SUSTAINABLE WORK AND EMPLOYMENT IN SOCIAL CARE: NEW CHALLENGES, NEW PRIORITIES?

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Rationale and objectives:

The social care workforce supports the most vulnerable members of society through the provision of personal support and practical assistance, typically in a community, residential or domestic setting. Yet this is a workforce itself vulnerable to low pay, precarious employment, and limited career development opportunities (Harley et al., 2010; Rubery et al., 2015). Despite these challenges, and indeed the significant and growing scale of the social care workforce in most developed countries (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022), social care work and employment have received limited attention in the HRM literature, particularly relative to the healthcare sector (Cooke & Bartram, 2015). While the health and social care sectors are interdependent, often dealing with the same vulnerable groups at different stages of their care journey, they remain structurally and organizationally distinct. Social care is a fragmented sector, comprising many small and medium-sized care providers, limiting their capacity to develop a supportive HRM infrastructure, in turn contributing to endemic problems of recruiting and retaining staff in the sector. Most recently liberalization has introduced new market forces into the sector placing downward pressures on workforce terms and conditions as employers seek to compete on the basis of cost (Hermann & Flecker, 2012).

The workforce challenges in social care have become even more pressing in the wake of COVID-19. Often treated by policy makers as the 'poor relation' to healthcare in fighting the pandemic, social care has been inadequately prepared and resourced to deal with the crisis, placing inordinate and intense job demands on employees (Barnett & Grabowski, 2020). Indeed, COVID has generated new workforce concerns for the sector, relating to: employee well-being; the balance between risk and reward; and the effective articulation of employee voice (Butterick & Charlwood, 2020; Johnson & Pulignano, 2021). In focusing on social care, this Special Issue aims to deepen understanding of workforce management in a much neglected but growing sector, emerging from a crisis with challenges to traditional assumptions about the low value and poor treatment of its workforce. The Special Issue is keen to bring together international, comparative, and critical perspectives on the nature, causes and consequences of employment systems in social care. It seeks to shape the future research agenda on HRM in the social care sector, and to contribute to the development of policy and practice as a means of improving care and the quality of life for those giving and receiving it.

Potential theoretical advancement and practical significance:

Social care work and employment raise myriad theoretical issues. First, multi-level analysis allows for contributions examining cross national, national, organizational, and individual employee approaches to and experiences of work and employment in social care. However, the Special Issue provides a chance to consider how these different levels interact with one another, shaping developments and experiences. Thus, there is an opportunity to draw upon and contribute to institutional theory, for instance, by examining how the form assumed by national

welfare states influences the architecture of employment systems in the social care sector, in turn influencing choices available to and constraints on social care employers as they manage their workforces and with implications for how employees experience work.

Second, with the social care workforce heavily feminized and often ethnically diverse, theoretical issues on or relating to the value (or lack of) attached to the care work performed by these employees move 'center stage'. The intersection between gender and ethnicity, perhaps overlapping with migrant status, assumes particular importance in explaining the often-precarious working lives of social care workers (Burns et al., 2016; Rubery et al., 2015). Closely related there is scope to advance theory on segmented labor markets, especially the creation of secondary labor markets for social care workers, generating low paid, low status jobs. Employers are often "the architects of inequalities in labor markets' (Grimshaw et al., 2017) encouraging an interest in whether, why and how social care providers, perhaps along with other actors such as the State, contribute to the degraded work and employment terms and conditions of their workforce.

Third, the Special Issue is keen to theorize on the relationship between workforce management and organizational outcomes in social care. The strategic HRM literature (SHRM) centers on the connection between HRM practices and organizational performance, principally viewed in terms of financial outcomes (profit, shareholder value) (Boxall & Purcell, 2011). In social care, organizational performance assumes a very different form, for example, as public value (Brewer, 2013), along with the well-being of vulnerable community members. This prompts interest in whether and how the management of the social care workforce impacts these outcomes. The mainstream SHRM literature focuses on a positive link between organizational performance and 'soft' workforce management practices, typically characterized as 'high commitment' or 'high involvement' (Guest, 2017). This would appear to be at odds with the 'harder' cost minimization practices often associated with the social care sector.

Finally, the Special Issue can advance theory on interest aggregation and articulation, particularly given the various actors involved in HRM in social care, with shared, but often conflicting interests. Stakeholder interaction has been studied through various perspectives within the HRM literature (Heery, 2017), with pluralists and radical approaches focusing on traditional HRM actors - employers, workers, and the State - typically seeking to manage tensions through the collective regulation of employment. In social care, other potential HRM actors come to the fore (Vermeerbergen et al., 2021), for example: the generic user of social care services, their family, and friends; civil society organizations, representing these user interests; and individuals with lived experience of conditions - homelessness, substance abuse, mental illness - increasingly employed in the social care sector workforce (Kessler & Bach, 2011). Whether, and how these new stakeholders combine with more traditional actors to address shared workforce issues, and with what consequences, becomes a central issue, not least given the generally disorganized nature of employment regulation in social care. Contributions might use and contribute to mobilization or advocacy coalition (Tattersall, 2010) theory, with paradox theory helping to examine how different and competing interests of groups might be balanced and pursued (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013).

Key themes/scope of focus:

Broadly aligned with the four theoretical streams outlined above, this Special Issue invites papers to discuss themes and issues including but not limited to the following:

Theme 1: Antecedents of sustainable work and employment systems in social care:

- How do national models of the welfare state, and approaches to the delivery and funding of social care impact the sector's employment system?

- How resilient has this employment system been? Has it been subject to change, for example in the context of austerity or financialization bringing forth new types of social care provider, and with what implications for the social care workforce, HRM and its actors?
- How and to what extent are key challenges like recruiting and retaining staff in the social care sector effectively addressed by national and organizational policies?

Theme 2: Workforce diversity and precarious employment in social care

- Why and how do secondary labor markets founded on low pay, low status, insecure employment, and poor career development opportunities emerge in social care?
- How do gender, ethnicity, and migrant status intersect to shape the work and employment treatment and experience of social care workers?
- To what extent and how will the workforce challenges exposed by Covid be addressed by the State, employers, labor unions and other actors, not least in securing a fairer balance between the high societal value displayed by a largely feminized social care workforce and the rewards received?

Theme 3: Strategic HRM in social care

- Are there examples of 'best practice' in the management of the social care workforce, whether in terms of pay, career development, work design, workforce planning or skill mix, and is the adoption of such practice related to organizational outcomes?
- How developed is the specialist HR function in social care, especially given the small and medium sized nature of many social care providers, and what role do line managers play in dealing with the social care workforce?
- With care delivered to different user groups in a variety of settings – care homes for the elderly and children at risk, sheltered accommodation for those with disabilities and personal residences for those with less severe chronic conditions, does the treatment of the workforce vary according to these market segments and if so how and why?

Theme 4: New HRM actors in social care

- Are new HRM actors, such as civil society organizations, services users, volunteers, and personal assistants playing a role in shaping the workforce management agenda in social care, and if so, what forms does it take?
- Are coalitions in social care being developed between traditional HRM actors, for example trade unions, and newer actors to pursue shared and complementary goals?
- In wake of Covid are employees and perhaps employers seeking a stronger employee voice in social care, and the development of collective institutions to regulate work and employment relations?

Submission Deadline: 31st March 2023

Submission Process: Authors can submit their paper between March 1st – 31st 2023 to HRM for review. Details on the manuscript submission process will be made available nearer to the submission period. Papers should be prepared and submitted according to the journal's guidelines: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/page/journal/1099050x/homepage/forauthors.html All papers will be subject to the same double-blind peer review process as regular issues of *HRM*.

The management of social care work and employment can be studied through various disciplinary lenses, with this Special Issue providing scope for collaborations between scholars from, for example, public management, public policy, and finance as well as HRM. The papers

do, however, need to relate and contribute to debates in the field of HRM, advancing theory and practice. If you have questions about a potential submission, we encourage you to make email contact: lander.vermeerbergen@ru.nl

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