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**Article**

## Researching on SHRM: An analysis of the debate over the role played by human resources in firm SUCCESS

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**Researching on SHRM: An Analysis of the Debate over the  
Role Played by Human Resources in Firm Success\*\***

Many different models have been recently proposed to explain the contribution of human resource management to organizational performance, drawing on diverse theoretical frameworks and using many different methodologies. Trying to shed light on the complex state of the art in this field of research, this paper proposes an analysis of the discipline, drawing both on a review of the literature and data obtained from an online questionnaire distributed to human resource management scholars.

Key words: **Strategic Human Resource Management, Performance,  
Review of the Literature, State of the Art, Theories, Methodologies**

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## Introduction

Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM), and its contribution to organizational success, is now consolidated as one of the most important research questions in the field of human resources. Since the traditional personnel management approach was replaced by strategic models oriented to internal aspects, academic interest shifted from administrative and bureaucratic issues to a much more integrative and proactive approach, directly related to human resource strategies and overarching philosophies (Drucker 1968; Foulkes 1975; Burack/Smith 1977; Watson 1977; Legge 1978; Rowland/Summers 1981; Russ 1982; Galosy 1983; Baird/Meshoulam 1984). Although the development of the field in these first years was criticized because of the lack of solid theoretical foundations (Zedeck/Cascio 1984; Dyer 1985; Bacharach 1989), SHRM research grew progressively, mainly after some crucial theoretical revisions such as those presented by Wright and McMahan (1992), Jackson and Schuler (1995) or the monographic issues of the *International Journal of Human Resource Management* (1997) and the *Human Resource Management Review* (1998). In this process, several SHRM models were proposed from diverse research perspectives, incorporating inputs from such very different disciplines as organization theory, sociology, organizational psychology, and management or strategic thinking (Jackson/Schuler 1995; McMahan/Virick/Wright 1999). This continuing explosion of the literature makes it necessary to undertake a systematic analysis of the different explanations that have been offered.

The objective of this paper is to review the present state of the art in the field of SHRM research, drawing on a review of the literature and on data obtained from 223 responses to an online questionnaire to Human Resource Management (HRM) scholars from different nationalities and academic contexts. Using the terminology presented by Jackson, Schuler, and Rivero (1989), Brewster (1995, 1999) and Delery and Doty (1996), four research perspectives have been defined to classify the literature: universalistic, contingent, configurational and contextual. These “modes of theorizing” (Delery/Doty 1996) represent four different approaches to the same research question, each emphasizing a specific dimension of the reality of SHRM. This criterion allows a systematic classification of the literature, because the definition of the four perspectives is based on the same principles, and together they show a spectrum that encompasses all possible approaches. Drawing upon data obtained from an online questionnaire distributed to scholars all over the world, this paper tries to analyse the actual landscape of SHRM research. The study focuses on the extent to which each perspective is used today, and which theoretical frameworks and research methodologies are fostering the development of a universalistic, contingent, configurational and contextual approach. The survey also included questions to determine their research objectives (Snow/Thomas 1994), and the particular areas of interest on which they have focused.

## The Study: sample and measures

To develop this empirical analysis of the state of the art, an online questionnaire was distributed to HRM scholars from all over the world. It contained eight sets of items that respondents were asked to evaluate in a 0 to 5 scale, thinking about their aca-

ademic activity in the past, present and future. Each of these parts of the questionnaire was designed to extract information about certain aspects that described individuals' approach to HRM research:

1. First, academics were asked about the journals and reviews that they normally use and intend to use in the future. The 66 titles that were finally included in the list were selected from ISI's Social Citation Index. Nevertheless, a final open option was provided in case the respondent wanted to highlight any other journal.
2. In a second set of questions, scholars were asked about the Theories and Perspectives used to support their propositions. Concretely, they were asked to choose between the following options: (i) Resources and Capabilities View of the Firm, (ii) Behavioural Perspective, (iii) Open Systems Theory, (iv) Agency and Transaction Costs Theories, (v) Human Capital Theory, (vi) Social Capital Theory, (vii) Resource Dependence Theory, and (viii) Institutional Theory. This initial list was defined drawing on previous reviews of the literature (Wright/McMahan 1992; Jackson/Schuler 1995). Nevertheless, we also provided an open possibility to capture other options not included in the previous list.
3. A third set of questions was included to evaluate each respondent's research approach, drawing on the four perspectives that guide our review of the literature: Universalistic, Contingent, Configurational and Contextual perspectives (Jackson/Schuler/Rivero 1989; Brewster 1995, 1999; Delery/Doty 1996).
4. Drawing on the analysis of management research of Snow/Thomas (1994), we also tried to extract information about academics' objectives: (i) Identification of key concepts; (ii) Establishment of how and why those key concepts are related; (iii) Prediction of the future behaviour of variables; (iv) Key concepts measurement; (v) Measurement of the relationships among variables; and (vi) Test of competing theories that explain the same phenomenon.
5. Once scholars had responded about their theoretical perspective and their research objectives, they were asked to specify the methodologies that they have used, use and intend to use. Also drawing on Snow/Thomas' (1992) items academics responded about their data-gathering techniques (direct and participant observation, interviews, questionnaires, computer databases, simulations, laboratory experiments or computer simulations).
6. Regarding their data analysis methodologies, the questionnaire differentiated between qualitative (i.e. case studies, Delphi, repertory grid) and quantitative (i.e. ANOVA, regressions, cluster analysis, factorial analysis) methods.
7. After methodological issues, the questionnaire included items to identify each scholar's research interests, as Staffing, Recruitment and Selection, Compensation, Training, Socialization, Motivation or Human Resource Strategies.
8. Finally, academics were asked about their future research projects, and their interest in topics that have been highlighted as future trends in the field of HRM, such as Entrepreneurship and HRM, Diversity, Involvement or International HRM. Both in the seventh and eighth sets of items, open responses were especially important to identify present and future trends in HRM research.

Together with all this information and in order to analyse if demographic variables could explain scholars' approaches, the questionnaire also included items about their affiliation (University or Research Centre), their nationality, and their tenure as academics (measured by the year of their first publication).

Our target population was HRM scholars, localized by the membership database of the HRM division of the Academy of Management, as well as lists of attendants from specialized Research Meetings (i.e., EIASM conferences and workshops, CRANET meetings, Cádiz University HRM Workshops, or IJHRM conferences). An email was sent to the 1656 scholars identified asking them to click a link to the questionnaire in .html format. After three rounds of emails, and once invalid responses were rejected (mainly because scholars declared they were not primarily focused in HRM), we finally received 223 responses, which represented 13.5% of the academics contacted. Surprisingly, this response rate does not differ much from those obtained normally in management surveys directed to organizations. As Table 1 shows, the majority of the sample came from Europe and the United States of America, the two main epicentres of HRM research.

**Table 1: Demographic distribution of the sample.**

<b>Year of scholar's first academic publication</b>	<b>Before 1980s</b>	<b>1980s</b>	<b>1990s</b>	<b>2000s</b>	<b>No response</b>
	31 (15.58%)	46 (23.11%)	106 (53.27%)	13 (6.53%)	3 (1.51%)
<b>Nationality</b>	<b>European</b>	<b>North American</b>	<b>South American</b>	<b>Rest of the world</b>	<b>No response</b>
	112 (50.24%)	89 (39.91%)	4 (1.79%)	10 (4.48%)	8 (3.58%)

To analyse the evolution of research in SHRM, we have distinguished between the universalistic, contingent, configurational and contextual perspectives (Jackson/Schuler/Rivero 1989; Brewster 1995, 1999; Delery/Doty 1996). Scholars' responses to the third section of the questionnaire allowed us to assess their level of adoption of each of these approaches in a three-interval variable (low, medium and high level of use) that was used to ascribe academics. From  $\chi^2$  and Kendall's Tau tests included in Table 2, we can deduce that, in general terms, these four research perspectives present theoretical and methodological differences in their analyses of the HRM-performance relationship. In fact, data show significant relationships ( $p < 0.05$ ) between academics' perspective and their main research interests, the theories from which they develop their propositions, and their data analysis techniques. From this starting point, in the next sections, we propose a deeper analysis of the research orientation adopted by universalistic, contingent, configurational and contextual academics, completing the review of the literature with data obtained about each of these issues.

### **Universalistic Perspective**

Universalistic propositions represent the simplest approach to the analysis of human resource strategies. Starting from the premise of the existence of certain ways of managing human resources that are always preferable, universalistic research tries to identify Best Human Resource Management Practices that, as Becker and Gerhart (1996)

argued, must have two characteristics: (1) a demonstrated ability to improve organizational performance and (2) they must be generalizable. This objective implicitly assumes that the relationship between variables (HRM and performance or firm success) is linear, and can be extended to the entire population (Delery/Doty 1996).

**Table 2: Research perspectives and topics of interest, theories and methodologies (N = 223)**

		Universalistic			Contingent			Configurational			Contextual		
		$\chi^2$ sig	Kendall's Tau		$\chi^2$ sig	Kendall's Tau		$\chi^2$ sig	Kendall's Tau		$\chi^2$ sig	Kendall's Tau	
			Tau	Sig		Tau	Sig		Tau	Sig		Tau	Sig
Research interests	Staffing, Recruitment and Selection	0.065	0.089	0.154	0.051	0.150	0.013	0.782	0.034	0.574	0.009	0.004	0.944
	Compensation	0.064	0.174	0.007	0.036	0.140	0.018	0.393	0.770	0.441	0.099	-0.083	0.168
	Training	0.012	0.154	0.018	0.046	0.092	0.123	0.846	0.005	0.299	0.039	0.161	0.008
	Socialization	0.000	0.244	0.000	0.204	0.1	0.085	0.216	0.122	0.065	0.256	0.132	0.032
	Motivation	0.134	0.167	0.006	0.001	0.226	0.000	0.248	0.091	0.139	0.235	0.137	0.022
Theoretical foundations	Human Resource Strategies	0.037	0.128	0.031	0.047	0.127	0.034	0.009	0.196	0.001	0.001	0.249	0.000
	Resource-Based View	0.089	0.127	0.33	0.020	0.058	0.340	0.003	0.226	0.000	0.069	0.10	0.868
	Behavioural Perspective	0.021	0.109	0.009	0.018	0.153	0.001	0.009	0.075	0.002	0.000	0.049	0.031
	Open Systems Theory	0.017	0.125	0.056	0.10	0.139	0.25	0.002	0.222	0.000	0.001	0.239	0.000
	Agency and Transaction Costs	0.016	0.169	0.007	0.46	0.164	0.005	0.107	0.167	0.010	0.041	0.055	0.358
	Human Capital Theory	0.024	0.191	0.002	0.009	0.197	0.001	0.13	0.216	0.00	0.054	0.089	0.142
	Social Capital Theory	0.218	0.131	0.041	0.000	0.176	0.003	0.001	0.255	0.000	0.002	0.149	0.014
	Resource Dependency Theory	0.368	0.107	0.095	0.005	0.215	0.000	0.003	0.234	0.000	0.002	0.205	0.001
Data analysis methodologies	Institutional Theory	0.132	0.124	0.054	0.10	0.205	0.001	0.002	0.233	0.000	0.000	0.310	0.000
	Qualitative	0.015	0.009	0.083	0.098	0.110	0.074	0.009	0.092	0.045	0.013	0.204	0.001
	Univariate	0.042	0.044	0.040	0.067	0.009	0.080	0.033	0.077	0.020	0.053	-0.037	0.054
	Multivariate	0.054	0.030	0.026	0.044	0.134	0.026	0.085	0.086	0.064	0.076	-0.075	0.026

When analysing their contribution to organizational performance, universalistic models normally choose isolated human resource practices as their level of analysis (Terpstra/Rozell 1993). In some cases, more than one Best Practice are combined, building what has been called High Performance Work Systems. Nevertheless, it must be said that, in contrast to other perspectives that are analysed below, the universalistic approach does not consider either synergic interdependence or the integration of the different practices. It just adopts an additive point of view (Pfeffer 1994; Osterman 1994; Becker/Gerhart 1996), implicitly denying the existence of different combinations of the elements that constitute the human resource system that could be equally efficient.

The value added by the universalistic perspective resides in the empirical demonstration, with high rates of significance, of the importance of the human factor and the different practices through which it is managed. While the literature has pointed

out a great variety of best human resource practices, we can identify topics that emerge repeatedly, representing what can be considered the core of the universalistic approach. In its first years, we can observe that this perspective focused mainly on the demonstration of the importance of those practices oriented to reinforce firm's workforce, for example through variable compensation (Gerhart/Milkovich 1990), certain recruitment and selection practices (Terpstra/Rozell 1993), comprehensive training (Russell/Terborg/Powers 1985), or performance appraisal (Borman 1991). On the other hand, more recent work has considered the importance of other aspects related to workforce commitment and participation, problem resolution capabilities, team-based work, group incentives, tasks redesign or new compensation mechanisms (Youndt et al. 1996).

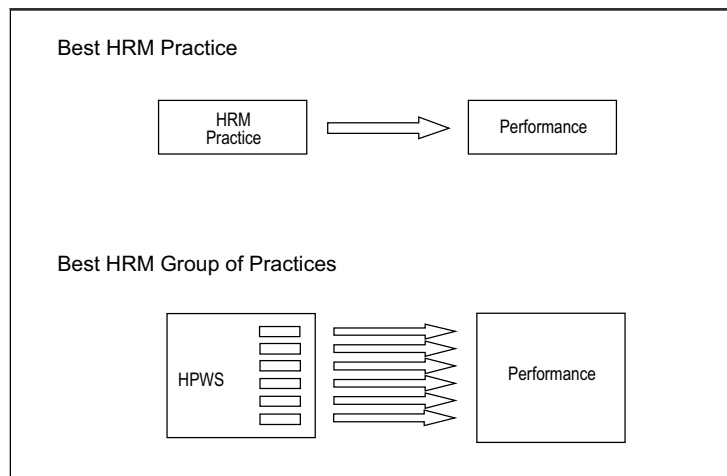
Compared to the other perspectives, it can be said that the universalistic approach is characterized by its lack of solid theoretical foundations, which allows it to ignore crucial relationships and constructs. Among the theoretical frameworks used by the universalists, both Agency and Transaction Costs Theories seem to have a special importance in demonstrating the superiority of certain policies that help the organization to control opportunism and reduce internal costs (Delery/Doty 1996). The Behavioural Perspective, one of the main vehicles of the contingent development, has also offered evidence to demonstrate the benefits of the adoption of practices such as shared benefits programs (Delery/Doty 1996). Finally, the basic principle of Human Capital Theory has also served to build many universalistic propositions, arguing that those organizations that use their human resource practices to develop valuable knowledge, skills and abilities present better performance levels (Duncan/Hoffman 1981; Tsang 1987; Rumberger 1987).

From a methodological point of view, the rigorous application of the deductive logic of analysis has allowed the universalistic perspective to achieve better statistical strength in hypothesis testing (Brewster 1999), developed mainly through quantitative techniques.

The universalistic point of view offers an evaluation of the contribution of the human factor to the performance of the organization. Adopting a deductive logic of analysis, these works achieve a high significance rate in the test of direct relationship between HRM and results. Considering the differences between the universalistic approaches that defend the existence of best practices and those that define best groups of practices, the contribution of this perspective can be expressed graphically as Figure 1 shows. However, this simple model has serious limitations that the literature has pointed out. In particular, it has been criticized for the narrowness of its objectives, due to the mechanical and rational character of universalistic explanations, that fail to consider crucial dimensions in the analysis of HRM strategies (Jackson et al. 1989; Delery/Doty 1996; Marchington/Grugulis 2000). Cappelli/Neumark (2001) have also pointed out important conceptual limitations to the establishment of universalistic causal relationships. The definition of its basic dependent variable (organizational performance) has been especially criticized. To measure it, universalistic authors use mainly financial indicators (Rogers/Wright 1998) that, although they are more visible and practical, ignore other effects of HRM practices, and the multiplicity of levels at which those effects take place. The organizational performance construct, core ele-

ment of the universalistic model, must be built through a combination of measures with different origins and with different relative weight depending on the particularities of each organization. Furthermore, it is also necessary to remember that, by definition, the survival of the organization is conditioned by the confluence of the particular interests of the different stakeholders involved (Bühner 1997; Rogers/Wright 1998; Gerhart 1999; Guest 2001). More recently, authors such as Sherer/Leblevici (2001) have also criticized the stability and uniformity of the best practice approach, which does not serve to analyse the strategic change.

**Figure 1: Universalistic perspective** (Source: own elaboration)



The data obtained from our questionnaire show that the universalistic perspective is no longer adopted by many scholars. The distribution of academics that have used, use and intend to use it as a research framework is limited, and shows a negative future trend (Table 3).

**Table 3: Use of the universalistic perspective (N = 223)**

Universalistic perspective	Past use	Present use	Future use
Low level of use	65.5%	66.4%	68.7%
Medium level of use	21.5%	21.1%	19.8%
High level of use	13.0%	12.5%	12.6%

We consider universalists as only those authors who have used, use, or intend to use this research perspective at a high or medium level. We now analyse their research interests. Table 4 shows an increasing trend of importance that present and future universalistic models give to all of the practices. In our opinion, this could be explained by the progressive abandonment of the individual analysis of Best Practices in favour of a more inclusive High Performance Work Systems approach. It is especially interesting to observe the importance that universalistic scholars give to human resource strategies as a future research topic, which also seems to evidence a stronger emphasis on a systemic and multifunctional approach to the analysis of HRM's contribution to performance. To test whether this result was particular to the universalistic approach,



or a common trend in the field of SHRM research, we have formally compared means between the universalistic subsample and the rest of the perspectives. ANOVA analysis shows that the parallel increment in all of the practices included in the analysis is a concrete characteristic of the universalistic perspective. Only for “Human Resource Strategies” was the F-statistic non-significant, so the increasing interest in this topic seems to reflect a general trend in HR research more than a specific characteristic of the evolution of universalistic research.

**Table 4: Main areas of interest of the scholars that use the universalistic perspective**

	Past (N = 77)				Present (N = 75)				Future (N = 70)			
	%	M (SD)	ANOVA		%	M (SD)	ANOVA		%	M (SD)	ANOVA	
			F	Sig.			F	Sig.			F	Sig.
Staffing, recruitment a. selection	46.8%	1.81 (1.940)	2.488	0.032	53.3%	1.87 (1.826)	2.524	0.030	55.7%	1.89 (1.798)	2.918	0.014
Compensation	57.2%	2.01 (1.895)	4.029	0.002	53.3%	2.01 (1.983)	1.906	0.044	58.6%	2.24 (1.989)	2.763	0.019
Training	58.5%	1.92 (1.738)	3.770	0.003	57.3%	2.08 (1.844)	5.049	0.000	62.9%	2.49 (1.939)	5.199	0.000
Socialization	40.3%	1.57 (1.888)	3.479	0.005	44.0%	1.67 (1.905)	4.414	0.001	48.6%	1.83 (1.933)	3.537	0.004
Motivation	58.5%	2.36 (1.932)	2.206	0.055	58.7%	2.44 (1.926)	1.903	0.095	64.3%	2.66 (1.880)	2.443	0.035
Human Resource Strategies	62.4%	2.35 (1.925)	2.773	0.019	76.0%	2.92 (1.836)	2.298	0.046	77.1%	3.19 (1.852)	1.127	0.347

Regarding its theoretical foundations, our data show that universalistic propositions have been developed mainly from a Behavioural Perspective, as well as the Resource-Based View of the Firm. In fact, these approaches, especially the first one, are used by a high percentage of universalistic scholars, which give them a relatively high importance as a basis to explain best practices and high performance work systems (Table 5). It is especially interesting to observe the growth of the use of Human Capital Theory, from which several universalistic propositions have been developed, drawing on the assumption that Skills, Knowledge and Abilities’ (SKA) development practices always have a positive effect on performance. ANOVA results in this case also provide evidence that means in the use of this paradigm are significantly different from those obtained from other perspectives, so we can deduce that this trend particularly characterizes universalistic research. Contrary to what could be expected, the Agency and Transaction Costs theories do not receive the same relevance. In fact, it is interesting to observe how this perspective loses relative weight if we compare it to more recent approaches, such as Institutional or Social Capital Theories.

Our data show an interesting trend for the methodologies used by the universalistic perspective to test the HRM-performance link. As shown in Table 6, academics who adopt this approach believe that qualitative techniques will play an important role in providing evidence to explain this relationship, while tests based on quantitative and, especially, univariate tools will decline in relevance in the future. This seems to confirm the abandonment of the traditional universalistic objective of looking for direct relationships between HRM and performance, and shows a clear preference for

more complex models including mediating and moderating variables. Universalistic works seem to be converging on the methods used by other perspectives that, as we will see below, show an increasing interest in qualitative analysis, and a clear preference for more developed quantitative methodologies.

**Table 5: Theoretical frameworks used by the Universalistic Perspective**

	Past (N = 77)				Present (N = 75)				Future (N = 70)			
	%	M (SD)	ANOVA		%	M (SD)	ANOVA		%	M (SD)	ANOVA	
			F	Sig.			F	Sig.			F	Sig.
Resource-Based View	72.7%	2.57 (1.689)	6.244	0.000	77.3%	2.84 (1.628)	2.059	0.072	72.9%	2.83 (1.810)	2.327	0.044
Behavioural Perspective	83.1%	3.21 (1.673)	2.251	0.050	80.0%	3.07 (1.719)	0.856	0.312	85.7%	3.34 (1.641)	1.823	0.110
Open Systems Theory	58.4%	2.17 (1.867)	8.750	0.000	53.3%	2.08 (1.908)	5.449	0.000	57.1%	2.11 (1.861)	2.154	0.060
Agency and Transaction Costs	55.8%	1.79 (1.633)	3.403	0.006	52.0%	1.69 (1.611)	2.369	0.040	52.9%	1.77 (1.687)	3.293	0.007
Human Capital Theory	50.6%	1.83 (1.765)	2.944	0.014	69.3%	2.49 (1.743)	3.619	0.004	74.3%	2.63 (1.746)	2.772	0.019
Social Capital Theory	39.0%	1.23 (1.486)	4.438	0.001	49.3%	1.71 (1.707)	2.417	0.037	57.1%	2.04 (1.805)	2.497	0.032
Resource Dependency Theory	42.9%	1.42 (1.533)	3.730	0.003	45.3%	1.57 (1.595)	2.471	0.033	47.1%	1.66 (1.641)	2.682	0.022
Institutional Theory	42.9%	1.57 (1.795)	2.305	0.046	50.7%	1.96 (1.878)	3.057	0.011	54.3%	2.13 (1.864)	2.259	0.050

**Table 6: Data analysis methodologies used by the universalistic perspective**

	Past (N = 77)				Present (N = 75)				Future (N = 70)			
	%	M (SD)	ANOVA		%	M (SD)	ANOVA		%	M (SD)	ANOVA	
			F	Sig.			F	Sig.			F	Sig.
Qualitative	55.8%	2.14 (2.057)	1.186	0.317	57.3%	2.23 (2.031)	0.997	0.433	63.0%	2.63 (2.114)	0.810	0.544
Univariate	45.5%	1.5 (1.831)	1.787	0.117	36.0%	1.19 (1.641)	0.767	0.574	38.6%	1.20 (1.575)	0.963	0.441
Multivariate	54.5%	2.14 (2.088)	1.407	0.223	48.0%	2.20 (2.224)	1.683	0.140	50.0%	2.36 (2.284)	1.454	0.206

### Contingent perspective

This approach adds a necessary point of complexity to strategic human resource models, by including interactions that were not considered by the universalistic perspective. To do so, the models begin with a different assumption about the relationships among variables, rejecting explicitly their linearity, and proposing a model based on interactivity. The link between the dependent and the independent variables will no longer be stable. It will vary because of the incidence of other critical variables, named contingency variables. This change brings to the field of HRM Chandler's (1962) classical idea that "structure follows strategy" and the general strategic contingent model proposed by authors such as Woodward (1965), Dewar and Werbel (1979), Schoonhoven (1981), Van de Ven and Drazin (1985), or Venkatraman (1989). The application of this logic to the analysis of HRM strategies, opened by Galbraith and Nathanson (1978), offered evidence that denied the existence of a set of practices that had results

better than others under any circumstance, showing that their influence on organizational performance will always be conditioned by other variables with which every human resource policy must be consistent.

The level of analysis adopted by followers of the contingent perspective does not differ from that of the universalists. In fact, it is also possible to identify contingent approaches from both a subfunctional and a systemic point of view. And, as happened in the previous perspective, even when several practices were analysed together, the analysis was limited to an additive point of view, without considering the mechanisms of integration of the different practices nor the synergistic effects that can appear (Delery/Doty 1996). From their analysis of contingency relationships, scholars have identified several intervening variables that can be grouped into three generic categories: strategic, organizational and environmental.

Rejecting explicitly the universal applicability of practices, contingent models argue that HRM will only have positive effects if it is consistent with an organization's strategy (Niniger 1980; Fombrun et al. 1984; Hax 1985; Van de Ven/Drazin 1985; Kerr 1985; Slocum et al. 1985; Lengnick-Hall/Lengnick-Hall 1988; Rhodes 1988 a/b; Miller 1989; Kerr/Jackofsky 1989; Butler et al. 1991; Cappelli/Singh 1992; Begin 1993). Extending this principle, some contingent articles propose that this relationship is bidirectional, considering that human resources also have an important effect on the formulation of generic strategies. The HRM strategy is no longer understood in a reactive way, but as an element that interacts with strategy. Although this argument is present in such early works as Lengnick-Hall and Lengnick-Hall (1988), it has been elaborated mainly in more recent models, such as those of Lado and Wilson (1994); Wright, McMahan, and McWilliams (1994); Richard and Johnson (2001); and Wright et al. (2001).

Aside from strategic variables, several papers have also introduced contingency relationships based on organizational variables. It has been argued that strategic HRM is conditioned by other factors such as size, technology or structure (Jones 1984; Jackson/Schuler/Rivero 1989; Jackson/Schuler 1995), as well as power relationships, (Jones 1984; Pfeffer/Cohen 1984; Pfeffer/Langton 1988; Pfeffer/Davis-Blake 1987; Balkin/Bannister 1993, Pfeffer 1987).

Finally, external determinants have also been identified as contingent variables. In this sense, it has been said that human resource strategies cannot be formulated and implemented without considering the competitive, technological, macroeconomic, and labour context of the organization (Kanter 1983, 1989; Warner 1984; Coates 1987; Walker 1988; Schuler/Walker 1990; Becker/Gerhart 1996; Boxall 1998; Jackson/Schuler 1995).

The contingent perspective is built on a much more solid theoretical corpus than the universalistic. Contingent models draw on two theoretical frameworks: the Behavioural Perspective and the Resource-Based View of the Firm. From the first, a wide set of propositions concerning the HR-strategy fit have been developed (Miles/Snow 1984; Schuler 1987; Schuler/Jackson 1987 a/b). The Behavioural Perspective has also served to study the incidence of other organizational and external variables, such as those introduced by Jackson/Schuler (1995). The Resource Based View has mainly focused on the strategic fit, pointing out that it is necessary to consider a reciprocal link between the human factor and corporate strategic decisions. As this organiza-

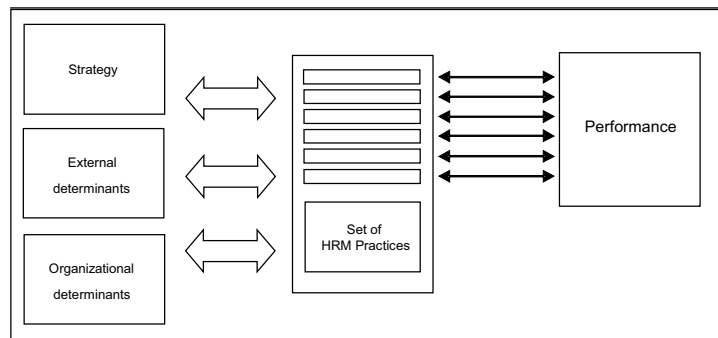
tional asset is characterized by its high value, rareness and inimitability, it must be considered a key resource of the strategic configuration of the firm (Wright/McMahan 1992; Barney/Wright 1998; Boxall 1998; Hitt et al. 2001; Richard/Johnson 2001; Wright et al. 2001; De Saa Pérez/García Falcón 2002). Together with the Behavioural and the Resources and Capabilities perspectives, we can point out contingent evidence that comes from Institutional Theory (Eisenhardt 1988), from Transaction Costs (Jones 1984; Gómez Mejía/Tosi/Hinkin 1987; Tosi/Gómez Mejía 1989, 1994; Gómez Mejía/Balkin 1991; Romero/Valle 2001), from Social Capital Theory (Uhl-Bien et al. 2000), and from Resource Dependence Theory, that proposes the introduction of power relationships as contingency variables (Pfeffer/Cohen 1984; Pfeffer/Davis-Blake 1987; Pfeffer/Langton 1988; Balkin/Bannister 1993).

As in the universalistic perspective, contingent empirical analysis is guided by a deductive logic of analysis and a quantitative focus. Although, in this case, we find that the statistical techniques used are much more varied, the level of significance achieved in their empirical tests is not as high as in the universalistic case, perhaps due to the complexity of the relationships included in contingent models. Reviewing the tools used by these works we can observe that regression techniques have been commonly applied (Koch/McGrath 1996; Youndt et al. 1996; Huselid, Jackson/Schuler 1997; Godard 1997; Keng-Howe Chew/Chong 1999; Khatri 2000; Way Kwong et al. 2001), although many contingent hypotheses have also been tested by other statistical tools such as factorial analysis (Ackerman 1986), cluster analysis (Romero/Valle 2001; De Saa Pérez/García Falcón 2002) or meta-analytical techniques (Tubre/Collins 2001). As significant exceptions we also observe some articles that investigate the influence of contingent variables through qualitative methods, based mainly on case studies (Boxall/Steeneveld 1999; Shafer et al. 2001; Kelliher/Perret 2001).

In light of our argument, we see that the universalist perspective is enhanced by the contingent proposal, given that the worth of any specific human resource decision will always depend on its fit to the strategic, organizational and external context of the organization. The added complexity introduced by those models is summarized graphically in Figure 2. While the contingent contribution to theory building in the field of SHRM has been crucial, it has some limitations. Becker and Gerhart (1996), for example, argue that the methodology applied by the contingent perspective to test their hypotheses leads them to universalistic conclusions. The reason is the extensive use of regression techniques, from which they deduce that the effect of a change on an HRM variable, measured by the organizational performance, will be always the same, and could be considered as universal, under a certain level of the contingency variable (Becker/Gerhart 1996; Sherer/Leblevici 2001). Other authors, such as Boudreau and Ramstad (1999) or Wright and Sherman (1999), believe that contingent research needs to improve its HRM measures. The problem appears when the contingency variable analysed is corporate strategy. In these cases, the contingent models usually apply generic typologies, such as that of Miles and Snow (1978). Following Chadwick and Cappelli (1999), it can be said that it is necessary to define typologies designed specifically for HRM research, able to encompass all the complexity of this research project. Furthermore, the contingent perspective has also been criticized because of its micro orientation, and because of its misunderstanding of the strategic

definition process. In this sense, we can observe the disagreement of a broad stream of the literature with a main contingent prescription: the superior performance of those organizations that follow the HRM-strategy fit. Many authors, as Becker and Gerhart (1996), believe that the design of fitted management systems leads to a too rigid and inflexible structure that does not respond to the need for adaptability in today's economic environment.

**Figure 2: Contingent approach** (Source: own elaboration)



Drawing on our data, we can deduce that, today, the contingent perspective is much more popular than the universalistic one (Table 7). The more complete model of the former seems to have displaced the simple universalistic framework, which fails to consider the many variables and relationships necessary to explain human resource strategies. We can also conclude from Table 7 that the contingent model will be of increasing importance in the future. In fact, for the category 'High level of use', we observe considerable growth of this perspective as a research option for future work.

**Table 7: Use of the contingent perspective (N = 223)**

Contingent perspective	Past use	Present use	Future use
Low level of use	32.7%	26.9%	28.2%
Medium level of use	29.2%	32.7%	25.1%
High level of use	38.1%	40.3%	46.6%

Following the same schema used to describe the universalistic approach, we started our analysis of the data obtained from scholars that were classified under the contingent perspective describing their research interests. From the data included in Table 8, we can observe that they also reflect the general trend of increasing interest in HR strategies, which receive the highest valuation in the three periods considered. Furthermore, our data also show an intense level of adoption of the rest of the topics listed. This supports our theoretical conclusion that the contingent perspective has been (and will be) applied to analyse the human resource function from both: (1) a subfunctional level – describing how certain policies, when linked to organizational strategy, have a positive effect on performance; and (2) a holistic point of view – analysing the fit between a firm's strategic orientation and the set of practices that are under the umbrella of human resource strategy (Wright/McMahan 1992).

**Table 8: Main areas of interest of contingent scholars**

	Past (N = 150)				Present (N = 163)				Future (N = 160)			
	%	M (SD)	ANOVA		%	M (SD)	ANOVA		%	M (SD)	ANOVA	
			F	Sig.			F	Sig.			F	Sig.
Staffing, recruitment a. selection	45.0%	1.72 (1.886)	1.0274	0.276	48.1%	1.72 (1.857)	0.635	0.673	47.5%	1.77 (1.943)	1.432	0.214
Compensation	43.0%	1.49 (1.792)	1.442	0.210	45.1%	1.65 (1.879)	1.201	0.310	49.4%	1.82 (1.926)	2.358	0.041
Training	49.0%	1.66 (1.754)	1.368	0.238	52.5%	1.82 (1.804)	1.110	0.356	51.2%	1.98 (1.942)	0.935	0.459
Socialization	35.6%	1.39 (1.785)	3.879	0.002	31.7%	1.19 (1.700)	0.863	0.507	36.2%	1.41 (1.888)	1.674	0.142
Motivation	55.4%	2.28 (1.931)	5.107	0.000	54.7%	2.25 (1.927)	2.753	0.020	54.4%	2.30 (1.990)	3.207	0.008
Human Resource Strategies	62.2%	2.47 (2.022)	6.331	0.000	67.9%	2.72 (2.010)	2.125	0.064	73.1%	3.08 (1.973)	2.134	0.063

Regarding its theoretical foundations, Table 9 confirms that contingent models have been proposed mainly by scholars using the Behavioural theory and the Resource-Based View of the Firm, as we see both from the percentage of respondents and the average valuation that they receive. Together with these approaches, that build the core, not only of the contingent perspective but of the whole discipline, our data also shows a particular increasing trend in the use of more recent paradigms such as the Institutional and Social Capital.

**Table 9: Theoretical foundations of the contingent perspective**

	Past (N = 150)				Present (N = 163)				Future (N = 160)			
	%	M (SD)	ANOVA		%	M (SD)	ANOVA		%	M (SD)	ANOVA	
			F	Sig.			F	Sig.			F	Sig.
Resource-Based View	61.3%	2.25 (1.796)	2.269	0.049	70.6%	2.58 (1.735)	1.482	0.197	71.9%	2.69 (1.799)	2.862	0.016
Behavioural Perspective	79.3%	3.16 (1.750)	7.202	0.000	80.4%	3.01 (1.685)	3.100	0.010	80.0%	2.99 (1.734)	3.045	0.011
Open Systems Theory	56.7%	2.05 (1.837)	3.807	0.003	50.9%	1.90 (1.776)	2.030	0.076	50.6%	1.84 (1.791)	0.480	0.791
Agency and Transaction Costs	42.7%	1.53 (1.713)	3.292	0.007	39.3%	1.38 (1.641)	1.268	0.279	41.2%	1.46 (1.704)	1.495	0.193
Human Capital Theory	49.3%	1.79 (1.759)	3.700	0.003	60.1%	2.15 (1.751)	1.858	0.103	60.0%	2.25 (1.893)	0.792	0.556
Social Capital Theory	36.7%	1.23 (1.525)	5.227	0.000	44.2%	1.48 (1.679)	2.662	0.023	46.2%	1.67 (1.807)	1.425	0.216
Resource Dependency Theory	45.3%	1.44 (1.574)	6.293	0.000	42.3%	1.45 (1.618)	2.969	0.013	43.7%	1.51 (1.656)	3.224	0.008
Institutional Theory	44.7%	1.57 (1.739)	5.184	0.000	46.6%	1.73 (1.823)	1.908	0.094	48.7%	1.84 (1.848)	1.303	0.264

Table 10 shows the empirical methodologies used for hypothesis testing under the contingent perspective. Again, in this case, our data reflect the general trend, as ANOVA results also confirm. We can observe that multivariate quantitative techniques are used much more than univariate ones. From this, it is possible to deduce that the structure of contingent models requires sophisticated statistical tools, designed to analyse the more complex relationships among variables. Furthermore, results for the present and future show a significant growth of the use of qualitative techniques, perhaps due to the generalization of case study research.

**Table 10: Data analysis methodologies used by the contingent perspective**

	Past (N = 150)				Present (N = 163)				Future (N = 160)			
	%	M (SD)	ANOVA		%	M (SD)	ANOVA		%	M (SD)	ANOVA	
			F	Sig.			F	Sig.			F	Sig.
Qualitative	36.7%	2.35 (2.043)	3.375	0.006	47.9%	2.40 (1.966)	1.697	0.137	55.0%	2.65 (2.016)	1.992	0.081
Univariate	35.3%	1.29 (1.786)	1.058	0.385	36.2%	1.25 (1.685)	0.609	0.693	33.7%	1.13 (1.605)	1.410	0.222
Multivariate	50.7%	2.06 (2.153)	1.694	0.137	54.6%	2.28 (2.164)	2.860	0.016	53.1%	2.33 (2.234)	3.798	0.003

### Configurational perspective

The configurational perspective offers an analysis of the synergic integration of the different variables that constitute this organizational function. To do so, it always adopts a systemic point of view that allows a deep study of the “black box” considered by the universalistic and contingent models. The HRM system is defined here as a multidimensional set of different elements that can be combined to form an infinite number of possible configurations. From amongst these, the configurational perspective extracts management patterns that represent different organizational possibilities (Miller/Friesen 1984; Ketchen/Thomas/Snow 1993). These ideal management models must be characterized by: (1) their consistency with external, organizational and strategic conditions, as the contingent model explained, and (2) they must be also internally consistent (Venkatraman/Prescott 1990; Doty et al. 1993; Delery/Doty 1996). It is important to notice that configurational patterns, more than empirically observable phenomena, are ideal types, similar to those proposed by sociological theory (Weber 1949). As Meyer et al. (1993) and Doty and Glick (1994) argued, real organizations will tend to resemble one of these models, although they will not exactly fit any one of them.

Underlying this new point of view, we find an important change in the way of understanding the relationship among the variables involved in HRM strategies. The linearity is broken with the introduction of the concept of synergy. The interdependence of the practices means that certain combinations could multiply or divide the effect of the whole system. That makes the universalistic High Performance Work Systems gain a necessary point of complexity. Configurational models do not forget the relevance of contingent relationships, and adopt explicitly the principle of equifinality. Under this premise, they suppose that the same business objectives can be reached

through different systems of practices that can be equally efficient (Delery/Doty 1996). In this point, they forget the universalistic purpose of finding Best Human Resource Practices.

The explanation of the internal dynamics of the HRM system was only possible through the application of General Systems Theory, which allowed a deep understanding of human resource strategies as a complex phenomenon, constituted by different elements that interact in a dynamic and synergistic way (Wright/Snell 1991; Snell 1992; Snell/Dean 1992). But the configurational approach has also received ideas from other paradigms, such as the Resource-Based View of the Firm (Lepak/Snell 1998; Wright/Snell 1998; Delery 1998; Delery/Shaw 2001), Behavioural Theory (Miles/Snow 1984), Transaction Costs Theory (Lepak/Snell 1998/1999), and Human Capital Theory (Lepak/Snell 1999). All those frameworks were summarized in the comprehensive model of Human Resource Architecture, proposed by Lepak/Snell (1998, 1999), that supposes a more sophisticated insight into the internal dynamic of the HRM function.

To develop its internal analysis, the configurational perspective has mainly used statistical techniques that allow the extraction of management patterns, such as cluster (Arthur 1994; MacDuffie 1995), factorial (Ackerman 1986; MacDuffie 1995), or neural network analysis (Woelfel 1993). From a different point of view, we can also find examples of regressions, as those developed by Wood and Albanese (1995). As with the contingent perspective, some aspects of configurational methodologies need to be refined. The study of the combination of the different elements that constitute the function and its synergistic relationships requires more sophisticated techniques, able to analyse the complexity of this internal integration (Delery 1998).

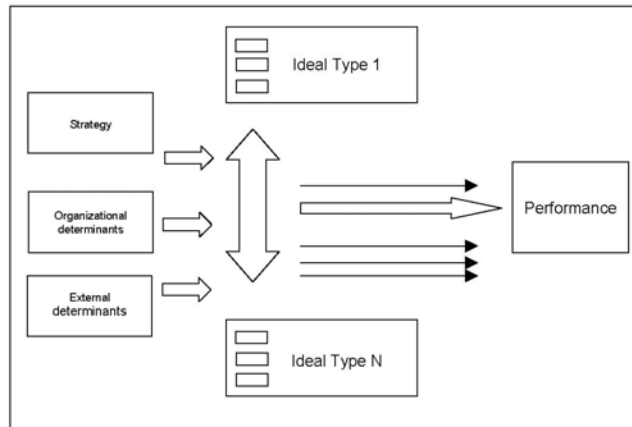
Universalistic and contingent approaches study the influence of HRM strategies in corporate performance without considering internal interactions. This is where the configurational contribution lies. It completes the model by defining the elements that constitute the system and by systematically and exhaustively analysing their integration mechanisms. This allows us to define ideal management models that can be equally efficient. Each organization must decide between them, considering its particular internal and external conditions (Figure 3). It is important to remember that the patterns proposed by the configurational models are just ideal types (Delery/Doty 1996). This fact implies simplification of the reality. We find another limitation of the configurational approach in its empirical development. The complex internal interactions are quite difficult to measure with the techniques that are commonly used in the field of organizational and strategic research. Because of this, the empirical evidence for configurational conclusions is much poorer than, for example, the universalistic (Delery 1998).

Although the use of configurational perspective is growing, the percentage of scholars that have used and intend to use it seems to be falling by comparison with the contingent approach (Table 11). These data could be explained by the fact that the configurational perspective focuses on a concrete dimension of human resource strategies (integration of practices), so we cannot deduce from them that the analysis of HRM configurations is losing relative weight. Human resource strategies are also the main area of interest, not only in the future, but also for the past and present (Table 12), but in this case, means for this topic of analysis are even significantly



higher, as ANOVA shows. Again, this fact can be explained by the main purpose of configurational analysis, which focuses mainly on global and systemic issues, not considering the different human resource practices separately.

**Figure 3: Configurational Perspective** (Source: own elaboration)



**Table 11: Use of the configurational perspective (N = 223)**

Configurational perspective	Past use	Present use	Future use
Low level of use	67.7%	63.6%	58.7%
Medium level of use	20.2%	17.9%	20.2%
High level of use	12.1%	18.4%	21.1%

**Table 12: Main areas of interest of configurational scholars**

	Past (N = 72)				Present (N = 81)				Future (N = 92)			
	%	M (SD)	ANOVA		%	M (SD)	ANOVA		%	M (SD)	ANOVA	
			F	Sig.			F	Sig.			F	Sig.
Staffing, recruitment and selection	45.1%	1.73 (1.804)	0.756	0.528	48.7%	1.74 (1.812)	0.952	0.448	50.0%	1.82 (1.910)	1.354	0.243
Compensation	47.9%	1.73 (1.920)	2.129	0.063	40.0%	1.54 (1.902)	2.533	0.030	53.3%	1.90 (1.922)	2.706	0.021
Training	50.7%	1.72 (1.845)	0.818	0.523	47.3%	1.78 (1.800)	1.086	0.369	51.1%	1.96 (1.966)	1.292	0.268
Socialization	43.7%	1.61 (1.785)	5.795	0.000	38.0%	1.38 (1.712)	2.601	0.026	38.0%	1.35 (1.738)	0.600	0.700
Motivation	51.4%	2.34 (1.977)	2.752	0.020	54.4%	2.29 (1.855)	2.043	0.074	51.1%	2.09 (1.920)	0.497	0.778
Human Resource Strategies	70.0%	2.84 (1.968)	5.377	0.000	75.0%	2.93 (1.847)	2.322	0.044	80.4%	3.38 (1.766)	4.043	0.002

Regarding its theoretical foundations, the configurational perspective follows what seems to be a common trend in HRM research (Table 13). Again the Behavioural Perspective and the Resource-Based View are the most used frameworks, and, as for the universalistic perspective, Human Capital Theory has been prominent. Compared with

the other perspectives it is also possible to observe that in the origins of the configurational perspective, Open Systems Theory played an important role, significantly more so than the other approaches. Our data seem to confirm that this generic framework has offered many of the elements that configurational models used to build their internal explanation of human resource strategies.

**Table 13: Theoretical foundations of the configurational perspective**

	Past (N = 72)				Present (N = 81)				Future (N = 92)			
	%	M (SD)	ANOVA		%	M (SD)	ANOVA		%	M (SD)	ANOVA	
			F	Sig.			F	Sig.			F	Sig.
Resource-Based View	72.2%	2.67 (1.720)	4.097	0.001	81.5%	2.96 (1.561)	4.042	0.002	84.8%	3.15 (1.547)	4.182	0.001
Behavioural Perspective	83.3%	3.32 (1.668)	2.709	0.021	84.0%	3.20 (1.577)	1.985	0.082	82.6%	3.10 (1.658)	2.040	0.074
Open Systems Theory	65.3%	2.54 (1.846)	5.679	0.000	60.5%	2.36 (1.763)	4.644	0.000	59.8%	2.26 (1.772)	3.048	0.011
Agency and Transaction Costs	50.0%	1.87 (1.830)	3.588	0.004	46.9%	1.67 (1.673)	2.199	0.056	44.6%	1.54 (1.699)	1.237	0.293
Human Capital Theory	58.3%	2.08 (1.790)	3.700	0.003	72.8%	2.65 (1.689)	4.995	0.000	69.6%	2.57 (1.830)	2.759	0.019
Social Capital Theory	44.4%	1.36 (1.447)	3.625	0.004	54.3%	1.85 (1.718)	4.089	0.001	53.3%	1.90 (1.804)	2.762	0.19
Resource Dependency Theory	59.7%	1.83 (1.610)	7.300	0.000	53.1%	1.79 (1.679)	3.710	0.003	45.7%	1.61 (1.670)	2.104	0.066
Institutional Theory	52.8%	1.97 (1.846)	6.587	0.000	58.0%	2.28 (1.892)	4.296	0.001	47.6%	2.25 (1.891)	3.053	0.011

Table 14 summarizes the responses of configurational scholars when they were asked about the methodologies that they use to test their propositions. The results seem to be similar to those obtained from other perspectives, although a deeper analysis of the data shows an even stronger emphasis on the use of multivariate techniques, such as cluster or factorial methods, that help scholars analyse systemic configurations.

**Table 14: Data analysis methodologies used by the configurational perspective**

Data analysis methodologies	Past (N = 72)				Present (N = 81)				Future (N = 92)			
	%	M (SD)	ANOVA		%	M (SD)	ANOVA		%	M (SD)	ANOVA	
			F	Sig.			F	Sig.			F	Sig.
Qualitative	51.4%	2.29 (1.982)	1.154	0.333	46.9%	2.40 (1.979)	1.697	0.137	57.6%	2.62 (2.021)	0.571	0.722
Univariate	40.3%	1.43 (1.798)	0.980	0.431	42.0%	1.36 (1.698)	0.609	0.693	42.4%	1.30 (1.609)	1.414	0.220
Multivariate	54.2%	2.18 (2.112)	0.557	0.733	56.8%	2.25 (2.089)	2.860	0.016	57.6%	2.41 (2.180)	1.357	0.242

### Contextual perspective

The contextual perspective proposes a reconsideration of the relationship between the strategic HRM system and its context (Brewster 1999). Drawing on contingent studies, the contextual perspective re-analyses environmental influences, not as unidirectional pressures, as those papers did, but integrating human resource strategies into a social macrosystem, which both influences and is influenced by managerial decisions (Brewster/Bournois 1991; Brewster, Hegewisch/Lockart 1991; Brewster 1993, 1995, 1999). Therefore, strategies must be explained not only through their contribution to organizational performance, but also through their influence on internal aspects of the firm (workforce satisfaction, turnover, conflicts, etc.) and their effects on the environment in which they are implemented. Strategic HRM will reinforce firm success to the extent that it helps to integrate and legitimate the organization in its environment, a condition that, as Institutional Theory has pointed out, is directly linked to firm survival (Powell/DiMaggio 1991).

This perspective introduces an important shift in the point of view, proposing a broader descriptive explanation of strategic HRM. It is an explicit aim of contextual authors to provide models applicable to any environment, encompassing the particularities of different industrial and geographical contexts (Brewster 1999). Although it is nowadays applied to many different environments, it can be said that the contextual perspective was created to explain the distinctiveness of European organizational context. This was one of the main objectives of the Price Waterhouse Cranfield Project, which was one of the main drivers of this approach in its first years of development.

The change proposed by the contextual perspective is visible, fundamentally in the reconsideration of three basic aspects: the nature of human resources, the level of analysis and the actors involved in this function (Brewster 1999). (1) Contextual models propose an expansion of the concept of HRM to encompass factors that have been traditionally underestimated, such as a firm's relationships with Public Administration and Unions, and other social and institutional determinants (Legge 1989; Gaugler 1988; Albert 1989; Guest 1990; Pieper 1990; Bournois 1991; Brewster/Bournois 1991). In contrast to previous perspectives, these variables are considered as part of the concept of strategic HRM, which, following authors such as Brewster (1999), must be considered as a reality that exceeds the boundaries of the organization. This reconsideration of the nature of HRM also influences the position of this function within the organization. Following the conclusions of Brewster and Hoogendoorn (1992), Brewster and Soderstrom (1994) or Brewster, Larsen, and Maryhofer (1997) it can be said that HRM is no longer an exclusive responsibility of personnel managers, but also of other managers, especially line directors. (2) Considering the above, it is easy to understand that the contextual framework also proposes a change in the level of analysis. The contextual framework takes neither a subfunctional nor a systemic point of view, adopting the wider scope of the social environment in which HRM strategies are formulated and implemented. Therefore, it is possible to find many European contextual works that try to analyse the influence of different national environments in the management of human resources (Brewster 1999). (3) Under these new premises, it is also necessary to reconsider the range of stakeholders that

take part in managerial decisions. The contextual perspective also considers that many actors are involved in the formulation and implementation of human resource strategies. These stakeholders are not only internal, but also external to the organization, so the degree to which they influence and are influenced by human resource policies must be considered (Tyson 1997). Therefore, mutuality of interests is seen as a necessary requisite to assure the survival of the organization in the long term (Brewster 1995).

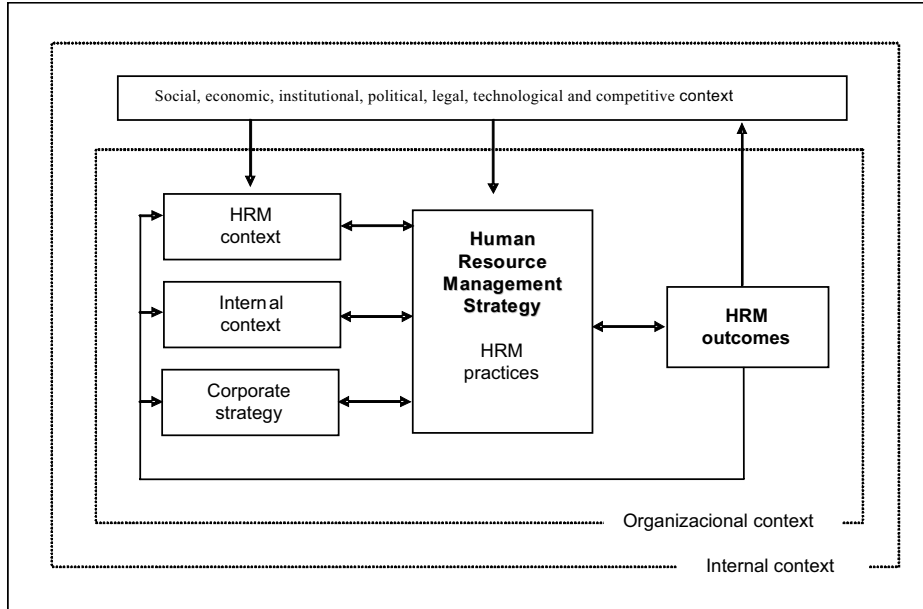
The theoretical foundations of the contextual perspective seem to begin at a different point. In contrast to the three previous perspectives, that shared common underpinnings, their reconsideration of the HRM model is much closer to industrial relations literature, which implies a criticism of many of the premises of the rational and normative theory (Brewster 1993, 1995, 1999; Sparrow/Hiltrop 1994).

The methodologies used by contextual empirical analysis are determined by their descriptive purpose. Techniques are based almost exclusively in simple statistical analysis, developed through the study of means and standard deviations (Brewster/Bournois 1991). The application of more complex quantitative and qualitative tools could allow a deeper analysis of social, political and legal influences, as well as a better understanding of the effects of human resource decisions on the social and organizational environment (Gratton et al. 1999). It would also make contextual conclusions comparable to those coming from the other perspectives, enriching the traditional normative and prescriptive approach with another focused on social issues and characterized by a more descriptive objective.

The value added by the contextual perspective lies in its analysis of the social dimensions of strategic HRM. The function is presented as an integral part of the reality in which it is developed, as a contextual framework, and not just as a simple contingency variable. The manager's decision autonomy depends heavily on the social, cultural and institutional pressures under which the strategic choices are taken, as well as by governmental and union policies. Under this new way of understanding HRM (Figure 4), strategies contribute to a firm's success and survival not only by providing performance, but also by helping to integrate and legitimate the organization in the environment in which it operates. The main limitation of this closed model comes from its empirical development (Beaumont 1992). The many series of data extracted from surveys such as those provided by the Price Waterhouse Cranfield Project were analysed, as we have said, using simple statistics, mainly descriptive, perhaps because of the explicative objective of this research perspective (Filella 1991). On the other hand, and although the contextual perspective explicitly adopts an inductive logic of research (Brewster 1991), qualitative methods are rarely used to test their models.

Drawing on the data obtained from the questionnaire, we can deduce that the contextual perspective has been, is, and will be, a crucial pathway of development of SHRM research. Table 15 shows that it has been as broadly adopted as the contingent perspective, the other pillar of the discipline. Similarly, human resource strategies attract the attention of the majority of contextual scholars (Table 16), and again ANOVA results are non-significant, although the models that they propose to explain them introduce a radical change in the point of view.

**Figure 4: Contextual perspective** (Source: own elaboration from Hendry/Pettigrew (1986, 1990) and Brewster/Bournois (1991))



**Table 15: Use of the contextual perspective (N = 223)**

Configurational perspective	Past use	Present use	Future use
Low level of use	45.8%	37.1%	36.7%
Medium level of use	21.1%	17.9%	14.3%
High level of use	33.1%	44.0%	48.9%

**Table 16: Main areas of interest of contextual scholars**

	Past (N = 121)				Present (N = 138)				Future (N = 141)			
	%	M (SD)	ANOVA		%	M (SD)	ANOVA		%	M (SD)	ANOVA	
			F	Sig.			F	Sig.			F	Sig.
Staffing, recruitment and selection	44.2%	1.73 (1.909)	1.804	0.113	46.7%	1.63 (1.835)	0.057	0.998	45.4%	1.67 (1.918)	1.785	0.117
Compensation	37.5%	1.31 (1.738)	1.394	0.228	38.0%	1.36 (1.806)	1.302	0.264	43.3%	1.50 (1.811)	1.355	0.243
Training	49.2%	1.76 (1.843)	3.884	0.002	54.0%	1.89 (1.846)	2.161	0.060	51.8%	2.01 (1.993)	1.563	0.172
Socialization	39.2%	1.48 (1.801)	3.411	0.005	34.6%	1.26 (1.739)	1.506	0.189	39.3%	1.40 (1.820)	0.896	0.427
Motivation	52.9%	2.26 (1.963)	1.925	0.091	52.2%	2.24 (1.957)	1.685	0.139	51.8%	2.23 (1.894)	0.881	0.495
Human Resource Strategies	65.5%	2.61 (1.979)	5.730	0.000	74.5%	2.98 (1.904)	4.339	0.001	75.2%	3.20 (1.939)	2.382	0.040

From the data included in Table 17 it is also possible to extract some interesting conclusions about the evolution of the contextual approach. When they were asked about the theories used to develop their models in the past, contextual scholars gave relatively lower importance to classical strategic theories, such as the Resource-Based View of the Firm, but if we consider responses for present and future, this trend changes and, surprisingly, the theoretical foundations of this approach do not differ much from the other approaches. We can observe how the Behavioural Perspective receives the highest valuation, together with the Resource-Based View of the Firm. Results for the F-statistic in both cases are highly non-significant, so we can assume that the contextual perspective is converging to the general tendency. For the interest of future research, means are different in the case of Open Systems, Social Capital, Resource Dependency and Institutional theories, which are directly related to the explanation of environmental issues. Therefore, we can conclude that the theoretical foundations of the contextual framework have opened its explanation of the social dimension of HR strategies to receive new propositions from those theories that have been traditionally applied in SHRM research.

**Table 17: Theoretical foundations of the contextual perspective**

	Past (N = 121)				Present (N = 138)				Future (N = 141)			
	%	M (SD)	ANOVA		%	M (SD)	ANOVA		%	M (SD)	ANOVA	
			F	Sig.			F	Sig.			F	Sig.
Resource-Based View	59.5%	2.16 (1.775)	1.221	0.300	68.8%	2.46 (1.768)	0.637	0.672	73.0%	2.72 (1.785)	0.963	0.441
Behavioural Perspective	79.3%	3.13 (1.775)	2.513	0.031	76.1%	2.91 (1.771)	0.475	0.794	77.3%	2.97 (1.789)	0.572	0.722
Open Systems Theory	59.5%	2.22 (1.877)	5.655	0.000	37.2%	2.11 (1.803)	4.797	0.000	60.3%	2.17 (1.812)	5.328	0.000
Agency and Transaction Costs	40.5%	1.52 (1.737)	1.599	0.162	42.0%	1.49 (1.662)	3.129	0.009	44.7%	1.55 (1.713)	1.513	0.187
Human Capital Theory	49.6%	1.73 (1.732)	1.352	0.244	61.6%	2.14 (1.748)	0.872	0.501	63.8%	2.30 (1.848)	1.656	0.146
Social Capital Theory	39.7%	1.24 (1.438)	2.515	0.031	49.3%	1.60 (1.641)	2.672	0.023	54.6%	1.98 (1.857)	4.183	0.001
Resource Dependency Theory	48.8%	1.49 (1.528)	6.025	0.000	46.4%	1.55 (1.608)	2.905	0.015	46.1%	1.61 (1.681)	3.874	0.002
Institutional Theory	49.6%	1.82 (1.784)	10.205	0.000	55.1%	2.05 (1.865)	7.605	0.000	57.4%	2.21 (1.900)	7.390	0.000

Compared to the rest of the approaches, we observe that the contextual perspective has experienced relatively lower growth in the use of multivariate techniques (Table 18). Contrary to what we might have expected, univariate techniques also receive a lower valuation, although contextual models have an explicative purpose. On the other hand, qualitative analyses are now used much more than in the past and, according to our data, they will be the most important methodology for future contextual re-

search. This confirms that an inductive mode of theorizing characterized the origins of explicative contextual models.

**Table 18: Data analysis methodologies used by the configurational perspective**

	Past (N = 121)				Present (N = 128)				Future (N = 141)			
	%	M (SD)	ANOVA		%	M (SD)	ANOVA		%	M (SD)	ANOVA	
			F	Sig.			F	Sig.			F	Sig.
Qualitative	47.1%	2.57 (2.122)	5.059	0.000	50.7%	2.53 (2.022)	2.387	0.039	58.2%	2.89 (2.035)	2.854	0.016
Univariate	35.5%	1.23 (1.731)	0.318	0.902	34.1%	1.12 (1.648)	0.419	0.835	34.0%	1.11 (1.617)	0.659	0.655
Multivariate	46.3%	1.89 (2.124)	0.727	0.604	45.7%	1.89 (2.137)	0.777	0.568	47.5%	2.05 (2.208)	0.421	0.834

### Summary/conclusions

From the review of the literature and the data we obtained from our questionnaire, we can conclude that the state of the art in SHRM can be described by four research perspectives that represent four different modes of theorizing HR contributions to performance. Nevertheless, empirical analysis has also highlighted several complementarities, which show that the different perspectives are not as disconnected as we expected. We have seen how the *universalistic* perspective represents the easiest way to analyse this relationship, assuming that it is possible to find optimal Best Human Resource Practices. To identify them the universalistic perspective defines linear relationships between HR and performance that one can generalize to the entire population, normally drawing on Behavioural, Resource-Based and, more recently, Human Capital paradigms. On the other hand, *contingent* analysis goes a step further, completing HR performance models with a third set of moderating variables. It has been argued that HR strategies and practices will not contribute to performance if they do not fit a firm's strategy and organizational conditions. Drawing on universalistic and contingent perspectives, *configurational* models propose an in-depth analysis of the internal dynamics of HR strategies, arguing that only consistent sets of practices will reinforce organizational performance in the long term. As in the previous perspectives, configurational propositions have been developed mainly from the Resource-Based and Behavioural approaches, which seem to be the main theoretical pillars of the discipline. Nevertheless, our data also highlight the importance of Systems Theory for configurational purposes. This general paradigm provides a useful framework to describe internally consistent systemic constructions. Finally, the *contextual* perspective maintains that, as social institutions, organizations need to integrate themselves in the social context in which they operate. Thus, the environment is reconsidered and defined as a macroframework that both influences and is influenced by management decisions. To effectively support organizational sustainability, HRM must help the firm to achieve social legitimacy, so its effects must not only be measured in terms of performance, but also considering their external consequences and their emphasis on objectives common to all stakeholders. Although in its origins, this perspective was grounded on an industrial relations approach, our data show that current contextual models are

progressively incorporating inputs from traditional strategic and HRM theories. It can be said that the contextual perspective, traditionally inductive and descriptive, and the contingent approach (much more deductive and prescriptive) are starting to share paradigms and methods in their complementary explanations of the link between the HRM system and its environment.

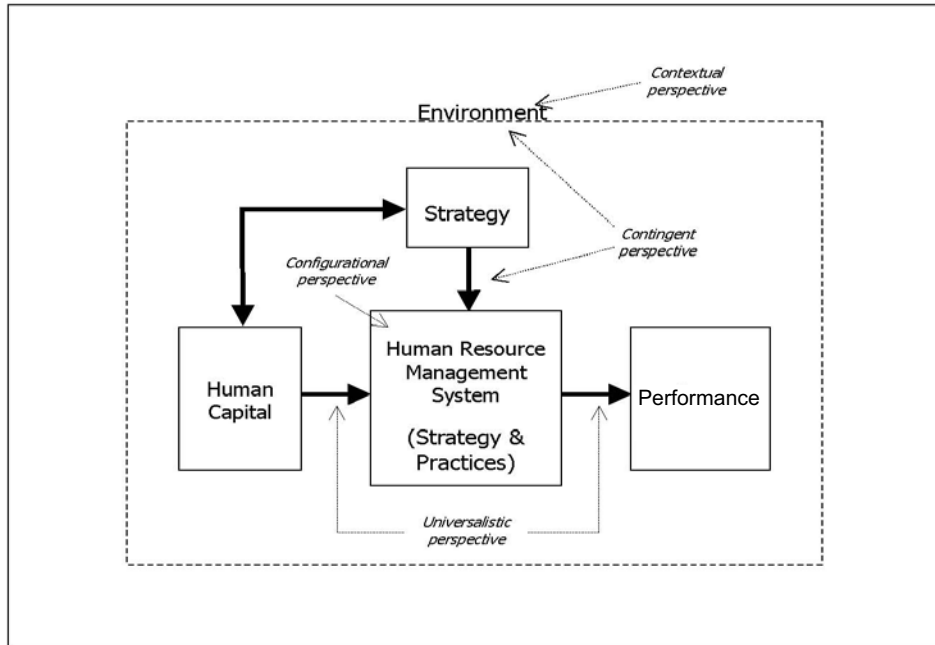
Despite the evident differences between the universalistic, contingent, configurational and contextual approaches, we can observe that each perspective complements the others by adding constructs, variables or relationships not considered by those others (Table 19). Integrating their main propositions, more complex models can be defined, enriching our understanding of HRM strategies with new dimensions (Figure 5). This discipline, as those others that have the human being as their central object of study, require multidisciplinary, multiparadigmatic, and multidimensional analytical frameworks. For that reason, much seems to be gained from integrating perspectives. It is especially interesting to observe how, balancing the contributions and main limitations of universalistic, contingent, configurational and contextual models, it is possible to extract an integrative model, which brings together their main propositions and that, in general terms, represents our common understanding of the complex phenomenon of strategic HRM.

**Table 19: Main contributions and limitations of the four research perspectives**

(Source: own elaboration)

	<b>Universalistic Perspective</b>	<b>Contingent Perspective</b>	<b>Configurational Perspective</b>	<b>Contextual Perspective</b>
<b>Contributions</b>	Demonstration of the importance of human capital in organizations. High level of statistical significance in the test of this proposition.	Inclusion of other variables that mediate the relationship between HRM and performance. Stronger theoretical basis.	Internal analysis of the HRM system. Consideration of synergy and interdependence between the different elements of the system. Assumption that different HRM configurations can be equally efficient.	Introduction of the social dimension of HRM. Integration of the HRM system in a macro-social context. Reconsideration of manager's autonomy of decision. Large series of data.
<b>Limitations</b>	Deficient theoretical foundations. Narrow objectives. Mechanistic and rational explanations. Conceptual limitations in the establishment of causal relationships. Performance measures based exclusively on financial indicators. Strategic change not explained. HRM considered as a "black box".	Micro-orientation. The statistical techniques mainly used (regressions) lead to universalistic conclusions. Excessive emphasis on "fit" issues. No consideration of political variables. HRM considered as a "black box".	The definition of management patterns is a simplification of reality. More complex methodologies required. Deficient empirical foundations.	Deficient empirical treatment, based mainly on descriptive statistical techniques. Theoretical foundations differ from the rest of perspectives, and are based mainly an Industrial Relations approach.



**Figure 5: Building an integrative model** (Source: own elaboration)

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