ILLUMINATING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LINE MANAGERS AND HR PROFESSIONALS: A SOCIAL EXCHANGE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Cognisant of the importance of organisational relationships, Krackhardt & Hanson (1993:104) assert that despite formal structures, much of the work within them is facilitated by the *"...networks of relationships that employees form across functions and divisions to accomplish tasks"*. The impetus for line manager-HR professional the relationship is rooted in the integrative HRM models proffered by Guest (1987), Storey (1992) and Ulrich (1998). The literature on the involvement of line managers in HRM identifies both collaborative and, at times, uncooperative relational dynamics between line managers and HR professionals in terms of their preparation for, and the delivery of, HRM. In building a case for illuminating the line manager-HR professional relationship, calls in the literature highlight that a paucity of attention has been placed on identifying the operationalisation and social dynamics of line-HR professional collaboration. Consequently, the theory of social exchange may have particular utility *"...to penetrate beneath the veneer of formal institutions, groups, and goals, down to the relational subtract"* (Padgett & Ansell, 1993:1259), serving to explore the underpinning relationship between collaborating individuals. The objective of this paper, therefore, is to illuminate understanding of the cross-functional line-HR relationship as previously presented by the authors (Power, Garavan, & Milner, 2007), through an emerging social exchange lens. In pursuit of this, a conceptual framework is developed in conjunction to a case study research design operationalisation offered, incorporating the deployment of a social penetration focus (Altman & Taylor, 1973), linking the collective social exchange theory to an individual-level of focus towards the sense-making processes (Weick, 1995), of line manager and HR professional exchange actors.

Introduction

The recognition and evolution of managing human resources has evolved from a traditional personnel management approach to increasingly embody a strategic management perspective (Hope-Hailey et al., 1997; Beardwell et al., 2004; Mamman & Rees, 2004; Teo & Crawford, 2005). Inherent in this emerging strategic focus of HRM, is the necessity to cope with intensifying sources of competition, changing organisational structures and sensitivity to the external business environment and regulatory pressures that organisations, both in the public and private sector, increasingly face (Hastings, 1994; Aghazadeh, 2003; O'Riordan, 2004; Pauuwe & Boselie, 2005, Vere & Butler, 2007). Reflective of the role line managers may assume in HRM delivery, MacNeil (2003) notes that as a group they are positioned between both lower and senior managerial levels in an organisation and, as such, may posses an unique ability to accommodate the confluence of strategic and operational priorities.

Positioning the Line-HR Relationship

The prominent work of Guest (1987), Storey (1992) and Ulrich (1998) positions line managers as a central delivery mechanism for day-to-day HRM practice as part of a wider strategy which sees HR professionals focus on higher-level HR activities. Both public and private sector organisations are pursuing strategies of HRM devolvement to line managers to achieve value-for-money (Holt Larsen & Brewster, 2003), improvements in efficiency (Budwhar, 2000; Renwick, 2000; Whittaker & Marchington, 2003; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005) and to ultimately integrate *"...HR strategy into the company's real work"* (Ulrich, 1998:126).

The trend for collaborative relations between line managers and HR professionals has gained momentum over the last decade or so, with commentators in the literature suggesting that line

managers may bring HR policies to life (Hutchinson & Purcell, 2003). Additionally, survey evidence supports that line-HR collaboration is an emerging trend (Cranet, 2006; IRS, 2006a: 2006b; CIPD 2007). The justification of such partnership formulation, as illustrated in table 1.0, is convincing from a strategic standpoint and this line of thinking has led Holt Larsen & Brewster (2003:228) to deem it the *"...received wisdom"*.

Table 1.0 The Justification for Collaborative Line-HR Relationship

Ulrich & Brockbank (2005:236)	*"...partnerships ensure that, while both parties bring unique competencies to their joint task, their combined skills are more than the sum of their parts"*.
Papalexandris & Panaayotopoulou (2004:281)	*"...competitive advantage can only result from HR practices which are jointly developed and implemented by human resource (HR) specialists and line managers"*.
Holt Larsen & Brewster (2003:230)	*"...with more of their work being handled from the line, there is less need for so many people in the "overhead cost" HR department"*.
Holt Larsen & Brewster (2003:267)	*"Management is about managing people and money, and they [the line] can only achieve what they need to achieve by managing those things correctly"*.
Budwhar (2000:142)	*"...local managers are able to respond more quickly to local problems and conditions"*.
Renwick (2000:194)	*"...we all bring different things to the team"*.
Cunningham & Hyman (1999:10)	Through devolving HRM *"...the function will be liberated to concentrate upon strategic activities associated with a personnel metamorphosis to "human resource management"*.
Ulrich (1998:126)	Line management can *"...lead the way in integrating HR strategy into the company's real work"*.
Storey (199:262)	*"...people management decisions ought not to be treated as incidental operational matters or be sidelined into the hands of personnel officers"*.
Guest (1987:51)	*"...if HRM is to be taken seriously, personnel managers must give it away"*.

A deeper exploration of line manager-HR involvement literature, however, signals that the practice is complex, with the majority of studies reporting dichotomous and at times, conflicting findings on the efficacy of the line-HR relationship (McConville & Holden, 1999; Renwick, 2000; Harris et al., 2002; McConville, 2006). Supporting this view, certain line manager respondents within the available body of literature are less than enthusiastic about involving themselves in HRM practice and collaborating with HR professionals due to issues of professional competence, managerial capacity and the paucity of support available to them

(Cunningham & Hyman, 1995; McConville & Holden, 1999; Harris et al., 2002; IRS, 2006b). Similarly, HR professional respondents within the literature express concern over the ability of technically orientated line managers to cope with formal HR responsibilities (Whittaker & Marchington, 2003: IRS, 2006b; CIPD, 2007).

Exploring the Line-HR Relationship
The dual pressures faced by line managers in accommodating their traditional managerial remit with additional HR responsibility, and for HR professionals to lessen their transactional but enhance their strategic involvement in HRM, may manifest in conflicting perspectives and interpretations of their relationship (McConville, 2006; Watson et al., 2007). The literature on the involvement of line managers in HRM identifies that the desired goals of their collaboration are not always realised, potentially as a result of differences *"…across the line manager and HR manager groups"* (MaxwelL & Watson, 2006:1160).

Much of the associated literature focuses on the impact on the roles, responsibilities and relationships of both line managers and HR professionals which may be explored via the behaviours relating to their interaction. The significance of a behavioural focus is that it may contribute to enhancing the understanding of the actions of employees within organisations (Wright & McMahgn, 1992). For example, one respondent from the research of Whittaker & Marchington (2003:257) noted that, *"I've got a really good relationship with people in HR and we try to work it as a team"*. However, comments from another respondent in the same study, presents a different picture: *"…sometimes we're pulling in the same direction and other times we're pole to pole"* (Whittaker & Marchington, 2003:257). Mindful that the involvement of line managers in HRM may result in collaborative line manager-HR professional configurations, the primary goal of this study is to contribute to further

illuminating the understanding of the relationship. In this vein, a concentrated focus on the exchanging actors (line managers and HR professionals) in terms of the make-up of this collaboration is supported in the literature (Harris et al., 2002; Dorensbosch et al., 2006). Parallel to this, and in response to the paucity of literature on the social dynamics underpinning line manager-HR professional relationships (Renwick, 2000:2003; Harris et al., 2002; Watson et al., 2007), this research seeks to respond by conceptually exploring, through a social exchange lens, the cross-functional line-HR relationship, supported by social penetration theory (Taylor & Altman, 1983), and the individual sense-making processes (Weick, 1995) of the exchange actors.

In terms of progressing the research to *"...go beyond the existing but simplistic studies that quantitatively frame these perceptions as positive or negative"* (Cascon Pereira et al, 2006:147), it is proposed to expand the level of research enquiry *"...to include the social dynamics of divergent and convergent views and their outcomes"* (Maxwell & Watson, 2006:1168). In pursuit of this goal and to effectively contribute to understanding in the area, various calls in the literature are presented as the basis for this particular research direction. As observed by Morley et al. (2006:614), *"Devolution of HR responsibilities to line managers is now seen as something of a defining issue in human resource management"*, and thereby warrants a contemporary research focus to which this research proposes to respond.

As already alluded to, it has been highlighted in some of the literature that scant attention has been placed on identifying the operationalisation of line-HR collaboration and the inherent assignment of roles and responsibilities within this. Evidence of this is found in Harris et al. (2002:218), where it is argued there is a limited understanding about the structure of line manager-HR professional collaboration in terms of the *"...shape they have taken and their appropriateness from the perspective of the different stakeholders"*. More recently, Watson et

al. (2007:46) have reiterated the necessity to enhance the understanding of *"Partnership working between HR unit level specialists and first-line managers"*. In response to the paucity of literature on the relationship aspects of the line manager-HR professional relationship, this research seeks to respond by exploring the individual processes, experiences and impacts associated with the relationship between line managers and HR professionals.

Exploring Social Capital Within Collaborative Relationships
Reflecting the importance of organisational relationships, Krackenhardt & Hanson (1993:104) assert that despite formal structures, much of the work within them is facilitated by the *"…networks of relationships that employees form across functions and divisions to accomplish tasks"*. Furthermore, commentators in the relational exchange literature (Wright & McMahon, 1992; Cole et al., 2002; Brandes et al., 2004; Neves & Caetano, 2006; Berninghaus et al., 2007) stress the importance of individual behaviour in mediating formal relationships, tasks and structures. Therefore, the theory of social exchange may have particular utility *"…to penetrate beneath the veneer of formal institutions, groups, and goals, down to the relational subtract"* (Padgett & Ansell, 1993:1259), serving to collectively explore the behaviours exchanged between collaborating individuals.

Despite the fact that organisational relationships are deemed critical for knowledge creation, transfer, leverage and exploitation, Aldridge et al. (2002) and Levin & Cross (2004) argue that findings have been mixed in terms of the social capital and, in turn, the relational characteristics of collaborating individuals. Drawing on elements of social capital theory, which concerns the value of social networks both structurally and relationally in generating a cohesive social order between the individuals located within them (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1995; Portes, 1998; Woolcock, 1998; Aldridge et al., 2002), the importance of relationships are argued to *"…constitute a valuable resource for the conduct of social affairs…embedded*

within networks of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Nahapiet & Ghosal, 1998:243). Reflective of this, Granovetter (2005:33) argues that social structure *"…especially in the form of social networks, affects economic outcomes"* with regards to accelerating the flow and quality of information, the rewards and punishment associated with social interaction and the related trust underpinning collaborative relationships. In a similar vein, Aldridge et al. (2002) identify that within social capital, relational bonding may occur at horizontal levels between equals, and similarly, relational bridging may occur between distinctive hierarchical groups. Furthermore, social capital may be distinguished between structural and cognitive grounds, reflective of this, Hitt et al. (2002) identifies that the structural elements may include the established roles and networks guiding collective action. In terms of the latter distinction, cognitive social capital accommodates for the relational shared norms, principles and values which exchanging individuals draw upon in their collaborative interaction (Nahapiet & Ghosal, 1998).

Cognisant of the role of social capital, Levin & Cross (2004) purport that the strength of relational ties (Granovetter, 1973:1983), both structurally and relationally, impacts on the outcomes of collaborative action in terms of the degree of social connection and relational strength. Moreover, this relational strength may be mediated by trusting and reciprocal perceptions and behaviours enacted between exchanging individuals (Levin & Cross, 2004). For Granovetter (1973), relational ties characterised by the degree of closeness and interaction represent the amount of time, frequency, reciprocation, emotional investment and closeness exhibited and displayed within interpersonal relationships. More specifically, Levin & Cross (2004) argue that strong relational ties fostered by mutual trust may produce more accessible and helpful exchange relationships. In presenting the alternative, Granovetter (1983: 2005) also report that weak relational ties may also be beneficial to knowledge creation and transfer in that such relationships may provide access and mobility to

structurally independent and non-redundant information that may not be clouded by a prior history of close interaction. Reflective of the research lens adopted in this paper, social capital's determinants relate to social exchange's theoretical components and is subsequently reflected in the following sections in the incorporation of reciprocity elements, trust underpinnings, shared values and norms which facilitate individuals to cooperate collectively (Woolcock, 1998; White, 2002; Fukuyama, 2006).

Social Exchange Theory as a Means for Exploring Collaborative Relationships
The premise of social exchange theory, as argued by Blau (1964), and more recently by Donaldson & O'Toole (2007), is that it focuses on socially interactive relationships and purports to illuminate the collective behaviours and the motivation behind them by accommodating material, informational, emotional, trusting, reciprocal and power dynamics (Thibaut & Kelly, 1959; Homans, 1961; Ekeh, 1972; Lawler, 2001; Aryee et al., 2002; Uhl-Bien & Maslyn, 2003; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Zafirovski, 2005). Additionally, Blau (1964:91) observes social exchange as *"...the voluntary actions of individuals that are motivated by the returns they are expected to bring and typically do in fact bring from others"*. The exchange interactions between individuals may be categorised as material, informational, and symbolic (Cook & Whitmeyer, 1992; Druckman, 1998; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), driven by the exchange actors self-motivation, insofar as they believe that it is in their best interest to interact.
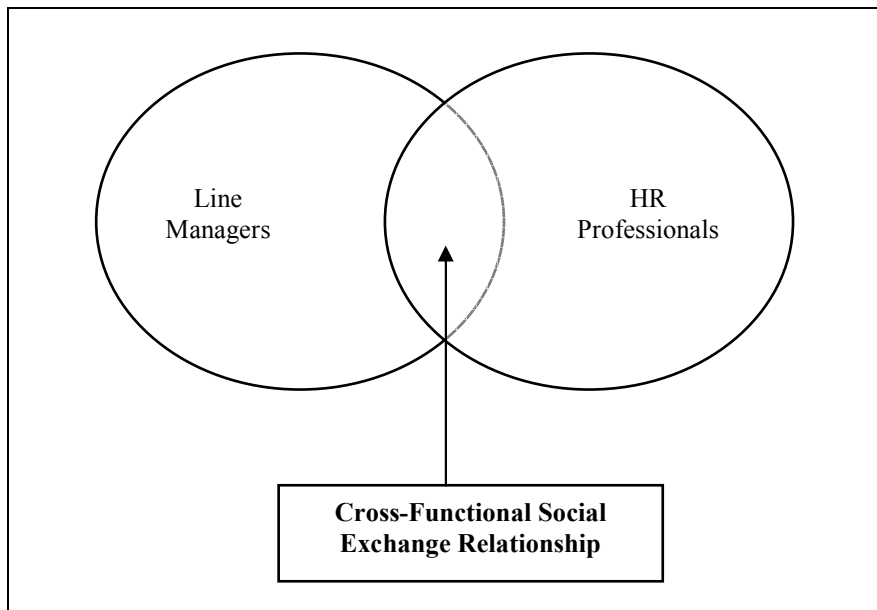
Furthermore, Alford (2002) argues that social exchange may involve anything the exchange actors value and thereby indicates that exchanges are not limited to buyer and sellers, but may also be utilised for collaborative purposes. In broadly identifying the exchange currencies of potential exchange actors, Liden & Maslyn (1998) identify that contribution, loyalty, affect, and professional respect are of particular salience in underpinning exchanging relationships

characterised by tangible and intangible role and information exchange. For Liden & Graen (1980), and more recently, for Bernerth et al. (2007), exchange partners may choose to interact with one another based on their functional skills, motivation to assume greater responsibility and also their trustworthiness.

An emerging paradigm in social exchange theory, which is of particular relevance to this research, is the area of cross-functional exchange of employees from differing organisational specialisms and backgrounds (Cole et al., 2002; Brandes et al., 2004). In justifying the forging of these ties, a lack of specialist knowledge and understanding is suggestive for the impetus for synchronising organisational-spanning relationships in order to pursue mutual gains (Krackhardt & Hanson, 1993). The cross-functional approach within social exchange theory would appear to be an under-utilised construct for exploring collaboration and this is, in turn, reflected in the paucity of research in this specific area. Cole et al. (2002) and Brandes et al. (2004) note that a paucity of research attention has been focused on the team-based cross-functional exchange. Reflective of this scope for illuminating cross-functional collaboration, figure 1.0 illustrates this line-HR relationship from a social exchange viewpoint.
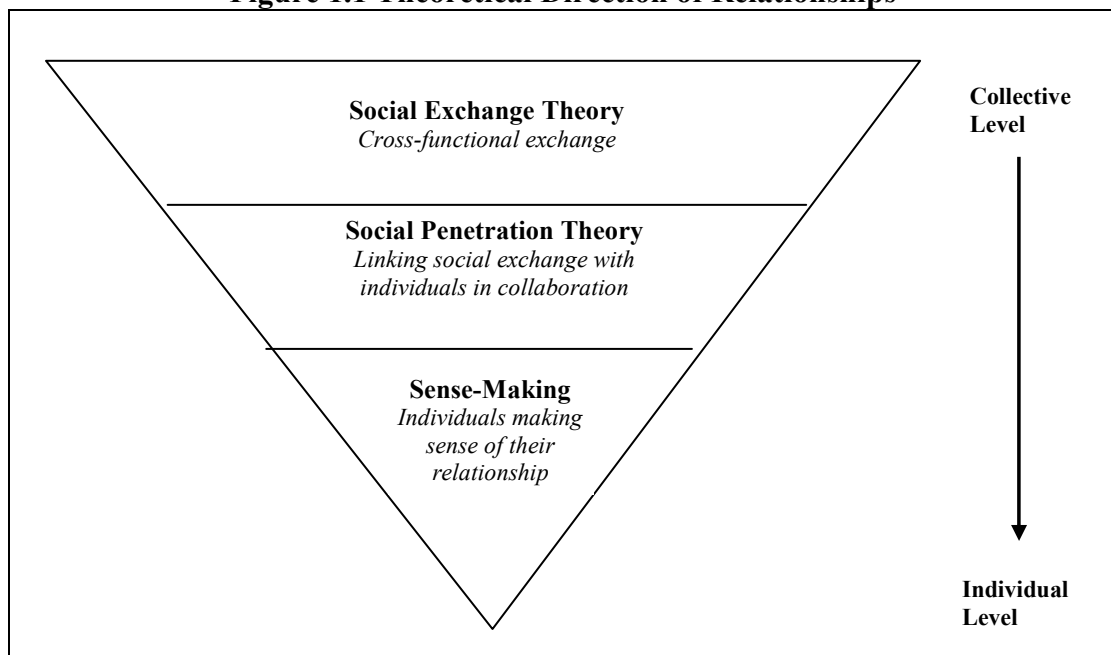
Accepting the dynamic nature of social relationships, social exchange theory acknowledges social exchanges are likely to be founded on an implicit agreement of non-specified, and at times, intangible resources and obligations. Reflective of this, the theory of social exchange utilises the norms of reciprocity and trust to govern the relational exchange and to facilitate repeated interaction within such relationships (Gouldner, 1960; Liden & Maslyn, 1998; Aryee et al., 2002; Uhl-Bien & Maslyn, 2003).

Figure 1.0 Line Manager-HR Relationship

Line
Managers

HR
Professionals

**Cross-Functional Social
Exchange Relationship**

From distilling the pertinent literature on the specific theory of social exchange, criticisms may be levied at the theory because it views relationships from a collective perspective (Homans, 1961, Ekeh, 1974; Cole et al., 2002).

Figure 1.1 Theoretical Direction of Relationships

Social Exchange Theory
Cross-functional exchange

**Collective
Level**

Social Penetration Theory
*Linking social exchange with
individuals in collaboration*

Sense-Making
*Individuals making
sense of their
relationship*

**Individual
Level**

To reconcile the potential conflict of adopting a collective relational social exchange theoretical perspective to an individual focus on exchange actors, an intermediate theory of social penetration is deployed (figure 1.1). Social penetration theory, acting as a conduit between the theoretical perspective and primary research focus serves to link the collective social exchange theoretical basis to the more individualistic sense-making processes of individual exchange actors in collaboration.

A Social Penetration Perspective to Social Exchange
Altman & Taylor (1973:3) developed the theory of social penetration in order to provide a better understanding of *"What people do, say, think, and feel about one another as they form, nurture, and disengage from interpersonal relationships"*. Utilising the metaphor of an onion to represent the potential levels and stages involved in social penetration, Altman & Taylor (1973) argue that individuals are multi-layered and through their interaction with their exchange partner, peel back these layers through social interaction. Chen et al. (2006:104) posit the view that social penetration theory *"…delineates the gradual progress of relationship development"*, through combining an individual's explicit interpersonal behaviours with their internal subjective processes associated with their social interaction. In terms of social penetration theory supporting social exchange theory, Altman & Taylor (1973) borrow from Thibaut & Kelly's (1959) and Homans (1961) social exchange research, specifically in relation to the costs and rewards of relationship impacts, with regards to satisfaction and stability levels arrived at through deepening interaction activity. Associated with the wider social exchange premise that individuals form relationships that are mutually advantageous (Homans, 1961; Blau, 1964; Burgess & Huston, 1979; Berninghaus et al., 2007), social penetration theory, in a similar vein, suggests that individuals form or avoid relationships with reference to the costs and benefits involved (Hays, 1984; Gudykunst et al., 1987; Taylor & Altman, 1987). Social penetration theory may also assist in exploring the

social exchange premise of increased social dependency within relational, as opposed to discreet exchange (Berninghaus et al., 2007), potentially manifesting in the evolution of reciprocal self-disclosing task and supporting relational behaviours underlying the relationship. In a similar vein, the issue of trust is highlighted as an exchange actor's decision to disclose task orientated and, moreover, socially orientated collaborative behaviours may be influenced on the receipt of trust within the interaction (Molm et al., 2003; Abodor, 2005).

By focusing on the development of social interaction and building on the relational dynamics of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), social penetration theory also accounts for the internal subjective processes of exchange actors *"...as a frame for attempting to understand how judgements are made"* (Chen et al., 2006:104). This inclusion of the subjective processes of individual exchange actors may manifest in the current evaluations, forecast assessments and memory repositories (Altman & Taylor, 1973), which individuals draw upon to make sense of their relationship which, in turn, sets the context for individual exchange actors sense-making processes.

The Sense-Making Processes of Collaborating Individuals
While social penetration theory may provide a logical framework for identifying the way a collaborative arrangement may evolve (Taylor & Altman, 1987; Baack et al., 2000) it does not necessarily provide a stand-alone comprehensive framework for illuminating possible underlying processes or patterns that explain what may happen and influence the collaboration. For this reason, it tends to emphasise the explicit relationship evolution from superficial to personal as a basis for framing interaction processes and therefore, the behavioural process are implicitly assumed in the cognition of the exchange actors. To address this, drawing attention to an exchange actors sense-making processes, *"...provides a focus on process dynamics"* (Geersbro, 2004:4) within the collaboration, and for this reason

supports a social exchange perspective on collaborative relationships (Lynch, 2006). Grounded in social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Burgess & Huston, 1979) and reflective of a social penetration focus (Taylor & Altman, 1987), Ring & Van de Ven (1994) view the establishment of cooperative relationships as a gradual and dynamic process consisting of a repetitive sequence of negotiation, commitment and execution episodes. However, they also argue that embedding in these relationships is a complex subset of informal social sense-making dynamics, anchored in the exchange actors' motivational and cognitive predispositions (Ring & Van de Ven, 1994).

Sense-making is literally *"...the making of sense"* (Weick, 1995:4), and moreover, it is the process by which individuals organise their experiences about their situation, roles and relationships and, in part, rationalise the actions they subsequently take (Watson & Watson, 1999; Brown, 2000; Weick, 2005; Czarniawska, 2005). Echoing the position from social penetration theory (Taylor & Altman, 1987), in which individuals store experiences of their previous interaction to assist them in making informed evaluations and forecasts of current and future interaction. Louis (1980) also accepts the retrospective process of drawing on past experiences to make sense of current situations. Relatedly, the relationship between social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and sense-making is inferred as Thomas et al. (1993:240) argue that the process involves *"...the reciprocal interaction of information seeking, meaning ascription, and action"*. More specifically, March (1984), Feldman (1989) and Sackman (1991) assert that the mechanisms involved in making sense of interaction include perception, interpretation, believing and enacting processes. Cognisant of these mechanisms, Ring & Van de Ven (1994) purport that sense-making may permit individuals in exchange to construct a shared understanding of each other's identity in relation to the other. In turn, this may enable individuals to become more socially affiliated through the establishment of enduring social
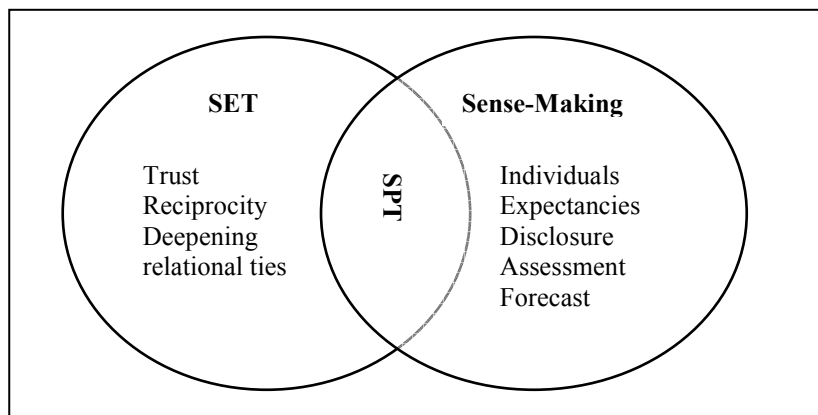
ties, as similarly reflected in Taylor & Altman's (1987) social penetration theory and in the wider social exchange theory (Aryee et al., 2002; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

The sense-making process of drawing upon repertoires of practical knowledge (Gioia & Manz, 1985) to inform reasons for conduct, may lead to a process where exchange actors reciprocate each others sense-making processes by sense-giving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). The notion of self-identity is important to the process as it influences how individuals present themselves and how they interact with others (Turner, 1987). Individuals, therefore, make sense of their identities and the identities of their exchange counterpart by projecting their own identity into the collaborative environment and observing the consequences. The function of sense-making and sense-giving may enable individuals with initially differing views about the potential of collaborating, to build a communal understanding of the situation and define a shared subjective view of expected and accepted behaviour (Gioa & Chittipeddi, 1991). Through meeting behaviourally confirming expectations (Turner, 1987), a stable social order may be reflected within the interaction when there is a mutual convergence of thought and deed of the exchange actors (Taylor & Altman, 1987; Giddens, 1991).

Convergence on the stability of relations is argued to provide a foundation for continued and deepening relational interaction (Buchel, 2000). Lessons learned from social penetration theory suggest that evaluation of, and within, relationships is not limited to reflecting upon previous interaction, it extends beyond this into forecasts about maintaining continued interaction (Altman & Taylor, 1973). For Altman & Taylor (1973:37), *"...persons simultaneously interact, access positive and negative facets of what is happening now, extrapolate to the future, form a picture of the other person, and reach some decision about next steps"*. Therefore, Weick's (1995: 2005) assertion that evaluation in sense-making incorporates assessment of current activity and forecasts of intended action is reflective of

Altman & Taylor's (1973) outlook from social penetration theory. To recap on the collective-to-individual focus of this research, figure 1.2 illustrates the conduit nature of social penetration theory (SPT) in linking the overarching theory of social exchange (SET) towards a focus on individual exchange actors in terms of how they make sense of their collaboration with particular reference to their expectancies, an in turn, conflict which may arise within their overall relationship (Lynch, 2006).

Figure 1.2 Collective to Individual Social Exchange Conceptualisation

Constructing the Line Manager-HR Professional Relationship Conceptual Framework

As this research is aimed at illuminating understanding of the line manager-HR professional collaborative relationship, the conceptual framework outlined in figure 1.3 serves to guide this objective.

Contextual Pressures Influencing HRM

Within this framework an appreciation of external influences on the HR function has particular utility as line manager involvement may be driven by the necessity to adapt the HR function in order to cope with both internal and external competitive, financial and regulatory demands (Boyne, 2002; O'Riordan, 2004). Such pressures, and the challenges they create,
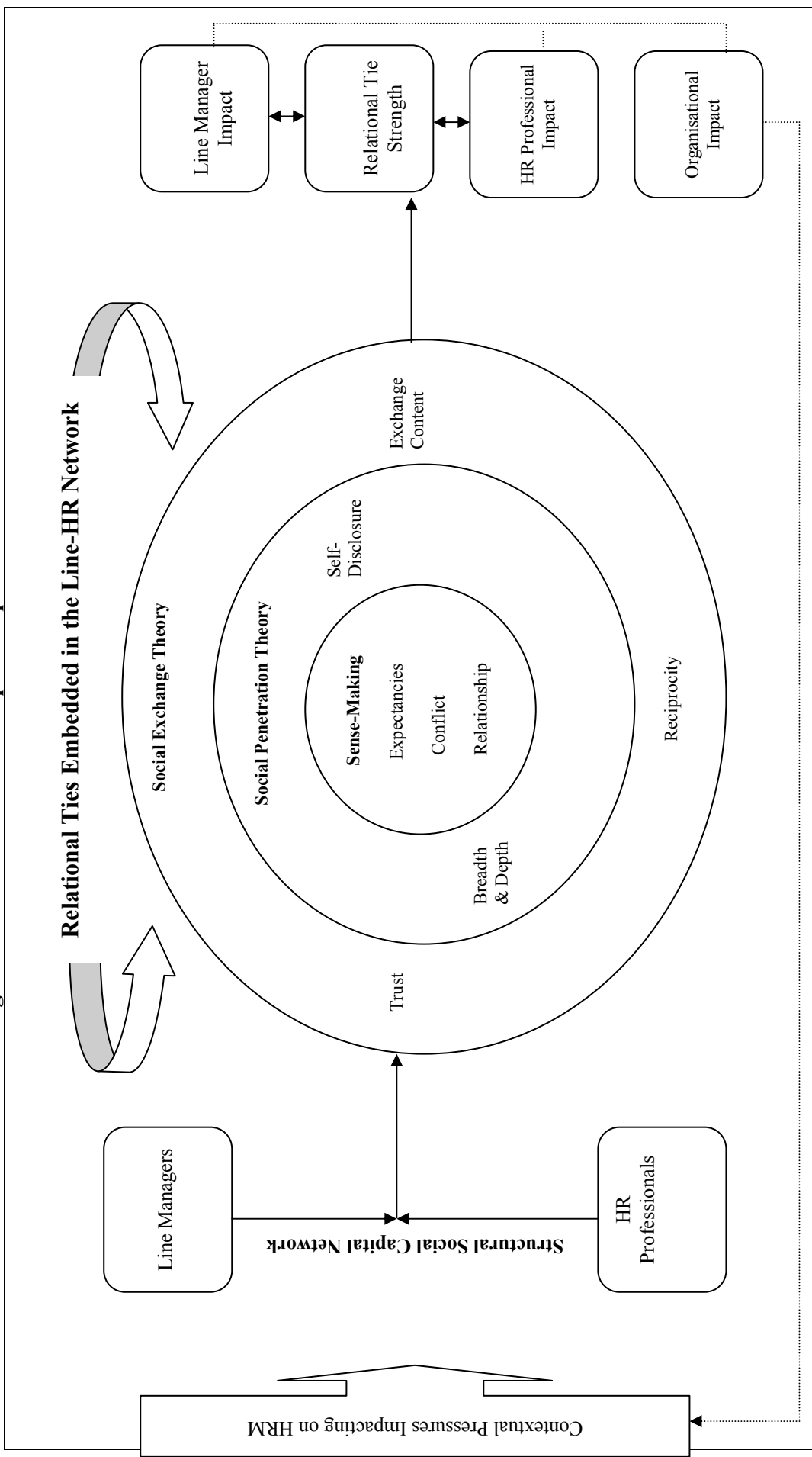
may provide the impetus for involving line management in the delivery of HRM (Guest, 1987; Storey, 1992; Ulrich, 1998).

The Exchange Actors: Line Managers and HR Professionals

As previously alluded to, line managers and HR professionals are increasingly adopting a shared ownership for HRM provision (Holt Larsen & Brewster, 2003; Brewster et al., 2004; Cranet, 2006). Relatedly, social exchange commentators highlight that certain currencies are salient in relation to the attractiveness of exchange partners (Dienesch & Liden, 1986) and, in turn, may facilitate them in forming strong ties and enhanced degrees of social capital connections (Granovetter, 1973; Levin & Cross, 2004). For line managers collaborating with HR professionals, their contribution may be directly related to their proximal relationship and knowledge of employees (Budwhar, 2000), and relatedly, their potential ability to integrate HR strategy into the core operations of the organisation (Mac Neil, 2003; Ulrich, & Brockbank, 2005).

In terms of the structural configuration of the line manager-HR professional network, MacNeil (2003) argues that line managers may be positioned as intermediaries possessing the ability to translate strategy into operations. This positioning may, in turn, from a social capital perspective foster advantageous opportunities to bridge differing organisational functions and structural holes (Hitt et al., 2002; Granovetter, 2005).

Figure 1.3 Line–HR Relationship Conceptual Framework

Relational Ties Embedded in the Line-HR Network

Line Manager Impact ⟷ Relational Tie Strength ⟷ HR Professional Impact

Organisational Impact

Social Exchange Theory

Social Penetration Theory

Exchange Content

Self-Disclosure

Sense-Making

Expectancies

Conflict

Relationship

Breadth & Depth

Reciprocity

Trust

Line Managers

HR Professionals

Structural Social Capital Network

Contextual Pressures Impacting on HRM

Reflecting the increasingly strategic positioning of HR roles, Rhoeling et al. (2005:208) posit the view that *"The HR function is transforming its focus from the management of human resources to the development and maintenance of organisational effectiveness"*. Within this shift, and of relevance to this research, is the inclusion of line managers as a delivery mechanism for transactional HRM, which may enable HR professionals to focus on more strategic issues (Budwhar, 2000: Holt Larsen & Brewster, 2003).

Exchange Content in Line-HR Collaborative Social Exchange
As previously discussed, social exchange may embody both tangible and intangible resources, behaviours and actions (Blau, 1964; Druckman, 1998; Aryee et al., 2002; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). With reference to the assignment of the various formal HRM tasks in the line manager and HR literature, research from the Cranet survey (2006) and the IRS (2006a) indicates that transactional (staffing, training and development, performance management etc.) day-to-day HRM may be performed between both line managers and HR professionals. Associated with delivering transactional activities in collaboration, social exchange theory accommodates for intangible and symbolic exchange between exchanging individuals (Cropanzanao & Mitchell, 2005). This has particular relevance to the intangible exchanges occurring between line managers and HR professionals with regards to the distribution of authority (Cascon-Pereira et al., 2006), decision-making powers (Currie & Proctor, 2001) and budgetary control (McConville, 2006) within their relationship.

The Role of Reciprocity within Social Exchange Theory in the Line -HR Collaboration
As ascertained in preceding sections, individuals enter into exchange to satisfy their self-interest which they may not achieve sufficiently by acting in isolation, and as such, strive to obtain a mutual benefit through reciprocated effort (Gouldner, 1960; Homans, 1961; Blau,

1964; Aryee et al., 2002; Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003; Wu et al., 2006). Line managers, in assuming HR responsibilities, may liberate HR professionals from the day-to-day transactional HRM provision: *"...the function will be liberated to concentrate upon strategic activities associated with a personnel metamorphosis to 'human resource management"* (Cunningham & Hyman, 1999:10). Therefore, in return for line managers' participation in HRM delivery, HR professionals may offer them the opportunity and requisite support to interact, translate and disseminate HR policy and practice to their own staff (Renwick, 2000; Currie & Proctor, 2001; Holt Larsen & Brewster, 2003). Reflective of this position, Renwick (2003:271), from his research on line-HR collaboration, posits the view that *"The line were aware of their responsibilities in HRM, but saw that HR needed to show a reciprocal commitment to the line in general management work also"*. As reflected in the conceptual framework outlined in figure 1.3, the role of reciprocity is important in terms of the relational ties in generating relational norms (Levin & Cross, 2004) as it may impact on both the exchange content and the development of trust in the relationship, which is discussed following section.

The Role of Trust within Social Exchange Theory in Line-HR Collaboration
Linked to the reciprocal nature evident in social exchange relationships, is the issue of trust, which may potentially impact on exchanging individuals behaviour and their perception of structural and relational cohesiveness (Gould Williams & Davies, 2005; Fukyama, 2006; Donaldson & O'Toole, 2007). The salience of trust is argued in close collaborative relationships (Blau, 1964; Aryee et al., 2002), due to the unspecified nature of reciprocal obligation and, moreover, as the resources and power required to discharge shared responsibilities may not be equally distributed within the relationship (Blau, 1964; Molm et al., 2003; Zafirovski, 2005). For this reason, trust may be argued to mediate issues of organisational justice and relational tie strength (Granovetter, 2005) concerning the

distribution of power within the exchange, the procedures through which the goals of the exchange are achieved and finally, with the degree of fairness within interactions (Emerson, 1972; Aryee et al., 2002; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Cropanzanao & Mitchell, 2005).

The dominant form of exhibited trust in the literature is the willingness of HR professionals to devolve and involve line managers in HRM and this may be attributed to exchange currencies based on liking, respect, loyalty and contribution of the respective social exchanging actors (Liden & Graen, 1980). In presenting the alternative view, HR professionals have reported a cautiousness about trusting line managers to implement and enact HR policies and practices based on their judgements of line managers competence, resources, divergent operational pressures and their short-term managerial focus (Budhwar, 2000; IRS, 2006b; CIPD, 2007). In terms of trust from the line manager perspective, due to the interdependent nature of their collaboration with HR professionals, line manager respondents identify that they *"...rely on HR to keep us right"* (Renwick, 2003:269) with regards to the quality and standard of the discharge of their HR remit. Conversely, issues of mistrust towards HR professionals may be with reference to inadequate preparation and support of line managers to assume and maintain an HRM brief (Cunningham & Hyman, 1995:1999; Renwick, 2000; Nehles et al., 2006). For Whittaker & Marchington (2003), a clear view has emerged that both line managers and HR professionals need to trust each other in delivering their respective roles in order for their relationship to work as a paptnership (Budhwar, 2000).

The "Onion" Metaphor of Relationships within Social Penetration Theory
Altman & Taylor's (1973) conceptualisation of social relationship development is analogous to that of an onion, indicating that individuals may exhibit different layers of themselves in social exchange. Taylor & Altman (1983) signal that this framework may assist in capturing

relational progression as similarly reflected in social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Aryee et al., 2002), and moreover, the deepening structure of relationships from mere superficial exchange to close interdependent social ties. Adopting such a focus to exploring the extent of social exchange within a relationship has particular utility with reference to this research as the activities exchanged in line manager-HR professional relationship are identifiable from survey based research (IRS 2006a: 2006b; Cranet, 2006), however, the "...*shape they have taken*" (Harris et al., 2002:218) is more ambiguous. Investigating the depth of the line manager-HR professional relationship along the lines of a superficial to close relationship scale may serve to correctly position an understanding of their interaction with reference to Maxwell & Watson's (2006) call for research on the social dynamics within the relationship. The onion metaphor may serve as a guide for the movement from superficial to deep relationship progression (Chen et al., 2006) and, therefore, has particular relevance to this research in exploring the social relationship status and history of collaborating line managers and HR professionals.

The Breadth and Depth Associated with Social Penetration Theory
In terms of breadth, which refers to the number of issues shared between individuals, research from the Cranet (2006) survey and IRS (2006a) reflect the varying transactional tasks (staffing, training, performance management), and of relevance to this research, this literature base neglects to a similar degree, the socially supportive behaviours exhibited in the collaborative relationship. A social penetration focus, therefore, may enhance these categorisations by incorporating a relational depth dimension to put into context the strength of their relationship in relation to the level of shared activity and the degree of social norms and dependence of the exchange actors (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Coleman, 1988). Line managers and HR professionals, through their collaborative interactions, may have established a history of social dependency and reliance between one another for the purposes

of providing collaborative HRM (Renwick, 2003). Exploring the relationship progression and, in turn, the depth of collaboration between line managers and HR professionals may be facilitated by focusing on social exchange currencies and relational tie indicators (Liden & Maslyn, 1988; Druckman, 1998; Aryee et al., 2002; Levin & Cross, 2004) in terms of the degree of respect, trust and commitment displayed among and towards these exchanging actors (Renwick, 2003; Whittaker & Marchington, 2003).

A Social Penetration Stance on Self-Disclosure
The association between social exchange and social penetration theories is further evident in terms of the issue of self-disclosure. For Dergla & Grzelak (1979), an individual's decision to disclose information about themselves or their role is related to their personal cognitions and motivation to exchange. Taylor & Altman (1973) assert that the disclosing process requires trust and commitment and may evolve in a reciprocal process over increasing interaction episodes, thereby mirroring social exchange theory on relationship progression (Berninghaus et al., 2007). The issue of self-disclosure, positioned in the line manager-HR professional context, may serve to illuminate the willingness of the exchange actors to invest in and contribute to the collaboration.

Furthermore, by exploring line managers and HR professionals willingness to contribute to a relationship may, in the context of this research, expose their willingness to comply with the tasks and functions of the collaboration as it has been suggested that certain line managers feel uncomfortable in the HR spotlight (Harris et al., 2002). Additionally, the socially supportive organisational citizenship behaviours (Peelle, 2007) of providing guidance, support and informal assistance beyond the transactional elements of the interaction are found to varying degrees in the literature (Thornhill & Saunders, 1998, Harris et al., 2002; Bond & Wise, 2003), and thereby the resources that these exchange actors are willing to disclose and,

in turn, contribute to the relationship may provide an indication to the strength of their relational ties (Lewin & Cross, 2004).

Making Sense of Exchange Actors Expectancies

In terms of line manager-HR professional collaboration, exchanging actors may expect that their collaboration will produce synergies, changes in HR responsibility, greater utilisation of HR resources, enhanced commitment and may potentially liberate HR professionals to concentrate on strategic issues (Cunningham & Hyman, 1999; Renwick, 2000; Harris et al., 2002; Holt Larsen & Brewster, 2003; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005). Within this, Weick (1995) argues that the construction of such expectancies may be based on past experiences, relying on reputations of exchanging individuals and, in turn, these expectations may influence the enactment of the collaboration.

Making Sense of Conflict in Exchange

For Turner (1987), by meeting behaviourally confirming expectations, a stable social order may be reflected within the collaboration when there is a mutual convergence of the exchange actors sense-making perspectives. However, when expectations and reality diverge, conflict may arise in the relationship and this may be heightened when the exchange actors come from differing backgrounds (Weick, 1995; Buchel, 2000), which is the case in this particular research. Conflict may manifest in two forms, namely task related and relationship related (Jehn & Mannix, 2001). In terms of the former, task related conflicts may arise in the line manager-HR professional relationship in the approach taken to enacting HR policy and practice and this is reflected in the literature (IRS, 2006b), in which HR and line manager respondents disagree over ranking their respective abilities to enact their collaborative HR remit. The sense-making literature (Pinkley, 1990; Weick, 1995; Jehn & Mannix, 2001) acknowledges that task conflict may not necessarily be destructive to the relationship as it

may provide a starting ground for the exchange actors to air grievances, state their position and attempt to negotiate a new shared sense of social order.

Conflict may also arise in terms of the relational bond and this may be potentially damaging to the relationship goals (Ensley et al., 2002). Evidence of this, as previously alluded to, potentially includes dissatisfaction and the resulting impact on trust in terms of the level of preparation and training received by line managers to assume a HR remit (Cunningham & Hyman, 1995; Whittaker & Marchington, 2003, Nehles et al., 2006). Similarly, line manager respondents in McConville & Holden's (1999) study report possessing impotent responsibility, which potentially confines their ability to contribute to the collaboration and may cause issues of power imbalance to manifest. Moreover, a lack of support from HR professionals may further contribute to conflictual pressures in the relationship (Cunningham & Hyman, 1999; Bond & Wise, 2003; Nehles et al., 2006). From the wider social exchange theory (Gouldner, 1960; Blau, 1964, Liden & Maslyn, 1998), however, during instances of conflict, relational norms of social exchange (Macneil, 1980), most prominently in the form of trust, communication and commitment, are argued to alleviate the degree of conflict within the social capital structural and relational elements to their relationship (Nahapiet & Ghosal, 1998; Hitt et al., 2002)

Making Sense of their Overall Relationship
As previously alluded to, relational norms are acknowledged to govern collaborative relationships, and that commitment, borne out of reciprocal and trusting sensing activities, is integral to focusing sense-making and sense-giving towards behavioural enactment (Weick, 1995: 2005). Reflective of this, Lewin & Cross (2004) assert that social relationships are important for acquiring information and, in turn, utilising and transferring this information to

solve problems is the manifestation of the social capital and tie strength residing within their overall relationship. From the line manager-HR professional collaboration literature, trust and the reciprocation of trust are central features that may impact on their commitment to the relationship (Renwick, 2003). Commitment, therefore, may manifest from the mutual informal acceptance of each exchange actor to accommodate and, in turn, behaviourally support his or her collaborative exchange actor (Budwhar, 2000; Whittaker & Marchington, 2003).

Central to the wider social exchange (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1972, Macneil, 1980; Berninghaus et al., 2007) and the more specific social penetration premise (Taylor & Altman, 1987; Chen et al., 2006), is that over time, relationships develop enhanced social degrees of connectedness, often underpinned by increasingly socially orientated collaboration. Reflective of this iterative nature of sense-making, individuals within collaborative exchanges continually assess the value of their relationship (Weick, 1995). Specific evidence of this is found in Altman & Taylor's (1973) social penetration theory, where it is argued that individuals, based on their current and past history of interaction, evaluate the rewards to be obtained from interacting and enact a coping strategy to guide their collaboration (Hales, 2007). Such an approach may shed light on the cognitive aspects of line manager-HR interaction as Maxwell & Watson (2006) indicates that further research is required on the social dynamics of line-HR collaborative relationships. Moreover, Watson et al. (2007) adopt a similar position in terms of highlighting the need to illuminate their partnership dynamics. Therefore, Weick's (1995) assertion that evaluation in sense-making incorporates assessment and forecast planning reflects Altman & Taylor's (1973) social penetration perspective on relationships, and this connection further strengthens the application of sense-making to illuminate social exchange relationships.

The Impact of Line Manager-HR Professional Collaboration

The outcome of line managers inclusion in a collaborative relationship with HR professionals may manifest in assuming responsibilities and a relationship which may be welcome (Renwick, 2003), and at times, unwanted (Harris et al., 2002). For HR professionals, their involvement in HRM may evolve from an interventionary role to a strategic and advisory role as a result of line managers assuming the transactional elements of HRM provision (Storey, 1992; Caldwell, 2000; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005; CIPD, 2007). In a similar vein to the line manager perspectives on collaboration, not all HR professionals welcome this collaborative arrangement due to a resistance to change (Harris et al., 2002), the time involved to prepare line managers for an HRM remit (CIPD, 2007), and concerns over line managers HR ability (IRS, 2006b; Nehles et al., 2006). A key feature of the issue appears to centre on the quality of exchange relationship (Aryee et al., 2002; Cropanzanao & Mitchell, 2005), which, in turn, may be influenced by preparation levels, authority issues and job pressures (Nehles et al., 2006; Mc Conville, 2006).

Exploring the quality of the line manager-HR professional relationship through the aforementioned multi-theoretical lens is proposed to generate an enhanced understanding of the relationship strength with respect to identifying the relational ties that support and govern their relationship (Granovetter, 1973:1983; Lewin & Cross, 2004). In terms of this tie strength, strong relationship ties are seen to represent intensive and repeated interaction underpinned by mutual social order and reciprocal and trusting behaviours (Lewin & Cross, 2004). Weak ties, in converse, are the manifestation of ad hoc and contingent interaction without the cognitive relational bond (Granovetter, 1983). As organisations are continually charged with seeking collaborative synergies and resource efficiency in the face of obstacles such as structural and informational asymmetries, fostering effective social capital may contribute to positive collective action in terms of shared vision and trusted and reciprocal

relational underpinnings (Hitt et al., 2002). The consensus on the organisational impact of line manager-HR professional relationships is that of collaborative partnership which has amongst the aforementioned individual impacts for line managers and HR practitioners, the potential to lead to enhanced levels of integration of HRM with organisational strategy consistent in supporting and informing a devolved strategy to HRM configuration (Ulrich, 1998; Holt Larsen & Brewster, 2003; Morley et al., 2006).

Operationalising the Line-HR Relationship Conceptual Framework
Reflective of the exploratory focus of the framework as a means of illuminating the social dynamics of exchange within the line manager-HR professional collaboration, in conjunction to the desire for contextualisation has informed the decision to adopt a case study research design (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Lowe, 2001; Stake, 2003). Hammel, Dufor & Fortin (1993) and Hakim (2000) support the view that a case study approach may facilitate an in-depth account of the research problem concerning the description of social entities such as organisations, events, work teams, roles or relationships. With particular relevance to this research, Stark & Torrance (2005:33) view social reality as *"...created through social interaction, albeit in particular contexts and histories"*, and adopting case study research design, may enable the inclusion of the organisational context throughout the entire research process (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Cresswell, 2007). Reflective of this, Zedeck & Cascio (1984:463) assert that research on HRM practice is *"...theoretically bankrupt"* in terms of its contribution, unless it is considered in the broad context of organisations. In a similar vein, Paauwe (2004:69) argues that, *"...we need theoretical models and accompanying research design that take into account the institutional setting and allow reality to emerge and enable us to analyse the underlying processes"*. To explore the research phenomenon at the primary research stage, semi-structured interviews are proposed to thematically incorporate a line of enquiry reflective of the overarching social exchange theory, in conjunction with capturing

the social penetration and the individual exchange actor's sense-makings processes associated with line manager-HR professional social exchange. The analysis of documentation may serve to assist in retaining the context specific data about the research site and the HR framework in which it operates. Both approaches aim to support the exploration of the social aspects of line manager-HR professional collaboration by *"...clarifying meaning by identifying different ways the phenomena is being seen"* (Stake, 2003:148).

Conclusion

The consensus in the literature indicates that line manager-HR professional relationships may produce cooperative and, at times, uncooperative relational dynamics. Acknowledging that there is a paucity of research exploring the collaboration between line managers and HR professionals with particular reference to social dynamics, this research attempts to illuminate the phenomenon through a social exchange lens, combined with social penetration theory to link collective social exchange to the individual-level sense-making processes of line manages and HR professionals. In terms of utilising this conceptual framework, an intended case study research design incorporating semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis was offered for exploring the relationship ties between line managers and HR professionals. From a practical standpoint, the conceptual framework, which captures aspects of relationship dynamics pertinent to collaboration, may provide a basis for researchers to explore and understand the social aspects of line manager-HR professional collaboration. In terms of contributing to research in the field, the social exchange perspective is an attempt to respond to the paucity of research specifically addressing line manager-HR professional collaboration relationship and, as such, may create a focal point for further research in the area.

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