



Translating national policy changes into local HRM practices

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore how a national policy on sickness absence management is translated by HR managers into local human resource management (HRM) practices by developing and applying an analytical framework with three dimensions: individual preferences, strategic reframing, and local grounding.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on policy documents and interviews with HR managers in Dutch law firms. The theoretical scope is the debate on HRM and institutional contexts.

Findings – The paper uncovers a variety of individual preferences among HR managers' interpretations of the national policy. However, in strategically reframing the policy, the organizations act upon it from a mainly "managerialist" perspective: they focus on reducing absence through increased control of employees, rather than reforming organizational practices that may adversely affect the health of workers. The local groundings reinforce unequal power relations between different categories of employees: HR managers/line managers; professionals/administrative personnel; men/women. The paper contributes to the understanding of how changes in institutional contexts are translated into organizations and the role of HR managers within this process.

Research limitations/implications – The paper explores the translation process in a particular setting. It would be fruitful to broaden the scope to other institutional contexts and organizations and to include a diverse range of actors to develop additional knowledge of the interaction in the translation process.

Originality/value – The paper develops both empirical and theoretical conclusions on the translation, that is, the sense making of HRM in an uncertain environment of changing national institutions.

Keywords Government policy, Human resource management, Sick leave, Absenteeism, Organizational change, Organizational theory

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Traditionally, human resource management (HRM) literature has recognized the institutional context in the regulatory and limiting effect of, for example, labour laws and labour markets on organizational HRM practices (Brewster, 2004; Hendry and Pettigrew, 1990; Paauwe, 2004). These studies suggest that organizational HRM

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practices are reflections or responses to pressures from regulatory agencies (Paauwe and Boselie, 2003), which underlines the importance of environmental changes for HRM practices, such as recruitment, selection and return to work procedures (Cunningham and James, 1998). A growing number of international studies analyzed the influence of institutional settings on HRM and found that, despite global tendencies of decentralization or devolution of HRM, national institutions are still crucial in explaining variety between different countries (Gooderham *et al.*, 2006; Andolsek and Stebe, 2005; Quintanilla and Ferner, 2003). However, the relationship between HRM and the national institutional context seems a rather tight rope to balance. While national institutions create variation in the consequences of global tendencies (Brewster, 2007; Wailes *et al.*, 2003), they also explain directional convergence in the adoption of similar policies within countries, without necessarily implying final convergence in local HRM practices and outcomes (Farndale and Paauwe, 2007; Tregaskis and Brewster, 2006).

Understanding the complex relationship of HRM and institutional environment may benefit from a more detailed and in-depth understanding of the “translation” process of national institutions and the active role of human agency in reacting to environmental pressures (Boon *et al.*, 2009; Farndale and Paauwe, 2007; Ferner *et al.*, 2005). The translation of national institutions into local practices seems crucial in identifying how institutional context changes are taken up and affect organizational policy and practices (van Raak *et al.*, 2005; Zilber, 2002). In our study, we explicitly aim to address the role of human agency, in our case the HR manager, in connecting the institutional context with local HRM practices. While the institutional perspective is traditionally known for the assumption that organizations in a similar environment will employ “isomorphic” practices (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), we focus on HR managers’ sensitivity and response to the institutional environment and their ability for various ways of sense making. Unlike previous researchers, who have discussed responses to institutional complexity primarily at the (inter)national comparative level (Andolsek and Stebe, 2005), we focus on how national and individual demands and preferences are balanced locally, within organizations.

We build on Boxenbaum (2006) to develop a three-dimensional framework for analyzing the translation process of a national policy for sickness absence management. The first dimension, individual preferences, constitutes those elements HR managers regard as most meaningful in the policy. Strategic reframing encompasses how the new policy refers to strategic issues, like financial targets, control, and performance. The final dimension, local grounding, considers the merging of new national policy elements with existing local routines and practices. Based on policy documents and interviews in organizations, our empirical material shows how HR managers interpret the national policy in various ways, with both managerial and critical interpretations of the institutional context. The strategic reframing, however, was predominantly managerial, while the local grounding tended to reinforce unequal power relations. The translation process of the national policy showed how HR managers’ preferences are only partly addressed in organizational policy and practices, as many organizations inclined to avoid the deeper problems that, arguably, are dealt with in the national policy.

Our study contributes to the debate on the relationship between HRM and institutional context in two ways. First, we develop and apply an analytical framework

to understand how institutional changes are translated in organizational (HRM) practices. This framework may contribute to the broader field of HRM by contextualizing HR managers' struggle to make sense of and act upon institutional changes as well as the consequences this has in terms of changing the organizational policy, routines and relationships. Second, in exploring the "translation" process, and the role of HR managers in this, we demonstrate that balancing national, local, and individual preferences and demands is not a straight forwarded process in which actors, including HR managers, realize their preferences. Rather, we uncovered that the translation process revealed several unintended consequences, both from the perspective of the national policy rhetoric and the individual HR managers.

Theory

Institutional theorists argue that actions in organizations are formed through formal and informal rules (Barley and Tolbert, 1997; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Following this, organizational HRM policies and practices are constrained by external institutional forces (Paauwe, 2004; Tregaskis and Brewster, 2006), with national culture and legislations playing a particularly important role (Farndale and Paauwe, 2007). Symptomatic for the HRM field's internationally comparative focus, Rosenzweig and Nohria (1994) found that, due to national institutional constraints, HRM practices in affiliates of multinational corporations (MNC's) closely resemble local firms. These results showed how surrounding institutional pressures are not deterministic, but actively moderated by organizational actors (Edwards *et al.*, 2007; Farndale and Paauwe, 2007; Ferner *et al.*, 2005). While institutional pressures limit the options for organizational actors; by translating environmental change, these actors are in the position to alter the institutions they enact (Barley and Tolbert, 1997; Garud *et al.*, 2007).

With organizational actors making active choices in responding to institutions (Oliver, 1991; Paauwe, 2004), the HR manager has an important position in influencing the processes of institutionalization in order to become a serious "player" within the organization (Green *et al.*, 2006; Ulrich and Beatty, 2001). In HRM literature, a main focus has been on establishing a relationship between HRM practices and performance (Becker and Gerhart, 1996; Guest *et al.*, 2003; Hope-Hailey *et al.*, 2005). HR managers are viewed as being in a position to implement the HRM practices that are:

- universally "best" (Huselid, 1995; Pfeffer, 1995);
- "fit" the organization's strategy (Gratton and Truss, 2003; Wright, 1998); or
- a "configuration" of internal consistency within the HR policies and practices that also fit the organization's strategy (Delery and Doty, 1996).

All these strategies require customization to the organizationally specific demands and are influenced by organizational micro-politics. For example, Ferner *et al.* (2005) showed how MNCs' HRM policies in relation to diversity underwent "hybridisation" when subsidiaries accommodated the transferred policies. Local managers, including HR managers, used different strategic responses to "manipulate," "compromise," and "avoid" internalization of the institutional pressure (Oliver, 1991).

Emphasizing different strategic choices as rational options underestimates the complex role of the HR manager in providing a bridge between the broader institutional context and organization-specific HRM practices. In contrast, it has been

argued that the everyday life of (HR) managers often involves non-rational adjustments, after-rationalizations, and highly ambiguous processes dependent on situational factors (Alvesson and Svenningsson, 2003; Czarniawska and Joerges, 1995; Watson, 2004). HRM literature has acknowledged the HR manager's problems in juggling their responsibilities towards employer, employees and other stakeholders (Caldwell, 2003; Ulrich and Beatty, 2001). However, the HR manager's role in interpreting the institutional environment has received less prominence (Watson, 2004). Without recognizing the interpretative role of the HR manager fully, it remains unknown how HR managers construct and make sense of their institutional environment differently (Gooderham *et al.*, 2006; Harley and Hardy, 2004). It appears that the role and agency of the HR manager as the interpreter of legislation, sense maker of the consequences for her/his specific organization, and the eventual implementer in this process, is in need for further theoretical development as well as empirical illustrations.

In structuring and understanding our empirical data, we focus on three dimensions of the translation process: individual preference, strategic reframing, and local grounding (Boxenbaum, 2006). These three dimensions need to be further theoretically developed in order to support the understanding of empirical data. First, the notion of individual preference highlights the many interpretative possibilities open to the actors. For example, Czarniawska and Joerges (1995) illustrate how interpretations of a national policy can diverge between local municipalities. The actors interpret and prioritize certain aspects of the policy in order to legitimize its implementation. This highlights how policies can be read in different ways as well as the emptiness of ideas and policies without actors giving meaning to them (Cooper and Law, 1995). It is the actor who energizes these texts by breathing life into plans or policies, making them meaningful to their surroundings (Samra-Fredericks, 2003, p. 143). In doing this, the actors modify, deflect, betray, add, or appropriate the policy or practice as a quasi-object (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1995). The translation process thus always carries some form of transformation or modification (Clegg *et al.*, 2006).

Second, strategic reframing focuses on how the various interpretations are being integrated in the strategic perspectives on core issues in organizations, such as financial aims, control and performance. The concept of strategic reframing can be associated with different interpretations that are grounded in various rationalities or logics. In the field of HRM, the different rationalities are highly relevant in shaping HRM policies and practices (Paauwe, 2004, p. 40). The managerial perspective often employs an instrumental-rational view on HRM, reflecting a goal-driven approach based on material interest and the will to power (Paauwe, 2004). The instrumental rationality can be contrasted to a value-driven rationality, which refers to moral, political or other ideals (Poole, 1986). The analysis of the process of strategic reframing will require a search for variety in the rationalities or logics employed in the translation of contextual changes.

The connection between HRM and institutional context only becomes locally grounded in the new setting if the policy becomes enacted in local practices. Attaching new meanings to policies or practices does not necessarily change them (Zilber, 2002). It requires new or changed enactments to alter the locally grounded practices, and this can only be initiated by actors who are operating in specific contexts. To understand the influence of a translation, the specific local conditions need to be taken into account

(Cooper and Law, 1995). Through interaction with other actors and practices, the translation is further modified and adapted, but also “carried forward” through this new involvement (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2000). If continuously enacted and accepted, the practices eventually become routines, taken for granted within the organization. The following empirical analysis will provide details of how this happens and the contextual factors that shape the local grounding.

Method and setting

Our choice of qualitative methodology is consistent with the explorative focus of this study and our emphasis on the process of translation and the role of HR managers. The empirical data are based on policy documents in the broader institutional context, particularly national policy changes in sickness absence management. Additionally, we conducted interviews with HR managers about sickness absence management within law firms; this sector contains a cross-section of types of workers (managers, professionals, and administrators), as well as a variety of problems related to sickness absence (e.g. with screen working, stress, and burnout). Although small, this sample is sufficient to explore the translation of the national policy and illustrate the key role of HR managers in this process. We selected nine organizations among the top 50 lawyer’s offices, each with 50 till 250 employees. The total of approximately 1,000 employees across the nine organizations represents nearly one quarter of all employees of the top 50 law firms. We did not contact the smaller offices (less than 50 employees) while they usually not have a HR manager and deal with absenteeism on an *ad hoc* basis.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with the HR managers in the law firms to grasp interpretations, organizational policy-making, and local practices that were developed in “translating” the national policy into sickness absence management. The HR managers participated in semi-open conversations that provided ample opportunity for detailed descriptions of changes in policy and practices, and airing their own views on these. The interviews were carried out between December 2005 and February 2006, lasted each approximately one hour, and were taped and transcribed. Given the three dimensions of our framework, we distinguished relevant elements in the interviews. First, we determined the variation in individual preferences, and analyzed how HR managers gave meaning and value to transformations in the institutional context. Second, we found out how they strategically reframed the organizational policy; what are the strategic consequences of national-level policy changes for the organization, and how do they justify changes in the organizational policy and HRM practices towards other actors, e.g. the line management or the employees. Finally, we examined the local grounding in noticing how the national policy changes are implemented in local management practices (as perceived by the HR managers), and the consequences of these changes for various actors within the organizations. The analyses of the three dimensions were compared across the organizations to search for similarities and striking differences that might uncover relevant mechanisms in the translation processes. Before we report our findings in the empirical section, we will briefly outline the national policy change in sickness absence.

Sickness absence management and national policy change

Sickness absence management is a long-standing strategic HRM practice that has been severely neglected over the past decades (James *et al.*, 2002). However, health problems

increasingly require attention from employers, employees, and governments alike in order to reduce social benefit costs, to prevent sickness absence, and to reintegrate sick workers. Over the past decade, the relatively high rates of sickness absence in Europe demanded a rethink of institutional rules and practices (Gimeno *et al.*, 2004). Many countries responded to the high-sickness absence rates with changing national rules and governance systems, in particular to reduce the problem of long-term disability. The central element in the national policy change in The Netherlands is devolution of the financial and social responsibilities for sickness absence from the national/collective level to the organizational/individual level. More specifically, the national policy radically changed through privatizing responsibilities for sickness absence. The Sickness Absence Act (WULBZ Act, 1996) obliges employers to carry the costs of sickness absence of up to a year (extended to two years with the VLZ Act, 2003). The Gatekeeper Law (WVP, 2001) provides detailed procedures and time-schedules for employers and employees to take concrete steps in reducing (long term) sickness absence.

According to the new national policy, organizations have to implement a “case management” in sickness absence. In case management, the worker concerned is actively monitored during the period of absence by:

- frequent contact; and
- a problem analysis after ultimately six weeks and three days) a “Plan of Approach” within eight weeks of absence.

The employer (or in its place the line manager and/or HR manager) and the employee have to discuss the Plan of Approach, and agree upon particular actions and time-schedules. Carrying out the agreement, organizations are required to compose and continuously update a “re-integration report” which provides information about the proceedings in the Plan of Approach to the state agency. If an employee does not return to the workplace within two years after the start of the sickness absence, the government decides on the basis of this report whether enough has been done to prevent long-term absence, and therefore whether social benefits will be granted, or sanctions on employers and/or employees are called for. The national policy thus involves legal and financial pressures for organizations to change their policy and practices in order to prevent (long term) absence.

Unfolding the translation process

Individual preferences

Although some parts of the changes in national policy appeal to the HR managers more than others; they largely agree with the devolution of responsibilities from the national/collective level to the organizational/individual level. However, we extract two main lines of interpretation of what this devolution implies for the organizations’ sickness absence management. First, the HR managers emphasize the opportunity for employers to extend the control of absent workers and tighten discipline. This is illustrated by the statements of various HR managers:

I believe, it is important that workers take their own responsibility and behave pro-actively. This is often not the case yet.

I think we could act more strictly in sickness absence management, because employees call in sick too easily sometimes.

I believe that the WVP (Gatekeeper Law) has increased the awareness, not so much among employers, but on the part of the employee, in the sense of “Oh yeah, I can register myself as absent, but I really have to do something to get back to work and that will take more commitment than I’d thought.

These statements show a rather “managerial” interpretation of the policy, in which most responsibility for preventing illness and implementing a return-to-work plan falls on the employee, thus reducing costs and improving performance. Under this interpretation of the policy, the emphasis is not primarily on the employer “becoming aware” of the policies’ aim that employers are responsible for reducing and preventing (long term) sickness absence; rather, it is the employees who must alter their “uncommitted” behavior.

Some HR managers also demonstrate a second interpretation, when they stress the importance of a “healthy” organization in reducing sickness absence. In this view, an appropriate health policy at organizational level should enable employees to arrange their own work as much as possible. HR managers often recognize the lack of workers’ autonomy in regulating work pressure as a major cause of sickness absence, in particular with respect to the jobs lower down in the hierarchy. As HR managers express:

There are few opportunities for administrators to regulate their work, so they will experience a much higher work pressure.

You often notice that the higher the job in the organizational hierarchy, the more autonomy they have to arrange their own work. In the lower ranked jobs, the barrier for absenteeism is also lower. These people are simply less engaged in the office.

Though, the problem of high-work pressure is not restricted to the lower ranked functions in the law firms. The HR managers in our study also emphasize that sub-optimal working conditions may often cause long-term absence because for the lawyers. As one HR manager states about the lawyers’ job:

It is really a stressful job and some people experience so many problems that they get “burnout.” Their absence can last very long then.

From this perspective, the HR managers view the national policy not primarily as a way of strengthening the control and authority of the employer, but rather as an incentive for creating and supporting a healthier way of working. This more “critical” reading of the policy goes beyond the managerial view and underlines the role of the organization in causing sickness absence. In this second interpretation, the emphasis is less on reducing sickness absence rates, and more on the prevention of absenteeism by curing the organizations’ diseases.

The individual preference of the HR managers in translating the national policy also reflects their own position in the organization. “Case management,” occupying a central role in the new policy for sickness absence management, is considered primarily a job for line managers. Regularly, HR managers even interpret the national policy as an opportunity to improve leadership qualities among line managers, and at the same time realize a role as advisor for themselves. They tend to sketch an ideal picture, encouraging line managers to run their own division with their professional advice. For example, one HR manager describes her role like:

I inform the line management about how to conduct conversations about absence, how they should deal with it, because that's something line managers are not really aware of. They do not know how sickness absence management works, they need to be trained in communication about how to deal with it.

However, some HR managers prefer to take a prominent role in execution themselves, exactly because they believe that they are better able to manage sickness absence than line managers would do. HR managers often notice that line managers feel less obliged to take up the case management:

I feel it is most important that I'm involved right from the start. [...] I've noticed that this works best. [...] while I've experienced that the line managers are not skilled in this area and that they pay attention to their clients above their employees.

Here, we observe that the preferences of HR management are contextual, and related to their perception of the priorities, capabilities and willingness of other stakeholders in the organization.

To summarize, our analysis uncovers variety among HR manager's individual preferences. They give diverse accounts of their translation of the policy, both in their views on HRM in this area (managerial versus critical) and their favored role in implementing the policy (advisor versus executive).

Strategic reframing

Although quite different interpretations of the policy are described during the interviews, the framing is less diverse. In translating the national policy into the organization's strategy, most organizations seem to act on the new policy from a managerial perspective: the development of an organizational strategy for sickness absence management concentrates at increased control and performance. The formerly existing organizational policy is re-framed into stronger demands on employees to reduce absenteeism. This is strongly emphasized by most HR managers:

Yes, the role of the employee has changed [...]. Currently, the employee has to act on anything that may contribute to a quick return to the job.

We have now emphasized the duties of employees far more. For instance, we have increased the frequency of absenteeism control.

I believe it is an important advantage since the WVP (Gatekeeper Law) that if employees are not willing to co-operate – this was a real problem in the past and we did not have any sanction – but nowadays you can stop their salary.

In the past, absentees could easily stay at home for a month or even longer without any contact with the company, while now it is quite normal that you're contacted and that you contact the company yourself.

These statements show how the institutional context is used by HR managers to legitimize their course of action. Some HR managers use the national policy explicitly to justify their actions to the employees. They feel supported by the national policy changes in their efforts to discipline workers. As they express:

Well, I was very pleased with the Gatekeeper Law [...]. With the new national policy in your hands, it was easier to say to your employees: "you also have a duty." That's the change I really appreciate. Of course, you could have disciplined them yourself as an employer, but I think it would have taken much more time. Now you can use the pressure of the national rules.

Of course, the employee is yet more obliged to provide information and conform to the rules. For instance, the return-to-work-plan, then they say something like “do we have to do that” and then I say: “It’s not me who invented these rules.” That was quite a change. In the past, they had their freedom to resist and now they haven’t any more.

Here, the HR managers use the policy to justify their actions and control mechanisms, involving an instrumental-rational logic to re-frame organizational policies and to strengthen their own position in sickness absence management.

While HR managers generally prefer a role as advisor; in the reframing of the organizational policy they mainly describe an administrative role. This shows that the role preferences of the HR managers are not automatically transformed to organizational policies. Moreover, our findings highlight that HRM roles are not only determined by the HR manager but established in the context of role preferences of other actors, e.g. the line manager. For example, one HR manager mentions her ambitions for a more critical reading of the policy, in which the line manager takes the case management and in doing so provides a better leadership and creates better working conditions. At the same time, this HR manager in fact plays the role of case manager herself and acts in a managerial way, though without much satisfaction. As she claims:

In our organization, I actually fulfill the role of case manager very often, but what we really want is that the line management takes this job. However, we will need a change of culture, because this is not what happens now.

This particular HR manager recognizes that a more radical change is needed to move beyond framing the policy in a managerial way.

A more critical reading of the policy is, in the opinion of the HR managers, often blocked by other actors with other preferences, in particular the line manager and the employer. For example, the HR managers frequently mention the line management frustrating HRM ambitions for a more critical reading of the policy. They feel that a more radical change is problematic because line managers have to change their own role drastically. The HR managers do not believe this will occur soon:

That’s a change we shall make slowly, in minor steps, because line managers [...] focus mainly on their own job and they don’t feel responsible for or pay attention to – nor do they have the quality – to accompany ill employees or to prevent their absence.

Second, an organizational health policy that goes beyond a focus on controlling short-term absence is in the eyes of the HR managers also restricted by the attitude of the employer. Employers did become more “active,” in line with the aim of the national policy, but the strategic support focuses merely on cost reduction. In particular, the national rules that force employers to pay the sick workers’ salary during a sickness absence of two years have stimulated a managerial interpretation of the policy, since employers are confronted with new financial risks.

To summarize, a managerial view of HRM dominates the strategic reframing of the organizational policy, despite the variety of the individual preferences among the HR managers we uncovered earlier. The strategic reframing of the organizational policy and the role of HRM are shaped in the process of translation, with some HR managers’ critical preferences are clashing with the preferences of other stakeholders, such as line management and employers.

Local grounding – HR managers and line managers

HR management distinguishes between the strategic reframing of the national policy in organizational policies and locally grounding them in practices, when they observe that the national policy might influence the organizational policy but not necessarily changes the local practices:

You can write down an incredibly attractive policy story of course, but if you don't follow it up properly, it does not make sense.

An important factor that seems to affect the local grounding is cooperation with line management. The success of the HR managers' efforts is strongly dependent on the collaboration of the line manager. As one HR manager explains:

The line management has certainly an important role in putting new policy aims into practice. You see, if they do a lousy job, you won't get them (the employees) back on the job.

Even when the HR manager fulfils the role of case manager, he or she needs the cooperation of the line manager. HR managers therefore attempt to install new routines in the organization, where the health issue is a regular topic in the contact between line manager and employee. For instance, HR managers propose a system of:

Regular deliberation between line managers and employees, where you try to put the issue (of sickness absence) on the agenda. This is not standard now, but it is an idea to take this up and to discuss the issue for a moment, even when there is no health problem.

The HR managers seek out procedures in which the line manager has a more prominent role. If the employee calls the office reporting illness:

HRM sends an e-mail to the line manager in requiring him to contact the ill worker. The line manager should ask the employee what's wrong, how long the absence will probably take, and whether work has to be handed over to others or whether they need support. The line manager gives the answers to HRM and I will consider if we have to do something or wait a while.

So far, these routines seem only partially grounded in the organizational practices, as demonstrated by the quotes below. HR managers often feel disappointed about the role of line management in the health practices. Asked whether the line manager was involved in sickness absence management, one HR manager states:

Not substantially. It is a fact that I give the line management the information, but they do not play an active role. This is a point I want to change in the organizational policy, because I really wish to achieve an active role of line managers.

Also, according to the HR managers, workers do not really notice a procedure that goes beyond control. The same HR manager, who replied that workers are asked if they want to have their work taken over by others during their absence, reveals:

We don't have the culture that when you report your illness, you will be replaced. Hence, when you report illness, the work is waiting for you. If you return after a period of sickness absence, your "old work package" is still there.

HR managers confirm that workers are usually not replaced during their absence, which implies that their workload – which is often an important part of the health problem – will mount up.

In summary, HR management often takes the initiative in sickness absence management, but remains largely dependent on the collaboration of the line management and employer to put its aims into practice. The danger of a mounting workload discourages workers from reporting absence, which decreases short-term absence rates but increases the risks for long-term absence.

Local grounding – professional and administrative personnel

Although the changes in national health policy are rhetorically framed to include all categories of employees, in our study the policy is only applied to administrative personnel, not professionals. The different position of the two groups of workers in relation to the health problem becomes apparent in the contrasting comments on the sickness absence among lawyers and secretaries. A skeptical attitude often prevails concerning sickness among administrative personnel (are they truly ill?), while disease among lawyers is seen as “real.” HR managers express the differences:

If they (the administrative personnel) are ill, people generally don't like it and they react with “I feel unwell sometimes, too” [...]. Hence, the general opinion is negative, while the sickness absence of a lawyer is always considered a real illness.

Yeah, we have been suspicious sometimes that a secretary wasn't really ill [...]. This is generally a problem with the administrative workers.

Part-timers (mainly administrative personnel) often get better on Thursday, in particular when they only work on Monday till Wednesday.

Implicitly, there is also a gender aspect in the different attitudes to ill workers, involving what is seen as masculine heroism in relation to illness. Men are generally viewed as strong, working until they become really sick, while women will take any opportunity to stay at home:

I think that men keep on going longer and, when they are ill, their illness is real and severe and they are knocked out for two weeks, while women return in two or three days.

[...] among the administrative personnel there are of course, many more women. Among lawyers, the numbers of men and women are fifty-fifty, so here the sickness absence is quite different.

Here, we observe that lawyers/men are not viewed as the problem in sickness absence management, even though they are absent for a longer period than the administrative personnel, who are women with short-term absenteeism. When we compare this reality to the aims of the policy, we can observe two contrasting aims that are not balanced here. In the national policy, the primary aim is to reduce long-term sickness absence; however, this problem is not at the heart of HR managers' perceptions or organizational practices. The policy's rhetorical focus on long-term absence is translated into a focus on short-term absence in organizational practice.

The organizations in our study have developed different practices in sickness absence management in line with the local views on the differences between the two groups of workers:

We have, of course, two different target groups, the lawyers and the non-lawyers. The non-lawyers have mainly short-term absenteeism and the lawyers are the ones with long-term absence.

This difference reflects the different work of the professionals and the administrative workers. The lawyers have their own clients and deadlines and if they take time off sick, their workload is higher the next day:

So it's simple: if they're not in the office today, everything will have to be done tomorrow. Short-term absence in particular is therefore very low among the lawyers, but the long-term absence is higher.

A lawyer will not report absence quickly, because the norm in the office is that you do not act like that. [...] usually a lawyer does not declare he's ill. As a consequence, the lawyers delay reporting their absence as long as possible, which means that it could take a long time to recover afterwards, because they go on for too long.

In summary, the local groundings of the national policy have been translated into new routines for improving controls on short-term absence. Contrary to the policy's aim, the local grounding works differently for professionals and administrative workers, and consequently one group is non-targeted: those who have the highest risks for long-term absenteeism.

Discussion and conclusions

This paper has examined the translation process of a national policy using an analytical framework based on three dimensions: individual preference, strategic reframing, and local grounding. Our study suggests that HR managers have interpreted the national policy from various perspectives, emphasizing on the one hand managerial control and cost reduction, and on the other a critical reading in stressing prevention of health problems by creating healthy organizations. However, in strategically reframing the policy, the organizations seem to act upon the new policy from a mainly managerialist perspective: they tend to focus on reducing absence through tougher controls, rather than solving problems in organizations such as work pressure or lack of autonomy that may adversely affect the health of workers. Hence, in a rhetorical sense, the translation of the national policy into HRM practices is framed as improving organizational performance, but in local terms these practices only partially address the health problem, interpreting it from a managerial perspective. The empirical material also shows how the focus on long-term absence in the national policy rhetoric is translated into a focus on short-term absence in the organizational practices, whereby only certain people or issues are identified as a health problem.

Our study contributes to the debate of HRM and the institutional environment by highlighting how a regulatory framework is enacted in the interplay between organizational stakeholders. In the translation process of the national policy, we noticed that a managerialist interpretation is not necessarily or merely an a priori preference of HRM. We have shown that the organizational HRM practices emerge in the relationship between different actors – national state/organization, HR managers/other stakeholders, and professionals/administrative workers. It is within this complex interplay of national policy aims and diverse local interpretations that new routines and practices in HRM are grounded. Our study showed that neither the aim of the policy nor the preferences of different stakeholders are realized in a straightforward manner. HR managers' suggestions of the policy being a radical change were "watered" down during the process through reframing and grounding in the organization. The broad range of possible interpretations of the institutional

context was narrowed down to limited adjustments in addressing a specific problem (short-term absence) and a specific group (lower skilled workers). This means that the discourses and relations which contextualize the process require further investigation to provide a foundation for discussing various strategies for HRM practices that focus on the prevention of illness through different forms of interventions (Quick *et al.*, 2007), rather than practices aiming at controlling ill employees.

While the various roles of HRM, e.g. advisor or administrator, often have been viewed as ideal models from which one can be picked as the most suitable to the individual preference (Caldwell, 2003; Ulrich and Beatty, 2001), our study demonstrates that in fact the room for making role choices depends largely on the situation. Both the institutional context demands and the preferences of other – often more powerful – stakeholders limit the possible strategic frames for HRM. This means that understanding HRM roles requires a contextual approach, underlining the importance of taking the institutional context into account (Paauwe, 2004). Furthermore, our study highlights that the institutional context is not only relevant in constraining strategic frames or HRM roles, but also in enabling and legitimizing certain HRM activities. This is revealed when the local grounding of the policy has unintended consequences. While the national or organizational policies do not make a distinction between different types of employees (e.g. professionals/administrative personnel, managers/workers, or men/women), the local grounding affected only one group of workers, a group among which long-term absence was not a major problem. The translation of the national policy for sickness absence management into organizational HRM practices thus divided the workforce into a trusted/professional/male group and a distrusted/administrative/female group. This implies that the management may actively use the national policy to legitimize and reinforce unequal relationships within organizations.

In the translation process, a balance between the various national and local perspectives, stakeholders' interests and preferences is not necessarily found or defined. We have demonstrated that changes in HRM policies and practices are ongoing social constructions (see also Bondarouk *et al.* (2009), this issue), where people actively make sense of the context and modify national institutional demands into practices within organizations. Our analysis shows that the role of the HR manager in forming organizational practices is not simply choosing between and implementing "given" policy frameworks or HRM roles, but making active interpretations. In the translation process, the HR managers' interpretations have to be balanced with the other stakeholders' perspectives and preferences. Our study explored that a more critical view of the HR managers is not dominant in this interplay. The translation process, however, does not only re-establish existing relationships between national, local and individual demands and preferences; it also may change these relationships by providing new meanings, rationalities and routines. Our study showed how the three dimensional framework can be effectively used to analyse the relationship between HRM and its institutional environment.

This study explored the translation process with serious limitations. The empirical research took place in a particular setting: a specific national policy and a small set of particular organizations. We examined the relationship between HRM and institutional context only from the HR managers' perspective. Although small and specific, we believe that our study has explored and illustrated the complexity of the relationship between HRM and its institutional environment. It would be fruitful to broaden the

scope to other institutional contexts and different type of organizations. Most of all, further research should include a diverse range of actors to develop additional knowledge of the interaction of various interests in the translation process.

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