

Research Traditions and Theorising in (Human Resources) Management

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Abstract:

Research Question: Why do research traditions affect theorising in management scholarship, and how do they affect research evaluation? **Motivation:** Management research is often described as methodologically plural, but variation in theory construction and evaluation lies deeper than method choice alone. **What's New:** The article develops the concepts of research environment and epistemological fit to explain how research traditions become operative in ordinary scholarly judgement. **So What:** The epistemological fit perspective helps authors and reviewers distinguish internal weakness from cross-tradition disagreement, especially when work travels between local research environments and international journals. **Idea:** Research traditions shape what becomes a research problem, which types of theorising are admissible, which methods are regarded as appropriate, and how contribution is judged. **Data:** The paper is a conceptual reconstruction of a recent philosophy-of-science synthesis in management research, supported by selected management and HRM literature. **Findings:** Research traditions operate through research environments: operative forms of traditions that shape what can be formulated, justified, and recognised as contribution. **Contribution:** The article contributes a conceptual account of theory construction and evaluation in plural management scholarship.

Keywords: research traditions, theorising, management sciences, philosophy of science, epistemological fit, HRM

JEL Classification: M10

1. Introduction

Management research is plural in a sense deeper than the coexistence of quantitative and qualitative methods, conceptual and empirical articles, or theory- and practice-oriented work (Alvesson & Gabriel, 2013; Lisinski et al., 2026). It is organised by research traditions: relatively durable lines of inquiry that define which problems are worth formulating, which explanations are admissible, which methods are appropriate, and how theoretical contribution is recognised (Lisinski et al., 2026). This article asks two questions. RQ1: Why do research traditions affect theorising in management scholarship? RQ2: How do they affect research evaluation? Here, theorising refers to the activity of formulating and justifying claims about management phenomena. It therefore includes the constitution of the object of inquiry, the definition of the problem, the selection of level of analysis, the type of theory sought, and the relation of the claim both to prior knowledge and to practice (Cornelissen & Durand, 2014; Whetten, 1989).

The questions arise from the way management scholarship is judged. Theoretical contribution is often treated as a criterion of publishable work (Boer et al., 2015; Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007; Corley & Gioia, 2011; Whetten, 1989). Yet contribution is not assessed in a neutral space. It is assessed by readers, reviewers, and editors formed within traditions that differ in their assumptions about the object of inquiry, the purpose of explanation, the relation between knowledge and practice, and the standards under which a claim can be defended (Corley & Schinoff, 2017; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006; Wickert et al., 2024). A paper may therefore appear persuasive in one research environment and under-specified in another. The argument draws on the concept of research traditions, defined as a „continuous line of inquiry grounded in shared ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions” (Lisinski et al., 2026, p. xvi). Research traditions

* Corresponding author: Oskar Kosch, e-mail: koscho@uek.krakow.pl

span the time and persist through social networks. A research environment denotes the operative form a research tradition takes at a given moment in time. It shapes what can be formulated, justified, and recognised as contribution, as understood by members of that network. In this sense, it may also be termed an epistemological environment (Lisinski et al., 2026).

Two claims organise the paper. First, research traditions shape theorising through problem visibility, level selection, admissible types of theory, standards of justification, and the relation between scientific and practical aims (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011; Bamberger, 2008; DiMaggio, 1995; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). Second, these effects can be analysed through epistemological fit, understood as the alignment between problem, assumptions, reasoning, method, and audience.

The argument is general to management scholarship, but HRM provides useful illustrations because it forces movement across levels and across types of theorising, from employee perceptions to organisational systems and from implementation processes to strategic resources (Boon et al., 2017; Jiang & Messersmith, 2017; Sanders et al., 2023; Shen et al., 2017). The paper's contribution is conceptual: it brings together distinctions often treated separately in methodology discussions and uses them to clarify why disagreements over theoretical contribution are often disagreements about deeper assumptions (Jaakkola, 2020; Lisinski et al., 2026), of which scholars are often unaware. More specifically, the paper distinguishes internal from external epistemological fit, clarifying when criticism concerns coherence within an inquiry and when it reflects the standards of another research tradition.

2. Conceptual Premises

This is a conceptual article based on the secondary analysis of Lisinski et al. (2026), supported by selected management and HRM literature used illustratively. The method is deductive, it begins from definitions and distinctions developed in the source text and derives their consequences for theory construction and assessment. The object of inquiry is the relation between research traditions and the production and evaluation of theory. The standard of adequacy is argumentative. The concepts used must be defined, the distinctions between them must remain stable, and the conclusions must follow from the premises (Jaakkola, 2020). Three premises organise the analysis.

First, management research belongs to the empirical sciences, with its object being organised action (Lisinski et al., 2026). It therefore concerns observed practices, institutional arrangements, interventions, and evaluative expectations that are inherently contextual. This gives management research a heterogeneous subject matter and makes it unlikely that one style of theorising will suffice across the field (Alvesson & Gabriel, 2013; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006).

Second, the question of method cannot be reduced to research methodology in the narrow sense. Lisinski et al. (2026) distinguish research methodology from the methodology of sciences. Research methodology concerns procedures used in inquiry (described in papers). The methodology of sciences concerns patterns of reasoning, standards of validity, and historically variable forms of scientific activity (Lisinski et al., 2026, p. 69). Disagreements over method in management often rest on prior differences in what counts as explanation, evidence, and acceptable inference (Lisinski et al., 2026; Simsek et al., 2025, for review research).

Third, theory must be assessed in relation to the kind of problem it addresses. As Lisinski et al. (2026) argue, the primary distinction is between theoretical problems and practical problems. A theoretical problem concerns knowledge required to satisfy general intellectual needs. A practical problem concerns the improvement of action under specified conditions (Lisinski et al., 2026). These problem types do not require the same form of contribution and should not be judged by identical standards (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006).

Within computational process theorising, Kuljanin et al. (2024) place models on a continuum from intellectual (decontextualised and theory-focused) to emulative (contextualised and applied), noting that a model may move along this continuum as it is adapted to a particular environment. This does not replace the distinction between theoretical and practical problems, but shows that a model's orientation towards theory and application can also vary by degree.

A research tradition, as the term is used here, is broader than a method preference and narrower than an entire discipline. Terms related in meaning need to be distinguished. A paradigm refers here to a coherent

configuration of ontological and axiological assumptions. A method refers to a specific procedure of inquiry. A subdiscipline refers to a topical domain such as strategy or HRM. A school denotes a more local lineage associated with a person, institution, or doctrinal orientation. Research traditions may incorporate all four, but are not reducible to any of them (Lisinski et al., 2026).

3. Epistemological Fit

Six dimensions of variation follow from this understanding of research tradition and environment, and constitute epistemological fit perspective. The first concerns problem type. A tradition may privilege theoretical problems or practical problems (Lisinski et al., 2026; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). The second concerns level of analysis. Traditions differ in whether they treat the individual (micro), the group or process (meso), or the organisation (macro) as primary (Bamberger, 2008; Felin et al., 2015; Lisinski et al., 2026). The third concerns type of theory. Management scholarship accommodates more than one such type, for example, narrative, or covering-law (DiMaggio, 1995); empirical generalisations, middle-range theories, or grand theories (Swamidass, 1991); unit or programmatic (Cronin, Stouten, & Knippenberg, 2021). The fourth concerns methodological legitimacy. In the source typology, methods are classified by reference to problem type, type of cognition, and mode of reasoning, with each being appropriate for certain tasks in science (Lisinski et al., 2026, pp. 98-99). The fifth concerns standards of justification: what counts as adequate evidence, sufficient conceptual precision, or acceptable inference (Corley & Schinoff, 2017; Simsek et al., 2025, for review research). The sixth concerns the relation between scientific and practical aims (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). These dimensions shape what researchers can see as a researchable object and as a defensible contribution (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011; Lisinski et al., 2026).

The preceding catalogue of theory types can be complemented by separating the form of theoretical expression - e.g., narrative or computational - from its explanatory focus - constructs or processes - so that the two dimensions yield four possible combinations (Kuljanin et al., 2024). Construct theories focus on relationships among constructs, whereas process theories focus on action or event sequences and the generative mechanisms through which organisational phenomena unfold over time (Kozlowski et al., 2026).

This leads to epistemological fit. Epistemological fit denotes the alignment between a research problem, the assumptions that render it intelligible, the level of analysis at which it is formulated, the type of theory it requires, the mode of reasoning and method used to address it, and the evaluative standards of the audience before which the claim is defended. The term has appeared in management knowledge mobilisation in another sense (McGivern et al., 2016). Here it is used in a theory-contributing sense. A distinction is required between the research and the manuscript. The researcher assesses the inquiry in relation to the problem, assumptions, and claim as developed. The reader has access only to the manuscript. Epistemological fit therefore depends on how the research is designed as well as on whether the manuscript makes the relevant elements available for evaluation under the standards of the intended reader's tradition (Corley & Schinoff, 2017; Jaakkola, 2020).

Table 1: Epistemological fit in research and manuscript presentation

Dimension	What the researcher must secure in the research (internal fit)	What the manuscript must make available to the intended reader (external fit)
Research problem	The problem is clearly constituted and treated consistently as theoretical or practical.	The problem is stated in a way the reader can recognise as intelligible and legitimate within the target tradition.
Level of analysis	The level at which the object is constituted is selected and maintained consistently.	The manuscript shows at what level the claim is made and how levels are related, if more than one is involved; these levels are considered appropriate for the research problem in the target tradition.
Type of theory	The type of theory sought is appropriate to the problem and the object. Its form of theoretical expression and explanatory focus are also appropriate to that problem and object.	The manuscript states what type of theory is being developed, tested, refined, or applied. That type is valued in the target tradition.

Dimension	What the researcher must secure in the research (internal fit)	What the manuscript must make available to the intended reader (external fit)
Methodological legitimacy	The method and mode of reasoning are capable of supporting the intended claim.	The manuscript shows why this method and this reasoning are adequate to the claim, and comply with the standards of the target tradition.
Justification standards	The evidence, conceptual precision, and inferential procedure are adequate to the claim under the study's own premises.	The manuscript shows what counts as evidence, why it is sufficient, and how the claim is justified in terms recognisable within the target tradition.
Relation to practice	The study's orientation toward theory, practice, or both is clear and consistent with the problem addressed.	The manuscript shows whether the claim is intended primarily as theoretical, practical, or both, and presents that orientation in terms intelligible to the target tradition, and fitting the journal's scope.

The same research may therefore be judged differently if the manuscript does not render its premises, level, type of theory, method, and intended audience sufficiently explicit for readers formed in another tradition (Corley & Schinoff, 2017; Wickert et al., 2024).

Three propositions follow. First, theory construction begins not from a neutral gap in the literature, but from tradition-shaped problem visibility (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). Second, the type of theory appropriate to a study depends on the problem type and level of analysis under which the object is constituted (Bamberger, 2008; Whetten, 1989), but also on the target audience. DiMaggio (1995) argues for the value of narrative theorising; in the Academy of Management journals, narrative theories also seem to have recently become more prominent than covering-law theories (Lisinski et al., 2026). Third, methodological rigour depends on fit between problem, assumptions, reasoning, evidence, intended claim, and audience rather than on method alone (Lisinski et al., 2026). Simsek et al. (2025) demonstrate this alignment principle for management research reviews; although their framework is review-specific, the same approach may also apply to other forms of management research.

4. HRM Illustrations

HRM provides useful illustrations because several research traditions meet within it. Reflecting this plurality, Human Resource Management Journal (HRMJ) describes its broad-based approach as appealing to scholars in management, industrial relations, psychology, and organisational behaviour (Farndale et al., 2020). Troth and Guest (2020) similarly argue that psychology contributes most fruitfully when integrated within multidisciplinary, multilevel, multistakeholder, and multi-method HRM research. HRM research may be psychological when it studies employee perceptions and attitudes, strategic when it examines human capital and performance, sociological when it attends to institutions and employment relations, and practically oriented when it addresses the design and implementation of management systems (Boon et al., 2017; Jiang & Messersmith, 2017; Sanders et al., 2023).

HRM process research shows how a change in tradition changes the problem itself. Earlier strategic HRM work often asked whether HR systems were associated with organisational performance (Combs et al., 2006; Jiang & Messersmith, 2017). By contrast, the HRM process research asks how HR practices are intended, implemented, communicated, and perceived (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Sanders et al., 2023). Delmotte et al. (2012) focus on perceived HRM system strength. As HR practices are no longer treated primarily as fixed organisational inputs but as signals, interpretations, and enacted processes (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Nishii et al., 2008), a different type of theory is required. Trullen et al. (2020) extend this process view by distinguishing intended practices from those actually used and from those experienced by different actors, while noting that practices may change as line managers and employees integrate them into existing systems. The object of explanation is therefore not only whether an HR system is associated with an outcome, but how a designed practice becomes enacted and experienced.

Multilevel HRM research shows the importance of level selection. Shen et al. (2017) argue that HRM systems often operate as organisational-level constructs while affecting unit-level and individual-level outcomes.

Renkema et al. (2017) similarly emphasise multilevel thinking. If HRM exists as an organisational arrangement but its effects appear elsewhere, the theory must specify how those levels are connected (Bamberger, 2008; Felin et al., 2015).

Strategic human capital research illustrates the problem of emergence. Boon et al. (2017) ask how human capital resources are formed and leveraged through HR systems. This shifts attention from the possession of knowledge, skills, and abilities to the processes through which these individual attributes become collective and strategically consequential resources (Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011; Ployhart et al., 2014). If individual-level capacities are to explain organisational advantage, the analysis must specify how they become organisational capabilities (Felin et al., 2015; Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011).

5. Implications

The first implication concerns theoretical contribution. Novelty is not sufficient. Contribution depends on epistemological fit. A new construct, moderator, or imported theory contributes when it resolves a genuine inadequacy under stated premises (Boer et al., 2015; Corley & Gioia, 2011; Cornelissen & Durand, 2014; Whetten, 1989). Epistemological fit also requires the practical implications claimed by a manuscript to remain commensurate with its problem, evidence, and intended audience. In HRM, this means moving beyond general assertions of relevance to consider implementation, as Kougiannou and Ridgway (2022) explicitly recommend.

The second implication concerns peer review. Informed by work on how editors come to understand theoretical contribution (Corley & Schinoff, 2017), this paper proposes that reviewers distinguish between internal weakness and cross-tradition disagreement. Internal weakness occurs when a paper fails under its own premises. Cross-tradition disagreement occurs when the reviewer expects a different kind of problem, explanation, or contribution from one the author has reasonably chosen and adequately justified.

The third implication concerns publication across traditions. Wickert et al. (2024) show that unfamiliar contexts and theories require careful illustration and justification if their explanatory potential is to be recognised. Extending that insight, movement across traditions should not require abandonment of the originating tradition. It requires a more explicit connection between originating premises and the standards of the target audience. Authors moving between research environments should therefore make explicit not only their methods but also the problem type, level of analysis, explanatory focus, and intended contribution, enabling readers to distinguish unfamiliar premises from internal inconsistency.

Limitations and Conclusion

This article is conceptual. It reconstructs the mechanisms through which research traditions affect theorising, research design, and evaluation, but it does not measure how frequently such mechanisms appear in published work or how strongly they affect review outcomes. It also relies heavily on the synthesis provided by Lisinski et al. (2026). The HRM examples are selective and illustrative rather than representative of the field as a whole. Alignment with a particular evaluative environment does not establish that its standards are uniquely valid. This qualification pertains to HRM, where Harley (2015) argues that the dominance of positivist, statistically complex, correlational research has crowded out alternative approaches, especially critical ones. For a comprehensive description of different scholarly contributions, including theoretical contribution, see Lisinski et al. (2026).

Research traditions affect theorising in management, for they shape the conditions under which claims can be formulated, defended, and recognised as contributions. They influence what appears as a problem, how objects are constituted, which types of theory are admissible, what counts as evidence, and how scholars position their work. These effects are best understood by treating research traditions through the research environments in which they are currently enacted and by assessing theory construction in terms of epistemological fit.

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About the Author

Oskar Kosch

Krakow University of Economics, Poland

koscho@uek.krakow.pl



Oskar Kosch is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Strategic Analysis at Krakow University of Economics. His research is located at the intersection of strategic management, research methodology, and the philosophy of science. He is particularly interested in the application and methodological foundations of machine learning methods in management research. He is the incoming Co-Chair of EURAM SIG 12 Research Methods and Research Practice for 2027. He is also a co-author of *Research Methods in Management: A Philosophy of Science Perspective* (Edward Elgar, 2026).