

Gabriele Faßauer*

Stakeholder Relations as a Matter of Recognition – the Case of HR Managers**

Abstract

Tensions seem inextricably linked to the HR profession. Research has intensively dealt with various tensions related to HR work and has taken different means to investigate them analytically and empirically. For HR managers, tensions considerably arise from the different expectations of multiple stakeholders with whom they interact in the workplace. This study focuses on how HR managers deal with different stakeholder expectations and argues that demands for recognition are central. Based on Axel Honneth's theory of recognition, the study proposes that expectations between HR managers and stakeholders not only refer to material resources or outcomes but also to immaterial demands for recognition. The study investigates the recognition demands of HR managers and shows how these demands vary in nature and intensity depending on the stakeholder by using qualitative analysis of interviews with HR managers. In terms of recognition, the study demonstrates that HR managers relate differently to key stakeholders, such as employees, line managers, or the supervisory board. Hence, HR managers' responses to multiple stakeholder expectations are made visible as a matter of HR managers' demands for recognition.

Keywords: HR manager, Honneth, recognition, power, stakeholder, tension
(JEL: J50, L29, M12)

Introduction

In the context of organised work, the exploration of HR managers' work is a matter of practical and theoretical significance. HR managers' principal area of responsibility is the systematic management of people and their employment terms (Storey, 2007, p. 6). As a distinctive approach, "human resource management" seeks to achieve competitive advantage through the strategic development of a highly committed and capable workforce using an array of cultural, structural and personnel techniques (Storey, 1995, p. 5; Marchington, 2015, p. 177).

* Gabriele Faßauer: Professur für Führung und Organisation in der Sozial- und Gesundheitswirtschaft, Evangelische Hochschule Dresden. E-Mail: gabriele.fassauer@ehs-dresden.de.

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Research has intensively dealt with the challenges of HR managers (e.g., Truss et al., 2002; Ehnert, 2009; Roche & Teague, 2012; Aust et al., 2015, 2017; Gerpott, 2015; Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015). Considerable challenges seem to arise from the different stakeholders that direct different and sometimes conflicting expectations to HR managers. The expectation to reconcile employee needs and interests on the one hand and organisational objectives on the other, for example, has been emphasised as a key tension for HR managers (e.g., Watson, 1977; Legge, 1978; Caldwell, 2003; Renwick, 2003; Bolton & Houlihan, 2007; Kulik et al., 2009; O'Brien & Linehan, 2014; Marchington, 2015). Different stakeholder expectations are also depicted in Ulrich's seminal HR role model (e.g., Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005; Ulrich et al., 2012) proposing that HR managers, among others, should take on the role of the "strategic partner" that aligns HR and business strategy and the role of the "employee champion" that listens and responds to employees (Ulrich, 1997, p. 24). However, respective research has also been criticised for neglecting the contradictions and trade-offs between different HR roles (e.g., Caldwell, 2003; Francis & Keegan, 2006; Marchington, 2015), advocating more research on the mediating activities and everyday work of HR practitioners to work through the tensions (e.g., Truss et al., 2002; Roche & Teague, 2012; O'Brien & Linehan, 2014; Aust et al., 2015, 2017; Lang & Rego, 2015). Consequently, there is a call to examine more closely how HR managers engage with the expectations of different stakeholders and their corresponding tensions and to focus on their day-to-day critical events, experiences, and emotional challenges to deepen the understanding of the HR managers' work role and activities (e.g., Watson, 2004, 2010; Pritchard, 2010; O'Brien & Linehan, 2014).

This study contributes to this field of research by investigating how HR managers relate to their stakeholders in terms of recognition. Based on Axel Honneth's concept of recognition, the study argues that the expectations between HR managers and stakeholders refer not only to material resources and output but also to immaterial demands for recognition. In management and organisation theory, recognition is considered a dimension of social interaction that informs people's identity-building, their sense of dignity, and corresponding self-respect (Holtgrewe, 2001; Sayer, 2007a,b; Islam, 2012, 2013; Grover, 2013; Hancock, 2016). Self-respect describes a positive relation to one self's identity and results from "a feeling that one is living a worthwhile life and a confidence in one's ability to do what one considers worthwhile" (Sayer, 2005, p. 954). Self-respect is also an "inescapably social emotion" (Sayer, 2005, p. 954) that can encourage certain behaviours and actions, such as "struggles for recognition" depending on how others recognise a person's value (Honneth, 1996; Fleming & Spicer, 2007). Consequently, instead of seeing recognition primarily as an HR management tool to be used to satisfy stakeholder demands (e.g., see Hancock (2022) for a critique of employee recognition schemes), the study looks at recognition (or its lack thereof) as a basic dimension of the relationships between HR managers and stakeholders (e.g., Islam, 2012, 2013).

While previous studies have focused on the different and sometimes conflicting demands on HR managers and their possible responses (Truss et al., 2002; Guest & King, 2004; Roche & Teague, 2012; O'Brien & Linehan, 2014; Keegan et al., 2017), this study conversely deals with HR managers' demands for recognition on their stakeholders. Based on the recognition theory, HR managers can hardly relate neutrally to all stakeholder expectations since some of these affect their own demands for recognition. Hence, HR managers' responses to multiple stakeholder expectations are a matter of their demands for recognition, too.

Consequently, based on a qualitative analysis of interviews with HR managers, the study empirically illuminates how the managers' recognition demands vary in nature and intensity depending on the stakeholder. Hence, the study shows how HR managers relate to key stakeholders differently, such as employees, line managers, or supervisory boards, and how these differences correlate with organisational conditions such as hierarchical power relations.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows: The study first gives an overview of the theoretical assumptions. Here, key arguments of Honneth's theory of recognition and linkages to research on HR work-related pressure are clarified. Next, the empirical study is introduced. This is followed by the presentation of findings showing how HR managers relate to their stakeholders in terms of recognition. The paper closes with a discussion of findings and consideration of the contributions of a recognition theory-based perspective on HR managers' work and respective tensions.

Recognition Theory

A central building block of Honneth's social theory is the argument that the call for mutual recognition associated with individuals' and groups' insistence on their claims to identity basically drives social reproduction and change (Zurn, 2015, p. 6). Among others rooted in George Herbert Mead's social psychology (Mead, 1934), Honneth argues that social development takes place under the "imperative of mutual recognition because one can develop a practical relations-to-self only when one has learned to view oneself, from the normative perspective of one's partners in interaction, as their social addressee" (Honneth, 1996, p. 92). Thus, "individuals become who they are in and through relations of mutual recognition with others" (Zurn, 2015, p. 6). As individuals fundamentally depend on recognition for the construction and maintenance of their very identity, they have a basic moral demand to be recognised appropriately by others. Recognition (or its lack thereof) thus describes a fundamental immaterial dimension of interpersonal relationships as a violation of one's demands of recognition is likely to touch one's notion of oneself as a whole human being. Detention of recognition and insufficient or unreliable recognition from significant interaction partners inevitably cause suffering that might be articulated in various ways but can even lead to

“struggles for recognition.” According to Honneth, these struggles, especially social struggles, in which social actors and groups caused by negative experiences of misrecognition struggle for expanded relationships of recognition, basically drive individual emancipation and social change (Honneth, 1996, p. 160). Consequently, Honneth understands today’s institutional arrangements resulting from a historical course of struggles for recognition and refers to them as “sedimented patterns of recognition” (Honneth, 2010b, p. 117), embodying how relationships of mutual recognition get “filled out” historically (Honneth, 2012, p. 152).

Consequently, today’s forms of organised work and the employment relationship are seen as inevitably undergirded by historically contingent expectations for appropriate recognition (e.g., see research by Fleming & Spicer, 2007; Sayer, 2007a; Islam, 2012, 2013; Grover, 2013; Fassauer & Hartz, 2016; Hancock, 2016; Fassauer, 2017; Newlands, 2022; Trittin-Ulbrich, 2022). Immaterial demands for recognition thus basically inform relationships between the interacting partners in the workplace and are more or less manifested at the institutional level of organisations. Additionally, an individual’s achievement of recognition in the workplace requires a form of struggle, both at the individual level and in terms of inter-subjective relationships at work and the institutional level of the organisation.

Honneth provides a typology of different forms of relationships of recognition, each correlating with a different role in developing a person’s identity. These forms are love, right, and esteem (Fraser & Honneth, 2003, p. 162 and p. 177; Honneth, 2010a): “Love” is an affectionate form of recognition and expresses itself through caring and paying attention to each other. Through the experience of love, people gain trust in the value of their own needs and can develop basic self-confidence (Honneth, 1996, p. 95; Fraser & Honneth, 2003: 163). In work organisations, love, for instance, might be represented by care and compassionate relationships between colleagues (e.g., Rynes et al., 2012). “Right” refers to the cognitive-rational respect between legally equal partners (Honneth, 1996, p. 107). It is directed at the general qualities and skills pertaining to all legal subjects irrespective of personality so that people can regard themselves as autonomous, morally responsible persons and full members of the community. In an organised work context, rights are, for example, reflected in working contracts and other legal arrangements or in organisational practices of equal participation. To recognise a person in terms of “esteem” means to gradually assess the person’s qualities and skills (Honneth, 1996, p. 121). For Honneth, the experience of esteem is “accompanied by a felt confidence that one’s achievements or abilities will be recognised as ‘valuable’ by other members of society” (Honneth, 1996, p. 128). The workplace is a central site for achieving esteem through recognition of one’s work-related abilities and performance through, for example, remuneration, feedback, or rewards.

HR Managers and Stakeholder Expectations

Previous research has been keen to study the various expectations placed on HR managers and to deal with the question of whether and how managers can meet these expectations. Consequently, tensions have often been seen as inextricably linked to the HR profession. This is evidenced in broad research on the typical roles, role ambiguities, and conflicts of HR managers (e.g., Caldwell, 2003; Roche & Teague, 2012; O'Brien & Linehan, 2014) or on the inherent ambivalences and paradoxes of their work (e.g., Legge, 1978; Guest & King, 2004; Aust et al., 2015).

In her seminal work on the role ambiguities of personnel management specialists, Legge (1978), for example, shows that personnel managers – owed to the historical development of the personnel function in organisations (e.g., Watson, 1977) – are seen as part of the management but also have a special relationship to and responsibility for the workers. The expectation to “maintain an image of competence and credibility in the eyes of management by implementing strategies and practices that respond to economic circumstances while maintaining the trust of the workforce” (O'Brien & Linehan, 2014, p. 1259) seems to be a key challenge for HR managers (e.g., Renwick, 2003; Bolton & Houlihan, 2007; Kochan, 2008; Marchington, 2015). This is also reflected in the popular multiple roles model of Ulrich and colleagues (Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005; Ulrich et al., 2012). The initial model defines four roles for HR professionals, which are the “strategic partner” role that aligns HR and business strategy, the role of the “change agent” that manages transformation and change, the role of the “administrative expert” that reengineers organisation processes, and the “employee champion” role in which HR managers listen and respond to employees (Ulrich, 1997, p. 24). According to Ulrich, these different roles should make it possible for HR professionals to address a wide variety of stakeholder interests and issues. Later, the multiple role models were criticised for downplaying contradictions between the roles and neglecting respective tensions among HR managers (e.g., Caldwell, 2003; Francis & Keegan, 2006; Gerpott, 2015; Marchington, 2015). Research on emotional labour and struggles for authenticity owing to frequent shifts between different HR role requirements (O'Brien & Linehan, 2014) reinforces the need to examine closely how HR managers engage with stakeholder expectations and to focus on their day-to-day-practices, critical events, and emotional challenges (e.g., Watson, 2004, 2010; Pritchard, 2010).

To systematically grasp the ambiguities, tensions, and implications for the HR profession, scholars recently advocated a paradox perspective (e.g., Ehnert, 2009; Aust et al., 2015, 2017; Gerpott, 2015) acknowledging contradictions and tensions as inherent and persistent features of modern organisations (Aust et al., 2015, p. 197). Based on the paradox framework of Smith and Lewis (2011), scholars suggest several categories of paradoxical pressures in the HR profession (e.g., Aust et al., 2015; Gerpott, 2015). Gerpott (2015), for example, depicts paradoxes of identity,

referring to those tensions that occur when HR professionals “are torn between being an advocate of employee interest and a ward of managers” (Gerpott, 2015, p. 218). However, rather than framing HR managers as actors one-sidedly exposed to these tensions, a paradox perspective advocates an active role for HR managers in dealing with plurality, contradictions, and multiple bottom lines.

Previous research shows that HR managers have to deal with different and sometimes contradictory stakeholder expectations. However, while much research has been done on stakeholders’ expectations, little is known about what expectations HR managers actually require of their stakeholders and whether and how these drive their responses to stakeholders. In this context, focusing on the recognition demands of HR managers could be particularly beneficial. The perspectives mentioned above already indicate that the different stakeholders’ expectations cannot be reduced to material interests or specific outputs but also include immaterial demands for recognition. For example, acting as an “employee champion” includes both safeguarding the material interests of employees and, thus, their confirmation as actors worthy of recognition in terms of work contributions and legal status. In turn, studies on HR managers’ emotional work and their struggles for status, identity, and authenticity in dealing with different stakeholder expectations point to the HR managers’ own demands for recognition and the suffering that might come with experiences of withheld recognition.

In recognition theory, HR managers and stakeholders thus have recognition expectations of each other. However, such demands for recognition might vary in intensity and nature and hence influence how HR managers and stakeholders deal with each other. Therefore, a focus on the recognition demands of HR managers helps in understanding the managers’ responses to particular stakeholders and how tensions arise from the managers’ viewpoint. Consequently, the empirical study presented below aims to find out how HR managers relate to different stakeholders in terms of recognition.

The Empirical Setting, Data, and Analysis

The study was interested in the recognition experiences of HR managers, their demands for recognition, and their thoughts about others’ respective demands, conflicts, and work behaviours. An interpretive research approach was applied with 26 interviews as the main data source and a qualitative analysis (e.g., Jo Hatch & Yanow, 2003; Yanow & Ybema, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Interview inquiries were directed at persons with pertinent job descriptions at various companies in Germany (see Table 1 for an overview). At the time of the interviews, a total of 24 interviewees are Heads of the HR Department; two interviewees have no leadership responsibility: one is solely responsible for managing the company’s strategic HR issues, and one is solely responsible for all HR themes in a small company. Nevertheless, these two interviewees were included in the sample based

on the assumption that despite their missing leadership responsibility, they are also confronted with typical stakeholder interests relating to their HR professional activities. Interviewees had various personal and work-related backgrounds. Approximately one-third came from small and medium-sized companies with up to 500 employees, the others from large businesses with up to and more than 5000 employees. Approximately one-third of each came from the manufacturing and service industries; the remaining were from retail trade, energy provision, pharmaceutical industry, healthcare, and broadcasting.

Table 1. Sample Overview (sample characteristics each with number of interviewees)

Gender	Age	Work Experience in HR	Number of employees of the company	Branch
women: 15	25–30 years: 2	2–5 years: 4	≤ 100: 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ manufacturing trade (e.g., steel, wood, textile, rail systems, aero-technics, synthetic materials): 9 ■ service industry (IT, financial, personnel, training): 8 ■ retail trade (incl. mail order trade and e-commerce): 4 ■ energy provision: 2 ■ pharmaceutical industry: 1 ■ health care: 1 ■ broadcasting: 1
men: 11	31–35 years: 4	5–9 years: 10	101 – 499: 8	
	36–40 years: 5	10–14 years: 5	500 – 999: 4	
	41–45 years: 6	15–19 years: 4	1000 – 5000: 11	
	46–50 years: 4	20–25 years: 3	≥ 5001: 2	
	51–55 years: 2			
	55–60 years: 3			

Interviews were semi-structured in that the interview guide provided some main and open-ended questions without specifying every question in advance, thus allowing unplanned questions to arise from the interview session. The interviews aimed to provide as much unrestrained space as possible for the interviewees' articulations. Additionally, interviewees were frequently encouraged to give examples and describe situations from their daily working lives. The interview guideline consisted of three sections: (1) the managers' position, responsibilities, and working tasks; (2) their notions and experiences of recognition in the workplace; and (3) their handling of tensions and conflicts. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Qualitative analysis was conducted in several steps with the help of MAXQDA as a software tool.

First, resulting from a back-and-forth process between the interview accounts, this study's overall interests and theoretical background three main categories for analysis were defined (see Table 2 for an overview). Thus, "demands for recognition," "conflicts of recognition," and "modes of recognition" were introduced to systematise the data. Whereby the first two categories stem from the recognition theory, the category "modes of recognition" was introduced as a broad term to capture the managers' descriptions of their handling of recognition in the workplace.

Descriptions of struggles, as well as withdrawal from attempts to foster recognition, are included in this category.

Table 2. Main Categories and Examples from the Interviews

Main Category	Description	Example from Interviews
demands for recognition	any characteristics, skills, behaviours, actions, and/or identities for which interviewees claim positive affirmation	<p><i>"One must be able to withstand something. One cannot break into tears and break down from setbacks, lack of recognition, or negative criticism. In my entire career, it has been, I believe, three times that I have been crying at work." (PB1)</i></p> <p><i>"I think what always helped me is my ability to develop good relationships with the base [production workers, author's note]. I like it to be there, talking to the people. I think I succeed quite well to be on the same level and to be the contact person for them." (LH5)</i></p>
conflicts of recognition	any discrepancies between demands for recognition and received recognition	<p><i>"The topic was something technical; it was about a recruiting process. Despite that we said the employee did not fit in there; he nevertheless was hired. This was not just a feeling, that did not fit professionally, that did not fit personally (...), but such a supervisory board sometimes has its own glasses on. However, that was misrecognition because it did not matter what we [HR department, author's note] said." (JW3)</i></p> <p><i>"So, I have a family, and our managing director also has a family, (...). She also knows that I have two children. That does not stop her from making appointments at 6:00 o'clock in the evening. I feel this is a personal disregard." (JW4)</i></p>
modes of recognition	dealing with / handling recognition in the workplace	<p><i>"I have experienced many transformations here, staff expansions and redundancies. The most important I learned is to do everything with decency, no matter what it is. You must be able to look the other in the eye." (MA3)</i></p> <p><i>"When I started in the company, the relationship with the works council was totally hardened. There was not much left. This had something to do with recognition. The works council is the elected representative of the employees. (...) you should meet the works council at eye level because such a works council has a tremendous power that can lame such a company (...). Therefore, you should reasonably deal with them and say, o.k., you are chosen by the employees. We accept you." (LH4)</i></p>

For each main category, several subcategories were defined by in vivo coding (Miles et al., 2014, p. 74; Saldana, 2016, p. 105) and by integrating similar in vivo codes into superordinate categories. For example, several interviewees stated that their position as HR managers distinguishes them from others by demanding a particular

“robustness” or “thick skin” to manage work-related conflicts and uncomfortable situations at work. These codes were summarised in the superordinate category “resilience” as a subcategory of demands for recognition, indicating the HR managers’ claim to deserve recognition for resilience.

In the main and subcategories, the statements were further organised according to the different organisational actors to whom the interviewees referred in their descriptions. Hence, four main reference groups were defined and used to systematise the data further. These are the supervisory board/supervisors, line managers, subordinates, and employees. In terms of recognition, these reference groups were defined as HR managers’ key stakeholders. Finally, Honneth’s three forms of recognition were used to achieve a more nuanced picture of the managers’ perspectives and experiences of recognition. Here, broad definitional room was reserved for the interpretation of the HR managers’ statements. “Love” was defined as mutual care and affection, “right” as recognition as a morally responsible person and equal member of the community, and “esteem” as recognition of the value of a person’s concrete qualities, skills, and achievements at work.

Using these three steps, the analysis resulted in the creation of three matrixes. The first matrix contains the HR managers’ demands for recognition (first main category) according to the four reference groups and the three forms of recognition. Along the same two axes, the second entails the conflicts of recognition (second main category), and the third, the modes of recognition (third main category) accordingly. Hence, a fine-grained picture of the HR managers’ perspective and handling of recognition in the workplace emerges.

Findings – HR Managers’ Relationships of Recognition

HR managers relate differently with their stakeholders upon the reconstruction of their perspectives on recognition. Thus, depending on the stakeholder, the forms of recognition in terms of love, right, and esteem have different significance for HR managers. Additionally, there are differences in how HR managers regard their positions and others’ positions in these relationships of recognition by attributing more passive or active roles. Hence, depending on the stakeholder, managers emphasise their role differently as addressees or senders of recognition and see themselves as differently equipped to resolve recognition conflicts by struggling for recognition actively. Ultimately, the level of personal concern and emotional involvement regarding recognition differs, arguably enabling a strategic handling of recognition to a greater or lesser degree.

The findings below are presented along the three forms of recognition and the different stakeholders to whom HR managers relate to respectively. Overall, the findings propose that the HR managers’ prioritization and positioning of the stakeholders in terms of recognition is central to understanding their perception and handling of HR work-related tensions.

Esteem

When asked for their notions of recognition, HR managers largely refer to the persons to whom they are subordinate. Hence, the supervisory board of the company, CEO, or head of the superior department seem to be significant stakeholders for HR managers. Positioning themselves to be “primarily there to implement the supervisory board’s requests” and to “deliver a good job for the supervisor,” the interviewees decidedly recognise this stakeholder as the central sender of esteem in the workplace, suggesting a strong influence of the hierarchical relationship. Consequently, conflicts of recognition arise from perceived “negligence” of the HR manager’s expert knowledge, “low integration in decision-making processes,” and the “degradation” of HR themes in general and “scarce feedback” on HR managers’ performance. Interviewees thus describe conflicts at the individual level, e.g., in terms of insufficient personal feedback, and at the collective level by lamenting the lack of recognition of the entire HR department or of HR work in general. For example, relating to the supervisory board, the following quote points to the HR manager’s frustration about the lack of recognition of the entire HR department’s contribution to the company’s success. Upon taking these contributions as “normal” and thus not specifically valuable, for this HR manager, recognition in terms of esteem is denied for the whole department:

“Our workforce functions well. We have very few staff ill. We have a motivated and healthy workforce. Whose contribution is this? This is the contribution of the HR department. (...) But for this, you get no recognition. (...) We negotiated thousands of employment policies. That is normal and is not recognised. That must not be.” (LH1)

While this suggests that the HR role is still faced with the status problems identified by Legge so many years ago, the findings also point to the HR managers’ self-confidence and willingness to struggle for HR work-related esteem. At the individual level, HR managers tackle such tensions by actively fostering esteem from their supervisors or the supervisory board. Asking for feedback and raising claims in appraisal interviews, for example, are central manifestations of such struggles for esteem:

“We have an annual personnel talk. Both sides are preparing for this so that one can find examples from the individual points of what went well or not so well. One tries, from the conversation, to determine whether he [the supervisor, author’s note] is satisfied or how he sees it [the HR manager’s performance, authors note] compared to others. Thus, one calls for recognition.” (LH1)

Regarding esteem for the entire HR department, HR managers often relate to their subordinates in the HR department. Interestingly, the managers transfer their own desires for esteem from their superiors and respective tensions to their subordinates:

“I am not solely responsible for the themes; rather, there is a team behind, which I would like to receive recognition and which I would like to inform that the executive director finds their work excellent. For them, I sometimes wish more recognition.” (HP1)

This positioning of the subordinates as addressees of esteem from the upper hierarchical level seems to predispose HR managers in their role as supervisors to “spotlight” the subordinates’ achievements or to make these persons more “visible” to the supervisory board; that is to struggle for the esteem of their subordinates vicariously. However, while such struggles are aimed at profiling the HR department as a whole and the work of HR managers themselves, the recognition of the subordinates for these efforts also seems important to HR managers. For example, this HR manager expresses his disappointment about the respective responses of his subordinates:

“You are happy to announce that you negotiated a pay raise, and then they say it is not enough, that you wasted your time. That is depressing if you campaigned for the people.” (HL5)

In this regard, the subordinates are important stakeholders in the HR managers’ recognition relationships. For HR managers, the subordinates, on the one hand, represent the work of the HR department in the organisation and are thus framed as the addressee of esteem. On the other hand, they are seen as senders of recognition for the HR managers themselves in their roles as supervisors. Hence, in terms of esteem, the recognition relationship with this stakeholder group seems largely derived from the hierarchical structure.

The influence of power relationships is also evident in the finding that esteem from subordinates is not actively demanded from HR managers. Thus, while from their subordinates, the interviewees wish “open feedback” and desire “praise” for their work as supervisors, they suppress their own attempts to foster such feedback at the same time:

“In a leadership position, you rarely receive open feedback. Of course, you must be careful with that because positive feedback is quickly misunderstood in the leadership relationship in the sense of currying favour with the executive.” (JW3)

As giving positive feedback to a supervisor seems under a cloud of flattery, fostering such recognition from subordinates would force them to appear in a bad light and is equivocal. Even if this may not be limited to HR managers but may apply to superior-subordinate relationships in general, it again shows how hierarchical power structures influence the HR managers’ handling of recognition in the workplace.

So far, the findings propose that HR managers, in terms of recognition, refer to their stakeholders differently. This correlates with their work role and with hierarchical positions and corresponding relations of power.

This is reflected in the HR managers’ reference to the line managers, too. While these represent an important stakeholder for HR managers, recognition relationships and conflicts with this stakeholder group are described differently from those with superiors and subordinates. Interestingly, interviewees often comparatively refer to line managers in terms of lack of esteem for the HR profession from their supervisors or the supervisory board, e.g., in terms of salary differences:

(...) in such a ranking [a template to determine one's payment, author's note], the HR managers regularly are inferior to the technical managers. Why are the HR people always inferior to the people who do the finance? I cannot understand this! They count money, and we work with the people. Generally, I would suggest that the role of the HR manager should be higher appreciated than that of the technicians." (MA5)

The assessment of the interviewees of the unjustified unequal recognition of HR and line managers coincides with their positioning to this stakeholder group. Towards line managers, HR managers thus often position themselves as "partners" who provide HR expert knowledge and who give support in personnel decisions. While this can be understood as a longing for esteem on the part of HR managers, their positioning as "equal partners," arguably, is also appropriate to mitigate respective conflicts with this stakeholder arousing, for example, by the line managers' ignorance of the HR managers' expert knowledge and counselling:

"They [line managers, authors' note] do not see the added value. When there is a vacant position, they ponder in the evening at the corner of their writing desk which person might be suitable. As partners having the instruments that could set the course, we are not asked." (LH1)

The accusation contained here of the unprofessional behaviour of line managers makes them a less significant stakeholder when it comes to the HR managers' demands for esteem; the significance of line managers as senders of esteem is diminished and rather turned into the HR managers' expectation of recognition as an equal partner whose skills and contributions in term of esteem are not even up for debate. This interpretation is underscored by HR managers' descriptions of the dismissive behaviours of line managers. Thus, according to this interviewee, as an HR manager, one should not perceive certain behaviours of line managers as lacking esteem. Rather, it is part of one's own professional understanding to handle such dismissive behaviours in the right way:

"I can only recommend to everyone in HR to get to know the other side, that this is not necessarily a conscious rejection since the managers are also driven by the technologies. They prioritise very clearly, and then there comes someone [HR manager, author's note] and wants to push something else." (HP4)

Compared to the conflicts of recognition with the supervisors/supervisory board, such distancing from line managers seems easier for HR managers. Here, formal hierarchical equality and the HR managers' positioning as "equivalent partners" who "likewise contribute to the company's success" arguably contribute to a diminished subjective significance of this stakeholder as the sender of esteem. This can also be seen in the subjective handling of permanent recognition conflicts with these two groups of stakeholders. While constantly falling short of the struggles for esteem with supervisors can lead to a dismayed withdrawal behaviour of HR managers, they seem to choose a more strategic approach to recognition when dealing with line managers. Regarding the first, this interviewee, for example, describes his supervisor's ignorance of outcomes of a work project lasting over months – a highly frustrating experience of lacking esteem:

"Yes, simply stapled [a proposal to improve the qualification program in the company, author's note]. You can do nothing about it. You cannot do anything in this situation. Everyone has his own strategy for it.

(...) So, you know, after eight years [in the job, author's note], when it is worthwhile once again to ask and when then the point is when you say that it is just that way." (PB4)

Apart from the ignorance of month-length work, it seems even worse that from the perspective of the HR manager, nothing can be done about it. Respective withdrawal from attempts for esteem often comes with feelings of bitterness and the need for personal justification. For example, when asked for their personal strategies to deal with such experiences, these interviewees answered:

"I have matured personally in recent years. This is due, at first, to work; at second, to age; and at third, to family. You have experienced many situations that leave you frustrated, so you simply condone certain situations." (MA2)

"Sometimes you must find your place and play a role. If you are not able to do this, I recommend that you leave." (MA3)

However, depending on the stakeholder, other reactions may occur. Thus, the recognition relationship with line managers described above suggests a more distanced view of conflicts of recognition and its handling on the part of the HR managers. The following statement thus illustrates a mere strategic approach:

"Most of them [line managers, author's note] want to be positively recognised. You must start carefully with a different opinion and look, how I say it, that they still feel recognised. This way, you suggest different ways of doing things quite adeptly." (PB1)

In such a situation, recognition is an instrument for the HR manager that glosses over the intention of interaction. In terms of HR managers' demands for recognition, the line managers, as this example suggests, seem to enjoy a lower subjective significance but are instrumental in achieving the HR managers' overarching goals. Therefore, the line managers' assumed demands of recognition are addressed albeit superficially. Proposedly, for HR managers, this way of dealing with recognition also seems to be a way to mitigate the tensions arising from different stakeholder interests.

So far, the findings are focused on HR managers' perspectives on esteem. Central stakeholders, their different significance for HR managers, and respective responses are presented. When looking at recognition as right, a different picture emerges.

Right

In terms of rights, HR managers particularly refer to the employees of the company. They refer to this group predominantly as addressees of rights, pointing to their recognition as morally responsible persons and equal members of the community. For example, this HR manager says that regardless of the other's status, employee issues have to be treated with "decency":

"I have experienced many transformations here, staff expansions and redundancies. The most important I learned is to do everything with decency, no matter what it is. You must be able to look the other in the eye. (...) When people change the roadside, if you come along, you did something wrong." (MA3)

Employees, at first, are recognised as legal persons with certain rights who, secondly, deserve “equal treatment” in the company. Referring to the first, obeying the law seems to stem from a normative commitment of HR managers that sometimes must also be enforced against other organisational actors’ interests:

“The HR manager is also the advocate of the employee. Sometimes, this is annoying for others. But I think it is important, too. Because it would be fatal if we undermined the German labour law; these things are important for Germany, e.g., the Law on Employment Protection or The Protection against Dismissal Act. We have the task of adhering to the law. We are expected to do that, of course, even by the management. Because of this, we sometimes are the admonisher who put the brakes on and who choose the rocky road.” (MA3)

The representation of interests and corresponding struggles for employee rights, even in opposition to the management, are addressed here while, at the same time, expressing that “even” the management expects this to be a central feature of the HR role. Tensions and the respective struggles are thus pointed out, but at the same time, they are normalised and legitimised owing to the institutionalisation of recognition relationships in terms of rights. However, in their descriptions of the different conflicts that arise among superiors or the supervisory board, HR managers also tend to enmesh their normative commitments with instrumental considerations. For example, this HR manager justifies her engagement with the employees with the following arguments:

“When I started in the company, the relationship with the works council was totally hardened. There was not much left. This had something to do with recognition. The works council is the elected representative of the employees. As managing director, you should meet the works council at eye level because such a works council has a tremendous power that can lame such a company (...). Therefore, you should reasonably deal with them and say, o.k., you are elected by the employees. We accept you. One should keep the laws anyway.” (LH4)

The recognition of employees in terms of right here to meet the works council as elected representatives “at eye level” is not only seen as valuable by itself but as necessary to prevent the company from harm, too. Hence, the struggle for recognition is also justified with instrumental and strategic considerations. Thus, even if HR managers might personally take a distanced stance towards recognition conflicts of employees, from their perspective, this argument could underscore the importance of their role in processing employees’ rights for recognition.

Apart from equal treatment in terms of the law, HR managers refer to employees’ equality similarly in terms of equal communication. Interviewees highlight that they “equally listen to everybody independent from the other’s hierarchical position” and take all organisational others seriously, “also the people at the production line.” Upon highlighting that this form of equality prevails independently from the other’s hierarchical position, the interviewees imbue the challenging character of this type of recognition in a context of unequal hierarchical power relations. Offers of communication from HR managers might thus lead to resentment among

those down the hierarchy, as this interviewee suggests by pointing to the possible reservation of employees:

“And, of course, I must be in the team; I must be the HR manager in the company. They [employees, author’s note] must not be afraid to talk to me. They need to know that they can come to me and who I am.” (PB3)

Consequently, HR managers often are annoyed with employees’ complaints about unequal involvement and communication:

“Now we have regular meetings with the employees, where the people get all the information. We regularly have bulletins if something important has happened. We do a lot. But nevertheless, most of the staff says ‘Our work is not appreciated. (...)’ This annoys me, then.” (LH4)

Arguably, HR managers cannot behave neutrally towards such claims for recognition and corresponding tensions, as these affect their self-image and esteem as HR managers having good contact with people “at the workbench.” Hence, employees are positioned as addressees of recognition in the form of rights and senders of esteem for the managers in their HR role.

Love

Interestingly, HR managers also address employees in terms of love. Love is caring and showing affection to others in the workplace. However, this form of recognition among HR managers appears ambivalent.

While the interviewees underscore their social competencies and respective capacities for nurturing caring relationships, they similarly appraise their “robustness,” their “thick skin,” and their ability to “separate between subject matter and personal issues.” This interviewee thus clearly addresses his reluctance to adopt a “caring philosophy”:

“So, I believe that the issue of resilience is very important. I sometimes perceive that the people who are active in HR management (...) sometimes have, like the nurses, such a caring philosophy. This must not be too strong (...). This means it is not the point to please anybody because you cannot.” (PB4)

However, similar to the line managers, the interviews suggest that in certain situations, the HR managers use their recognitive capacities in an instrumental way to resolve conflicts and tensions with employees:

“I still find empathy is very important. This will put you into the position of the other, but also with a certain limit, because you have a role as an HR manager, and you must fill this role. But I believe that what always helps very well is to get into the feeling world of the other and to know: Ah, how does the other feel? How does a dismissal feel from the opposing position?” (JW3)

Hence, playing “the role as HR manager,” e.g., in the case of conducting a termination interview, foretells the use of one’s capacity for recognition, thus being emphatic and “to get into the feeling world” of the other in a merely instrumental way. Dealing with recognition becomes a tool to frame the relationship to mitigate tensions and make them manageable.

For completeness, it is said that in terms of love, HR managers also relate to their supervisors and subordinates. However, these findings do not appear to be specific to HR managers but are typical for supervisor-subordinate relationships. Essentially, it is about the recognition of one's personal situation and family commitments. As subordinates, HR managers want to be treated by their supervisors as persons who can care for others, be it a family, colleagues, or other people. In turn, in their role as supervisors, they claim to recognise their subordinates in this way. However, instrumental considerations are also evident here, pointing to the interweaving of attitudes of recognition with organisational positions, respective roles, and power relations:

"We work in flexitime, and my two colleagues both have two children; one gets the third. If there is something with the children, we always find a way. Either they work from home, or they bring the children with them to work (...). Of course, they enjoy these concessions. But, otherwise, it would not work." (LH4)

Hence, refusing to recognise colleagues' family commitments and thus their caring capacities is not only viewed as negative per se but seen as damaging because "it would not work otherwise." Making respective "concessions" here rather appears as an ambivalent offer of recognition and an impaired positioning of subordinates in terms of recognition.

Discussion and Conclusions

In accordance with research on this topic, this study indicates that the HR manager's role is characterised by tensions. Findings, among other things, show that HR managers are exposed to conflicting interests of management and employees, corresponding status problems vis-à-vis top and line management, and conflictual relationships with subordinates. Tensions thus arise from different stakeholder expectations directed at the HR managers. However, the findings also show that the HR managers' perspective on recognition significantly shapes their perception and handling of such tensions. The study shows that in terms of recognition, the stakeholders have different significance for the HR managers' own demands for recognition, that HR managers refer to stakeholders in different forms of recognition and ascribe more active or passive roles to them. Hence, the study follows the call to more closely analyse how HR managers manage the expectations of different stakeholders and corresponding tensions (e.g., Watson, 2004, 2010; Pritchard, 2010; O'Brien & Linehan, 2014). Upon defining recognition as a central dimension of relating with others, recognition theory offers a framework for analysing how and why HR managers deal with different stakeholder expectations differently.

The findings show, for example, that depending on how personally affected HR managers are by recognition conflicts, they are also more willing to fight for recognition for themselves and others. This can be seen, for example, in the

struggles for the supervisor's/supervisory board's recognition for their work or that of the entire HR department. In turn, the signs of frustration and withdrawing behaviour in the event of futile struggles indicate that for HR managers, it is rather difficult to deal neutrally with the behaviour of their superiors/supervisory board. In contrast, this shows up in the relationship with line managers. Owing to the HR managers' understanding of this recognition relationship as an equal partnership, the line managers are a less significant stakeholder in terms of HR managers' demands for esteem. Of course, HR managers are personally affected by conflicts, for example, owing to line managers' rejection of HR issues. However, dealing with this stakeholder and such tensions takes a more strategic approach. Thus, there are indications that HR managers use recognition as a strategic tool for the line managers to achieve their overarching goals. This kind of shaping of the recognition relationship allows for the weakening of conflicts for HR managers and to handle tensions more amicably.

However, in line with Honneth's theory of recognition, the results also show that HR managers, regardless of how personally they are affected by recognition conflicts, must deal with different stakeholder conflicts in a certain way. That is owing to institutionalised manifestations of recognition relationships linked to corresponding expectations directed at the role of HR managers. In the findings, this is particularly evident in the framing of the recognition relationship with the employees and their positioning as the addressee of recognition in terms of rights. On the one hand, even though HR managers are not personally affected by these recognition conflicts, they show a normative commitment to enforcing employee rights in the organisation. On the other hand, the institutionalisation of this type of recognition in the form of laws also provides a solid basis for conflicts with the top management, legitimising and dealing with respective tensions. This suggests that formal institutionalisation and implementation of recognition claims in the workplace and the formalisation of the corresponding responsibilities are central to bolstering HR managers' work. A recognition perspective thus suggests that dealing with the tension associated with the HR profession cannot be viewed as the individual sole fight of HR managers. However, it is always embedded in institutionalised social and organisational structures.

Similarly, the findings show that hierarchical power structures strongly influence demands for recognition and perception of tensions. Thus, HR managers consider recognition in the form of esteem from stakeholders higher in the organisational hierarchy to be relevant and more often struggle to be esteemed by these persons. Conversely, actively demanding recognition from subordinate employees does not seem appropriate for HR managers. One explanation might be that, from the managers' perspective, the employees, owing to their subordinate position in the hierarchy, cannot freely say what they really think (e.g., Sayer, 2007a). Corresponding requests for esteem would, therefore, be reduced to nothing by suggesting an instrumentalisation of recognition on the part of subordinates, thus devaluating

such recognition at the same time. Overall, relationships of recognition and the respective framing and handling of tensions among HR managers seem to be essentially constituted – at least in terms of their subjective relevance – and also undermined by power relationships pointing to complex interrelations (e.g., Sayer, 2007a; Tweedie & Holley, 2016; Tweedie et al., 2019, p. 89).

This study provides a micro-foundation for seminal HR role models and typologies, which take up the multiple expectations and ambivalences of HR managers' work but do not dive deeper into the questions of how and with what outcomes the managers deal with corresponding tensions (for such a critique see for instance Watson, 2004, 2010; O'Brien & Linehan, 2014; Aust et al., 2015, 2017). Hence, the study supports the increasingly evolving paradox theory-based research in HRM, which also strives for a theoretically and empirically expanded focus on tensions, responses to tensions, and outcomes in HRM (e.g., Aust et al., 2015, 2017; Keegan et al., 2018). For example, by focusing on HR managers not as "neutral" applicants of recognition but as self-affected actors in relationships of recognition, the study provides insights into the outcomes of responses to tensions. Findings, for example, indicate that owing to permanent disappointments of HR managers' fights for recognition, these struggles become thus less and less likely while resignation and instrumentalisation of recognition may increase. As a result, HR managers may not, or only superficially, meet some of the central expectations placed on them in the workplace to actively fill out the recognition dimension of the HR profession. However, regarding the social and organisational legitimacy of the HR function, this could contribute to the side-line position of HR managers that Legge (1978) diagnosed decades ago and which still concerns HR research and practice (e.g., Guest & King, 2004; Kochan, 2005; Marchington, 2015).

However, a recognition perspective and precisely the understanding of HR managers as actors in relationships of recognition consider their potential to contribute to new developments. Precisely because they are actors in need of recognition, they are inclined to fight for their own and others' recognition in the workplace and may thus improve employee well-being. In terms of the possible outcomes of responses to tensions, the recognition perspective thus allows both "vicious" and "virtuous" cycles to be depicted. Hence, the recognition perspective provides a micro-foundation of paradox-theoretical considerations, reflecting on the different outcomes of responses to tensions and the contextual characteristics spurring these (Aust et al., 2017, p. 423).

Finally, a recognition theory perspective allows more explicitly normative theorising of HR management (e.g., Islam, 2012, 2013; Tweedie et al., 2019; Visser & Arnold, 2021). Because recognition theory views recognition as an indispensable prerequisite for human well-being and "flourishing," it can help to evaluate the HR managers' responses to tensions critically and to "normatively reconstruct" respective HR practices more broadly (e.g., Islam, 2012; Visser & Arnold, 2021;

Newlands, 2022). Honneth's concept offers a systematic framework for such analysis. However, in accordance with Tweedie (2019, p. 90), one can ascertain that Honneth's approach has so far been less used in "empirical qualitative workplace research that shows that recognition is demanded in different complex ways by different actors or roles (e.g., customers vs. colleagues), at different organisational levels and hierarchies and in different social and economic classes." Respective investigations could thus also yield empirical substance and new insights for Honneth's approach. Hence, the study elucidates how HR managers adopt and navigate recognition, thus highlighting the central role of recognition in the workplace and its complexity and fragility in the context of organised work and unequal power relationships.

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