salmons, 2011). The recording also presented some challenges with regard to interviewing online. Many platforms allow a meeting to be directly recorded through the platform, though this typically includes the video element. However, two participants interviewed online did not wish to be recorded directly through the calling platform due to privacy concerns. In both these cases, the interviewer recorded the audio of the call through a Dictaphone, though this did have a slightly detrimental effect on the quality of the recording. Recording challenges were also present due to the small number of participants requesting to be interviewed via phone rather than online. In these scenarios, the phone was placed on speaker, and the Dictaphone was used alongside for recording. This did have a somewhat detrimental impact on the audio quality, resulting in one interview, in particular, being unable to be transcribed verbatim.

As mentioned above, in addition to the practical challenges of carrying out data collection during this time, there were also ethical considerations to be made as to whether continuing data collection during this time was appropriate. As discussed, the pandemic placed a focus on certain jobs or so-called 'key roles' in society. For HR, it can be argued that the function was split into roles that were paramount in keeping organisations running during the pandemic and roles deemed unnecessary at the time. As mentioned above, key roles in HR were largely around senior levels, HR business partnering and administrative roles such as payroll. In contrast, certain specialist HR roles such as training and development, and in many sectors, recruitment were viewed as unnecessary during this time. This led to challenges and also ethical considerations around contacting HR practitioners to participate in the research. With the process of contacting HR practitioners ongoing at the start of the pandemic, ten practitioners had either already confirmed a day/time for an interview or were in the process of confirming this. In March, I was contacted by four of these participants to cancel or ask to reschedule due to their workload and priorities. Three of these participants asked whether it would be possible to conduct the interview on an evening or weekend due to a lack of time in the working week. Whilst this was not an issue for me, it posed questions as to whether placing additional work on participants was appropriate during this time. After considering these challenges, the decision was made to stay in contact with those who had already emailed to discuss

an interview whilst still emphasising that there was no pressure to participate at this time. However, there was no attempt to contact new participants at this time.

The questions being asked of participants were also a consideration at this time. Whilst the interview guide did not include particularly sensitive questions, I was aware that some questions could be viewed differently given the current circumstances. With a core element of the research being perceptions of the importance of HR, a significant amount of the interview guide is around this topic. During the Covid-19 pandemic, I interviewed both HR practitioners that were still working and also HR practitioners that had been furloughed until further notice. I was aware that questions surrounding the importance of the HR function, and particularly the importance of their HR role, may be particularly sensitive for those that had been furloughed. As such, I ensured that my questions were posed in a broad manner so that participants were free to discuss current perceptions and experiences if desired but also could easily focus their responses on the time period prior to Covid-19 lockdowns. I also gave consideration to the extent to which the current pandemic may shape participant responses. This consideration also contributed to the decision not to actively pursue more participants at this time.

3.14 Data analysis

As detailed in the ontological and epistemological considerations, the interviews' analysis was not to uncover the 'truth' about the HR function but to gain a further understanding of the perceptions and lived experiences of those working within the function. As such, whilst certain themes were identified as important to many participants, perceptions that deviated from others or appeared specific to certain participants were not overlooked or viewed as a challenge to the validity of findings.

Analysis of this research required any areas of interest to be identified, also establishing if these are present across the range of interview data or whether they are identifiable with a gender, industry or organisation size more than another. To establish this, interview data has been analysed thematically. Thematic analysis is a process used for encoding qualitative information (Boyatzis, 1998). This form of analysis goes beyond counting explicit words/phrases and focuses on identifying themes in the data (Guest et al., 2011). Themes refer to a pattern found within the information. These patterns should, at a minimum, describe and organise the possible observations

(Boyatzis, 1998). Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87) suggest six key steps to conducting thematic analysis:

1. Familiarising yourself with your data

2. Generating initial codes

3. Searching for themes

4. Reviewing themes

5. Defining and naming themes

6. Producing the report

My own experience in conducting thematic analysis follows these six steps with the exception of an added level of coding. As such, I would characterise my coding process as follows:

1. Familiarising yourself with your data

2. Generating primary codes

3. Generating secondary codes

4. Searching for tertiary codes (themes)

5. Reviewing themes

6. Defining and naming themes

7. Producing the report

Adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006).

As noted, the data was transcribed verbatim to aid in conducting a thematic analysis. It was deemed important to familiarise myself with the gist of the interviews prior to beginning the coding process. Each interview was, therefore, listened to in full at least once and read through as a transcript at least once. Before beginning the coding process, broad notes encapsulating the general

thoughts from the interview were also made separately. This allowed me to return to these notes and ensure the broad gist of the interview did not get lost in the coding process. Once familiarised with the data, NVivo CAQDAS software was used in a relatively simplistic manner to assist in coding the data. For this research, there was the option to code manually through a Microsoft Word document or physical copy of the transcript, or there was the option to utilise a program such as NVivo. I have had a small amount of training in NVivo; however, the primary rationale for using the program was to aid in organising the analysis. Using NVivo allowed me to have all transcripts, codes, and memos in one location, resulting in a more organised analysis process and allowing me to move between transcripts efficiently. Coding the data refers to identifying and recording passages of text that, in some sense, exemplify the same theoretical/descriptive idea (Gibbs, 2018). Coding can be thought of as 'a way of relating the data to ideas about the data' (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). As noted above, I underwent three levels of coding; primary, secondary, and tertiary. Primary coding involved identifying any aspects of text within the interviews that had the potential to answer the research question in some way. As a result, there were a very large number of primary-level codes created. Secondary coding then involved beginning to consider the relationships between the primary codes and refining the categories, resulting in a smaller number of secondary codes. Finally, tertiary coding (or themes) is the final level at which interpretation of the data becomes necessary, and the final overarching themes are identified. Thematic analysis is one of the most typical forms of analysis for qualitative research. There are clear benefits to adopting this approach, particularly the flexibility that thematic analysis allows. This means there is little restriction regarding what can be said about the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, it is important to recognise that the interpretative power is limited if theory is not appropriately used to back up claims made regarding the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The following chapters detail the themes and findings identified from the interviews.

This chapter has provided a detailed account of the methodology, which links the research questions to the findings. In outlining the philosophical standpoint taken by the researcher, the chapter provides a rationale for the research design and strategies utilised. The qualitative method of semi-structured interviews was then detailed, including how participants were sampled and accessed, how these interviews were set up, and any challenges in conducting these interviews. An overview was given as to how these interviews were analysed, and the following chapters will discuss the findings identified from these interviews.

Chapter Four - Legitimacy and Professionalisation

4.1 Introduction

The first of these two chapters is devoted to HR practitioners' constructions of HR legitimacy and professionalisation. The perceptions of HR practitioners are detailed to explore how those within the occupation understand the legitimacy of HR and how this impacts their day-to-day experiences working in the occupation. These accounts depict the views interviewees hold about their personal experiences of legitimacy in HR but also their perceptions about the occupation more broadly. This chapter is structured around key tensions which were identified in the interviews with HR practitioners. Participants addressed a number of topics which they perceived to be impacting the legitimacy and professionalisation of HR. Through the analysis of these interviews, it was evident that there is a conflict in understandings of legitimacy and that many HR practitioners themselves recognised this conflict. As such, the chapter first provides an overview of the broad findings with regards to legitimacy and is then structured around the following five tensions: caring or cost control, specialist expertise or broad business knowledge, strategic HR or operational work, HR professional or organisational champion, and occupational closure or commercial credibility. The aspects above considered together shed light on how the HR occupation is shaped by understandings of its legitimacy. The perceptions of HR practitioners on HR legitimacy and how these issues manifest in their day-to-day work have significance in shaping the occupation.

It is of value to understand how practitioners understand the legitimacy of HR both in and outside their respective organisations. This set of findings depicts broad practitioner views on the extent to which they personally see the HR occupation to have legitimacy in organisations. As detailed in Chapter Two, in academic literature, notions of legitimacy, credibility, and status are often conflated. Whilst a distinction has been made between these concepts in Chapter Two, the commonalities were also emphasised and throughout the interviews, most practitioners used legitimacy, credibility, and status in conversation interchangeably. As such, the following findings, whether referring to legitimacy, credibility, or status, are taken as understandings of legitimacy.

The following extracts demonstrate some of the explicit statements that have been made by participants. The majority of participants perceived the legitimacy or status, as many referred to it, as being very dependent on the organisation,

> I think that very, very much depends where you are. Here, I think, I think my voice is valued, which is great. I have worked places before where I've been told on arriving that they hate HR. – Female, Head of HR, Technology.

> I think it differs by organisation. So I've seen HR area- HR teams, that have been much less credible, and therefore, you know, they're not given much kudos. But I've seen it in some businesses, where the reverse has been true, you know, the finance function, the marketing function have been actually not that good. And therefore, they have not had much credibility. – Male, HR Director, Financial Services.

However, there did remain several participants that were direct at many points in stating that the function had what they would perceive as minimal legitimacy and status,

> I think HR has got quite a low status. They're seen as very transactional, they're seen as who you go to when there's a problem… and they're seen as almost an administrative function. – Female, Equality Manager, Emergency Services.

What was evident from the points in which participants spoke explicitly about legitimacy was that no HR practitioners perceived the occupation as having strong legitimacy. There were occasions when individuals felt that HR in their current organisation, or a previous organisation, held legitimacy. However, these were often presented as individual cases, and participants still seemed to acknowledge that it may not be a wider-held view of HR. What became evident during these conversations is that participants do not appear to have any expectation that HR will be highly valued, and when they work somewhere where it is, this is almost viewed as an aberration that they are grateful for. There were four interviewees that stated they were 'lucky' when referring to the idea that HR felt at least somewhat valued in their current organisation, indicating that the function being valued is perceived as a positive rather than a baseline expectation, as may be the case for more established, traditional professions.

The findings also detail HR practitioners' career paths within the HR occupation. HR practitioners discuss what drew them to working in HR, the ease of entering the HR occupation, and the knowledge and qualifications they had prior to entering HR. These findings provide a picture of HR as a career path and the process of becoming an HR practitioner. HR practitioners were asked the broad question, 'could you explain how you got into HR?' What became apparent from this question was that a large number of participants did not view HR as a vocation when they initially entered an HR role. Slightly under half of all participants expressed that going into HR was not a conscious career choice. The phrases 'drifted into HR' and 'by accident' were used numerous times in interviews. The following two extracts are from two female HR practitioners that entered the HR occupation through a manager recommending an HR role to them. For both practitioners, HR had not been a career they had previously considered nor had any exposure to,

> Oh, total accident [how I got into HR]. So I was working as an assistant manager and the general manager said to me 'oh, I need a personnel administrator, what do you think about doing that?' And I was like, 'what does that mean?' And then before I knew it, I was the personnel administrator. - Female, HR Manager, Higher Education 2

> It was kind of through chance really, through a role that I was doing in a previous job. And my manager at the time when the vacancy came up, he said to me, you know, have you thought about going for it, I think you'd be really suited to it. I took all the information away. If I'm honest, I didn't think I would fall into it but went for it and have loved it ever since. - Female, HR advisor, Higher Education.

For other participants, exposure to the HR role came through acquiring certain HR activities in their roles outside of the function. What is apparent in both of the following examples is that HR activities were seen as something that could be 'picked up' by other individuals in the workplace regardless of their knowledge and experience in the area,

> And after I graduated, I stayed on to create a bespoke role for the college [previous role] that looked at development and community partnership, but unfortunately, my manager at the time, unfortunately, went off with a very serious illness and her role really within the college itself was to be sort of the HR manager. Although that wasn't her title, that was a lot of her role as she dealt with employee engagement, student engagement, employee

> relations, kind of things like that. So I ended up picking all that up, not through an actual choice of my own, I just ended up picking it up because she wasn't very well. And because of that I became fascinated with it. - Female, HR Business Partner, Food Manufacturing.

> I hadn't even considered an HR career at all, I did a degree in English. And then ended up working in a contact centre for a large pub company, and kind of fell into doing a lot of HR queries. From pub managers that would call in asking for advice, they would get sent my way, I would then give them the first time response, then I picked up payroll queries as well. And while I was doing that, I thought, well, actually, maybe this is something I should consider doing. - Female, HR Business Partner, Further Education.

Just under half of those interviewed described their entry to HR as unintentional. However, for the remainder of the participants, entry to HR was a thought-out and intentional path. Interestingly, of those who spoke about HR being an intentional career, approximately half had worked in other occupations prior to entering HR. Whilst HR was a new career for these individuals and perceived by them as a career change, the majority spoke about utilising their experiences of working alongside HR,

> I understood HR more predominantly from a user perspective. My career background is 13 years public service. And I career changed with the explicit understanding of what I did and didn't want from HR function. So I felt that HR in the public sector was to back office, too far removed. And as a result of that, there was an awful lot of waste of public money, because managers were ineffective at dealing with absences and in public sector there's six months full pay. And so in terms of the commercial reality, I thought the HR in public service was fairly atrocious, really. And so quite clear about from a user perspective, what I found the perception, I suppose, within that culture was HR is useless. Yeah. And I was quite clear that I didn't think it needed to be. So I specifically wanted to find a job that helps the commerciality element to it. - Female, HR Business Partner, Legal 2.

> I moved into it from an operational role. I've been an operational manager in [company]. I've got experience of HR as a people manager. The job came up for HR business partner for the team I'd been an operational manager in, so I knew the business, I knew the job, and I knew the people I'd be supporting, and I just thought, ‘my goodness, that job's got my

> name on it'. I hadn't thought about HR at all. I applied for the job, got it, and stayed in HR ever since. - Female, HR Business Partner, Higher Education 3.

> I understood it [the HR role] from being on the receiving end and having the support or not having the support I needed to manage my team. - Female, HR Business Partner, Higher Education 3.

Whilst many HR practitioners did not perceive their entry to HR as a conscious decision, continuing in the occupation and progressing appeared to be a choice. These findings indicate that, despite attempting to present itself as a professional occupation, HR does not have the same level of calling or attraction from an early career that many traditional professions have. Although many practitioners discussed having little idea what HR entailed, having some level of prior exposure to the occupation appeared important in attracting them towards HR, whether this was picking up HR tasks or experiencing HR from a user perspective.

What was striking is that even though just over half of those I interviewed described their entry to HR as a conscious and intentional career choice, for many participants, there remained a perception that HR is not an occupation that is often an intentional choice for people,

> I don't think a lot of people do make a conscious decision to go into HR to be honest. Friends I have and peers, plenty of them said, you know, they did something else ended up in a HR department, and then you progress as a career decision. - Female, HR Director, Technology.

> Yeah, I think people fall into HR. I don't think they choose to, unless you're really interested. This is the thing, right? Unless you're really interested in ER yeah, that would only ever have developed in my mind years ago, because the trade union influence we had in the UK. And that's gone away. - Female, Change Partner, Automotive 3.

> So my daughter is 15, I know that she doesn't have any idea really what I do. And I'm pretty sure that even though we you know where we live is very middle class and they do lots of careers things. I'm pretty sure most the kids have absolutely no idea what HR is. So for somebody to choose to go into HR, to end up in HR, I don't know, it's probably a bit random. - Male, HR Director, Property.

When discussing the notion of people 'drifting' into HR, a number of participants noted that HR is not an occupation that is well known in society. This differs from the more established professions such as law or medicine, which are often viewed as career paths from a young age or a 'calling' for individuals. As a result, these participants viewed the likelihood of someone being aware of HR and viewing it as a career from a young age as unlikely.

The findings detailing practitioners' entry into the HR occupation have highlighted a number of aspects which can be seen to impact perceptions of legitimacy and professionalisation. A key aspect is that many of those interviewed working in the HR occupation do not view their entry into the occupation as intentional or strategic. Most practitioners also acknowledged that HR is not an occupation that is widely known or understood, particularly at the stage in which people enter the world of employment. The lack of visibility of HR as a career path emphasises why HR may be perceived as a 'semi-profession' or an 'aspiring profession' (Bolton & Muzio, 2008) that lacks the attention of more traditional professions. It is also recognised that there is a potentially circular nature regarding the legitimacy and visibility of professions. Whilst HR may struggle to establish legitimacy due to a lack of visibility, this lack of visibility may also be furthered due to the lack of status of HR. A study conducted on the nursing profession notes that a lack of visibility in society results in little appreciation for the work and creates struggles with power in organisations. However, it is also argued that a lack of value of the profession hinders the extent to which they can further their visibility (Mendes et al., 2011). Based on the findings in this research, regarding the lack of visibility of HR and the legitimacy struggles the occupation faces, it is not unreasonable to posit that the HR occupation may be facing a similar challenge.

4.2 Caring vs. cost control, or "Tea and sympathy"

One of the first key tensions identified in the interviews is surrounding perceptions of HR being a so-called 'soft' side of management and HR being a commercial function that works for the business. Throughout the conversations on the legitimacy of HR, one of the most frequently argued points is that HR comparatively struggles with its legitimacy due to the association with welfare. The notion of HR being a 'soft' side of management was mentioned in the majority of interviews. It was also apparent that, for most, this 'soft' side was not viewed as desirable and contributed to a devaluation of HR.

For many participants, there was an element of frustration around the perception of HR as the 'soft side of management'. A number of employees spoke about believing this not to be an accurate reflection of HR,

> You know, oh, it's the soft, fluffy stuff. Because actually, HR is anything but the fluffy stuff... anyone that enters HR, thinking that it's because they want to help people, and it's soft and fluffy, have definitely chosen the wrong career. - Female, HR Business Partner, Legal 2.

> Tea and sympathy is something I hear, but that's not and shouldn't be HR in a corporate organisation. – Female, Recruitment Specialist, Freelance.

Whilst almost all participants recognised that the 'soft' and 'tea and tissues' perception of HR was hindering the credibility, a small number of participants either shared that they enjoyed that aspect of their role or that they felt it was important that HR did not completely lose that element,

> That kind of stereotype of the tea and tissues, sometimes that's necessary. And I do like that part of my job, that welfare piece. – Female, HR Director, Technology.

> A lot of people see us as the 'have a cup of tea and a little chat' function, and we can be that at times. – Female, HR Business Partner, Food Manufacturing.

For participants, there appeared to be two primary reasons as to why they thought HR had a perception of being the 'soft' side of management, these being; the history of HRM as welfare and the fact that the function inherently deals with people. These two aspects were mentioned in numerous interviews when discussing the perception of HR as 'soft'.

The history of HR, stemming from welfare work, addressed in the previous chapters, is argued to have shaped current understandings of HR in the present day. This can be seen in the findings regarding the perception of HR as the 'soft' side of management. There were numerous references by participants regarding HR's inability to 'shake off' its history as welfare or that HR still retains a perception of the 'old school' personnel and welfare function.

The notion that HR simply 'deals with people' was also addressed numerous times with regard to the 'soft' perception of HR. Participants largely noted this in terms of there being a

misunderstanding as to why individuals enter the HR occupation. As can be seen below, these quotes emphasise that those working in HR do not see the function as merely 'helping people' but that this is often a perception for those about to enter the occupation,

> But we get a lot of psychology students. That are kind of interested in the individual and wanting to do what's best for them. Which can be okay but only if it comes with the understanding that you're partnering with the business. - Female, Recruitment Specialist, Freelance.

> So I had a graduate working for me… and he wanted to come into HR… And then we had a chat about what the purpose of HR was, and he was like "you're there to help employees." And I said, no, that's actually not the- you know, yes, we are there to make sure employees are treated fairly, but actually, the crux of it is that we do that, in order to mitigate the risk for the organisation. - Female, HR Business Partner, Automotive 5.

The two quotes above both address the idea that HR is working for and partnering with the organisation rather than for the individual employee. This was a clear tension addressed in several interviews, and for many practitioners, there was an understanding that whilst the employee focus is important, HR is ultimately doing a job for the organisation, and that should remain the priority,

> It's not nice and soft and fluffy, I don't do it because I love people. I don't do it because, you know- yes, I am a big fairness driver, a massive fairness driver personally, but ultimately, all of our purpose is to have a functioning, profitable business. - Female, HR Business Partner, Automotive 5.

> When I go to my HR networking meetings I find it incredibly frustrating because they all do talk about health and well-being, mental health in the workplace, coaching, the softer side of HR. And I just think that they're doing themselves a disservice, because I absolutely get why those things are important, because people are important and those things matter. But the harsh reality is that we are paid by the business, doing a job for the business, controlling cost. - Female, HR Director, Technology 2.

The first quote above demonstrates a somewhat unitarist view of HR, in that employee fairness matters but only to the extent to which it benefits and protects the organisation. As can be seen

from the second quote above, the interviewee perceives that focusing on the 'softer' side of HR is not to the benefit of HR practitioners, stating that they are doing themselves a disservice. This view was not unique to this participant, and the quotes below by other participants present the notion that the 'softer' side of HR is not beneficial to success in the HR role or for HR gaining credibility at senior levels,

> So I think, HR has a perception that it's all about being nice to people, which I don't believe. I think if you're successful in HR you actually don't like the people lens. - Female, Change Partner, Automotive 3.

> And, again, it varies from organisation to organisation, but there can be a perception that it is there for the kind of soft, cuddly, welfare type activities. I don't think in our organisation it's perceived that way, because that's how we approach it. But I think it can. I think, if HR isn't getting round the table at senior level, it's often because of that perception. That it's this employee welfare, wellbeing. - Female, HR Business Partner, Property 3.

Whilst there was a view from many participants that HR requires a balance of the employee-focused 'soft' approach and the business side commercial approach, it was clear from most participants that the latter provides more legitimacy for the function. The following quotes come from broader conversations around the legitimacy and professionalisation of HR. As can be seen, there is a perception from HR practitioners that to further the credibility and legitimacy of HR, there needs to be a move away from the welfare, caring, and 'soft' understandings of the occupation,

> I do feel quite strongly about moving away from any stigma of that sort of tea and tissues. – Female, HR Business Partner, Legal.

> We need to work out how to move the perception of HR from the personnel and tea and tissues, to something that is partnering and shaping. – Female, HR Manager, Higher Education.

The findings present a mixed view on whether HR practitioners enjoy the 'softer' side of the HR role, but what is evident is that very few HR practitioners perceive this 'softer' side to be beneficial for their personal or the function's legitimacy. This appears to have resulted in a majority view that a move away from the perception that HR is a caring function is desirable.

As addressed in Chapter One, it has been argued that the increased focus on HR's contribution to organisational performance, close alignment to organisational strategy, and pressure to demonstrate added value to the bottom line has marginalised the soft approach to HR (Legge, 2005; Delbridge & Keenoy, 2010). Whilst several participants in this research spoke about the importance of this soft HR, valuing the commitment, wellbeing, and development of employees, it is evident there is a tension as to whether this is seen to hinder their legitimacy, The following section details further participants views around legitimacy and the ways in which they perceive the legitimacy of HR can be enhanced.

4.3 Specialist expertise vs. broad business knowledge, or "the technical knowledge you can pick up"

In recent years, there is argued to have been an extensive focus on HR building its commercial acumen to the extent that commercial interests are said to now dominate the HR occupation (Keegan & Francis, 2010). The findings of this research support this existing literature and the accounts of HR practitioners illustrate that commerciality is perceived to be key to HR's legitimacy and credibility. With HR often viewed as a 'new management profession' and CIPD's focus on HR demonstrating its commercial ability in organisations, it is perhaps unsurprising that those in the occupation have embraced this rhetoric. However, there is a clear tension identified regarding whether, through embracing this rhetoric, the specialist expertise and language of HR are downplayed. From the accounts of participants, 'commerciality' appears to be a broad term which was used to cover numerous aspects such as business language, business acumen, and strategy involvement. The following section addresses both business language and business acumen.

An aspect that was often perceived to demonstrate a level of 'commerciality' was the language which HR practitioners adopt in the workplace, particularly when having conversations with those outside the function. A number of participants spoke about intentionally choosing not to speak to management in 'HR language' with the view that 'HR dialogue' did not seem to constitute credible business conversation in their organisation. For a small number of participants, 'HR language' referred simply to the terminology used. For instance, one participant spoke about using more general terms such as 'pay' as opposed to going into the specifics of different forms of compensation. However, for many participants, the 'language of HR' appeared to go deeper than just the terminology used. The need to downplay the 'softer' welfare side of things and emphasise

the commercial side was referenced by many HR practitioners. With a view that the so-called 'softer aspects' of business are often seen to be devalued in organisations, participants avoided referencing these in discussions with management and placed emphasis on aspects such as productivity, sales, and profit. As such, participants felt they were required to adopt a language deemed more palatable to the commercial ideals within organisations. This is shown by the extract below, in which the participant suggested that their legitimacy and acceptance in the organisation depended on their ability to 'speak their language',

> Ultimately, it has to increase productivity, and ultimately profit. So I always have that in the back of my mind… It's almost like you have to speak the language. I mean, it's definitely not business tactics. But sometimes when I know something will benefit the wider organisation and I know I need to get buy in from him [the Managing Director] then that's what I have to do. – Female, HR Advisor, Shipping.

This extract addresses the notion that HR activity is only legitimated when it is enacted with the purpose of achieving goals that are defined by management. However, this participant appears to suggest that 'speaking the language' is often enough to gain buy-in from management, regardless of the initial rationale for introducing or conducting an HR activity.

In contrast, in the following extract, the participant appeared to conform to the notion that 'HR jargon' was inappropriate to use in business. The participant emphasises that HR legitimacy may be hindered due to an inability or refusal from HR practitioners to utilise the appropriate discourse,

> I think one of the worst things HR people do is speak HR language and it's awful. It alienates people and means nothing to the business. So, we've got language kind of used in HR itself, I just think when you talk to the business you shouldn't get bogged down in terrible, awful HR jargon. – Female, HR Director, Technology.

The perception that HR should adopt a particular script in organisations is also endorsed by the CIPD. In the CIPD's professional map, a quote in prime position on this webpage advises HR practitioners on the importance of being able to 'speak the same language as our business customers' (CIPD, 2021). It can be argued that this reinforces the notion that 'HR language' does not equal 'business language'. The perceptions of HR practitioners demonstrate that there is an

acceptance that HR's legitimacy will only be gained when the function adheres to the expectations of management, thus meaning HR has to adopt a conformist role (Legge, 1978). Whilst perhaps not unusual for organisational functions to need to align with one another, this is perhaps more pronounced for the HR function due to the way in which 'people priorities' are not often viewed as the language of the business. This links back to the prior discussion on soft and hard approaches to HRM. This is indicative that the hard approach to HRM is seen by HR practitioners to acquire the function more legitimacy than the soft approach may provide.

In a similar vein to 'talking business', many participants drew on the notion that HR knowledge and skills are not enough on their own and in order to be seen as 'legitimate' in the eyes of the organisation, they must have full knowledge of the organisation and its operations,

> You have got to understand your own organisation, its context, the environment, the value chain. – Female, Head of Organisational Effectiveness, Telecommunications.

> You've got to understand the business, it isn't just about the hire to retire process. – Female, Change Partner, Automotive 3.

> You need to, as an HR professional, understand how the business is operating, how it works, so you can make contributions as to how best to organise the structure to deliver what the business needs. – Male, HR Director, Automotive.

Interestingly, there were a small number of participants who resisted or downplayed the need to have the business knowledge and understand the organisation. The extract below highlights how the need to understand the business was perceived by colleagues; however, the participant felt that they were capable of doing their job without this understanding,

> In my last job I got told I was naïve, because I didn't know what they did as a business. I had to remind them, I don't need to know how we fix the furniture or how we answer in customer service, that's not my job. – Female, HR Director, Charity.

Some participants also went further to state that HR practitioners need to have the actual business skills to be legitimate, not just the understanding of what the business does,

> I see real senior HR practitioners being absolutely skilled in coaching, knowledgeable about business and true influencers all of those all of those kind of qualities. Rather than the technical knowledge you can pick up. – Female, HR Manager, Higher Education.

> I think we should expect people [in HR] to have a much broader business education… you would understand the other business functions better. – Male, HR Director, Financial Services.

There was also a significant difference in views among those who had entered the occupation from other functions to those who had been in HR for most of their career. The extract below details how a male HR practitioner felt his accountancy knowledge allowed him to have more constructive conversations with the finance director. Whilst he went on to explain that having a degree in another area of business is not necessarily required for those in HR, having a strong knowledge of other areas of business would be beneficial for HR and its credibility,

> I… obviously, being a qualified accountant, this allows me to have conversations with the finance director, that I perceive to be quite different from what I've seen the finance director have with other HR functions who aren't that qualified. – Male, HR Director, Financial Services.

The following extract also comes from a male HR director who transitioned into the function. When discussing the fact that many in HR appear concerned about the occupation's legitimacy and credibility, he went on to state that he believed this was a result of many HR practitioners not having solid enough business knowledge,

> And people who don't understand the business and don't understand how we make money or don't understand how to read the balance sheet or how a profit and loss works, then yeah they're probably right to be worried. – Male, HR Director, Property.

This final quote, by a female HR director who transitioned into the function, highlights the topic above of 'speaking the business language'. This quote does also touch on the same point the male HR director above made, the perception that HR practitioners should have a level of financial accountancy knowledge (i.e. be able to read and understand a balance sheet),

> If you can't read a balance sheet, and you can't talk the same language as the other people around the executive table, people won't turn to you to contribute because if you can't speak the same language, they just won't discuss with you. And if you can't put your argument forward in a way that makes sense, they won't listen to it. – Female, HR Director, Financial Services 4.

Whilst having a broad business knowledge and understanding was the dominant theme in terms of perceptions of legitimacy, a smaller number of participants, predominantly women, could also be seen emphasising the importance and legitimacy in specialist knowledge. The extracts below are all from female HR practitioners who expressed that they perceive an element of legitimacy or credibility to come from having specialist HR knowledge that they believe others do not hold,

> I mean, we're called, the term is SME, we're called Subject Matter Experts. So, I think the value for the organisation to have us in house is to have specialists with specialist expertise and knowledge. – Female, Equality Manager, Emergency Services.

> With this profession, it's more kind of an expert service, kind of profession. It's not something that everyone knows, it is something that I have had to research and then learn through experience and exposure. – Female, HR Business Partner, Manufacturing 2.

> People knowing that you have got that background, that means that you can be a point of specialist advice and support them with authority on a particular issue. – Female, HR Manager, Higher Education 2.

Whilst the legal aspects involved in HR were not mentioned as much as may have been expected in the research, employee relations and employment law could arguably be seen to have importance with regards to the legitimacy of HR. In Chapter Two, regulatory legitimacy was discussed, and this form of legitimacy would align well with the role HR has in ensuring the organisation is legally compliant. However, as noted above this was not a theme that was drawn on extensively by practitioners, perhaps indicating a missed opportunity for claims to legitimacy.

Whilst HR practitioners can possess both specialist knowledge and broader business knowledge, there did appear to be a tendency for practitioners to place significance and importance on one

over the other. This was particularly evident in those that placed emphasis on broader business knowledge, as they appeared to prioritise this over specialist HR knowledge.

Having an awareness and understanding of the wider organisation was perceived by almost all participants as a significant aspect of demonstrating 'commerciality'. However, the extent to which this needs to happen differed between those who had been within HR for the majority of their career and those who had entered the function at a later point. Those who entered the occupation at a more senior level expressed the view that HR practitioners should have a much broader business background, to the extent that an education in other areas of business would be beneficial. Arguments that HR practitioners should have a strong grasp of other areas of business such as finance, operations, and accounting is not a new stance and has been addressed in academic and practitioner literature for some time (Kaufman, 1996; Ulrich et al., 1995). In the interviews, a theme was identified that HR is seen as peripheral to 'the business', and there is, therefore, an expectation that HR educates itself about the workings of the organisation. As such, it is perhaps the nature of HR that requires its practitioners to have a broader business understanding than would be required of other organisational functions. The perception that HR is 'outside' of the business can be argued to link to the hard approach of HRM. As noted, in the hard approach of HRM, employees are viewed to be resources rather than legitimate stakeholders in the organisation; as such, this gives little rationale for the HR function to be fully integrated into the workings of the business. The perception of some that HR practitioners should have a broad business education does also pose questions in terms of the dilution of HR as a specialist area of expertise. As will be addressed later in the chapter, though recognition was given to the importance of a broader business acumen, many participants, particularly women, still emphasised HR as requiring specialist skills and knowledge.

4.4 Strategic HR vs. operational work, or "the mythical status of strategic partner"

In recent years, the HR 'strategy wave', whereby focus has been placed on HR involvement in strategic work, has been argued to be key to the HR occupation in justifying its worth (Hong, 2016). Literature has posited that if HR adopts the strategic discourse, it will begin to see a change in its longstanding legitimacy challenges (Heizmann & Fox, 2019; Ulrich, 1995). This is also said to have been widely embraced by HR practitioners (Kinsey, 2012) and endorsed by the CIPD

(2020). The findings of this research support this, with the significant majority of HR practitioners emphasising the role of strategy in bringing credibility to HR. Many participants drew on the notion of 'strategic HR' when discussing their role in HR, as shown below,

> I'm really setting the strategic direction of the HR department in terms of setting the objectives. – Female, HR Director, Automotive 2.

> I'll be looking over the HR strategy that's overlying the overall business. – Female, HR Business Partner, Food Manufacturing.

> I deal with… anything that's a bit more high profile, I would say it's 30% transactional, 70% development side. – Female, HR Business Partner, Legal.

> I'd like to think I'm more the strategic side of it. I'd say 70/30 strategic. – Female, HR Business Partner, Legal 2.

Participant responses largely indicated that 'strategic HR' was something desirable to engage in and was viewed as adding an element of legitimacy and credibility to their role. The notion of strategic HR was frequently referenced in terms of how HR could improve its status and add more value in organisations,

> Also, in terms of strategy, so workforce planning, that's where we bring the most. – Male, HR Advisor, Charity.

> I think [we bring value by] the more strategic and more proactive stuff, that we are able to plan. – Female, HR Manager, Higher Education.

> I think [we bring value by] being honest about the strategic implications of different things, because HR are the overseers because we look at every aspect. – Female, HR Business Partner, Food Manufacturing.

However, among the participant responses, there was little consensus regarding how strategic HR is defined. There was also a tendency among interviewees to provide vague responses to questions about what strategic HR was. The extracts below highlight some of the ambiguity,

> If I had to define what strategic HR is… I guess just the thinking and not the doing? Yeah, more thinking and less doing. – Female, HR Business Partner, Legal 2.

> I think it's [strategic HR] kind of how do we keep the business competitive. Maybe, competitive and attractive? Yeah, to both internal and external people. – Female, HR Business Partner, Food Manufacturing.

> We get the opportunity to set the strategic direction. So we're doing that at the moment… just really simple, like 'what does inclusion even mean'?... So yeah, it's a big, blue sky question. – Female, Equality Manager, Emergency Services.

> I guess my aim with the strategic stuff, is just to make things better in the organisation. – Female, HR Advisor, Shipping.

When questioned about specific accounts of what strategic HR entails, many participants were still somewhat elusive in their responses. The majority spoke about aligning HR to the 'business strategy', as shown in the extracts below,

> So we take the business strategy and look at specifically what we can deliver, to ensure that the firm delivers their strategy. – Female, HR Business Partner, Legal.

> A lot of people think strategic HR is all about what are we aiming for? But it's about how do we deliver HR to support and enable the business strategy. – Female, Change Partner, Automotive 3.

The ways in which HR practitioners have depicted their strategic work in HR have been somewhat vague. HR practitioners also appear to struggle in providing clear examples of strategic HR. There is certainly no real consensus among practitioners as to what strategic HR entails nor at what point HR shifts from being transactional or operational into being strategic. Struggles to separate operational HR and strategic HR are to be expected when the two are commonly intertwined on a day-to-day basis. Most management, whether that be HR or otherwise, involves a 'doing' element, thus making the distinction between the two problematic (Caldwell, 2004). However, the fact that many HR practitioners appeared to want to construct their role almost entirely as strategic may indicate the hegemony of the 'strategic HR' discourse among practitioners.

A key finding from the interviews with regards to strategic HR was the noticeable difference in perceptions from the small number of men interviewed. As noted above, the desire to engage in 'strategic HR' was evident across many of the interviews, and strategic HR was seen as something that would provide legitimacy. However, no such view was found amongst the majority of men interviewed, who tended to downplay the notion of HR. The gendered aspect of this topic will be discussed further in the forthcoming chapter, but this difference highlights that, despite the prescriptive nature of the literature on strategic HR, there are clear differences in practitioner perceptions and the strategic HR theme has not been entirely embraced by all. One male senior HR practitioner was one of the very few people interviewed who stated that he did very little strategic work but still appeared to take pride and see significant value in the operational work he did,

> It's predominantly operational, I would say 70%, operational 30% strategic.. it's the operational HR, it's the making it happen. If you make it happen, then you're valued. And I think if you've got a track record of making it happen, then people are like well I'll talk to [name] because he'll know how to do this. - Male, HR Director, Automotive.

The extract below also depicts the view of a man working in a senior HR position. As the extract shows, there is a perception that strategic HR has become a term in HR that everyone wants to be involved with. He also emphasised the notion that he does not believe HR practitioners are able to be in purely 'strategic roles' and that all aspects of HR involve an element of doing,

> The problem you have is everyone wants to be strategic and you can't be strategic every day. I mean, life isn't like that. You know, everyone is like ‘I want to be a strategic business partner’. And I'm like ‘what does that mean’? You can't be strategic every day. You need someone to understand data, analyse data, think about trends, think about the impact of various actions, think about the markets, the customers all that sort of stuff. But then they need to do something, you know? So I think the idea of being strategic is just- it's really annoying, and it's only half the story. – Male, HR Director, Property.

The following quote also comes from a senior male HR practitioner. When discussing strategic HR, he expressed the view that HR 'over-worries' about strategic HR and also its influence, and states that it personally does not concern him whether HR is seen as a strategic partner to the

organisation. He also went further to state that he feels that the view of HR as a strategic partner is actually unachievable,

> I think we over-worry. We seem to be chasing this mythical status of being this massive, really important big strategic partner. I think you just got to- I just think we're chasing the unicorn, to be honest. I think we over worry about it. It never worries me personally. – Male, HR Director, Financial Services 2.

Another quote from a male freelance HR practitioner makes a similar comment in that HR and the CIPD are trying to chase the idea of being a strategic partner. However, this quote provides another perspective in that the interviewee perceives that for many organisations, people are not inherently viewed as a strategic asset. As discussed earlier in Chapter One, the hard approach to HRM views individuals as a resource. This quote strongly aligns with this and emphasises that HR's strategic purpose is to ultimately improve productivity and thus profitability for the organisation,

> And I think part of the problem is from the top down, people just look like another resource. And so from their point of view, and I've had this conversation recently, with some CIPD people at head office that from that strategic perspective, their objective is we need to open another 20 retail locations this year. Right, you, facilities guy, go and find some shops that we can rent. You, IT guy, go and connect up the shops. You, HR guy, go hire some people. And so we've got HR and CIPD saying all people are a strategic issue, honestly, from a corporate top down perspective, they are not. People are a resource like buildings and money in the bank and intellectual property. They're not in themselves a strategic asset. … So I think, I think if you apply strategic thinking to the role of HR, it means thinking about what's coming next, what's going to affect people related things like recruitment, retention, performance, engagement, ultimately productivity. – Male, Learning and Development Specialist, Freelance.

It is important to note the quotes above regarding the downplaying of strategic HR. These quotes offer a different perspective to what was stated by the majority of participants. A small number of women did state that it was not possible to be engaging in strategic HR all the time. However, this was a minority out of the women interviewed, and their responses were less downplaying the notion of strategic HR and more emphasising that the HR role often requires an element of day-

to-day work still. As noted, the fact that the quotes downplaying strategic HR were disproportionately represented among the men that were interviewed is also something that will be considered in the forthcoming chapter.

This chapter thus far has depicted the perceptions of HR practitioners with regard to the construction of HR legitimacy. These findings demonstrate, firstly, that the legitimacy challenges facing HR are well acknowledged by participants. Whilst there was some variation in the extent to which practitioners emphasised the importance, there was still relative consistency in the perceptions that broader business knowledge and skills were the way in which HR would enhance its legitimacy. The key theme in terms of how legitimacy is constructed by HR practitioners is the notion of commerciality. Commerciality can be seen as an encompassing term referring to the views of 'business language', 'business acumen', and 'strategic HR'.

4.5 HR PROFESSIONAL VS. ORGANISATIONAL CHAMPION, OR "WHERE DO YOUR LOYALTIES LIE?"

While participants had opposing views on many aspects of professionalisation, there was a clear consensus in responses that being classed as a profession and a professional was important to participants. However, for some participants, it was emphasised that it was less important to them personally but important that the business viewed them as such. The emphasis on the external perspective is perhaps unsurprising as Freidson (1984) suggests that professionalisation is not a mere process of self-definition as a profession but also requires that the occupation is externally recognised as such. Public perception of the special status of a particular form of work is argued to be in part what defines it as professionalised,

> It's definitely something important to me, that it is seen as a profession and is respected as such. – Female, Head of HR, Higher Education.

> I do make quite a point of being like 'I am an experienced professional' – Female, Equality Manager, Emergency Services.

> For myself, it doesn't really matter what I class myself as… but it's important that the business sees you as that [a professional] – Female, HR Director, Technology.

As addressed in Chapter Two, within the academic literature, there is little consensus over what constitutes a profession. It is, therefore, perhaps unsurprising that participants had little agreement or clear view over what a profession was. The initial theory regarding defining a profession was the trait perspective (Greenwood, 1957). The trait perspective used a case study method to adopt a 'tick box' approach to defining a profession. It became viewed that the following five factors were deemed to be requisites of a profession; a systematic body of knowledge, a professional authority recognised by clients, community sanctions, a regulatory code of ethics, and a professional culture sustained by formal professional associations.

Despite this perspective being widely critiqued in academia, participants appeared to typically take the trait approach when describing a profession. The most common responses from participants were to list traits such as having professional accreditation, having a professional body, and having specialist knowledge,

> The most obvious thing I would correlate a profession with is having professional qualifications. – Female, HR Advisor, Shipping.

> [A profession is when] There's associations and professional memberships that have been recognised as traditional endorsement. – Female, Change Partner, Automotive 3.

> [A profession is] When it's not something that everybody knows, knowledge that I've had to research and then learn through experience and exposure. – Female, HR Business Partner, Food Manufacturing.

In light of the traits perspective being extensively critiqued, the power approach to professionalisation emerged in the 1970s (Freidson, 1970; Johnson, 1972). This perspective focuses less on how occupations become classed as professions and more so on how they achieve and maintain power. This power is then viewed as the distinguishing feature of professions. Ultimately, this perspective shifted the theorising of professions away from traits and processes and towards power and control. Interestingly, no participants mentioned anything to do with power or control in their definitions of a profession. It is also apparent from responses in other parts of the interviews that many participants do struggle with achieving power in their roles. However, at

no point was this aspect seen to impact whether or not they were classed as a profession or professionals.

As discussed above, participants largely viewed that accreditation from a professional body was a trait of being a profession. However, views around CIPD accreditation were varied and often appeared contradictory. Nearly all participants had gone through some level of CIPD accreditation. One participant that had not was in an HR advisor role and stated that they were currently looking into beginning the accreditation. There was only one participant, an HR manager in a higher education institute, who stated that they had no desire or ever felt the need to get CIPD accredited. A few participants had been accredited but did not have an active membership. The reasons for this were around the company not paying for the membership. Many participants did also state that if their company were unwilling to fund their membership, they would be unlikely to maintain it.

Views on CIPD accreditation were somewhat varied. However, some participants did share that they felt the accreditation did little for their HR knowledge, and it was more something they felt was a requirement to continue a career in HR,

> My frustration is that I had to get my CIPD to tick a box. I don't believe it's of significant value to the profession, to anybody in HR. – Female, Change Partner, Automotive 3.

> My impression is that if you want to get as senior as I want to, then you just have to have it. – Female, HR Director, Charity.

Despite some participants being critical of having to gain CIPD accreditation, a significant number of interviewees were positive about the notion of mandatory accreditation. There were concerns raised about the potential of creating barriers to individuals from certain socio-economic backgrounds. However, many participants stated that mandatory accreditation was largely desirable as long as this was considered. This is particularly interesting given the gender composition of HR. Witz (1990) argues that feminised 'professions' often seek to engage in professionalisation strategies, some of which involve attempts to make the profession or occupation more exclusive and raise barriers to entry. This, therefore, can be linked to participants' desire to reassess the entry into HR and potentially restrict entry to only those accredited, something which will be discussed further in the forthcoming chapter,

> My instinct is I think I would like that to be the case… yeah, I would advocate raising the standard. – Male, HR Director, Financial Services.

> In some ways it should be mandatory… but people should also respect the profession enough to say 'that qualification is of value to me' – Female, Director of HR, Automobile.

Interestingly, one participant felt that mandatory accreditation would be the correct route for HR as it would put the occupation on a level with the lawyers in the organisation. However, the participant included a caveat that CIPD would need to reassess the quality of its programmes and accreditors,

> It would be a good thing… but I think CIPD would need to do a lot more due diligence on who they allow to be issuing their accreditation. – Female, HR Business Partner, Legal.

Despite, as evidenced above, many participants seeing CIPD accreditation becoming more of a requirement as desirable, participants' responses about CIPD themselves were skewed towards being critical of the organisation. A common critique was the notion that CIPD is 'out of touch' with the realities of enacting the HR role in organisations. A 'simplistic' or 'idealistic' view was often referenced,

> All the articles are showcased type articles. HR is always going to need the buy in of the CEO or MD, there needs to be more about the actual practicalities of influencing. – Female, HR Business Partner, Legal.

> With CIPD, you're definitely looking at the ideal. [Their advice] is not as flexible as I need to be on a day to day basis. – Female, HR Advisor, Shipping.

Conversely, one participant critiqued CIPD for 'being too self-critical. These participants took the view that CIPD brought the profession down by questioning HR's importance,

> I don't agree with how they keep bringing the profession down… You see in their magazines and at their conferences… 'is there a future for HR?' Well if your own professional body can't think of why there is a reason and phrase it more positively… it just winds me up. – Female, Head of Organisational Effectiveness, Telecommunications.

Despite the variations in criticism towards CIPD, almost all participants shared the view that CIPD has minimal influence over how HR is enacted in the UK. Academic literature on professionalisation posits that a professional body should be able to exercise normative isomorphic influence over the occupation/profession (Abbott, 1988). Standards, code of conduct, and entry membership should also be able to be exercised by the institute (Abbott, 1988). Participant responses regarding CIPD accreditation may indicate that CIPD has a level of influence with regards to accreditation being a requirement for many HR roles. However, participants' responses regarding the influence of CIPD on the day-to-day enactment of HR appear to indicate that the professional body is not able to exercise normative influence,

> I don't think they have much influence, HR is so varied across organisations… I wouldn't say people outside HR really know what CIPD is either. – Female, HR Business Partner, Legal.

> I think ACAS has a lot more influence than CIPD in my view. – Male, HR Business Partner, Charity.

> I had the beauty of being a part of the finance profession as well, and being part of that… the ability of CIPD to really influence the key, significant players in HR is much less. – Male, HR Director, Financial Services.

Because of the large number of people drifting into HR, evidently, the lack of qualification within HR has not been a barrier to many people entering the HR profession. Very few HR practitioners had any education or qualifications directly related to HR when they joined the occupation. There were a few individuals that had done a degree in HR prior to their first HR role, and for most of those, the CIPD accreditation had been incorporated as part of the degree. Out of all those interviewed that did not have education and qualifications in HR prior to entering the occupation, only one individual spoke about their lack of CIPD qualification being a barrier to gaining an HR role,

> When I left university I couldn't find a job in HR. So I just went into a general admin. And then started studying my CIPD at college, night school. So that was directly through the CIPD and examined through the CIPD rather than through the university. But that was

> quite good, because of the degree that I did at that point the CIPD recognised that and I only had to do two years of the qualification, which I don't think they do that anymore, which isn't so helpful for people. And then my roles have literally been all the way up - Female, HR Business Partner, Charity 4.

Despite CIPD accreditation evidently not being a requisite for many in terms of entering the HR occupation, almost all those interviewed have gone on to gain a CIPD qualification whilst within their HR roles. The findings demonstrate that for some HR practitioners undertaking a CIPD qualification was a tactical decision in order to further their job prospects, with some stating they felt a CIPD qualification was necessary to stay within the HR occupation. Other reasons posed were that it demonstrated a commitment to working in HR,

> I did, however, my previous organisation paid for professional membership. So I kept it for a couple of years, and then let it lapse, because I didn't see the point. And then took it back out when I was looking for jobs. So that I could put it on my CV, because it will always say CIPD qualified, so I put it on there because I didn't want a 'bye' and then it's lapsed again now. - Female, HR Business Partner, Automotive 5.

> I think it's just more sign of commitment that you've the basics, really. You know, I don't think there's, what, more than one or two elements that I can't remember... I mean, it was back in the '90s when I did my CIPD. I don't think I utilised a lot or transferred a lot of those skills into the workplace - Female, Head of HR, Transportation 2.

However, for other practitioners, the choice to undertake a qualification with CIPD was more of a personal one. It became apparent that those who transitioned into the role at a later stage in their career were more likely to undertake CIPD as a personal choice as opposed to viewing it as necessary for their role,

> I have subsequently off my own bat put myself through the CIPD. And I've helped CIPD determine the new framework for the profession. Because I felt passionately that HR was not sufficiently commercial. - Female, HR Director, Financial Services 4.

The above findings have shown that professionalisation does appear to hold an element of importance for HR practitioners, as the majority of participants shared that HR being viewed as a

profession was at least somewhat important to them. The majority of participants also engaged in some kind of professional development through the professional body, albeit this has been conducted post entering the profession for many participants. Whilst these findings demonstrate that the HR occupation has elements of professionalisation, the extent to which HR can be seen to constitute a profession in the same way as traditional professions such as medicine or law is questioned. As noted, the fact that many practitioners were able to enter the occupation prior to completing any professional qualification indicates that for some organisations, this is clearly not a prerequisite. A number of the same participants then spoke about putting themselves through CIPD rather than it being mandated or even encouraged by anyone else in the organisation. Furthermore, the often negative views from participants towards CIPD accreditation and whether it was of any benefit to their work pose additional questions. Accreditation for traditional professions such as medicine and law are widely accepted as a necessity and is unlikely to be questioned in the same manner.

Another key way in which to understand the professionalisation of HR is to explore the extent to which HR practitioners identify and feel part of a wider professional community. Whilst being involved in a professional community is an aspect addressed in theories of professionalisation (Abbott, 1988), this often does not extend to address the impact of whether individuals actually perceive themselves to identify with this community and wish to be a part of it. It is posited that the strength of an individual's identification with a professional community is relative to the other groups or communities they may be a part of (Caza & Creary, 2016). Within this research, the majority of participants referenced their identification with the HR professional community in relation to the extent to which they identify, or wish to identify, with their respective organisation.

These findings show a sense of not only the extent to which practitioners feel there is a cohesive professional HR community but also the extent to which they see it as desirable to be a part of one. Interviews with HR practitioners showed that a small number of practitioners valued their personal networks with others working within HR and identified as part of an HR community, as evidenced by the quote below,

> I think, as a personal identity as an HR professional, I definitely have one I've built up over the years, a really strong network, within sort of the HR community, with the people that

> I've worked with in the past, people I've met through forums and sort of online groups. And, you know, I'm really proud of the fact that I can still call on and still meet up regularly with groups of people from every organisation I've worked in from an HR perspective. - Female, HR Business Partner, Further Education.

In contrast to the quote above, many felt that there is no strong professional community within HR, nor do they desire to identify strongly with an HR professional community. Many practitioners who participated in this study largely wanted to identify themselves with the organisation in which they worked as opposed to as an 'HR professional',

> I think I tend to want to resonate more with the organisation, so I want to live and breathe the value of the organisation and be a champion of the organisation, coming from an HR function. - Female, HR Business Partner, Manufacturing 3.

Whilst some practitioners shared the idea that they could identify strongly with both the HR profession and their organisation, many seemed to view identifying strongly with both as incompatible, thus needing to associate themselves more strongly with one or the other,

> In my very first job, in the very first job I got after graduating, the director I was supporting as a junior BP sat me down and said, ‘where do your loyalties lie? Do they lie with the business, or do they lie with HR?’ And I really don't know what the key is there, because I don't belong in the business and I don't belong in HR as far as how I feel sometimes. So it's, yeah, if I'm on HR's side, then I feel part of HR, because they're like, yeah, thanks for supporting us. But then I'm not then doing what the business want and therefore the business are like, ah, you know, you're not helping us. And you end up being massively in the middle. - Female, HR Business Partner, Automotive 5.

Regardless of whether they felt they identified more with their organisation than their 'profession', most HR practitioners still referred to HR when asked how they would term their career to someone. However, some practitioners within the study also went further and sought to actively disassociate from identifying themselves with and being identified as an 'HR professional'. These practitioners were reluctant to associate themselves at all with the HR label and stated that if asked what they do, they would simply say 'I work at [their current organisation]'. The reasons for this

were both the view that there is a lack of understanding by many people as to what HR does; hence they would not understand the role. However, also the view that HR is held in such a negative light that they do not wish to be directly associated with the occupation. Those who expressed this preferred to identify themselves either by their specialisation (e.g. an equality and diversity specialist) or as a broader 'business person' who just happens to have a specialisation in the area of HR,

> I think it's because we have an opportunity as new members of staff, also to kind of bring a fresh perspective and actually reset the perception. And unfortunately, yeah, that does probably mean separating us, from HR a bit - Female, Equality Manager, Emergency Services.

> I work for the organisation. The fact that I have a skill set in HR is irrelevant. - Female, Change Partner, Automotive 3.

The above section has depicted HR practitioner views with regards to the professionalisation of HR and the extent to which this is seen as desirable. What is evident from these findings is that qualifications and HR-specific expertise are seen as key to classing HR as a profession. When pairing these findings with the findings earlier in the chapter, which emphasised business knowledge and depicted individuals entering HR with no background or qualifications, this calls into question the extent to which HR can be argued to have achieved professionalisation.

Many participants did appear to feel strong about HR being viewed as a profession, stating that this gave the occupation a level of status and legitimacy. Despite this, there did not appear to be a cohesive professional identity and community among HR practitioners. This is significant for the HR occupation as identification with a profession has an influence on the extent to which individuals incorporate the values of a profession into their day-to-day work (Caza & Creary, 2016). A lack of professional identity for HR, therefore, has the potential to further HR practitioners' shift towards embracing the needs of the organisation over professional standards and values. Professionals are also said to utilise their professional community to assert jurisdiction over their work (Freidson, 1992), meaning that the absence of such a community for HR could further the power struggles in organisations.

Taken collectively, these findings indicate that the HR occupation is relatively undeveloped with regard to professionalisation. Therefore, this provides a number of challenges if the occupation aims to professionalise itself further. These findings also indicate that the CIPD may continue to struggle in developing one collective identity. The identification that HR can currently be argued to be an open occupation will be discussed further below.

4.6 Occupational closure vs. commercial credibility, or "basically anyone can do HR"

Many of the findings regarding strategic HR and commerciality also extended to discussions by participants about those who occupy the most senior positions in HR. Below addresses conflicting views between HR practitioners as to the background and skills regarded as credible in senior HR and perceptions of those making horizontal career changes into senior HR.

Legitimacy in the most senior HR positions was not initially intended to be a focal point of this research. However, within the broader discussions regarding the credibility of the occupation, it was mentioned by several interviewees that the most senior HR practitioner in their organisations has significance in terms of the way in which the remainder of the function is perceived. HR practitioners suggested that the HR director is seen as particularly important in terms of how the organisation perceives the credibility of the HR function.

The following extracts reference the notion that having the most senior HR person closely aligned to the most senior people in the organisation, whether that be the CEO or the board, has a positive impact on the HR function's credibility and legitimacy. Having this close alignment is perceived to travel down from the senior levels to the remainder of the function,

> It significantly depends I think on the capability and the influence of the most senior HR person. The teams that I've seen have been able to be most effective both have a strong leader who has a place at the top table, I hate that expression but there it is. – Female, Diversity and Inclusion Manager, Legal 3.

> Where the HR director is seen as very closely aligned to the CEO, as their business partner then that business partner model will filter right down from CEO's office. – Female, Head of HR, Transportation 2.

As participants have expressed that those in senior HR positions, particularly the HR director, have significance in relation to the perceived credibility of the HR function, the extracts from both senior and non-senior practitioners on this topic are of interest. The following findings detail participant understandings of career paths into senior HR and the skills, knowledge, and background needed for these positions.

As addressed above, having a strong understanding of the organisation they are based in and also having broader business skills/capabilities were seen as key to HR garnering further legitimacy. In discussing the importance of having this commercial credibility within HR, many participants went on to address that this commercial credibility appears to extend to the point that senior positions are seen to require more commercial credibility than they do HR credibility, expertise, and background.

The following extracts continue on from when these participants were referencing the importance of wider business credibility for HR legitimacy. Both participants went on to note that they have seen examples of individuals coming across from 'the business' to take on senior HR roles. As the second extract illustrates, having been in the business is seen as an indicator that they understand the business and what it needs. The extract below is illustrative of the comments made by a minority of participants, indicating that entering HR from other organisational functions is a well-known occurrence,

> You'd get people coming from a technical background that was fitting with the company, then taking over the HR role, because they had all the - it was almost like a competency streaming kind of thing. If you are in an engineering company and you are an engineer and then you are the engineering manager, you know all the competencies that that company needs. – Female, HR Manager, Manufacturing 2.

The following extract depicts specifically the link between gender and senior HR participants, which will be addressed further in the following chapter. However, this extract also demonstrates an acceptance that having the business background automatically equates to having 'commercial credibility', potentially in a way in which having an HR background does not,

> And I do think that typically, when you do see men, they're further up the HR food chain, if you like. But quite often, if you look at the credentials, again, they have the business background. So they carry the commercial credibility. – Female, HR Business Partner, Legal 2.

The extracts above illustrate how many participants felt that having existing credibility in other business functions resulted in individuals being placed into senior HR positions without having had any prior exposure to working in HR. Horizontal moves into senior HR from other organisational functions were viewed as significant to HR legitimacy by a number of participants, however, in differing ways. Those interviewed who have made this type of career change, and a small number of other participants, spoke positively and perceived these moves as being beneficial for HR legitimacy. This is contrasted by a larger amount of participants who viewed these moves as diminishing the skills, education and experience needed for HR and ultimately having a detrimental impact on the legitimacy of the occupation.

As addressed earlier, from the experiences of participants, horizontal moves in senior HR positions from other areas of business do not appear uncommon. These horizontal moves are also portrayed as happening due to the 'commercial credibility' that these individuals hold. The perceptions of HR practitioners on these transitions differ somewhat with regards to whether they are appropriate and whether they deem them beneficial to HR legitimacy.

The following extracts depict the views of a relatively small number of participants that perceived these horizontal moves to be beneficial to the HR occupation. The quote below illustrates the views of one HR practitioner, in that to be successful at a senior level in HR, certain skills are needed, which those in the HR occupations may not have themselves. This participant also thought that these 'business skills' should be prioritised over having any kind of HR knowledge and experience, with the perception that HR knowledge would be relatively simple to pick up once in the role,

> There were senior HR people that weren't from an HR background, they were business people that they put into HR leadership roles. And I see that, personally, as the way to go. So I you know, I see real senior HR practitioners being absolutely skilled in coaching, knowledgeable about business and true influencers all of those kind of qualities. Rather than technical knowledge that you can pick up. – Female, HR Manager, Higher Education.

This participant was not alone in viewing horizontal moves to HR as a positive. The extract below illustrates the view of another participant that, whilst the individual may need to rely on those with expert HR knowledge, a horizontal move may be beneficial in terms of making the function 'more commercial'. Similar to the findings above, this again suggests that having someone enter the HR occupation from 'the business' will commercialise HR in a way that those currently in the occupation are unable to do,

> I think there's nothing wrong with people coming in…. especially if a function needs shaking up, and becoming more commercial. It all depends what their leadership style is, as long as they don't assume they have got all the answers and use their experts. Then there's no reason why that can't work well. – Female, HR Business Partner, Higher Education 3.

Whilst, as highlighted above, there were a small number of HR practitioners who viewed the horizontal moves in senior HR positions as a positive, the majority of those that discussed this topic perceived these moves to have a potentially detrimental effect on HR's credibility. Interviewees expressed that they viewed such moves as undermining the HR 'profession' as it portrayed HR as an easy function to simply walk into.

The extract below shows that, for some HR practitioners, there is a scepticism that those entering the function with little to no HR background will have the capability to succeed in the role. Whether or not the individual holds an HR qualification was not deemed important to this participant, but the lack of HR background and knowledge is a concern,

> A couple of them that I know, actually were working in kind of operations roles, and then literally just walked into an HRD role. And you go, wow, how's that happened? And they, they don't necessarily have an HR qualification to their name, which isn't a problem. But do they have the understanding and the knowledge to be able to unlock the potential of the people beneath them? From an HR point of view, I don't know. – Female, HR Business Partner, Further Education.

Concerns surrounding where the priorities of senior HR individuals would lie if they came in from other functions were also of importance to a number of participants. These interviewees felt that

the focus on the people side of the occupation might be diminished for an increased focus on costs and profit,

> It undermines the value proposition of the business because what are you saying about people if what you're bringing in is an operations director, who probably is looking at the bottom line. Yeah. Okay so my decisions are based on money, so okay that person's costing me 20 grand, that person is costing me 30 grand, so that person's out. - Female, HR Director, Technology 2.

One participant, although already at the HR director level herself, expressed that she personally would not choose to work in an organisation in which the senior HR person did not have an HR background,

> I just think the focus is different. You know, you can see that in organisations, you can see the level of sort of turnover, the demoralisation, certainly of those people working with HR. I certainly have conversations with them where they're certainly not valued, and I've been told so. I certainly wouldn't work in an organisation where, you know, where the senior person above me- didn't have a background or knowledge of- hadn't come up through the ranks of HR – Female, HR Director, Property 2.

For many other participants, less focus was placed on whether these individuals were actually capable of the role, and more focus was placed on concerns that these horizontal moves would diminish the legitimacy of HR. There was a tendency to draw comparisons to other management functions, and several participants expressed what felt like a double standard with regards to coming in at a senior level without the function-specific background. As can be seen in the extracts below, finance was one of the most common comparisons, with interviewees expressing that either the organisation would not consider a finance director without the relevant background or that they themselves would never feel it appropriate to go into that role without the accompanying background,

> It can [undermine the HR profession]. I don't think you'd get that in finance would you? So why should it happen in HR? I don't know. - Female, HR Business Partner, Charity 4.

> This is another thing about HR which kind of pisses me off, companies are quite comfortable sticking someone in at HR director level who hasn't got a background in the profession. There's no way you'd stick anyone into an FD role, who wasn't properly qualified and experienced. And I think that's why a lot of men get top jobs in HR; they get moved across from other functions. – Female, HR Director, Charity 5.

> Yeah but my experience tells me that it tends to be that if a guy has got into the HR job it's because they've come from an operational background and the justification for putting them in there is that you can't do that strategic HR director job without having operational experience. I think it undermines the professionalism of the HR function. It's like I wouldn't walk in and be the next finance director or the next ops director… you know, who the bloody hell do I think I am? - Female, HR Director, Technology 2.

Interestingly, there was one male participant who shared that they believed they could make a horizontal career change to another function in the way that those seem to do for HR. The quote below links to the prior findings regarding broader skills being more important for senior roles as opposed to the technical knowledge,

> Could I go and work in finance, could I lead an operations function? It will be a pretty steep learning curve but if you've got the right people or right capability, it's about leading part of the organization. It's more of the leadership skills. - Male, HR Director, Financial Services 2.

Of the 55 HR practitioners I interviewed, three interviewees had made a horizontal career move into the most senior HR positions. This included one woman and two men, all based within the private sector. They had previously worked in derivatives, IT, and finance roles and had made the horizontal move into heads of HR and HR director positions within the organisations they were in at the time.

Whilst there were only a small number of interviewees that 'parachuted' into the senior HR positions, these interviewees all had a similar experience with regard to the ease of entering the HR occupation. All three participants that made a horizontal move into senior HR positions

expressed that the job was either offered up to them or their request to make the move into the role was easily accepted,

> I said to him [the manager and MD] I've been a line manager in this business for the last nine years, and had a rubbish service from HR, I know what it is that the business is not getting from HR, why don't you let me be HR director because I've been on the other side of things, and he said, 'okay then'. So, I became HR director, and had a team of HR business partners and other functions. – Male, HR Director, Financial Services.

> And so, I had to do a project as part of my MBA. And the project I did was on the HR function in one bit of the business at [previous employer]. And I did that, and they liked it. And then they said 'well, why don't you come in and run HR?' So, I said 'oh good because that's really what I'd like to do'. And that's how I got into it. - Male, HR Director, Property.

> And I'd got the legal background, I'd got the technology background, and I'd got the industry background, so I was asked to coordinate the acquisition. On the day that we notified the stock exchange… [the company] sent an email out to people telling them that I had become the head of HR. Weirdly, they didn't even ask me. - Female, HR Director, Financial Services 4.

> Interviewer: So you just got put into the role?

> I just basically got plonked into the role! Assuming they were going on the basis of that I had done a lot of background that would lend itself well to working in a senior HR position. It's the most strange appointment I think I've had in my career - Female, HR Director, Financial Services 4.

As can be seen from the first quote, the way consideration for the HR director position was posed was that there needed to be an improvement in the standard of HR in the organisation. This was not unique to him, and the other man who had made the horizontal move also noted that in gaining his first HR position as head of HR, he believed the organisation were looking for a change as to the HR that had been before him,

> What people were looking for was probably a reaction to what had gone before [the previous HR director]. So people wanted leadership. They wanted someone who was commercial. – Male, HR Director, Property.

As addressed above, many HR participants seemed sceptical about HR directors being appointed from other functions. The following extract illustrates that one of the men who made this horizontal move was very aware of the doubts that his function held when he entered the role,

> Yeah, they were extremely sceptical and quite militant that somebody came from finance. They could recognise that, you know, having a finance qualification was an admirable affair, they just didn't see it having any transferable value, or appropriateness coming into HR. - Male, HR Director, Financial Services.

Obtaining the CIPD qualification appeared significant for those who made this horizontal move, with all these participants stating that they made a decision to gain a CIPD qualification. It was, however, noted by these participants that the extent to which CIPD actually furthered their knowledge in HR was limited and obtaining the qualification was more to do with legitimising themselves in either the eyes of their function or themselves,

> When I was first getting into HR, one of the first things I did was I got qualified because I was very conscious that for people who were working for me were more qualified than I am, and very sceptical about someone coming in to be their boss who didn't know anything about HR. – Male, HR Director, Financial Services.

> I went straight in and I kind of felt a little bit, not exposed but a little bit sort of, you know, that imposter syndrome thing? So then I decided to get sort of accredited with the CIPD. So to give me I think more of a boost more of a kind of, yeah I am legitimate, I can really do HR. – Male, HR Director, Property.

As evidenced above, for some participants, concerns around horizontal moves in HR came from a belief that they may not have the skills, knowledge and capability to succeed in the role. For those who came into the function this route, there appeared little significant concern as to whether they were capable of the role and had the knowledge and skills required. The following extracts are from the two of the individuals who made the horizontal move to senior HR positions,

> To be quite honest, a huge amount of HR is common sense. But you just need to think of an awful lot of things simultaneously. – Female, HR Director, Financial Services 4.

> In hindsight, basically anyone can do HR. There's no kind of real prerequisite. And even all the studying all the rest of it doesn't really help, because it's not a very theoretical thing, not like accounting. – Male, HR Director, Property.

As can be seen from these extracts, there is a perception that HR is a relatively simple role and not one that requires extensive studying, knowledge, or background to be capable. This also links to the notion that qualifications may not be perceived as essential for an HR role. As can be seen, the male HR director made a comparison to the accounting field, showing the potential difference in the need for qualifications between HR and more traditional professions.

The view that HR-specific skills and knowledge were not required in these senior positions was also shared by the other male HR director that made this move. His perception was that having been on the receiving end of HR was enough to provide some capability for the role and the HR knowledge was something that could be picked up at a later date,

> I didn't need to have HR knowledge at that point, I'd already been on the recipient end of, you know, very unhelpful advice for eight or nine years in the business. So I could use that as my starting point. – Male, HR Director, Financial Services.

Again, this quote poses the question as to the professionalisation of HR and whether qualifications are seen as necessary for the HR role. As can be seen from this quote, and also the earlier findings about participant entry to HR, a number of participants see having the user perspective of HR as a benefit to their ability in role.

The above findings have shown that HR practitioners have largely embraced the commerciality rhetoric to the extent that several interviewees perceived broader business expertise to take precedence over HR expertise. This, therefore, calls into question the perceived importance of professionalisation for HR. It is argued that legitimacy concerns justifying not only what occupations do but also who they are. With those in occupations seeking to establish 'who they are' and gain increased legitimacy, the constructs of the 'professional' and 'profession' often come into play (Abbott, 1988). Whilst the literature posits that professionalisation may be a source of

legitimacy for HR, Chapter Two also considered the challenges with regard to the professionalisation of HR, particularly with regard to occupational closure and establishing HR as a specialist area of expertise. The above findings have shown that, for a number of HR practitioners, presenting HR as a specialist area is not seen as a key focus in improving legitimacy. These findings can be linked back to the research questions of this thesis. The way in which HR practitioners perceive legitimacy, largely being commercial and strategic, has shaped their broader understanding of the HR role. Many HR practitioners do not appear to see the occupation as one of specialist knowledge and skill, but one that is open to being entered by those with little to no experience or qualifications.

4.7 SUMMARY

The first of the findings chapters has examined HR practitioners' perceptions and lived experiences of legitimacy and professionalisation within the HR occupation. The research questions of this thesis are ‘how do the concepts of legitimacy and gender shape understanding of the HR occupation’? And ‘in what ways are the perceptions and lived experiences of HR practitioners shaped by legitimacy and gender’? Throughout this chapter, the accounts of HR practitioners’ have evidenced the extent to which views on legitimacy have shaped how those within HR experience and understand the occupation.

The findings within this chapter have demonstrated, based on the extracts from current HR practitioners, that the HR occupation continues to be challenged, questioned, and called to account over its legitimacy and credibility in corporate organisations. HR practitioners often used references to other managerial functions or other professions to emphasise this challenge. For the majority of practitioners, there is an understanding that the HR function struggles in to be viewed as a 'true business function', the way in which areas such as operations or finance do. It is also acknowledged that HR can be seen as peripheral to the rest of the organisation. As such, many of the issues addressed in the early literature on HR legitimacy are still applicable in the current day.

Current literature on the HR occupation has established that there is a pervasive understanding that HR lacks the commercial credibility of other management functions. The findings within this chapter demonstrate that, for many HR practitioners, increasing commerciality is seen as imperative for the legitimacy of the HR occupation.

HR practitioners referred to adopting ‘commercial language’, deemed more palatable to management than HR terminology. Practitioners also discussed conscious efforts to further their understanding of the organisation, other functions, and the industries in which they are based. The term ‘commerciality’ is an encompassing term to refer to these ideas. For many HR practitioners, 'strategic HR' also offered a promise of further legitimacy for the HR occupation. As such, strategic HR appears to have been embraced by the majority of practitioners. However, commerciality and strategic HR were often viewed in opposition to the caring aspects of the HR role. With these concepts being understood in the binary form, valorising the commercial has the potential to result in a devaluing of the welfare side.

With commerciality and strategy being seen as key to HR's legitimacy, this appears to have resulted in an intense focus by HR practitioners on portraying these aspects of their role. The significant majority of HR practitioners placed emphasis on their so-called strategic work and seemingly wanted to construct themselves as 'strategic partners' in the organisation. Despite this, the extent to which practitioners actually engaged with strategic work on a day-to-day basis appeared limited and attempts to define strategic HR often seemed challenging.

Participants posited that the focus on commerciality in HR has contributed to a perceived increase in horizontal career changes to the most senior HR positions. Perpetuated by the view that the HR function is peripheral to 'the business', there was an understanding by participants that those entering HR from other management functions are deemed to have a higher level of commercial credibility than those who have worked the majority of their career in HR. As noted above, this demonstrates how the way in which the legitimacy of the occupation is perceived influences the broader understanding of the occupation.

These findings have supported the existing literature with regards to the longstanding legitimacy crisis HR practitioners and the occupation itself face. This research has also shown that the theme of strategic HR leading to legitimacy has truly taken hold within the occupation itself. However, the perceptions regarding individuals entering HR at senior levels with little to no HR experience have evidently created tensions within the occupation, and the downplaying of strategy by certain practitioners (predominantly men) poses a further challenge for HR.

A number of the issues addressed within this chapter also hold gendered underpinnings that were spoken about either explicitly or implicitly by participants. For the large majority of participants, gender was seen to have significance in both how they understand and believe others understand the HR occupation. The following chapter will consider a number of the issues presented in this chapter and the way in which participants saw gender to interplay with these issues.

Chapter Five – Gender and Legitimacy

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter has utilised extracts from the HR practitioner interviews to show the key areas of significance for interviewees when discussing their understandings and experiences of legitimacy and professionalisation within the HR function. This chapter now turns to issues of gender within the HR function and the ways in which gendered assumptions of legitimacy and professionalisation may be present in HR practitioner perceptions and experiences. As discussed within Chapter Two, it has been well established within academic literature that organisational structures and practices and their accompanying notions of success and value express ideologies of masculinity (Acker, 1990). As such, it is important to conduct research exploring a feminised occupation based within arguably inherently masculine organisations. Whilst HR is a clear example of such; there remains minimal existing research exploring gender within the HR occupation. Furthermore, the small amount of literature on the topic is predominantly quantitative. The following discussions allow for an understanding of the micro-level perceptions of HR practitioners and how they understand the interplay between gender and legitimacy to shape HR.

This chapter begins by looking at the perceptions and experiences of practitioners with regard to diversity in HR. The ways in which gender in HR is seen to directly interplay with legitimacy are then addressed. The chapter then addresses how some participants perceived the notion of HR as the 'soft' side of management to be underpinned by gender. Following this, extracts from participants expressing, explicitly and implicitly, the need to alter their behaviour to adhere to gendered norms will be covered. Finally, as discussed in the previous chapter, participants viewed that those in senior HR positions were more likely to be men and also that many came from other areas of the business. This notion is continued in this chapter, focusing on the gendered perceptions and experiences in relation to senior HR.

5.2 Diversity in HR, or "it's a load of women and the odd man"

The topic of diversity in HR was initially brought to participants in a broad way so as to allow them to discuss any areas of significance for them. Despite having the freedom to address any

demographic, all participants spoke predominantly about the female concentration in the HR occupation. However, from about half of the participants, there were also brief comments made regarding other demographics. Whilst this research focuses on gender, it is important not to neglect other areas of importance, whether distinct or intersecting, regarding diversity and equality in the HR occupation.

Ethnicity was mentioned by a small number of participants, but these responses were significantly mixed. A few participants noted that they felt HR lacked diversity with regard to minority ethnic groups, perceiving the majority of HR practitioners to be White,

> There tends to be a lower prevalence of ethnic minorities working in HR, than there does White staff... that would be my observation. – Female, HR Manager, Higher Education 2.

These views align with the statistics regarding minority ethnic groups in the HR occupation. As discussed in Chapter One, research states that in 2019, 9% of HR practitioners were BAME, this being slightly lower than the 12% of the total UK workforce (CIPD, 2021). Whilst not significantly so, this does show that the HR occupation is less ethnically diverse than the general workforce. However, an almost equal number of participants expressed that the HR functions they had worked in had been relatively diverse in terms of ethnicity. Some interviewees did state that they felt the ethnicity issue was broader than just HR, and aspects such as the location of the organisation had a significant influence over how ethnically diverse the organisation, including HR, was,

> I think the racial disparities are more pronounced in the north. But I guess that's in line with where ethnic minorities tend to be. So, yeah London's much more diverse. – Female, HR Advisor, Transportation.

> It doesn't help I live in... the area that I live in is, it's probably very white middle class, from that perspective, that's always going to drive it. With ethnicity and things. – Female, HR Business Partner, Automotive 5.

Aside from describing the diversity of the function, there were no other mentions of ethnicity throughout the interviews with regard to perceptions or experiences. However, it is recognised that this may be a reflection of the fact that the significant majority of participants were White and also potentially a result of myself, the researcher, being White. As noted in Chapter Three, the ethnicity

of participants is a reflection of those that responded to the calls for participation and also likely a reflection of the predominantly White HR workforce.

A small number of interviewees also noted sexual orientation. It is documented that sexual orientation can have significance for an individual's legitimacy and credibility in the workplace (Colgan & Rumens, 2014; Wright, 2016). However, the ways in which sexual orientation may impact legitimacy are also challenging to understand, given that sexual orientation may not be a visible part of an individual's identity at work due to the potentially high stakes of disclosure (Ragins et al., 2007; Wright, 2016). No participants spoke about their own sexual orientation, but there were a number of comments that, within the relatively small amount of men working in HR, they perceived there to be a higher proportion of gay men than they would expect. There is a lack of data regarding the sexual orientation of those working within the HR occupation. However, the views of practitioners do align with the existing research, which posits that gay men and lesbian women are often in professions and occupations traditionally associated with the opposite gender (Baumle et al., 2009). Aside from the comments below, with regards to the demographics of the HR occupation, sexual orientation was not mentioned any further in the interviews, indicating that whilst sexual orientation may have importance for individual legitimacy, it was not seen by participants to have significance in shaping perceptions of the HR occupation as a whole,

> I have worked with an awful lot of gay men in HR. And I don't know why that is. – Female, HR Business Partner, Further Education.

> So I give you a kind of stereotype which is lots of young girls and gay men [in HR]. Is that really true? Well, like say my last team was 250, 50 something in the UK. The guys who were in their 30s, who were business partners, probably all but one was gay. – Male, HR Director, Property.

When participants were asked about the diversity of HR, age was also seen to have relevance for a small number of participants. Again, the majority of these comments were within the context of describing the demographics of the HR occupation. Almost all comments on age noted that HR is a typically young and female occupation,

> You know, traditionally it's been a young female industry. And the demographics of my team support that. - Female, HR Manager, Higher Education.

> For some reason, the only applicants we get is white, young, female. - Female, HR Director, Transportation 5.

These participants did not go on to make any further comments with regards to age and legitimacy in the HR occupation. However, one participant spoke further about how he perceived age to have an impact on HR practitioner credibility,

> Let's just say… it's a bit ageist, but let's just say you're 23-year-old girl who's recently joined from university into an HR function, and you're kind of in there and you got to deal with someone who's, you know, struggling at work with performance, and they're somebody in their 40s, they're doing a reasonably good job there, you know, Head of Marketing somewhere in their 40s. They've got a mother with Alzheimers. They've got a teenage son who is autistic. And they've got real issues with their line manager and its potential for bullying. It all sounds a bit grim. And you're sat across from them, your 23, you have pretty much no life experience apart from getting utterly rat-arsed at the weekend. How do you deal with that? - Male, HR Director, Property.

The above quote shows how an individual's identities intersect and shape others' perceptions of them. The emphasis this participant put on both the gender and the age of the, possibly hypothetical, individual demonstrates that these both have significance in his understanding of the legitimacy of that individual. The quote, although perhaps not explicitly, shows how the credibility of an HR practitioner may be marginalised due to being both young and female.

However, another participant had a different view and perceived the typical HR practitioner to be one who is older in age. The participant, who requested the direct quote not to be used, shared that from her experience and her colleagues' experience with HR, they have noted that many HR practitioners are similar with regards to them being women, older in age, wearing similar clothes, and even often having the same name. This highlights the way in which their experiences have led to a creation of a stereotypical image of what an HR practitioner looks like.

The same participant also commented later in the interview on a similar point when discussing her new male boss that had been appointed,

> And he was by far the best person that we interviewed, he was, you know, really innovative, like, really exciting, really crazy. And I said explicitly, I said, if you want cultural change, he is the man we need to appoint, but we also interviewed three, for want of a better term like, cardigan wearing, older women who are also perfectly competent. – Female, Equality Manager, Emergency Services.

Whilst the comments on age were predominantly made in the context of describing the demographics of the HR occupation, the quotes from the two HR practitioners above do indicate that age intersects with gender to a certain extent in shaping the perception of the HR occupation. The ways in which age and gender intersect in professions is an under-researched area; nevertheless, it is acknowledged that age affects men and women differently with regards to privilege and disadvantage (Choroszewicz & Adams, 2019). A study by Adams (2019) on the engineering profession found that younger women (under 35) and older women (over 50) were most likely to experience discrimination in terms of their skills and abilities being discounted. This aligns somewhat with the anecdotal findings of this research. Whilst there were minimal comments from participants regarding age, the two comments above indicate that younger women in HR may face legitimacy issues due to a perceived lack of life experience, whereas older women in HR may face legitimacy issues due to a stereotype of lacking the excitement and innovation that other employees may be perceived to have.

The above findings have addressed the potential significance of ethnicity, sexual orientation and age in the understanding of the HR occupation. The following section focuses on gender in HR, but this is not aimed to discount the importance of the above. As noted, the topic of diversity was brought to participants in a broad way to give them the freedom to address any aspects they deemed of interest and importance. The findings above are the only references to ethnicity, sexual orientation, and age by participants, indicating that for many, gender is the standout diversity challenge for the HR occupation.

As addressed, the predominant focus from participants was on the gender imbalance in the HR occupation. The female concentration in HR was something that was apparent to all participants and something they all stated they had noticed in previous and current HR roles,

> I would say, roughly 75 to 80% female in the HR function. In the businesses I was in that were more engineering based, like construction, I would say perhaps a little bit more male presence, but never a bit beyond maybe a third at most. So it is definitely, for businesses I've been in, a predominantly female profession. – Male, HR Director, Financial Services.

> I do think HR is predominantly female, from where I've worked previously, where I work now, you know, you look at my LinkedIn network of HR contacts, I'd say the vast majority of them will be female. The events that you go to, networking events, female. – Female, HR Business Partner, Legal.

> In all the teams I've been in they've all been female, bar one. I've probably been in 5 roles and in those teams I had two male recruiters, so not even strictly HR, but all the others have been female. – Female, HR Director, Charity.

> It's not diverse, it's a load of women and the odd man. – Female, HR Director, Technology.

The extracts from HR practitioners regarding the female concentration in HR were largely expected. CIPD membership currently stands at 79% female to just 20% male (CIPD, 2020); therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that all participants expressed their awareness of the gender imbalance in HR.

Whilst all participants spoke about the concentration of women in the HR occupation, a number of interviewees also commented on the significance of both industry and HR roles on the gender composition of HR. The type of HR role or HR specialism was seen by a small number of participants to have significance in terms of gender. It was understood that those in HR administrative roles were more likely to be women, and, as can be seen from the quote below, the pool of applicants for these roles is seen to be skewed heavily towards women. These views align strongly with the data on women in HR administration, with CIPD stating that in 2019, 91% of HR administrative roles were held by women (CIPD, 2021). This inevitably has links to the proportions of women and men in junior and senior HR roles, given that administrative roles are

often entry-level. The prevalence of women in junior HR positions will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter,

> The administrator role... the last time that we recruited for that I don't think we interviewed one single man for it. And when I am recruiting for my own team, I do it by the book, make your little matrix of what am I looking for and compare each CV. And I do try to run a good, rigorous, unbiased recruitment process. But yeah, we didn't, we didn't interview a single man for that, for that role. I had more male applicants for the L&D roles. - Female, HR Director, Charity 5.

As can be seen in the quote above, the participant also notes that she has had more men apply for roles in learning and development. This sets aside the influence of seniority and indicates that men may be seen to be clustered in specific HR specialities. This participant was not the only one to note this, and four other interviewees stated that they felt there were a higher proportion of men in learning and development roles as opposed to HR as a whole. The same was also said for employee relations and reward roles. Based on participant comments, it appeared to be unsurprising to many that men were predominantly in these areas, and interviewees seemed to acknowledge that these are more 'masculine' areas of HR,

> The exceptions are employee relations, you see more males in the area that specialise in employee relations. Traditionally, dealing with the unions was seen as a man's game. - Female, HR Manager, Higher Education.

The industry was also seen to have importance in terms of how male or female-dominated the industry is, with one practitioner stating that, from her experience, the industry seemed to have more influence than the type of HR role. A small number of participants perceived that the more male-dominated the industry was, the more male HR practitioners there were likely to be. However, as the quote below indicates, even in these examples, participants emphasised that this did not result in a majority of men or even an equal number of men and women in HR,

> Yeah, I guess actually where there have tended to be more males, and so I don't mean a majority of men, I just mean there are more men than in other areas, that tends to have been particular to the industry rather than actually a particular discipline. So for example, again

> in law firms or financial services there have been more men, whereas in one of the charities I worked for, the department was entirely female. - Female, Diversity and Inclusion Manager, Legal 3.

With gender being the standout demographic for participants in terms of diversity, there were a number of reasons proposed as to why HR may be so significantly tipped towards women. These reasons ranged from the barriers, such as caring responsibilities, that women face in the workplace to ingrained gender stereotypes of the HR occupation.

The barriers for women in the workforce were addressed in some interviews, predominantly focusing on the idea that HR may be an occupation that is more accessible to women with children or caring responsibilities. The reasons for such included that, from their experiences, there appeared to be a higher than average number of part-time HR practitioners but also the idea that HR may be a 'simpler role' than some alternative occupations and therefore of more appeal to women with caring responsibilities,

> You know, it's a pretty straightforward role… within a HR function. I think that can be very appealing for people that have caring responsibilities, who are way more likely to be women. – Female, Equality Manager, Emergency Services.

Whilst there were some suggestions that gendered caring responsibilities may have an impact on the demographics of HR, the significant majority of participants spoke about the perceptions of HR and who may be deemed most suitable for such a role. Gender stereotyping and how this fits with stereotypes of the HR occupation was spoken about frequently throughout interviews, much of which is discussed further below. However, many participants spoke directly about the fact that they perceived gender stereotypes to be the principal reason for the gender imbalance in HR. These stereotypes most often refer to the idea that women are reported to be more 'nurturing' and 'caring', which is seen to align with perceptions of the HR role,

> There's probably a lot of stereotypes going on. It's seen as a soft side of management and all the historical softer skills around empathy and compassion… which don't tend to be male gendered terms within society – Female, Head of HR, Higher Education.

> There's still a bit of the, you know, certain jobs are for women and certain jobs are for men. So nursing is women, boardroom is men etc. – Female, HR Business Partner, Legal.

> Women are just reported to be more nurturing. That's where we get the women from. – Female, HR Advisor, Shipping.

The above quotes were from participants who emphasised that there is a perception or stereotype that women are more suited to HR. However, there were also a small number of interviewees who viewed this less as a stereotype and more as a truth about the inherent characteristics of men and women. These participants largely argued that biology means that sexes are typically stronger in certain areas, empathy and soft skills being viewed as one area in which females are stronger. These views are significant as, whilst many participants viewed these associations as a stereotype, these participants perceived that not only does the biological differences in the sexes contribute to occupational segregation, but it also leads to females being better suited and more competent in the HR role,

> And just, you know... and I'm quite a firm believer in biology generally in that, you know, there is a certain proportion of a female brain that is more attuned to the softer stuff. If you talk about- if you talk all about averages and generalisations. If you took a massive generalisation of women. Female characteristics and male characteristics. You know, the female characteristics do have more of the kind of the softer skills and things like that. And there will always be outliers to that, always. - Female, HR Business Partner, Automotive 5.

> Generally, the female race is more empathetic. And in fact, I went to a dignity and inclusion conference a few weeks ago, and there was a genetics lady, science woman from [university]. Can't remember her name, but she basically stood up and went... according to science, men are built like this, and women are built like this, and you can't change it. So, she said, when you're trying to do D&I programmes, there's an element of some things you're never going to change. She said it is as black and white and as scientific as that... women are more empathetic and do suit more people related roles as a norm, you know, if you were to be scientific about it. You know, so I think there is an element of that. - Female, HR Director, Financial Services 3.

> I've worked a lot on the inclusion and diversity agenda. I try not to think that males have common characteristics and females have common characteristics. I think it's more common for a female to be in a role that's supportive and caring because women have children so their hormones are naturally supporting them to be caring for that. I think that women are more inclined to care about what makes people successful and how we can support them, supporting the teams in the organisation to be more successful. - Female, HR Business Partner, Manufacturing 3.

The history of HR was also brought up as a potential explanation for the gender imbalance. A small number of participants referenced both the early welfare stage of HR and also the personnel stage, perceiving that the numerical concentration of women has been a continuation from then,

> I would just put it down to like I said, the history of the profession. And I think from my view would just be down to this history, just because of how HR initially started and I think it was started more on women were handling the people, majority of people in those are women. And kind of that's how it kind of evolved - Male, HR Advisor, Charity.

Finally, the way in which people entered the HR occupation was also seen to have implications on the gender concentration in HR. As noted in the previous chapter, HR is seen as an occupation many people fall into and is less of a vocation or calling than some of the more traditional professions. However, out of those that stated they fell or drifted into HR, there was a disproportionate number of women. Whilst only a small number of men were interviewed, only one stated the view that he somewhat drifted into HR, and all other male participants spoke about an intentional entry to the occupation. From those that drifted into HR, a number came from roles such as PA or general administration, which are historically predominantly female occupations. This, therefore, provides another potential cause for the gender imbalance in HR. The quotes below depict two women who have entered HR from such a career path,

> I got into the HR profession by accident. I was a PA working to cover someone's maternity leave, who was a PA in the HR team. When she came back from maternity leave, she decided she didn't want to go back full time. A vacancy arose in the team and I applied for it. It was absolutely by accident and I got qualifications to move up the ranks, and here I am. - Female, HR Business Partner, Manufacturing 3.

> I had a very traditional mother who had sent me- when I did my A level I also did typing, because they would always need typists. So I went, I went and did some sort of routine sort of office jobs for a while. And then was lucky enough to get an office management position that had a focus on HR. And then from then... CIPD, and the rest is history. - Female, HR Director, Property 2.

The views that interviewees hold about the female concentration in HR are addressed more in the coming sections; however, at a broad level, it appeared that the majority of participants hold some level of concern at the lack of gender diversity in HR. Most interviewees noted that they had noticed the predominance of women in the occupation and that they felt there should be more of a gender balance. However, a number of participants also spoke about HR being overlooked in terms of its lack of diversity. The extract below, by a female HR manager in higher education, illustrates how in certain industries, more focus is seen to be given to diversity in other areas of the organisation. This participant perceives this to be where the public interest is,

> I mean I'm not saying that's right, so I'm very much of the view that we should be applying the same principles ourselves as we would advise others. But I think if you look at the HE sector, for example, you've only got to look at the headlines in the news to know that what the public are interested in is the number of male and female academics and female and male Vice-chancellor and Pro-vice-chancellors – Female, HR Manager, Higher Education 2.

5.3 The 'soft' side of management, or "she's just the people person"

In discussing their initial concerns regarding the gender imbalance of the occupation, many comments were made explicitly stating that they felt the gender composition had a negative effect on the occupation. Approximately a third of participants made direct references to the female concentration in HR, contributing to a devaluing of HR and a lack of legitimacy for the function. The extracts below are from participants who expressed this view explicitly,

> I still think, unfortunately, there's an element of the job that's predominantly female, therefore, in some people's eyes attaches a lower importance, you know, credibility, because they've come from a traditional male ego type view of roles. So I think I think it

> has, it does have still negative impact on the actual profession. – Male, HR Director, Financial Services.
>
> Absolutely. I think it's [the demographics of HR] part of it being devalued as a profession – Female, Recruitment Specialist, Freelance.

The notion of HR being a 'soft side of management' and this being associated with women was mentioned in the majority of interviews. It was also apparent that, for most, this 'soft' side was not viewed as desirable and contributed to a devaluation of HR. This was often directly opposed to the 'hard' or 'strategic' aspects of business, such as engaging in strategic and financial work.

The supportive aspect of HR was drawn upon frequently in interviews, and arguably 'maternal' terminology was used to describe this element of the role. 'Hand holding', 'reassuring', and 'caring' were common terms used by participants. This kind of rhetoric often indicated a subservient role for HR in that they are there to support the individuals who are running the organisation,

> Sometimes our HR team are working with people who are complaining or you know, that have raised a grievance, and they have to be really sensitively taken through those processes. And actually, that hand holding that you have to do, I say that tentatively, because I don't want to use gendered terms. – Female, Equality Manager, Emergency Services.
>
> I think a big part of my role is just being a sounding board for managers. I spend a lot of my day going 'there there'… but in a nice and constructive way. – Female, HR Advisor, Shipping.
>
> You have to go back and say [to line managers], "well, okay. I'll walk you through this and hold your hand as you go through this process, and then, next time you do it, you can do it yourself to become a bit more independent. – Female, HR Director, Financial Services 3.

The construction of HR as a mothering role and the use of maternal language was also directly addressed by participants that felt the organisation viewed them in that light. One participant felt that the organisation viewed the function as a mother and teacher and a function that needed to adhere to their expectations. Another participant recalls when her former HR director was referred

to as having been a mother to her colleagues. Both of these participants spoke about this topic with frustration, perceiving that women in authority are often reserved to the 'mothering role',

> I remember when she [previous HR director] resigned, and I stepped up. I remember him [the organisation founder] saying to me, ‘oh, [name] has been a little mother to us all.’ And I was listening and thinking, ‘not me!’ You have a woman in authority, and she was not married, and she didn't have any children. But seen in terms of what, you know what stereotype is there for a woman in some position of authority? It is the mum. So, I think that goes on everywhere. – Female, HR Director, Charity 5.

> I think the way in which the perception of the function is means that the behaviour is almost like 'I expect you to be my mum and my teacher, and I expect you to kind of pick up and do things. – Female, HR Director, Property 2.

Other potentially gendered terminology came up frequently. There appeared to be a language ascribed to the HR occupation that associated it with 'femininity' and 'soft' management. The terms 'soft' and 'fluffy' came up multiple times with regards to the perception of HR, and the phrase 'tea and tissues' (or a slight variation) also came up numerous times from participants. Again, this was largely seen in a negative light by participants, and many felt such gendered perceptions of the function were hindering HR's credibility and legitimacy. Many women spoke directly about experiencing situations whereby the perceived 'softness' and gendering of HR appeared to result in a devaluing of HR by those outside of the function. The following two extracts are from women who were asked in their organisations to take notes in a senior meeting and to make the teas and coffees for their managing director. In describing these stories, both women seemed to attribute their experiences partially to their gender and also due to a devaluing of HR and it not being taken seriously as a function. The first quote has been referenced previously in Chapter Four when discussing that some participants feel the so-called ‘soft’ aspects of HR are important to the role. However, the participant went on to address that this does not help with the credibility of the occupation.

> I will say that kind of stereotype of the 'tea and tissues', sometimes that's necessary... and I do like that being part of my job... that welfare piece, but I don't think it helps. Like I have

been in a meeting and someone said, 'can you take the notes?' and I said 'are you really asking the only woman in the room to take the notes?' – Female, Head of HR, Technology.

Interviewer: And do you see that as being to do with gender or to do with HR?

I don't know, but I do think because HR isn't seen as that strategic role, you are the person that has to push back on that kind of thing. 'I'm not making the tea or taking the notes, no, sorry.' – Female, Head of HR, Technology.

I'm not just the girl from HR, I've worked bloody hard. I've got good knowledge and I'm qualified to do a proper job, not just making the tea. I had an MD once who when his PA was away came into the HR office and asked me to make teas and coffees as he was having a business meeting… I was the only other female on the premises, and he clearly couldn't make his own tea and coffees. – Female, Employee Relations Specialist, Utilities.

The extract below also comes from a woman in a senior HR position who perceived that the 'softer skills' of HR resulted in a male colleague from the finance function undermining both her and the HR function more broadly. The anecdote provided in this quote is of interest as it is not explicitly gendered in itself. The finance colleague within this quote downplays the importance of the HR function and the 'people' aspect on which it focuses; however, makes no comment on gender. The interviewee, however, utilises the term 'just the lady, isn't she' when sharing the story. As such, it is evident that for her, gender is seen to be significant in how others perceive both her and the HR function, but whether this is an accurate depiction of the colleague's view is unclear. As detailed in Chapter Four, there are numerous reasons for which HR practitioners feel the function is devalued and whilst some may be underpinned by gender, others, such as HR being a cost control rather than a profit-making function, may simply be a reflection of the function's role. Nevertheless, the way in which the interviewee chose to incorporate gender in this anecdote indicates the significance it has on HR practitioners' understandings of the occupation, whether or not this is reflected in those outside the function. This quote is a clear example of the ways in which gender and legitimacy interplay to shape the perceptions and experiences of those working within the HR occupation,

> Well, the finance guy here, he's a very young, ambitious guy. He's incredibly generous with his time, he's a real pleasure to work with. He the other day was talking about me to somebody else, who is another senior person, and says 'yeah but [name] is just the people person'. So I said to him 'hello, that undermines me'. And he apologised. He said he's sorry, that wasn't his intent. What he was trying to do, was say 'this is me coming from a cost control element' and 'this is [name] coming from a broader people element'. Yeah but obviously the way in which he delivered that message undermined me, because people… softer skills… just the lady isn't she, empathy, caring and sharing, not worried about the bottom line. – Female, HR Director, Technology 2.

In a similar vein, the following quote from a female participant also emphasised the relevance of gender to her in terms of how the function is perceived. The participant makes no indication that gender has been brought into the conversation by others, but she wonders whether gender is shaping their views. Again, this quote showcases the ways in which gender may influence how HR practitioners perceive the legitimacy of themselves and the occupation,

> Yeah, about the attitude that people might have about the seriousness of the work or HR's ability to connect with a commercial agenda and things like that. I just feel like those are fairly common biases in people's minds about women, whether they're true or not. And I feel quite strongly that an attack that's made on HR, whatever an accusation that's made towards HR departments a lot is that they don't understand the commerciality of the business and I'm not sure how fair that is actually. But I just don't know if that's a biased perception that women don't get the numbers or something. I feel that, disproportionately, HR departments are challenged as to how much they understand the commercialities of the business. - Female, Diversity and Inclusion Manager, Legal 3.

5.4 Enacting gender, or "leave it to the fluffy people person"

Seemingly in response to the gendered constructions of the HR role, many women who were interviewed spoke directly about changing the ways in which they worked to align with how they perceived men to act in organisations. The following extract, by a female HR manager, illustrates how masculine behaviours are perceived to result in more success, particularly at a senior level,

> I mean there is great diversity in the different female leaders. But traditionally, to be successful at the top table as a female, you have to replicate quite male behaviours. And so, you know, it's hard to tell whether it's more about the style than the gender. – Female, HR Manager, Higher Education

'Male behaviours' were discussed by a number of female participants when sharing their experiences of being in meetings and networking with men, particularly men in senior positions. A common thread was the perception that, from their experiences, men are disproportionately heard as opposed to women,

> So he'd be in a room with a bunch of women, and yet he is senior to them, but his voice was disproportionately heard. It was a noticeable thing that the feminists talk about and women's voices not being heard and a man's voice being disproportionately heard and I would just notice that as a thing. - Female, HR Change Partner, Council.

The following interviewee makes a very similar point to the one above. However, she takes a stronger stance that, in her experience, men's voices being disproportionately heard is a result of arrogance,

> But I would say that there is probably 30% of them are men. And I can guarantee you, every time I go [network meeting], the 30% of the men do 90% of the talking. And you sit there and they're not necessarily saying anything different from what the women would say, they're not like, you know, I don't know, big thinkers, more senior, got more value added. But for some reason, they feel more confident in speaking up. Actually I don't think it's confidence, I think it's arrogance. So whereas the rest of the women are looking around the table thinking I'd like to add some value here and I could do that. They're being considered, mindful of everybody else, listening to the person that's speaking and while generating their thought process with regards to what they would like to say to add value. But some bloke's popped up and said whatever the fuck he wants to really loud, leaning forward, dominating the room. - Female, HR Director, Technology 2.

With many participants perceiving that HR, as a 'space for female inclusion', is inherently devalued, some female participants spoke of adopting 'masculine' ways of working in an attempt

to counteract this. As discussed in Chapter Two, the belief that 'masculine' ways of working are valued above those associated with the 'feminine' is in line with the theory of gendered organisation (Acker, 1990). To ascribe to the 'masculine' ideals of work is to essentially 'do gender' in organisations (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Butler, 2004).

The predominant theme from female HR practitioners was that HR currently needs 'strong' individuals willing to shout their position and push back. Whilst this in itself may not be explicitly 'masculine', the findings showed that many practitioners referred to this way of working as the way many men act in organisations,

> If you're not strong then you're going to retreat back into yourself… if someone has a go at me, I will have a go right back. – Female, HR Business Partner, Food Manufacturing.

To some women in this study, the ability to enact the masculine behaviours at times and also enact the more subservient and feminine norms at other points was seen as a skill. The participant below explains how she personally struggles to enact herself any differently but can see how effective it is when others do it and views it as a skill,

> I can see the power of it when other people do it. So my CEO, for example, is going through this transition with a guy that would consider himself to be a very senior and influential person within the organisation. And the way that she interacts with him is significantly different to the way she interacts with everybody else, And it is because of that individual and the arrogance of that individual and them thinking they're more important than her. And so for her to be able to flip, to doing it in the way that he prefers, it's been immense. So I wish I had some of those skills but unfortunately I'm just like this. – Female, HR Director, Technology 2.

For another woman interviewed, the ability to choose when to play the 'masculine' side, by being assertive and speaking up, or the 'feminine' side, by playing up to gendered stereotypes of HR, was also seen as a strategic approach,

> I do sometimes say 'leave it to the fluffy people person.' As you can imagine, this is as an engineering company, very male dominated. In the management team, I'm the only woman. You need to understand, depending on the situation, depending on the person that you're

> talking to, depending on when you need to play the strong role. – Female, HR Manager, Manufacturing 2.

As shown in the examples above, for several women interviewed, choosing the enact the feminine norms expected or choosing to enact the masculine ideals of the organisation is perceived as a necessity and a skill in the workplace.

The same female HR manager as above, however, did express her dislike of being seen to enact 'male behaviours' and perceived that her approach should be taken as strength as opposed to acting like another gender,

> The problem is if you have a strong woman, they'll say that you're acting masculine, but you're not acting masculine, you're just strong in your opinion… If you're saying things in a strong way or a firm way, then you get from other people a perception that you're different from a man doing the same thing. If I push back because I think that something is wrong, I don't act like man, I just act as a strong woman. - Female, HR Manager, Manufacturing 2.

There was little comment on the theme of 'acting masculine or feminine' by the male participants of this study, this perhaps indicating that the men within the study felt no requirement to alter their behaviour in order to gain acceptance amongst colleagues. However, one male HR freelancer interviewed did express a view that the enactment of male behaviours by women is something that he' hopes is coming to an end'. His rationale for this was that he would prefer to see women valued for the skills they have rather than enact male norms,

> I think there was a period of time, hopefully, it's coming to an end, where women seemed to get on in organisations by pretending to be men. So they would dress like men, they would speak aggressively, they would, you know, be tough and mean with people. And it's like they thought they have to, to present themselves in that way in order to survive in a male dominated culture. – Male, Learning and Development Specialist, Freelance.

The findings show that in some scenarios, women actively portray an image of themselves which adheres to the expected 'feminine' role. For instance, as outlined above when a woman tells her colleagues in a male-dominated organisation to let her handle the 'fluffy stuff', this, from her

perception, appears to have a positive impact on her relationship with them and allows her to influence via 'coming in through the side'. This can partially be explained through the understanding that enacting what are seen to be 'masculine behaviours' comes with a risk as it may challenge the gender norms that have become accepted and embedded within the organisation (Fournier & Kelemen, 2001). As noted, a male HR practitioner appeared critical of women's attempts to 'act masculine' in organisations and viewed this in a negative light. To avoid challenging the gendered order in organisations, women may choose to present themselves in what is seen to be a more acceptable organisational image (Marshall, 1995).

The theme of women having to strategically decide what approach to adopt in organisations also highlights what may be seen as the natural conflict in HR roles. There is a need to act the 'soft, supportive, subservient' role to the organisation at points and a need to act as a 'strong character' who pushes back at other times. However, it is important to note the lack of this theme within the interviews with male HR practitioners, thus suggesting there is an expectation of women to perform gender in an appropriate and considered manner, often needing to correctly balance the masculine and feminine (Kelan, 2010) as opposed to men who are not under this level of scrutiny. This does therefore suggest that the tensions identified in this research are perhaps relevant more so to who is doing the occupation rather than the occupation itself.

5.5 Gender and seniority, or "you've got the token on the end"

It has been well established within gender and organisations literature that organisational ideals have been constructed around 'male norms' (Acker, 1990; Witz, 1992). This is particularly emphasised in senior positions in organisations which have also been constructed around notions of 'masculinity' (Mavin et al., 2014). This has been illustrated through the perceptions of many women in HR that masculine norms, traits, and attitudes need to be adopted in order to advance and succeed in organisations. As discussed, the gendered concepts of commerciality and strategy have become viewed as essential criteria for a credible senior HR practitioner. This has resulted in a perceived increase in horizontal moves to senior HR positions, and it has also resulted in a perception that men are more likely to achieve these positions.

A key original finding of this research is surrounding perceptions of gender in the most senior HR positions. This is also a finding that is of significance to participants. Perceived issues surrounding

gender and seniority in HR should, perhaps, have been anticipated by myself, given that horizontal and vertical gender segregation are often concurrent in occupations and professions (Woodfield, 2007). However, there is currently little existing literature considering the inextricable link between commerciality, gender, and seniority in HR.

The link between gender and the senior levels of HR seems to be inextricable and, in many of the interviews, the issues surrounding seniority in HR were brought up through conversations about gender. As addressed earlier within the chapter, there is clear awareness among HR practitioners as to the concentration of women in the HR occupation. There were a small number of interviewees who perceived this concentration of women to extend into the senior levels of HR, however, they were in the minority. Most participants noted that when progressing up the HR career path, the number of men and women in senior HR roles appears to 'balance out', with some suggesting it may go further and tip toward there being more men than women in the head of HR and HR director positions,

> In the HR team, seniority is interesting. So the assistant director is a man, the head of recruitment is a man, the head of training is a man. – Female, Equality Manager, Emergency Services.

> Yeah, director level and kind of head of level sometimes you get more men than women. So I reported into quite a number of male HRDs rather than female, but it probably varies a bit sector by sector. – Female, HR Business Partner, Charity 4.

> Predominantly female in all of the organisations I've worked in. But then the more senior you go, the more equal proportion in terms of gender. – Female, Change Partner, Automotive 3.

As can be seen above, one participant notes that they perceive the sector to have a potential influence on the number of men and women in senior HR positions. As shown in Chapter Three, in this research, 21 of those interviewed were in senior HR positions, five of whom were men. The women in senior positions were from the public, private and voluntary sectors across a wide variety of industries, both typically male and female-dominated, such as; automotive, financial services, charity, and higher education, amongst others. However, it is important to note that the five men

interviewed in senior HR positions were solely in the private sector in; financial services, property, and automotive.

The explanations put forward by participants as to why gender balances out, or even tips towards more men, at senior levels varies from caring responsibilities to biases in the selection process of senior HR. The two extracts below show the perceptions of two women interviewed that there is a potential bias in the recruitment of senior HR roles. Both women express that it is the board and the CEO that are likely to select the most senior HR practitioner, and due to the male concentration on boards, this leads to a potential bias. This bias was viewed as men recruiting in their own image,

> One of the things that would be interesting to think about is recognising that again, historically, there have been more male CEOs and more male board members than that have female whether there is any unconscious bias when it comes to selection, because I strongly suspect there is, I have no evidence to back this up but… – Female, HR Manager, Higher Education 2.

> So, if you look at a stereotypical board, the top one is a man and then like 95% of them are men reporting into them and then you've got the token on the end… But men recruit in their own image, I've been up against it my whole career, where you will be with a man and he'll say 'oh yeah but she's likely to have children' and that shit still happens. - Female, HR Director, Technology 2.

An alternative explanation was provided by a male HR practitioner who suggested that the most senior HR position may be incompatible with the hours and lifestyle that women may want or require,

> I think also it goes to the much wider, broader questions about the nature of senior jobs whether it's HR director or anything, and how compatible being a senior person is, with just the kind of lifestyle, crazy hours and other things – Male, HR Director, Financial Services.

The above quote aligns with Hakim's (1995) preference theory, addressed in Chapter Two, in that it perceives women to choose to avoid the more senior positions in organisations for various reasons. As addressed in Chapter Two, preference theory has been widely critiqued, and it is

posited that it also has less relevance when referring to the most senior positions in an organisation as, by this time, women have established their ambition and ability to progress (Bushell et al., 2020). It is also important to note that the most senior positions in organisations are not always recruited and selected in the typical approach. This can be seen in Chapter Four, whereby all those who made a horizontal career change to senior HR positions described their selection as untypical or the selection process as a 'tick box exercise'. As such, access to these senior positions may be highly dependent on networks (Bushell et al., 2020). One senior female HR addressed this and shared that having visibility at the senior level is important but often involves having to bond with male colleagues,

> If you're going to be appointed by senior management, senior management needs to be aware of you. And therefore visibility, be that going out for drinks after work, be that being able to join the golf day be that- there are certain activities in some organisations, where being one of the boys helps you stand out. And I've known some very good HR female practitioners that make sure they're good at golf, for example, so that they can hold their own and be there too. And when it's automatically assumed that it's going to be boys only, they can put their hand up, and say 'I wouldn't mind doing that. I've got a pretty good handicap'. - Female, HR Director, Financial Services 4.

There were many participants that also spoke about how they were unsure as to whether explanations such as biases in selection or challenges regarding balancing caring responsibilities at senior levels were the reason for the large number of men in senior HR or whether it was the occurrences, as discussed above, of individuals entering HR from other organisational functions,

> And I think that's why a lot of men get top jobs in HR; they get moved across from other functions. – Female, HR Director, Charity 5.

For a number of participants, these two factors seemed to contribute simultaneously to the number of men in senior HR positions. As the participant below explains, there is seen to be an element of needing the operational experience to succeed in the senior role, but she perceives there also to be an underlying gender bias,

> My experience tells me that it tends to be that if a guy has got into the HR job it's because they've come from an operational background and the justification for putting them in there is that you can't do that strategic HR director job without having operational experience. Yeah you're in a Catch 22… But I don't think it's solely on the basis of the fact I've got an operational background… I think it's because they're a man recruited by a man.– Female, HR Director, Technology 2.

For one female HR freelancer, the predominance of men in senior levels and the horizontal moves into HR culminated in frustration that both women and HR are not perceived as legitimate at the senior levels of organisations. For this participant, a 'true HR person' was one who had experience in the occupation as opposed to the rise in individuals coming in with little to no HR background,

> Because it just makes me feel... okay so we have to have a man heading up to legitimise this function? But they can't actually be a true HR person. – Female, Recruitment Specialist, Freelance.

As discussed, Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organisations has been utilised as a framework for this research. If we are to accept Acker's position that organisation ideals are inherently masculine, it is perhaps unsurprising that the experiences of HR practitioners have led to perceptions that the feminised, in both a numerical and a socially constructed sense, the HR function is seen as peripheral in organisations. Furthermore, to accept Acker's framework is to acknowledge that the HR function may continue to struggle with its legitimacy and credibility whilst it maintains an image of the 'feminine'. This does, therefore, perhaps provide a rationale for the intense focus that academic, practitioner and CIPD literature has given to transforming HR into an influential and strategic partner to the organisation. It also may provide an understanding as to why so many of the women within this research expressed wanting to be seen as a 'strategic business partner' and using commercial language to influence in organisations.

However, the extent to which adopting this commercial, strategic, and potentially 'masculine' discourse is seen to have a positive impact on the occupation's legitimacy is limited. Whilst the HR occupation still retains a perception of being 'feminised', whether this is through the numerical female concentration or the gendering of certain elements of the HR role, attempts to adopt a more masculine discourse may run the risk of undermining the legitimacy further.

The work of Reichel et al. (2009) has demonstrated that the gender of the HR director is statistically significant in terms of the function's status in the organisation, this being that the function is more likely to have higher status with a male HR director. It could, therefore, be argued that the horizontal career changes to HR, which from participant experiences appear predominantly male, will provide a boost to HR legitimacy. However, whilst the occupation is trying to transform itself into one that is seen to be more commercial and strategic, having senior HR practitioners that have pre-existing legitimacy in this aspect creates challenges when the strategic input of HR is downplayed by them. Through having this pre-existing legitimacy on an individual level, it appears that these practitioners are less concerned about HR's influence and involvement in strategy than women that have been in the occupation for the majority of their careers. These senior practitioners who have transitioned in have also expressed the view that 'anyone can do HR'. There is, therefore, the possibility that the perceived legitimacy of HR will ultimately be further reduced by those who have entered the occupation at this senior point, and further emphasis may be given to the notion that HR does not constitute 'real business'.

As noted, most participants perceived gender at senior levels to be relatively balanced but viewed this in a negative light given the predominance of women in low to mid-levels of HR. However, there were a small number of participants that viewed HR to be a positive example of women being able to reach senior positions. These perceptions were significantly skewed towards the men who were interviewed. The extracts below are from two male HR practitioners who perceive, from their experiences in the occupation, that HR is an occupation where women are able to reach senior levels and be taken seriously,

> I've worked with a lot of female HR directors. So we're progressing in the right direction, I think they have a lot of influence. – Male, HR Business Partner, Charity.

> We [the HR occupation] line up very well in terms of gender split. There are professional fields where it's difficult for women to be taken seriously and reach top levels, HR has never felt like that. – Male, HR Consultant.

Another male HR practitioner shared the view that HR was an example of an occupation where many women are able to reach senior levels. Whilst this statement was made casually, this highlights the pervasive gendering of senior positions in organisations and that there remains an

acknowledgement that women comparatively struggle to reach senior positions in organisations. However, this person also perceived the number of women in senior HR to be a 'balancing mechanism' to counteract the concentration of men in other senior positions. This view is in contrast to the perceptions depicted above of several women who believed that men are prioritised at the senior HR level,

> The concentration of women does progress up. But then again, it gives you that balance. You've got a senior person who is a woman. cynically, I've ticked that box. But let me say that they're very, very good at what they do. But I think it's sometimes… I think that can be to the detriment of our female colleagues, if you know, we need a female at that level. And that's the wrong driver. – Male, Head of HR, Automotive.

The perception that a woman at the senior level is likely to be the HR person was also addressed by a small number of other individuals. Some viewed this in a negative light, perceiving that women will be taken more seriously at senior levels when they are from a multitude of functions and not always HR. The extract below is from a female HR manager who was discussing the ways in which male behaviours are the norm at senior levels,

> I think [it will improve] as more females get seats in the top table and not just with the HR hat on? Yeah, because I think that that used to be the thing, probably the only female that would... well first there was no females around the top table. Then when a female was allowed, it was you know, they would be the HR, they would be the people person around the table. – Female, HR Manager, Higher Education.

A similar view was taken by a female HR business partner. Whilst having women in senior positions was seen as a positive, there was a concern that the women may be perceived simply as the welfare side whilst men get on with 'the business',

> I think it's a double edged sword. Yes, it allows women to get potentially to that senior level. But, you know, are they then seen as the, you know, looking after the welfare side of things, while the guys get on with business. It's important that the HR person at the table, no matter their gender, is seen as cooperating with and committing, contributing as much to the business side of things and the risk management side of things as everybody else

> around the table. So there's, there's a risk that that becomes seen as the only way in for women. – Female, HR Business Partner, Property 3.

The following extract is from an interview with a female HR director who took a slightly different stance and explained that if the 'HR route' is how they need to get to the top, then that is still beneficial for women's position in organisations,

> All of those things are enabling us to be more… better placed in an organisation. If that means that we're doing it via the HR route, fair enough. Who gives a shit, as long as we get to the top. – Female, HR Director, Technology 2.

This perceived space for women in organisations has occasionally been viewed as a positive within the literature, in that the obvious association with 'femininity' may 'protect' the function for women (Anker & Melkas, 1998; Burjek & Rafter, 2017). As shown above, this view was provided by a small number of participants in this research who posited that HR was a good space for women to advance in management and that it provided a 'balancing mechanism' to make up for the male dominance in many other business functions. However, these views were predominantly expressed by the men in the study, and many women noted that the association of HR as a 'space for women' has not been beneficial for HR's legitimacy and credibility. HR, as a form of female inclusion, also risks giving the surface-level impression of equality and therefore blinding people to the ways in which it further perpetuates gender constructions in organisations (Davies, 1996). The comments made in interviews about senior women in HR being a 'tick box' to give the impression of diversity at the board level demonstrate this.

5.6 Summary

The awareness of gender and the extent to which it may impact understandings of HR and HR legitimacy has been evidenced throughout the chapter. HR practitioners were all acutely aware of the gender imbalance in HR and also perceived gender to have an impact on perceptions of the function. The findings also demonstrate the nuance in understanding participant perceptions of legitimacy and gender. The chapters have detailed how adhering to the 'soft' or 'feminine' perception of HR may actually be seen to boost credibility on an individual level and allow participants to forge relationships with the wider organisation. Despite this, there remains a clear

view among practitioners that this 'soft' or 'feminine' view does not align with the aspirational view of a credible strategic organisational function.

A consideration of the differing perceptions between men and women in HR and also between those that have worked in the occupation the majority of their career and those that have entered the occupation at a senior level has also been provided in these chapters. The findings have shown differences with regard to strategic HR and whether this should be one of HR's core focuses with regard to improving legitimacy. Those who have worked in HR for the majority of their career, which were also largely the women within the study, placed significant importance on strategic HR, and many sought to construct their role around this. This differed significantly from those who entered the function later in their career, mainly the men within the study, who perceived strategic HR to be somewhat over-hyped and placed more emphasis on the importance of getting the day-to-day work done well. These differences in perception pose questions regarding whether being a woman and also having experienced legitimacy issues in HR for the majority of their career leads to a desire to adopt certain approach that holds the promise of enhanced legitimacy. This links back to the research questions of this study by demonstrating how gender interplays with legitimacy to shape the perceptions and lived experiences of HR practitioners. However, it also shows that differences in the perceptions and lived experiences of male and female HR practitioners.

Significant differences have also been shown regarding the skills, knowledge and background required for senior HR positions and how this ultimately affects HR legitimacy. Those who entered the function at a senior level, again predominantly men, perceived having broader business knowledge and acumen to be of importance and viewed HR-specific knowledge and skills as something that could be easily picked up once in the role. This inevitably causes challenges to the professionalisation of HR if the boundaries to the occupation are porous and HR expertise is not viewed as a requirement to enter the occupation.

This chapter has highlighted that, whilst the HR occupation may also have challenges regarding legitimacy more broadly, the importance of gender cannot be overlooked. The way in which gender influences the perceived legitimacy of the HR occupation has been shown by the interviewees with HR practitioners. Historical stereotypes of HR as a ‘caring’ and ‘soft’ management function appear

pervasive and are viewed by many practitioners as gendered. This perception has perpetuated the notion that the gender composition of the HR occupation hinders the extent to which it can be seen as a valued and legitimate management function. Furthermore, the ways in which the HR practitioners spoke about adopting 'male' or 'female' ways of working shows how gender is seen to play a factor in legitimacy. Finally, the interviews demonstrate that perceptions of men being more suited to the senior (and more legitimate) levels of organisations are present in the HR occupation. Collectively, these findings showcase the tensions that HR practitioners face in trying to navigate issues around both gender and legitimacy in the occupation, and the extent to which these concepts interplay.

The preceding two chapters have established that, in the views of participants, there is a clear interlink between gender and legitimacy in terms of how they understand the HR occupation. The following chapter will discuss these findings alongside the existing literature and further consider them in relation to the research questions.

CHAPTER SIX – DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify how the concepts of legitimacy and gender intersect in the HR occupation, leading to a further understanding as to how these may shape how HR is understood and how the role is experienced. This chapter includes a discussion of key findings related to the literature on how the HR occupation is understood with regards to legitimacy and how professionalisation is seen to relate to the legitimacy of the HR occupation. Also included is a discussion on how the findings of this study relate to the theory of gendered organisations. The chapter considers the gendered underpinnings of the concepts of legitimacy and professionalisation and how this has shaped the HR occupation for those working within it. The chapter concludes by detailing the contributions of this research, a discussion of the limitations of the study and consideration of areas for future research.

The previous two chapters have utilised extracts from the HR practitioner interviews to show the key areas of significance for interviewees when discussing their understandings and experiences within the HR function. This chapter now moves away from the detailed accounts presented in these chapters and considers how these broader themes, in conjunction with the existing literature, answer the key questions of this research stated below.

How do the concepts of legitimacy and gender shape understanding of the HR occupation?

In what ways are the perceptions and lived experiences of HR practitioners shaped by legitimacy and gender?

The empirical findings regarding how gender and legitimacy intersect to shape the understanding of HR and the experiences of those within the occupation were presented in two chapters; legitimacy and professionalisation of HR, and enters gender. Within these chapters, findings were further categorised into key tensions. In Chapter Four: a) caring or cost control, b) specialist expertise or broad business knowledge, c) strategic HR or operational work, d) HR professional or organisational champion, and e) occupational closure or commercial credibility. In Chapter Five, the findings presented were as follows: a) diversity in HR, b) HR as the 'soft' side of management, c) enacting gendered ideals, and d) gender and seniority in HR.

As discussed, some of the details of these findings were more prominent in certain demographic groups such as male or female, some were prominent in individuals with certain career paths, and some were more prominent in those in certain HR roles. These key themes provide an understanding of how the HR occupation is shaped and experienced by perceptions of gender and legitimacy.

6.1 Legitimacy

6.1.1 Understandings of legitimacy

As addressed in Chapter Two, there have been various perspectives introduced regarding how the concept of legitimacy can be studied (Suddaby et al., 2017). Through adopting a stance of legitimacy as an individual perception, this research has been able to explore the differences, tensions, and nuance in HR practitioners' understandings of legitimacy in their occupation. As demonstrated in Chapter Four, legitimacy evidently remains an ongoing concern for HR practitioners, and many of the early challenges surrounding the occupation's credibility continue to this day. It has been over 40 years since Legge (1978) first identified the three vicious circles in relation to the personnel occupation and almost 20 years since Guest and King (2004) argued that these challenges were still prevalent in the HR occupation. Legge's (1978) three vicious circles referred directly to the ongoing legitimacy and power challenges the HR function faces. Despite some literature, particularly practitioner literature, positing that HR has now found its footing as a strategic, commercial partner, the findings of this research show that practitioners are still grappling with many of the issues first posited by Legge. The first circle refers to the non-involvement of personnel in decision-making at this time, which in turn resulted in little influence in the planning of personnel-related issues. As such, this resulted in a perception of poor effectiveness from personnel and justified further exclusion from central decision-making. This study has shown that involvement in strategic decision-making is still a primary concern for HR practitioners. Whilst the rhetoric around the issue may have changed, the findings are clear in that there is a concern from HR practitioners about their involvement in business decision-making. The second vicious circle introduced by Legge can also still arguably be seen as present in the HR occupation. The second circle refers to uncertainty from personnel as to what denoted success for their function; there was, therefore, a lack of consensus as to what should be given priority. As

addressed previously, whilst the majority of women interviewed embraced the notion that strategic and commercial HR is a measure of success within HR work, a number of the men in senior positions downplayed the idea of strategic HR. This demonstrates there is still a lack of cohesion within the HR occupation as to what should be given primary focus. Within the findings of this study, the primary tensions surrounding legitimacy were regarding the perception of HR as a 'soft' side of management against the desire by HR practitioners for the occupation to be seen as commercial and strategic.

These tensions partially occur due to ideas being seen in the binary, and the distinction between 'soft' and 'hard' aspects of business, whereby 'softer' aspects of management do not equal commercial or strategic, identifying with the organisation means downplaying the professional identity, and to emphasise the importance of wider business knowledge means to diminish the specialist expertise narrative. It is clear that, for the majority of HR practitioners, their understandings of HR legitimacy are ones in which the occupation supports the organisation and is deemed credible and valuable by the organisation.

The above statement highlights that a unitarist perspective to employee relations appears to have been embraced by many HR practitioners. Extant literature has expressed concerns surrounding HR embracing a unitarist perspective and the way in which it is held accountable to management in the organisation (Van Buren III et al., 2011; Kochan, 2007). The fact that HR deals with what is typically the organisation's highest cost – labour - also places pressure on the function to focus on controlling and, in many cases reducing this cost. This pressure inevitably leads to a closer alignment with management and move away from activities that may be beneficial for employees (Van Buren III et al., 2011). The increased focus on HR demonstrating its strategic value to organisations has exacerbated these concerns. The introduction of the business partner role and focus on strategic involvement is argued to have resulted in an increased alignment with management and made balancing the needs of the employer and employee even more challenging for HR practitioners (Kochan, 2004; Keegan & Francis, 2010). Van Burren III et al. (2011, p. 209) posit that HR practitioners 'have made the shift to a strategic mindset. In so doing, they have marginalised employee-focused HRM responsibilities and ethics activities.' These phenomena were evident in this research, with most HR practitioners accepting or even embracing this unitarist view. It is important to note that within this study, HR practitioners did not necessarily neglect the

importance of the employee aspect of the HR role. However, there was an understanding that it is not what leads to legitimacy and credibility for the function. As noted in Chapter Four, there were comments from HR practitioners that in order to be successful in HR, one may need to downplay the 'people' aspect of the role. In this sense, it appears that many of the concerns in the literature are founded and that HR work is being reframed as a unitarist business issue.

This aspiration to move away from what is perceived as a caring function is not new to HR. Literature dating back to the early 1980s shows a desire for HR to engage further in commercial strategy (Kanter, 1983; Miles & Snow, 1984). However, it is evident that the Ulrich model, paired with a broader desire for strategic involvement, has shaped the understanding of the occupation for HR practitioners. As addressed in Chapter Two, Ulrich's (1995) three-legged stool has often been hailed as providing the HR occupation with a sense of legitimacy and allowing HR practitioners to engage with strategy (CIPD, 2020). As discussed, the purpose of the HR business partner role is, in part, to engage with organisational strategy. The significant number of HR practitioners supporting the business partner model (Kinsey, 2012) shows that the hegemony of Ulrich's work in academia has also translated into practice. Despite this, within the findings of this study, there was a lack of consensus among participants, including business partners, as to what strategic HR involves and what this looks like in their HR roles. Whilst a number of practitioners expressed that HR still involves an element of operational and transactional work, for some, there was an apparent attempt to distinguish between so-called transactional and operational HR and being a strategic HR partner. This demonstrates that, despite a lack of cohesive understanding as to what strategic HR is, it is evident that it shapes how practitioners understand the legitimacy of their own occupation.

6.1.2 Questioning strategic HRM

As shown in Chapter Four, views on embracing strategic HR were not universal, and a number of practitioners in the study thought that HR has over-focused on this aspect. The fact that predominantly men shared this view indicates the gendered underpinnings of legitimacy in HR, something that will be discussed later in the chapter. These differences in views of strategic HR challenge the literature that posits that HR practitioners have fully embraced the strategic HR rhetoric. The fact that these individuals are also disproportionately in senior HR positions calls into question the notion that strategic HR is the sole way in which HR will achieve legitimacy. As

addressed in Chapter Four, these participants have little interest in whether HR is seen to be a valued strategic partner. This is of interest as these participants did not appear to be concerned about the marginalising of employee interests but more of an indifference to whether HR is considered strategic. It can be argued that the desire for strategic HR is a wish to have more legitimate power in organisations; the nuance in views between the men and the women in this research poses the question as to whether the desire for strategic HR is only prevalent in those perceiving a lack of this power.

6.1.3 Horizontal moves to HR

As shown in Chapter Four, as a result of this need for commerciality, broader business skills were emphasised. Despite this, there did appear to be an understanding for many that this should not result in individuals entering the function without a background in HR. This does not necessarily show inconsistency in their rhetoric, as embracing wider business skills does not equate to requiring solely those skills. However, it does highlight one of the key challenges the HR occupation appears to face; embracing business skills, knowledge, and experience to further their perceived organisational legitimacy whilst still seeking to retain a level of control over who is suitable to work in an HR role. This will be discussed further in the section below regarding professionalisation.

Whilst I interviewed only a small number of senior HR practitioners who had made a horizontal move into HR, the ease with which all of them entered the function demonstrated that there was already existing legitimacy on an individual level. Whilst these participants may have had to work at their legitimacy, as viewed by the remainder of the HR function, it is clear that they were already deemed a credible and trusted entity within the wider organisation. This speaks volumes regarding the extent to which HR credentials and specialist knowledge is deemed irrelevant to the wider organisation. It is unlikely that an individual would be able to enter a senior position in the finance function, for example, with no prior finance experience or qualifications to their name. It is well established that HR cannot be seen as having the same professional hegemony as law or medicine. However, these findings indicate that the HR occupation is also unlikely to be viewed as a profession in the same way as other 'management professions' such as finance.

However, what is of interest is the perception of HR practitioners that at the senior levels, commerciality appears to be significantly prioritised over HR knowledge, skills, and experience. Those who had transitioned to HR from other organisational functions largely portrayed HR as a 'simple role' for which the skills could simply be picked up at a later date.

This inevitably shapes the understanding of HR as a profession, which will be discussed below.

6.2 Professionalisation

6.2.1 Perceptions of professionalisation

As addressed in Chapter Two, the term professionalisation is subject to a number of meanings and explanations. This research did not seek to establish whether HR is a profession but to explore how HR practitioners understand professionalisation in relation to legitimacy.

The literature on the professionalisation of HR often emphasises the importance of the professional body of HR and the accreditation it provides. As discussed, the CIPD (as it is now called) has existed in some form since 1913. However, the extent to which the professional body has authority and influence over the occupation is questioned. Previous studies on professionalisation, including the professionalisation of HR, have identified the professional body as having importance (Abbott, 1988; Bolton & Muzio, 2008). However, the findings of this research have shown some doubts and disagreements amongst HR practitioners regarding the importance and even the need for a professional body of HR.

As the HR occupation is not licensed, it is for the discretion of employers as to whether they require HR practitioners to be CIPD accredited. It has been argued that the CIPD has succeeded in creating a market expectation for accreditation (Williams, 2007), but the findings of this research raise questions about this. These findings align with literature suggesting that CIPD accreditation is becoming more common as a requirement; however, it is also clear that it is far from being universally the case. Whilst it can be argued that holding a professional qualification is always insufficient to fully class oneself as a professional, in more traditional professions, accreditation appears to hold significantly more weight than it does in HR. The level of CIPD accreditation an HR practitioner holds appears to have little significance for both HR practitioners and also (in participants' view) for those in the wider organisation in indicating any level of professional expertise as it may do in traditional professions.

6.2.2 PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Existing studies show that the HR occupation has a weak professional identity when compared to traditional professions (Wright, 2008). This research supports the existing literature that professional identity appears to hold little weight for HR practitioners when it comes to understanding the occupation's legitimacy and is often intentionally moved away from. From the findings of this research, the lack of cohesive professional identity for HR appears to stem from two key aspects; first, there is little requirement for training and engagement with the professional body and community, meaning professional identity is not formed through socialisation. Second, professional and organisational identity is often viewed in binary form, and professional identity may be actively avoided for the sake of legitimacy in the eyes of the organisation.

As shown in Chapter Four, HR practitioner engagement with the CIPD appeared limited, and many participants stated that their CIPD membership was a 'tick box' as opposed to something they actively engaged with. As such, the professional body seems to have little influence with regard to forming or maintaining any professional identity for HR practitioners. With a number of practitioners sharing that their preference is to network outside of the CIPD with their own connections, this limits the control the professional body can have over any form of cohesive professional identity. The previous sections have identified that the caring, people-oriented aspects of HR are being leaned away from in order to boost legitimacy. Organisational goals are evidently not an aspect of traditional professionalism, whereas being an employee champion is a key part of the professional values. This demonstrates that, from an organisation's standpoint, there is a clear benefit to having HR practitioners that distance themselves from the traditional professional values of HR. As addressed a number of times, legitimacy for HR practitioners seems to be directly related to how well they are able to be seen in partnership with and contribute to the wider organisation. The findings of this research suggest that orientations to the organisation and to the profession are often seen in tension with one another. With this tension apparent, and perceptions of the organisation being seen as key to legitimacy, this does provide an understanding as to why HR practitioners appear reluctant to align themselves strongly with a professional identity.

Some research has posed the question as to whether HR practitioners can be seen as having a hybrid form of professional-managerial identity due to the way in which they are argued to be professionals working within an organisational environment (Syrigou, 2018). This argument

appears to hold somewhat true for some of the participants that were interviewed. However, as noted, many participants addressed the identities in a binary way in which alignment with both the profession and the organisation is challenging. As such, rather than position HR practitioners as holding a professional-manager hybrid identity, the findings of this research indicate more tension between the identities and, for many, a desire to move away from the profession and to the organisation.

6.2.3 Occupational closure

As discussed within Chapter Two, the ability of HR to define both who conducts HR work and who enters the occupation has significance in terms of its legitimacy as an occupation and also whether HR is accepted as being a profession. It has also been argued that feminised occupations often have a stronger interest in demarcating the boundaries of their occupation in an attempt to make the occupations more exclusive and boost legitimacy (Witz, 1990). However, the HR occupation has struggled with occupational closure for some time, in part due to the introduction of the HR business partner role. As the business partner role involves close alignment with line management, arguments that these may result in line management further taking over the HR role have been raised in the literature (Wright, 2008). In Chapter Two, it was argued that further research was needed to fully understand the challenges around demarcation between line manager and HR practitioner roles. This study did not find that HR practitioners were overly concerned about demarcating their role from that of those in line management positions but had more concerns around those actually entering the HR occupation from other areas of management. The HR business partner role has been argued to encourage those from other business functions to enter the HR occupation as the business partner role is seen to require a broader business skillset (Wright, 2008). However, as discussed, from the findings of this research, this does not seem to be restricted to business partner roles, and the most senior positions in HR currently appear to have porous boundaries to entry. The perceptions and experiences of HR practitioners seeing, predominantly, men enter the occupation at senior levels with little to no background in HR have largely resulted in practitioners feeling the function is being devalued. As noted by one participant, it appears that the function needs to be headed up by a man but that they also cannot be a 'true HR person'. These perceptions of HR being devalued appear to largely stem from HR's inability to be recognised for its own skills, abilities, and experiences and thus needing a 'commercial person' to

come in and 'save' the function. This struggle for the occupation to have any significant control over who makes it into these senior positions appears to shape how those in the occupation understand its legitimacy. In this sense, occupational closure, particularly in terms of defining who may enter the occupational group, seems to be becoming increasingly unlikely for HR. From the perceptions of HR practitioners, commerciality and business acumen are seen to be valued and HR-specific knowledge, skills, and experience less so, particularly at senior levels. If true, the numbers of those entering the HR occupation at mid to senior levels, despite having no background in HR, may be likely to increase. Presenting HR as a specialist area of expertise can be seen as a way of providing HR practitioners with a sense of professional identity (Abbott, 1988). This can be particularly appealing for a feminised occupation that may lack the legitimacy that is gifted to male-dominated and masculinised occupations (Witz, 1992). However, it becomes increasingly difficult to portray HR as being a specialist area of expertise if practitioners are seen to require the same, if not more, level of expertise in other areas of business. As such, the HR occupation may continue to struggle in making claims to professional status, and the identity of the HR occupation itself may also be at risk.

6.2.4 The desire for professionalisation?

The intent of this research was never to establish whether HR should or should not be classed as a profession, but the perceptions of participants on this topic are important to the answering of the research questions, these being; how do the concepts of legitimacy and gender shape understanding of the HR occupation? And how are the perceptions and experiences of HR practitioners shaped by legitimacy and gender? It has been well established that, particularly for feminised occupations, professionalisation holds a certain promise of legitimacy and status (Witz, 1992). However, the extent to which this can be argued to hold true for HR is unclear when the occupation is also a managerial function within organisations. It has been argued multiple times throughout the thesis that HR appears to differ from the more traditional professions. A key aspect as to why this appears to be its accountability to other management functions. Traditional professions, such as medicine or law, have claims to authority and are typically argued to have a desire for autonomy for a higher objective. However, the extent to which this rings true for HR is very limited. This research has shown that, for the majority of HR practitioners, legitimacy comes from the extent to which they are seen to be strategic, commercial, and benefitting the organisational objectives. This shows a

unitarist perspective from many HR practitioners, a view which does not align with the occupation having professional authority. As noted above, traditional professions are seen to have a level of authority and autonomy to make decisions towards a greater objective, one which may not directly align with the objectives of the organisation. This unitarist perspective and accountability to management means the HR occupation is less likely to question or stand against senior members in the organisation as it, in their eyes, can be viewed as a hindrance to legitimacy. This is an obvious shift from the earlier incarnations of the HR occupation, which were arguably pluralist in their focus on the welfare of workers.

The above has highlighted key obstacles to HR claiming itself as a profession, but nevertheless, this claim was of importance to many participants of this study. As addressed in Chapter Four, HR practitioners are less concerned as to whether they themselves are classed as being within a profession but want others to see them as such. This shows that HR is evidently an occupation that is highly focused on its external gaze. This desire to be viewed as a profession appeared for many participants to be a status aspect as opposed to any clear indication of why HR should be seen as such. This research has demonstrated that for many in HR, both being seen to be a profession and legitimacy within the organisation are important. This creates a challenge when the two appear to be incompatible in many ways. As noted above, CIPD accreditation was shown to indicate a level of professionalisation but was largely not viewed as necessary or beneficial for the role. Equally, identifying with the professional community was not deemed to be beneficial for legitimacy despite it being an indicator of the professionalisation of HR. Finally, the intense focus on commerciality in order to boost legitimacy has arguably diminished HR's ability to enact occupational closure, which is a key understanding of power and professionalisation. This research has, therefore, evidenced challenges for the HR occupation and the CIPD to pursue legitimacy in the eyes of the organisation whilst also pursuing further professionalisation. It has previously been questioned whether it is perhaps more pertinent for those in and associated with the occupation to view HR as a 'managerial profession' or 'organisational professional project' (Syrigou, 2018). Managerial professions can essentially be viewed as a hybrid in that they hold elements of professionalisation but are also accountable to specific organisations in a way that traditional professions are not. From the findings of this research, this may be a desirable route for practitioners that wish to be seen as professionals but do not seek to hinder their organisational legitimacy by doing so. However, if the broadening of skills needed for HR continues and

individuals outside of the function continue to enter senior HR positions, even maintaining a claim to elements of professionalisation may become challenging.

6.3 Gender

6.3.1 Gendered underpinnings of 'soft' and commercial HR

In order to answer the research questions and also draw together the findings of this study, this section considers how gender has contributed to HR practitioners' understanding of the occupation.

As addressed within this thesis, organisations are a location in which gender is enacted on a day-to-day basis. Organisations are also largely spaces in which the masculine is valorised and the feminine devalued, thus meaning notions of success, legitimacy and credibility are all underpinned by the masculine ideal (Acker, 1990; Kerfoot, 2002). This was evidenced by this research, with findings showing significantly different experiences for men and women in engaging with organisational practices, processes and structures. With management, strategy, and commercial acumen all interwoven with notions of masculinity, those engaging in such roles and activities are deemed to require the adoption of a dominant masculine script to be perceived as legitimate and credible in their work.

This research has extensively addressed the notion of being commercial in HR and the importance this holds for many participants. However, the theme of 'being commercial' is inherently gendered due to 'commerciality' often being viewed as the activities taking place in the most senior positions of organisations and male dominance at this level (Mavin & Grandy, 2012). As discussed, the perception that HR needs to develop its 'commerciality' is often presented in contrast to the perception of HR being a 'soft' side of management. Within the findings of this research, there were many extracts suggesting that HR needs to shed the perception of itself as a 'soft' and caring role to be seen as a commercial function. This indicates that for many HR practitioners, these two discourses are seen as incompatible with one another.

As evidenced within the findings chapter, a small number of participants in this research took a more nuanced or even critical approach to strategic HR. Almost all of the men that were interviewed expressed the view that there has potentially been too much emphasis placed on HR practitioners in engaging with strategic HR in recent years. The male participants expressed little to no concern as to whether they were perceived as doing' strategic work'. To understand that

organisations and their ideals are inherently masculine is to accept that men, particularly those in senior positions, will inherently carry a level of personal legitimacy. Whilst rhetoric surrounding' business language', 'commercial acumen' and 'strategic HR' may provide a sense of legitimacy for women, the men in this research did not deem this aspect of legitimacy necessary. This may also be furthered by the fact that some of these men have also entered the HR function from other business functions, thus not having to deal with the inherent legitimacy challenges of having worked in HR for some time.

The fact that the men in this research have not adopted the same focus on 'being strategic' as the majority of women interviewed sheds light on the ways in which gender has potentially shaped HR practitioners' understandings of legitimacy. For men, the pre-existing legitimacy they may have on a personal level appears to result in less concern about demonstrating the traditional and 'masculine' organisational ideals. Whereas for women, constructing themselves as a' strategic partner' offers a masculinised appeal and perceived promise of legitimacy and credibility. However, the extent to which this has proved fruitful for women is questioned. Kochan (2004) posits that attempts to engage in strategy will remain unsuccessful if HR lacks credibility from the wider organisation. This is evidenced throughout interviews with female participants. Those who placed significance on their 'strategic role' and constructed this as a large part of their role also spoke about themselves and the HR function more broadly as marginalised. It is also challenging for the portrayal of HR as a 'strategic partner' to be taken seriously by the wider organisation when it appears that the men in HR, who are largely concentrated in senior positions, are dismissive of labelling HR in this way.

6.3.2 MEN IN HR

Whilst the majority of participants in this research were women, the small number of men interviewed has allowed an understanding of the perceptions and experiences of men working in a feminised occupation. Within the literature on gender in occupations and professions, there is comparatively little research on occupations and professions whereby men are the minority and even less so exploring the experiences of these men. Nevertheless, there are a number of studies which explore men working in what may be classed as 'women's work' (Simpson, 2004; Pullen & Simpson, 2009; Williams, 1993; Bagilhole & Cross, 2006). These studies have primarily focused on professions such as teaching and nursing. Whilst HR may not be as strongly associated with

women's work as a profession such as nursing, the findings from this research show that HR is also clearly constructed as a feminised occupation, and therefore the perceptions and experiences of men in HR are of interest. Men who enter highly female concentrated or feminised occupations and professions are often categorised as finders and seekers, based on whether their entry was a case of them drifting into the occupation or whether it was intentional and thought out (Simpson, 2004). Within this research, findings showed that men who had entered the HR occupation tended to do so out of a conscious career decision and, as such, could be categorised more so as 'seekers' of the HR occupation. This has importance for the understanding of gender and HR as many women in HR spoke about drifting into the occupation, demonstrating that men in HR perhaps initially have a clearer idea as to why they wish to be in the occupation and how they see themselves working in the role. Many women who drifted into the HR occupation shared that, at the time of entry, they had little understanding as to what the function involves. In contrast, the men that made a conscious decision to enter the function often spoke about understanding the function (particularly what was lacking from the function) from an external perspective. With HR practitioners seeming to understand legitimacy as largely aligning with the organisation, this does indicate why those consciously entering the occupation from other functions may be seen to have a more legitimate place.

Research posits that men in female-dominated occupations may experience tensions between embracing the feminised aspects of their work whilst also seeking not to undermine their masculinity (Pullen & Simpson, 2009). In this sense, HR can be seen to differ from many other feminised and female-dominated occupations and professions. Feminised occupations are typically associated with skills that are deemed to be more prevalent in women. The HR occupation is no exception, and this research showed that HR is typically associated with empathy and caring skills. However, whether this association accurately portrays the role is questionable. It is clear that, regardless of whether these skills should or should not be perceived as needed for HR, the commercial and strategic aspects are what are seen to bring legitimacy. As such, there appears little incentive for men in HR to embrace the feminised aspects of the role, thus leaving less chance for tensions to arise. In a similar vein, existing studies found that minority men in feminised occupations and professions may consciously or unconsciously downplay the feminine elements of the role and place emphasis on any aspects perceived to be more masculine (Williams, 1993; Bagilhole & Cross, 2006). Over time, this then has the potential to shape the role into one seen as

more desirable for the men in these positions. Whether or not this can be seen to be the case within the HR occupation is questionable based on the findings of this study. As addressed in Chapter Five, a disproportionate number of men within this study had entered the HR role as a career change from areas of management that are seen to be more typically masculine. This research shows that these men also placed significance on commerciality in HR and emphasised the need for financial and operational knowledge and expertise. As such, this could be argued to be in line with the extant literature. However, a key way in which the HR occupation appears to differ is in the overall desire from most practitioners, whether male or female, to move away from the perceived feminised aspects of the role, as, for many women in HR, a move away from the feminised aspects of the role offered a promise of legitimacy. The ways in which the HR occupation appears to differ from other female-dominated occupations and professions further strengthens the importance of studying gender in the occupation and positions HR as a liminal management position in terms of gender prevalence.

One of the key areas of interest for participants in this study was the way in which men appeared to be clustered disproportionately in senior HR positions. This is not an unusual phenomenon, and vertical segregation is prevalent in many female-dominated occupations and professions (Woodfield, 2007). The causes of vertical gender segregation are multifaceted. However, it is posited that men may benefit from their 'token' status in female-dominated occupations and receive special attention for their heightened visibility (Williams, 1993). As a result, men then tend to monopolise positions of authority. As addressed in Chapter Five, there are evidently occasions when organisations are seen to desire a change for the HR function and when the function is predominantly female, that desired change results in the hiring or promotion of a man in HR.

6.3.3 Enacting gender

It has been well established in the academic literature that there is a 'double standard' for men and women in terms of how they are expected to act in organisations (Butler, 2011). For women to conduct themselves in the manner which is typically associated with men, i.e. assertive, direct, or even aggressive, this is seen to challenge the gender order which has been embedded in organisations, and they are not given the same acceptance or even approval for doing so as their male colleagues. Within this research, a frustration was shared that acting 'powerful' is seen to be 'acting masculine', and a male participant also shared that he wished women would to stop trying

to appropriate the working styles of their male colleagues. This highlights the extent to which these gendered norms have become accepted and how by deviating from these comes a certain level of disapproval.

It is posited that in certain situations, women are able to reap the benefits of ascribing to the gendered norms given to them. Within this study, one HR practitioner perceived that embracing the gendered assumptions of the HR occupation may help build rapport with colleagues. This can be said to be a beneficial tool for HR practitioners in terms of relationship building (Kinsey, 2012). This construction can be argued to be a way in which to 'do gender well' (Mavin & Grandy, 2012) through strategically deciding at which point to adopt performances of masculinity and femininity. It can also be argued that embracing the gendered assumptions of HR maintains a level of control over the work, thus contributing to an element of occupational closure.

6.3.4 Gender and seniority

As mentioned above, it has been well established within gender and organisations literature that organisational ideals have been constructed around 'male norms'. This is particularly emphasised in senior positions in organisations which have also been constructed around notions of 'masculinity' (Mavin et al., 2014). This has been illustrated through the perceptions of many women in HR that masculine norms, traits, and attitudes need to be adopted in attempts to get ahead and succeed in their organisation. Although this was not anticipated prior to undertaking the fieldwork, in understanding how ideas of legitimacy and gender shape the HR occupation, perceptions surrounding gender in the most senior HR positions proved significant. As discussed, the gendered aspects of commerciality and strategy have become viewed as essential criteria for a credible senior HR practitioner. This study has found that this has brought a perceived increase in horizontal moves to senior HR positions and a perception that men are more likely to achieve these positions. However, there is currently very little existing literature considering the inextricable link between commerciality, gender, and seniority in HR.

The issue in these individuals entering the occupation at a senior level from other functions is that their appointment into the role can be rationalised through the fact they have the commerciality that is perceived as lacking in many of those within HR. As discussed, senior men who have entered the function as a horizontal move are presenting their move as coming in to reinvent or

even 'save' the function. For these individuals, there appears little questioning as to why they are suitable for the role, thus presenting it as a rational choice by management. The challenge with this is that it then has the potential to mask any gendered underpinnings of these horizontal transitions. This was evidenced by many of the female participants expressing that they were unsure whether these individuals had gained the position due to the fact they are men or due to the fact they have a background in other functions. This demonstrates that the way in which the theme of commerciality has taken hold within the HR occupation has led to rationalising the higher proportion of men in senior HR positions, thus reducing the visibility of gendered assumptions present. The challenges that participants had in establishing whether the individual is favoured for the senior HR positions because they are a man or because they come from 'the business' may well be because the two are so tied to one another that it is virtually impossible to separate. It has been well established in the literature that organisations and professions are not gender neutral (Acker, 1990; Witz, 1992). The findings of this research have demonstrated as such with a gendered distinction apparent between the perceived 'soft' and 'hard' aspects of business. The HR occupation is viewed as a feminised function within the broader masculinised area of business. As such, men seeking to transition into senior HR positions benefit from both their gender but also the way in which their gender is inherently associated with notions of commerciality and strategy. This issue is exacerbated by the perceptions mentioned by some practitioners that women in senior HR positions may be a result of a 'balancing mechanism' by organisations to incorporate more women into senior positions or the board of directors. As discussed in Chapter Four, the HR director is seen as significant in terms of the legitimacy of function. As such, when men, who are deemed to have the commerciality element, are positioned as a rational choice for the senior position and women are seen as the 'token', it is easy to see how this leads to differing perceptions of legitimacy for the function.

6.4 Summary

This chapter has considered the findings of in-depth interviews with HR practitioners alongside the existing literature regarding the HR occupation, gender in organisations, and legitimacy. There is no question, based on the perceptions of current HR practitioners, that the HR occupation continues to be dogged by questions of its legitimacy in corporate organisations. For those within HR, there is a perception that it is often perceived as the 'other' function and struggles to be viewed

as a 'true business function' in the way in which areas such as operations or finance do. In this sense, it can be argued that many of the issues presented in literature decades ago still remain relevant today.

In line with much of the extant literature on HR, commerciality is seen as the golden ticket for HR to transition to a credible and valued business function, whether this is through using 'commercial language' or making conscious efforts to further understanding of the organisation, other functions, and the industries in which they are based. Engaging in 'strategic HR' is also viewed as key in legitimising the HR occupation. As discussed, the notion of commerciality holds the underpinnings of masculinity. As such, this led to tensions among many women in HR trying to navigate the 'feminised' version of HR that was often expected of them with the aspiration of commercial and strategic HR. With commerciality and caring aspects of the role often seen in a binary, mutually exclusive fashion, valorising the commercial often resulted in the devaluing of the welfare side.

The notion that HR needs to further the strategic and commercial aspects of the role has been widely embraced by HR practitioners. This has resulted in HR practitioners seeking to construct their HR roles as ones which are predominantly strategic. As a result, the discussion of day-to-day operational HR appears to have diminished significantly, with practitioners viewing this as low-status work that offers little legitimacy and credibility. Despite this, the extent to which practitioners actually engaged with strategic work on a day-to-day basis appeared limited and attempts to define strategic HR often seemed challenging and resulted in vague responses.

It was viewed by many to be this hyper-focus on commerciality that has resulted in a perceived increase in those entering HR at senior levels from other functions. The majority of HR practitioners viewed the rationale for these horizontal moves as being accepted and even encouraged as these individuals are seen to have a higher level of commerciality and business acumen than those who have spent their career in HR. However, as discussed, such horizontal moves have also been made disproportionately by men. This has resulted in HR practitioners feeling that neither women nor HR is perceived 'as legitimate' in organisations, particularly at a senior level.

This research has supported the existing literature with regard to the longstanding legitimacy crisis HR practitioners and the occupation itself face. HR is evidently a feminised occupation, and this

is understood by all those within it. However, the desire to move away from the perceived stigmatisation associated with this has, to some extent, led to a distancing from 'traditional' HR and a move towards a broader, commercial business function. This research has shown that the hegemony of strategic HR literature has truly taken hold within the occupation itself and is seen as the path to legitimacy for the female-dominated occupation. However, this appears to be a status symbol and one that, based on the findings of this study, is not required for men in senior HR positions. The perceptions regarding individuals entering HR at senior levels with little to no HR experience have also evidently created tensions within the occupation, and the downplaying of strategy by those that enter from other functions poses a further challenge for HR.

6.5 Contribution

6.5.1 Implications for theory and research

The findings of this research contribute to the relatively small stream of academic literature exploring gender in HR and how this may play into longstanding issues around legitimacy and professionalisation. Much of this extant research adopts a quantitative approach and focuses on identifying the factors influencing women's participation in senior HR roles. This study offers a different perspective by providing an insight into the micro-level perceptions of gender in HR and how these reflect in the experiences and understandings of practitioners.

In studying a female concentrated occupation based within organisations which are by nature gendered, this research helps to further our understanding of the gendered tensions HR practitioners experience with regard to the credibility of the function. Whilst there is significant literature on the legitimacy of HR, there is little qualitative research that explores the potential influence of gender. It is well established within gender literature that the prevalence of women in an occupation has a detrimental effect on status and legitimacy. Despite seeing many shifts in its focus and role, HR has been an occupation that has arguably struggled to establish its legitimacy in organisations. As previously addressed, a number of quantitative studies exploring legitimacy and gender in HR have laid the groundwork for this research. However, whilst these quantitative studies shed light on links between gender and status, they give little understanding as to how this has shaped the occupation and the perceptions and experiences of those within it. This research has shown that, for HR practitioners, gender is seen to influence the legitimacy of the occupation in several ways. Gender and the perception of HR as a 'soft' side of management are inextricably

linked, and this study has identified a clear desire for HR practitioners to separate themselves from the (gendered) 'softer' side of HR and embrace the (masculinised) strategic and commercial aspects. This study also identified a clear gendered difference in the desire to engage in strategic HR, demonstrating the way in which this may be seen as symbolic capital rather than something the function actively engages in. Vertical gender segregation is apparent in the HR occupation, and this research has shed light on the link between this and horizontal career changes to senior HR. HR practitioners struggled to separate the way in which men transitioned into senior HR levels and were also seen to be more commercial than those in the function. This shows the extent to which the concepts of legitimacy and gender are unable to be viewed as independent of one another in the context of the HR occupation. As such, gender cannot be overlooked when it has a role in shaping the way in which HR practitioners understand and act in their role.

This research also provides a new perspective as to why HR may have pervasive legitimacy challenges, thus challenging the hegemony of the literature suggesting this is solely due to HR's lack of commercial and strategic involvement. The study has also shown the HR occupation as an example which does not necessarily support the literature on feminised occupations and professions. As previously discussed, feminised occupations often comparatively struggle with legitimacy and are deemed to have an increased desire for professionalisation due to the promise of status this brings. However, as HR's legitimacy appears to largely derive from aligning with the organisation, further professionalisation is unlikely to bring further status to the occupation.

In exploring how HR practitioners understand the legitimacy of HR, this research has identified that, whilst most practitioners appear to have fully embraced Ulrich's (1995) call to be more commercial and more strategically involved, this does not come without repercussions for the occupation. The way in which the desire for commerciality has pushed HR practitioners to align further with the organisation presents significant challenges for the welfare elements of HR. As such, this research calls into question the prescriptive HR literature, which encourages a somewhat blind pursuit of legitimacy through the eyes of the organisation, irrespective of the potential detrimental impact on employee focus.

Furthermore, whilst there is significant literature on commerciality in HR, there is little research that explores the influence of this on barriers to entry in HR. It is well established within academic

literature that HR is a profession that struggles in establishing its professional identity and demarcating itself as an area of expertise (Caldwell & Storey, 2007). This research, therefore, allows an increased understanding of the impact horizontal moves into senior HR and what these horizontal moves represent, may have on this. In exploring one of the potential challenges a commercial focus for HR may create, this research challenges the hegemony of practitioner HRM literature which often argues that increased commerciality will be of benefit to the professionalisation and credibility of HR.

6.5.2 Implications for practice

This research has implications for the practice of HR as it provides a richer understanding of the HR role. The influence of gender on the HR occupation has been somewhat overlooked in both academic and practitioner literature. As such, this research places the topic of gender in HR on the map as an area to be considered when debating the legitimacy of the occupation; this is particularly pertinent for the CIPD, who currently have minimal research on the topic. In a time where HR is being encouraged to engage in strategy and being called to account for its contribution to the organisation, the views identified in this research may shed light on whether this is a pertinent issue with regards to HR's legitimacy or whether other aspects, such as gendering, have an impact. This research also allows practitioners further understanding of the impact the intense focus on commerciality and strategic HR may have on their ability to demarcate the HR occupation as an area of expertise. In a time when HR practitioners are being encouraged to further their commercial acumen, this research may shed light on whether this benefits the profession or is counterintuitive in encouraging other functional groups to take over senior HR positions. As such, if developing professionalisation is an aim of the HR occupation, it may be more conducive for HR practitioners to limit distancing themselves from HR's specialisation in people in order to avoid diluting the profession through emphasising broad business knowledge, experience, and skills.

6.6 Limitations and further research

As with any study, there are limitations to this research. It is acknowledged that there are ways in which this study could be complemented. As addressed in Chapter Three, historical data from the Modern Records Centre was utilised to gain an understanding of the issues prevalent at various points through the history of HR. Whilst this research was always intended to be preliminary and

supplementary, it could have had a more central place in the thesis further to emphasise the pervasive nature of legitimacy challenges in HR. In addition, discourse analysis of secondary data such as press and CIPD documents could complement this research and provide an understanding of how the HR occupation is spoken about publicly.

This research intended to understand the role gender and legitimacy have in shaping HR practitioners' understandings of their occupation. As such, it could be argued that this provides a one-sided understanding of the HR occupation. The way in which those outside the function understand HR and the way in which they interact with HR practitioners has significance in how the occupation is constructed. There were particular findings in this research that offer a glimpse at the external gaze on the HR function. Prior to entering the HR function, individuals' perceptions, particularly those who transitioned from another management function, often offered a different perspective. As addressed in Chapter Three, the Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on this research and interviews with line managers had just begun to be conducted at the time of the first national lockdown in March 2020. As such, only a very small number of line manager interviews were completed, and for this reason, they were not incorporated into the thesis. However, it would be of benefit to interview line management and non-HR senior management in future research to gain an external perspective on many of the tensions identified in this research. Interviewing those outside the HR function would provide a fuller picture of how HR legitimacy is understood. It is also recognised that future research exploring the ways in which undergraduate and postgraduate HR students and teaching staff understand the occupation prior to entry would be of importance. With the increased focus on commerciality and strategic HR, exploring how the occupation is presented to those prior entry provides an understanding as to whether the expectation matches the reality of working within HR.

As noted in Chapter Three, I did not begin this research as an uninterested and unbiased outsider. Whilst I sought to position my participants as the ones who had valuable experiences in and understanding of the HR occupation, it is acknowledged that my academic position as an academic researcher may have influenced responses and the aspects participants chose to discuss. Chapter Three details the ways in which I attempted to mitigate this risk. However, it is nevertheless important to note that participants may have chosen to discuss aspects differently under different circumstances.

6.7 Conclusions

This research aimed to explore how legitimacy and gender have shaped HR practitioners' understandings of their occupation. A key focus of the study was to understand how legitimacy and gender intersect in the context of the HR occupation. In order to further understand this, the study has explored HR practitioners' perceptions and experiences in three key aspects; legitimacy, professionalisation, and gender.

The HR occupation has been subject to debate and criticism regarding its legitimacy since the origination of HR as an organisational function. These challenges continue in the current day, and HR can be seen as a less established occupation. This is, in part, evident by the emphasis often placed on the external views of HR. HR practitioners' understandings of the occupation's legitimacy appear largely based on what the organisation deems of value. There have long been accusations that the HR function lacks commercial acumen and is out of touch with the wider business. HR practitioners appear to have taken heed to these claims, and a 'legitimate' HR function is one that is seen to be commercial, strategic, and contributing to business strategy. The focus on commerciality and strategy positions the concerns of HR occupation alongside that of management and calls into question HR's desire and willingness to engage in employee-centred activities and behaviours.

The professionalisation of the HR occupation has long been debated, with the occupation often being posited as a 'semi-profession' or 'management profession'. HR imitates aspects of established professions, such as the presence of a professional body and specialist qualifications. However, the occupation lacks the power, closure, and status of traditional professions. The desire from HR practitioners to be seen as qualified professionals is apparent, demonstrating that professionalisation has importance with regards to the legitimacy of HR. However, the current dominance of commercial rhetoric has resulted in desires from HR practitioners to distance themselves from their supposed specialisation in people. This reluctance, alongside attempts to broaden the knowledge and skills associated with their role, can be argued to have diluted professionalisation attempts and opened the occupation to entry from other management functions.

The legitimacy of HR is constructed through gendered subjectivities, which has contributed to the denigration of the occupation as an 'outsider' to the workings of the business. Due to the gendered

norms in organisations, the caring and 'soft' aspects of the HR role are viewed as inherently 'feminine' and subsequently lacking in business credibility. There is a clear desire for HR practitioners, both women and men, to move away from any feminised connotations of the occupation. The desire for HR practitioners to move away from the notion of HR as a 'soft' side of management and towards a more commercial and strategic function is underpinned by gendered assumptions. The way in which ideas of management, commerciality, and strategy are unpinned by masculinity means adopting a 'masculine script' is required to be seen as credible in this work. The gendered underpinnings mean that women in HR are required to challenge the gendered order to embrace the commercial rhetoric, whereas men are privileged with pre-existing legitimacy. This provides further understanding as to the acceptance or, even embracing, of male horizontal career changes into senior HR positions. The concepts of masculinity and commerciality are interwoven for HR practitioners, shaping how the HR occupation is understood. The dominant theme of commerciality in the HR occupation has the potential to valorise masculinity in HR whilst still masking the gendered underpinnings within the function.

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Appendix 1 – Interview guide

Interview Guide:

This study explores the professionalisation of HR; how the legitimacy of the function is understood, and whether gender has any effects on these issues.

I am particularly interested in the debate regarding the HR profession. Organisational rhetoric commonly emphasises people as its most important asset; however, academic literature discusses HR as being a potentially undervalued organisational function. Therefore, this research seeks to understand the realities of this for HR practitioners. This study also considers whether gender plays into this in any way, given the HR profession in the UK is predominantly female.

Background Information:

1. How long have you worked in HR?
2. How long have you been with your current company?
3. How did you initially get into HR?

The HR Role:

4. Can you tell me a bit about your role?
5. What are your main priorities?
    - Who determines these?

6. Do you feel as though the bulk of your time is spent doing operational HR or strategic HR?

- What does operational and strategic HR actually mean to you?

HR Value:

7. What HR department activities do you think are most valued by the rest of the organisation? Why?

8. What status do you feel is afforded to you as a HR practitioner?

- Why is this?
- Is this appropriate?

9. Are you aware how the top level strategic decisions are made in your organisation?

- At what point do HR become involved?

10. Do you feel that you have control over all aspects of your work?

- Does this matter?
- Why/why not?

11. What do you see as your primary sources of power as a HR professional?

Professional Identity:

12. What does the term profession mean to you?

13. How important is viewing yourself as a professional to you?

14. To what extent do you think there is a strong professional identity in HR?

Professional Body/accreditation:

15. Do you currently have CIPD membership?

- What do you use your membership for?

16. To what extent do your values as a HR practitioner align with that of CIPD?

17. How much influence do you think CIPD has in determining what HR does or how it should behave?

18. Do you feel that professional accreditation should/should not be a requirement in HR roles?

- Why?
- What effect/s do you think this would have?

Diversity in HR:

19. How would you describe the demographics of HR functions you have worked in? E.g. (age, ethnicity, gender)

- Homogenous?
- Diverse?

20. Do you have any thoughts as to why you think this is the case?

21. Do you think demographics of a profession has an impact on:

- The way the profession is viewed?
- The way the professions conducts itself?

Do you have any questions or further comments concerning this research?