# License to Practice: Reconsidering HR as a Profession, Role and a Function

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**Abstract**

This study was constructed through the lens of non-dual ontological and epistemological philosophies. It aimed to explore and analyse the attitudes, perceptions, debates, and insights around whether Human Resources (HR) is a role, function, or profession, in addition to critically examining the historical, cultural and process of professionalisation of HR. This research explored the perceptions, views, and life experiences of a range of social actors (HR practitioners, employees and managers) through a social constructivist lens influenced by a dominant phenomenological mode of constructing knowledge.

This qualitative study used life history instrument to collect data from forty-seven participants by combining convenience and purposeful sampling strategies, in addition to applying documentary evidence as a complementary method. Positioned as a reflexive insider, the life histories offered the opportunity to explore and advance an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives and perceptions of HR professional status as a lived experience in-depth and with flexibility by utilising their authentic voices.

The data, analysed thematically, revealed several key findings. Firstly, it was found that HR lacks a distinguishing feature of professional activities-licensing. This finding challenges the traditional view of HR as a profession. Secondly, the data suggested that HR can be defined as a professional role, as it occupies an advanced position in Greenwood's Professionalism Continuum based on 'know-how' rather than 'know-what'. Thirdly, the study found that the levels of professionalism among HR practitioners are influenced by their knowledge, seniority, and the nature of the HR roles assigned to them. Lastly, the data revealed that HR is developing a dynamic 'role-related' professional identity, where the HR practitioner's 'current self' influences the degree of self-identification.

Key Words: Non-dual Ontology, HR(M), Profession, Role, Identity, Attributes

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## Abbreviations

CIPD: The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

CISAM: Chartered Institute of Sales and Marketing

CoP: The Theory of Communities of Practice

CQC: Care Quality Commission

CSR: Corporate Social Responsibility

EAPM: European Association of People Management

EFL: English as a Foreign Language

ESL: English for Speakers of Other Languages

GMC: General Medical Council

HPC: Health Professions Council

HPWS: High-Performance Work System

HRM: Human Resource Management

IPD: The Institute of Personnel and Development

IPA: The Institute of Public Administration

LEO: The Lyons Electronic Office

NMC: Nursing and Midwifery Council

OECD: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

22. OFS: Office for National Statistics

SHRM: Strategic Human Resource Management

UNCTAD: United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

WBG: World Bank Group

WFPMA: World Federation of People Management Association

WWA: Welfare Workers' Association

# Chapter 1. Introduction: License to Practice: Reconsidering HR as a Profession, a Role, and a Function

## 1.1 Context and Focus.

There has recently been a rise in studying, categorising, and exploring occupations' professional statuses. Consequently, dividing economic activities into professional and non-professional and why some occupations are professionalised more than others remain an area of focus for sociologists who generally assume that professions retain distinctive features and attributes and are considered a social phenomenon. This researcher [1] believes that the professionalisation of an occupation can be described as a planned change in a particular social system. That said, professions take diverse and complex forms in structure and attributes. Yet, specific attributes must pertain to them to be recognised, regulated, and listed as professions.

'A profession is perceived as a strategy developed by skilled workers to consolidate and increase the social distance between themselves and their clients. Moreover, the success of this strategy is understood not in terms of the intrinsic worth of professional expertise or its functional contribution to social order. Rather, a successful profession depends upon social recognition and acceptance of the claims of professionals by powerful others and, in particular, their capacity to responsibly and reliably regulate the quality of their value (Willmott, 1986) .

License to practice is a crucial feature of well-established and regulated professions such as medicine, nursing, law, and teaching. Licensing, a distinctive feature that pertains to professions, creates a legal barrier between professions and occupations, grants legitimacy, and ensures that the monopoly of professional activities is protected by law. As a predefined feature of

[1] In the context of this study, the first person pronoun "I" or the term "this researcher" will be used to refer to myself.

professions, license to practice is a process by which a government body or a professional body authorised by the government grants individual practitioners the right to perform a particular role or function as well as restricting entry into practice by enforcing legal and administrative constraints (Kleiner, 2017).

Exploring the professional status of HR necessitated tracking the developments and the professionalisation processes that have taken place in Human Resource Management (HRM). As of the early stages, the personnel department's function was primarily operational and transactional. This included administering personnel policies that govern the relationship between employees and organisations relating to wages, leaves, absenteeism, bonuses, compensations, training, etc. Over time, particularly during the Industrial Revolution, personnel departments' evolution was influenced by the rise in labour unions, state legislations, and changes in social and political landscapes. This era was also associated with labour unions gaining more power as workforce representatives. This led personnel departments to gradually move to an industrial relations department and become more concerned with handling relationships between management and unions. However, many commentators, such as Gary (1994) and Huselid (2008), describe this development as the beginning of Human Resource Management (HRM).

Numerous commentators asserted that Human Resource Management differs from Personnel Management in philosophy and practices. Armstrong (2006a) and Strauss (2001) suggest the strategic nature of HRM and believe it is more concerned with aligning individual performance to organisational objectives rather than routinely managing day-to-day operations. In 2008, the term 'Professionalisation of HRM' came into existence when the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) launched the initiative of leadership with ethical standards termed 'The Ethical Capitalism' to develop a balanced approach to the complex relationship between organisations' economic goals and employees' interests.

The professionalisation of HRM continued gradually and calls to consider HR as a profession emerged and became popular among many commentators, including the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Management (CIPD). The development of HRM into a profession instead of a role and/or a function was associated with radical changes, including more alignment with business agenda and organisational objectives, devolving the operational side of HR to the line, partnering with businesses, and contributing to strategy formation. Thus, HRM has undergone rapid transformation in its philosophy and process in terms of its relationship with business and the image of the practice and implications this has had on employees' work approach and work-related behaviours.

'HR must become more professional', this bold statement was made by Ulrich, a well-known HR scholar and Eichinger in 1998. At that time, Ulrich contended that to achieve this ambition, HR needs to structure a body of knowledge, set performance and entry standards, and develop a strong professional identity and code of conduct. Then, developments accelerated in HR practices and applications, which were led mainly by the CIPD and HR theorists, including Ulrich, who theoretically contributed to the processes of professionalisation. Hence, investigating the professional status of HR necessitated exploring the conceptual complexities of the terms profession, professionalism, and professional identity without neglecting the importance of HR practitioners and their counterparts' perspectives and perceptions.

## 1.2 The Research Objectives.

This study aims to explore the attitudes, perceptions, debates, and insights regarding whether HR is a role, function, or profession, in addition to critically reviewing the historical, cultural and process of Professionalisation of Human Resource Management.

This study aimed to hear and record the unheard voices of HR practitioners and non-HR participants (employees and managers), explore their perspectives on HR status, and identify the factors that influence their perceptions.

This study also aimed to critically review HR's professional status in relation to the distinguishing features and attributes that pertain to recognised professions, particularly licensing of professional activity. Further, the study also aims to examine the elements of professionalism and the components of HR professional identity.

### 1.3 Research Questions.

This research aimed to address the following questions:

Q1: From the perspectives of a range of stakeholders, how do they construct the meaning of HRM/D as a profession?

Q2: Investigate and formulate the perceptions of how practitioners, society, and employers influence the professional status of HRM/D. Why do they present these perceptions of HRM/D as a Profession?

Q3: Create and assemble the factors that determine the professional status of HRM/D. Why do these factors influence the construction of HRM/D professional identity?

Q4: Explore the conjecture within the extant literature regarding HRM/D being considered a Profession, a role, or a function. Is HRM/D a role, a function, or a profession? What elements of professionalism influence their professional practice?

### 1.4 The Research Originality and Contributions.

The research represented several methodological, theoretical and practical contributions to human resource management.

Methodologically, this research offered information to fill the knowledge gap in understanding the professional status of Human Resource Management (HRM) from a non-dual ontological lens, also known as subject-object nonduality and used by historians. This philosophy aims to solve the problem of interpreting one ultimate reality differently. To the best of this researcher's knowledge, no previous work has investigated the nature of HRM as a profession or the true reality of the practice. Existing studies have mostly examined HR as an ‘actual being’ or ‘given reality’, as evidenced by publications by Dave Ulrich, a renowned HR thinker and scholar, and some professional organisations such as the CIPD. This study, however, went further in revealing the ‘Modes of HRM Being a Profession’. It gathered subjective accounts of life history and analysed views from sociologists who objectively determined the nature of things based on their structure and characteristics.

Moreover, applying a descriptive phenomenological lens to analyse the misperception of HR professionals' status and the contradicting realities can be considered a methodological contribution to the field of study. This philosophical stance has provided valuable insights into how HR professionals perceive their practice and the meanings they attach to themselves as professionals. It has allowed me to examine the life history of participants' inner reality and perception of HR, using their subjective personal accounts to understand how they constructed their assumed reality of HR. This approach has facilitated an exploration of the relationship between the various perspectives - of the life history participants and those who have experienced it - and the one assumed reality of HR as sociologists perceive. Furthermore, the phenomenological view can reveal complexities around HR professional identity as experienced by the life history participants, as opposed to sociologists' perspectives on the dynamic nature and components of professional identity. Relatedly, when adopted, this philosophy can be a valuable tool in identifying the existing realities. It is particularly effective in distinguishing between the perceptions of reality that are naïve and the actual ones. Doing so provides a better understanding of how these different realities are constructed.

Applying the life history data collection method offered a unique and insightful approach to understanding how HR professionals perceive their practice as a lived experience. This qualitative data collection method provided an opportunity to delve into their authentic voices and gain a deeper comprehension of participants' perceptions of HR professional status. This approach offered valuable insights into whether participants' perceptions and assumptions reflect reality and whether there are one or multiple realities concerning the HR mode of being. Most importantly, life histories give HR practitioners a platform to express their professional identity and its various components. It allows them to narrate their personal experiences and provide a better understanding of their professional identity. Additionally, the life history data collection method can be particularly pertinent when analysing individuals' lived experiences using their authentic voices, as it enables qualitative researchers better to understand participants' perspectives, beliefs, and perceptions.

Investigating HR reality and HR professionals' modes of knowledge regarding professional status can be considered a theoretical contribution. To illustrate, this study identified that conceptualising and categorising HR as a profession is built upon rationally naïve perceptions. It does not represent the nature of HR and its mode of being as a profession or ‘the actual reality of HR’. Thus, this study attempted to define the reality of HR by applying structural and attributional defining features to the practice similar to those applied by the work sociologists in their attributes and power approaches to professions. These structural and attributional features form HR as a concept and make sense of its existence as an objective reality or a practice within the broad management field. In essence, HR as an experienced concept and lived practice, at least among this research community/participants, is formed, according to the data obtained through life histories, through three processes: perceiving, considering (i.e., a knowledge-based), and then categorising the practice as a profession. By looking at these three processes, it becomes apparent that the concept-forming process among the HR community and the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) as a representative body lacked the element of ‘evaluating’ as a deciding factor that leads to correctly categorising and conceptualising HR. Proposing an ‘Evaluation-centred approach’ to HR is supposed to provide a knowledge-based framework built upon identifying HR structural and attributional features (i.e., Knowledge construct) before categorising and deciding the nature of the activity and whether HR is a profession or not. Theoretically, this could advance learning and understanding within the practice based on HR’s reality identification as a professional role.

This study makes a theoretical contribution (i.e., with a practical dimension) by conceptualising HR as a professional role. This researcher argues that HR can be categorised as a professional role as it occupies an advanced position in 'Greenwood's professionalism continuum' and 'Larson's Pyramid of Prestige' (see Chapter 2, section 2.1.3). This claim can be supported theoretically based on the sociologists' perspective of professionalism attributes approach and practically based on HR practitioners' expertise and role-related attributes. The data collected also supports this assumption, as HR participants clearly understood their roles and the professional attributes and competencies associated with their specific roles, whether administrative or strategic. Therefore, the researcher suggests conceptualising HR as a role starts with a practitioner's self-awareness of HR as a practice within a given organisation. This practice awareness should be based on clarity of HR unit purpose, whether operational, strategic or a combination of both (see Hard and Soft approaches to HRM, section 3.4.2), the hosting organisation's structure, culture, and objectives, and practitioners' ability to meet the expected outcome. Unlike the CIPD's profession map, the purpose should be process-led rather than principle-led. This approach encourages practitioners to use their practical wisdom, professional behaviour and situational judgment in decision-making, especially during change.

Practically, it could be highly advantageous for HR practitioners to recognise the professional nature of their roles. Doing so allows them to comprehend better their responsibilities and the specific attitudes, behaviours, and actions necessary to present themselves as professionals. As a result, the value of their services is enhanced for both employees and organisations, besides ensuring the highest level of expected outcomes. To achieve this level of professionalism, HR practitioners and the CIPD must shift their focus from simply marketing HR as a profession to improving the quality of the services they provide and increasing employee productivity. By investing in people, HR professionals can enhance the effectiveness of their organisations and make a more meaningful contribution to the success of their businesses.

### 1.5 Summary of Previous Research.

The literature review aimed to gain insight into the concepts of profession, professionalism, and professional identity, identify gaps in existing knowledge, and explore the HRM professionalisation process.

The literature review is structured into two conceptual and contextual chapters to bridge and integrate two different disciplines, sociology and HRM. The conceptual chapter is informed by sociologist perspectives and lays the study's theoretical foundation, by critically analysing the concepts of professions, professionalism and professional identity, in addition to the approaches adopted by sociologists to define regulated professions. This chapter facilitated an understanding of HRM modes of being and attributes of it as a non-regulated profession. To situate the research and provide the context for the study, the second chapter focused more on PM and HRM. Tracking developments aided in understanding of the evolving nature of the HRM and identified the role of the social actors, including sociologists, government agencies and the CIPD. Although they all contributed to HRM professionalisation processes, the role of CIPD is considered the most significant.

The literature review involved critically reviewing academic articles and textbooks on these subjects to help construct knowledge, as this researcher adopted a social constructionist philosophical stance. The process of knowledge construction provided this researcher with a detailed understanding of the complexities around defining the concept of the profession, the features of professions, semi-professions, professionalism, and professional identity, which will be later applied to how HR is developed and transformed. From a philosophical standpoint, the knowledge and theoretical experience gained from the literature review stage were well-seated and existed when this researcher qualitatively investigated participants' perceptions of HR professional status at a later stage.

This research adopted a sociological approach to investigating these concepts of professions, professionalisation and professional identity, as the study of work, occupation analysis, and economic institutions are major parts of sociology. In fact, Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim can be regarded as the first social theorists who influenced the radical changes in personnel management practices. Furthermore, in the fields of sociology of work and industrial sociology, the study of occupations, professions, and professionalisation processes is highly significant. Diverse methods and theoretical perspectives distinguish professional activities from non-professional ones. This analysis is pertinent for comprehending the dynamics of the evolution of different professions. By examining the attributes and characteristics of professions, researchers can identify the factors that elevate some activities to the status of a profession as well as reconsider what is perceived to be a profession, such as the case of HR.

Commentators have used the sociology of work and industrial sociology to conceptualise professions, employing different theoretical orientations and positions. Some commentators have sought to differentiate between professions, such as doctors and carpenters, lawyers and autoworkers, while others have tried to understand why specific individuals are labelled as professionals and not others (Wilensky, 1964; Yee, 2001). For instance, Willmott (1986) viewed the profession as a label used by skilled individuals to distance themselves from the public based on their knowledge, expertise, and monopoly over the role or service they provide. However, little attention has been given to fundamental aspects, such as what it means to be a professional within a profession or how professionals define themselves and perceive their professional identities.

Beyond these naïve attempts to conceptualise professions, the attributes, power and functionalism approaches remain dominants in sociology. As contended by Hall (1984) and Macdonald (1995, pp.2–4), these approaches not only differ in their definition of the profession but also in their methods of analysis and their explanation as to why some occupations have evolved and professionalised while others have not and why some professions are more professionalised than others. However, this study pays particular attention to the attribute approach combined with elements from the power approach, such as licence and occupational closure. In fact, this researcher argues that even licencing and occupational closure is also included in the attribute approach as two fundamental features of professional activity and cited by Greenwood in his paper 'Attributes of Professions', which was published in 1957. Greenwood stated that ''every profession strives to persuade the community to sanction its monopoly' (Greenwood, 1957a, p.47). In his paper, Greenwood has laid the theoretical foundation for the attribute approach to the profession by defining it as a social phenomenon and structured group of individuals that distinguish itself by possessing professional knowledge, formal education, extensive training and the overall systematic body of theory that grant professionals a discriminative power and monopoly of judgment when interacting with others as well as his argument that a profession has control over its accreditation process, granting and withholding accreditation. Greenwood emphasises power, monopoly and professional control over the activity; however, other sociologists, such as Roth (1974), were particularly critical of Greenwood's work on professional authority. She argued that Greenwood's monopoly and control attributes were primarily a 'mixture of unproven' and 'unexamined claims' for professional control and autonomy. Roth also contended that sociologists' approach to the profession's attributes is based on their profession's required attributes rather than those common in most professions. This is despite Greenwood's explanation that his five attributes are not the exclusive monopoly of a particular profession thus, nonprofessional occupations can also possess them, but to different degrees; as such, he viewed his five professional attributes as quantitative rather than qualitative (Greenwood, 1957a, p.46). Schmidt and McArthur (2018) were also concerned about Greenwood's emphasis on control and professional power, which led him to introduce the behavioural continuum as a means by which professional values are defined, enforced, and observed. It is, however, essential to note that Greenwood, when illustrating the professional-client relationship, stressed that professional discriminating capacity is not ‘limitless’ but rather is governed by professional knowledge and guided by extensive formal and informal education to fulfil broader social goals (Greenwood, 1957a, pp.47–48). That being the case, this researcher's focus on Greenwood’s attributes framework for professions stemmed from its unique inclusion. In fact, it integrated elements from both the functionalism and power approaches. These elements include licensing, occupational closure and the structural features of professions.

Shaman's (1988) work delved into the distinctions between professions and occupational groups, emphasising the crucial link between a profession's purpose and its "moral claim." Throughout his analysis, he emphasised the essential qualities of professionalism, including morality and the sense of duty to serve the public. In essence, his work aimed to establish a clear connection between profession and professionalism. Evetts (2013) detailed how the normative value system can shape professions and descriptively analysed the nation-state's role in legitimising professional activities through licensing. Similarly, Timmons and Robinson (2018) focussed on professions’ attributes, asserting that licensing is a determinant factor in any professional activity besides other features such as formal education and training, professional knowledge, specific skill set, social recognition, monopoly power and entry requirements to exclude incompetent individuals and to ensure high service quality output. Previous research also focused on semi-professions, or the occupations that have some, but not all professions’ attributes; however, the sociologists’ debate on semi-professions revolved around the ‘Continuum of Professionalism’ an expression used by Greenwood in 1957, where he claimed that all economic activities are positioned in a continuum, at one end is the undisputed profession such as medicine and law which possess the maximum degree of professionalism, and at the far end is the occupation with the least degree of professionalism as well as minimum profession characteristics (Greenwood, 1957a; Welbourne, 2009).

The literature on professions revealed that commentators such as Münte and Scheid, (2017), Franco-Santos and Gomez-Mejira (2015), Urban (2009a) and others mainly focused on the characteristics that differentiate professions from occupations. However, their perspective often disregarded the broader context, which involves considering a profession as a distinct product of its social, economic, and political environment. As a result, professions emerge, evolve, adjust, and operate in the context in which they exist. Frost (2009) He used a similar approach when illustrating the term ‘Material Reality’ to describe the influence of socioeconomic, technological, and political factors on professional activities. However, uncertainty engulfed his philosophical standpoint towards professions, as further inquiry in this domain is of significance to professionalisation processes.

A potential gap is the lack of research on the growing influence of social actors in reforming professional activities and professionalisation processes. These social actors include service users, whose expectations and ratings have now become a significant factor in evaluating the services provided by professionals. Their ratings can range from the evaluation of the quality of services provided to the assessment of experts' level of knowledge and expertise. Apart from this, there has been a rise in the emergence of external sources of power, which act as ethical guardians and service evaluators. These sources of power include institutions such as the Care Quality Commission (CQC) and the Ombudsman in the UK. They play a vital role in evaluating the value of services provided by professionals. They can sometimes impose changes in professional activity in a role similar to that of nation-states.

In 1969, Richard advanced Greenwood's attribute approach by offering a more refined comprehension of the characteristics that distinguish a profession. He categorised these attributes into two types - attitudinal and structural. Attitudinal attributes pertain to the personal traits of a professional, including their values and beliefs. Conversely, structural attributes are more closely tied to the profession itself, encompassing its education and training prerequisites. Richard's perspective reinforces the previous assumption that professionals possess exceptional and distinctive attributes, which Greenwood labelled as the professional power (Greenwood, 1957a; Richard, 1969). Sciulli (2007) proposed a set of attributes that define professions to develop a sound theoretical framework for the attribute approach. These attributes include theoretical knowledge, comprehensive education, different forms of control, collegiality, adherence to ethical codes, work for the common good, discretion, and autonomy. The objective was to establish a standard set of attributes that define professions with clarity. However, all of these attempts are an expansion of Greenwood's attributes framework.

The literature on professionalism mainly focuses on identifying the attitudinal side of the concept, which is similar to the attributes approach to conceptualising the profession (Hatem, 2003; Pattison, 2004; Poorchangizi et al., 2019). In fact, profession and professionalism are closely interrelated concepts to the extent that each can influence the other (i.e., professionalism in medicine can differ from teaching based on the profession's characteristics.) Measuring the degree of professionalism remains a grey area. It is under-researched, perhaps because of the qualitative and dynamic nature of professionalism's attributes, its association with human behaviour (professionals), and the self-interpretation of values. That said, this researcher suggests a new line of inquiry that investigates the possibility of applying the tools (i.e., measuring the degree of professionalism) used in medicine in other fields, including management. In the medical field, systematic methods were developed to observe professionals' behaviour through self-evaluation or by analysing physicians' duties on an individual basis and translating these into measurable behaviour, then assessing the development and changes in professionals' behaviour over time (Gauger et al., 2005; Jarvis-Selinger, Pratt and Regehr, 2012). Moreover, the literature on professionalism has mainly provided definitions on a micro-level scope, where the focus is centred on the organisational level or how a professional acts and behaves professionally in his/her own professional practice and how each profession requires attributes and behaviours that are based on the nature of its professional activities or as stated by Azer (2005) the concept of professionalism was developed 'by lawyers for Lawyers' (Balthazard, 2014). Hence, It would be advantageous to investigate professionalism on a broader scale, including what distinguishes a particular behaviour as a professional in one field and not in another and how this may affect a professional's sense of self and identity. For example, empathic communication may be seen as desirable professional behaviour in nursing, but it could be deemed unprofessional in other professions (Babaii, Mohammadi and Sadooghiasl, 2021).

The analysis of different perspectives on professionalism has shown that some critical aspects related to maintaining professionalism, self-observation, and updating competencies have been overlooked. The COVID-19 pandemic has shed new light on the previous understanding of professionalism and professional practices on both the micro and macro levels. For example, the closure of schools and universities has had a direct impact on teaching practices and the behaviour of professionals, highlighting the importance of certain attributes and qualities such as technical skills, virtual learning methods, teachers' knowledge of online teaching techniques, and their ability to monitor their own performance, adapt to new situations, and identify their learning and training needs. The medical field also provides another example of the need for certain professional attributes, such as social responsibility, the ability to participate in decision-making, and the ability to work in partnership with non-medical agencies to facilitate the delivery of services. It is worth noting that Coulehan and others, in a study conducted in 2003, emphasised the importance of social responsibility as a crucial attribute of medical professionalism (Coulehan, P. C. Williams et al., 2003). However, their discussion was mainly concerned with social and economic issues facing medical professionals in general, with little consideration given to how these factors would impact medicine as a professional activity on a collective level.

Professional identity formation is a relatively new field in sociology that has drawn attention across several disciplines, including management. The nature and scope of the study necessitated exploring how professional identity is perceived and constructed due to its direct impact on the HR professionalisation process, professionals' behaviour and their self-concept. According to Cruess et al. (2015) , professional identity formation is a complex and ever-evolving process shaped by a range of factors stemming from interactions with others. Professionals respond to these factors in distinct ways, leading to diverse identity expressions. Vivekananda-Schmidt and others echo this sentiment, noting that professional identity involves redefining norms, values, and attributes. Meanwhile, Chen and Reay (2021) emphasises that professional identity construction commences with an individual's self-identification as a profession member and subsequent involvement in a professional role. Jarvis-Selinger et al. (2012) add that identity formation occurs at both a collective and individual level.

In its contextual chapter, this study tracked the developments of HRM and the waves of change that HR practice has experienced and is currently experiencing. This researcher argues that investigating HR professional status and identifying its actual reality necessitates exploring historical developments, defining the factors that influence HR, and evaluating HR professional practices from theoretical and organisational perspectives.

HRM has continuously developed and evolved throughout history. Several commentators Strauss (2001) and Armstrong  (cited in Osibanjo and Adeniji, 2012, p. 5) have tracked the evolution of HRM and claimed that it is just a new form of old personnel management. However, Eilbirt (2012a) contend that the Factories Act of 1933 led to the first form of personnel management as a department tasked with enforcing the new government legislation that aimed to improve work conditions and regulate working hours, as well as appointing inspectors to enforce known as welfare secretaries (Ahammad, 2017a).

Tubey et al. (2015), Hall and Torrington (1998) suggested that PM, in its early stages, was primarily concerned with day-to-day operations and industrial relations, besides staffing issues and complications associated with mass production. However, this researcher may argue that most, if not all, literature that analysed PM developments during this period was descriptive and focused on PM historical changes, change drivers, and the operational function of personnel management. Added to, the same literature showed that PM was mainly operations-focused, reactive, and bureaucratic (Mujahid et al., 2014).

Reviewing the literature on the early personnel management professionalisation processes revealed that most of the early developments in the practice occurred as a response to external factors such as mass production, the social theories influence, and government legislation (Ahammad, 2017a; Hall and Torrington, 1998; Tubey, Rotich and Kurgat, 2015). These influential factors not only focused public and organisations' attention on personnel management practices but also defined it as a function that was established to ensure employees' productivity and maximum financial success for organisations. In fact, sociologists have mainly led the first wave of change. To illustrate, the scientific management development by F W Taylor, Dunlop Systems Model, and the Weberian bureaucratic management collectively laid the theoretical foundation that guided the personnel management functional activities (see Chapter 3. Section 3.2.1).

In a later stage, the evolution HRM, a term emerged in the 1980s, captured commentators' attention as a new wave of change and replacement of personnel management (PM). Commentators such as Legge (1989), Martell and Carrol (1995a), Ulrich and Conner (1996) devoted their efforts to studying the nature of the change, the nature of HR, debating the strategic focus of HRM and arguing the need for reinventing HRM by expanding its domain beyond the traditional operations and transactional role to achieve effectiveness and add value to organisations.

Over the years HRM has undergone a significant transformation towards professionalization. The CIPD has been one of the leading voices in advocating for HR to be recognized as a profession. This shift has brought about substantial changes in the field, including aligning HR with business objectives, delegating HR operations to the line, forming strategic partnerships with businesses, and contributing to the development of strategies. As a result, HRM has evolved both in philosophy and process, impacting not only its relationship with businesses but also its influence on the work methods and behaviours of employees.

Different literature viewed the current wave of change in HR from a practice to a profession as a major shift that impacts not only HR's role and function but also practitioners and organisations. Many commentators contributed to this discussion, and some of them offered detailed views of HR professionalisation by linking its processes with organisations' effectiveness, such as Ulrich and Dulebohn (2015) and Mitchell et al. (2013). However, others, such as Tubey et al. (2015), focus on factors that influence the processes of professionalisation, including economic, environmental, social and technological advancement. Furthermore, the CIPD enriched the literature and practice when it introduced 'The CIPD 2018 Profession Map', which is mainly based on a mixture of models, frameworks, and research findings such as those published by Ulrich, Richm, Anderson and Nowak. The literature and the recent CIPD profession map attempted to provide a general framework for professionalisation, consisting of knowledge of business and practice, shared values, behaviour, decision-making mechanisms, etc.

### 1.6 Rationale Behind This Study.

This study aimed to explore the attitudes, perceptions, debates, and insights in terms of whether HR is a role, function, or profession, in addition to critically reviewing the historical, cultural and process of Professionalisation of Human Resource Management.

There has recently been a rise in exploring occupations' structure and dividing economic activities into professional and non-professional, as well as why some occupations are professionalised more than others. Human resources (HR) as a practice has witnessed several structural changes influenced by either external macro factors or imposed by social actors such as the CIPD. What is known as the professionalisation of HR has accelerated recently and reached it is peak by claiming that HR is a profession. This researcher argues that defining HR modes of being or the actual reality of the practice is significant to both practitioners and their internal and external stakeholders. As such, this necessitated investigating the unheard voices of HR practitioners, employees and managers, exploring their perspectives and defining the factors that influence their perceptions of HR professional status and what they think of HR. Participants' authentic accounts, complemented by the CIPD perspective of the HR professionalisation process, lead to well-informed and reliable findings on what constitutes the perceived reality of HR. This cannot be done without considering another well-established and opposite reality constructed through the sociologists' attributes and functionalism lenses and their non-dual assumption of what forms a profession.

Within both the attributes and functionalism perspectives of the professions, licencing serves as a determinant factor that distinguishes between professional and non-professional activities. However, exploring the participants' epistemological mode of knowledge of what qualifies HR to be recognised as a profession is vital and can be considered a learning opportunity. Defining the actual reality of HR will enable practitioners to understand their role better and articulate their identity and what is expected from them as professionals. At an organisational (i.e., the CIPD) level, defining HR reality can either pave the road towards a more professional role or alter the focus and change the direction of the practice. Furthermore, gaining insights into how non-HR (employees and managers) perceive HR's professional status is crucial for HR's continuous improvement journey. Understanding the perspective of other internal stakeholders towards HR can help identify its strengths and weaknesses, pinpoint areas that require improvement, and modify its professionalisation strategies accordingly. This can also assist HR in aligning its objectives with those of other business units, thereby improving its service to the organisation.

### 1.7 Research Methodology and Data Collection Methods.

This study's nondual ontological and epistemological assumptions are applied through social constructionism with a dominant phenomenographic view. This researcher acknowledges that this philosophical stance has grounded the qualitative approach, the questions, the aims and the data collection methods.

The qualitative inquiry was systematically conducted to reveal whether HR is a role, a function, or a profession by exploring certain elements that determine the nature and features of professions, such as licensing and whether these determinant elements apply to HR. According to Aspers and Corte (2019) explanation: The qualitative approach, commonly referred to as the human instrument approach, presents an exceptional opportunity for researchers to investigate human attitudes and perceptions. This approach is especially fitting for the selected data collection method, as it depends on humans as the primary data source. Using this approach, this researcher can better understand how participants experience and perceive HR.

As the study aims to explore the attitudes, perceptions, debates, and insights regarding whether HR is a role, a function, or a profession, life histories were used to collect primary data. The semi-structured life history consisted of five open-ended questions to establish the foundation for more in-depth answers. The first and the second questions are generally broad and intended to put participants at ease and encourage them to engage in the conversation. The third, fourth, fifth and sixth questions are intended to obtain detailed answers to the research-specific questions. This study recruited two groups of HR practitioners (Group 1) and employees and managers (Group 2). Two non-probability sampling methods were utilised in this study. Convenience sampling was employed to gather data from readily available participants, regardless of location or gender. Moreover, purposeful sampling was implemented to gain a thorough and nuanced comprehension of the phenomenon under investigation from the participants' personal and distinctive perspectives.

The epistemological assumptions of this study assumed the possibility of HR professional status being a subjective reality. Thus, this assumption necessitates exploring how this reality is perceived by a wider and relevant community, besides revealing and examining whether any census on the reality of HR or what exists.

Thematic analysis, facilitated by NVivo 12, a software suitable for qualitative data, was the chosen method. During data analysis, I assumed the role of an 'insider' and maintained a reflexive stance. This 'insider' perspective was derived from my involvement in developing the life history questions and engaging in continuous dialogue with participants' transcripts/accounts, as well as my previous experience as an HR trainee at Newcastle City Council. The phenomenographic view is inherently linked with the 'insider' stance, as Crowther and Thomson (2020) argue that this perspective arises through dialogue with interviewees and participants, the texts read, and professional or theoretical experience.

Being an insider researcher necessitated deep reflection, which I used to convert my two-year experience as an HR into a learning journey. Believing in numbers and viewing my surroundings through a positivist lens was me, or so I thought. But sudden changes can unveil the essence of things, like boiling water; returning it to its elemental form, steam. Moving to the UK exposed me to an unfamiliar way of life, culture, language, and perspectives. This shift provided a chance for questioning and reflecting; it allowed me to rediscover my reflexive nature and fascination with human differences. Perhaps the support, care, and kindness I received upon arriving in the UK have influenced how I viewed HR. I believed its purpose was to support and develop employees and fight for them. Yet I questioned whether this was the real reality. What exactly is HR? Does it serve ‘us’ or ‘them’? Is it focused on people or procedure?

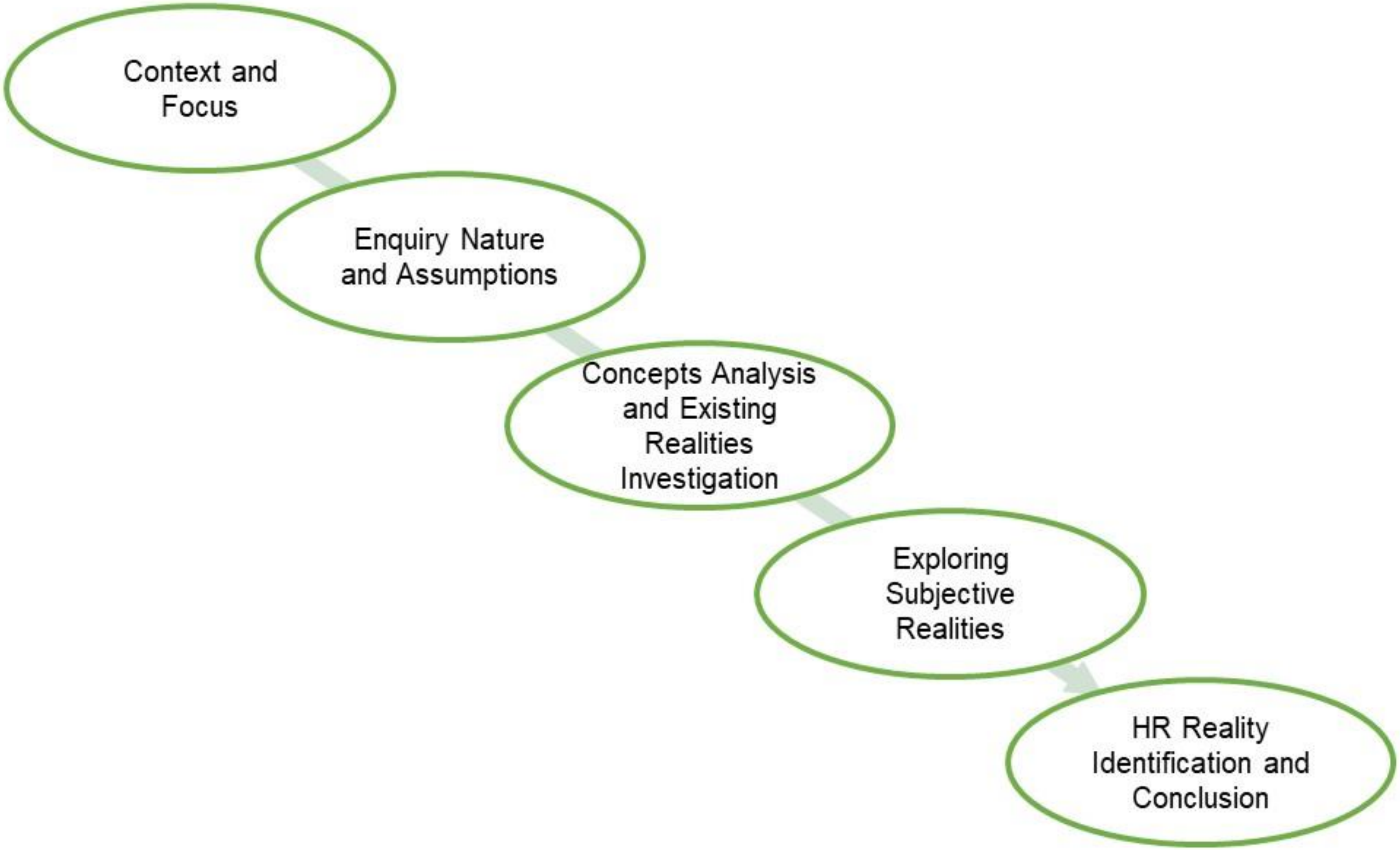
I recall a terminated colleague returning his badge; when I asked about his next steps, his response was loaded with sadness and uncertainty, 'I really don’t know.' Guilt washed over me. My pre-reflection on HR was perhaps influenced by guilt and the aspects I wished to forget, yet they persisted in my memory. They are those who always tell me, ‘You are not shortlisted; they keep an eye on you, discipline and terminate. These preoccupied my thoughts. However, I acknowledge this wasn't just; the diverse perspectives and perceptions of HR deserve exploration, consideration, analysis, and respect.

Separating the pre-reflection assumptions from reflection when analysing participants' views and experiences proved an ongoing struggle and a responsibility test. It was a continuous battle to determine what was ethical and what was not, what was objective and subjective. Thus, preserving authenticity in interpreting participants' experiences and being ethically responsible became my paramount concern, guiding me through bends of subjectivity, negativity, and biased opinions. I continually reassessed my prior beliefs, revisited research ethics and best practices, engaged in self-observation, and sought guidance and advice from the study's director. To the utmost of my ability, This has been done to ensure that the analysis accurately reflects and interprets the participants' perspectives.

This study also used documentary evidence as a complementary method besides life history to investigate the professional status of HR and the professionalisation processes from an organisational or the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) perspective. This researcher considers the CIPD to be both a social actor and a representative body for HR professionals. Documentary evidence is a comprehensive approach that involves evaluating various documents, including written CIPD reports, the CIPD Profession Map, and other secondary data, along with direct quotes from the CIPD officials, to extract meaningful information and insights into the research topic. However, it's essential to differentiate between using the CIPD documents as sources and as the object of study. In the first case (intended by this researcher), the CIPD documents are seen as factual or contextual sources. They can reveal the interests and intentions of the CIPD and provide insights into its perspective of HR and HR-related professionalisation initiatives (intended approach). In the second case, documents are viewed as meaningful social products or cultural artefacts that have independent consequences and are worth analysing for their own sake (unintended approach) as illustrated by Karppinen and Moe (2019). The researcher's philosophical perspective on the study of human experience, knowledge acquisition and beliefs coincides with the method of documentary evidence. As explained by Chanda (2021) this method aims to interpret the document's meaning, both on its surface and beneath.

## 1.8 The Research Framework: An Overview of the Design.

Figure 1. Research Design



### 1.8.1 Context and Focus.

This study focused on investigating the professional status of human resources (HR) by capturing the perspectives of HR practitioners, employees, and managers. It also analysed their views on HR and identified the various factors that shape their perceptions.

### 1.8.2 Enquiry Nature and Assumptions.

The exploratory aspect of this research is characterised as investigative, involving a qualitative inquiry that systematically examines HR's professionalisation and the complexities involved in comprehending its actual reality or modes of being. Furthermore, the study also aimed at defining elements (i.e., licensing) that contribute to characterising the actual reality of HR and whether it is a profession, a role, or a function. This study does not seek to challenge the beliefs and perceptions of participants but rather to attentively hear, record and analyse their views and notions.

### 1.8.3 Concepts Analysis and Existing Realities Investigation.

Taking a sociological approach, this phase entailed a thorough examination of the notions of profession, professionalism, and professional identity. This involved pinpointing areas within current knowledge where there are gaps, in addition to, human resources management (HRM) developments and professionalisation processes. Throughout this phase of the research, the sociologists' assumption of a profession was explored while focusing on the object (profession) attributes and functional modes of being.

### 1.8.4 Exploring Subjective Realities.

Life history has been conducted to gain insights into participants' perceptions of HR professional status as a lived experience. In addition, it unfolds whether their perceptions of HR are to be 'the actual reality' and answers the questions of what exists. Is it one reality or multiple realities?

### 1.8.5 Reality Identification and Conclusion.

This involves revealing HR professional status and its actual being, whether it is a role, a function, or a profession.

# Chapter 2. Presenting Professions, Professionalism and Professional Identity.

## 2.1 Introduction.

This chapter presents the professions framework and highlights how professions have been viewed from different perspectives, particularly by sociologists. It also investigates how the term ‘’Profession’’ has been approached and what distinguishes professions from occupations. This section also explored the debate around the term ‘semi-profession’ and the distinction between a profession, a semi-profession, and an occupation. The second section investigated sociologists’ perspectives on professionalism, professional attributes, and how the concept is perceived and practised. In its last section, the chapter discussed the term professional identity and how the term can be defined using Walker and Avant’s concept analysis model. The section also discusses the sociological approaches to professional identity and the different types and levels. Lastly, the chapter investigates the process of professional identity formation and its components by focusing on reflection, professional knowledge and practical wisdom besides professional identity authentication.

## 2.2 The Sociology of Work and Industrial Sociology.

The sociology of work and industrial sociology is regarded as reputable sociological sub-fields in Europe and the United States. Unlike the industrial sociology discipline, which is concerned with analysing industrialisation processes’ impacts on societies, unionisation, and formal and informal social relations in the economy or work organisations (Bamidele and Okafor, 2016; Edwards, 2014a, p.3), the sociology of work, As stated by Rodeheaver and Zafirovski (2017) typically focuses on what they termed ‘gainful employment’ or paid occupations, occupations and professions attributes and careers path, work dimensions and social contexts.

Table 1. A comparison between industrial sociology and the sociology of work

| The Discipline | The Scope |
|---|---|
| **The Sociology of Work** | Analysis of waged work characteristics and attributes, including viewing waged work as a social structure.<br>Career path<br>Organisational features, employees' control of work processes, and monopoly over certain economic activities in addition to institutional membership<br>Demarking and analysing differences between professional work 'white-collar' and non-professional 'blue-collar'.<br>Occupations and professions' structure and the featural changes influenced by technological advancement (e.g., waged- work to post-work society) |
| **The Industrial Sociology** | Views paid occupations as a formal structure or social system influenced by macro factors, technological (e.g., computerisation), economics, political and legal.<br>The impact of macro factors (e.g., Technological, political, etc.) on formal and informal workplace relations<br>Division of labour, occupations' structure types, professionalisation, and the structural changes in industrial communities,<br>Work organisation and exclusivity or social closure, including economic activities entry requirements.<br>Social change and social relationships, either formal or informal<br>Wok values and distribution of power and control<br>Gender and work.<br>Systems relations such as the links between industrial systems and societies (e.g., factory system vs. family system). |

Adapted from: Laaser, (2022); Thompson and Smith, (2009); Watson, (2017, p.220); Rodeheaver and Zafirovski, (2017); and Halford and Strangleman, (2009).

## 2.3 The Sociology of Professions.

The first step in any analysis is defining the subject matter. In the case of professions and occupations, many definitions are available, as numerous studies, mainly by sociologists, have investigated occupations, professions, and the differences in addition to the process of professionalisation by which an occupation can be recognised as a professional activity (Thomas Brante, 1988; Frost, 2009; Larson, 2018; Yee, 2001).

Both sub-disciplines, the sociology of work and industrial sociology of work, shared an interest in analysing occupations and professions. As contended earlier, industrial sociologists define occupations as a formal structure and social systems influenced and shaped by macro factors such as technological advancement, political system, legal and institutional, and economic landscape (Bamidele and Okafor, 2016; Edwards, 2014a). By the same token, work sociologists perceive waged work as a social structure and show more interest in occupations' characteristics, attributes and featural changes, particularly the changes influenced by the evolution of technology. However, it is evident that sociologists from both sides are attentive to the division of labour, occupation categories and types, and the process by which some occupations become more specialised or, in other words, the professionalisation processes (see; table 1)

### 2.3.1 The Concept of Profession.

Throughout the 20th century, the profession concept has developed and was used within social science, primarily in sociology. According to sociologists such as Sundin and Hedman (2005), a profession should be understood in the context of two interconnected elements, 'increasing specialisation' and 'institutionalised expertise'. Further to this, Larson (2018) contended that professions aim to establish a structural link between relatively high levels of formalised education and the society that grants legitimacy and desirable prestige. Thus, these two perspectives emphasise the importance of professions members' attributes and societal recognition as defining features.

'It [is] useful to think of a profession as an occupation which has assumed a dominant position in a division of labour, so that it gains control over the determination of the substance of its own work. Unlike most occupations, it is autonomous or self-directing. The occupation sustains this special status by its persuasive profession of the extraordinary trustworthiness of its members. The trustworthiness it professes naturally includes ethicality and also knowledgeable skills. In fact, the profession claims to be the most reliable authority on the nature of the reality it deals with'.(Freidson, 1970 cited in Wolinsky, 1988 p.34).

In addition to the specialisation, expertise, and social recognition of Sundin and Hedman (2005) and Larson (2018), occupational control was a central focus for other sociologists, such as Freidson, who contended that profession members, unlike occupations, control the recruitment and supply of professionals, exclusively provide the institutionalised training that is relevant to the activity, dictate how the activity shall be performed and who will evaluate its quality (Freidson, 1989). Like Freidson's perspective, Kalleberg and Leicht (2021) attempted to define professions by focusing on control, monopoly of professional activity, and the interaction between the professions and society, granting legitimacy and prestigious status. However, they -Kalleberg and Leicht- were particularly interested in the interaction between professional work and society by arguing that societal needs have generally contributed to the increased power of professions and professional associations in the labour market. By the same token, Akinpelu et al. (2011a) He used societal needs for certain services and their usefulness to the wider community to conceptually demarcate professions from occupations; he also furthered his analysis by establishing a correlation between social acceptability, known as 'social standing,' professionals' material rewards, and professions' marketability.

## 2.4 Theoretical Approaches to the Professions.

Over the years, commentators across different disciplines have used different theoretical orientations and positions, but mainly from a sociological point of view, to provide an understanding of the profession concept (see section 2.3.1).

Some of these attempts were put as what are the differences between doctors and carpenters, lawyers, and autoworkers (Yee, 2001), and what makes us describe a person as a professional and deny the label to the other (Wilensky, 1964). Willmott (1986) perceived the profession as a strategy formed by skilled individuals to distance themselves from the public based on knowledge, expertise and monopoly over their role or service. Apart from practitioners' attributes, traits and the occupational field, little attention was paid to some fundamental aspects, such as what it means to be a professional within a profession or how professionals define themselves and perceive their professional identities. Therefore, this section will mainly focus on the sociologists' approaches to professions.

Commentators such as Macdonald (1995) argue that approaches to professions differ not only in their definition of the profession but also in their methods of analysis and their explanation as to why some occupations have professionalised why others have not, and why some professions have become more professionalised than others. However, as this research, at a later stage, will employ indicators from the attributes approach, such as (i) Licensing and professional monopoly over activities, (ii) Public recognition and (iii) Autonomy, this research will only be interested in the attribute perspective of professions. On this account, the attributes approach is independent of any occupational setting and structure and can be applied to determine the distinguishing criteria of professions. Relatedly, the attributes approach is crucial for studying professionalism components and professional identity construction from the same perspective; thus, using it will establish the consistency needed to analyse professions, professionalism, and professional identity as interrelated concepts.

### 2.4.1 The Power Approach to Professions.

Power and control prove to be key themes in professional work conceptualisation attempts. When analysing the occupational control for five professions in the United Kingdom, Child and Fulk (1982a) defined the concept of profession and occupational control by stating that ' The concept of a profession refers to the collective capability of occupation members to preserve unique authority in the definition, conduct, and evaluation of their work and also to determine the conditions of entry to and exit from practice within occupational parameter' (Child and Fulk, 1982b). Similar to Child and Fulk, other sociology theorists such as Morris et al. (2006), Zhang (2016), and Nolin (2008), when illustrating the concept of the profession, identified power and occupational control attributes as distinctive features of the profession. Additionally, the same theorists furthered their analysis by examining control sources and professions' ability to maintain power through the monopoly of knowledge, determining and evaluating knowledge used in their professional activities, gatekeeping or restricting entry, and autonomy. That said, Zhang (2016), Nolin (2008), Morris et al. (2006), and Larson (2018) share with Freidson (1989) and Kalleberg and Leicht (2021) the same assumption that control and monopoly of the professions is a product of an intentional interaction between professions and the wider society which grants legitimacy and prestigious status in exchange for providing complex and quality services needed by the society. Perhaps this systematic thinking of control and the linkage between professions' emergence, developments, and the hosting society is closely affiliated with the professions' power approach.

Historically, conceptualising the profession using power and control is associated with the Marxist perspective on social class and social stratification, concerned with the unequal distribution of power, income, and prestige (Aminzade, 1976). Using the Marxist stratification analysis, other sociologists such as Brand and Mesoudi (2019a) ranked all occupations on a hierarchical prestige scale based on the service's value provided by the professions and occupation to society, the skills and knowledge required to perform it, the degree of autonomy and control over the professional activity, and the financial reward obtained as a result (Bergman and Joye, 2005; Brand and Mesoudi, 2019a). Similarly, using the class approach, Treiman introduced 'the prestige scale' to conceptualise professions as a distinguishable social construct whose members differ from other occupations (Christoph, Matthes and Ebner, 2020a).

Based on a ‘subjectively perceived prestige’, to emphasise the activity’s goodness to society, Treiman suggested ‘the prestige score’ depending on the degree of power and control practitioners enjoy-usually wealth enhanced control- and educational level (Christoph, Matthes and Ebner, 2020a, pp.18–19).

Taking the medical profession as an example, several commentators asserted two inter-connected facets of medicine’s power; the first related to the profession’s autonomy or the ability to regulate and control the activities of medical professionals; the second is its dominance and formal control of other health-related activities. Seemingly, the focus on power and control attributes to delineate professions from occupations, particularly the traditional professions, led sociologists to retrieve the occupational closure notion, which characterises professions and focuses primarily on their monopolistic behaviour based on state regulations which restrict entry, regulate the professional activity, grants legitimacy and privilege, besides, mainlining boundaries between professions and occupations (Lewis, 2012; Zhou, 1993).

Although power and control are commonly used to conceptualise and analyse professions, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom, during the 1960s, several sociologists criticised this approach. They considered it an unjustified enforcement of labour division traditions and meant to limit recruitment opportunities. For instance, Pol and Drange (2017) contended that the power approach aims to increase wage differentiation by creating social and legal barriers to performing certain activities such as medicine, law, teaching, social work, etc. These social and legal barriers led to what is known as ‘occupational closure’, which intentionally or unintentionally grants certain occupations a form of power to control entry and practice of economic activities (Edwards, 2014b, p.320).

#### *2.4.1.1 Occupational Closure: The Professions Licensing Mechanism.*

Licensure is considered a distinctive feature that pertains to professions and professional individuals. UK Commission for Employment and Skills states that;

‘licensing refers to situations in which it is unlawful to carry out a specified range of activities for pay without first obtaining a licence which confirms that the licence holder meets prescribed standards of competence (Forth et al., 2011). Licensing is considered the most restricted type of occupational closure and aims to limit access to specific occupations, as it establishes minimum entry requirements and level of formal education for practising professional activities. More importantly, licensing serves as a regulatory barrier.

In general, the barrier to entry, either strategic or structural, can be defined as anything that prevents entry and limits competition (OECD, 2007). The regulatory barriers are usually structural and represent long-term legal restrictions and government actions determining the conditions individuals and firms must face before practising certain economic activity or entering a new industry. Several commentators claim that these barriers protect public health and safety, reduce competition, and prevent market failure, which is usually caused by poor-quality goods and services (Djankov et al., 2002a; Kotsios, 2010). Besides granting professions legitimacy, licensing helps to ensure other professional attributes are possessed,  as Timmons (2018) asserted that licensing involves prolonged professional education and training, professional knowledge, specific skills and competencies, social recognition, monopoly power and entry requirements to exclude unqualified individuals and to ensure standardised service quality.

Traditionally, states are regarded as the regulators of professional activities and are responsible for establishing the processes by which occupations can gain control of a particular activity protected by law. Historically, Larkin (2017)  and Forth et al. (2011) illustrated that states’ involvement in licensing has some objectives to achieve, such as protecting the public against employing incompetent practitioners, raising the level of competencies among practitioners, and setting a legal basis for professional activities in addition to enforcing standards of services. Correspondingly, Kleiner (2017) and Law and Kim (2005) claimed that licensing is also motivated by professionals’ interests and functions as a barrier to restrict entry, limit competition, and increase service prices in licensed occupations.

Different reports and studies related to licensing and the market advantage concluded that clients and service users pay higher in return for licensed professionals' services (Ryan, 2018). Another study by Klein (2016) emphasised the association between state-licensed professions and the level of prestige; he also linked licensing with exclusiveness and monopolisation and asserted that professions as social groups seek to maximise financial rewards by using licensing to restrict access to resources and economic opportunities. Additionally, Kleiner (2017) acknowledged the influence of licensing on wage determination; however, he stated that there is little evidence to show that licensing improves the quality of the services delivered primarily in the United Kingdom, where %19 of occupations were subjected to government licensing. Unlike Morris's findings, a study in the United States conducted by Timmons, et al. (2019) revealed that stricter licensing requirements for dentists and teachers are associated with better dental services and higher academic achievement compared to less technical professions; however, Morris and Timmons found that licensing can create a wage gap between licensed and unlicensed practitioners, restrict employee mobility, and increase social inequality. Several economists, such as Dingwall and Fenn have debated this correlation between licensing and social inequality (1987, p.54), who contended that the competitive market in professional services would reach a point where service users could choose among the competing suppliers. Yet this view neglected the impact this may have on the quality of services, as some professions may be forced to reduce their average service quality levels to survive.

'Each discipline has its concept of success as a vehicle for prestige,

(Kehm and Teichler, 2013, p.7)

Furthermore, licensing can also be linked to professions' prestige and dominance. For example, the relationship between licensing and profession dominance is rooted in Friedson's theoretical position of professional dominance. Freidson (1970) proposed that the dominance of the medical profession in the United States comes from legal and regulatory means (e.g., license to practice) and the monopoly of medical professionals over medical knowledge and services (see also Navarro, 1988, p.57). More recently, Christoph et al. (2020b) contended that occupations' prestige could be measured by wage inequalities and the degree to which legal restrictions and licensing are imposed as conditions to practice certain economic activities. Additionally, Brand and Mesoudi (2019b) described occupations' dominance and prestige as 'two ways to the top'. They argued that dominance is a 'social form attained by threat and fear, and achieved through a legal process such as licensing. That said, it can be assumed that both dominance and prestige are facilitated by licensing, which grants professionals the power to control entry, monopoly over activities, limit competition and enjoy the prestigious status, or as stated by Fredric Wolinsky, 'the dominant profession stands in an entirely different structural relationship to the division of labour than does the subordinate profession' (Wolinsky, 1988, p.35).

### 2.4.2 The Functionalist Approach to Professions.

The functionalist approach emphasises the function of professions in a modern social structure. It explains how some occupations developed into professions with a particular focus on old professions, such as medicine and law, and what is required for professions' continuous existence (Macdonald, 1995; Wenocur and Reisch, 1983).

Historically, the functionalist approach to professions can be considered the oldest sociological perspective to the professions, as some cited the sociologist Emile Durkheim (1857-1917), who was particularly interested in labour division, as the founder of the functionalist approach (Durkheim, Division of Labour in Society, translated by Hall, 1984). In his casual analysis, Durkheim studied the causes of labour division in society and provided a casual explanation suggesting that work as a social fact is caused by man's desire to increase his happiness, besides comparing the functional division of labour in society 'to the parts of the body which must function together if the whole is to run smoothly' (Barnes, 1966).

Durkheim functionalism greatly influenced Talcott Parsons's structural functionalism and his classic work on subsystems' relationship (Parsons, 2005, pp.16–22); however, Parson was mainly concerned with the functions of professional activities, particularly the medical profession, in comparison to other occupations and considered both social structures, besides his particular interest in the structure of the occupational system and the upgrading of occupational status. Other sociologists, such as Brante took up Durkheim and Parsons's functionalist perspective (1988), who suggested that professions are considered a social phenomenon or an evolution in the social system from simpler to more complex forms, which require integration and adaptation with other subsystems within the same society. However, Brante didn't illustrate the mechanism that leads to or influences this complexity in profession formation, how integration with subsystems takes place or whether it is on an organisational or national level. Perhaps Brante's view led other industrial sociologists, such as Yee (2001), to link the formation of professions with their political and economic environments, social structure, and cultural norms. Similarly Godara (2021) considered professions a subsystem that interacts with external macro systems. He illustrated that professions' structure and function are products of other related factors. For instance, when natural resources are utilised on a commercial scale, this leads to more diversification in occupations and professions' structure; also, sciences and technological advancement can create more specialised occupations.

In contrast, work sociologists focused on two fundamental questions; the first was concerned with the extent to which professional occupations as 'self-selected' and 'self-disciplined' groups could be regarded as a unique production of the division of labour in society and have power in their area of practice besides control over the content of their work (Freidson, 1970; Kougioumtzis, Patriksson and Stråhlman, 2011). The second question paid particular attention to how the role and function of professions are influenced by economic, political, and social factors. The interplay of economic, political, social, and technological factors has garnered attention from commentators such as Grajo Boisselle and DaLomba (2018), who have recently discussed how these elements are crucial for professions to maintain their structure and efficiency. Moreover, the multifaceted interactions of these factors can shape, reshape, or even jeopardise the survival of traditional professions. They emphasised the necessity of re-skilling and up-skilling; for instance, demographic change, technological advancements, artificial intelligence …etc., can lead to the emergence of new professions or force other professions to go through fundamental changes. It is, however, essential to note the association between view and the occupational adaptation process developed by Schultz and Schkade, who emphasised that occupational adaptation is a continuous process and comes as a response to different external occupational challenges, including those mentioned above (Grajo, Boisselle and DaLomba, 2018)

Along those lines, this researcher assumes that the functionalist approach to professions is essential to understanding how professions interact with and/or are influenced by other macro factors, including government legislation, economic conditions, technological developments, and political landscape. This can be evidenced by observing the impacts of technological changes, such as AI, advances in machine learning, Robotics, and increased computer power, on the function, structure, or even the future of professions (Hötte, Somers and Theodorakopoulos, 2023). To illustrate this further, recent studies in the medical profession found that the advanced digital technologies used in medicine led to the emergence of new subfields, such as medical technology and robotic surgeries, besides improving the quality of treatment and increasing the competitiveness and efficiency of medical professions (Mamyrbekova et al., 2020).

### 2.4.3 The Traits and Attributes Approach to Professions.

This approach defines professions based on the features that distinguish them from other occupational groups (Münte and Scheid, 2017). Several sociologists pointed out that the root of this approach can be found in the taxonomic perspective, which was developed in the United States and the United Kingdom during the 1950s to early 1960s and seeks to determine the attributes and traits that distinguish professions from other occupational groups (Saks, 2016).

In general, reviewing the literature on the attribute approach, it became evident that these attempts to conceptualise the approach are rooted in Morris L. Cogan's work in 1955 and Greenwood's paper on 'Attributes of a Profession' in 1957. Morris defined the concept of the profession by illustrating the essentials of the profession and quoted:

'A profession is a vocation whose practice is founded upon understanding the theoretical structure of some department of learning or science and upon the abilities accompanying such understanding. This understanding and these abilities are applied to the vital practical affairs of man. The practices of the profession are modified by knowledge, accumulated wisdom, and experiences of mankind,' (Cogan, 1955, p.107).

Sociologist thinkers, such as Weiss-Gal and Welbourn, Greenwood, Hickson, Thomas and Lester, have tried to determine the traits and characteristics of professions that distinguish them from other occupations. These attempts were started by determining the features and attributes that distinguish old and undisputed professions such as medicine, law, and teaching (Greenwood, 1957b; Hickson and Thomas, 1969; Lester, 2015; Weiss-Gal and Welbourne, 2008).

In his classic work, Ernest Greenwood, the theoriser of the attribute approach, defined a profession as a social phenomenon, a structured group interacting with the broader society. According to Greenwood, society influences professions' formation and development to meet specific social needs; he also named five crucial attributes that all professions possess (Greenwood, 1957b).

*2.4.3.1 Attribute (1): The Systematic Body of Theory.*

Greenwood (1957b) contended that the difference between professional and non-professional activity lies in the specialised skills possessed by professionals. Greenwood illustrated this by stating that professional activities are usually complicated and require specialised knowledge acquired formally and informally, as well as extensive training, such as the activities performed by surgeons and research physicians (Leighninger, 1978). In the same line of argument, Greenwood stressed that the specialised knowledge and skills that characterise professions must be supported by an internally consistent theoretical system, which he named the ‘body of theory’, which is the most distinguishing element in professions and aiming at justifying the existence and focus of professions (Marshall, 1999). However, it is worth mentioning that Greenwood acknowledged that some nonprofessional occupations might possess a higher order of skills than many well-established professions. Yet, the systematic body of theory distinguishes professions(Greenwood, 1957b).

#### *2.4.3.2 Attribute (2): The Professional Authority or the knowledge-based authority.*

According to Greenwood (Greenwood, 1957b) professional knowledge, formal education, extensive training, and the overall systematic body of theory grant professionals a discriminative power and monopoly of judgment when interacting with clients, unlike in occupations where customers can assess their needs and determine and evaluate the products or services they receive.

#### *2.4.3.3 Attribute (3): The Sanction of the Community.*

According to Greenwood, ‘every profession strives to persuade the community to sanction its monopoly’; he also emphasised that this positive sanction grants the profession power and privilege. With reference to medicine and law, Greenwood furthered his point by illustrating that a profession has control over its accreditation process, granting and withholding accreditation, schools and training centres numbers and location, curriculum contents, the control over the admissions to the profession, screening those who are qualified to practice or controlling the licensing system (Greenwood, 1957b). Respectively, Greenwood stressed that the privileged professions enjoy immunity from community judgement; he quoted that ‘the professional’s performance can only be judged by his peers (Greenwood, 1957b). Drawing on Greenwood's analysis, Bjarnason (2009, p.36) explained that community sanction becomes more critical for a professional's self-development based on the tangible and intangible responses they receive from their social environment, meaning that professionals' performance, attitudes, and professional behaviour are subjective to community expectations.

#### *2.4.3.4 Attribute (4): The Regulative Code of Ethics.*

Describing it as part formal and part informal, Greenwood argued that to maintain monopoly, power and prestige ethically, a profession must have regulative ethical codes that govern its activities and deter it from restricting entries, creating a scarcity of professionals, or unreasonably increasing service prices. On the other hand, the regulative code of ethics will enable professionals to maintain their emotional neutrality when interacting with clients, irrespective of their age, beliefs, gender, or social background (Greenwood, 1957b). Blau (1962) expressed a similar view using the term 'universalism', which refers to the standards, rules, norms, and attributes of social structure that guide its members rather than their perceptions, culture or personal values systems (Wallensteen, 1984).

#### *2.4.3.5 Attribute (5): The Professional Culture.*

Greenwood (1957b) argued that every profession operates within a network of formal and informal groups, including the profession-hosting organisation (hospitals and law firms for medical doctors and lawyers), educational establishments which supply professions with talents, and professional associations. These collectively contribute to forming professions' unique sub-cultures (e.g., medical culture differs from social work). The uniqueness of professions' subcultures was of particular interest to many sociologists, including Bonder et al. (2004), who focus on the medical professions sub-culture; Nolan (2011), who named it legalism devoted his work towards the law profession sub-culture, and Hoang-Thu (2010) who focused on in culture leaning among TSL and EFL teachers and the teaching profession.

Despite the significant contribution made by Greenwood to this approach, some sociologists directed moderate criticism towards his five traits. For instance, Roth (1974) was particularly critical of Greenwood's work on professional authority. She argued that Greenwood's monopoly and control attributes were primarily a 'mixture of unproven' and 'unexamined claims' for professional control and autonomy. Roth also contended that sociologists' approach to the profession's attributes is based on their profession's required attributes rather than those common in most professions. In contrast, Greenwood explained that his five attributes are 'not the exclusive monopoly of a particular profession' (Greenwood, 1957b). Thus, nonprofessional occupations can also possess them, but to different degrees; as such, he viewed his five professional attributes as quantitative rather than qualitative.

Arthur joined Roth in his professional control and autonomy concerns. Arthur was a critic of the concentration of power in the hands of professionals by indicating the knowledge gap as the professions' source of power. He introduced the behavioural continuum as a means by which professional values are defined, enforced, and observed (Arthur, 2018). It is, however, essential to note that Greenwood, when illustrating the professional-client relationship, stressed that professional discriminating capacity is not 'limitless' but governed by professional knowledge and guided by extensive formal and informal education to fulfil broader social goals (Greenwood, 1957b). Additionally, Hickson and Thomas (1969) and Moore (1970, pp.23–51) suggested additional attributes, such as the implementation of a rewards scheme or strategy and service orientation, to distinguish professions from other occupational groups.

The rewards scheme as an attribute to professions can be defined as a monetary, non-monetary return or a psychological payment a professional receives in exchange for his/her commitment, performance, and the services he/she delivers (Franco-Santos and Gomez-Mejia, 2015). However, it is noticeable that professions are characterised by and privileged with two types of reward systems: tangible or financial rewards resulting from monopoly and control over professional activities and in-tangible or emotional rewards from the prestigious status of professional (Adebayo et al., 2022). The attribute of service orientation influences professional service quality and interactions with clients and, thus can be conceptualised on two levels: on an individual professional basis, where the focus is on the degree to which a professional is service-oriented, and on a profession level where the focus is on to what extent a profession is service-oriented (Oliveira and Roth, 2012; Urban, 2009b). Although these two attributes might be considered shared attributes and exist in most occupations, in the case of professions, regulatory bodies such as the Law Society, Royal College of Nursing, and Institute of Mechanical Engineering, these bodies play a fundamental role in promoting professions' reward systems. In addition to assessing and/or securing service standards and quality (Hickson and Thomas, 1969; Moore, 1970). Also, it can be assumed that professions are distinguished by psychological rewards, which tie nicely with the sanction of the community pointed out earlier by Greenwood. These rewards are much needed by professionals to confirm their ability to meet societal needs and assign them with value believed to be adequate.

Furthermore, defining and structuring professions this way led other theorists, such as Sciulli (2007), to stay the course and formulate a well-established theoretical framework for the attribute approach by suggesting several attributes characterising professions. These attributes included theoretical knowledge, comprehensive education, various types of control, collegiality, ethical code, work for the common good, discretion, and autonomy. Similarly, Lester's list of professions' attributes included a code of ethics, processes to regulate entry to a profession, a standard body of knowledge and the existence of a professional association (Lester, 2015).

Further insights into the nature of the attributes of professions are provided by Richard (1969), who suggested that professions attributes can be divided into two types, attitudinal and structural. The attitudinal attributes are concerned with individual traits, and the structural are more related to the professions of which an individual is a member. However, Richard's view supports the earlier assumption about professionals and phenomenal features.

When comparing these distinguishing profession attributes, whether they be the ones illustrated by Greenwood or those added by others such as Arthur (2018), Hickson and Thomas (1969), Lester (2015), and Moore (1970). It is evident that many sociologists consider a profession a social phenomenon consisting of two essential elements: a behavioural dimension related to professions' members and structural features that pertain to professions as phenomena.

Based on this literature, this researcher argues that these attempts tried to characterise professions by pointing out what professions have in common, or in other words, what are the similarities among professions, as well as what are the differences between professions and other non-professional occupations. However, it would be significant if more attention is paid to the fact that each profession is a unique product of its own social, economic, and political environment; thus, professions emerge, develop, adapt, and function accordingly. It could also be contended that theorists of the attribute approach often overlook several critical aspects., for instance, how professionals or practitioners define their professions, to what degree they possess professional attributes and qualities, and, if so, how this can be measured besides, how they regulate their professional activities concerning these traits (e.g., to what degree is their profession autonomous and how free their practice is from bureaucratic and political, and social strains, etc.). It is also important to note that Greenwood's attributes are merely based on medicine and the law profession as self-defined and self-characterised. Added to this, these attributes are qualitative in nature and are not quantitative to be measured.

Furthermore, the literature discussed above gives a little emphasis to essential aspects, which are how the degree of professionalism is measured within professions and how the members of the public perceive the role and efficiency of some emerging professions, especially if we consider what is mentioned by Yee (2001) who highlighted the complexities associated with the social recognition of some professional activities (e.g., measuring the level of public support to some professions such as social work), as well as the argument that state recognition doesn't always reflect societal recognition (e.g., to what extent does the public support and recognise social work as a profession, considering its negative image in the eyes of some members of the community, however, this view on social work profession is subjective and cannot be generalised to all professions). Greenwood (Greenwood, 1957b) pointed out the regulative code of ethics, which governs professional practices to ensure goodness and worthiness. Also, Goodie emphasised that professional decisions are based on clients' needs and require control through external regulations such as licensing or internal regulations such as ethical codes (Zhang, 2016).

To conclude, despite the critics directed to the attribute approach, it can be argued that the significance of this approach comes from the fact that it can provide a framework for studying and analysing other related concepts, such as semi-professions, by utilising the structural and attitudinal attributes and features offered by the approach and known as 'the professional project', that is on hand. On the other using this approach to analyse professionalism, a profession-related concept that describes the core attributes of professions' members, seems appropriate considering that the concept has three attributional dimensions. These dimensions include professional behaviour, which refers to knowledge and skills; professional responsibilities; and professional parameters, which refer to ethical and legal issues. By the same token, the attribute approach is closely linked to professional identity formation and articulation as several sociologists suggest that professional identity is mainly shaped by work attitudes, attributes and beliefs and underpinned by theoretical and practical knowledge, social recognition, and the existence of a professional body (Neary, 2014).

### 2.4.4 Applying the Attribute Approach to Analyse the Semi-Professions.

For many, semi-professions and emergent professions create boundary trouble between them and well-recognised professions such as medicine, law, etc. Generally speaking, semi-professions possess some but not all professional attributes. Some commentators argue that semi-professions lack systematic and expertise knowledge, are less legitimate and lack lengthy and continuous education and training (Jehn, Davies and Walters, 2022). Burns tried to delineate the distinctive features between professions and semi-profession occupations by monopolising activities and possessing expert knowledge of their practice (Burns, 2006).

As aforesaid, some authors, such as Gamer (1970), noted that semi-professions, compared to the recognised profession, are less legitimate, less established, have less specialised knowledge, lack formal education/training and have less autonomy or societal recognition. Willmott (1986), and Yee (2001), suggested that 'semi-professions' and 'emergent professions' dynamically develop their knowledge base and are approaching societal acceptance.  Davis pointed out journalism as an example of a striving occupation in his article 'Why Journalism is a profession', where he attempted to establish the professional status of journalism despite the absence of a body of theoretical knowledge, license, vetting, and lengthy education through which journalist must be accredited as well as the fact that journalism lacks control and monopoly over its activity (other examples can be Bloggers, freelance journalists, youtubers,.etc., Davis, 2010).

To conclude the discussion on professions, This researcher suggests that the complexities associated with defining professions impacted the attempts to conceptualise semi-profession. However, among all the distinctive attributes outlined by sociologists, there is some consensus on particular attributes semi-professions lack, such as prolonged education, the body of knowledge, the monopoly over professional activity, a system of governance, and societal recognition.

Furthermore, occupations can be categorised into two groups; the first one includes the well-recognised and undisputed professions (e.g., medicine, law, and teaching) or what can be called the skilled and licensed occupations. The second group includes occupations with elements of professionalism or what may be termed Skilled occupations. Skilled occupations involve complicated operations based on knowledge and skills but are not recognised as professions. For instance, these occupations include toolmaking, diamond cutting, fine art, etc. A comparative example of this view appears in the work of Welbourne, in addition to Greenwood, who argues that all known occupations are positioned somewhere along the continuum of professionalism, where at one end of this continuum are the undisputed professions which possess the maximum degree of the professionalism attributes (e.g., physician, attorney, scientist, etc.), at the opposite end are the least skilled occupations such as labour, assembly worker pizza delivery drivers and goods loaders (Evans, 2008; Greenwood, 1957a; Welbourne, 2009). Perhaps Greenwood's continuum inspired Liljegren (2012) to construct the professions hierarchy model, which is also known as the professions pyramid or the pyramid of prestige (Larson, 1977, cited in Liljegren, 2012), where old and undisputed professions such as medicine and law are at the top of the pyramid. Relatively the less notable professions (e.g., social workers and nurses) are at the base of the pyramid. However, Liljegren furthered this by describing the interactions between professions, which seem to be a social standing conflict amongst professions or a social struggle for control and marketability (Akinpelu et al., 2011b). Thus, Greenwood, Welbourne, Liljegren and Akinpelu attempted to conceptualise the professional activity either focused on the sensitivity of the profession to macro factors (e.g., social recognitions) or labelling occupations based on the degree of professionalism (e.g., greenwood's continuum).To draw a clear picture, it would be significant to develop a new specific field of inquiry that directs sociologists' attention to 'the grey area' between professions and non-professions.

The suggested focus on the 'grey area' between undisputed professions and semi-professions will be mainly concerned with the conditions by which a profession is defined and its activities recognised, besides investigating the influence of external factors such as the socio-economic, political, demographic, and technological advancement in forming as well as reforming professions. In this proposed field of inquiry, any attempts to conceptualise or delineate the differences between professions and semi-professions will require a broader perspective, considering other significant and influential macro factors, including those outlined previously. Frost (2009) used a similar approach when illustrating the term ‘material reality’ to describe the above socioeconomic, technological and political factors; however, his philosophical standpoint towards professions remains questionable regarding whether these factors are objective or subjective forces.

This researcher argues that the emergence or survival of existing professions can also be understood in line with two societal perspectives. The first perspective concerns the old and traditional professions, such as medicine and law, which arose naturally to fulfil an essential function that was much needed in their society. The second perspective is concerned with those who gained their professional dominance through licensing their activities in a way that establishes a type of monopoly protected by law to ensure the quality of the service and to protect practitioners from questioning their competencies and credentials and, as a result, gained the social status, privilege and the control over membership processes (Vogd, 2017).

On another relevant point, emerging or would-be professions are typically developed and formed in different socio-economic, technological, and political environments. Consequently, these differences subject each profession to a type of complexity that requires it to focus on specific professionalisation processes or structural changes to regulate its activity and justify its existence. The conditions that led to the birth of old and recognised professions differ. As such, literature on traditional professions (e.g., medicine and law) was less concerned with the social aspects of professions; however, today, this social aspect has a significant influence and impact on the formation and reformation of professions. These societal factors include the rise of service users’ expectations or ratings, which might range from the evaluation of the service quality provided to the assessment of professionals’ expertise or level of knowledge besides clients’ and consumers’ rights legislations (Lelliott et al., 2001), besides the emergence of other external sources of power which act as an ethical guardian or as an evaluator of services’ standards such as the Care Quality Commission (CQC) and Ombudsman in the UK. All of these led to what can be considered the dominance of society and the decrease of the role of the nation-state as an ultimate grantor of professional status; to illustrate, some professions are well recognised by the state, such as social work; however, their professional status is questioned by society as argued by Yee (2001). This point can also be linked with the functional perspective on professions as it is much concerned with the interaction between professions and the broader society on the basis that professions exist to fulfil an essential function in the community where it possesses the discriminatory power of knowledge and the society receives this knowledge output in the form of services delivered. Yet, the community evaluates, assesses, and decides the quality of these services.

### 2.5 Professionalism: The Concept and Approaches.

It is necessary to begin this section by considering the earlier disagreements and disputes about conceptualising the term profession. As illustrated in the previous section, some researchers, such as Greenwood (1957a), Hickson and Thomas (1969), Macdonald (1995), Willmott (1986), Lester (2015), Sundin and Hedman (2005), have used different perspectives and orientations to define a profession and attempted to provide an understanding of the criteria required for an occupation to be labelled as a profession. Considering the association between the two terms, it will be logical to assume that the definitional problem of the term 'profession' impacted conceptualising professionalism.

This section starts with establishing the connectedness between two interrelated concepts, professionalisation and professionalism, as both concepts are used interchangeably to describe the process by which occupations evolve within a spectrum of status, such as the continuum of professionalism introduced by Greenwood in his professions attribute approach. According to Reed et al. (2019), professionalism and professionalisation are often associated with semi-profession as well as established professions such as medicine and law. In the case of the established professions, a study conducted by Burlakova et al. (2020) found that applying new theories and methods of teaching, such as system-activity and activity-based methods in higher education, improved professionalism levels in the teaching profession, teachers' professional competencies, and personal qualities. In medicine, a study commissioned by the Health Professions Council (HPC) concluded that changing training routes and introducing degree-level qualifications improved healthcare professionals' clinical judgement, attitudes, and professional behaviour (Marrow et al., 2014).

Professionalisation can be understood as a process through which an occupation structurally develops and evolves to regulate its activities and be recognised as a profession. According to some sociologists such as Phillips and Dalgrano, this process is ongoing and acquires specific characteristics such as knowledge, skills, expertise, ethics and morals (Phillips and Dalgarno, 2017). Consequently, others, such as White et al. (1966), and Wilensky (1964) suggested that Professionalisation occurs when an occupation requires the characteristics of a profession, such as an ethical code, a set of established educational practices, a defined group of specialist skills, a professional representative body, and a process of self-regulation. Further to this, Teixeira et al. (2017) clarifies that Professionalisation requires the recognition of society, considering that professions operate in a broader social context and exist to fulfil particular social needs.

Considering the definitional problem of the professions, it is apparent that sociologists have a long history of attempts to clarify the meaning of professionalism. Some commentators, such as Evetts (2013) and Freidson (2001), claimed that professionalism refers to the attributes of occupational behaviour and practices of workers who not only have a full-time job but also possess certain personal and professional qualities through which they perform their professional duties. On the other hand, Zafiropoulos and Mulder respectively argue that professionalism is not merely based on behavioural traits but also reflects the professional competencies of a practitioner as well as the fact that a professional is competent when he/she acts responsibly and effectively according to given standards of performance (Muller, 2014; Zafiropoulos, 2016). Perhaps this led other researchers such as Bukhtair (2018a) to indicate the importance of professionals' behavioural competencies as an essential component of professionalism, these competencies in his opinion will include communication, professional knowledge, attitude, ethical code, the ability to solve problems with definite solutions, the ability to manage issues and making decisions with limited information given. However, other sociologists, such as Dickson (2007), described these competencies as dynamic. They introduced the term expertise-in-action, which only highlights the practical aspect of professionalism. This perspective concerns professionals' ability to use appropriate strategies and various technical tools known as hard skills, such as IT knowledge and analytical skills.

Poorchangizi et al. (2019) specified many attributes and behaviours that professionals are expected to bring to professions as essential aspects of professionalism. This will include working with established standards and principles, considering ethical and professional codes of practice, demonstrating autonomous technique within the scope of the profession, maintaining and developing professional expertise (Poorchangizi et al., 2019). However, with more challenges that are facing professions and the calls for more ethical practices, Pattison (2004) and Hatem (2003), respectively, proposed a new type of formula by which professionalism combines qualities that relate to trained and skilled Individuals who share common values and are committed to the same societal goals. According to Pattison and Hatem, these shared values and societal goals are not only a key component in defining professionalism but also help to orient professionals as a group and distinguish occupational groups from each other; however, both gave little attention to how the societal goal will be achieved and measured and who determines these societal goals.

This researcher posits that the literature above focussed on the connection between professional groups, values, and societal goals but lacked important aspects, such as how professionals relate their values to the demands of the occupational group values and how professionals interpret and perceive the values of their occupational groups considering the changing nature of these values and codes of practices. In this respect, a cross-sectional study conducted by Poorchangizi et al. (2019) explored the changing nature of the concept of professionalism and its values. Poorchangizi et al. concluded that values change as a result of the increasing complexity of ethical issues and policies; however, the study neglected what we can be called 'the values' containers' or the professionals themselves and how they perceive these changing values and the possibility of conflict between these new values and the ones already seated. Also, the study overlooked the external forces that may influence the change, such as the environmental, socio-economic and political landscape where professions operate.

This researcher argues that the perception of professionalism as an inherent quality has evolved due to the growing complexity of the work environment and swift societal changes, rather than an examination of its effects on professional practices. Consequently, professionalism may be perceived as a 'behavioural attitude' that subjectively adapts to specific situations, essentially implying 'you know it when you see it.' This suggests that professionalism is a deliberate attitude or action taken by a professional.

In proportion to the changing nature of professionalism, Frost (2009) suggested that societal changes and increased complexity play a role in redefining the nature of professionalism. Frost interlinked these changes with the phenomenon of globalism, Informationalism where a large amount of information is available and accessible, in addition to the emergence of what Frost named the 'network society', an expression coined to describe the social, economic, cultural and political changes caused by technological advancement. Respectively, this debate on how different factors influence professionalism extends to the professional identity, which can be framed as a necessary foundation for professionalism.

To conclude, the literature on professionalism focuses mainly on identifying the attitudinal side of the concept, which is similar to the attributes approach to conceptualising the profession. In point of fact, profession and professionalism are naturally interrelated concepts to the extent that each can influence the other. Nonetheless, measuring the degree of professionalism remains problematic, perhaps because of the qualitative and dynamic nature of the professionalism's attributes, its association with human behaviour (professionals), and the self-interpretation of values. However, an exception has existed in the medical field, where systematic methods were developed to observe professionals' behaviour through self-evaluation (Gauger et al., 2005) or by analysing physicians' duties on an individual basis and translating these into measurable behaviour, then assessing the development and changes in professionals' behaviour over time (Jarvis-Selinger, Pratt and Regehr, 2012). Additionally, the literature on professionalism largely provided definitions on a micro-level scope where the focus is centred on the organisational level or how a professional acts and behaves professionally in his own professional practice and how each profession requires attributes and behaviours based on its professional activities. This assumption can be supported by what was mentioned by Balthazard (2014), who stated that the concept of professionalism was developed by 'lawyers for lawyers' (Azer, 2005).

This researcher claims that these multiple views neglected some critical aspects of maintaining professionalism, self-observing, and updating the required competencies in times of change. For instance, the current wave of COVID-19 has shed new light on the previous understanding of professionalism and professional practices on both the micro-level- and macro-level. To illustrate this, the closure of schools, universities and colleges directly impacted teaching practices and behaviour of professionals positively or negatively, as some professional attributes and qualities have now become more crucial, such as technical skills, virtual learning methods, teachers' knowledge of online learning techniques as well as, teachers' ability to monitor their performance, adaptability and identifying their learning and training needs. This can be furthered by giving another example from the medical field, as some professional attributes will be more valued, such as the social responsibility of the medical and care staff, their participation in decision making and their ability to work in partnership with other non-medical agencies to facilitate the delivery of services. It is worth mentioning that Coulehan and others, in a study conducted in 2003, highlighted a similar point when they discussed social responsibility as a crucial attribute of medical professionalism (Coulehan, P. Williams et al., 2003). However, their discussion on social responsibility and ethics was only concerned with social and economic issues facing medical professionals in general, and little consideration was given to how these two factors will impact medicine on a collective level and influence it as a professional activity.

## 2.6 Professional Identity: The Concept and Construction.

Professional identity has received a lot of attention in recent years. Sociologists generally regard professional identity as unstable, having dynamic components and a necessary foundation of professionalism.  Likewise, in professions and professionalism, the attempts to define or elucidate the nature of Professional identity vary even within a single professional group.

### 2.6.1 Approaches to Professional Identity.

Professional identity is often used in literature without a comprehensible definition. As such, this section will attempt to provide a standard conceptual definition rather than the operational definitions, which focus on the processes by which the presence or lack of professional identity is recognised (Fitzgerald, 2020)However, the common sociological definitions will be explored before Walker and Avant's method is applied to analyse the concept of professional identity.

Several sociologists argue that identity is fluid and creates boundaries but is also relational and connects personal and social (MacInnes, 2004). In their analysis of Identity positioning and construction McKeown and Ladegaard (2020) described it as closely tied to what we do and our interpretations of those actions in the context of our relationships with others. The same societal dimension and the dynamic nature of identity were pointed out by Phillips and Dalgrano (2017), who announced that professional identity is not a stable entity and evolves according to individuals' ability to observe and absorb values.

Additionally, Brown emphasises the term ambiguity by stating that identity is crucial, dynamic, and problematic, hence hard to define (Brown, 2015).

Lambert et al. (2021) produced a basic definition of professional identity; they defined the concept as ‘who we are’ with reference to a workplace or a group of individuals who share the same workplace. Slay and Smith (2011) defined professional identity as one’s professional self-concept based on attributes, beliefs, values, and experience. In addition, Floyd (2012), Volpe and Hopkins (2019), Barbour and Lammers (2015) all shared the view that professional identity is multi-dimensional and constitutes many different identities or sub-identities, such as personal and social identities.

Others, such as Mori et al. (2024) suggested that professional identity is an essential concept in the theory of communities of practice (CoP) and, as such, is influenced by workplace factors such as work attitudes, values, and beliefs and consequently affects behaviour in a given situation. in addition, professional identity enables individuals to assign meaning to themselves as well as meaning attached to them by others. Neary (2014) indicated that professional identity describes how we perceive ourselves within our occupational context and how we communicate this to others. Neary furthered his view by suggesting that professional identity is underpinned by a professional association, body of knowledge, rationally recognised qualification, and social recognition. In general, this view ignored the role of personal beliefs and values or how beliefs influence and support professional values and the impact of that on professional identity formation. Caza and Neary’s perspective showed that professional identity is not only the professionals’ image of who they are but also what they want to be?. Both researchers pointed out essential elements of defining professional identity, which is the social dimension of the concept related to role expectation and how professionals’ identity could be influenced by others’ perceptions, such as colleagues who do not share the same social domain.

### 2.6.2 Deconstructing Professional Identity: Applying Walker and Avant's Method.

The method of concept analysis developed by Walker and Avant has been modified and utilised by this researcher to address the practical limitations of defining professional identity. This approach offers a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of professional identity's complex and multifaceted nature. Walker and Avant's concepts analysis method consists of eight steps (Abdolrahimi et al., 2017). However, five steps will be used to articulate a conceptual and practical understanding of professional identity and apply this later when discussing HR professional identity; thus, the steps will be as follows: a. Concept selection, b. Defining the concept components, c. Determining the concept attributes, d. Identifying the model case, e. Reporting the borderline cases. In a related scenario, Fitzgerald (2020) used the Walker and Avant method to analyse the concept of professional identity in nursing and social science professions, whilst Schmidt and McArthur (2018), used the same method to clarify the meaning of professional nursing values as a component of nurses' professional identity. In addition, Lebel et al. (2014) also used Walker and Avant method to conceptualise physiological stability, while Cao, et al. (2023) applied the method to approach the concept of nursing and to analyse the conceptualisation impact on nurses' morale. On account of this, Walker and Avant method is dominantly used to conceptualise medical concepts, and no attempt has been made to modify it or make use of it to provide a conceptual and operational definition of professional identity in an HR setting; this is to the best of the researcher's knowledge.

Figure 2. Deconstruction of the Concept of Professional Identity


Source: Adapted from Walker and Avant’s concepts analysis method

*2.6.2.1 The Professional Identity and its Components: The Concept Selection.*

The scope of this study necessitated conceptualising professions, professionalism, and professional identity as three interrelated concepts to investigate whether HR is a profession, a role, or a function.

*2.6.2.2 Defining the Concept Components.*

The concept has two components: professional and identity. As such, this step will seek to illustrate both professionals as a sub-concept and identity as a concept. Reviewing the literature on professionals revealed that the term is multifaced and has multiple purposes when used in literature. Browes and Altinyelken (2022) contended that professionals refer to individuals who are associated with a particular occupation (e.g., occupational professionalism) or a profession and possess specific competencies, values, and expertise. Brenner et al. (2023) suggest that the term describes practitioners who demonstrate excellence, humanism, altruism, accountability, commitment, integrity, and respect for others. In addition, Goddard and Brockbank (2023) explained that a professional meets the professional standard and possesses the knowledge and skills useful to society. Similarly, Sebastian et al. (2023) described professionals as those who possess specialist knowledge and cognitive skills, have a structured approach to work and are governed by ethical codes. Respectively, Gormley et al. (2021) described the professional as one who acts ethically to maintain the contract between society and the profession he/she associates with. On the other hand, identity has received intense interest across several disciplines, mainly sociology and psychology; thus, the concept lacks a standard definition. Tajfel stated, ' Identity is that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge, of his membership of a social group, or groups, together with the values and emotional significance attached to that membership (Tajfel, 1978, cited in Vignoles, 2017). Overwhelmingly, commentators and sociologists, in particular, define identity as individual concepts of themselves concerning others; for instance, Wagenschwanz (2021) briefly defined identity as the individuals' understanding of who they are and their desire to become in future. Turner and Oakes (1986) defined it as the person’s self-concept based on his/her membership in a social group and furthered their definition by referring to the interactions between the in-group members and out-group members as well as the perceived differences between the member and his in-group (e.g., perhaps the differences are stemmed from the potential conflict between the personal and social identities). Relatedly, Cameron (1999) argues that identity is a set of meanings or attributes one attaches to him/herself to determine who he/she is. To conclude this step of professional identity concept analysis, it can be suggested that professional identity constitutes the sub-concept of professional and the concept of identity. Assumably, the professional identity comes into being as a result of an interaction between an objective individual and a subjective social group where the social group or the in-group influences the individual’s work-related values, behaviour, attitudes, and approaches to work, including ethics he/she is expected to adhere to.

*2.6.2.3 Determining the Concept Attributes.*

This step will discuss personal and social identity attributes and how they influence professional identity. Heled and Davidovich (2019) suggested that professional identity is shaped by the interaction between how a professional perceives him/herself and how he/she interprets his personal experience, his/her personal value system, beliefs, and his/her social status on one side, and the group professional identity on the other. Li and Wang (2015) furthered Heled, and Davidovich’s perspective by illustrating that personal identity is a combination of individual identity and social identity, thus has two components, psychological and social, where the psychological identity dimension is concerned with the self-concept and the social is concerned with the individual existence in a social group (e.g., culture, gender, or employment) and how he/she perceives this (Badaoui et al., 2018). The interplay between the personal self and the collective self is also outlined by Sedikides et al. (2019), who argued that the relational self, which includes the self-concept and the attributes that define him/her as a person, can only be achieved by the collective self or the in-group he/she is associated with. Again, Baray et al. (2009)

emphasised that personal and social identities relate to each other but claimed that social identity always takes over and personal identity vanishes in the wider groups. Finally, it would be significant to integrate both individualistic and collectivistic perspectives to characterise and analyse professional identity. This assumption can be supported by Reid and Deaux (1996), who introduced an integration model and argued that differences in self-related attributes and features could not be contained in the ones-selves structure but instead can be combined in a larger in-group identity, such as the professional identity.

##### *2.6.2.4 The Model Case of HR Professional Identity.*

This refers to how the HR participants perceive the nature and components of their professional identity.

##### *2.6.2.5 The Borderline Cases.*

The Non-HR Participants' Perception of HR Professional Identity (employees and managers): This step of analysis is explored and analysed in the data analysis chapter.

### 2.6.3 Professional Identity Formation.

Professional identity formation is considered relatively new in sociology; however, it attracted the attention of sociologists and other commentators across several disciplines, particularly medicine, education, and social work. Based on Cruess et al. (2015) perspective, the formation of professional identity is not ready-made but rather a dynamic process achieved and shaped by multiple factors; in other words, professional identity formation should be viewed as an emergent outcome resulting from the interaction between the self and others. However, professionals react to these factors at different levels, and their identity articulation varies accordingly (see also Pollali and Sidiropoulou, 2021). This view is also accepted by Vivekananda-Schmidt et al. (2015a), who contended that forming professional identity involves renegotiating norms, attributes and values previously held by the professional and the in-group or work he associated with. Similarly, Chen and Reay (2021) emphasised that professional identity construction begins when an individual defines him/herself as a member of a profession and engages in a professional role. Again, Jarvis-Selinger et al. (2012) proposed a similar assumption in his 'A 5 Stage Model' of identity formation, as he argued that the formation of professional identity develops at two levels firstly, at a collective level, which involves the socialisation of a person into appropriate roles and forms of participation in the work's community 'Act Role', secondly; identity formation at an individual level which involves the development of the personnel (how to be and how to become).

Referring to what has been said above, the unstable nature of professional identity seems to be a central issue among sociologists, as most of the literature agrees that this formation is an evolving and ongoing process. This perspective is supported by Webb (2017), Jarvis-Slinger et al. (2012) and Forouzadeh et al. (2018), who described professional identity as more interactive than a relatively straightforward process. Webb (2017) stated that professional identity is not stable; it is an ongoing process of interpretation and customisation shaped by contextual workplace factors. As per Swennen et al. (2010) the concept of professional identity is not a fixed or predetermined notion. It is a continuous process that evolves over time and is influenced by an individual's professional and organisational experiences. Therefore, professional identity is an ongoing journey of comprehending and reassessing these experiences throughout one's career.

Based on the above views, it is clear that there is consent among commentators that professional identity is continuously evolving and developing. However, other commentators, such as Joynes (2018), claimed that professional identity develops mainly through socialisation into a profession and exposure to professional behaviour and interaction in the real world of practices. That being so, Jones is mainly focused on factors that contribute to constructing and developing professional identity; however, he does not adequately answer some related questions, such as the role of professional socialisations, professional training and the interaction with other professionals within a profession, not only in constructing professional identity but also in re-constructing it, besides how individual build and uphold -if possible- a matured professional identity.

Considering these different attempts to analyse the process of professional identity formation, this researcher suggests that the identity formation process can also be understood as a 'social state of mind'. This suggested approach or perspective of professional identity will provide insight into the concept and formation of professional identity, which builds upon two basic assumptions. These two assumptions were illustrated separately in most of the previous studies. The first assumption is the 'professional self', and the second is the 'socio-dynamic' nature of the process. These two interrelated components of professional identity appeared when professional identity formation was discussed in sociology in the medical field. For instance, Vivekananda-Schmidt et al. (2015b), in their focus on building a model of professional identity formation, concluded that the self-perception of a professional is a key element in forming his/her professional identity; in other words, this formation of one self's professional identity is personal or an internal process by which individual professionals modify and develop their behaviour to accept the responsibilities and obligations associated with the professional role. Similarly, in his study of professional identity, Haller and Muller (2008) referred to the natural connection between the self and personality and recommended integrating them in any attempt to define the process. Based on this, Haller and Muller designed a personality model in which they claimed that professional identity is shaped by the big five personality characteristics, which are limited personal traits that form identity and influence its formation. These big fives are openness to new experiences, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and extraversion; however, other authors such as Cobb-Clark and Schurer (2012) questioned this model and considered these big five as unstable and inconsistent personal traits. In the same vein, Crocette et al. (2008) revealed in their identity formation model that the Big Five personality dimensions of extroversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, along with emotional stability, are intertwined in the process of identity formation, with in-depth self-exploration, commitment, and reconsideration of commitment, this will intensify the formation. Although Haller, Muller, Crocett, and Mees's discourse highlighted an important aspect of professional identity, which is the personal traits, as well as their attempt to address the identity question of who am I?. Valid questions can be asked, such as, are these big five traits measurable? Even so, can the personality test, widely used as a tool for self-assessment, be applied to examine professional identity on a collective level? Although most literature lacks addressing these issues, it is understandable that this can be due to the difficulties in identifying an appropriate tool or a method of analysing the concept aside from those in the medical field, such as the self-evaluation mechanism, even though this method can only be implemented on an individual level, not on a collective level, such as measuring the shared identity.

Moreover, This researcher maintains that limiting professional identity mostly to 'oneself' or personal qualities appears to be a narrow perspective to understand professional identity formation based only on the pre-existing personal traits and rule out other active ingredients that form identity. These other active ingredients were highlighted by other researchers, such as Liegh (2019), who asserted that professional identity is not just an interpretation of personal traits and attributes or who we are but also provides insights into elements of the environment that affect a professional's experience. As such, Identity construction can be seen as a negotiation with both self and others and within the discourses present in one's life. Mancini et al. (2015) expressed a similar view by arguing that professional identity includes personal and social dimensions; they also attempted to provide evidence of the relationship between inter-group and inter-individual processes through work value, professionals' behavioural involvement and emotional adjustment.

In general, the views of Haller, Muller and Crocett haven't provided answers to questions closely related to the Big Five characteristics; for instance, are these attributes fixed or changeable over time? Would the change's impact on the stability of one's professional identity if it occurred? Are there any other non-personal attributes that may influence and contribute to identity formation?

Other commentators cited additional attributes and described them as necessary facets of professional identity formation; these traits were mentioned by Dasher and Fletcher (2019), which include notions such as autonomy, peer review, critical self-evaluation, and professional judgement. Additionally, are these big five traits measurable? Even so, can the personality test, widely used as a tool to measure the Big Five, be applied to measure professional identity on a collective level? Although most literature lacks addressing these issues, it is understandable that this can be due to the difficulties in identifying an appropriate tool or a method of measuring the concept aside from those in the medical field, such as the self-evaluation mechanism, even though this method can only be implemented on an individual level, not on a collective level, such as measuring the shared identity.

The second assumption and the foundation of this suggested approach proposed by this researcher is the socio-dynamic nature of professional identity, which is based on the argument that professional identity is mainly of a social nature. This view can be promoted by the previous work of Fricke (2010), who saw professional identity as a social construct defined and valued only when evaluated against a specific cultural context. Thus, professional individuals classify their place in the world based on their membership in a collective group, during which individuals are influenced more by the categorisations of others than their cognitions and emotions (see for further details; Goldie (2012) who conducted a study on the formation of professional identity in medical students published in Medical Teachers' Journal). Relatedly, Evetts and Aldridge (2013) described professional identity, produced and re-produced through socialisation, as a work-inflected phenomenon distinctly structured by work contexts. Once again, Evetts and Aldridge devoted their efforts to outlining only one aspect of professional identity formation, demonstrating that the concept could often be best understood concerning inter-group processes and relations.

The previous literature attempts to examine professional identity formation took two different approaches. The first approach was concerned with the concept's nature with no meaningful focus on its components (Lane, 2018; Webb, 2017). Likewise, professions, these attempts resulted in more conceptual confusion in defining and understanding what professional identity is and how it forms, yet this can mean different things to different professionals within different professions.

Moreover, the literature that approached professional identity missed noticing how professionals balance their personal identity components, such as inherited traits, values, culture and beliefs and their work identity, as well as how this will impact their professional decision-making in given situations. In the second approach, much of the research has focussed on self-identification and how professionals self-define themselves in relation to their professions, and here it can be said that professional identity in, its root is a personal identity that is mostly shaped by the organisation’s culture, values and ethics well as, through professionals’ social engagement with colleagues in a professional work environment. To illustrate this, the concept and formation can be best described as a self-controlled situational human behaviour influenced by a particular social atmosphere in a work context and can be interpreted into actions and attitudes.

### 2.6.4 Components of Professional Identity.

Commentators from various disciplines highlight other crucial components of professional identity, including an individual's self-perception as a professional, socialisation, and interactions within their group. This section will explore these elements that together shape professional identity.

#### *2.6.4.1 Reflection.*

Several studies have evidenced that reflection significantly contributes to building professional knowledge, confidence, and personal and professional identity, besides enabling professionals to learn and relate to their work (Chin et al., 2020). Although reflection thinking is traditionally linked with problem-solving, practicing reflection is an essential part of a professional's self-knowledge creation. It involves a critical inquiry into one's beliefs, values, and actions and is intended to bridge the gap between what is theoretically learned and real practice.

Sociology scholars such as Robledo-Gil et al. (2022) contended that reflection could also take the form of the 'social self' where a professional reflects on him/herself in relation to others within the same group with a supporting mechanism -besides his/her socialisation-, usually provided by learning organisations or professions and include, mentoring, and coaching. A study conducted by Moseley, et al. (2021) found that the experiential education environment, which facilitates in-action reflection, besides the close supervision and professional engagement with mentors, contributes to the quick evolution of professionals' identities.

Schon, as cited in Kehily (2012), argues that reflection is a key element in professional knowledge construction as a component of professional identity. He referred to two types of reflections, in-action and on-action, where the reflection takes place during the process (continuation or adjustment) or after the process (recalling, reconstructing or analysing the action) (Chin et al., 2020). Further to this, the medical field is famous for a third type of reflection known as the reflective judgement, which aims to enhance professionals' knowledge through the re-evaluation of existing evidence or seeking new evidence to solve ill-structured problems (Boyd, 2008). A study conducted by King and Kitchener (2004) revealed that reflective judgement is part of professionals' knowing process as it provides alternative approaches, evidence, and rules to challenge existing assertions. That being said, it can be assumed that reflection and knowledge creation are closely intertwined and equally contribute to professional identity construction because reflection internalises knowledge, helps professionals to apply it in real situations, and, as a result, creates a sense of worthiness and belonging through effectiveness and competency.

#### *2.6.4.2 Professional Knowledge.*

According to the attribute approach to professions, specialised knowledge is a key feature of professional activities and identity. Cech (2015) stated that ‘even during academic education, aspiring professionals are expected to develop a professional identity that upholds the values and norms of their professions. As earlier illustrated by Greenwood (1957b), the systematic body of theory and specialised knowledge, either theoretical or practical, possessed by professionals legitimates professional activities and is the source of professional knowledge-based authority. Professional knowledge as a key component of professional identity is acquired through professionals’ exposure to formal and informal education, certification, training, practical experiences, and professional interactions with the in-group members (Suarez and McGrath, 2022).

As argued by Brosnan (2015), key distinguishing attributes of professions are autonomy and professionals’ ability, through their professions, to determine how they perform the work, control education and training, and other entry requirements without being subject to evaluation by out-groups apart from the state that grants them the legitimacy, an example of such professional knowledge exists in the medical field where professionals’ specialised knowledge allows them to exercise autonomy by making critical decisions and act against their emotions to serve a greater good based on their ‘professionals selves’, not on ‘emotional selves (Pfaff et al., 2023). Relatedly, a study conducted by Young et al. (2012) revealed that when an individual perceives himself as a do-gooder, this positively impacts his self-concept and increases his moral consciousness and behaviour, more precisely, Lohbeck et al. (2018) their study of 248 German teachers found that teachers’ self-concept and emotions are greatly influenced and positively related to the role they perform, including subject content knowledge, motivating students and academic achievements (see also Lachner, Jarodzka and Nückles, 2016).

#### *2.6.4.3 The Practical Wisdom.*

As a concept elaborated by Aristotle, practical wisdom (also known as practical rationality and phronesis) refers to an individual's ability to make wise decisions and take morally grounded action using knowledge, practical reflections, experience, and judgment (Kristjánsson et al., 2021), besides moral will and moral skills (Schwartz, 2011). Practical wisdom is as important as professional knowledge in professional identity formation. For instance, in medicine, professional knowledge requires health professionals to combine medical knowledge and clinical experience to make the best decision. In contrast, practical wisdom requires them to analyse and evaluate medical facts, weigh and assess the benefits and risks of treatment options and understand the broader emotional, social, and cultural aspects unique to each patient. As such, practical wisdom for doctors should be used as a framework for their professional knowledge (Massingham, 2019). Practical wisdom involves not only considering clinical and technical knowledge but also a deep and judgemental reflection on practices that enables healthcare providers to take a more comprehensive approach to assess needs and deliver outcome-oriented services. Kaldjian stated that a proper understanding of doctors' clinical thinking requires seeing good clinical judgement as a form of phronesis itself (cited in Paton and Kotzee, 2021). This led Panton and Cotzee (2021) to suggest that clinical practitioners are demanded to combine their medical knowledge with service users' preferences, the social contract, and service providers' moral views. On the whole, it will be reasonable to argue that practitioners with high practical wisdom are more likely to have a more developed professional identity based on the assumption that practical wisdom in itself encompasses several other professional identities, micro and macro components, including professional knowledge and skills, reflection on practice, values, beliefs and more importantly, the moral responsibilities (Gusar, Tokić and Lovrić, 2021). This assumption can be supported by Liang et al. (2020) argument that the demonstration of high standards of clinical knowledge and profession ethics are not only required to form a medical professional identity but also to guide the professional identity formation process.

Practical wisdom can also be considered a key component of teachers' professional identity, as teaching is considered by many as a reflective social practice that requires not only professional knowledge but also moral wisdom (Cooke and Carr, 2014). Stenberg and Maaranen (2022), debated that professional knowledge and occupational skills are central in the teaching profession but are not enough to deal with multifaced and continuous changes taking place in classrooms; thus, teachers are expected to have the ability to make the correct and immediate pedagogical decisions based on their awareness of the current situation. Relatedly, Lunenberg and Korthagen (2009) argued that teachers' awareness is essential to practical wisdom as it shapes their perceptions of the situation and informs logically structured actions.

#### *2.6.4.4 Professional Identity Authentication.*

Identity authentication as a term and being authentic as an attribute of professionals have attracted the attention of sociologists, psychologists, and philosophers for the past few decades. As a concept, most definitions assume that professional identity authenticity is the alignment between the real self and the expressions of it (Sedikides, Gaertner and O'Mara, 2011) or the alignment between an individual's attributes, such as beliefs and values, and their representation. From a practical point of view, being authentic refers to a professional's ability to act according to his/her true self in his/her daily professional activities (Metin et al., 2016) or in other words, practice what you breach. That said, professional identity authentication can be understood on two levels; the first one is concerned with the self with its personal and social multiple identities, and the second is concerned with identity authentication on a collective level (Pierce, 2015).

Stets and Burke (2014), when debating the dimensions of self-esteem, self-worth, self-acceptance, and authenticity, argued that individuals' desire to feel valued motivates them to act positively to maintain and enhance this positive self-view and social worth in a process known as identity verification. As such, they define themselves in two ways: by examining their roles and how they act and respond to these roles, as well as by observing others (Davis, 2014). A study by Sloan in social psychology found that individuals' actions and expressions are not natural or genuine; instead, they are shaped by cultural beliefs, socialisation processes and structural positions (Sloan, 2007). This led him to assume that authentic professional identity requires professionals to possess adaptive behaviour and flexible attitudes toward work activities as core professional attributes. Demonstrating adaptive behaviour and positive attitudes can facilitate identity construction, stability, and authentication on both individual and collective identity levels, especially in times of change and the ambiguity associated with it, such as the radical ones caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in teaching and medical practices (Khaw et al., 2023).

## 2.7 Chapter Summary and Findings.

Well-established, emerging, or aspiring professions are typically developed in different socio-economic, technological, and political environments. As a result, each profession is subject to a certain level of complexity that requires it to focus on specific professionalisation processes or structural changes to regulate its activity and justify its existence. The conditions that led to the emergence of old and recognised professions differ, and undisputed social needs necessitated their existence. The traditional literature on professions, such as medicine and law, was less concerned with the social aspects of professions. However, today, the social aspect significantly influences and impacts the formation and reformation of professions. Societal factors, such as the rise of service users' expectations or ratings, have a significant impact, ranging from the evaluation of the service quality provided to the assessment of professionals' expertise or level of knowledge, as well as clients' and consumers' rights legislations. Other external sources of power, such as the Ombudsman in the UK, act as ethical guardians or as evaluators of service standards. All of these have led to a decrease in the role of the nation-state as the ultimate grantor of professional status. For instance, while some professions, such as social work, are well recognised by the state, their professional status is questioned by society, as argued by Yee (2001). This suggestion can also be linked with the functional perspective on professions, which is concerned with the interaction between professions and the broader society.

It was also found that, although the discussed literature provided different theoretical frameworks of the profession, professionalism, and professional identity, the three concepts remain interconnected and share similar attributes and structural features. For instance, professional activities can be distinguished from non-professional occupations based on characteristics and attributes. By the same token, professionalism as a concept and a practice is associated with professional activities attributes such as specialised knowledge, code of conduct, and other behavioural and attitudinal attributes, as well as the assumption that professional practitioners are expected to act and perform according to predefined standards set by professions, possess relative qualifications, skills and competencies, and develop professional identities. Similarly, professional identity is determined by qualities and attributes, including reflection, professional knowledge, and practical wisdom. Thus, investigating these three concepts from an attribute's perspective establishes their connectedness and ensures analysis consistency.

In this chapter, this researcher proposed that the Walker and Avant concept analysis method can be used to analyse the concept of professional identity. Although the original method consists of eight steps, this study only used five steps to develop a practical and conceptual understanding of professional identity. The method has been modified to overcome the practical limitations of defining professional identity, providing a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of its complex and multifaceted nature. This researcher suggested that the professional identity -at its root- is the meanings and attributes that one attaches to him/herself. It is shaped by the organisation's overall or departmental culture, values, and ethics, as well as through social interaction with colleagues in a professional work environment.

# Chapter 3. The Evolution of HRM: Role, Function and Profession.

## 3.1 Introduction.

This chapter investigated the development of HRM. The first section started with defining the Personnel Management (PM) concept and how it was approached and developed. The second section discussed the emergence of Human Resource Management (HRM), the evolution of Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) and the practices associated with HRM strategic direction. In its last section, the chapter discussed the devolution of HR, a practice associated with the strategic dimension of HRM, besides the opportunities and challenges facing the practice. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on practice was illustrated as one of the most recent changes that have forced HRM to adapt or perhaps reform its philosophy, practices, and applications.

## 3.2 Personnel Management (PM).

Several attempts have been made to trace the historical developments of HRM discipline. However, these initiatives have focussed mainly on certain times or specific countries and regions such as the USA, Australia, the United Kingdom and Asia (Chukwunonso, 2013; Tubey, Rotich and Kurgat, 2015).

Personnel Management (PM) is concerned with human beings in an organisation. There are several definitions of PM; however, these definitions can be categorised into two main groups: the traditional definitions, which define PM as an old version of HRM and a second group, which defines and links the concept with the changes in the social and economic activities throughout the history. Kaufman (2014) detailed how the concept of Personnel Management emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, while others, such as Mujahid et al. (2014) and Thronthwaite (2012), were more concerned with identifying the reasons that led to the emergence of personnel management in different western countries in the early twentieth century, these reasons are mostly associated with the industrial revolution, mass production, socio-political factors in addition to, the shift to bureaucratised control, internal labour market strategies to facilitate more efficient employer coordination and control of employees as organisations grew in size and complexity.

Tubey et al. (2015) suggested that the same above reasons which led to the emergence of PM, in particular the adoption of mass production and the socio-political factors, forced workers to act collectively to improve work conditions, attract the public's attention to their poor employment conditions as well as to force the government to issue and pass legislations and laws to regulate hours of work, increase wages and to protect workers from unhealthy or unsafe working conditions. Therefore, this stage of the evolution of PM can be linked with more intervention from the severely underprivileged workers and labourers in PM function and employment practices, besides workers' attempt to gain more power to negotiate for better wages and good working conditions. This assumption can be reasonable, especially when it is compared with what was concluded by Singer (1990) and Makhlouf (2016), who outlined that during that time -before and during World WWII- newly formed departments were established in factories and mass production businesses to handle employee welfare concerns. They attributed this move to the overwhelming desire on the part of employers to prevent unionisation efforts, which were not broadly accepted and met with a great deal of suspicion and hostility by employers both in the United Kingdom and the United States, especially when unions started to use strikes as a primary instrument to put pressure on employers to force them to accept their demands and attain better settlements with the employers. However, this assumption can be particularly disputed when we look at other opinions, such as that stated by DeNisi et al. (2014), who claimed that the organized personnel department is dedicated to improving worker relations by properly handling employee grievances, discharges, health and safety issues, and other employee-related issues.

According to Mayo (1969) and Ahammad (2017a), PM can be defined as bureaucratic processes and policies developed from social science theories. These processes are used to manage people in a structured manner, focusing on employee relations. This definition primarily deals with personnel welfare and industrial relations aspects of an organisation, as well as covering the fields of staffing such as hiring employees, retention, pay and perks, setting and managing performance, management of change, and taking care of exits from the organisation.

The people-centred approach to personnel management was first pointed out during the early 1900s in the work of FrederickTylor (1910), the principles of scientific management. Frederick introduced an approach termed ‘’Taylorism’’ aimed mainly at improving efficiency in manufacturing jobs (see also Obedgiu, 2017), by which the organisations will be able to scientifically select and then train, teach and develop workers to ensure all of the work has been done, besides an equal division of the work and responsibilities between the management and workers. Singer (1990) illustrated that the approach developed by Frederick and his contemporaries Lillian and Frank aimed mainly at improving workplace efficiency and setting standards for workforce performance by recruiting and selecting the best person to do the job. Apparently, Frederick, through his principles of scientific management, attempted to design a simple system of employee performance that was aimed at improving the overall performance of the organisation. However, Frederick’s framework was only ‘role-oriented’; thus, his approach to the concept of Personnel Management is indistinguishable from the ‘System-Centred’ perspective of any economic activities other than it lacked setting an appropriate system by which a balance can be created between individual goals and needs, and the organisations’ economic goals.

Furthermore, it should be noted that Abdullah (2009), when discussing the term PM, pointed out that the term ‘Human capital’ was associated with a negative undertone and dealt with workers as an economic asset; however, when the term emerged again, it was redefined by other commentators such as Gary (1994) who explained that the term ‘Human Capital’ refers to the people whose assets are of value and can be enhanced through investment, although, his explanation means that an organisation tries to maintain the contributions of its members and direct their efforts to achieve success and serve its financial purposes.

In general, these widely used definitions considered PM as a tool to achieve efficiency and high economic performance; however, less attention was given to achieving justice or creating a reward system that will eventually enable the working individuals and groups to make both the best contribution to the success of the businesses as well as achieving their personal goals. Added to this, little consideration was given to other aspects of personnel, such as the participation of personnel representing bodies such as unions in the decision-making process. Related to this, Rea (1972a) in his commentaries on the definition of PM provided by the CIPD, he states that it is a specialised business unit primarily concerned with managing people's work-related issues and their relationships with the organisation or employer. Rea furthered his perspective by stating that PM aims to band together, organise, and develop an effective association between the men and women who make up an enterprise to achieve economic goals. It is, however, important to note that the definitions provided by some authors, including Abdullah (2009), Gary (1994) and Rea (1972b), basically stemmed from the socio-economical atmosphere that engulfed enterprises in that era, which was mainly concerned with utilising the organised workforce to increase businesses' financial gain through maximising productivity and improving efficiency and abilities to accommodate changes. Besides, these definitions view PM according to the organisation's needs. They regarded personnel as a tool to achieve economic results and to service an existing production system with limited consideration of other aspects related to the human side of the term, such as the practices of fairness, justice and engagement. As such, these views represented a biased perspective which focused on productivity, profitability and economic gains, and little consideration was given to personnel well-being and prosperity.

The same staff-centred approach to PM was strongly supported by Lamond (1995), who perceived it as a series of activities consisting of, firstly, a contractual relationship that enables working people and their employing organisations to agree on the objectives and nature of their working relationship and, secondly, assurances that the agreement is fulfilled. Similarly, Ahammad (2017a) believes that PM is an operational function of a business that supplies an organisation with the staff needed for its activities and manages the relationship between staff and organisation. Ahmed also emphasised the technical aspects of personnel management, such as hiring, evaluating, training, and compensating employees or, in other words, an operational staff function unit in most organisations.

To summarise, This researcher contends that the work done by the above commentators shows that Personnel Management has an important strategic dimension. However, it has always been described as a 'strategy–free' practice. These undetected strategical dimensions of personnel management appeared firstly in Fredrick's work of enhancing performance through knowledge and training and practically introduced an old version of the concept of the 'best fit' in the work division among the workforce. The second was shown in the attempt of businesses to re-position themselves to adapt to /or challenge some external national and international forces, including political intervention in the economic activities, especially during and after WWI and WWII macro-economic changes, societal and legal pressure to improve work conditions and the increased power of labour unionisation movement (Baron, Dobbin and Jennings, 1986). The third and most important strategic dimension of personnel management was implementing competency-based pay systems to achieve two major goals: changing employee behaviour towards work and enhancing productivity to maximise organisational performance (for traditional reward systems can improve employee performance and businesses' competitive advantages, see Maycock, Ikuomola and Johnson, 2015).

### 3.2.1 The Historical Development of Personnel Management: 1900s – 1960s.

For many, the Industrial Revolution started with the introduction of new technologies such as the steam engines and spinning Jenny in Britain in the late 18th century. These technological advancements revolutionised the manufacturing industry in Britain and soon spread to other parts of Europe and

America. Consequently, this transformation caused a significant shift from the traditional rural lifestyle as people migrated to cities for employment opportunities. The newly established factories employed women and men, with textile production being the most prominent industrial activity, in addition to other activities such as glasswork, metalwork, and paper production (Groumpos, 2021).

During this period, also known as the welfare or administration stage of personnel management, factories in the United Kingdom and the United States of America recognised the importance of prioritising employee welfare. This period saw welfare officers appointed as the primary point of contact between the factory management and workers (Eilbirt, 2012b). Their role was to investigate and implement various forms of improvement to enhance employee well-being. During this time, mass production processes became widely adopted., which led to concerns over workers' unhealthy and hazardous work conditions, prompting collective action for work condition improvement (Davison and Smothers, 2015). Social theories, such as the Marxist, Humanitarian and Cooperative theories, may have influenced the growing tension between management and workers (Rotich, 2015). However, out of the three theories mentioned, the Marxist theory was thought to be the main driving force behind labour movements as it established the basis for theorising the relationship between the economy and the workmen/women operating within the economic system (Guy-Evans, 2024). Similarly, Marx's views on the division of labour and mass production, referred to as proletarianisation, led to a rise in demand for a welfare class, a notion that was heavily endorsed by social reformers, journalists, and labour unions (Schaupp, 2022).

'We stand on the threshold of a new era in which attention and interest are beginning to shift from…things that are worked with, to the worker; from the machinery of the industry to the man who made, owns, or operates it' Robert Yerkes, Chairman of the Personnel Research Federation, National Research Council, 1922

As the industrial growth expanded, organisations -as mentioned earlier- needed to establish protocols to handle the increasing number of employees. While a few welfare officers were in place by 1900, it wasn't until 1916 that the earliest form of personnel management emerged (Jerrell, 1997). At that time, companies employed welfare officers to enhance workers' quality of life. They accomplished this by offering access to reading materials, dining facilities, and sick rooms. Additionally, they dealt with employee concerns and complaints, managed recruitment and placement, and inspected workers' homes to ensure sanitary conditions.

##### *3.2.1.1 The Evolving Professionalisation of Personnel Management: The Influence of Taylorism and Scientific Management.*

Frederick Winslow Taylor, a renowned engineer who lived between 1856 and 1915, is widely recognised for his pioneering contributions to optimising factory systems across America and Europe. He is credited with introducing the concept of maximising output, which transformed the way manufacturing processes were carried out, leading to significant improvements in productivity and efficiency (Nelson, 1992; Uddin and Hossain, 2015). Taylor's approach involved closely observing human behaviour at work and creating a set of rules to operate and utilise workers' skills effectively. In his work ‘Principles of Scientific Management’, Taylor not only revolutionised the production systems in the industrial sector but also transformed the rule of thumb into the science of management principles through his suggested systematic theoretical and practical approach to management (Grachev and Rakitsky, 2013).

‘We do not want any initiatives. All we want is them to obey the orders we give, do what we say and do it quick’ FW Taylor, The Principles of Scientific Management, 1911

In addition to the above brutal statement, several elements of an autocratic personnel management style were visible in Taylor's approach to scientific management. Particularly his notion of a financial-based reward system, workers’ productivity and his detailed analysis of worker behaviour (Uddin and

Hossain, 2015). By applying a positivist scientific approach, Taylor studied the relationship between the efficiency of workers and the performance of newly invented machines used in factories on one side and the relationship between workers and their management on the other.

Unlike the Marxian ideology, Taylor rejected the concept of 'class struggle', which both workers and managers accepted at that time. He put the claim that 'the pie is big enough' (Taylor, 1912, cited in Locke, 1982, p.4). Therefore, the two parties depend on each other and share a common interest based on the belief that increased production and reduced costs will result in higher wages through the performance-based reward system. (Locke, 1982; Turan, 2015).

The PM concept of workforce planning and the separation of tasks into planning (management) and execution (workers) were fundamental principles of Taylorism (see the above quotation from FW Taylor, 1911). This approach was adopted to ensure workers were assigned duties aligned with their unique abilities and skillsets. Perhaps the underlying rationale behind this proposed method was likely to improve productivity and efficiency in the workplace. To further improve worker performance, Taylor divided tasks into smaller units and attempted to identify the best training method for workers to achieve the maximum expected output. Through this, Taylor recognised the inefficiencies in traditional businesses and established that each work task should be executed under the maximum capacity of workers with a predetermined work method and specific training format (Littler, 1978).

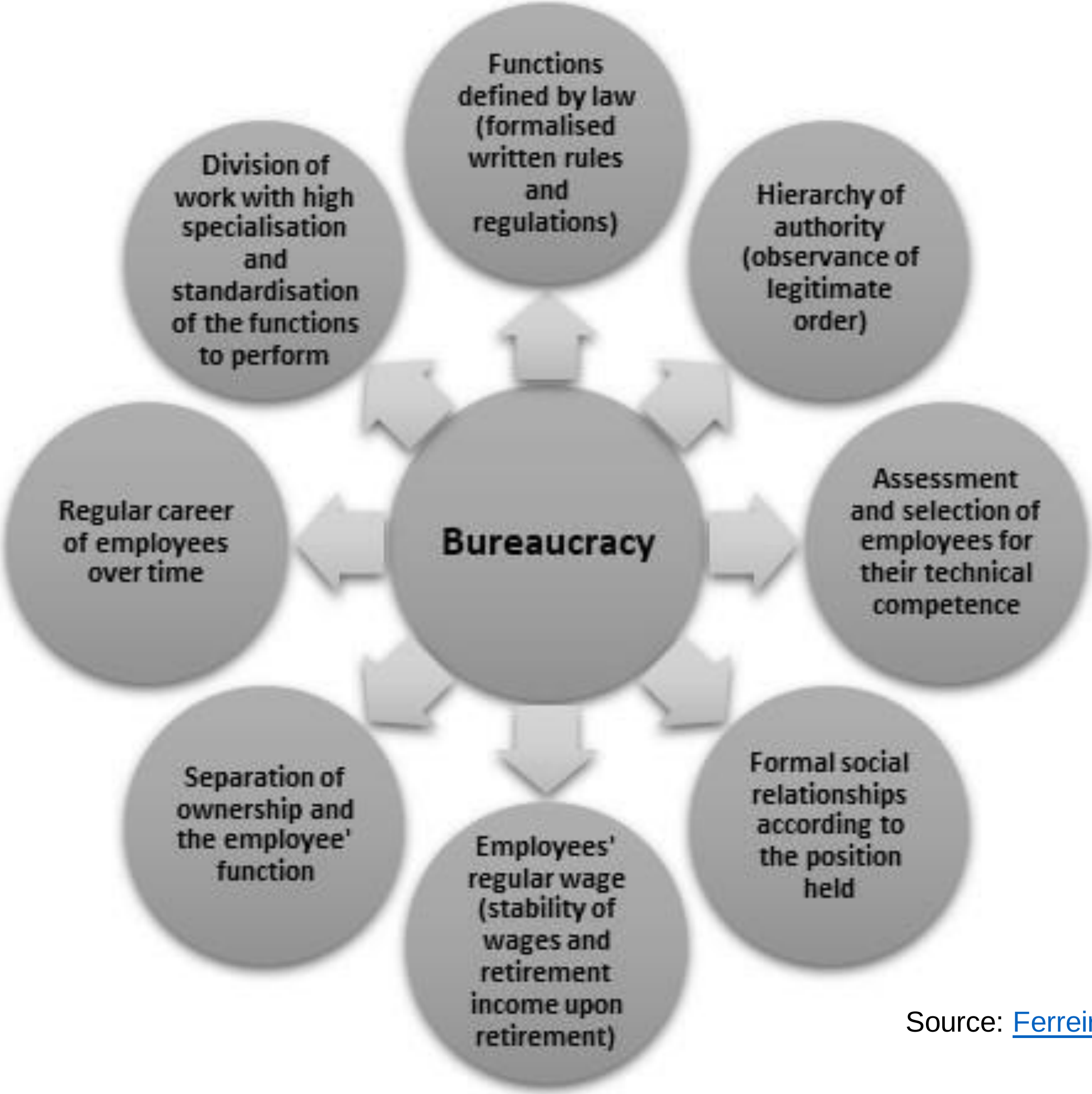
The field of labour management relations focuses on regulating the relationship between employers and employees, both as a group and individually. It covers substantive and procedural matters at various levels, including industrial, organisational, and workplace levels (Okhawere, 2023, p.309). Taylor's managerial ideology noticeably influenced his approach to labour-management relations. To clarify this, in his argument, Taylor asserted that his management philosophy would yield benefits for both workers and employers. He placed great emphasis on the need for collaboration amongst all parties involved in production and stated that this would ultimately lead to an improvement in the firm's overall performance (Nyland, 1998). This approach, referred to as the mutual-gains strategy in industrial relations, is widely supported by other theorists in the field, including Cohen-Rosenthal, Burton, Kochan, and Osterman (cited in Nyland, 1998, p.521). However, the approach proposed by Taylor regarding labour-management mutual gains in industrial relations seems to lack innovation and fails to foster collaboration. The assumption that workers can enhance productivity solely by adhering to management's instructions appears incomplete and overlooks the valuable contribution of workers' ideas and perspectives. A more comprehensive approach to industrial relations would involve a collaborative effort between workers and management to identify and address the underlying issues that hinder productivity. This approach can lead to a more inclusive and effective work environment, resulting in better outcomes for all stakeholders involved. For example, the labour-management partnership industrial relations approach aims to establish cooperative industrial relations and secure benefits for employers and employees through innovation, creativity, and business success (Lee and Lee, 2009).

Besides Marxism and Taylorism, other theoretical approaches have influenced the development of personnel management. One such approach is the Systems Conceptual Model created by John T Dunlop an American Professor of Labour Economics (Heery and Noon, 2008). According to this model, personnel management is a subsystem composed of three main components: workers and their organisation, employers and their associations, and the government (Okhawere, 2023, p.309). Like Marxian power struggle and Taylor's behavioural perspective, the System Model paid particular attention to employees' behaviour and interactions with other subsystem components by describing employees as an industrial society -with no hierarchy or distinctiveness among its members- engaging in a power conflict with managers and their representatives. Nonetheless, the nature and intensity of the interaction are heavily influenced by the actions taken by specialised government agencies, besides any changes in other external factors such as markets and technological advancements (Dunlop, 1999, pp.44–47).

Although Dunlop is widely recognised for his contribution to personnel management and industrial relations – and his model is taught in universities- some authors, such as Piore and Stafford, contend that his approach is overly simplistic and lacks clear theoretical deduction where he has not defined or articulated the key concepts of system and subsystems (Piore and Safford, 2006). Furthermore, a significant flaw in Dunlop's theory is the lack of adequate reasoning for choosing only three external factors (technological advancement, markets, and government agencies), which may undermine the validity of his approach. To provide more clarity, it might be important to take into account the social and cultural environments in which a business operates and the way it manages its personnel; this involves aspects such as work ethics, level of motivation and attitudes towards work. It is worth noting that Dunlop's approach may have a potential limitation in that it regards workers as a singular social unit, as opposed to Taylorism, which allocates roles and responsibilities based on individual skill differences. As such, this approach may overlook the specific skills and strengths of individual workers, which could have an impact on overall productivity and efficiency within the workplace.

The social action approach theory, developed by Max Weber (1864-1920), a sociologist and political economist, has significantly influenced the development of personnel management. Through his focus on bureaucratic administration and human behaviour, Weber's perspective on personnel management is built upon three fundamental assumptions (Chidi et al., 2012). Firstly, it acknowledges the inherent human qualities and emotions that individuals possess. Secondly, it recognises the influence of informal small groups on an individual's behaviour within the organisation. Finally, the theory emphasises the importance of an individual's distinctive personality traits, which can significantly influence their behaviour and decision-making abilities in a workplace environment (Serpa and Ferreira, 2019a). However, the extent to which an individual can participate in decision-making depends on the level of autonomy and his/her position within the organisation's hierarchy (Weber, 1922, cited in Koch, 1994, p.10).

Figure 3. Characteristics of Bureaucratic Administration




Source: Ferreira, and Serpa, 2019, p. 14

Based on the bureaucracy administration's three assumptions, it can be argued that Weber's approach places significant emphasis on two key areas of personnel management: the level of authority and dominance that managers, stakeholders, or organisations hold over the nature and operations of personnel management and the employee behaviour within the workplace. Weber's interest in power, control, and employee behaviour makes it seem as if he attempted to provide a more inclusive approach to PM by combining Taylorism's scientific management and Dunlop's systems approach. Both Taylor and Weber asserted the hierarchy of authority and management control over the division of work and jobs design, recruitment, employee planning and assessment, besides the separation of ownership and employee function (Okhawere, 2023; Serpa and Ferreira, 2019b). By the same token, Weber and Dunlop highlighted the behavioural dimension in personnel management; however, Dunlop provided a more articulated view by indicating the behaviour of employees as a subsystem and how this can influence the interaction with management.

In summary, personnel management was mainly a reactive function within businesses during the previously mentioned period. It is important to note that the theoretical foundation for personnel management as a function -as established by Dunlop, Taylor, and Weber-, was significantly influenced by their social, political, and economic climate. As a result, the functional scope of personnel management can be delineated in the following points:

#### *3.2.1.2 Recruitment and Selection.*

The shift to mass production and social and political changes, including the onset of World War I, represented forced and unanticipated changes to the industrial sector (see ONS, 2019). Before these changes, agriculture was a common source of employment, and most businesses were generally small and family-run; thus, owners rarely needed employees outside their families (Jerrell, 1997). These changes resulted in a higher need for workers, but finding suitable candidates was difficult due to the lack of well-defined recruitment strategies. Methods such as advertising, skill assessments, medical tests, and future workforce planning were not commonly used during the selection process (Jerrell, 1997); however, it is possible to assume that the lack of employment regulations, particularly those pertaining to anti-discrimination, equality and diversity laws contributed to this aspect of personnel management. Added to this, employers may have been more focused on fulfilling the immediate staffing requirements and productivity targets than ensuring that their recruitment and selection practices were fair and impartial.

#### *3.2.1.3 Employees' welfare.*

During the evolution of personnel management, the emergence of welfare officers or welfare secretaries can be considered the first step towards promoting the well-being of employees within the industrial sector. This was in response to ethical pressure from Marxian and social movements, as previously mentioned (Guy-Evans, 2024; Rotich, 2015). The role of employees' welfare as a new managerial function was primarily developed to improve work conditions and ensure the safety and well-being of workers. However, apart from the Old Age Pension Act 1908 (Thurley, 2008), and the National Insurance Act of 1911 (Gilbert, 1965). It was only in the mid-1950s that employment well-being regulations and legislation started to become well-recognised by businesses. For instance, the Agriculture Safety, Health and Welfare Provisions Act 1956 was established during this time to protect both agricultural workers and children who may come into contact with agricultural machinery; this crucial act included a set of regulations that aimed to ensure the safety, health, and welfare of all those involved in the agricultural industry (UK Public General Acts 1956). It is, however, important to note that the aforementioned regulations only focused on factors that directly impact employees' performance and productivity and lacked formal procedures and policies that aim to examine or improve the quality of life of employees apart from those included in the welfare officers/secretaries' duties (Uddin and Hossain, 2015).

Development has accelerated, and numerous regulations have been introduced to balance the rights and responsibilities of employers and employees. This ensures fair treatment, safety, and respect in the workplace. Key acts and regulations include the Employment Rights Act 1996, Working Time Regulations 1998, National Minimum Wage Act 1998, Employment Relations Act 1999, Maternity and Parental Leave Regulations 1999, Part-time Workers Regulations 2000, Employment Equality Regulations 2006, Equality Act 2010, and more recently, the Carer's Leave Act 2023 and Protection from Redundancy Regulations 2023 (Madden, 2024).

#### *3.2.1.4 Employees' Performance Management.*

During the early stages of PM development, the focus was on maximising outputs, productivity, and efficiency. This was based on the scientific management approach developed by Taylor, which emphasises observing employees' behaviour and personal qualities to identify training and development opportunities in order to enhance their productivity, efficiency and overall organisational growth and profitability (Nelson, 1992; Taylor, 1910). Weber and Taylor share a similar perspective on performance management, acknowledging the importance of recognising individuals' inherent human qualities and emotions. Their approaches involve a hierarchical and operational performance system, where objectives and outputs are determined from the highest level to the lowest. This ensures that the organisation's goals are aligned and effectively cascaded down to each employee's role and responsibilities, ultimately contributing to the company's overall success (Mohanty and Shankar, 2019).

Although the performance management dimension can be considered the most developed aspect of personnel management, the dominance of the power and control approach negatively impacted this practice. Besides the lack of employee engagement in determining the desired productivity targets due to the hierarchical and bureaucratic nature of employees' management systems, the widespread adoption of the systems model developed by Dunlop has marginalised employees' perspective in performance management based on the assumption that personnel is a singular social unit and operational subsystem within organisations that have no strategic role or participation in short or long-term planning; this is due to the top-down management style (Chidi et al., 2012; Heery and Noon, 2008).

All in all, it can be assumed that insufficient engagement mechanisms and practices- at that stage of personnel management- such as effective communication between employees and management, influenced the level of performance and the overall alignment between personnel and their organisations, that is, on the one hand. On the other, it's worth noting that the implementation of a reward system that is based solely on individual performance (e.g., the performance-based financial reward system proposed by Taylor in his scientific management) may be an attempt to enhance productivity. However, this approach can ultimately impact the social dynamics or interactions among the employees. Another valid assumption is that While Taylor’s employees' performance system may encourage competitiveness, it may also hinder positive social interaction among employees and perhaps their self-esteem, self-worth, and shared work ethics. In brief, although performance management is often emphasised as a key feature of personnel management, there has been insufficient exploration of other related elements, such as a creative and innovative approach that connects performance with employees’ well-being. This incomprehensive approach to performance may be attributed to the emphasis on productivity and organisational outcomes rather than identifying the psychological and technical factors that are essential in empowering employees and enhancing their progression, besides employees' sense of belonging and competence levels (Jan et al., 2015).

To conclude this section, this researcher suggests that personnel management has rapidly developed since its emergence in the early 1900s. For most authors, these early developments occurred as a response to external factors such as mass production, the influence of social theories, and government legislation (Ahammad, 2017a; Torrington and Hall, 1998; Tubey, Rotich and Kurgat, 2015). These influential factors not only focused public and organisations' attention on personnel management practices but also defined it as a function established to ensure employees' productivity and maximum financial success for organisations. Respectively, the scientific management development by F W Taylor, the Dunlop Systems Model, and the Weberian bureaucratic management collectively laid the theoretical foundation that guided the personnel management functional activities.

During the post-World War II era till the 1960s, also referred to as the golden age of capitalism, the factors that led to the emergence and evolution of PM continued to be relevant. The rapid economic growth, social progress, reduced inequality, and relative political stability in Western countries and the United States collectively led PM to adapt and shift focus not only to meet the high expectations of organisations but also to survive by maintaining the balance between organisations' needs and employees' wants (Glyn et al., 1988).

### 3.3 Pre-Human Resources Management Era.

'Personnel Management is that part concerned with people at work and their relationships within a firm. Its aim is to bring together and develop into an effective organisation the men and women who make up an enterprise and, having regard for the well-being of the individual and of working groups, to enable them to make their best contribution to its success'. (Doaei and Najminia, 2012, p. 162)

Over time, European and United firms realised the need for more structured and formal practices. Nguyen and Bryant argue that formality refers to how personnel management practices are documented, analysed, systemised, and legalised (Nguyen and Bryant, 2004). As contended by Kotey and Slade (2005), personnel management was characterised by adopting informal practices; as a result, firms have come to recognise the importance of having a specialised department that can efficiently manage and organise their human resources and improve business processes. This department should also contribute to achieving sustainable organisational performance and enhance the decentralisation process and staff development, especially with the emergence of what is known as knowledge-based organisations (Rasool et al., 2019).

As previously stated, recruitment and selection procedures in personnel management were not characterized by well-defined recruitment strategies. Traditional approaches including advertising, skill assessments, medical tests, and future workforce planning were not commonly implemented during recruitment and selection (Jerrell, 1997; Pophal, no date). It could also be posited that employers' control and the partial absence of contractual restrictions, and employment regulations, especially those pertaining to anti-discrimination, equality, and diversity laws, played a role in this aspect of the personnel management function (Paker, Stephenson and Wallis, 2021). Furthermore, employers might have prioritised fulfilling immediate staffing needs and productivity quotas over guaranteeing that their recruitment and selection practices were impartial and unbiased. These shortcomings in recruitment and selection criteria highlighted the need for a more professional approach during the employee attraction phase that combines both formal and informal processes.

Historically, informal post-hire practices were believed to be effective in establishing a shared work culture and empowering employees to negotiate work responsibilities, shifts, sick pay, and other related forms of aid. However, the advent of formal recruitment and selection processes posed a new challenge for traditional personnel management which lacked several important and strategic dimensions, such as determining the recruitment objectives, the basis for recruitment strategy, recruitment activities, intervening variables leading to positive recruitment results, hence, personnel management departments and businesses recognised the importance of more professional and formal processes for both the pre-and post-recruitment phases of the employment cycle (Fried and Fottler, 2015).

By the 1960s and early 1970s recruitment processes became more developed, involving the identification of current and future job vacancies, determining job specifications, and identifying necessary skills and qualifications, as well as conducting health checks. Moreover, firms recognized that professionalising selection practices were essential in assessing applicants' competencies, qualifications, physical fitness, and other factors to ultimately choose the most suitable candidate for the position. As such, by introducing and implementing formal processes, businesses can ensure that employers select the right candidate for the job, which can lead to better productivity, job satisfaction, retention and overall success for the businesses (Sameen, 2016).

The evolution of personnel management into a professionalised practice was also spurred by a remarkable intention to enhance employees' well-being, safety, motivation, and morale. The 1960s and 1970s witnessed a remarkable influence of social actors and trade unions, who relentlessly advocated for more comprehensive employment laws. Consequently, the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 (also abbreviated as HSW, HASAWA, and HSWA) was instituted as a pivotal legislation to address occupational health and to establish a legal framework for employment in Great Britain (Health and Safety At Work Act 1974). The Health and Safety at Work Act, commonly known as the HSW 1974 Act, was a crucial legislation that safeguards employees by ensuring better work conditions and that their workplaces are safe. It also serves as the foundation for recruitment and selection practices, including setting a minimum age for admission to employment (Bogg et al., 2020, p.49).

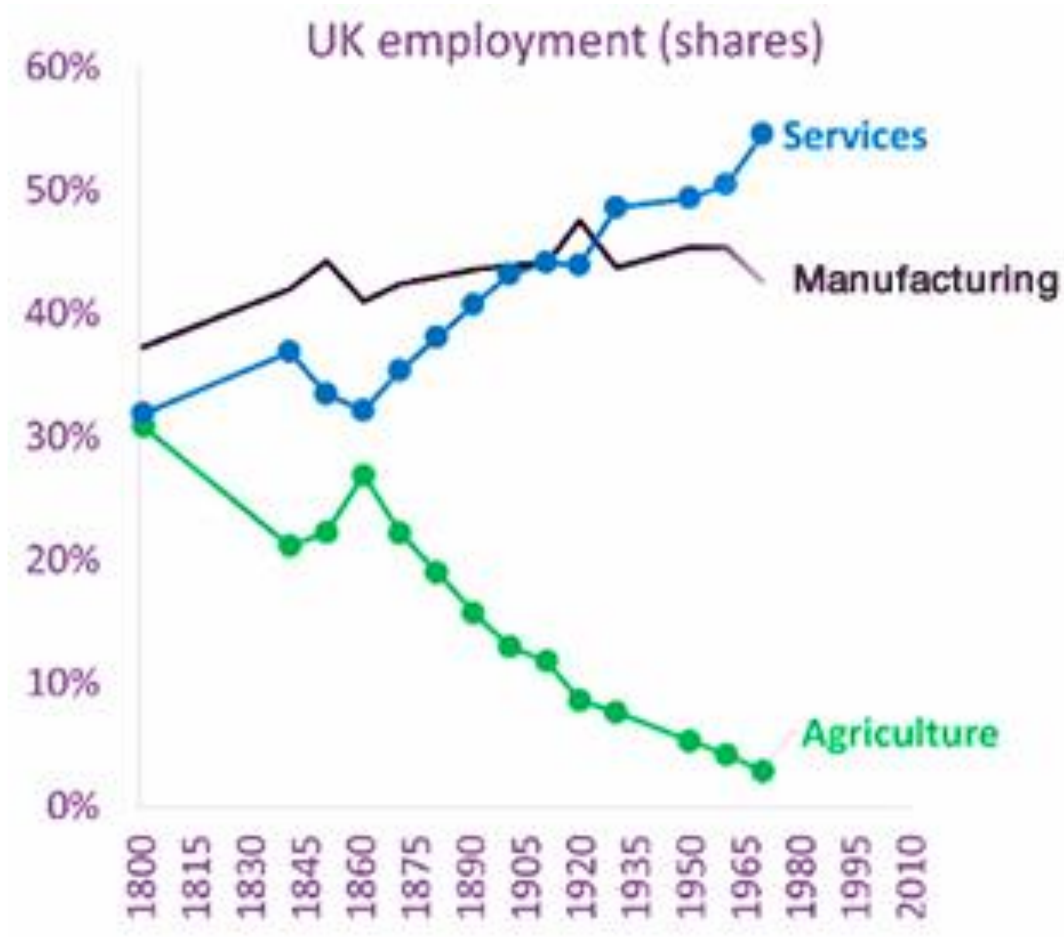
Further to the above, the expansion of laws forbidding discrimination in employment was another driving force for more professionalisation in personnel management. For instance, the Race Relations Act 1976 makes it unlawful to treat an individual less favourably in the workplace on the grounds of race, colour, and nationality and provides protection from discrimination in the field of employment (Race Relation Act 1976). Another example is the United Kingdom’s Equal Pay Act of 1970 and the Sex Discrimination Act of 1976. These two laws prohibited any form of discrimination between men and women in terms of pay and conditions of employment (Equal Pay Act 1970 and Sex Discrimination Act 1975).

Undoubtedly, government initiatives and interventions have played a vital role in the professionalisation of personnel management. Analysing these regulations reveals that they set a new framework for personnel management practices in five different areas: recruitment of personnel and labour market, wages and social security, safety at the workplace, education and training related to work, and the relations between employers and employees (Health and Safety at Work Act 1974; Race Relation Act 1976; Equal Pay Act 1970 and Sex Discrimination Act 1975),. In the realm of personnel management professionalisation attempts, the legal factor or the government intervention in economic activities has played a key role in shifting the focus of personnel management from being task-oriented to people-oriented through the creation and implementation of new policies that prioritise the well-being of employees while taking into accounts the overall organisational needs such as productivity and performance. The impact of these legislations cannot be overstated, as they have fundamentally changed the way in which personnel management functions and operates (Weerasinghe, Liyanage and Lakmali, 2021).

Different authors such as Bondarouk, Brewster, and Buller have identified that personnel management is the most localised practice in the management field; therefore, its development and evolution can be significantly impacted by the economic circumstances and technological advancement of the particular country in which it operates as well as the size and domain of hosting organisations (Bondarouk and Brewster, 2016; Buller, 1988). For instance, in the industrial sector, the technological changes caused a phenomenon known as the dehumanisation of routine tasks within factories, which was considered a major concern for the personnel department as it was directly linked to technological unemployment, employment absorption, and a further rise in labour inequality, that is on one hand (Mokyr, Vickers and Ziebarth, 2015). On the other hand, the service sector underwent a significant transformation in how personnel management activities were carried out. The technological change was brought about by the advent of new technologies- such as the introduction of new technologies to the workplace, including the Lyons Electronic Office

(LEO) and the first commercial computer (World Bank Group, 2019)-, which disrupted the existing systems. As a result, new policies and practices had to be established to ensure organisations' competitiveness and that the practice kept up with the changing nature of work and constantly evolving to align with the latest trends.

Figure 4: The impact of technological progress on the employment rate in UK industrial and services sectors




(*Globalisation, automation and the history of work: Looking back to understand the future* | *UNCTAD*, 2019)

Moreover, despite the long-term advantages of integrating technology into personnel management, it has required a significant shift in practices due to a number of challenges that have emerged. As highlighted by Mokyr et al. (2015), Beer, and Muller (2020), these challenges include anxiety around the changed work culture, a sense of vulnerability, and ambiguity. Additionally, Baldwin (2019) has noted the phenomenon of the 'skills twist', where the value of manual labour is downgraded while the value of mental labour is increasingly emphasised

These factors have necessitated a careful reconsideration of personnel management's traditional practices to ensure they remain relevant and effective in the face of legal, economic, and technological changes. One way to do this is by strategically planning, controlling, and managing resources. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, the global economy was hit by a severe recession while technology rapidly advanced, leading to globalisation. Governments worldwide responded, on different levels, to these challenges by implementing legal measures to control economic activities or ease the mounting pressure on companies and businesses. In response to these dynamic changes, academics formally developed a new approach to managing employees in organisations. Their ideas gradually evolved into the widely recognised and essential management field known today as human resource management.

### 3.3.1 Summary of Personnel Management Key Developments and Timeline.

Before 1900, reformers were focused on improving the working conditions of employees. Some employees attempted to form unions in order to achieve better conditions. However, it wasn't until shortly after 1900 that a simple form of personnel management emerged as a specialised function within organisations.

During that time, individual supervisors made most decisions regarding hiring, firing, training, and pay adjustments. Taylorism, or the scientific management approach launched by Frederick W. Taylor and others in the early 1900s, revolutionised the industrial sector's production systems, leading to significant improvements in productivity and efficiency by establishing one of the earliest employee performance management systems. As organisations grew, many managerial functions, such as purchasing and personnel, began to be handled by specialists such as welfare officers.

Between 1910 and 1940, social actors and theories contributed significantly to the rapid evolution of personnel management. Dunlop and Max Weber's systems approach and social action theory influenced this development by focusing on bureaucratic administration, human behaviours, personnel competencies, and personal qualities.

The government legislations of the 1960s and 1970s resulted in increased legal requirements and constraints, forcing dramatic changes in the personnel management departments of most organisations. Personnel management departments had to become more professional and more concerned about the legal ramifications of policies and practices. Organisations also had to re-evaluate employee involvement and quality of work due to concerns about the impact of automation and job design on worker productivity. The economic landscape and technological advancements such as automation and smart offices hugely impacted the manufacturing and services sector, leading to new policies and practices to ensure organisations' competitiveness and that the practice kept up with the changing nature of work.

### 3.4 The Emergence of Human Resource Management (HRM).

The concept of Human Resource Management (HRM) was first introduced in American textbooks during the mid-1960s when Douglas McGregor's book, "The Human Side of Enterprise," was published in 1960. In his book, McGregor presented two contrasting theories, namely Theory X and Theory Y, to understand employee motivation. These theories are based on the premise that it is the responsibility of management to gather and utilise the factors of production, including human resources, to achieve the company's economic advantages. During the early 1980s, HRM had spread from North America, where it originated, to Europe, Asia, and other regions worldwide. In the 21st century, HRM has become an essential aspect of business practices and is widely accepted and implemented globally (Yuan, 2012).

As stated earlier, some commentators argue that HRM replaced the term Personnel Management in organisations. In this light, the distinctiveness claim of HRM as a management philosophy and practice is disputed by many authors; however, others highlight the essential features of HRM underlying a belief that human skills and knowledge are a strategic resource and emphasise the necessity of HRM integration with organisational strategy as well as, the devolvement of some HR responsibilities to line managers to be more strategic and less transactional in its domain, that described by Colling as the internal devolution (Morley et al., 2006).

### 3.4.1 Human Resource Management: The Concept and Practice.

Different articles and research work pointed out Armstrong as the one who led the direction of PM and HRM. Armstrong cited that human resource management is ‘an old wine in a new bottle’ (Armstrong, 2006a). This view is well supported by many authors, including Strauss (2001), who claimed that HRM is a re-labelled or, at the most, re-packaged version of traditional personnel management. In his handbook of Human Resource Management Practice, Armstrong regarded HRM as a replacement for the term personnel management and stated that ‘human resource management is a strategic and coherent approach to the management of an organisation's most valued assets- the people working there who individually and collectively contribute to the achievement of its goals’ (Armstrong, 2006b, p.4). Although Armstrong and Straus have the same perspective on HRM, they both acknowledge that HRM has some distinctive features; for instance, Armstrong made some references to the strategic nature of the concept of HRM when he stated that the discipline is much concerned with the strategic management of organisations’ employees rather than routinely and operationally manage staff, as such HRM utilises personnel to achieve specific organisational objective including enhancing competitiveness and profitability (Armstrong, 2006a).

Opatha (2009) attempted to conceptualise human resource management by describing it as an organisational function that is mainly concerned with policies and systems aimed at effectively managing employees during the various aspects of their employment cycle. Opatha (2021) furthered this by stating that HRM is an aspect of overall management that aims to enhance organisational human relations by establishing, implementing, evaluating and assessing policies, procedures, and programs that focus on human resources. Similarly, Ludwikowska (2022) argued that human resource management (HRM) involves implementing a variety of policies, practices, and systems that significantly impact the conduct, attitudes, and productivity of employees within an organisation; in essence, HRM is instrumental in shaping how employees behave and perform within the workplace setting.

A more comprehensive people-oriented definition was offered by Jackson, who describes human resource management as the aspect of enterprise that is tasked with specific employee management operational practices such as recruitment, selection, and performance, and formulating employee policies, particularly that attract, motivate, develop, and retain employees who collectively contribute to business's success and survival, and furthered this explanation by stating that HRM role effectiveness is significantly affected by other internal and external factors which include, organisation's size, structure, and life cycle stage as well as technology advancement, legal, and social environments (Jackson, 1995). Decenzo et al. (2016) considered the same dynamic external factors when conceptualised human resource management and stated that HRM focuses on recruiting, attaining, and developing employees and motivating them to higher levels of performance is directly influenced by complex and dynamic external factors such as cultural environments, globalisation, technology, regulation and legislation which collectively impact on HRM staffing, ethics and employees rights, and training and development.

Analysing the above people-oriented definitions of human resource management suggests that several authors perceive the emerged practice as primarily employee-focused, reactive, partially disconnected from the business's vision, production and productivity-focused and functional in its activity nature (Rakesh et al., 2021). Additionally, there is some similarity between this perspective of human resource management and the systems model of personnel management advocated by Dunlop, as these two views perceive the function as a singular business unit or a subsystem that is concerned with the human aspect of the economic activity and its processes are associated with ensuring competitiveness and achieving organisational goals such as recruitment and selection, training and development, retaining, appraisal and performance management.

Critics have pointed out that the traditional approach to human resource management is too narrow in its focus, as it only considers HRM operations and routine tasks. To address this issue, a more balanced perspective has been proposed that takes into consideration the needs and objectives of both the organisation and its employees. This comprehensive approach recognises the critical role played by employees in the success of any organisation. It acknowledges that their well-being and satisfaction are key to achieving this success. Therefore, by adopting a holistic approach to HRM, organisations can create a positive and productive work environment that benefits everyone involved.

Several studies have shown a linkage between effective human resource management and improved organisational performance (Hope Hailey, Farndale and Truss, 2005; Katou, 2008). In the current competitive environment, organisations need to not only focus on hiring and developing employees but also aligning these activities with the overall organisational strategic objectives. For instance, Armstrong stated that 'human resource management is a distinctive approach to employment management which seeks to obtain competitive advantage through the strategic development of a highly committed and skilled workforce, using an array of cultural, structural and personnel techniques (Armstrong, 2006a, pp.5–6). Storey's (1998) definition of human resource management combined two different approaches to HRM as a new management field. Storey asserted that several practices can be taken as indicators of a soft or hard approach. These HRM practices include sophisticated selection techniques, focus on the team, and a strong emphasis on training and development for the soft approach, in addition to limited employee influence over management decisions, limited training and relatively low wages for the hard approach (Storey, 1998). Paauwe stood on the same platform when he revealed that HRM is no more than a new development of personnel management. Yet, he emphasised its strategic contribution, closer alignment to the business agenda, the involvement of line management in HRM, and focus on HRM functional outcomes such as its quality of services (Paauwe, 2009). Others, such as Khuay et al. (2023), view human resource management as a management system that aims to effectively utilise manpower to achieve organisational objectives through employing traditional processes such as talent acquisition, development, and training, motivating and retaining besides, developing policies, practices and activities that are designed to systematically maximise productivity and contribute to the overall success of organisations.

Several studies have been carried out to examine the relationship between effective management of human resources and an organisation's overall performance and competitive position. In this regard, financial and non-financial measures have been utilised to evaluate this association. Mattalatta and Andriani revealed a significant correlation between the knowledge, skills, experience, and innovation of employees and the growth of sales. From a non-financial perspective, factors such as employee satisfaction and participation, absenteeism, and operational performance, connected to service users and customer satisfaction and service quality, have also been considered (Mattalatta and Andriani, 2023). However, particular attention has been paid to the behavioural aspects of performance to establish the effectiveness of HRM practices as outlined in the employee abilities, motivation and opportunities model known as the Employees’ AMO Model, which was initially formulated by Bailey in 1993 and later further developed by Boxall and Purcell in 2003.

Practitioners and authors widely accept the model as a framework for understanding the relationship between the behavioural aspect of human resource management and performance (Marin-Garcia and Martinez Tomas, 2016). As argued by Beltrán-Martín and Bou-Llusar, the AMO model theoretically establishes the relevance between three employees'-related variables, which are employees' abilities, motivation, and opportunities to participate and firms' performance (Beltrán-Martín and Bou-Llusar, 2018); thus the CIPD and Institute for Employment Studies jointly suggested that the AMO model should be adopted in high-performance work system (HPWS) by combining different HRM practices rather than only individual practices to reach the maximum workplace performance (Armstrong and Brown, 2019). Analysing the CIPD suggested human-practices formula, it may appear feasible to integrate the AMO Model with the 5Ps Model for the best HRM strategy conceptualisation and execution, more specifically, combining four components of the 5Ps, which are HR's purpose, principles, policies, and processes, with people related AMO model variables, by which behavioural and HR's cross-functional dimension are both considered in HRM professionalisation processes (Pryor, Smith and Toombs, 2007). Additionally, It can be argued that the CIPD profession map was developed by incorporating insights from the AMO model's behavioural dimension and the 5Ps model's purpose focus. This could have been a strategic move aimed at achieving a harmonious blend of HRM's functional coherence and specific behaviours that are congruent with an organisation's core principles, long-term aspirations, and overall strategic direction.

In line with the above, this researcher argues that definitions provided by some commentators -such as Strauss, Armstrong, and Paauwe- attempted to promote a framework that conceptualises HRM in two ways, operational or at the employees-level and organisational levels. The employees' level is primarily concerned with recruitment, retention, skills, knowledge, performance, welfare, and employee contribution to the business's success. The organisational level sees HRM as a strategic function and business–oriented unit; however, little attention was given by the previous authors to investigate the interrelated relationship between the two levels rather than enriching their definitions by revealing the correlation between these two levels of understanding apart from the employees' contribution to organisations' financial gains and the overall performance.

This alignment between HRM and the organisation's performance or business goals led to a new development known as strategic human resource management (SHRM). Commentators such as Martell and Carroll (1995b) suggested that the emergence of strategic HRM or SHRM represents a shift from traditional HRM to a new, more proactive approach which links both strategies with corporate performance.

### 3.4.2 Hard and Soft Approaches to Human Resource Management.

Among the several human resource models, two widely recognised ones are the soft and hard HRM identified by Storey and Guest in their attempt to define the term HRM (Truss et al., 1997a).Truss et al. (1997a) argue that these models are founded on two opposite assumptions and beliefs about human nature and different managerial strategies for control. this classification of hard and soft HRM can be traced back to McGregor in the 1960s. Douglas McGregor presented two theories on employee motivation in his book "The Human Side of Enterprise." These theories are referred to as Theory X and Theory Y. The central idea behind both theories is that management's primary responsibility is to gather the necessary production components, including personnel, to benefit the company economically.

Bogdanović (2018) argues that hard and soft HRM philosophy and application are linked to hard and soft management practices such as those proposed in Taylor's scientific management and the Weberian classical and bureaucratic approach to management and their human relations complexities. Bailey suggested that the hard HRM model places greater emphasis on strategic control and regards humans as primarily motivated by economic incentives, known as Theory X, while the soft HRM model prioritises control via employee commitment and perceives humans as intrinsically motivated, known as Theory Y (Truss et al., 1997b). Respectively, the dissimilarities between the two HRM approaches were further discussed by Gado, Verma, Rüzgar, and Ülgen, who all stressed that the hard HRM is mainly based on the American traditions of strategic control, systems, organisation structure, managing and treating employees as a source of competitive advantage, besides it emphasises on productivity incentives and employees-employers mutual financial gain in workplace performance. In contrast, soft HRM, which is rooted in European traditions, places a strong emphasis on the human element of employee management, prioritising the cultivation of a collaborative relationship between employer and employee, besides promoting the managerial actions and behaviours that contribute to the well-being and effectiveness of employees thereby fostering a mutually beneficial working dynamic (Morley et al., 2006; Rüzgar and Ülgen, 2017).

Others, such as Ihuah (2014) argued that soft and hard human resource management (he referred to them as hard and soft variants) are not solely belief-based approaches but rather an attempt intended to address the ambiguity and confusion resulting from the different interpretations of the HRM's professionalisation processes and whether these processes are people-oriented, through enhancing employees' commitment and flexibility, or business-oriented by achieving the common organisational goals, in particular, the profitability and competitive position.; however, he asserted that applying either approach differs according to the organisation's structure and HR professionals' preferences; however, it is worth mentioning that several researchers contend that HRM professionals tend to incorporate both hard and soft approaches in their practices, which is sometimes referred to as 'the tough love' as expressed by Legge and Edgar (Edgar, 2003; Legge, 1989).

The tough love expressed by Edgar and Legge, or blending hard and soft HRM into one managerial system, is an area of ongoing debate. Two primary perspectives of economic activities emerged, with one that perceives the organisation as a technical ecosystem (hard), while the other views it as a psycho-social system (soft) (Bogdanović, 2018). The technical ecosystem approach was adopted by James Moore in 1993, who views business and economic activity in general as a strategic partnership formed between two or more entities known as members who work together to generate and distribute value for a shared group of customers (Moore, 2006). In addition, within the business ecosystem are various participants, with at least one member serving as the orchestrator; however, both parties, participants and orchestrator, maintain their own unique and distinct identities (Bannya, Bainbridge and Chan-Serafin, 2023). From a broader perspective, it can be assumed that this perspective also considers organisations as a system operating within a network that affects and is affected by other actors, such as suppliers and competitors. Thus, the HRM in this context can be viewed as an interdependent business-oriented subsystem embedded in a larger system, which is the hosting organisation. This assumption can be supported by Jackson (1995), who described HRM as a component in a closed system or organisation; however, Jackson's view neglected the impact of other external systems on HRM’s nature and outputs, such as legal, social, political, environmental, and economic conditions. In contrast, Dunlop developed a more comprehensive framework by combining closed and open systems in his Systems Model and maintained that the personnel department is a subsystem composed of three main components: workers and organisation (closed system), employers and their associations, and the government (open system) (Okhawere, 2023).

In short, the discussion surrounding the hard and soft approaches to HRM aimed to establish a clear definition of the practice and examine the nature and direction of professionalisation processes in the field. Central to this debate was whether human capital or business objectives should take precedence or if a new approach that equally and strategically prioritises both aspects should be adopted. As a result of various contextual factors, including organisational structure, domain, objectives, and external influences such as government legislation, political landscape, technological developments, and the economy, HRM recognised the need to shift it is focus to a more strategic approach.

Consequently, strategic human resource management was coined to reflect this transformation and pursue the professionalisation of human resource management.

### 3.4.3 Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM): Evolution of Practices.

In recent decades, professional bodies, policymakers, researchers, and practitioners have been increasingly using the term strategic HRM, referred to as SHRM, instead of just HRM. Yet the term SHRM can cause conceptual confusion, as HRM has always been labelled as strategic in nature, meaning that HR policies and practices are meant to align with the organisation's overall objectives and vision. In practice, HRM and its companion term, SHRM, are often used interchangeably, and their differences are mostly theoretical.

‘Strategic human resource management (strategic HRM) is an approach to managing people that supports an organisation’s long-term goals with an overall planned and coherent framework. This helps ensure that the various aspects of people management work together to develop the behaviours and performance needed to create and distribute value. It focuses on longer-term people issues, matching resources to future needs, and large-scale concerns about structure, quality, culture, values and commitment. It's necessarily dependent on the evolving nature of work itself, which is explored in our Megatrends series and our Profession for the Future work.’ (CIPD, 2021)

The above quotation from the Chartered Institute of Personnel Management (CIPD) could be understood as a new approach to conceptualising human resource management, where behaviour and performance are intertwined and directed towards achieving quality outcomes that add value.

Further to the above, Pynes (2004, pp.17–19) proclaimed that, for organisations to perform effectively and remain adaptable in the face of change, they must implement a strategic approach to HRM. This involves aligning HR practices with the overall business strategy, identifying, and addressing workforce needs and skills gaps, and creating a supportive workplace culture that promotes employee engagement and retention. As such, HR units are required to implement policies and practices and make the necessary ongoing changes to support or improve the organisations' operational and strategic objectives and become part of the visionary process. That said, several studies on strategic HRM pointed to the significance of HR policies and practices in boosting employee productivity and organisational performance. An example of this is what is referred to by Jiang et al. (2012) and others as HRM's 'high-involvement work system' and the 'high–commitment' work system by which HR practices are intended to enhance employees' Knowledge, skills, abilities, motivation, and commitment not only to achieve a positive organisational outcome but also to predict future performance.

Mujahid et al. (2014) are among those who believe that the shift in practice from HRM to SHRM means that the human resource department must be integrally involved in the organisation's strategic processes; for instance, HR managers are supposed to have input in organisations' strategic planning, decision-making, and in implementing particular strategic alternatives, besides staff related issues and the operationalised strategy which involves talent recruitment and retaining and SHRM ability to identify skills, behaviour and attitudes that contribute to organisation's success and thus include HR in the business performance model (Karami, Analoui and Cusworth, 2004). As clarified by Fowler-Guzzardo, Stewart and Sambrook, this transformation means that instead of pursuing a functional approach to delivering services, HR practitioners now are seeking to play a professional role which involves developing and supporting the critical firm capabilities, driving business strategy as well as operating within the strategic framework of the business (Fowler-Guzzardo, 2010; Stewart and Sambrook, 2012).

By portraying strategic human resource management (SHRM) as fundamental to organisations' effectiveness, Boxall and Purcell claimed that adding the adjective strategic to HRM implies the strategic choices of HR departments concerning HR practices, key HR policies, investment, labour processes and labour behaviours' management, and to what extent these choices are connected to the organisation’s performance and future developments (Boxall and Purcell, 2000; O’Riordan, 2017, p. 10). Thus, SHRM's responsibility is to craft strategic policies and practices that align with the overall firms’ objectives, which usually entails securing a competitive edge and promoting economic growth. In fact, these obligations extend beyond HRM functional terms and necessitate a more professional role and close collaboration with other stakeholders within the firm (see also Barney and Hesterly, 2015). Similarly, Hamadamin and Atan stressed the importance of Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) within an organisation. They explained that SHRM is not just a ‘function’ but a ‘role’ that focuses on aligning employees with the organisation's strategy. As a result, HR effectively and efficiently manages employees by investing in training and development opportunities that add value and enhance competitiveness, either directly or indirectly (Hamadamin and Atan, 2019). Considering HR as a role can also be detected in its ability to identify business issues and the internal or external factors that can impact the performance of an organization in achieving its objectives (Armstrong and Taylor, 2020, pp.24–27). These business issues include financial concerns, operational inefficiencies, market changes, regulatory compliance issues, or other obstacles that can hinder the organization's ability to operate effectively. Identifying and addressing these issues is critical to maintaining a healthy and successful business.

The evolution of strategic human resource management (SHRM) was also considered by many authors, such as Uysal (2013) and Tubey et al. (2015) as much related to enhancing business vision and purpose through human resources as well as the implementation of policies and practices that maximise productivity and develop human resource–related organisational capabilities as contended by Mitchell et al. (2013). Nevertheless, organisations also started to recognise the importance of identifying the gap between the organisational interests and external stakeholders' concerns, which requires having more socially responsible and comprehensive HR practices and applications that respond to certain societal demands and extend beyond economic considerations.

### 3.4.4 Strategic Human Resource Management: External and Internal Stakeholders Perceptions.

Ferdousi and Abedin examined how adopting and implementing different HRM policies can lead to high performance and create shared value by comparing for-profit organisations with social businesses or organisations with social missions. Interestingly, the study found that social business organisations that aim to recruit severely disadvantaged people, such as girls rescued from sex trafficking, measure HR effectiveness and the overall organisational success and performance only by the improvements they bring to the beneficiaries' lives, their self-concept, mental health, social status, family stability, and emotional well-being (Ferdousi and Abedin, 2023).

The introduction of corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become a critical element in HRM professionalisation processes as the practice started to analyse how its internal human resource management initiatives, policies and procedures can impact external stakeholders' perceptions of HRM nature and the legitimacy of the practice (del-Castillo-Feito, Blanco-González and Hernández-Perlines, 2022). However, several studies concluded that although HRM has a potentially key role to play in addressing and delivering CSR initiatives, HRM is still not fully accepted by the top management as an implementer or CSR strategy maker (Stahl et al., 2020). Perhaps the nature of HRM and whether it is employee-oriented or business-oriented and social brand-centred are factors that influence HRM labelling. As business-oriented or social brand-centred, HRM activities usually revolve around supporting organisational objectives and branding strategies; it is also proactive to external threats or opportunities and responsive to commitments towards the wider society, as contended by Vu (2022) and Al-Shuaibi (2016). Meanwhile, employee-oriented HRM is seen by top management as functional, operational, reactive, less anticipated, and has limited engagement in broader strategic issues and long-term organisational planning. Having said that, it can also be assumed that the perception of external stakeholders of HRM and whether they consider it as a role or a function is dependent on the following:

*3.4.4.1 The degree to which HRM align with the business strategic direction and the hosting organisation's public image (e.g., legal but unethical practices tension).*

In this regard, the external stakeholders' perspective can indirectly impact HRM practices and role expectations based on how they perceive the hosting organisations' employee-related practices. This aspect is also linked with business ethics and moral guidelines such as the case of Amazon and Apple China; or, more broadly, businesses facing social pressure to improve the unethical practices concerned with workforce conditions, low wages, and unsafe work environment (see; Holton, 2020; Kelly, 2021; Hamilton and Hoch, 2015). Therefore, HRM is seen as a supporting function or a facilitator that is supposed to assist the top management in designing strategies and translating them into actions, such as the case of improving the work environment, promoting diversity and employee engagement (Sarvaiya, Arrowsmith and Eweje, 2021).

*3.4.4.2 Internal stakeholders' actions and perception of HRM.*

Human Resource Management plays a crucial role in improving the overall performance of an organisation, either as an employee-centred that focuses on the employees' day-to-day operational activities, or a business-oriented that aligns the HR policies and practices with the company's objectives (Mwaniki and Gathenya, 2015). However, a new perspective has emerged under the terminology 'Sustainable HRM' or 'the green HRM', which is based on a multi-stakeholder model that takes the strategic HRM beyond the narrow internal stakeholder circle through establishing an external partnership, fostering diversity practices, etc. (CIPD, 2019a). As such sustainable or green HRM can be considered an attempt to position HRM as a key player that operates beyond the organisation's boundaries by integrating external agenda and recognising the long-term challenges related to creating and capturing values, either social, environmental, or economic-related. This approach required HRM to focus on fulfilling the interests of multiple stakeholders in exchange for legitimacy and recognition by emphasising that HRM activities outcomes may directly affect the broader community and indirectly influence external stakeholders' perception of the practice, such as those outlined in Ferdousi and Abedin's study (Ferdousi and Abedin, 2023).

'As HR professionals in the public sector, we forget how the work we do impacts the citizens. Oftentimes, we are so focused on the team members and organisation that we forget that we need to listen to our citizens' needs in order to drive value for agencies. I think the most important things for our citizens are efficiency and transparency. HR must understand how our purpose can contribute to the overall citizen experience' (Hanson and Schwanger, 2022)

Despite the above statement of Hanson and Schwanger's (2022) and Sarvaiya et al. (2021) who emphasises that HRM should be acknowledged as a strategic partner by external stakeholders and tasked -by top management- with the role of identifying, prioritising, and building external partnerships that align with the organisation's values and objectives; this ambition remains highly disputable and problematic. One central argument can be that HRM, in this context, plays a supportive role; however, it is characterised by a strategic dimension that requires HR to initiate new and adapt existing employee-related practices and policies that assist top management in balancing economic values and external commitments.

The HRM's desire to take a more proactive and direct role in engaging with external stakeholders may pose some challenges. It can create a conflict of interest between internal and external stakeholders and shift the HRM's focus away from its primary responsibilities and obligations, including business objectives and employee operations. In this respect, Meijerink, et al. (2016) noted a correlation between employees' and employers' perception of HRM, its service value and HRM's practices visibility, the value embedded in its activities, timeliness, and HR professionals' efforts to address and meet organisation and employees' expectations.

Moreover, a noteworthy perspective on HRM is presented by several commentators, including John and Björkman (2015), who propose that HRM should be considered an internal support function rather than a separate and distinct role. HRM can be seen as a collaborative effort among different departments within an organisation rather than a centralised role or function with its independent agenda. Relatedly, Marescaux et al. (2013) and Madera et al. (2017) pointed out the strategic interaction between HRM policies and practices and organisations' effectiveness. They stressed that an HR unit can only be labelled functionally strategic when its activities are consistent with the organisational strategy and designed to create added value. However, when Marescaux et al. (2013) and Madira et al. (2017) analysed HR involvement in broader issues such as organisations' competitiveness and surrounding environment, yet they presented a contradicting view by stating that HRM is a 'role' performed to support an organisation's financial success and survival. It is worth noting that some studies reached a similar conclusion when considering external factors when analysing HRM's nature. These studies categorised HRM as a role by establishing a correlation between specific HRM practices and the profitability and effectiveness of firms (Haberberg and Rieple, 2008, p. 105; Terpstra, 1994). For example, HRM departments in multinational corporations should consider factors such as the legal system, political landscape, local culture, technology advancement, and the economy of the host country when designing staffing practices and selection methods to ensure optimal performance and overall organisational effectiveness. Thus, transferring some HR practices and policies to different countries with different cultural and institutional environments may be a factor in labelling HR as a role that necessitates a direct involvement in designing and delivering new management practices or developing the existing ones (Myloni, Harzing and Mirza, 2004)

All in all, although this strategic perspective of HRM has been seen to improve the performance of firms, several HR theorists, such as Talyor (1910), Pil and MacDuffie (1996), contended that HR's desire to play a professional role is dependent on the organisation's characteristics and behaviour, its strategic needs and direction as well as the degree to which HR department participate in the decision-making processes. Therefore, it might be logical to assume that for HR to expand its domain and become a key player within organisations, HR actively sought a new role and positioned itself as a Business Partner. Theoretically, this role is supposed to enable HR departments to be involved in the business's strategic issues, change management processes, and value creation. Yet, the differences in organisational culture, size, characteristics, domain, and structure can either facilitate or hinder performing the role.

## 3.5 The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD): Historical Developments and Key Contributions.

Formed under the name of the Welfare Workers' Association (WWA) in 1913 with thirty-four members, several commentators emphasise that to understand the CIPD role and contributions to HRM professionalisation, it is important to examine the historical context, including the political, social and industrial tension of the era (Druker et al., 1996). The Welfare Workers Association (WWA), held its first meeting in York, chaired by renowned social reformer and industrialist Seebohm Rowntree (1871-1954) and saw the participation of representatives from notable companies such as Cadbury which founded in 1824, Chivers & Sons, founded in 1806, and Boots in 1849 (*CIPD | Our History*, no date).

When WWA was founded, female workers in UK factories endured unfavourable working conditions that raised concerns among welfare workers. Several observational and field-based studies of women's work at that time focused on women's health and safety at work, wages, and gender segregation in the workplace (Honeyman and Goodman, 1991). To tackle these challenges, it's unsurprising that twenty-nine out of the thirty-four founding members of the Welfare Workers' Association (WWA) were women. However, the significance of welfare workers was acknowledged in 1915 when the Ministry of Munitions formed the Health of Munition Workers Committee to review and advise on issues related to industrial fatigue, working hours and other factors that impacted the physical and mental health of workers in munition factories and workshops (*CIPD | Our History*, no date; Thornthwaite, 2012). Consequently, at the end of the First World War, the United Kingdom had appointed approximately one thousand welfare workers, six hundreds of whom were recognised as members of the WWA. This development marked a significant shift in the WWA approach to workers' welfare, as the country recognised the need to provide targeted assistance to those affected by the consequences of mass-production processes and poor work conditions to ensure their well-being, safety and ultimately contribution to economic growth (*CIPD | Our History*, no date)

Between 1917 and 1924, the WWA underwent five name changes and saw a rise in the hiring of welfare officers due to the war. This resulted in the emergence of local welfare worker associations nationwide that were not associated with the WWA. The fragmentation of the welfare movement concerned the WWA, which led to the adoption of a new constitution that integrated the local associations into a branch structure. After a conference held in Leeds in 1917, the WWA was renamed the Central Association of Welfare Workers (CAWW), and its first office was opened in London in 1919. In 1924, CAWW had evolved to become the Institute of Industrial Welfare Workers (IIWW) (*CIPD | Our History*, no date)

During the 1920s, a labour management movement began to take shape, spurred by deep social tension, inflation and the introduction of welfare officers/secretaries by WW1. Employers appointed these officers to oversee recruitment processes, discipline, employment termination, and industrial relations among male unionised workers. Despite the Institute of Industrial Welfare Work's focus on welfare, labour officers and managers were more concerned with other aspects of labour management and did not join the IIWW. By the end of the decade, members of the movement formed a loosely connected group that aimed to establish their own professional association. The IIWW changed its name to the Institute of Labor Management (ILM) in 1931 to reflect this shift, and its journal Welfare Work was renamed Labour

Management. By 1939, the ILM had 800 members across the United Kingdom and Ireland, with 60% of them being female (*CIPD* **|** *Our History*, no date)

In 1946, the ILM underwent a name change, becoming the Institute of Personnel Management (IPM), as its members' priorities shifted towards training, providing short courses, and publishing (Farndale and Brewster, 2005). The IPM furthered its objectives in 1955 by implementing examination-based membership requirements and an external education program, which colleges could offer to prepare students for the national exam. This initiative proved instrumental in paving the way for more extensive personnel management courses offered by colleges in the future *(ArchiveHub, 2020)*

The IPM sought global recognition in 1962 and formed regional partnerships with similar professional organisations in Germany, Sweden, France, and Switzerland. Together, they established the European Association of People Management (EAPM) as an independent representative body for national personnel management organisations in Western Europe. The goal was to allow members to share their experiences. The IPM sought global recognition in 1962 and formed regional partnerships with similar professional organisations in Germany, Sweden, France, and Switzerland to further improve. Together, they established the European Association of People Management (EAPM) as an independent umbrella body for national HR organisations in Europe. The goal was to allow members to share their experiences. To further develop and improve its service quality and practitioners' competencies, in 1976, the IPM joined the World Federation of People Management Associations, a global network of professionals in people management, with a current 660,000 professionals in more than 90 countries (*History* **|** *WFPMA* **|** *World Federation of People Management Associations*, no date)

In 1994, the Institute of Personnel Management and the Institute of Training and Development joined forces to become the Institute of Personnel and Development (IPD), intending to unify personnel, training, and development within a single institution. to further develop and gain official recognition. The effort was rewarded six years later when it was granted a chartered status by the UK Privacy Council, now Royal Charters, culminating in the formal establishment of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) on July 1st, 2000, to create an inclusive workplace, tackling barriers to employment and credibility and standards of the services provided to both internal and external stakeholders (*CIPD | CIPD Values: Our Purpose and Impact*, 2021).

### 3.5.1 The CIPD Profession Map: Considering HRM as a Profession.

Since the emergence of HRM in the 1980s as a replacement for PM, developments in the field have started to accelerate, with a shift in focus from management and control of subordinates to a centrally strategic function within organisations, besides applying a proactive approach that links strategies with corporate performance (Legge, 1989; Martell and Carroll, 1995a).

The evolution of HRM has sparked ongoing debate regarding its role; notably, commentators such as Ulrich and Conner emphasise the need to reinvent HR to increase its effectiveness and overall value to organisations by broadening its scope beyond its operational and transactional responsibilities (Ulrich and Conner, 1996).

‘The Profession Map sets the international standard for all people professionals, including HR, L&D and organisation design and development professionals. Focused on values-based decision-making and linked to the overarching purpose of the people profession, it is designed to anticipate new priorities and evolve, keeping people professionals’ future fit as they lead change and shape the future of work’.

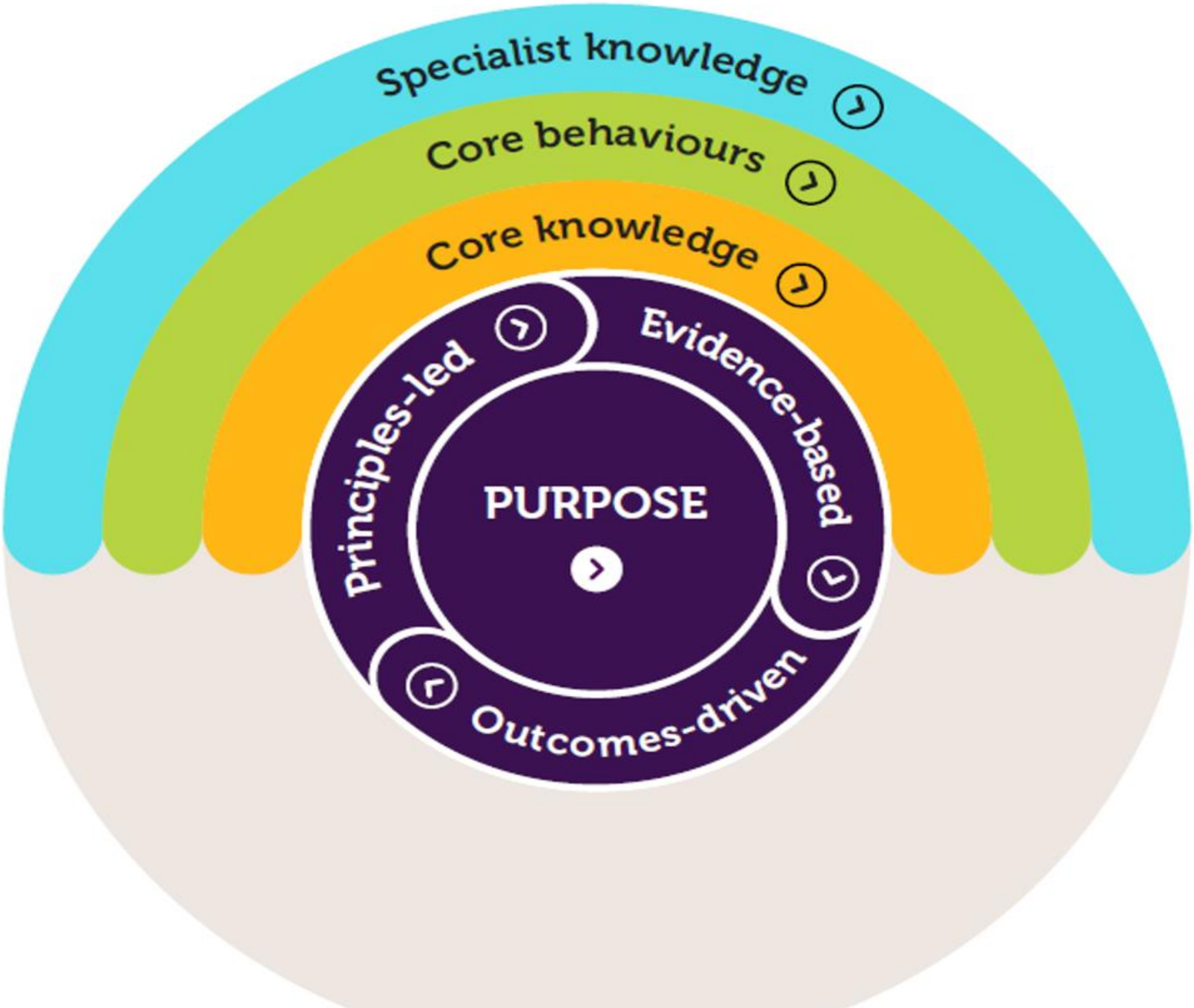
(CIPD, 2019)

The change in HR from a practice to a profession, led by the CIPD, can be considered a new major shift in HRM that will impact its role or function and the organisational level. Theoretically, many commentators contributed to this new development, with some offering detailed studies on the importance of changing HR purpose, from employment terms and conditions to creating value for both internal stakeholders (e.g., organisations and employees) and external stakeholders (e.g., customers and community as a whole) (Ulrich and Dulebohn, 2015). However, other commentators such as Rotich stressed that HR becoming a profession is a new stage of the ever-evolving nature of the modern strategic HRM and furthered this by his indication of the influence of external factors that contributed to the change in HR direction and philosophy, including, economic, demographic, social, and legislative changes (Rotich, 2015, p. 71). Respectively, Tubey et al. (2015) and Genc (2014, p. 103-104) attempted to develop an understanding of how changes in national economies, technological advancement, societal expectations, and legislative changes reshaped the professionalisation of strategic HR.

In response to the ever-changing business landscape and the influence of external factors, the CIPD acknowledged the need to adapt its approaches to better suit the current context rather than relying on its old-fashioned generic best practices and processes. Hence, the CIPD formulated its Profession Map for 2013 and 2018 to serve as the international standard for the people's profession. In November 2023, CIPD changed five areas of the Map to reflect the latest research, the changing landscape, and feedback from the profession. These changes included people analytics, technology and people, resourcing, talent management, and business acumen (*CIPD | The Profession Map update history*, 2023).

William Hague, the CIPD transformation and HR director, stated, 'By adopting the Profession Map, we’re building our professional credibility. And we’re demonstrating to the organisation that we’re serious about keeping our professional skills up to date. We’ve used the Map to align teams with their relevant specialist knowledge areas, clarifying the expertise we need in every role across every grade. This is helping us build a breadth of talent across the division, conduct career development conversations, explore future moves and highlight the options for our people to build matrix careers.’ William Hague, CIPD Transformation and HR Director, (*CIPD | The Profession Map*, 2021)

Figure 4. The CIPD Profession Map 2023



With its four bands, the CIPD Profession Map serves as a framework for professionals across HR, L&D, and organisational development (OD) professionals to apply a unified set of standards and values to make better decisions in any situation by being principle-led, evidence-based, and outcome-driven (*CIPD | The Profession Map*, 2021). To further this, values, for example, provide a framework for HR professionals, offering universal guidance rooted in moral principles such as integrity, reliability, fairness, and thrift. Nevertheless, every organisation develops unique values that mirror its industry, market, and operations and are shaped by factors like organisational size, life cycle stage, and industry attributes.

Moreover, Gaponenko et al. (2021) argue that shifting to a value-based HR strategy, involvement in business-focus practices, and the implementation of innovative changes in some exited roles have become apparent. As an example, HR business partnering, a practice introduced by Dave Ulrich in 1997, has evolved significantly and has become a fundamental component of several organisations' structures due to applying value and evidence-based approaches conceived by the CIPD in its profession map. When suggested by Ulrich, HR business partnering was primarily to help organisations reach their strategic objectives in human resource management and implement long-term employee strategies (Matuska and Niedzielski, 2018). However, after the introduction of the CIPD Profession Map, the role of HR business partners has evolved significantly, allowing them to flexibly perform their roles across different organisations, regardless of the dissimilarities in business strategies, culture, and the location of HR in the organisational structure, factors deemed to hinder the implementation of the old classic model of Business Partnering (Tabor-Blazewicz, 2022).

At least three factors influence the CIPD's strategic engagement in broader business issues. First, the CIPD recognises that HR can utilise a range of competencies to improve working methods. Such competencies include stakeholder analysis, project management, communication, risk analysis and management, and change planning and management. Secondly, HR professionals aspire to collaborate closely with business leaders and key stakeholders to shape strategic thinking and decision-making, aiming to be recognised as trusted advisors. However, this requires a solid understanding of business principles, the ability to contribute to the analysis and implementation of business strategies, and the continuous development of professional and personal competencies, especially in the area of consulting skills. Lastly, the CIPD posits that robust, effective, and strategic people management practices can impact organisational outcomes, including organisational and team performance, employee commitment and engagement, rates of absenteeism and turnover, execution of strategy, innovation, and the success of change initiatives and the adoption of new practices (Bosley and Gifford, 2023; Delany and Tregaskis, 2018).

### 3.6 HR Professionals Becoming Business Partners.

The concept of HR business partnering has recently gained popularity, but it was first introduced by Tyson in 1985 as the role of a business manager. The idea is to integrate HR activities into the long-term business agenda, anticipate changes, and support the organisation's objectives. In other words, the purpose of human resources is to help achieve organisational goals, or as further elaborated by Ulrich in 1997, 'HR for business' (Armstrong, 2006a; Tyson, 2006). The CIPD defines HR business partnering as a model in which HR units work collaboratively with business directors, line managers, and other stakeholders to build the organisation's strategies and achieve its objectives. This approach involves driving people strategy and performance and implementing appropriate HR policies and practices. However, the specific role of HR as a business partner may vary depending on the organisation's size, culture, and objectives (*CIPD | HR Business Partner roles*, 2024).

Lee and Wilkie (2018) listed specific characteristics associated with HR as a business partner, such as a reactor to ensure compliance with policies, respond to business needs and install basic initiatives to manage talent along with its function added to an anticipator through the use of analytics to forecast talent needs, providing insight and solutions to ensure a high – quality supply of talent.

However, other commentators, such as Buzady (2016), claimed that this role is far beyond talent planning and that HR will be taking on the role of classic business planning and strategic management. HR business partnering role, according to Mitsakis (2014) and Caldwell et al. (2011)-who named it HRP-, requires early involvement of HR in the strategic decision-making process and organisation's strategy formulation in general, in other words, be part of the executive leadership team with responsibility for developing HR relevant strategies, in addition to, becoming a change-maker instead of change-manager of continuous transformation, shaping processes and cultivating a culture that improves effectiveness (see also Mansour, 2015).

In their attempt to trace the evolution of Human Resources, Ulrich and Dulebohn (2015) identified three waves of change that have occurred. The early wave occurred between the 1930s and 1940s when HR focused on the administrative systems of work. Then, the attention shifted to practices such as staffing, performance monitoring, and staff well-being before considering the strategic dimension of human resource management. Lately, HR evolution is established on the assumption that the side strategy of HR can be used as a window to see other external factors that influence the role of HR or 'How do we do HR from Outside/In'. The most interesting part of Ulrich and Dulebohn HR's perspective is their explanation of how this outside/in logic happens. The two authors believe that ten essential criteria must be observed when building HR, such as value creation or what add value HR creates to internal and external customers, looking at the context in which HR functions and understanding the business context and settings. All this was summarised by the establishment of the 'STEPED' framework, which pointed to the external forces that have an impact on HR function and practice.

Ulrich et al. (2012) expanded this framework by attempting to determine the degree to which HR professionals possess certain competencies and explain what makes HR professionals effective at a personal level and what makes HR professionals effective as they impact business success and organisational performance. This point highlighted the importance of HR professional attributes and how these influence HR function and role, such as practitioners' ability to facilitate or adapt to the change in a proactive manner using the appropriate change management models, both on an individual level or from a behavioural and attitudinal standpoint, and on a functional level such as developing new HR policies and applications, improving or at least maintaining HR services quality provided to both employees and businesses, outsourcing and devolving the operational responsibilities to the line and thus, focus on strategic issues.

With respect to professional competencies, the views provided by Ulrich et al. (2012) concerning the business context and environment would be important if the three authors furthered their contribution by creating a behavioural model that aids individual HR practitioners in encountering the changes in a business context and performing their proposed change agent role. The suggested HR model may emphasise certain competencies such as strategic thinking, business knowledge, leadership and technical skills, considering that the current ones, such as Lewin’s Model, McKinsey 7-s Model and Kotter’s Model, are either outdated or incompatible with terms of domain and anticipated future responsibilities.

Commentators such as Ratnawat (2018) when discussing HR Competency-based Model, focused on identifying the competencies related to value creation and those that improve the overall performance of organisations, however, less attention was paid to other elements such as the behavioural and attitudinal attributes that drive HR practitioners’ performance, how they perceive the changeability of HR role and function as well as, the impact of all these on practitioners’ professional identity formation and re-formation at the workplace, supposing that we refer to what has been suggested by Curtis Nichol and Williams as the influence of the organisational context on professional identity through which individual practitioners need to develop a sense of self and a personal view of their role, all this need to be adequately addressed in order to build a solid framework that helps in the smooth transition in HR role and function (Nichol and Williams, 2014).

The literature suggests that HR's role as a strategic business partner means it is becoming more strategic and has the potential to secure its future during times of change. However, the literature does not adequately address concerns related to this transformation, such as the ability of HR units to adapt and adjust their priorities and develop processes systematically to approach this new role. Another concern is how this shift will impact other core HR roles, such as employee-focused departments, as HR units become more business-oriented and involved in strategic issues as consultants for other departments. Additionally, it remains to be seen how HR departments balance the conflicting demands of businesses and employees while maintaining their moral obligations.

Despite the literature emphasis on HR's ability to implement and influence organisational strategy, act as a change agent, performing the roles of employee champion and administrative expert, there is a lack of clarity about how these can be delivered, measured or what degree these perceived differently/or similarly by HR practitioners and their peers in other units within the same organisation especially when the variation in practitioners' seniority, level of knowledge and experiences considered. Besides, the literature seems more concerned with gaining the strategic title rather than practically attaining organisational worthiness (see Human Resource Champions, Ulich, 1996).

The literature reviewed also shows a potential tension between 'lecture rooms' talk' and HR theorists on one side and practitioners in action on the other side. This tension is assumably centred on practitioners' psychological and practical acceptance of HR changing or evolving roles in terms of whether HR practitioners are mindful and ready to accept and encounter the challenges and responsibilities associated with these roles or whether they possess sufficient business knowledge, behaviour and the attitude that aid them to accommodate the change (see Lambert, 2009). Consequently, this may also apply to HR as a department; for example, a previous study conducted by Gerpott (2015) predicted a potential conflict between allocating resources to the exploration of new ideas, such as business partnering versus investing in the exploitation of established activities (e.g., recruitment, selection and learning and development, compensation and benefits and employee relations).

Another closer look at the literature reveals a focus on HR’s role in driving effectiveness, value creation and helping organisations win in the marketplace (see; Bailie, 2019 and Ulrich et al., 2012). However, there remain some potential unanswered questions regarding the proposed role, as it necessitates additional and more specific professional attributes. This raises the question of how HR professionals define and perceive their evolving or soon-to-be-evolved professional identity, considering that professional attributes and the degree of professionalism may differ depending on whether the role is traditionally operational or strategic. (Ulrich, 2024; Ulrich et al., 2012).

Despite the previously illustrated practical complexity of HR business partnering, the practice gained many supporters, such as Hunter, who conducted a seven-year study and concluded that HR business partnering has influenced several changes in HR activities orientation and revealed a series of shifts in strategic planning, strategy execution and delivery (Hunter et al., 2006). However, others, such as Piwowar-Sulej rejected Hunter’s view on HR activities change and the shift of strategic planning. They stated that ‘there is no consistency in defining or a specific job description for the role of HR business partner and people who are recruited for this job can, in practice, perform tasks which are assigned rather to a functional expert or general HR practitioner (Piwowar-Sulej, 2017). It, however, can be added that when Hunters illustrated his model for HR PR areas of practice, he identified critical business issues as a key competency which is far beyond an ordinary HR personnel knowledge scope and operational experience, in addition to other complicated processes associated with the role, for example, HR business partner is required to develop structured recommendations and strategies for implementation, advises on the cost implications of business strategies, identifies obstacles to change and develops strategies to overcome them.

The challenges associated with HR business partnering draw attention to another prominent development in HR roles, functions, and service delivery, known as the devolution of HR responsibilities to line managers. Many commentators have indicated this development and considered it a key theme in HR literature (López-Cotarelo, 2018; Mcguire, Stoner and Mylona, 2008a; Morley et al., 2006; O'Riordan, 2017b; Perry and Kulik, 2008). Most of this literature focussed on the degree of the devolution, what responsibilities are devolved and the impact on cost and service delivery. However, the discussion here will be more interested in linking this development in HR with the central notion that HR function and role is now more strategic than the traditional personnel management or the later forms of HR on the one hand, and how the devolution of HR responsibilities to the line is directly linked with the later development of HR business partnering initiative on the other hand.

### 3.7 The HRM Evolution through Devolution.

Brewster and Larsen can be regarded among the first commentators who produced an insight into the practice and concept of HR devolution by defining it as the degree to which human resource management involves and gives responsibility to line managers rather than personnel specialists. (Cascón-Pereira, Valverde and Ryan, 2006)The two commentators provided valuable insights by stating that delegating HR responsibilities has a twofold effect: It enhances an organisation's overall effectiveness and empowers HR to act as a coordinator and facilitator for line managers' activities. As a result, HR is better equipped to collaborate with line managers in resolving people-related business issues and to provide more effective support to the organization.

Lowe (1992) argues that the role of line managers is no longer restricted to monitoring and organising production but also achieving HR policy goals of commitment, quality, flexibility and ultimately, the profitability of subordinates. This view is also supported by Hoogenboorn and Brewster, who argue that the new role of line managers will include not only budgeting and resource allocation but also people management (Hoogendoorn, Brewster and Foreman, 1992). This perspective seems appropriate to other commentators such as McGuire et al. (2008b), who contended that by devolving responsibility of HR practices to line managers, organisations expect a closer relationship between line managers and employees with speedier decision-making and more effective resolution of workplace problems.

Holt and Brewster (2003) suggests that there is presented evidence that The HR role is increasingly assigned to Line managers, and the extent of such assignment varies. However, Marchington and Whittaker (2003) found that HR took the lead in determining policy across all areas, either having sole responsibility or deciding on policy in conjunction with line managers. This is noteworthy given that it is rare for line managers to take the lead on policy issues.

Lately, Ulrich emphasised the involvement of line managers in HR when he highlighted the linkage between HR business partnering and the line. He argued that line managers have ultimate responsibilities for approving and executing HR, just as they have responsibilities for finance and marketing (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). This perspective was also pointed out by other commentators, such as Huselid, who states that HR and Line's managers work as partners to develop a differentiated workforce strategy, which, if successful, will lead to greater economic and customer value (Huselid, 2008). Additionally, it was suggested that in many performance management schemes, there must be a coalition involving HR specialists and line managers to create an issue-based cross-functional team to define what must be done, identify targets and stretch goals and establish performance indicators (Armstrong and Baron, 2003).

Furthermore, a study by Mesner Andolšek and Štebe (2005) revealed a clear connection between devolving HR responsibilities to line managers and the organisation's characteristics and level of HRM control. For instance, in their study, Hyman and Cunningham concluded that, in large organisations, line managers are adopting a developmental role, which is a key aspect of performance management and training and development for non-managerial staff (Cunningham and Hyman, 1995). In particular, Gibb (2003) thinks that devolving some aspects of training and development will reflect better quality training and development, enhance human relations within the organisation and lead to a transformation of the line managers themselves and become more competent in interpersonal interaction in work teams. Cooper (2004) explained that line managers could ensure the worth of any developmental process when their staff transferred it to the job. Also, Hutchinson and Purcell (2016) contended that line managers have increased responsibilities in providing formal and informal training, career development and promotion, coaching and guidance, job rotation and development of multi-skills so the individual is better able to contribute to the work of the team or department.

Pynes (2004) suggested that line managers are now playing a key role in workforce planning, which, as a process, identifies gaps in the current workforce compared to future requirements so that an organisation can achieve its strategy. Some studies suggest that line managers have a limited impact on areas like recruitment and selection. For instance, Schraeder and Jordan (2011) highlighted the use of personal traits to identify individuals who match the specific requirements of a job. Furthermore, recruitment is governed by a formal framework of social and legal responsibilities, including the "Equal Pay Act" and "Sex Discrimination Regulations," as explored by Weightman (2004). However, a study conducted in fifteen European countries reported that recruitment and selection practices were outsourced by 59%; according to Ordanini and Silvestri (2008) When HR decides to externalise such a core activity, it only focuses on supporting competitive advantage and efficiency through a path-independent recruiting and selecting process rather than cost.

In summary, there are two distinct categories of studies on the devolution of HRM to line managers. The first is descriptive and explanatory, intending to identify which facets of HRM are most commonly delegated and the potential outcomes of such delegation. The second group of studies is primarily explanatory and delves into the effects of devolution on the responsibilities and functions of line managers.

### 3.7.1 The Cost of Devolving HR Operations to Line Managers.

Despite the increased pressure to devolve HR responsibilities to line managers, there has been little practical change since 2003. In a study, Hall and Torrington (1998) found that there is a deliberate policy to devolve HR activities, and line managers are encouraged to take them, but managers do not feel they have the skills, interest, or time for this. For instance, a study conducted by Renwick (2003) which investigated devolving HR activities to line managers, including performance appraisal, counselling of employee sickness and absence, recruitment, and employee development. The study found that line managers were not convinced that doing HR work was something they should spend too much time on and being tasked with HR work was difficult as other managerial duties needed completing as well. This view is also supported by Hoogendoorn and Brewster (1992), who found that devolving HR responsibility will increase line managers' workload, and they may feel incompetent to perform that responsibility effectively. Moreover, Gilbert et al. (2011) found in their study that line managers are confronted with unclear information about their role expectations, which causes role ambiguity. Moreover, devolving HR work to line managers may lead to what is known as "role stress" if not accompanied by clear policies and procedures regarding the use of HR practices and the division of responsibilities.

Linked with the above, the finding of Francis and Keegan (2006) revealed that the devolution of HR responsibilities to line managers led to employees increasingly losing day-to-day contact with HR specialists and relying on line managers who may have neither the time nor the skills to give HR work the priority it needs. Added to, according to the findings of Harris (1998) there is little evidence that organisations are providing any formal training to their line managers to handle the human resource management tasks that are being allocated to them, as these devolved responsibilities may involve taking ethical decisions and line managers not be equipped to deal with, such as termination and staff development as line managers may be trapped between 'justice and mercy' in such devolved tasks. Hunter and Renwick (2009) found that formal written policies and procedures to guide the line managers in HRM can be helpful when taking on such HR responsibilities. However, even in organisations with a clear policy and detailed guidelines in HRM for line managers, HR outcomes may vary according to line managers being flexible in interpreting and using such policies and procedures.

To conclude this section, devolving some HR operational responsibilities, such as day–to–day people management activities, is not only cost-cutting, enables a faster decision-making mechanism, or improves service quality, but also serves the strategic ambitions of HR by having more time to focus on other core business issues including value creation, talent management, driving performance, and facilitating change. Thus, the devolution of HR requires a partnership between the HR department and the line to ensure that managers are trained and have the time and capacity to deliver these services.

### 3.8 HRM: Key Challenges and Opportunities.

In recent times, the spread of the global pandemic Covid-19, Brexit, and the war in Ukraine, managing diversity, the fierce war for talents, and work-life balance, collectively forced different changes in HR policies, applications, and undoubtedly HR priorities (Anbuoli, Thenpandian and Sakthivel, 2016; Sharma, 2021). Some commentators, such as Calvard (2020) and Haque (2023) emphasises that HR departments need to revise their traditional policies and workplace thinking, be prepared to manage complex reactions to the changes and think about how to ensure stability in emerging expectations and routines, along with how changes in work practices such as remote working are affecting staff wellbeing, productivity and performance.

The future and current roles of HR seem likely to be unpredictable due to the challenges that force HR units to reshape their practices and policies, re-arrange priorities, and innovate new ways of meeting staff and employers' expectations. For instance, research has consistently demonstrated that organisations struggle with understanding HR Business Partners' contributions to the business, their impact on the business value chain, and how the role is structured and positioned (Sellschop et al., 2013). Other potential challenges were pointed out by several commentators, including Ulrich, who argue that HR business partners' overemphasise of business outcomes has led to ‘the erosion of the traditional HRM operational role and possibly result in employee-champion vs strategic-business partner role conflict (see Das, Azmi and James, 2020; Shi, 2021).

There are reasons to suggest that sudden and unplanned changes can create significant and long-lasting impacts not only in HR's business-oriented role and function but can also shift HR focus to its traditional responsibilities, including staff’s attitudes, behaviour, well-being, performance monitoring, and workforce planning. For example, recent research has examined the impact of rising living costs on HR. A study by Nous found that 74% of HR leaders are concerned that the cost-of-living crisis affects employees' performance. That being said, addressing employee mental health concerns, such as stress and anxiety, and providing financial advice services, may necessitate a more people-centric HR approach.

Some rapid changes, such as digitalisation and technology advancements, represented a new lens to business environments and led to important changes in work processes. According to Oesterreich et al. (2019), these changes led to workforce implications, such as skills gaps and shortages. Recent examples include machine learning, big data, mobile technology, the Internet of Things, and integrating artificial intelligence (AI) and AI-based applications into human resource management processes. Dennis and Aizenberg (2022) argue that using AI and tech-based tools in HR can raise ethical and legal concerns, including privacy, accountability, human dignity and bias concerns. However, it is worth noting that integrating these tools can also improve the recruitment process by automatically filtering through a large number of applications to identify candidates who best match job requirements, in addition to using Predictive AI, deep learning and data mining techniques as decision-making and problem-solving tools (Malik, Budhwar and Kazmi, 2023; Nageshpolu, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic has represented another timely and crucial factor to consider in studying how HR is currently forced to reposition itself as an employee-focused rather than a business-focused department. It has started reallocating its resources towards more traditional HR operations, besides reapplying classical personnel management practices. Previous studies by Akkermans et al. (2021) and Kalogiannidis (2021) showed that before COVID-19, HR was overly focused on the impact of its practices on organisational performance while neglecting impacts on employees; however, the pandemic has had a major impact on organisations and individuals and led to changes in the work environment, work processes, work-related behaviour, and attitudes. Elayan (2021) noted that as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, 72% of employees have been working remotely, with 40% reported turnovers, besides other factors that directly influence organisations' competitiveness and performance such as employee, mental and physical health (see also Johar et al., 2022). Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic has also led to significant changes in HRM Talent Management policies. According to the European Labour Authority report released in 2021, these changes have had a fundamental impact on the recruitment process (European Labour Authority, 2021). In response, CIPD has developed a range of resources and policies to help organisations adapt to the new hybrid and flexible working arrangements, as well as to plan their resources effectively in this new environment (*CIPD | COVID-19 topic hub*, 2024).

Whether it results from technological advancements, automation, political climate or economic decline, job loss presents a substantial challenge for HR departments. To manage job loss effectively, HR must consider ethical considerations, legal requirements, talent management, workforce planning, and the effects on the remaining employees. Addressing this multifaceted issue necessitates strategic planning, legal knowledge, and social intelligence to mitigate the emotional, psychological and financial effects on the employees and the organisation at large. These effects may manifest as toxic workplace atmospheres, reduced loyalty, and challenges in recruiting new talent. Similarly, HR departments encounter challenges linked to the 'Sunday Night Phenomenon[2], indicative of burnout, imbalanced work-life dynamics, low self-esteem, and job dissatisfaction. Tackling these issues might necessitate a strategic approach encompassing employee engagement, offering development opportunities, fostering a supportive and inclusive workplace, and better workload management.

In a survey of 500 HR directors by the employee money-saving platform, one-third (34%) noted a decline in productivity due to employees being preoccupied with personal concerns. Brian Dow, CEO of Mental Health UK, reinforced these findings, warning that the UK is at risk of becoming a burnt-out nation, with the cost of living being a significant factor in workplace stress and anxiety (Mahalia, 2024). HR departments can play a crucial role in assisting employees in coping with the rising cost of living by implementing strategies and initiatives, such as regularly reviewing and adjusting wages in line with inflation and offering financial support services.

To conclude, HR faces various challenges in today's fast-paced world. These challenges arise from economic shifts, globalisation, workforce diversity, and technological progress, leading to new organisational demands. Consequently, the HR field is venturing into new areas, necessitating adaptation and innovation. However, these challenges also present many opportunities for HR and organisations to discover new avenues and advance their evolution.

### 3.9 Chapter Summary and Findings.

HR is perceived either as employee-centred or strategic and business-oriented. The employee-centred approach focuses on the HR operational and

[2] Sunday Night Phenomenon, also known as Sunday evening anxiety, commonly manifests as a combination of stressful thoughts, difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep, dreading the upcoming week, and a general sense of sadness or unease. These symptoms often have a noticeable impact on mental health and overall well-being, potentially affecting productivity and mood throughout the week (Robintek, 2019).

transactional duties, which involve staffing, recruitment and selection, coaching, and managing employees' compensation issues and performance. As strategic, HR focuses on value addition and business results by associating its processes with long-term business objectives. Although the debate centred around whether HR is operational or strategic, the HR Business Partner role (HRBP) is evidence that HR can also be strategically operational. In contrast, the HRBP role performer is expected to be an administrative expert and change-maker, possess the knowledge of employment laws and legislations, and participate in building business strategies and achieving its objectives through employees' productivity and performance, which is on the one hand. On the other, when analysing PM or HR in its older version, the strategic dimension becomes visible only when PM is viewed as a function, not a role. This assumption can be supported by Fredrick's argument on the scientific management principles theory and employee performance system, whereas personnel management can functionally improve employee productivity and overall organisational performance. Notwithstanding, the researcher can also argue that the debate on HR and whether it is perceived as a role, a function, strategic or strategy-free, is dynamic and subjected to employers' perceptions, expectations and HRM positionality within organisations; in addition, the structure, orientation, and culture of hosting organisations where HR operates in.

# Chapter 4. Research Design: Methodological Considerations for Lived Experience Qualitative Life Histories.

## 4.1 Introduction.

This chapter examined the philosophical underpinnings of the study, encompassing the methodologies and data collection techniques employed. It began by delineating the researcher's philosophical stance, followed by a concise definition of the research activities and an examination of the diverse interpretations of the terminology. Furthermore, the chapter sheds light on the research design, articulating the advantages and limitations of the selected data collection methods and the subsequent data analysis. It also evaluated the efficacy of the chosen research instruments in yielding results and their alignment with the study's goals and objectives. The final section of the chapter addressed the ethical issues and considerations associated with employing life history as the data collection technique, strategies for mitigating these challenges, and the method's suitability. The chapter culminated in a depiction of the thematic analysis process, executed in four phases.

## 4.2 Positionality Statement.

This section elucidates the philosophical stance that informed my positionality and the paradigm I selected. The philosophical dimension is a fundamental component of any research activity. In social research, Wahyuni (2012a) suggested ontology and epistemology as the dominant philosophical dimensions that distinguish existing search paradigms.

This study is directed by two philosophical assumptions: non-dual ontological and epistemological. Ontology, as a branch of philosophy, is concerned with ‘the nature of being’ and ‘what exists?’ in addition to the fundamental nature of things or categories (Aspers, 2015; Kee, Musa and Wong, 2011) while epistemology is concerned with knowledge, where knowledge is located, its forms and its relation to certainty (Cunningham and Fitzgerald, 1996).

### 4.2.1 An Overview of the Ontological Philosophy.

Generally, social science research philosophies involve a wide range of factors, and among the most critical are the philosophical dimensions of ontology and epistemology. These dimensions are essential in distinguishing one research paradigm from another. Ontology and epistemology are concerned with the nature of knowledge and how it evolves; however, ontology, in particular, as a branch of metaphysics or 'the theory of ultimate categories of things', as explained by Corazzon (2023), deals with an individual's perception of reality and the nature of its existence; as such, it is more concerned with the different ways of understanding what exists and how it exists. Consequently, when ontology is applied to social research, it refers to the belief that reality exists independently of social actors and their interpretations. This means that the social world is an objective reality that can be studied and understood regardless of individuals' subjective experiences and interpretations. By understanding the importance of ontology in social research, researchers can develop a more objective and accurate understanding of the social world (Wahyuni, 2012a). Furthermore, Smith (2003) and Coffey (2014, p. 33) claimed that ontology as a domain of philosophical inquiry refers to investigating the nature of reality and the object of knowledge and seeks to explore the possibilities of what could exist and how we may come to understand and define the nature of actual reality.

To this end, ontological assumptions are often associated with and employ metaphysics, which is concerned with studying the fundamental nature of being and the world around us. Interestingly, the term ontology was first coined in 1613 by two philosophers, Rudolf Göckel and Jacob Lorhard. Since then, the term has become a crucial part of philosophical discourse, with its first recorded use in English dating back to Bailey's dictionary of 1721, where it was defined as 'an Account of being in the Abstract' (cited in Smith, 2003, p.155). Moon and Blackman (2017) expressed similar perspectives. They stated that ontology is a valuable tool for researchers to understand how certain they can be about the nature and existence of the objects they are studying. Additionally, It helps researchers to determine what claims they can make about reality, who decides what is considered legitimate and actual reality, and how to approach conflicting assumptions of reality. In essence, ontology deals with the existence of a singular reality that can be studied, comprehended, and experienced as a 'truth' (Merrill, 2011).

### 4.2.2 The Non-dual Ontological Assumptions of the Study.

To establish a comprehensive understanding of the non-dual assumptions underlying this study, it is crucial to provide a clear definition of the concept of non-duality and clarify its relevance and specific applications within the context of this study.

Bracken suggested that the concept of non-dual ontology, also known as subject-object nonduality, has come into existence to solve the problem of 'one and many' in reference to one ultimate reality and its different interpretations (Bracken, 1996a). The term also refers to the belief that only one single and ultimate reality is viewed from different perspectives and standpoints. Historically, non-duality has been linked to various religio-philosophical traditions, including Mahāyāna Buddhism, Advaita Vedānta Hinduism, Kabbalistic Judaism, and Christianity. Several commentators suggest that these traditions have found value in non-duality as they provide a shared starting point, allowing for meaningful discussion among different beliefs despite their divergent views (Klotz, 2021). However, this researcher's perspective stems from his assumption that non-duality exists to facilitate understanding some complex beliefs, such as the Trinity or the concept of three in one in Christianity. Thus, the subject-object reality is viewed as a unified entity rather than separate parts and multiple realities. This researcher's assumption can be supported by the views of Klotz, who stated that the 'non-duality' or the 'oneness' is not a mathematical but a metaphysical concept. It is not 'one' in contrast to the 'many'; nor is it 'one' as the sum of all parts'.

Furthermore, Bracken argued that the philosophy of non-dual ontology exists to solve the problem of many and one in reference to one ultimate reality and several perceptions (Bracken, 1996b). Closer to social science, nonduality has been used by Nathan Rotenstreich in his paper ‘The Ontological and Epistemological Dimensions of History’ published in 1972. Here, he used the term non-dual ontological history. In his paper, Rotenstreich analysed the relationship between history and modes of actuality, emphasising historical events' modes of being and actuality, which can be viewed from multiple perspectives. To illustrate, historical events such as WWII are actual realities that can be viewed either as written historical facts (mode of being 1) or as a lived experience and an eyewitness account from those who experienced it(mode of being 2) (see Rotenstreich, 1972).

The non-dual ontological assumptions of this study are based on the sociologists’ -as one society- different perspectives while holding one assumption of professions as an objective reality. As analysed in chapter two, sections 2.1.5, 2.1.5a, 2.5.6 and 2.1.7, the sociologists’ debate around professions stemmed from their several perspectives, presented mainly in the attribute and functional approaches to the term profession. The attribute approach, which is rooted in the work of Morris L. Cogan (1955) and Greenwood (1957b) paper ‘The Attributes of a Professions’, tends to provide defining individual traits and a descriptive list of attributes that distinguish professions (e.g., medicine, law, teaching, nursing, etc) from non-professional occupations such as sales, cashier, customer service, etc, (see Greenwood, 1957a; Lester, 2015; Weiss-Gal and Welbourne, 2008; Welbourne, 2009). According to this perspective, these distinguishing attributes include theoretical knowledge, professional education, and various types of control such as licensing, occupational closure and entry restrictions, in addition to collegiality, ethical code, work for the common good, discretion, and autonomy (Christoph, Matthes and Ebner, 2020a; Sciulli, 2007). In contrast, the functionalist approach to professions is more concerned with the structural features of the old professions, such as medicine, law, and teaching, and views them as social phenomena (Alexander, 1981; Parsons, 2005). Unlike the attribute approach to professions, the sociological functionalism perspective focuses more on the structure of the occupational systems and the upgrading processes of occupational status from simpler to more complex forms that integrate or interact with other subsystems and are influenced by external macro factors such as legal system, social, and political environments ( Brante, 1988; Durkheim, cited in Young, Chakroff and Tom, 2012, p.28).

The non-dual ontology philosophy is also present in employees' and managers' life history descriptive accounts and sociologists' perspectives on HR professional status, where both parties assume that HR is not a profession. As illustrated in Chapter 2, section 2.1.2, sociologists such as Kotsios (2010), Djankov et al. (2002b), and Timmons (2019) emphasise that licensing, regulatory barriers and occupational closure are key distinguishing features and attributes of professional activities whilst managers' and employees' life history personal accounts revealed a perspective of HR being not a profession based on many beliefs that include, besides lacking licencing, rigorous academic and practical training as some of the HR practitioners -according to several non HR participants- are not professionally qualified as same as doctors (participant 31), or HR is a managerial role rather than a professional one (participant 37).

Moreover, the non-dual ontological philosophical debate resurfaced in HR participants' perspectives of their professional identity and the sociologists' perspectives of professional identity existence and formation levels. HR participants and sociologists hold the same perception of professional identity, ‘mode of being’ or ‘nature of being’ based on the assumption that professional identity is dynamic, not stable and varies in degree based on practitioners’ practical, theoretical and professional knowledge, their seniority, role type, qualifications and their association with or membership of professional bodies such as the CIPD as contended by life history participants 3, 20 and 39. For example, during data analysis, it became clear that HR professionals utilise distinct approaches when determining and prioritising their professional identity components. These differences were closely linked to their specific HR roles, suggesting that HR has developed a role-related Identity that incorporates both personal qualities/traits and specific behavioural and attitudinal aspects of their role-based identity. Participants' self-identification varied significantly based on the behaviour associated with each role, underscoring the crucial role of role-based identity in HR. Notably, those who hold job titles such as business partner, HR director, or HR advisor or are CIPD-accredited were better able to define themselves professionally and articulate their HR professional identity with greater clarity, highlighting the importance of these roles in shaping HR professional identity. (see participants 3 and 20, 39 comments on their HR professional identity). In line with this, sociologists' perspective of professional identity modes of being and nature stems from their assumption that professional identity or work-based identity is multifaceted and shaped by professional self-concept, attitudes, attributes, and beliefs and consequently affects behaviour in a given work-related situation; in addition, sociologists assume that professional identity enables professionals to assign meaning to themselves, and meaning attached to them by others and is influenced by professionals membership in a social group including occupations such as the field of human resource management (Neary, 2014; Vivekananda-Schmidt, Crossley and Murdoch-Eaton, 2015a).

### 4.2.3 The Epistemological Assumptions of this Study.

This view endorses the existence of more than one reality and the modes of knowledge contributed to constructing the multiple subjective realities. As a philosophical discipline, epistemology concerns the nature and modes of knowledge and its acquisition. It seeks to address fundamental questions regarding the justification of our beliefs or the question of I don’t just believe that, I know it), the criteria by which we determine and perceive reality/or what is true, and the methods and standards of evidence that inform our inquiry into the world and human experience (Roscher, 2003). By examining the nature and limits of human knowledge (i.e., the truth content and the justifiability), epistemology aims to establish a foundation for the legitimacy of knowledge claims and to clarify how individuals can gain knowledge with certainty. Thus, epistemology is an indispensable tool for researchers and practitioners in fields ranging from science to law, politics, and beyond, providing a framework for rigorous and reliable inquiry (Kurzman, 1994).

‘The theory of knowledge. Its central questions include the origin of knowledge, the place of experience in generating knowledge, and the place of reason in doing so; the relationship between knowledge and certainty, and between knowledge and the impossibility of error; the possibility of universal scepticism; and the changing forms of knowledge that arise from new conceptualisations of the world. These issues link with other central concerns of philosophy, such as the nature of truth and the nature of experience and meaning. It is possible to see epistemology as dominated by two rival metaphors. One is that of a building or pyramid built on foundations. In this conception, it is the philosopher's job to describe, especially secure foundations, and to identify secure modes of construction so that the resulting edifice can be shown as sound. This metaphor favours some idea of the 'given' as a basis of knowledge and of a traditionally defensible theory of confirmation and inference as a construction method. The other metaphor is that of a boat or fuselage that has no foundations but owes its strength to the stability given by its interlocking parts. This rejects the idea of a basis in the 'given', favours ideas of coherence and [ ... ] holism, but finds it harder to ward off scepticism’ (Niiniluoto, Sintonen and Wolenski, 2004).

Based on what was mentioned by Wahyuni (2012b), social actors -such as HR life history participants- perceive reality depending on their consciousness and the reality mode of knowledge. Throughout this study, individuals who shared their life histories had differing assumptions, experiences, and levels of knowledge regarding the status of HR (this was first detected when this researcher conducted a pilot life history before data collection). Each participant employed these varying factors to create their own unique perception of reality (further details can be found in Chapter 5, section 5.5.1). Conversely, sociologists view professional activities through a different lens (functionalism, power and attribute approaches) and assumptions that shape their understanding of the reality of HR. (this is explored in Chapter 2, section 2.1.3)

Consequently, multiple realities have been created (HR participants constructed reality one, whereas sociologists theorised reality two).

The epistemological stance also stems from the assumption that there is more than one reality in considering whether HR has developed a professional identity. As discussed in Chapter 5, section 5.5, HR participants believe that they possess a professional identity (reality one). At the same time, managers and employees argued that having a professional identity is dependent on labelling HR as a profession (reality two). Participants' different assumptions of reality can be supported by the epistemologists' debate on the analysis of knowledge and 'the Truth Condition'. According to the concept of truth condition, personal beliefs can be considered an approach to reality knowing where individuals know what they believe, which may or may not be true (Ichikawa and Steup, 2018). Relatedly, in considering HR as a profession and the formation of HR professional identity, the participants' epistemological debate closely aligns with the sociological assumption of subjective idealism, which suggests that an individual's view of reality is shaped by their personal experiences, beliefs, emotions, and awareness. These internal factors collectively form the individual's subjective consciousness, which may or may not align with the external objective reality. However, the argument put forth by this researcher emphasises the crucial role that self-perception plays in shaping an individual's subjective reality. The researcher posits that social factors, such as interactions and membership in a particular social or occupational group, can profoundly impact one's perception of reality and reality knowing or modes of knowledge. Put simply, a person's social and occupational environment can influence both their self-perception and their perception of the world around them, ultimately affecting how they construct their own imaginative reality (see discussion on theme 6, Chapter 5, section 5.6). This assumption can be supported by the epistemologists' debate on the analysis of knowledge and 'the Truth Condition'. According to the concept of truth condition, the belief condition can be considered an approach to reality knowing where individuals know what they believe, which may or may not be a true reflection of reality mode of being and nature (Ichikawa and Steup, 2018).

### 4.2.4 The Researcher's Paradigm.

To conduct research and explore a topic of interest, one must take a systematic approach that enables him/her to broaden his/her understanding of a given subject and ultimately offer solutions to social issues. Known as the Paradigm, the term was introduced by Kuhn in his book, 'The Structure of Scientific Revolutions' where he defined it as a comprehensive and interconnected cluster of substantive concepts, variables, and problems. It encompasses diverse aspects of a given subject matter. It provides a holistic view of its various dimensions and is supported by an array of methodological approaches and tools that enable efficient analysis and interpretation of the data (Kuhn, 1996, cited in Siddiqui, 2019, p.255). Ebohon et al. (2021) proclaimed that a paradigm is the researcher's beliefs and perspectives, which are defined by his ontological and epistemological stance and serve as a lens for viewing the world. Similar to Ebohon's perspective, Khatri (2020). suggested that a paradigm can be defined as a set of beliefs through which individuals see the world around them. Also, a paradigm is a basic set of assumptions that guide the research's inquiry and influence how the research is conducted. In addition, paradigms came into existence to reflect the differences in the human ways of thinking and understanding, as well as to serve different research purposes (Adom, Yoboah and Ankrah, 2016).

The topic of research paradigms classification has been widely discussed in academic circles, yet there remains no clear consensus on the appropriate number of classifications. Some Academics, including Shah and Al-Bargi (2013), categorised research paradigms into three groups: the Positivist paradigm, which takes an ontological realism stance named naïve realism; interpretivism/constructivism, which seeks to explore individual beliefs and perceptions of social phenomenon, and lastly the critical theory paradigm that challenges the two previous paradigms and aims to unlock and bring to light the beliefs and practices that act as a barrier to human freedom of thinking and restrict his/her autonomy. Meanwhile, Guba and Lincoln have identified four research paradigms, which include positivism, either dualist, naïve realist or experimental; post-positivism with its critical realism, modified dualist and objectivist stances; constructivism with it is subjectivist and relational created realities; and lastly the critical theory paradigm with its transactional and subjectively constructed reality (E. Guba and Lincoln, 2005, p.193). Similarly, Saunders et al. (2019, pp.140–144) classify research paradigms into two main groups: radical structuralist and radical humanist to include positivism, initial realism, interpretivism, post-modernism, and pragmatism within them.

The social constructionism is a widely applied sociology paradigm stemming from the social constructivism theory (Akpan et al. (2020) note that Jerome Bruner is credited with introducing the constructivism theory in 1966. This theory posits that individuals acquire their understanding and knowledge of the world through active engagement with their experiences and subsequent reflection. Drawing from the principles of cognitive theory, it is also known as cognitive constructivism. At a later stage, the social construction of reality emerged as a new field in sociology that emphasises that human perception of reality is a product of a social process where individuals construct a relational reality that is influenced by others within the same society (Nickerson, 2022).

While positivists aim to discover the actual reality, the social constructionist paradigm claims that reality is dynamic and socially constructed by social actors. According to this paradigm, individuals create their own reality through their interactions and interpretations of those interactions rather than discovering a reality that already exists and is constructed by others (Sheppard, 2012, p.22). The social constructionist perspective emphasises the role of social context (i.e., ethnic group, occupation, etc) and interaction in shaping the perception of reality.

This study's nondual ontological and epistemological assumptions are applied through social constructionism with a dominant phenomenological view. According to Andrews (2012) and Adom et al. (2016), the social constructionism philosophical paradigm is an approach that emphasises that individuals construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experience, reflection, and interaction within society, while the phenomenographic view is more concerned with the different understandings and interpretations of reality as well as the mistaken perception of reality (see also Stephens, 2018). It is worth noting that combining both philosophical views, social constructionism and phenomenology, is a common positionality in sociological studies, as some believe that social constructionism is rooted in phenomenology (Aspers, 2015). Moreover, different studies applied the same stance, such as the research conducted by Koole and Stack (2016), which aimed to explore professional identity development among PhD students and how different challenges contributed to its formation.

The phenomenological stance, according to Sundler et al. (2019), is a philosophical approach that examines the essence of human experience by exploring how individuals perceive and interact with the world around them. Its focus is understanding the nature of phenomena and how they manifest in our consciousness, including our thoughts, emotions, and sensory perceptions. By elucidating the subjective experience of individuals, phenomenology offers a distinct perspective on the world and the human condition.to capture the lived experiences of study participants. That being said, through the exploration of individuals' experiences and the meaning they attribute to HR as they encountered it, phenomenology yields a deeper understanding of life history participants' perceptions, attitudes, and interpretations. This positionality also allows for the dimensions of HR (as a role, function or profession) to be uncovered, offering valuable insights into how life history participants interpret and make sense of the practice.

From a nondual perspective, the descriptive phenomenological inquiry has been applied to analyse HR as a phenomenon and objective reality from the different perspectives of those who have experienced it. As a researcher, this philosophical position has enabled me, to interrogate life history participants' inner reality and perception of HR using their own subjective personal accounts to determine the professional status of HR as an objective reality. Thus, exploring the relationship between the non-duality of the many perspectives (or the life history participants and those who have experienced it) and the one objective reality of HR as sociologists perceive. Furthermore, the phenomenological view has uncovered complexities around HR professional identity as experienced by HR life history participants (see Chapter 5, section 5.6), and sociologists' perspectives of the dynamic nature and components of professional identity (see Chapter 2, section 2.3). However, combining nondual ontology and phenomenology has enabled me, as a researcher, to articulate that both parties share the same assumption about the nature of professional identity (nature of reality), although they hold two different views of it as a phenomenon and concept.

Mehan stated, 'The perceived object varies according to the standpoint, orientation, attitude, etc., of the perceiving subject, for example, when an object is looked at from the front at one time, and from the back another time. Thus, there is no single determination of an object' (Mehan, 1981, p.72). Epistemologically, Mehan's descriptive phenomenology approach is also employed in this study. As a concept, descriptive phenomenology is an approach that aims to describe the fundamental nature of a phenomenon by examining it from the perspective of those who have experienced it, whether their perception of the object's nature of being is an articulate reflection of the actual reality. This approach's primary objective is to provide a detailed account of the meaning of the experience, including what was experienced and how it was experienced (Neubauer, Witkop and Varpio, 2019). This enabled me to identify the reality misinterpretations in perceiving HR as a profession (distorted reality) by HR life history participants, resulting from more than one reality. The first reality, or the actual reality, is decided and viewed from a sociological standpoint, where defining economic and occupational activity as a professional is conditioned by specific structural features and attributes. These attributes include licensing, body of knowledge, societal recognition, monopoly over activities, etc. (see Chapter 2 sections 2.1.2 and 2.1.4). Besides, another assumption oversimplifies the reality of HR professional status as perceived by

HR life history participants who categorise HR as a profession without considering the profession's modes of being (detected when pilot life history was conducted and later confirmed in Chapter 5, section 5.5). Additionally, the phenomenological stance offers valuable insights into investigating professional identity multiple realities as perceived by HR participants who believed that they constructed and possessed professional identity against another reality expressed by managers and employees' life history participants who believe that since HR is not a profession, HR professionals have not formed professional identity. Therefore, two contrasting realities are unearthed: an actual reality expressed by HR participants where they possess the essential components of professional identity as outlined by sociologists (see Chapter 2, section 2.3) and a naïve reality that is relational to another subjective reality expressed by managers and employees and stemmed from their perception that 'if HR is not a profession then HR professionals haven't developed an HR professional identity' (see Chapter 5, section 5.6 and Gabow, 2017, discussion on naïve reality).

This researcher used a qualitative approach to design and conduct his study. A semi-systematic approach is utilised to review the literature on professions, professionalisation, and professional identity to gain a detailed understanding of the research topic. This stage involved critically reviewing academic articles and textbooks on these subjects to help construct knowledge. This process of knowledge construction provided me with a detailed understanding of the complexities around defining the concept of the profession, the features of professions, semi-professions, professionalism, professional identity, and how HR developed and transformed. From a philosophical standpoint, the knowledge and theoretical experience gained from the literature review stage were well-seated and existed when I qualitatively investigated participants' perceptions of HR professional status at a later stage.

### 4.2.5 Data Collection and Analysis: The Influence of the Researchers' Positionality.

This research administered life history to collect primary data from participants from two groups, group 1, HR practitioners, and group 2, employees and managers, to ensure that the strategy for recruitment of participants was relevant to the research topic, contents, and questions. As stated earlier, the epistemological view of this study assumed the possibility of HR professional status being a subjective reality. Thus, this assumption necessitates exploring how a wider and relevant community perceives this reality, besides revealing and examining whether any census on the reality of HR or what exists (also known as the social recognition or acceptance of professional status).

The life history instrument is used to facilitate a conversation with participants and to hear their voices. To generate meanings, semi-structured open-ended questions were developed to investigate how participants perceive the reality of HR status. Given the safety measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, I had to change my original plan of conducting oral life histories. Instead, I opted for audio-recorded and written responses. Surprisingly, this method was beneficial as it allowed the participants to feel more at ease in their own environment. It also provided them with the time to reflect and give authentic and detailed accounts of their lived experiences.

During this process, I positioned myself as an ''insider'' and took a reflexive stance. My involvement as an insider stemmed from being the one who developed the life history questions and encountered the lived experiences of participants through my continuous dialogue with their transcripts/accounts, besides my previous personal experience as an HR trainee in Newcastle City Council. In fact, the phenomenographic view is always associated with the insider stance. Crowther and Thomson (2020) contend that this position occurs through the dialogue with interviewees and participants, the texts read, and the professional or theoretical experience. Role confusion is a key concern arising from being an insider, as Mohler, Rudman (2022), and Dincer (2019) argued, as such, I was aware that my knowledge, experience or perspective may influence the research and become dominant.

To address this and reduce research bias occurrence, I maintained a balanced relation between holding an insider positionality and the researched HR mode of being through consciousness and self-observance of my subjectivity without negatively impacting the interest and curiosity that led me to initiate the inquiry. Consequently, as a researcher, I recruited participants at different levels of experience and seniority. I avoided questions that led to pre-determined responses and assumptions or might cause any misrepresentation of participants' actual perceptions and values. Self-observance was also key when meanings surfaced through a reflexive stance (see Palaganas et al., 2017). As a researcher, I paid attention to my engagement and my perspective. Thus, participants' transcripts were considered meaning containers and sources of a new understanding of the searched HR status. It is, however, important to note that my pre-understanding, previous experience as an HR trainee, and the knowledge constructed during the literature review are all acknowledged in the process of knowledge production but not dominant or led me to be trapped in my self-view on HR professional status (Chhabra, 2020). Additionally, sense-checking was employed as a critical validation technique to improve the analysis. The supervisory team played a key role in this process by participating in regular, structured meetings. These meetings facilitated in-depth discussions about the quality of the collected data, provided continuous oversight, and ensured the findings' trustworthiness, accuracy, and reliability.

### 4.3 The Research Methodology and Methods.

Ranjit stated that 'research is undertaken within most professions. More than a set of skills, research is a way of thinking: examining the various aspects of your day-to-day life and professional work, understanding and formulating guiding principles that govern a particular procedure, and developing and testing new theories that contribute to advancing your practice and profession. It is a habit of questioning what you do,' (Ranjit, 2011, p.23).

According to Naidoo (2011), research can be defined as a process of collecting, analysing and interpreting information to answer questions; it is also a diligent systematic enquiry into nature and society to authenticate and refine gained knowledge and to establish new knowledge. This definition is like the one suggested by Williams (2007), who defines research as a systematic process that involves collecting and analysing data and aims at exploring solutions to an existing problem or understanding a phenomenon. Aziz (2017) defined research as the systematic inquiry to reach new conclusions or to confirm an earlier finding. According to Aziz, this systematic method of inquiry identifies the purpose of research as obtaining information on some question or set of questions. Similarly, Balakumar et al. (2013) suggested that research is an original investigation undertaken to gain knowledge and understand concepts in a central subject area of specialisation and includes the generation of ideas and information leading to new or substantially improved scientific insights with relevance to the needs of society. As such, most of the above definitions emphasise that any research activity needs to be systematic, have a purpose, create knowledge, further an existing understanding and reach a result in a significant theoretical or practical field. Moreover, Saunders et al. (2019) stated that research is an activity based on logic and does not rely on just beliefs, and people undertake to find things with rational thinking. This rational thinking differs from critical thinking when undertaking research, as it involves a process and a series of actionable, repeatable steps that can be performed to accomplish the desired goal. However, this desired goal, result, and conclusion require defined data collection methods that facilitate obtaining accurate information and/or selecting and recruiting the right participants based on the method employed. To ensure success, data collection methods must be followed by an equally important process of examining data quality, understanding data, and deciding on the appropriate analysis tool or tools. Critical thinking in research can also be described as a process of using reasoning to determine what is true and what is untrue; it involves identifying a new field of knowledge, examining it, evaluating it against what already exists and is known by researchers, and then, objectively test and validate results and findings (Walton and Keynes, 2008; Wood, 2002).

Despite the comprehensive nature of the above definitions, it reveals several gaps and shortcomings. It lacked emphasis on an important aspect of any research activity, which is how research enables and aims to build a robust foundation that enables a better understanding of any phenomena that may encounter individuals or groups collaborating in a social or professional form. Yet, different definitions slightly touch on this aspect of research activity; however, these were mainly in the medical field or inclusively looked at the term research as a tool for value creation and better financial gains through more investment in learning and development (L&D) to enhance the better understanding of the organisational, social and economic environment and add value to the organisation's activity (Filani, Novieastari and Nuraini, 2019). An example of this view is illustrated by Hall and Hayash (1989), who described the research as a firm-level investment activity either triggered by changes or used to predict firm prospects, such as profitability and technological opportunities.

### 4.3.1 The Qualitative Nature of the Study

In general, qualitative research is both a systematic and objective approach that aims to explore realities, human behaviour, attitudes and lived experiences and give them proper meaning (Mohajan, 2018). Taherdoost (2022) argues that qualitative research can achieve in-depth and detailed information, obtain meanings, and explore individuals' experiences and perceptions in different situations.

The exploratory argument drives the qualitative approach chosen for this study, the qualitative content and nature of the research questions, and the data type needed to answer these questions (Jackson et al., 2007) The qualitative approach is described as 'the human instrument approach' that focuses on understanding human beings' experiences, reflections, and perceptions. As such, the qualitative approach concentrates on words and observation of individuals, groups, and communities and attempts to express reality by reflecting on norms, perceptions, and lived experiences. This study emphasises exploring and analysing the reality of HR status and how it is perceived as a lived experience by the study participants or the research community.

The exploratory nature of this research can be defined as investigative, where a purposive qualitative inquiry is conducted systematically into the professionalisation of HR and the complexity associated with understanding the real status of HR. Thus, the focus of the study is primarily on exploring certain new elements that help to characterise the nature of HR and whether it is a profession, a role, or a function. As a result, no attempt was made to test the beliefs and perceptions of participants but to reveal their conceptual understanding of terms such as profession, professional identity, a better understanding of HR as perceived and lived by life history participants, and ultimately determine its actual reality. Another important aspect of the exploratory nature of this research resides in the fact that defining HR as a profession is a current issue, and any new revelations or insights into this debate can be the focus of future studies on HR's professionalisation processes.

### 4.3.2 Data Collection Methods and Analysis

Life histories were used to collect primary data from participants. Davies et al. (2018) defined life history as a qualitative data collection method through questions and answers to describe or comment on a person's life or experience. Similarly, Olive (2014) argues that life history provides a voice to the experienced life of individuals and advances understanding of the complex interaction between individuals' lives, experiences or perceptions and the institutional and societal context in which they lived in. Both authors agree that life history can be in written or oral narrative. Harrison (2009) contented that the purpose of life history is to make sense of how people view themselves in relation to their culture or society, and this is achieved by obtaining a detailed account of a particular aspect of participants in their own words.

Lanford and Tierney (2019) define the life history data collection technique as an extensive record of a person's life as it is reported either by the person themselves, others, or both. These records may come from written accounts, interviews, or both. Thus, life history data are not always oral testimonies. Additionally, using this method to collect data, as argued by Olive (2014), provides a more in-depth perspective of the qualitative questions of what, how, and why. However, it is important to differentiate between life history and semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews utilise pre-established topic guides with key questions, which are uniformly applied throughout each interview. Nevertheless, the interviewer may vary in the order of these questions and the extent to which they probe for information. Additionally, semi-structured interviews prove helpful when the researcher has prior knowledge of what is happening within the target group concerning the research subject. Unlike semi-structured interviews, life history is a method of studying the experiences of individuals and groups. It involves gathering detailed accounts of their narratives, memories, and reflections, offering a comprehensive understanding of their life trajectories from their own perspective. This type of qualitative research data collection covers various time frames and analyses people's lived experiences in-depth.

From a methodological standpoint, life histories offered the opportunity to explore and advance understanding of participants' perception of HR professional status as a lived experience in-depth and with flexibility, in addition to unfolding whether perceptions of HR are to be 'the real reality' as well as, answering the questions of what exists? Is it one reality or multiple realities? Similarly, the life history allowed the research participants to voice their lived experiences as HR practitioners, in addition to self-expressing their professional identity and its components.

Lanford and Tierney (2019) suggested that life history relies on the authentic voices of participants to lend authority to research findings, particularly when used in analysing the lived experiences and attitudes of an individual, considering the belief that an individual can be descriptive of a larger perceived reality (see also Goodson, 2001)Hence, life history responses are used as opinionated evaluations by HR and non-HR participants to the questions of whether HR should be considered a profession, a role, or a function, coupled with defining and describing the professional identity of HR if it exists.

There are several examples of using life history as the single source of data collection in exploratory studies, particularly in social science. For instance, Woodhouse (1990) used data from twenty-five life histories to explore accessing treatment for female drug and alcohol misusers and the social aspect of female drug and alcohol misuse. Lund and O'Doherty Jensen (2008) collected data from eighteen life histories to explore the development of organic consumption among Danish consumers. Likewise, Emilio Diniz-Pereira (2008) used the life history method to study the identity construction among activist educators; he introduced the terms ''insider'' and ''outsider'' to describe the researcher's balance when sharing race, gender, or class membership with participants. Emilio Diniz-Pereira illustrated that by being an ethnic insider and conducting life histories among ethnic minority participants. Interestingly, Peticca-Harris and McKenna (2013) used a single-person career life story of a Human Resource (HR) manager to study the relationship between professional identity and career struggle; their method included what they named 'The Thick Description' or the detailed account of the participant's life and his HR role.

### 4.3.3 An overview of the life history design and Questions

As the aim of this study is to explore the attitudes, perceptions, debates, and insights regarding whether Human Resources (HR) is a role, a function or a profession, a life history data collection method was conducted to start a conversation around this debate. The life history consisted of five open-ended questions listed in a particular order to gradually establish the foundation for more in-depth answers. The first and the second questions are generally broad and intended to put participants at ease and encourage them to engage in the conversation. The third, fourth, and fifth questions are intended to obtain detailed accounts of participants' lived experiences in their own words in order to answer the research-specific questions and achieve its objectives.

See below the life history questions:

1. From your own perspective, how would you define Human Resource Management (HRM)?

2. Based on the previous answer, why is HR misunderstood?

3. Briefly illustrate your understanding of the term profession

4. How does HR conform to your understanding of a ‘profession’?

5. Describe the professional identity of an HR practitioner?

Davies et al. (2018) Divide the interview process into three stages: before, during, and after. This researcher applied the same process in life history. See below Table.

Table 2.Life Histories Data Analysis Processes, adapted from Davies et al. (2018) interview processes.

| Process | Steps<br>I have taken the following steps: |
|---|---|
| Before conducting the life history data collection method | 1. Revisited research questions and objectives.<br>2. Explored the areas of focus.<br>3. Life history questions were developed.<br>4. Decided on potential participants, how to gain access and means of contact.<br>5. Ethical approval was applied for and obtained.<br>6. A decision was made on how data will be analysed.<br>7. 10 pilot life histories were conducted. |
| During data collection | 1. The targeted participants were contacted by email and telephone.<br>2. The purpose of life history was explained to participants, and they were assured that their privacy would be protected.<br>3. Participants were allowed to send written responses or audio records.<br>4. The responses received were grouped into two categories: HR professionals (first group) and employees and managers (second group). |
| After collecting data | 1. Audio-recorded responses were transcribed.<br>2. Responses read in-depth, searching for meanings and patterns.<br>3. Notes are taken to build initial ideas and familiarise oneself with the data.<br>4. Coding: The data was labelled manually and line-by-line to improve understanding before being imported into the NVivo software.<br>5. Data imported to NVivo. |

### 4.3.4 Life History Data Analysis: Applying Thematic Analysis

This researcher applied Braun's six-phase approach to conduct the thematic analysis. This method has demonstrated its effectiveness and relevance in similar studies. Udod et al. (2017) employed this method in their exploratory thematic analysis with a sample of 17 participants. Their study aimed to gain insights into nurse managers' perceptions regarding their role stressors and coping strategies in acute healthcare facilities in Western Canada. In 2022, Jackson et al. (2022) applied the six-step approach of Braun et al. to perform a thematic analysis of front-line personnel operating within the Norfolk and Waveney Integrated Care System in the East of England between April and October 2020. Their investigation aimed to examine the perspectives, experiences, and perceptions of 187 practitioners at different healthcare system levels in their response to COVID-19 during the initial surge of the pandemic.

#### *4.3.4.1 Phase 1: Familiarisation with life histories data*

Braun et al. (2016) noted that the familiarisation process entails active engagement with data in an informal manner, facilitating note-taking and meaning generation. In the first stage of the study, three audio recordings from individuals in South Africa were transcribed (please note recruiting participants was also based on accessibility regardless of their location). This researcher then conducted an initial analysis, dividing the 47 life history responses into two categories: those from HR practitioners and those from staff associated with HR in some capacity. The HR responses were further categorised based on the practitioners' seniority and specific roles, such as HR directors, HR business partners, and HR generalists. This researcher compiled an initial demographic data table, including participant location, gender, job role, and professional membership of CIPD. While keeping the research objectives and questions in mind, this researcher read the life histories multiple times to gain familiarity with the data, understand the participants' perspectives, and identify relevant comments.

#### *4.3.4.2 Phase 2: Generating codes*

Coding, as defined by Skjott Linneberg and Korsgaard (2019) is an important tool in transforming unstructured qualitative data into meaningful and trustworthy information. This researcher initiated this basic form of life history data analysis by manually labelling the data with words and short sentences (line-by-line coding) to reduce the amount of data, gain deeper insights and capture relevant meanings aligned with the research aims and questions.

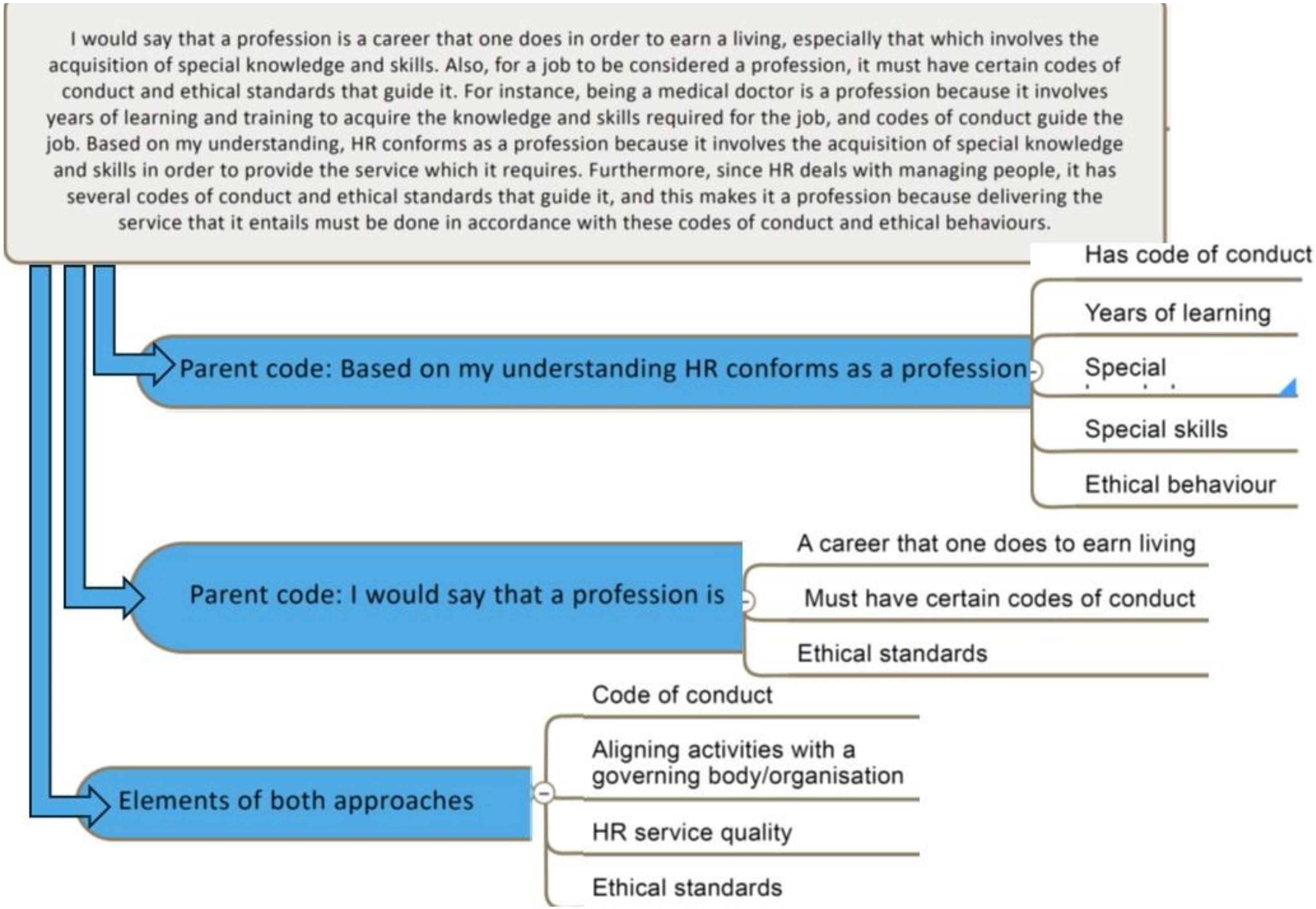
An inductive Value coding method was employed due to the subjective nature of the participants' human experiences, whereas codes were determined by capturing the following:

- Beliefs or a participant's acceptance that something is true or real based on his/her values, knowledge, experiences and attitudes.
- Attitudes or the way a participant perceives something
- Values or a participant's conscious and unconscious judgement of what is important.

Descriptive parent and children codes were derived from the data before importing transcripts into NVivo software.

See the below example of data coding (Attributes and Functionalism approaches were applied to support analysis):

**Figure 5. An Example of How data Coded**



#### *4.3.4.3 Phase 3, 4 and 5: Themes Identification*

According to Mishra and Dey (2022), themes in qualitative research are characterised as the perceptions, experiences, feelings, values, and emotions that participants or respondents hold concerning a particular research topic. This stage started with developing reduced and more focused codes, either repeated or significant. Through the process of conducting Phase 1, Phase 2 and applying KWIC or the word lists technique, used to capture the most frequent keywords mentioned in the participants' accounts a number of distinct and induced themes emerged from the data-inductive themes-, each with its own unique characteristics and attributes. In particular cases, life history questions also contributed to theme generation; Coffey and Atkinson quoted that 'themes often come from the questions in an interview protocol' (Ryan and Bernard, 2003).

Several subthemes were identified due to their relevance to the primary themes. As demonstrated by Vaismoradi and Snelgrove (2019). The process of dividing primary themes into subthemes is an effective approach to further analysing them as it allows researchers to capture the similarities and differences within the same primary theme. One noteworthy example of these subthemes is the distinction between defining HR as people-oriented and operational versus business-oriented and strategic. These subthemes have arisen from the primary theme of self-defining HRM, which is a critical aspect of understanding the overall landscape of HRM. Another example is the primary theme of HRM professional status, which gave rise to three subthemes: HR as a licensed profession, HR as a role and HR as a function.

During the NVivo analysis phase, this researcher meticulously reviewed and evaluated the identified themes and subthemes. This involved a thorough revisit of the coded data and the entire dataset. The review served two crucial purposes: first, it ensured the accuracy of the analysis and the absence of any coding misrepresentation that could have distorted the data. Second, it verified that the identified themes and subthemes aligned with the research questions. (Braun, Clarke and Weate, 2016; Ibrahim, 2012).

#### *4.3.4.4 Phase 6: Presenting and Discussing Themes and Subthemes*

In this phase, this researcher critically analysed themes and subthemes, using direct quotes from participants to support the discussion. During this stage of the Braun et al. method, it is of utmost importance to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the research participants. Therefore, identifiable information, such as names, has been removed in strict adherence to research ethics guidelines.

### 4.3.5 The CIPD Documentary Evidence: A Complementary Method

Distinguishing between primary and secondary sources of information is a critical aspect of research. As argued by Ajayi (2023), primary data encompasses firsthand information gathered by the researcher through surveys, interviews, and direct observation of a phenomenon investigated by this researcher. In contrast, secondary data is more refined and relevant to the research objective, collected from sources such as government departments, agencies, and websites by someone other than the researcher (O'Reilly and Kiyimba, 2015, p. 130).

In a study conducted by Chowdhury and Mahmood (2012), a similar approach was taken to analyse the influence of societal institutions on the human resource management practices of European multinational subsidiaries in Bangladesh. The research centred on four multinational subsidiaries and uncovered a range of influences on their human resource practices, which could be partially attributed to societal factors. Furthermore, the study emphasised the interplay between strong and weak institutions and how it impacts the legitimacy and reverse legitimacy of MNC subsidiaries and their societal institutions. Interestingly, the research also found that the political system served as both a societal institution and a determinant of HRM practices in these subsidiaries. In 2015, Guerci and Carollo conducted a comprehensive investigation into implementing green HRM systems in six Italian companies.

They employed a combination of document analysis and semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth information about the strategies, policies, and practices employed by the companies to promote environmental sustainability through their HRM practices (Guerci and Carollo, 2016).

In this study, documentary evidence, besides life history, was used as a data generation tool meant to support investigating HR professional status and HRM professionalisation processes from the CIPD perspective. In this context, the CIPD is considered a societal institution and a representative body for HR professionals. Documentary evidence as a comprehensive approach involves evaluating various types of documents, including but not limited to written CIPD reports, CIPD Profession Map and its related secondary data. Additionally, several direct quotes from CIPD officials have been used to extract meaningful information and insights into the research topic. Documentary evidence, often combined with other qualitative research methods, is a methodical approach to assessing printed and electronic materials. According to Morgan (2022), researchers often use triangulation, which involves combining pre-existing data, such as documents, with other types of data, including life history data. This technique is commonly employed to enhance the credibility of a study, ensure the consistency of findings, and gain a more comprehensive understanding of the topic under investigation. Consequently, triangulation can help minimise biases, especially when dealing with philosophical positions like the reflexive stance taken by the researcher. Furthermore, it's important to differentiate between using CIPD's documents as sources and as the object of study. In the first case, the CIPD documents are seen as factual or contextual sources, similar to historical research. Thus, it can reveal the interests and intentions of the CIPD and provide insights into its perspective of HR and HR-related professionalisation initiatives (intended approach). In the second case, documents are viewed as meaningful social products or cultural artefacts that have independent consequences and are worth analysing for their own sake (unintended approach).

This researcher's philosophical perspective on the study of human experience and his knowledge acquisition and beliefs coincide with the method of documentary evidence. As explained by Chanda (2021), this data collection method aims to interpret the document's meaning on its surface and beneath it. This approach involves making inferences, which includes interpretative analysis, various types of historical research or historiography, hermeneutics, narrative analysis, and aesthetics. This technique allows this researcher to understand the document's intended message comprehensively. Furthermore, through the social constructivist lens, Owen utilised document analysis in a qualitative study aimed to examine the history and experiences of Georgia Institute of Technology's pre-employment background check policies (Owen, 2014).

### 4.3.6 The Demographic Characteristics of Participants

This study employed two combined non-probability sampling strategies. Convenience sampling has been utilised to gather data from participants who are easily accessible to participate in this study regardless of location or gender. Purposeful sampling has been employed to obtain a rich and detailed account of the phenomena under study from participants' unique perspectives. To ensure a comprehensive investigation, the views of senior managers have been taken into account. This was deemed necessary because their life history accounts provided valuable insights that helped this researcher identify and highlight common themes. However, to better understand the transferability of the study's findings to a broader context, this researcher is planning, in future research, to investigate the perspectives and experiences of employees further. In another related point, it is also important to highlight that, as the research progresses, it was determined that the data obtained from the 47 participants was sufficient to achieve data saturation for the study. Thus, additional data collection would not yield further insights or reveal new themes.

Table 3. The Participants' Demographic Data

| Participant | Role | Professional Membership |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | HR | Unknown |
| 2 | HR | Unknown |
| 3 | HR | CIPD |
| 4 | HR | Unknown |
| 5 | HR | Unknown |
| 6 | HR | Unknown |
| 7 | HR | Unknown |
| 8 | HR | Unknown |
| 9 | HR | Unknown |
| 10 | Other senior role | Unknown |
| 11 | Other senior role | Unknown |
| 12 | HR | Unknown |
| 13 | HR | Unknown |
| 14 | Other senior role | Unknown |
| 15 | HR | Unknown |
| 16 | HR | Unknown |
| 17 | HR | Unknown |
| 18 | HR | CIPD |
| 19 | HR | Unknown |
| 20 | HR | CIPD |
| 21 | HR | Unknown |
| 22 | HR | Unknown |
| 23 | HR | CIPD |
| 24 | Other senior role | Unknown |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 25 | Other senior role | Unknown |
| 26 | HR | Unknown |
| 27 | HR | Unknown |
| 28 | HR | CIPD |
| 29 | HR | CIPD |
| 30 | HR | Unknown |
| 31 | Other  role | Unknown |
| 32 | HR | CIPD |
| 33 | HR | Unknown |
| 34 | HR | Unknown |
| 35 | HR | Unknown |
| 36 | HR | unknown |
| 37 | Other senior role | Unknown |
| 38 | Other senior role | Unknown |
| 39 | HR | Unknown |
| 40 | HR | unknown |
| 41 | HR | unknown |
| 42 | HR | Unknown |
| 43 | HR | Unknown |
| 44 | HR | Unknown |
| 45 | HR | Unknown |
| 46 | HR | unknown |
| 47 | HR | CIPD |

## 4.4 The Application of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) Criteria of Trustworthiness

Qualitative research is commonly regarded as reliable and valid when it is rigorous. However, the discussion around rigour in qualitative research is ongoing and can often lead to confusion due to the multitude of terms and criteria used, besides the long-standing belief -among some quantitative researchers- that quantitative research is subject to researcher bias, lacks rigour and is incapable of generating valid results (Enworo, 2023).

Trustworthiness plays a crucial role in assessing the worth of a qualitative research study. In essence, it involves evaluating the study's overall quality value and ascertaining how accurately the study findings align with the research objectives based on the inputs provided by the participants (Alexander, 2019). In 1985, Lincoln and Guba refined the concept of trustworthiness by introducing a set of criteria that includes credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Nowell et al., 2017). According to Lincoln and Guba the issue of trustworthiness is simple and evolves around 'How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of? What arguments can be mounted, what criteria are invoked, what questions are asked) that would be persuasive on this issue? (Guba and Lincoln, 2005, pp.191–215)

Below is the suggested approach to trustworthiness, adapted from Lincoln and Guba's four criteria.

Table 4. The Application of Lincoln and Guba's Trustworthiness Criteria

| Criteria | Strategies applied in this study |
|---|---|
| Credibility:<br><br>Credibility is a crucial component in qualitative research. It determines the accuracy and truthfulness of the study's findings. Credibility measures the researchers' research methods and expertise in the subject area (Cutcliffe, 1999, p.375).<br><br>Purpose: To establish confidence that the results (from the perspective of the participants) are authentic, credible and believable (Forero et al., 2018, p. 3).<br><br>Lincoln and Guba emphasised two important steps to ensure the credibility of qualitative research findings. Firstly, the study should be conducted in a manner that enhances the believability of the results. Secondly, it is essential to take measures to demonstrate the credibility of the findings to external readers (referred to as the truth value). | To establish the credibility of this research findings, I was guided by my phenomenographic philosophy, which emphasises gaining insights from the perspectives and voices of life history participants that accurately reflect their experiences, perceptions and beliefs. As a researcher, I have taken the following steps:<br><br>I consistently reviewed my research questions and objectives.<br><br>The ethical approval with (Ref no: 007623) was granted from the University of Sunderland.<br><br>To meet the requirements of obtaining credible, in-depth data from participants, the researcher started the life history with an open question that intended to allow the participants to reflect on HRM before being asked more focused open-ended questions to gain a detailed understanding of HRM from their perspectives, these included, their perspectives on how HR is misunderstood, whether they |

| | |
|---|---|
| | consider HR as a profession, their perspective on the term profession and HR professional identity. It is worth noting that, further to ensure credibility through my phenomenographic positionality, I designed the life history questions by adopting the Stenfors-Hayes et al. (2011) approach that emphasises exploring participants' understanding of the concepts before encountering their experiences (Stenfors-Hayes et al., 2011, cited in Mohd-Ali et al., 2016, p. 187)<br><br>A total of 10 exploratory pilot life histories were conducted. After receiving the responses, they were subjected to a credibility assessment to ensure their authenticity. Grammarly Software was used to check for similarity in responses and to ensure that participants presented their own perspectives and that no external sources were used.<br><br>Purposeful and convenience sampling: To enhance credibility and due to the qualitative nature of this research, I combined two sampling strategies: convenience and purposeful sampling. According to Palinkas et al. (2015, pp.533-536), |

| | |
|---|---|
| | purposeful sampling involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups who are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest. As such, I recruited participants who directly or indirectly experience HR to ensure that different perspectives and authentic voices are heard. |
| Dependability: Lincoln and Guba stressed the interconnectedness between credibility and dependability: a demonstration of the former goes some distance in ensuring the latter' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, cited in Shenton, 2004, p.71)<br><br>Purpose: To ensure the reproducibility of a study by providing the details of the methodology and procedures employed during the original inquiry. This helps to facilitate future research and enables future researchers to build upon existing knowledge. | Strategies applied in this study<br><br>Maintaining consistency in the group of participants, the coding process, and the contextual factors of the study. By doing so, as a researcher, I attempted to ensure that the findings were not a result of chance or external factors but rather a true reflection of the studied phenomena (see Table 3: The Four-Phase Data Analytic). |
| Confirmability: It aims to demonstrate that the findings and their interpretation are solely derived from the life history data (Enworo, 2022, p.374). | Strategies applied in this study<br><br>According to Sathl and King (2020, p. 26) Triangulation is a process of cross-checking the data collected |

| | |
|---|---|
| | from different sources to identify patterns and achieve greater accuracy and reliability in research. By triangulating data, researchers can minimise the potential for bias and increase the trustworthiness of their research. Besides life history as the main data source, I used documentary evidence from the CIPD as a complementary method. |
| Transferability:<br><br>Transferability in qualitative research refers to the extent to which the findings and conclusion derived from the research can be applied to other contexts (Anney, 2014, p. 277) | Strategies applied in this study<br><br>This researcher suggests that the transferability of this study depends on the studied phenomenon's features and characteristics and the researchers' philosophical stance.<br><br>This researcher also suggests that the nature of the enquiry (quantitative or qualitative) may determine the expected findings and conclusions. |

### 4.5 Ethical Considerations

The study used an appropriate setting for all study procedures, including applying for and obtaining ethical approval from UREG at the University of Sunderland before conducting the life histories (see Appendix A). Enrolling participants relevant to the research subject and processing and analysing their life history transcripts were guided by two ethical principles: 'do good and do no harm'.

It is worth noting that this researcher employed two combined sampling strategies: convenience and purposeful sampling. These two adopted strategies were based on participants' accessibility, willingness to participate, and relevance of the phenomenon being studied, regardless of gender, age, or geographical location.

As the study involves human subjects, the two principles of do good and do no harm were central and observed during all stages of the research. Gyure et al. (2014), emphasised that how researchers approach potential participants affects their attitudes and willingness to participate in research. To do good, this researcher emphasised establishing interest and willingness to participate by providing potential participants with sufficient information on the research topic and its objectives.

This phase required demonstrating respect, compassion, and understanding of individual and cultural differences among potential participants, in addition to this researcher's self-awareness of his position as an insider. This researcher asked for participants' consent and allowed them to choose whether they wanted to participate without undue influence. This researcher ensured that life history participants' privacy was protected and respected throughout the research process, granting them autonomy and control over the information they wanted to share.

To manage participants' data securely, this researcher took various steps to protect confidentiality. These included deidentification, access control, anonymisation, and secure storage. These processes involved removing or restricting access to any identifiable information, such as names, contact telephone numbers, and email addresses. In addition to complying with legal frameworks that govern the use of personal data, such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Nevertheless, considering the nature of the research and the low risk of privacy harm, limited disclosure was provided, which included the participant's role and professional membership.

To avoid harm, this researcher was mindful that when life history participants share their perceptions and perspectives, they may be vulnerable to misinterpretation. To ensure integrity and trustworthiness, life history utilised clear and concise questions to gather information from participants. It was also emphasised that participants had the freedom to decline to answer any specific questions if they chose to do so. Lincoln and Guba's trustworthiness criteria have been applied to enhance credibility and to ensure that findings accurately mirror the responses obtained from participants. Additionally, participants were assured that their perspectives and opinions would be valued and respected at every stage of the research process.

## 4.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter examined the non-dual and epistemological underpinnings of the study, along with the researcher's philosophical stance. It defined the scope of the research activity and delved into various interpretations of the terminology. Furthermore, it outlined the research design and the study's qualitative approach, highlighting the advantages of incorporating life history in data collection, supplemented by documentary evidence. The chapter also elaborated on the data analysis procedure using NVivo and the execution of thematic analysis. Finally, it details the application of Lincoln and Guba’s trustworthiness criteria and discusses the ethical challenges and considerations.

# Chapter 5. License to Practice: Reconsidering HR as a Profession, Role, and Function

## 5.1 Introduction

This chapter is focused on data analysis and the study findings. The life histories used in this study were carefully analysed to ensure clarity, and Word Clouds were utilised to capture theme indicators for more in-depth analysis. As stated in Chapter 1, section 1.2, this study explores attitudes, perceptions, debates, and insights regarding whether Human Resources (HR) is a role, a function, or a profession. This necessitated that the life history design and contents serve the study objectives and questions as well as the overall qualitative nature of the study.

This chapter is divided into five sections based on the themes identified during the data analysis. Themes come as follows:

The first section analysed participants' perceptions of HR and examined how the concept is self-defined by HR participants (Group 1), employees, and managers (Group 2).

The second section is on the HR image. It analysed how participants perceive HR roles and functions within organisations.

The third section is on HR professional status. It outlines the reality of HR and whether it is a role, function, or profession.

The fourth section considered and presented the 'real reality' of HR.

The fifth section considered and presented the professional identity of HR.

The chapter concluded by providing a summary of the key findings.

## 5.2 Theme 1: Defining HRM: Perceptions and HR Practitioners and Employees

In this section, this researcher has examined and thematically analysed the responses of life history participants to the first question, "From your perspective, how would you define Human Resource Management (HRM)? This question investigates how HR practitioners (Group 1), employees, and managers (Group 2) view HRM as a self-defined concept. The section also aimed to understand better participants' theoretical and conceptual knowledge of the term Human Resource Management. This researcher believes that well-established theoretical and conceptual knowledge is crucial for any professional activity, and an attribute pertains to established professions, as suggested by Greenwood (1957a) in his ‘attributes of professions’. Examples of professions with a systematic body of theory and professional knowledge include nursing, medicine, teaching, law, etc.

Word cloud visualisation methods have been applied when discussing themes and subthemes. As contented by Ahearn (2014), the word cloud is a qualitative tool commonly used in transcript analysis and survey responses. Thus, employing Word Cloud combined with the thematic analysis to discuss themes and subthemes outputs offers the researcher deeper insights into participants’ accounts. Word clouds can also be used as a tool to confirm findings and their interpretation further (see McNaught and Lam, 2014).

### 5.2.1 Subtheme 1: Defining Human Resource Management as Operational and Administrative

The participants displayed a range of perspectives on HR as a self-defined concept. Their viewpoints primarily varied based on their interpretation of HR and the boundaries of the terminology. Additionally, differences emerged on whether HRM is solely a function for managing people, a strategic role and business-oriented department, or a blend of both.

‘……the department that is tasked with the responsibility of **managing the workforce**…... such responsibilities include but are not limited to **recruiting**

**and selecting** competent personnel(s), **training** …., **promoting the well-being**…..**employee relations**, ..…. **payments and compensations** of the employees. Furthermore, HR is responsible for **developing and implementing policies and procedures** that will help the **organisation achieve its aim** ….. **enforcing organisational policies**. ……… **educates people**…. involved in **managing an organisation's workforce**. It involves ….. **employee engagement, performance managemen**t, employee **motivation**, **compensation**, etc. ( Participant 3, HR)

Figure 6. Word cloud of participants who perceive HR as employee-centred


When considering Human Resource Management as a people management department, participants focussed on certain HR operational activities such as (a) recruitment and selection, (b) performance monitoring, (c) employee well-being and engagement, (d) labour and employee relations, (e) managing a workforce in line with legal requirements and internal policies and procedures, (f) training and development, and (g) compensation and benefits. See the quote below[3].

[3] The direct quotes may include typo and grammatical errors. To maintain authenticity, no changes or corrections have been made.

‘HR is…for **recruiting**…**empowering** staff, **training**…**making decisions**… **staff welfare**. They are also involved in… **promotions**…**dismissal**…**approval** of staff **resignation**’. (Participant 13, HR)

Participants’ responses tended to provide what can be named ‘operational definitions’, wherein they defined HR by naming or listing what HR is tasked with, its responsibilities as a department within an organisation, and what distinguishes it from other business units. These operational definitions are almost identical to those mentioned by Lamond (1995) and Ahammad (2017b), who considered HR a series of activities enabling working people and their employers to agree on the objectives and nature of their working relationship. Respectively, HR was also labelled by several participants as an administrative function of a business that exists to recruit, train and manage employee-employer relationships.

Human resources was referred to as:

‘…deal with **recruitment** and **advise**…on **employee issues** and **ensuring consistency**… (Participant 9, HR)

‘…a **function for individuals** …. to **manage the career lifecycle** of staff ….. …includes **recruitment**, **vetting, training and development, absence management, and discipline**’. (Participant 26, HR)

The perspectives presented by participants suggest a consensus with points raised by several commentators. Mayo (1969) and DeNisi et al. (2014) defined HR as a new version of PM and emphasised HR bureaucratic processes such as employee relations, handling employee grievances and discharges, and staffing, including recruitment and selection, retention, pay and perks, and performance management. In contrast, when participants 21 and 30 referred to HR as a department that solely focused on employees and day-to-day operations, the strategic aspect of employee management was present in their comments. Consequently, this researcher argues that these comments attempted to redefine and update the old term ‘Personnel Management’ instead of replacing it by proposing a strategic dimension to HR’s employee-related practices. Perhaps the objective was to alter the conventional understanding of HR's core role from simply ‘managing people’ to ‘strategically managing human capital’. Based on previous participants' comments, achieving this conceptual shift would require HR to rethink its transactional function to optimise both employees and organisational performance, nurture a positive workplace culture and align HR practices with the business agenda. Relevant quotes are provided below:

‘HR is the **legal safety** net……provides organisations with the backbone and **guidance** to **effectively manage** their greatest asset, their **employees**’, (Participant 21, HR)

‘It is tasked with contributing to the **continuous improvement** and maintenance of the **organisation’s performance**, **productivity** and **internal relations**…… overseeing the workforce’s **hiring, firing, training, appraisal, skill development and welfare**. (Participant, 30, HR)

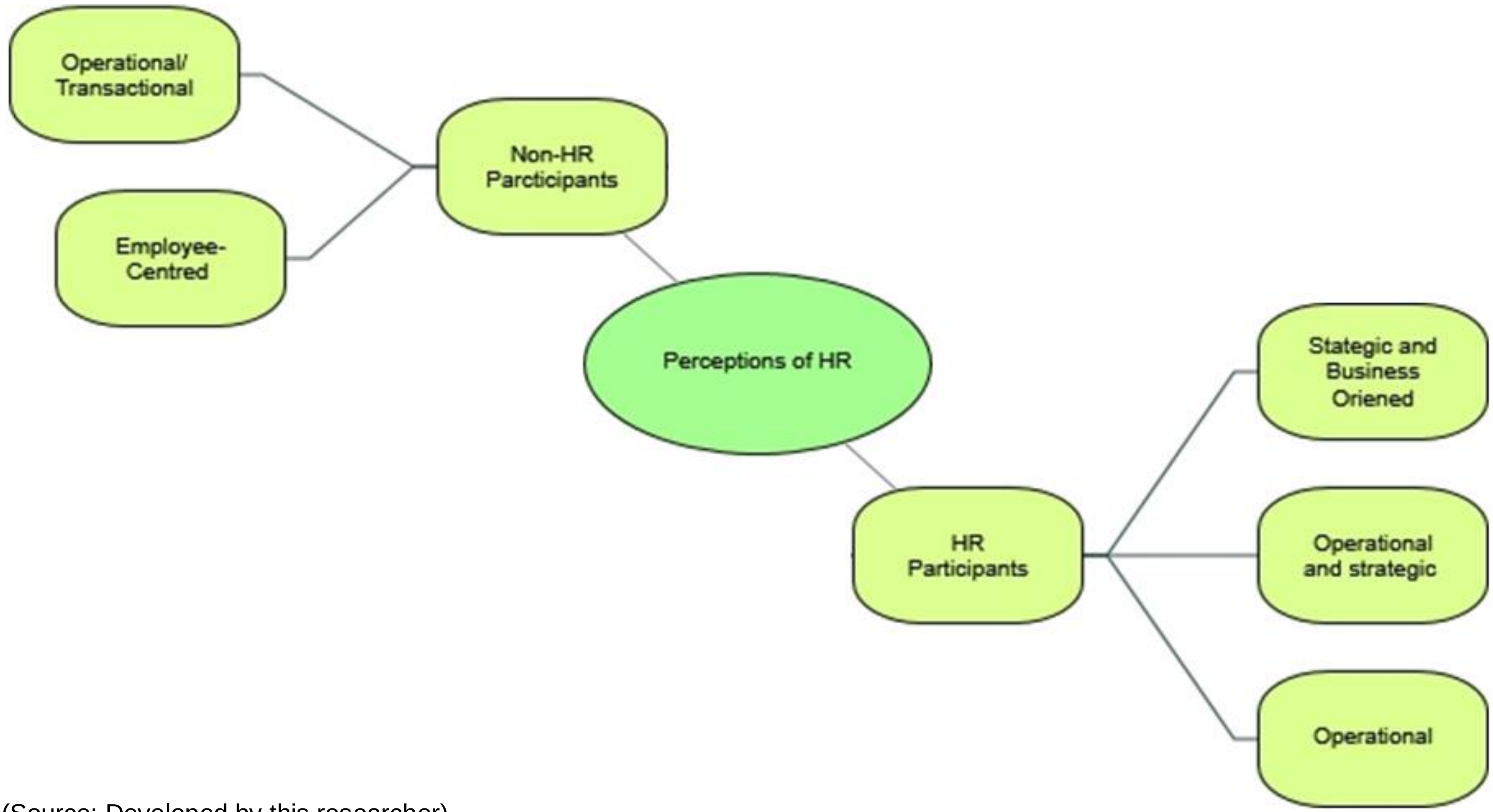
Likewise, among participants, several commentators highlighted the same strategic dimension of traditional HR, such as Maycock et al. (2015), and Baron et al. (1986), who all pointed out the importance of productivity enhancement and its impact on maximising organisational performance besides, the role of human capital in improving businesses’ competitive advantages. Additionally, this line of argument emphasises what was mentioned by Hans (2021), who considered employees as strategic assets. Therefore, aligning HR employee-related practices and operations can contribute to gaining competitive advantages. However, it may be important to mention that the only participants who identified the strategic dimension of HR are those who work for large organisations such as local authorities, CIPD members and those who were recruited from professional online platforms such as LinkedIn. It could also be logical to link this approach with the ‘HR New Operating Model’, developed recently by several commentators, including Ulrich, Durth, Komm, and Pollner (Durth et al., 2021). The HR’s New Operating model has emerged as a response to the global pandemic Covid-19 impact on employees and businesses and is aimed at promoting ‘the investment in the Human Aspects of

Work' to include adopting meaningful employee practices such as offering individualised HR services that meet their expectations and to better employee experiences while considering the overall organisational interests (e.g., performance, maximising productivity and profitability).

'… is primarily concerned with the **management of the workforce**…involves a …**recruiting, developing, overseeing, and retaining**…**facilitate an organisation's objectives**…maintain a **thriving** and **efficient work environment**…**link between organisations and their employees**, ensuring that the workforce…**motivated**, and **compliant with regulations** to assist **organisations in reaching their goals**. **Nurturing a positive workplace culture**, aligning the **workforce with organisational objectives**, and promoting **diversity** and **inclusion**…'. (Participant 42, HR)

'…to ensure that **strategic decision-making takes account of the workforce requirements**…**deliver the business plan**…**identify the core values and behaviours needed for success**. HR then ensures that staff are in place, with the…**knowledge skills, attitudes** and **behaviours** to **deliver the business plan**'. (Participant 34, HR)

Figure 7. HR Participants (Group 1) and employees' and Managers' (Group 2) perceptions of HR




(Source: Developed by this researcher)

### 5.2.2 Subtheme 2: Considering Human Resource Management as Strategic

Concerning perceiving HR as strategic, several comments appeared in life histories indicating the strategic dimension of HR. In this context, participants' comments often used certain words to describe the strategic dimension of HRM. These words were specifically related to aligning HRM activities with business and HR's role in driving performance. For example, 'drive performance', 'works closely with the whole part of the organisation', 'assist in developing policies', and 'deliver value' were commonly used to indicate that HRM is strategic and more than just operational or administrative in nature.

Data analysis revealed that many participants tried to propose a new version of HR. They suggested a balanced approach that combines business-focused HR with employees' needs, including their well-being, engagement, and involvement in business matters that could directly affect them.

'…is the backbone, "**the engine room''** of an organisation, responsible for **managing people**…**creating a positive work culture**. I also see HR…**executive, judiciary, and legislature**. They **execute, interpret, and implement every organisation's policies and procedures**, but these functions should be carried out with…**empathy** in order to **foster fairness**, **equity, and inclusion**…' (Participant 32, HR)

'…is a **multifaceted** function…primarily focuses on **managing** and **maximising** the potential of its **human capital**. It encompasses a wide range of activities,…**recruitmen**t, **talent development**, **performance management**, **benefits administration**, **work-life management**, **employee relations**…**compliance with laws** and **regulations**…**aligning the workforce with the strategic goals**…ensuring a **conducive work environment**… **culture of productivity**…**engagement, and inclusivity'**. (Participant 18, HR)

Figure 8. Perceiving HR as a Strategic and Business-Oriented


Although the operational role and function of HR were partially present in participants' comments such as 'managing employees' performance, 'compensation', 'positive working environments', 'maintaining employee wellbeing', 'engagement and retention' and other employee-related practices, there was a great emphasis among participants on the assumption that HR should fully align with 'business activities and agenda', 'keeping up with business issues', 'deliver value', 'become a policy maker', and 'assist in managing change in organisations'. Despite the increased popularity of some HRM strategic dimensions, such as business partnering, HR as a changing agent, and employee advocacy, it was observed that participants rarely refer to them. Only seven comments were made regarding HR's role as a business partner, and two comments were made to describe HR as a change agent. Interestingly, these references were repeatedly cited by four participants who are either active members of online professional platforms like LinkedIn and CIPD North East of England or those who hold senior positions in the HR field.

Furthermore, data analysis uncovered a conceptual gap between HR academics and commentators' vision of HR on one side and HR personnel participants on the other. For instance, participants simplified the strategic dimension of HR by exclusively emphasising certain HR aspects, such as how HR practices and processes can impact an organisation's success and profitability; in other words, ''HR is for business''. Consequently, participants pointed out how they perceive strategic HR by indicating HR's ability to align with the business agenda, HR's ability to enhance the organisation's performance, HR personnel's ability to identify the core values and behaviours needed for the organisation's success (see; figure 7, Word Cloud). For example, participant 28, who is an HR commented:

'…people think HR is just about **recruiting** and **terminating employment**. … a service that **supports…employer and not the employee**. A good HR …will be **quick to respond, impartial, and advise clearly on policy**. They…**resolve issues**…will help an organisation **understand its vision and values**…achieve its **strategic objectives'**. (Participant, 28, HR)

In contrast, HR theorists and commentators such as Ulrich provide an intertwined vision of 'HR for HR' and 'HR for business' to 'win in the marketplace', which require complicated processes of HR adding/ creating value, designing and implementing change methodologies, knowing, and applying organisational development processes, understanding team behaviour and lead them to high performance and ability to think strategically and creatively (Ulrich et al., 2012; Ulrich and Dulebohn, 2015). In this sense, it can be logical to suggest that there is an 'academic-HR practitioners' tension, whereas both sides acknowledge the strategic aspects of HR; however, each side perceives these aspects differently and sees them from a different perspective. This finding can be confirmed by what was disclosed by Aust et al. (2020), and Mash and Adler (2018), who noted the existence of HR's reality vs theorists' tension and linked it with the core purpose of HR and professionals' perspective on one side and HR assumed theoretical possibilities proposed by theorists on the other. Aust et al. (2020) furthered their argument by giving HR business partnering as an example where HRM must navigate a delicate balance between strategic partnering and employee advocacy, cost-effectiveness vs social acceptance, and between economic gain and moral values.

Collected data also suggests that perceiving the strategic dimension of HR differs between participants from the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US), who will be named Group A, compared with participants from South Africa, Nigeria and India, named Group B. The comments made by Group B indicated that they perceive HR as an operational function and less strategic; for instance, the responses received were as follows:

'HR is a function that **maintains employee wellbeing, engagement, retention and contentment**'. (Participant, 36, HR)

'…concerned with **managing people** to **maximise productivity**…**motivating people**…**developing**…**recruiting**'. (Participant 27, HR)

Moreover, life history comments revealed that HR was perceived differently amongst participants regarding whether it is a role or a function. Based on these quotes, ''HR is a support function to the wider business and its people'' Participant 4: 'HR is a function for individuals and whole HR teams to manage the career lifecycle of staff members. This includes recruitment, vetting, training, and development' participant 9. Thus, it can be assumed that these individual differences might refer to their own organisations' differences in structure and objectives, their HR department's philosophy, characteristics and focus, as well as what aspects of HR they perform or the type of HR duties assigned to them.

Based on this theme's analysis, this researcher claims that the definition of HRM, whether strategic, operational or a blend of both, remains debated. It is subject to either participants' interpretation of HR as a lived experience or the influence of their sociocultural environment. When participants define HRM as transactional and operational, they are, in fact, reflecting on their individual experiences of HR, their roles within HR and the duties assigned to them.

Conversely, when several participants considered HR strategic and business-oriented, they shared the same meaning-making process based on their duties and employers' expectations. Furthermore, the sociocultural environment can also shape individual perceptions of HR. This may include participants' social interaction and their attempt to form one collective identity, as observed in the comments of LinkedIn and HRM online platform members.

### 5.3 Theme 2: Perceptions of HR: Reforming the Image of the Practice

There is a common belief amongst the participants that HR is misunderstood and perceived negatively. In general, there is a wide range of comments relating the negative perception of HR to the traditional and operational aspects of people management. Participants referenced HR involvement in monitoring employees' behaviour, contract termination, control and disciplinary warnings. Other references linked this negativity with the HR function in addition to how HR bureaucratic processes can impact employee-employer relations. For instance, comments included:

'HR is often misunderstood due to **perceptions of control, fairness and favouritism**.HR is perceived negatively due to **inherent functions**…such as **termination and retrenchments'**, (Participant 10)

'…HR is often dealing with **employment Relations**...**barrier** between **employees and management**…issuing **disciplinary warnings**…'. (Participant 23, HR)

This researcher posits that the role-related negative perception seems to arise from the belief that HR is less focused on the human side of work and employees' issues. In conjunction with that, there is a belief among several participants that HR is one-sided and overly focuses on complex business issues rather than employees' wants and concerns; some comments include.

'…HR are people…there to **recruit, discipline** and **help staff**. They are individuals who should but **don't always have good people skills**. From past experiences – I've only ever seen people from HR when **being employed or when leaving a job'** (Participant, 24)

'…HR is possibly seen as **the enemy** by employees who think an HR function is working solely for **the purpose of the business**. From a management position, **frustrations can arise** due to the need to follow **processes** and **procedures**. I see it as an assessment to **manage business risk**, yes, but also taking into account **employee relations** and how **this would affect a business's reputation**…'. (Participant 5, HR)

Several HR participants argued that there is a misperception and misunderstanding of HR administrative duties, breadth and depth of HR responsibilities. They repeatedly referred to the lack of communication between HR and employees, HR historical norms, stereotypes and false beliefs, as well as the lack of awareness of HR's role in creating a positive work culture, employee development and training, and HR efforts in adopting and enhancing employees' wellbeing practices. The analysis uncovered a disparity between employees and HR professionals in how HR is experienced and perceived. Perhaps this resulted from employees' expectations of the HR role, purpose and priorities, or personal experiences with the HR department. See related quotes below:

'HR is mostly misunderstood…because some people think that HR will always **take the organization's side**. This has been an odd misconception because HR **bridges the gap between the organisation and the employees**. They have gained a reputation as being **responsible for difficult decisions taken by the board of directors** which would be **communicated by the HR to the employees**… (Participant 46, HR)

'HR is misunderstood because…if we are present When **something bad is going to happen i.e. redundancies, investigating a grievance**'. (Participant 8, HR)

'Several reasons contribute to this misunderstanding…**people may struggle to fully comprehend the depth and intricacy of HR**…**negative**

**stereotypes**…unfairly **perceived as ‘policy enforcers’** and **‘compliance police’** within organisations…employees may believe **HR prioritises the organisation's interests over their own’**. (Participant 42, HR)

Several comments revealed a possibility of employee-employer tension arising from HR priorities. This was noted in participants' responses to the question, ‘Why do you think HR is misunderstood? For example, employees' and managers' responses revolved around the stereotypes ‘HR is the department that only hires and fires’ ‘a way of policing and deterring staff’, ‘always in favour of the company's interests against the interest of the employees’, ‘HR prioritises the organisation's interests over employees’ and ‘if HR calls an employee or sends a mail to an employee, the first thing that comes to the employee's mind is ‘What have I done wrong’. Conversely, HR participants tended to respond defensively, implying the lack of knowledge of HR's role as the primary cause of the misconception by stating that ‘There are certainly negative connotations with the role that I feel distracted away from a lot of the good that HR do’, In relation to lack of knowledge, a lot of people have little or no knowledge of what HR entails and may feel that HR is only concerned with administrative duties like paperwork’. In closing, HR is often subjected to misunderstanding and misconceptions. These can be attributed to various factors, such as historical norms, personal experiences and HR's purpose, responsibilities, and tasks assigned to it by organisations. Perhaps enhancing communications and taking a more balanced approach can help position the practice as employee-focused while considering organisational objectives.

## 5.4 Theme 3: The Professional Status of HR: Participants’ Perspectives

This theme analyses participants’ perspectives on HR and whether it is a profession, role, or function. Direct quotes from participants are included to support findings while considering the sociological perspective in the theme analysis.

### 5.4.1 Subtheme 1: Perceiving HR as a Profession: Participants, Employees, and Managers' Perspectives

Life history responses showed that 'HR is a profession' is the most frequently mentioned comment; however, HR participants differed regarding why they consider HR a profession. Participants' comments stemmed from two approaches influenced by their understanding of the term 'profession'. Firstly, the role-characteristic approach appeared in many comments, where participants confirmed the status of HR as a profession by emphasising the distinctiveness of the HR role and the professional attributes required to perform it. For instance, HR participants' comments mainly focused on specialised knowledge of HR practices, familiarity with employment laws and legislations, code of conduct, skills, relevant training and qualifications, etc. Within the same group, several HR participants believed that HR professional status is connected with its strategic dimension, including HR's role in serving the business agenda, driving organisational performance and employees' productivity. Interestingly, the analysis found that despite the discrepancies in HR participants' perspectives of HR nature and whether it is operational or strategic -as discussed in the previous theme-, there is a census among them that HR is a profession.

'… **HR conforms as a profession …** involves … **acquisition of special knowledge and skills**. … deals with **managing people**, … **in accordance with these codes of conduct and ethical behaviours**' (Participant 44, HR)

'HR is a profession because of **the role it plays** is not just **recruiting** or **training** people, but more **as a policy maker**, and **process maker'**. (Participant 7, HR)

Also,

'HR **aligns with the concept of a 'profession'** through its demand for **specialised knowledge**, adherence to **ethical standards**, emphasis on **education** and **training**, commitment to a **code of conduct**, and dedication to

**continuous development**. HR professionals play a pivotal role in **enhancing organisational success**…’. (Participant 16, HR)

Contrary to the role-characteristics approach, several comments indicated the attributes and power approaches to professions. With regards to the power approach to professions that emphasises the collective capability of occupation members (Child and Fulk, 1982c), HR participants made several references to HR practitioners' professional qualities and traits, such as specialised knowledge, skills, relevant training and qualifications; however, no references were made to occupational control, entry restrictions and the monopoly over HR activity. Correspondingly, the attributes approach, which determines the attributes and characteristics of professions, was also present in many comments. Additionally, functional features were included in participants' comments, such as the professional culture, body of theory and code of conduct, selected skills, and formal qualifications, particularly those provided by the CIPD. Yet no references were made to HR professional authority, HR monopoly over its activities, community sanctions, or social recognition. These are essential characteristics of professions (see Bjarnason, 2009; Bol and Drange, 2017; Greenwood, 1957a). Relatedly, the data analysis also revealed that, despite the CIPD's leading role in HRM professionalisation, there were only 14 references made to it. These references were made concerning the CIPD qualifications. However, no reference was made to the CIPD as a representative body of HR professionals. See relevant quotes below:

‘HR commonly subscribes to **established ethical codes of behaviour** and **conduct**…often established by…the **(CIPD)** and (**SHRM**). These codes serve as **guiding principles for HR professionals**, **promoting ethical conduct** and ensuring **equitable employment practices.** HR professionals also **enjoy a degree of autonomy**…particularly in functions such as **managing employee relations**, **overseeing talent development**, and **shaping organizational growth**…**upholding legal and ethical standards** while **making decisions** HR practitioners are compelled to engage in **continuous learning** and **professional development**’. (Participant 43, HR)

‘I believe HR is a profession, it requires **key knowledge** and understanding in…**legislation**, **policy**, **process** and most of all as it **concerned with individual people**…that requires **honesty**, **transparency**, **authenticity**, **empathy** and **care**’ (Participant 3, HR)

Furthermore, participants’ comments revealed that their perspective of HR as a profession is based on practitioners' attributes and professional qualities rather than other key structural features that distinguish HR from other non-professional occupations. In fact, HR lacked a feature known as ‘differentia specifica’, widely applied by work sociologists and aimed to study occupations' internal similarities (i.e., related to the practice) and external differences (i.e., authority, control, autonomy) to classify the economic activities into professional and non-professional (see Brante, 1988). HR participants' claim of HR professional status was determined by the internal similarities and those concerned with the practice, such as knowledge, rules and behaviour associated with knowledge applications, skills, relevant training and qualifications, adherence to a code of conduct, etc. However, the participants' comments did not fully consider the structural external differences, such as an established monopoly and control of HR activity, HR entry requirements, autonomy, etc.

Analysing HR participants’ responses suggests that their perception and understanding of the term profession and what qualifies HR to be considered a profession seems unrelated to the theoretical debate led by work sociologists. This debate focuses on the professionalisation and the processes by which an occupation can be recognised as a profession. As illustrated earlier in Chapter 2, the sociological perspectives are influenced by two main approaches, the functionalism and the attribute approach to professions, whereas the attribute approach provides the defining individual traits along with a descriptive list of structural attributes that distinguish professions from other occupations (Greenwood, 1957b; Hickson and Thomas, 1969; Lester, 2015; Richard, 1969; Welbourne, 2009), while the functional is more concerned with the structural features of professions (Alexander, 1981; Parsons, 2005).

Sundin and Hedman (2005), Larson (2018) and Brante (1988) agree that a profession as a concept should be understood in the context of increasing specialisation in working life combined with the acceleration of institutionalised expertise and the structural link between relatively high levels of formalised education and relatively desirable positions and rewards in the social division of labour. Moreover, regulating occupations or licensing their activities becomes important not only for ensuring the quality of services but also for setting minimum competency standards for professionals and members of professions.

*5.4.1.1 Licensing: A Key Factor in Considering HR a Profession*

The attribute and power approaches to professions identify the professional monopoly over a specific type of work as a crucial factor in considering an occupation as a profession (Willmott, 1986). This monopoly comes in the form of licensing to practice.

As previously stated, it is the responsibility of individual states to regulate professional activities and to establish the necessary processes for an occupation to be authorised to perform a legally protected activity. Historically, Spencer (1945) noted that states were involved in licensing to protect the public from unskilled practitioners, improve the level of competence among professionals, and create a legal framework for professional activities, as well as enforce service standards (see also Forth et al., 2011). Similarly, Cai and Kleiner (2016) and Law and Kim (2005) suggested that licensing is also influenced by the interests of professionals and serves as a barrier to limiting competition, restricting entry, and raising service prices in licensed occupations. That being said, the researcher has found no evidence confirming the existence of any form of entry requirements, monopoly over HR activities or a title protection law related to HR role holders.

In the life history responses, only three references highlighted licencing as a factor in considering HR a profession. These responses came from participants 11, 31, and 37, who all occupy other senior roles.. See related quotes below:

'…HR…do **not undertake rigorous training** comparable to other disciplines that fall in the 'profession' classification…**no required vetting**…unlike **other profession**…**members are vetted** for the **knowledge** and **skills** gained to assess whether they are **sufficiently qualified** to work in the profession as **qualified professionals**…'. (Participant 11)

'HR does not fully demonstrate my understanding of the profession…because…HR may not…**undertaken rigorous academic** or **practical training** to **qualify** to work on human resource management…Other professions, such as **teaching**, **medicine**, etc, in contrast, **demonstrate specialist knowledge** and **skills**…'. (Participant 31)

When participants were asked to explain the correlation between HR and the profession as a concept, their responses to some extent, lacked both conceptual and practical understanding. Their responses mainly focused on describing the HR roles and the attributes that enable HR practitioners to perform the duties assigned to them. See comments made in relation to this aspect.

'A profession is a **vocation** or **occupation**…requires **specialised knowledge**, **training**, and **expertise**…It often involves a **commitment to ethical standards**, a **code of conduct**, and a **dedication to serving the best interests** of clients, customers…Professionals are expected to continually **enhance their skills**, **stay updated**… and **contribute positively**…**HR conforms to my understanding of a profession**…Firstly, it demands **specialised knowledge** in areas such as labour laws, organizational behaviour, talent management, and conflict resolution. Professionals in HR..pursue **formal education** and **engage in ongoing training** to **stay updated**…bound by **ethical codes of conduct,** ensuring **fair treatment of employees** and **compliance with legal standards**. Their role involves…**balance organisational interests** with **employee well-being, demonstrating a commitment to the broader community'**. (Participant 29, HR)

'**HR is a profession** whereby **knowledge** and **experience** in this field can be demonstrated daily. Most individuals who choose to work in this arena have the **desire to help organisations** achieve their goals within the **parameters of the law**', (Participants 34, HR)

Moreover, it should be noted that 13 participants mentioned the CIPD in their responses, whereby they associated the CIPD with HR qualifications, accreditation, and code of conduct for practitioners. However, no references were made by those participants to suggest that the CIPD has the duty of granting licensing to HR practitioners, staff vetting, overseeing the practice, or setting occupational entry requirements (CIPD, 2021).

At this point, licensing is of central concern to determine the professional status of HR. Timmons (2018) defined occupational licensing as a form of regulation requiring individuals who want to perform certain types of work to obtain legal permission. Thus, licensing creates a regulatory barrier or a fence, often called the right to practice, to keep unlicensed individuals off the practice. In the UK, according to the Professional Qualifications Act 2022, all professions are regulated by law, where there are legal requirements including specific credentials, qualifications, experience or meeting an alternative condition or requirement to practice an economic activity and to use a protected title such as a doctor, lawyer, teacher, an accountant, etc (see also Ryan, 2018). This restricted form of occupational regulation is overseen by government agencies or other professional bodies only when delegated by the government, as illustrated by Kleiner (2000). These licensing authorities manage the initial entry to professions and in-migration, thereby controlling supply and raising the wages of the licensed professionals. In the UK, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is considered to be the official body that regulates professions, where some professions are regulated on a UK–wide basis, while others are regulated separately in different parts of the country (BEIS, 2021).

As stated above, administrative and legal constraints are likely to influence the licensing status of HR. To consider HR as a regulated and licensed-based profession, these constraints are generally a set of requirements that apply to all recognised professions such as medicine, law, education, private security service, taxi driving, accountancy, etc. These requirements include specific education, occupational training, formal qualifications, examinations, validation, revalidation, and vetting of entrants to screen out the least competent practitioners and guarantee high-quality output (Basso et al., 2021; Klein, 2016) in addition to supporting professionals' sense of trusteeship over their activities and enhancing civic engagement. As a matter of fact, licensing provides professionals with authority and monopoly in their field, protected by the law. However, these legal and administrative constraints vary considerably between professions (Damelang, Stops and Abraham, 2018).

Although HR is perceived as a profession, there is no tangible evidence to support the claim that HR is a licenced profession and has been granted the 'right to practice'. taking into account the view that states and localities primarily control licensing. Comparatively, in the life history resposes to the question of perceiving HR as a profession, HR participants made no clear indication or reference to licensing, even though licensing is the most important distinguishing feature in professions. Instead, participants made 13 references to the qualifications, accreditation and certification provided by the (CIPD) to support their claim of HR professional status. They considered them equivalent to 'the right to practice'. Interestingly, participant 47, an HRM lecturer, stated: 'In my view, a profession is a field of work that requires **specialised knowledge,** skills, and expertise. It typically involves a commitment to **ethical standards** and **ongoing learning** and often has a **formalised educational** and **licensing process**. Profession…**serve the greater good** and involve a **code of conduct** or **ethics**…**HR is one of them**. …it meets many key criteria. HR professionals often **possess specialised knowledge in labour laws**, **organisational psychology**, and **workforce development**…**required to adhere to ethical standards** and promote **fairness** and **equity**…Many HR…**seek certifications (e.g., CIPD qualifications, SHRM, HRCI**). Yet, it is essential to note that accreditation as a formal process of evaluating and re-evaluating is not exclusively related to HR individual practitioners or non-regulated professions, as appeared in several comments. In fact, accreditation applies to professional individuals who are already members of recognised professions such as medicine, nursing, teaching, and law to encourage continuous improvements within accredited and well-established professions. It occurs by assessing service quality and delivery regarding pre-determined and published standards (Nicklin et al., 2017). Additionally, accreditation and re-accreditation are usually performed by either a government department or, on rare occasions, by government-initiated agencies authorised to make a formal judgement or recognition (Nauta et al., 2004). Hence, suggesting the CIPD accreditation and qualifications as a form of licensing indicates that accreditation and certification are not fully understood as concepts or processes of assuring and improving service quality. For instance, when HR participant (41) defined the term profession, he stated:

'…the **profession itself defines professions** requires…**Formal education** and **training** requirements, such as **academic degrees**, **certifications**, and **licences**…They are directed by **organisations** or **professional bodies** that **set norms for professional performance and competence**. A wide range of disciplines, including medicine, law, engineering, accountancy, and teaching, might be included in a profession'. (Participant, 41, HR)

However, when the same participant was asked: How does HR conform to your understanding of a 'profession'? he replied:

'By incorporating **specialised knowledge**, **ethical standards**, **independent decision-making**, **ongoing learning**, a **service-oriented focus**, and **accountability**, **HR complies with the definition of a profession**…meet the **organisation's demands** for **human capital**, **foster a pleasant workplace culture**, and **guarantee the success** of the organisation…HR **experts**…skills…'.

Equally significant, This researcher claims that the CIPD, as an occupational body, shares the same platform with similar professional organisations, such as the Chartered Institute of Sales and Marketing (CISAM) and the Chartered Institute of IT (BCS), representing those working in computer science and information technology. These organisations play key roles in occupational education and training, setting standards and ethical frameworks and improving service quality. Subsequently, there is no evidence to support that the CIPD is neither a regulatory body that shelters HR as a recognised profession nor has the legal authority to grant licenses to HR practitioners or protect the right to practice (*CIPD | Competence and competency frameworks | Factsheets*, 2024). Said that there is no tangible evidence to support the notion that CIPD membership is a requirement for practising HR, although this membership is often associated with career progression in the HR field due to its relevant qualifications. Similar to licensing, no evidence was found -either in participants' accounts or in the CIPD publications, indicating that HR professionals are validated or registered with the CIPD. Considering the fact that practitioner registration and validation is a lesser form of licensing but goes hand in hand with it and is a common practice in all established professions where representative organisations collect individual practitioners' information and assess/or periodically re-assess their qualifications, skills, behaviour, etc. to demonstrate their fitness to practice in accordance with a pre-determined professional standard. For instance, for medical professionals, the General Medical Council (GMC) applies to doctors, and the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) applies to nurses and midwives (NMC, 2021). See the related quote below from HR participant 4:

'**Profession is a work** in which an individual **studies** or **learns**. A profession cannot be **inherited**…**An expert** in a field of study is a **Professional**. A lot of processes is being put in place for a person to become a professional; it involves **enrolling in a higher institution of learning** and **researching** a lot about the course involved. A profession…involves **skills** and **knowledge**…Profession can also be **an occupation** which is **being paid** for. **HR is a profession**…**qualification**…**to be studied in the higher institution**..**extra qualifications** such as the **CIPD** ones **also needed** to be

**added before HR is employed**. Human resources **involve psychology**…'. (Participant 4, HR)

More broadly, the above analysis highlights differences in HR perceived reality between HR participants and employees and managers on the one hand and between employees and managers and sociologists on the other. Concerning HR participants, employees, and managers, there are two opposing assumptions of HR nature 'HR is a profession vs HR is not a profession' and, accordingly, multiple realities. In contrast, employees, managers, and sociologists have the same perception of HR objective reality and its nature: ' HR is not a profession'; however, they hold two different perspectives. Related to this, this researcher also observed that HR participants' assumption of HR reality is influenced by their specific HR role differentiation and their self-identification rather than a theoretical and conceptual awareness (concept boundaries), legal knowledge (e.g., licensing), or the practical framework that qualifies HR to be defined as an undisputed profession. see related quotes below:

'The **profession is the occupation** one attains after **training or formal/informal education**. Professional is what one becomes after the **training**. HR demonstrates my understanding of the profession by means of the **development of employees** into the **right roles** based on the selected **skills** or **qualifications**…'.(Participant 28, HR)

'A profession is any **type of work** that requires **special training** or a particular **skill**'. (Participant 16, HR)

'A profession is…**occupation** that requires **expertise** and **specialised knowledge**…**code of conduct** that governs it. **HR is a profession** because it involves…**well-trained** personnel with **special skills**…**empower** an organization's people to deliver to the best of their ability' (Participant 46, HR)

And

‘It is a profession…it focuses on **serving the strategic agenda** of the organisation and influences **employee engagement** and **productivity**’ (Participant 15, HR)

In summary, HR professionals generally regard HR as a profession. Yet, there is an argument to be made that this perception may arise from a misconception of what constitutes a profession among those in HR. Notably, HR practitioners vary in their roles, expertise, and seniority, which influences their depiction of HR's reality. In contrast, others attempted to support their claim based on practitioners' attributes and qualities. Conversely, non-HR participants, particularly those in senior positions, do not consider HR a profession. Their perspective is based on understanding a profession's distinguishing attributes, such as licensing. These findings also suggested that HR participants lacked the theoretical knowledge and the conceptual understanding of the distinguishing features that typically characterise a profession, such as licensing, certifications, and exclusive control over activities. It can also be suggested that the CIPD contributed to this conceptual confusion when it introduced the concept of HR as a people profession rather than a licenced profession. See below quote:

‘Traditionally, the role of professionals was about promoting good for society. Well-established professions such as medicine and law protect their status through a licence to practise – a legal requirement in addition to the relevant qualification - ensuring that professional standards are maintained. But what about younger management professions, where a formal certification is not necessarily required and where profit maximisation is the end goal?’ (Baczor, 2017)

### 5.4.2 Considering HR a Professional Role

As discussed in the previous subtheme 5.5.1a, the consequences of the licensing and other related legal and occupational regulations deterred HR from being recognised as a profession; however, the practice has elements of professionalism. These elements of professionalism qualify HR to position itself somewhere along the continuum of professionalism described by Welbourne (2009) and Greenwood (1957b), where at one end of this continuum, there are the well-established and recognised professions that possess licensing, the right to practice, societal recognition and the maximum degree of professional attributes, such as the professions of teaching, nursing, attorney service, and engineering, at the opposite end of the same continuum are those unlicensed, unregulated, and those with the minimum skills and entry requirements.

'HR is both a **transactional role** and a **transformational role**…it ensures...**payroll, sickness absence, monitoring performance** etc. But equally…ensuring that the **right people** are in place with the **right skills** and **competence** to achieve **organisational success**. HR is absolutely **a strategic partner…**although it sometimes isn't perceived as such, due to the additional **transactional nature** of the role', (Participant 35, HR).

The dynamic changes in HR practices and striving to gain professional status can be considered the new or the fourth wave of change that HR is currently experiencing. This new wave of change or the re-invention of HR, as described by Ulrich, involved the reformation of the HR role based on deep and active engagement in the organisation's strategical aspects alongside more focus on controlling service quality by specifying certain attributes and qualities that practitioners are expected to bring into the practice. Perhaps HR's emphasis on service quality control results from being a nonregulated profession and the lack of licensing to practice, whereby these two factors give HR more control over HR practitioners' quality, mainly through licensing, validating, and re-validating and other related measures and processes that discriminate those of least competencies. These discriminatory processes involve lengthy education, periodical exams, vetting, etc. Thus, HR is substituting practitioners' quality with service quality. In This sense, considering HR as a professional role will be based on the professional attributes that developed within the practice while considering how life history participants perceive the role.

The rapid changes in HR issues, whether those resulted from the new business challenges or initiated by HR itself, have forced HR -as data revealed- to introduce what can be called the ‘situational and dynamic behavioural professionalism’ in HR’s different roles. This dynamic and behavioural-initiated professionalism is similar to the approach identified by Dickson (2007), the expertise-in-action. In this dynamic professional role, HR emphasises the practical nature of professionalism where practitioners’ competencies and qualities combined with the specific HR roles they perform and shared occupational goals are the factors that contribute to high service quality.

Life history data revealed that HR participants understand their roles well. This was visible when participants were aligned between their roles and the key professional attributes required to perform the duties and responsibilities associated with the same roles. Additionally, participants’ comments showed their ability to identify the core competencies related to the broader business context. See the quote below:

‘A professional HR practitioner embodies a **combination of skills**, **attributes,** and **values** that contribute to the **effective management** of human resources…They are **exper**t at **interpersonal communication**, **conflict resolution**, and **negotiation**. They possess a **deep understanding** of **employment laws**, **organisational dynamics**, and **talent development strategies. Integrity, discretion,** and**…handle sensitive employee information**..strong sense of e**mpathy** and **a genuine interest in the well-being and growth of employees…**dedicated to **fostering a positive work environment, promoting diversity** and **inclusion…**aligning HR **strategies with the overall business objectives’.** (Participant 44, HR).

Furthermore, data revealed that participants’ responses regarding the professional aspects of the HR role and required competencies and attributes varied depending on their specific HR role nature, complexity and their organisation type, size, culture, and the purpose of HR within organisations (e.g., local authority, manufacturing sector, retail etc). Thus, responses included,

‘…**Knowledge, training, and/or education** relevant to an industry and a particular job. **Experience** using skills…training to perform job duties and tasks that are key to the **job responsibilities**…**Values, ethics and workstyle behaviours…**’. (Participant 33, HR)

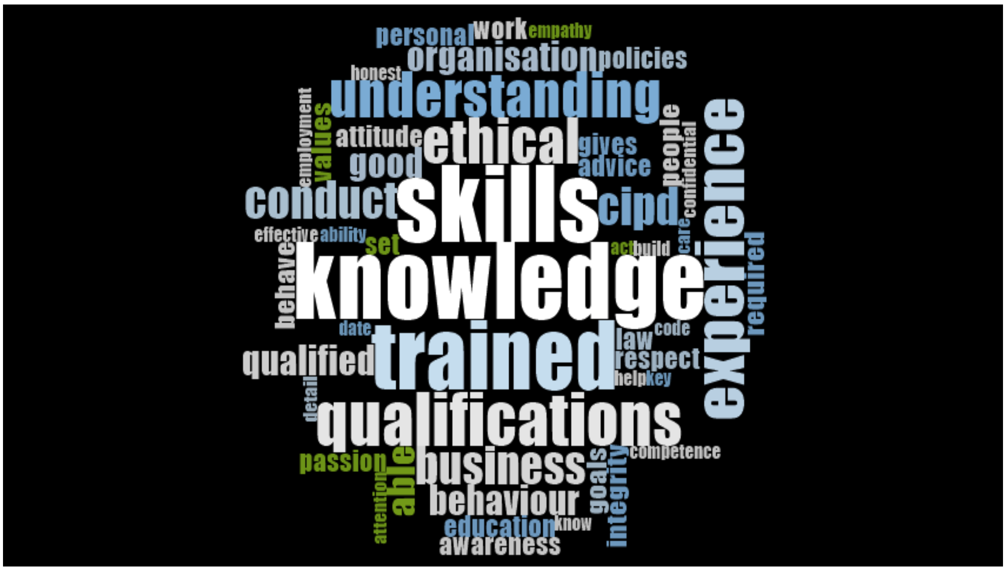
‘An individual that has a **rounded perspective on HR issues**…**understands government and legal policies** and can **apply them in practice**…**passionate** about **driving a people agenda to support the success** of a business,’ (Participant 19, HR)

And,

‘….**bring personal values into the role**. They could be a **generalist**…a **specialist**…HR Practitioners will provide a service to all employees, no matter what the level they are at or role they perform. Roles would normally include **recruitmen**t, discipline, **workforce change**, **embedding equality**, diversity, and inclusion, **advising managers**, ensuring **staff are trained, developed**, **motivated**, and retained. **Confidentiality** and **impartiality**…’. (Participant 15, HR)

‘As a small business owner…have to handle my own recruitment...I have to conduct my own HR, **interview people**, **check** their skill set and make sure they are **qualified** for the job. If I **needed more than 10 personnel, the easiest way is to find a recruitment agency to do the shortlisting, conduct interviews, and references check’.** (Participant 38)

Figure 9. Word Cloud of most frequent professional attributes mentioned by participants




In relation to Figure 8 above, participants made 68 references to knowledge, 54 to skills, 49 to formal training, 35 to qualification, 31 to experience, 29 to understanding the business environment and 25 to effectiveness. This result ties nicely with the CIPD's published initiatives that focus on certain aspects of professionalism, such as behaviour and knowledge, as the foundation of transforming HR roles and practice (see the discussion on CIPD Profession Map, 2018, Chapter 3, section 3.5.4)

Based on the above, this researcher argues that the HR role has evolved rapidly and can be branded a 'professional role'. It could also be true to suggest that many elements of professionalism are well-recognised and established in participants' responses. However, the behavioural and attitudinal dimensions of professionalism were dominant amongst participants as they mainly focussed on behavioural traits and personal qualities when describing their roles.

Although participants identified certain behavioural attributes and core competencies such as knowledge, skills, formal training and experience, a total of six participants didn't clarify whether these attributes are the most significant or are the ones that need to be developed. For example, participant 29 commented, ‘I believe professionalism is a particular behaviour which is applied to the idea, e.g., X is an HR Professional – it describes a level of accomplishment in a particular field’’. In another point, participants referred to qualifications thirty-five times without specifying whether these qualifications must be related to HR practices. Besides, only seventeen references were made to ‘’qualified’’ and linked it with the CIPD; for example, participant 16 commented, ‘All of our HR professionals are CIPD qualified and completed continuous development programmes to ensure they are highly skilled and competent’. This suggests that participants tend to focus more on the practical aspects of their role than the theoretical and conceptual aspects; in other words, they focus on ‘’ know-how’’ instead of ‘’ know-what’’. This finding is consistent with what was revealed earlier about the practical nature of HR professionalism or what is termed ‘HR expertise in action’.

Another key finding emerged that most participants perceived professionalism as a product of HR being a profession; secondly, professionalism is generated and resulted from the high service standards expected from HR practitioners who possess attributes and competencies related to their specific HR role. Again, the first view that relates professionalism to the occupational status of HR confirmed an earlier finding that HR participants do not delineate between professional attributes as a component of professionalism and professions distinguishing attributes. The second view represents a valid argument, considering that professionalism in HR is based on the characteristic nature of the role. For example, sociologists differentiated between professionalism and professions. Thus, when they attempted to conceptualise the term professionalism, they indicated that occupational behaviour and the practices of workers are the key characteristics of any professional activity or role. To illustrate, Frost (2009) contended that professionalism emerges to reflect the complex nature of work, its rapid developments and societal changes; therefore, professionalism can be understood as behavioural attributes that change according to certain situations, and this is exactly what is expressed by the CIPD in the and HR participant 42 who provided a detailed account on this.

‘The ability to apply situational judgement and demonstrate moral integrity is what sets them apart as professionals, and are important characteristics in helping organisations create long term sustainability’, Source: The CIPD, Research Report 2017

‘An HR practitioner emerges from a blend of factors, encompassing their **education, experience**, **values**, and **job responsibilities**…HR professionals typically receive **formal training** in HR-related domains…**undergraduate degrees** in HR, business, or related fields to more **advanced qualifications** such as **Master's degrees** in HR Management or **MBAs** with an HR specialisation. Many HR experts also pursue certifications like **PHR** (Professional in Human Resources) or **SPHR** (Senior Professional in Human Resources) to enhance their **knowledge and validate their credentials**. HR practitioners possess **specialised expertise** across various facets of HR, including employment law, talent acquisition, compensation and benefits, performance management, **organisational development**, and employee relations. This specialised knowledge equips them to tackle intricate HR challenges and provide **valuable guidance to their organisations**. **Integrity** and adherence to **ethical standards** are foundational to the professional identity of HR practitioners. They are entrusted with upholding **ethical codes of conduct**, **emphasising fairness**, and **championing diversity and inclusivity** in the workplace. **Ethical decision-making** is paramount, particularly when **addressing sensitive matters** such as **employee relations and data privacy**…’ (Participant 42, HR)

Data analysis has shown that HR participants could identify many competencies and behavioural attributes that developed within the practice. Moreover, participants provided a form of ‘professionalism attributes checklist’. This professionalism attribute checklist introduced by HR participants evidenced the practicality in their understanding of the term professionalism. However, it can be suggested that professionalism in HR has a theoretical base according to the attribute approach. For example, several authors defined professionalism by listing its components, such as Evetts (2013) and Freidson

(2001), who asserted that professionalism refers to the behaviour and practices of employees who work according to given standards of performance and who possess a clear sense of what their work is about and how they achieve a desired outcome., in other words, ‘know-how’. Also, Bukhtair (2018b) added a list of behavioural attributes and competencies and described these attributes as the essential components of professionalism, which include the ability to solve problems, ethical values, hard skills such as technical knowledge and soft skills, including effective communication, expertise knowledge, positive attitudes, decision making with limited information given.

HR, being considered a professional role, can also be linked with functions associated with the HR different roles, whereas a function in this context can be considered as an output of a specific HR role -below participant quote- that differs according to the type of an organisation’s objectives, its strategic direction and the purpose of the HR department, for instance, HR business partner role is to help businesses to achieve their strategic goals in areas of human resources management and implement long term workplace strategies (Matuska and Niedzielski, 2018). However, according to a life history response, the same role includes eight domains or sub-roles, each with its specific functional agenda. Examples of these sub-roles and associated functions are a strategic positioner, compliance manager, paradox navigator, culture and change champion, etc.

‘HR…is a **multidisciplinary function**…responsible **for overseeing various aspects of managing** the organisational **employees**. It involves **planning, implementing, and managing policies, practices…systems…recruitment, employee development**, **compensation, benefits**, and **workplace culture**…aligning the **workforce with organisational goals** and ensuring a **productive, engaged, and compliant workforce’**. (Participant 40, HR)

Moreover, the professional attributes approach maintains its significance in HR participants' responses, irrespective of the HR department's orientation or the focus of its activities, whether HR is viewed as administrative, strategic, or a combination of both. See related quotes below:

‘As an HR professional, you have to be **trained formally** and possibly **do an internship** in order to practice as an HR professional and are guided by **certain standards and ethics’**. (Participant 30, HR)

The data also revealed that employees’ and managers’ perspectives of HR professionalism are consistent with their assumption of HR professional status not being a profession. They commented on three occasions that the two terms, profession and professionalism, are interdependent. Thus, the fact that HR has not earned enough credentials to be recognised as a profession resulted in the HR role being not a professional. See the below quote,

‘The term professional relates to individuals possessing **specialist knowledge** and **skill sets** that are broadly **recognised by legally constituted vetting organisations t**o **be sufficient**…the term profession relates to **work classifications…knowledge** and **skills** possessed by those **qualified in that profession**...These terms are…**interdependent**…You need professionals to work in a profession and a profession for people to qualify and deploy their knowledge and skills to work in’. (Participant 37)

As appeared in the above quote, employees and managers participants believe that HR doesn’t meet the essential characteristics to be designated as a profession, the HR role is not a professional role. However, professionalism, according to the same participants, is a framework or a process that consists of different aspects such as: knowing, learning and then doing or delivering. In this regard, a claim can be made that professionalism in HR is rather a series of attributes and behaviours that drive action and are based on ‘know-how’ or ‘expertise in action’ as stated earlier. This can be supported by the CIPD perspective of HR professionalism. Louisa Baczor, a CIPD research associate stated:

‘Being a professional is not just about demonstrating expertise and skills, but knowing how and when to apply that knowledge. For HR, which faces mounting pressure to ensure that the organisation operates in a way that creates ‘shared value’ for all stakeholders, conflicts of interest are routinely experienced. In the case of the BBC, the immediate demands of the business were at odds with the interests of wider stakeholders (public licence-fee payers). Sensitivity to available ethical choices, above and beyond the legal requirements, is what makes professional advice relevant and trustworthy. HR professionals must build their trust and credibility by showing capability and courage to challenge accepted practice, and offer business leaders a range of critical perspectives on how to create sustainable organisational value through people' (Baczor, 2017).

Furthermore, it can also be true to argue that HR professionalism levels vary according to each HR's role differentiation as well as the value of the service associated with this particular role. To support this point, Claus and Collison (2004), discussed vertical and horizontal differentiation within HR work; as such, HR roles and levels of professionalism will be differentiated accordingly. As an example, professionalism attributes range from an HR administrative assistant or HR generalist to a senior HR who is also a CEO in a multinational organisation. Eriksson (2014) highlighted a similar view of perceiving HR professional work when he claimed that HR professionalism is influenced and controlled by organisational professionalism, whereas HR practitioners were often seen as a minority in organisations and others may not always recognise or value the knowledge field of HR. The varying perceptions of HR professionalism could lead to organisational pressure on HR departments. This situation warrants a more thorough investigation and additional research into its effects on HR's alignment with business objectives. It also raises the question of whether HR should transition from altering practitioner behaviour and pursuing legitimacy to evolving its practices, directly tackling the issue of what organisations truly expect from HR.

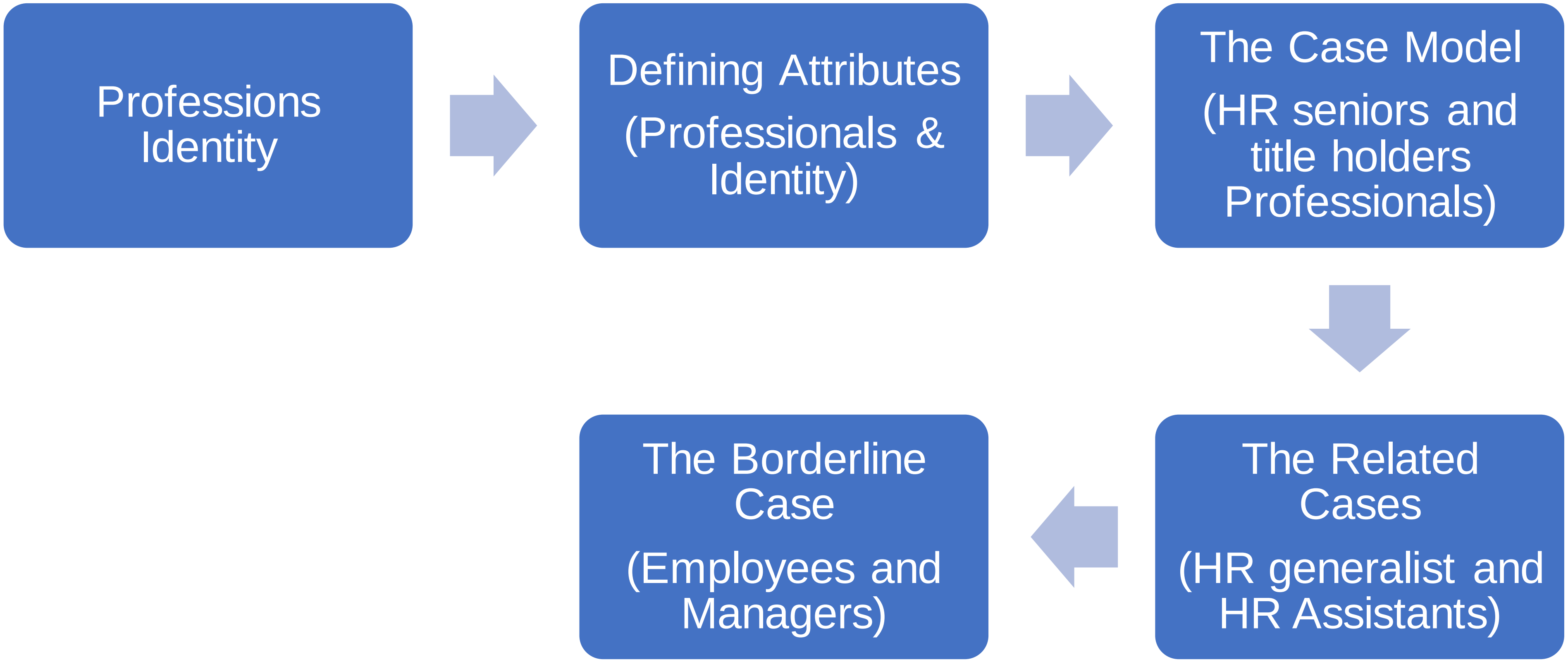
Unlike non-HR participants' perspective of HR's role, several occupational sociologists appeared to agree with HR participants on the professional nature of the HR role. HR participants and sociologists share the same assumption of what the sociologists termed as 'the mode of being' that emphasises the strategic nature of the practice. Almeida, in a study conducted in 2008, accepted that the structural modes of HRM practices, complexity in work-related issues., and the overall maturity of HR as a discipline qualify it to be branded a professional practice ((Almeida, 2008). Moreover, Philips and Dalgrano (2017), White (1966) and Freidson (2001) asserted that professionalism and professionalisation are the processes through which an occupation demands certain characteristics such as expert knowledge, special skills (soft and/or hard), ethical code of conduct, and relevant formal and informal training and education. These defined characteristics can result in structural development within any given occupation. CIPD initiatives, such as the introduction of the CIPD Profession Map, demonstrate the presence of elements of professionalism in HR-based roles. This is due to the structural changes that have occurred and are still happening in the practice, including the continuous evolution of HR's nature (i.e. from administrative to strategic). By the same token, several HR academics and professional bodies, such as Ramlall and Melton (2018), et al, CIPD, and the Institute of Public Administration (IPA), all perceive the HR role as a professional; however, this assumption is often associated with the strategic nature of the practice and the role performed such as business partnering) (Armstrong, 2006a; Ramlall and Melton, 2018).

Data suggests that HR can be considered a professional role. To illustrate, HR participants have a solid understanding of their roles and can articulate the professional attributes and competencies associated with their specific roles, either administrative or strategic. However, non-HR participants' perspective of HR professionalism was consistent with their perception of HR professional status: 'HR is not a profession'; consequently, they asserted that HR role is not a profession. This section illustrated that HR occupies an advanced position in 'Greenwood's professionalism continuum' and 'Larson's Pyramid of Prestige', a claim that can be supported theoretically based on the sociologists' perspective of professionalism attributes approach and practically, based on HR practitioners' expertise and 'know-how' role-related professional attributes and qualities.

## 5.5 Theme 4: The Professional Identity of HR

In this section, participants were asked to describe the professional identity of HR practitioners. Therefore, two themes were developed to explore HR professional identity as a self-concept and to illustrate the components of HR professional identity as reported by participants. Slay, and Smith (2011) defined professional identity as one's professional self-concept based on attributes, beliefs, values, and experience. In the same way, Vivekananda-Schmidt et al. (2015a) stated that the self-perception of a professional is a key element in forming one's professional identity by which individuals modify and develop their behaviour for the purpose of accepting the responsibilities and obligations of the professional role. Neary (2014) and Caza (2015) Furthered these two definitions by adding that professional identity enables individuals to assign meaning to themselves within an occupational context.

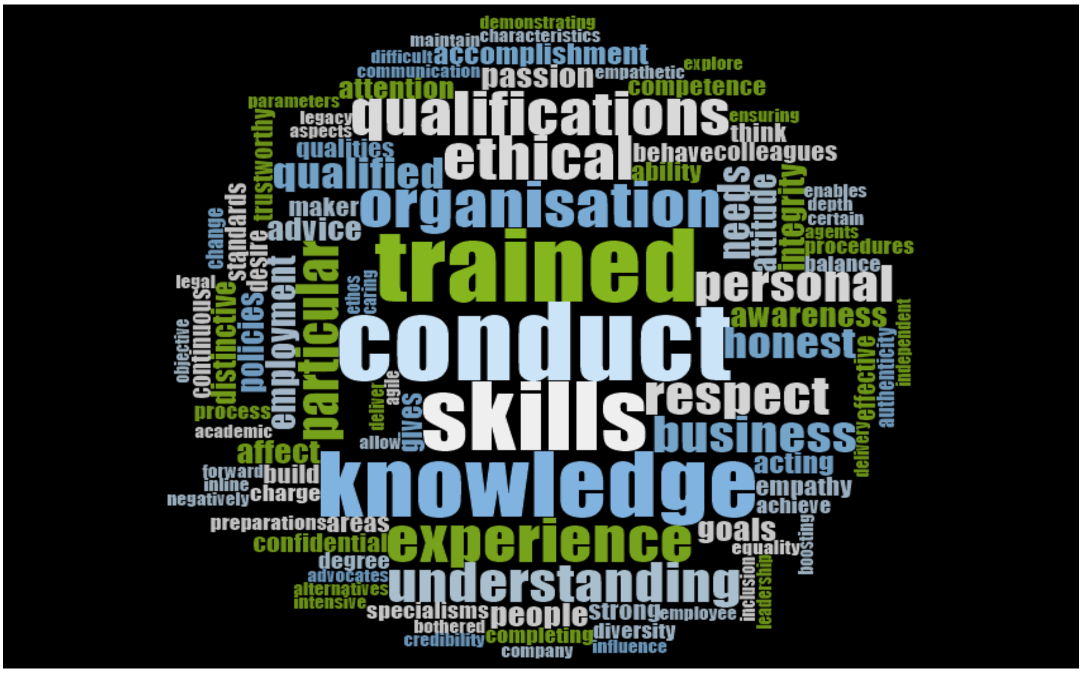
Figure 10. Deconstructing the HR Professional Identity




(Source: Developed by this researcher)

As previously stated, this researcher has adapted Walker and Avant's concept analysis method to deconstruct HR professional Identity (See below Figure 11). Five steps of the method are applied to articulate a conceptual and practical understanding of HR professional identity, which come as follows: a. the concept selected is HR professional identity, b. the determining the concept attributes are the identity components described by the participants, c. The model case is HR seniors and title holders, d. The related cases are HR generalists and HR assistants. And lastly, the borderline cases are employees and managers participants and their perspective of HR professional identity.

**Figure 11. Word Cloud of Professional Identity Components Mentioned by Participants.**




As shown in Figure 10 above, HR participants believe they have developed A professional identity. Their responses included the key components contributing to forming an HR professional identity, including the code of conduct, knowledge, skills, training, understanding, ethical value, respect, understanding, personal attitudes, etc. Leaper (2011) refers to a similar situation when he illustrates that professional identity constitutes when individuals' self-concepts are based on their membership in a social group such as an occupation, nationality, ethnic group, etc. See the related quote below from an HR participant.

'I think the professional identity…is characterised by several key elements: **knowledge** and **expertise**…**in-depth knowledge of HR principles**, **employment law**, and **industry-specific regulations**; **Ethical standards**…committed to **upholding ethical and moral standards**, including **fairness**, equality, and **confidentiality**…They play a strategic role in **shaping an organisation's culture, driving employee engagement,** and ensuring …**Continuous learning**: HR **professionals engage** in continuous learning to stay updated with evolving laws, **best practices**, and industry trends; **Change agents**…'.(Participant 47, HR)

Moreover, this researcher contends that there is a differentiation in determining and prioritising the HR professional identity components among HR participants. These differentiations, in most cases, were associated with participants' specific HR roles they perform; thus, it can be claimed that HR has constructed a 'role-related identity' which reflects both the 'self' of the HR practitioner in terms of personal qualities/traits as well as, the specific behavioural and attitudinal role-based identity components. Participants' identifications to 'oneself' varied in life history responses based on each role's attached behaviour. To illustrate, the CIPD-qualified participants and participants with job titles such as business partner, HR director, or HR advisor were noticeably able to define themselves professionally and articulate their HR identity. For example, participants 3 and 20, 39 commented:

'A specific set of duties and obligations establish the professional identity of HR practitioners. They are **skilled** in **managing talent**, handling **employee relations**…**employment law**. They put a high value on **maintaining their skills** in...Their core principles are **maintaining ethical standards** and **handling sensitive workers' concerns honestly**. HR…HR plays a vital role in CSR **social Responsibility**…creates a **positive impact**…**fight for justice** and effective conflict management, promoting a healthy working culture…with the goal of creating a healthy work environment and achieving the goals of the company'. (Participant, 39, HR)

'The professional identity of an HR practitioner would be someone who is **qualified** and, whilst **being semi-autonomous**, is subject to an **ethical and moral code of conduct**. These **standards** and any **qualifications** are likely to be promoted by **a professional body'**, (Participant 3, HR)

'The professional identity of an HR practitioner to me is someone who **cares** about the people… **able to balance** the needs of both the individual and the organisation…'. (Participant 20, HR)

In line with the above, Neary (2014) defined professional identity as 'how we perceive ourselves within an occupational context'; he Indicated knowledge and qualifications as the contributors that support practitioners in defining who they are and what they do. Neary's argument may explain why it was challenging to understand HR professional identity in a collective sense due to the multiple roles and the diverse responsibilities within HR, which means that the identity is constructed on different levels, for instance, participant 18 stated that: 'I believe this would be how a person determines themselves in their professional role. For example, how would they explain their job and what they do and achieve as a person? Consequently, participants' responses revealed that The HR role as the identity resource resulted in a dynamic HR professional identity that varies and reflects the professionals' current self or 'doing' rather than HR as an occupation or as a social structure and subsystem, for example, HR participants 13 and 5 commented that:

'professional identity of an HR professional would include characteristics of **ethics, integrity, reliability, and continuous training, passion, knowledge skills and experience**…'. (Participant 13, HR)

Also, Participant 1 commented:

'Professional identity can be defined **as the self** that has been **developed with the commitment to perform competently** and **legitimately** in the context of the **profession** and its **development can continue** over the course of the **individual's careers'**. (Participant 1, HR)

Moreover, in their attempt to describe their professional identity, some HR participants provided descriptions of their professional selves. Participants outlined their job responsibilities and listed their role-related professional attributes and competencies. See two quotes below.

'I believe an HR practitioner should be **honest, show integrity**, have **empathy**…**remain confidential**…be able to **deal with people on all levels**…have good **organisation and persuasive skills…**to **lead people**. They should **have good attention to detail**, be **calm and act with fairness and without prejudice**'. (Participant 8, HR)

And,

'A knowledgeable professional who **puts the good and wellbeing of others above** any personal or vested interest…always conducts their business in as **open**, **honest and ethical practice** as they can. To be **honest**…'. (Participant 40, HR)

The study uncovered an interesting revelation regarding how other participants (employees and managers) perceive HR professional identity. In contrast to HR participants (Group 1), employees and managers (Group 2) believe that HR is not a profession. As a result, they do not recognise HR professionals as possessing a professional identity. This assumption could significantly impact the HR role, particularly in terms of social acceptance, how HR professionals view themselves and how they convey their professional identity to others.

See below two comments:

'**I don't think practitioners should be pigeonholed into an identity** as there should be a diverse mix of individuals so organisations have a wider perspective of how HR can be managed. There should not be an HR mould'. (Participant 25)

And,

‘I believe that **HR practitioners' identity is very blurred**. I believe they should be there to encourage, motivate and help build team skills. However, I believe the majority of **my experience** has been **admin assistants**. I believe HR practitioners should be seen more**, more engaging** and in charge of boosting **moral** and **productivity**’ (Participant 14)

## 5.6 Findings summary: This section summarises the research findings.

Findings on perceptions of HR revealed that participants differed when representing their understanding of HR, even within HR society. Perhaps this is shaped by the differences in participants’ roles, level of professional knowledge, seniority, and organisations’ scope. For instance, HR participants in manufacturing sectors or regulated professions such as law firms will likely perceive HR as a people management function. This group of participants considered HR to be employee-centred, operational, and more concerned with day-to-day activities and staffing bureaucratic processes. On the other hand, HR participants associated with local authorities, CIPD-qualified members and those active in professional online platforms such as LinkedIn, HR Ninjas, and the CIPD online forum tend to perceive HR as strategic, business-oriented and less operational. While some participants stood in the middle and considered HR operational and strategic, they narrowed their strategic perspective to HR core staffing activities. However, employees and managers -who will be referred to by non-HR- have life history accounts that reveal that they perceive HR as merely operational.

The findings on HR perceptions suggest two main issues: first, HR is perceived as a 'recorded reality' shaped by the roles, knowledge, organisational domain, and pre-existing views of individuals, including those not in HR. Second, it points to potential conceptual discord within the HR community, stemming from a lack of consensus on the definition of HR, necessitating further investigation to clarify this aspect.

The findings also revealed a common belief that HR is misunderstood. Participants associated HR’s negative image with employees’ perceptions of

HR's operational activities, such as ' a way of policing and deterring staff', and 'a department that only hires, fires, and pays people'; also, several participants believed that HR is one-sided and 'always are in favour of the company's interests against the interest of the employees'. These findings may suggest a 'double vision' in HR practices, where employees' issues and expectations are on one side, and HR strategic aspirations are on the other; thus, a balanced approach that addresses employees' concerns and organisations' objectives could reshape or shift existing perceptions and attitudes towards HR.

Findings on HR professional status demonstrated that most HR participants perceive HR as a profession. As argued elsewhere, this common belief and perception are mainly driven by a conceptual misunderstanding of the term profession among HR participants. However, they differ in roles, professional knowledge, and seniority. In contrast, most non-HR participants, particularly those in senior roles, believe that HR is not a profession.

HR participants' representation of 'HR's reality' is generally factored by either HR distinctiveness or their professional qualities. In contrast, non-HR participants' perception was entirely based on their personal and conceptual understanding of the term profession. This finding indicates that HR does not qualify as a profession because it lacks several defining characteristics, such as licensing and exclusive control over HR activities.

Findings provided evidence that HR can be considered a professional role. The data showed that HR participants understand their roles well and can specify professional attributes and competencies related to their roles; however, non-HR participants' views of HR professionalism were consistent with their view of HR professional status. They stressed that HR had not earned enough credentials to be recognised as a profession, impacting the HR role as unprofessional.

This section concluded that HR is advanced in 'Greenwood's professionalism continuum' illustrated earlier. The professional role of HR is based on 'know-how' rather than 'know-what'. Thus, levels of professionalism vary depending on each HR role's specifications, to what degree HR is aligned with the business, and the structure and culture of the organisation in which HR operates. The finding also predicted an 'inter-role conflict' such as the HR aspiration to perform the 'change agent' role traditionally assigned to OD or organisational development practitioners.

Linked with the above, another promising finding was that HR is developing a dynamic professional identity. HR's dynamic professional identity is developing at different levels. It reflects HR practitioners' 'current self' and 'doing', perhaps this is influenced by the variations in their degrees of professionalism, attributes and behaviours. That said, there is a strong association between role and oneself identification that led this researcher to describe it as a 'role-related HR professional identity, wherein identity construction is determined by attributes and behaviours that are expected from the role holder. For instance, data revealed that CIPD-accredited participants and participants with job titles such as business partners, HR directors, or HR advisors were noticeably able to define themselves professionally and articulate their professional identities clearly.

# Chapter 6. Conclusions, Further Research, Development as a Researcher

This concluding chapter summarises the study's key findings in relation to the research aims and questions. The chapter also discusses the research's theoretical and practical contributions and outlines the research limitations and future research suggestions.

As previously stated, this study aimed to explore the attitudes, perceptions, debates, and insights regarding whether HR is a role, function, or profession, alongside critically reviewing the historical, cultural and process of professionalisation of HRM. Moreover, the study aimed to hear and record the unheard voices of HR practitioners and non-HR participants (employees and managers), explore their perspectives on HR professional status, identify the factors influencing their perceptions and analyse their professional identity.

## 6.1 Addressing the Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following questions:

Q1: From the perspectives of a range of stakeholders, how do they construct the meaning of HRM/D as a profession?

Q2: Investigate and formulate the perceptions of how practitioners, society, and employers influence the professional status of HRM/D. Why do they present these perceptions of HRM/D as a profession?

Q3: Create and assemble the factors that determine the professional status of HRM/D. Why do these factors influence the construction of HRM/D professional identity?

Q4: Explore the conjecture within the extant literature regarding HRM/D being considered a profession, a role, or a function. Is HRM/D a role, a function, or a profession? What elements of professionalism influence their professional practice?

To address these questions, the study commenced by conducting a literature review and constructing in-depth knowledge on the concepts of profession, professionalism, and professional identity. The literature review served as a starting point for the study. It was influenced by this researcher's philosophical positionality, who considered it indispensable in establishing a comprehensive comprehension of professions and professionalisation processes besides pinpointing gaps in existing knowledge. In this stage of the study, knowledge construction around the concepts of profession, professionalism, and professional identity enabled this researcher to develop his arguments and articulate the study methodology, data collection methods and analysis techniques that assist in answering the research questions. The literature review entailed a detailed analysis and synthesis of various perspectives, approaches, and knowledge developed by other researchers, particularly sociologists.

To fully understand the evolution of human resource management, it was necessary to adopt a narrative approach that critically reviews the literature on the history, present and anticipated future of the practice. The research questions, being qualitative, required a detailed analysis of the stages of the HR professionalisation process and the factors that led to the structural and philosophical changes in the practice over time. This approach helped to uncover the underlying factors that necessitated the transition from personnel management to strategic human resources management. By exploring the developments in HR, a clearer picture emerged of how the practice evolved and the key drivers that influenced this transformation.

Positioned as a reflexive insider, I conducted life histories to collect data from forty-seven participants based on a combined purposeful and convenience sampling strategy. The rich data obtained through this method, combined with documentary evidence using the CIPD publications as a complementary method, offered the opportunity to consider the unheard voices and identify participants' perception of HR professional status as a lived experience in-depth, in addition to unfolding whether perceptions of HR are to be 'the real reality' and it is actual mode of being as well as, answering the questions of what exists, what HR? Is there one reality or multiple realities? On a similar point, the life history offered the participants the opportunity to voice and self-express their professional identity, its components and how their identity is perceived by other social actors.

## 6.2 The Study Findings

Data revealed that participants had varying self-defined perceptions of HRM. HR practitioners viewed HRM as employee-focused (operational), business-oriented (strategic), or a combination of both. In contrast, employees and managers perceived HR primarily as an operational and support function. Thus, the question of whether HR is strategic, operational, or a blend of both is still open to debate. This depends on the participants' interpretation of HRM, shaped by their sociocultural environment and the degree to which an organisation's structure and objectives influence HR department philosophy and focus. When participants viewed HRM as operational and transactional, they reflected on their experiences, roles, and the nature of their HR duties. Alternatively, participants engaged in the same meaning-making process when HR was considered strategic and business-oriented based on their assigned duties and employer expectations.

This study has uncovered an important perspective regarding the perception of HR among participants. Many participants held nonfavourable view of HR, often citing its operational function and describing it as a means of policing and discouraging employees. Conversely, some respondents expressed the view that HR should adopt a more strategic approach focused on addressing business needs and considering employee concerns and expectations. This finding emphasises a potential intra-role conflict and challenge for HR. As such, this researcher suggested that it is important for HR practitioners to take note of this and develop innovative ways to address the concerns of both the employees and the business.

Concerning the research’s central question, interestingly, although HR participants perceived the practice as a profession, there was no tangible evidence to support this claim. Furthermore, the findings uncovered HR participants' perception is primarily based on either the distinctiveness of HR's role and the extent to which this role contributes to the overall organisation's performance (named the role approach) or based on HR practitioners' self-identifications (called the attribute approach) whereas, HR participants' participants provided several behavioural traits and personal qualities that distinguish HR practitioners, such as the skills sets, knowledge, experience, value, formal training and, on several occasions, the CIPD qualifications.

The data suggested that HR lacks a determinant factor that qualifies it to be recognised as a profession: licensing. Therefore, both functional and attribute approaches to 'the profession' asserted that the licensing and the monopoly of this activity are important features of all regulated and recognised professions such as medicine, law and teaching. It was also found that the practice lacks the legal and administrative constraints likely to qualify it as a regulated profession; these include formal and specific education, compulsory occupational training, examinations, and vetting practitioners. Another interesting finding was the HR participants' misconceptions about the theoretical and legal framework of the term 'profession', as several comments indicated the CIPD qualifications as equivalent to licensing. In reality, no evidence supports that the CIPD is either a regulatory body or delegated by the state to grant HR practitioners licences to practice. Besides, this study found no evidence in the participants' accounts or the CIPD published documents, including 'The CIPD Regulations 2021', indicating that the CIPD has the responsibility or the duty of vetting HR practitioners, setting the entry requirements or must control the quality of HR practitioners.

Surprisingly, in an unreported finding, when this researcher examined 'the non-time limited' qualifications provided by the CIPD, it was found that HR also does not meet the requirements to be considered a 'certified practice', which is a lesser restricted form of licensing by which a non-governmental body issues a 'time-limited' credential, to ensure that practitioners demonstrate the theoretical and practical knowledge and skills needed to perform their roles.

The study found that HR possesses many elements of professionalism and can be considered a professional role. To reach this conclusion, this research utilised Greenwood's continuum of professionalism based on participants' responses and their ability to identify the core professional attributes attached to their roles, such as expertise, knowledge, relevant skills, experience, code of conduct and occupational training. The findings on this aspect emphasised the following: firstly, the practical nature of professionalism in HR, seeing that participants' personal accounts tend to focus more on 'know-how' instead of 'know-what'; secondly, The CIPD has contributed to the HR role's professionalisation and the changes that occurred in HR philosophy and practice including developing HR processes, HR strategy formulation-normally in alignment with business strategy-, promoting occupational learning and proposing the CIPD Profession Map 2020.

Another finding is that while HR can be characterised as a professional role, the extent and degree of professionalism differ among HR practitioners. This variation can be attributed to the diverse array of HR roles, each demanding unique competencies and attributes tailored to its complexity, the culture of the organisation, and the sector. Consequently, the professional role in HR can be viewed as a process encompassing two dimensions: 'knowledge' and 'application', enabling practitioners to acquire and apply the competencies and attributes pertinent to their distinct roles.

When considering whether HR has developed a professional identity, the study found that HR practitioners have formed a professional identity. This finding accords with what was stated by several authors, including Vivekananda-Schmidt et al. (2015a), Caza (2015), Neary (2014), and leaper (2011), who all contended that an individual's self-perception is a key element in forming one's identity and assigning meanings to him/herself within an occupational context by which the individual modifies and develops a certain pattern of behaviours to accept the responsibilities and obligations of his/her role. With this respect, HR participants identified most of their identity components, including the code of conduct, knowledge of the field, relevant skills, ethical values, understanding and personal attitudes.

Likewise, regarding the centrality of the role in shaping HR professionalism, the study found that HR has formed what this researcher named 'role-related identity. The role-related identity' was visible in participants' accounts, where a variation was detected in deciding and prioritising the components of HR professional identity based on the nature of the role within the practice and whether this role is operational or strategic. Consequently, the study also found that HR's role as a source of identity influences participants' ability to articulate their professional identity. Participants with titles such as HR advisor, HR director, CIPD member, or HR business partner noticeably expressed a stronger professional identity than general practitioners or HR assistants.

## 6.3 The Study Contributions

This study presented and intended to investigate the professional status of HR, with a significantly limited number of studies focusing on this aspect. In doing so, the research made the following methodological, theoretical and practical contributions:

### 6.3.1 Contribution to Knowledge About Research Design

This study offered information to fill the knowledge gap in understanding the professional status of HR from a non-dual ontological perspective, also known as subject-object nonduality. This philosophy has come into existence to solve the problem of 'one and many' in reference to one ultimate reality and its different interpretations. To the best of this researcher's knowledge, no previously published work has investigated HR professional status or the real reality of the practice. This study analysed HR modes of being and revealed their actual reality based on life history, subjective accounts, and the CIPD documents, as well as the view of sociologists who objectively determined the nature of things.

*Applying a descriptive phenomenological inquiry to analyse HR professional status misperception and contradicting realities*: This philosophy, if adopted in the field of human resources management, will offer researchers valuable insights into how professionals make sense of the practice and the meanings they attach to themselves as professionals (self-perception and self-concept). As a researcher, this philosophical view enabled me to interrogate the life history participants' assumed inner reality and perception of HR using their own subjective personal accounts to determine the professional status of HR while also considering what qualifies HR to be defined as a profession from a sociological perspective. Moreover, the phenomenological view can reveal the intricacies of HR professional identity as perceived by HR practitioners, in contrast to sociologists' views on the evolving nature and elements of professional identity.

*Adopting a phenomenological view can reveal both naive and actual realities:* This perspective enabled the researcher to explore the professional identity of HR practitioners. The investigation uncovered various realities, including the HR participants' belief in their constructed professional identity. This belief starkly contrasted the views of non-HR participants, who contested that HR is not a profession and, thus, HR professionals lack a professional identity. This dichotomy highlighted two opposing realities: the actual reality acknowledged by HR participants, who believe they embody the key elements of a professional identity as defined by sociologists, and the naive reality perceived by managers and employees, which is based on the notion that 'if HR is not a profession, then HR professionals do not possess a professional identity.' (more information is available in Chapter 2, section 2.3, Chapter 5, section 5.6).

*Applying Life History Data Collection Method*: Life histories offer a unique and insightful approach to understanding how HR professionals perceive their practice as a lived experience. It allows for hearing their authentic voices and better understanding their HR perceptions. Additionally, this method offers valuable insights into whether these perceptions are accurate or if multiple realities are at play. Moreover, life histories give HR practitioners a platform to express their professional identity and its various components. It allows them to narrate their personal experiences and voice their professional identities.

Lanford and Tierney (2019) suggested that life histories, which rely on the authentic voices of participants, lend credibility to research findings Taking this into account, the life history method is especially relevant for analysing an individual's personal experiences and attitudes because it allows researchers to gain a better understanding of the broader perceived reality. As a result, life history responses serve as a subjective and self-specific evaluation by both HR participants and employees/managers. This approach helps us address whether HR should be viewed as a profession, role, or function besides defining and describing HR professional identity.

*Combining Life History and Document Evidence Data Collection Methods*: As stated in Chapter 4, section 4.4.1, document evidence is a structured and methodical approach to examining documents to gain insights, extract and meaning. Applying these two techniques can enable researchers to identify patterns, themes, and trends and assess the credibility and reliability of the information presented. This technique can complement other qualitative data collection methods, including interviews, to track changes and developments over time and provide a deeper understanding of the subject matter, especially if the researcher is trying to investigate the impact of an initiative.

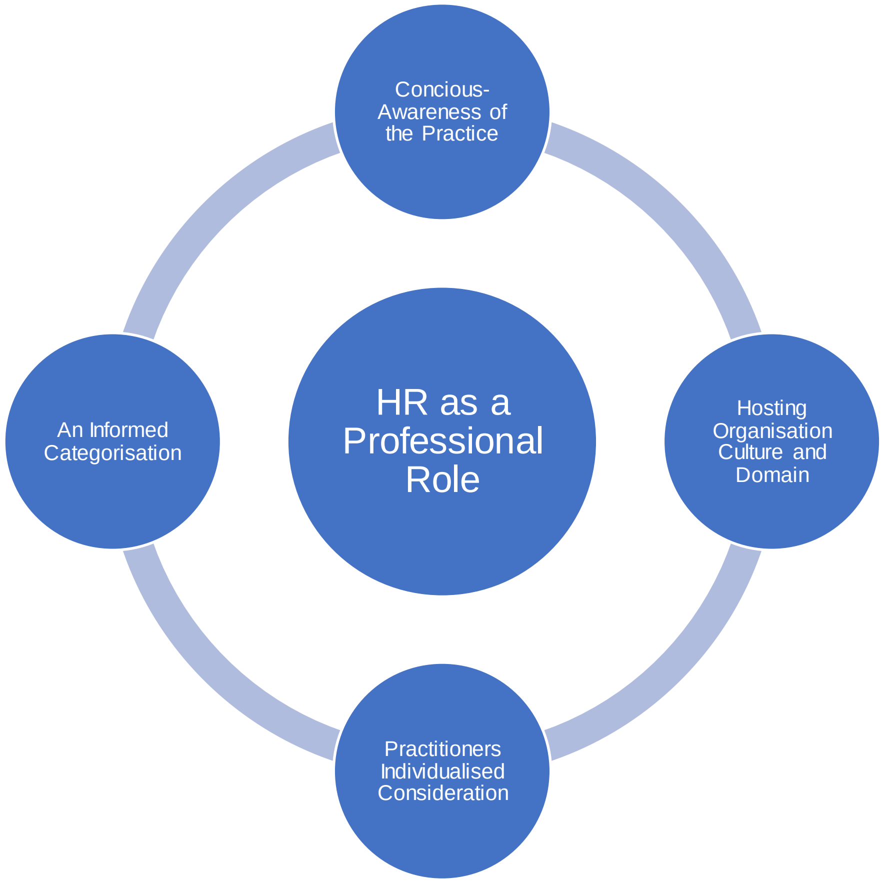
### 6.3.2 Contributions to Theoretical Knowledge about Understanding HRM/D:

*HR Reality Identification*: The current research identified that conceptualising and categorising HR as a profession is built upon rationally unsupported perceptions and does not represent the professional status of HR or 'the actual reality of HR'. Thus, the current study attempts to conceptualise the reality of HR by applying structural and attributional defining features to the practice. These structural and attributional features form HR as a concept and make sense of its existence as an objective reality. Furthermore, HR as an experienced concept and lived practice, at least among the HR participants community, is formed through three processes: perceiving, considering, and then categorising the practice as a profession. Looking at these three processes, it becomes apparent that the concept formation process among the HR community and the CIPD as a representative body lacked the element of ‘evaluating’ as a deciding factor that leads to correctly categorising and conceptualising HR. Proposing an ‘evaluation-centred approach’ to HR should provide a knowledge-based framework built upon identifying HR structural and attributional features before categorising and deciding the nature of the activity and whether HR is a profession or a role. Theoretically, this could advance learning and development within the practice based on HR’s reality identification as a professional role.

#### *6.3.2.1 Conceptualising HR as a Professional Role*

This researcher previously stated that HR practitioners used their perceptions and experiences to define HR reality. As such, it can argued that HR and its claimed professional status seem to be influenced by and tied to external factors that shape HR practitioners’ views and inform their perception of the practice (e.g., the CIPD and/or HR theorists such as Ulrich). That being the case, this researcher suggests that conceptualising HR as a role starts with a practitioner’s self-awareness of HR as a practice within a given organisation. The practice awareness in this context will be based on HR unit purpose clarity, the hosting organisation’s structure, culture, and objectives, and practitioners’ ability to meet the expected outcome. Contrary to the CIPD’s profession map, the purpose is process-led rather than principle-led, by which practitioners are encouraged to use their beliefs and situational judgement in decision-making, especially in times of change. See below Figure 12;

Figure 12. Conceptualising HR Professional Role: A Suggested Process




(Source: Developed by this researcher)

Based on a previous finding, this researcher assumed that an HR unit's purpose varies based on the hosting organisation structure, culture, and objectives, as these collectively can influence and shape the nature of HR activities and orientation (i.e., operational, strategic, or a combination of both). Moreover, relating HR's role to the hosting organisation's culture will, when HR shares the same organisational values, internally inform HR processes and its decision-making mechanisms, leading to better HR service delivery and, eventually, an effective contribution to the overall organisational performance through value creation.

This researcher suggests that practice awareness and understanding of the organisation's culture and strategic objectives can facilitate practitioners' individualised consideration of the practice as a professional role. This stage is based on the assumption that HR individualised consideration is influenced by two inter-related factors, which are firstly, the practitioner's inner values, knowledge of their practice (i.e., practical and theoretical), their attitudes towards the role, the learned occupational behaviour, the degree of individuals' professional identity, and levels of competency. Secondly, the observable factors include the domain, structure, culture, and objectives of the hosting organisation, as well as the employees' wants, needs, and expectations of the HR departments.

Conceptualising HR will involve categorising HR into two different operating models, an operational/administrative and an operational, with a strategic dimension. The HR operational model mainly focuses on HR core responsibilities such as recruitment and selection, training, managing employees' records, compensation, employee relations, employee performance, etc. This model suits the manufacturing and industrial sectors and small to medium-sized organisations where HR has limited contribution to decision-making and less involvement in determining the business's direction and agenda or long-term strategic planning. Markedly, the research participants attached to manufacturing or industrial organisations and those in small and medium-sized firms tend to perceive and define HR as operational, transactional, and employee-oriented. By the same token, categorising the HR professional role as operational suits organisations with a strong local culture where HR is expected to align completely with the organisation's values, objectives, and vision. Perhaps categorising HR's role as professionally operational may also be appropriate when HR operates in organisations that adopt a top-down management approach or have an autocratic leadership style and practices. Additionally, the researcher argues that unplanned or forced change, when it occurs, can influence the categorisation of HR. For instance, COVID-19 has shifted HR focus and priorities. It forced the practice to be operationally responsive and reactive to changes in work settings, new work processes, and business environments, including homeworking/teleworking and Agile working. These can collectively lead HR to reallocate its resources and re-apply the traditional personnel management methods and practices.

Viewing HR as operational could yield certain benefits. For example, this research found that HR's negative image arises from the perception that it prioritises strategic business goals over employee concerns, leading to a one-sided approach. Consequently, HR has the opportunity to redefine its role, placing greater emphasis on enhancing employee mental and emotional well-being, encouraging staff engagement and positive behaviours, and focusing on training, reskilling, and upskilling, as suggested by one of the participants. 'I think HR is often misunderstood as being the people who are only involved when there is an issue, such as a disciplinary, grievance or other negative things. However, HR should be there to motivate staff and pass the message on when people have done well. Professionally, I know that there is more to HR; however, from experience, I have only ever seen the negative stereotypes having worked in automotive and manufacturing' (participant 36, HR).

Similarly, when HR functions operationally, it may reduce role conflict or ambiguity; for example, tensions are likely when HR assumes the role of a change agent or facilitator alongside an existing OD department. Alhmeidiyeen (2019) shared this perspective, suggesting that in large organisations, change management is traditionally the domain of the Change Management (CM) or Organizational Development (OD) departments. Nonetheless, this researcher contends that HR can still play a distinct role in change management by leading the human aspect, such as communicating and enabling change or sometimes managing resistance to change. However, HR's engagement in change management requires solid and specific knowledge, including an understanding of change management methodologies and instruments.

Likewise, when HR is considered operational, role conflict or role ambiguity may be limited; for instance, tension is expected to occur when HR plays the role of change-maker or enabler if an OD department exists. A similar view was expressed by Alhmeidiyeen (2019), who argued that in large organisations, change management traditionally belongs to the change management office

(CM) or organisational development (OD). However, this researcher argues that HR can still play a defined role in change management, which may include leading the people side, such as communicating and facilitating the change, or in some cases, dealing with change resistance if it occurs. Yet, HR involvement in change management processes may require firm and specific knowledge, including familiarity with change management processes and tools.

Further to the above, this researcher also proposes that categorising HR as an operational with a strategic dimension seems appropriate for organisations that partially outsource HR responsibilities, known as ‘external devolution’, as well as organisations that devolve some of the HR activities to line managers, known as ‘Internal Devolution’. Hence, HR can assign some aspects of the recruitment and selection processes, performance management, and training. This researcher suggests that HR involvement can take the form of determining and providing clear policies and procedures across these areas, besides having the sole responsibility to remain compliant with employees and employment legislations and acts. Nevertheless, some authors, such as Klaas et al. (1999), believe that outsourcing some HR operational activities may lead to cost reduction and increase access to expertise; this researcher contends that maintaining traditional HR operational activities is essential for business success, considering the interaction between the effectiveness of employee-oriented HR and the planning and execution of organisational strategies. HR can maintain its core functions and enhance its impact on business success by fostering learning and talent development, enhancing practitioners' competencies, and improving employee engagement and relationships. Additionally, by developing employer branding and innovating or updating workforce planning strategies, HR can respond to changes from events like Covid-19 and Brexit. Service delivery and value creation methods can also collectively and strategically boost employee performance and organisational effectiveness.

In summary, the evolution of HR remains a prevalent topic. Recognising HR as a professional role, whether operational or strategically operational, seems appropriate given the diversified business environments in which HR operates and the spectrum of roles encompassed within the discipline, including HR assistant, HR generalist, advisor, or HR business partner. These roles are contingent on knowledge, experience, professional membership and qualifications. Significantly, identifying HR as a professional role might facilitate the establishment of a consistent and unified professional identity and attain the social recognition they partially lack.

### 6.3.3 Contributions to Knowledge about the Practice

This study seeks to provide the following practical contributions that can be applied in a real setting.

HR professionals play a crucial role in managing an organisation's most valuable asset, its people, in addition to its contribution to organisational success. Identifying the professional nature of HR roles can bring numerous benefits to individuals in this field. It provides them with a clearer understanding of their responsibilities and the specific attitudes, behaviours, and actions necessary to present themselves as professionals. This, in turn, enhances the value of their services equally to employees and organisations by ensuring they provide the highest expected outcome. To achieve this level of professionalism, HR practitioners need to shift their focus from just enhancing their professional status to improving the quality of their services and increasing employee productivity. By doing so, HR professionals can bolster the effectiveness of their organisations and make a more meaningful contribution to the success of their businesses through investing in people. In short, enhancing professionalism in HR is not only about improving the efficiency of the organisation but also about investing in people.

Acquiring insights into how employees and managers perceive the professional status of HR can prove to be a pivotal step in HR's journey towards continuous improvement. By comprehending the viewpoint of other internal stakeholders towards HR, it can obtain a clearer understanding of its strengths and weaknesses, identify areas that require improvement, and adjust its professionalisation strategies accordingly. This information can also aid HR in serving the organisation better by ensuring that its objectives align with those of other business units. Additionally, it can help HR prevent any potential role conflicts or interference with other departments and foster stronger relationships with them.

Furthermore, comprehending non-HR/managers' and employees' perceptions can assist HR practitioners in enhancing their professional attitudes, behaviour and knowledge. HR professionals who are cognisant of how others perceive them can take steps to elevate their behaviour and communication, resulting in a more efficient and professional work environment. Moreover, by concentrating on establishing a professional process, HR practitioners can set an example for others and cultivate a culture of professionalism throughout the organisation. Revealing employees' and managers' (non-HR) perceptions of HR professional status could assist HR in assessing its current professionalisation processes, adjusting, or perhaps re-position itself to achieve better outcomes and add the desired value to organisations, as well as eliminating any potential role conflict or role interference with other business units. All in all, considering non-HR perceptions can ultimately assist HR practitioners in what can be called ‘being a professional process’ through the impact this may have on their attitudes, which influence the behaviour that drives them to act professionally and be perceived as professionals.

## 6.4 Challenges and Ways to Improve the Study

Like any other academic research, this study had several limitations. Some stemmed from the researcher's qualitative approach, while others were related to external factors.

In the realm of qualitative research, conducting face-to-face interviews has long been hailed as the most effective means of gathering data. Numerous scholars have attested to its usefulness, and it is even called ‘the Gold Standard’ (Self, 2021). However, the unprecedented outbreak of COVID-19 on March 11th, 2020, brought about seismic shifts in how people live, communicate, and interact with one another. As a result, traditional interviewing methods have become increasingly difficult and risky to implement, with legal restrictions and safety measures making it near-impossible to conduct in-person interviews. As a qualitative researcher, I had initially planned to conduct oral life histories, but the safety measures during the pandemic made it necessary to consider alternatives. Therefore, two methods were implemented for conducting life history interviews: audio recording and written responses. As stated by Olive (Olive, 2014), life history responses can be either oral narration or written accounts. Therefore, there were no methodological concerns with using written responses. In fact, I discovered that requesting written responses can have several benefits. For example, certain participants might find this mode of response more comfortable, enabling them to share their experiences in their own physical environment without any discomfort, interruptions, or distractions, potentially leading to more authentic and comprehensive responses.

*Data Collection Challenge:* Several studies used life history as a single source of data, such as Woodhouse (1990), Lund and O'Doherty Jensen (2008), and Emilio Diniz-Pereira (2008), who used the method to study identity construction among educators. I acknowledge that combining life history with other data collection methods, such as semi-structured interviews or focus groups to address the research questions, helps explore diverse perspectives and reduces the limitations of using a single data source. To overcome this challenge, I applied document evidence as a complementary method. This method involved reviewing and evaluating the CIPD's most up-to-date electronic publications, which are reliable, accessible and effective in triangulating findings.

*Accessing the CIPD Online Forum*: Despite my several attempts to contact the active members of the CIPD through their online forum, access was denied by the forum officials as they conditioned the researcher’s access by obtaining the CIPD membership or enrolling in one of the CIPD accredited courses. Although some CIPD members participated in the life history, I, as the inquirer, acknowledge that more CIPD participants as a subgroup may enrich the discussion on HR professionalisation processes, besides the debate on other key concepts explored in this research, such as profession, professionalism, and professional identity.

*Financial Constraints*: As a learner, attending conferences, CIPD periodic events, and relevant academic courses, such as those involving qualitative data analysis tools like NVivo software, are valuable learning opportunities. However, the steep registration fees for these events often challenge my participation, leading to frustration and emotional discouragement. Consequently, staying abreast of the latest HR practices, especially those influenced by Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, becomes difficult. To address this, I have turned to self-study and reading publications, but these methods are time-intensive and lack the comprehensive benefits of in-person attendance.

## 6.5 Recommendations For Further Studies

*Conceptualising the Semi-Profession*: Concerning the concept of profession and several sociological perspectives, it would be significant if some attention were directed to the term semi-profession. The existing literature on professions is mainly concerned with professions' structure and characteristics, as presented in the professions' attributes and functional approaches. Thus, this researcher suggests a new line of inquiry focusing on the 'grey area' between professions and semi-professions. A broader perspective is needed, considering other macro external factors that may influence the professionalisation process of semi-professions. These factors may include the socioeconomic system, political landscape, technological advancement, and geographical location. This researcher proposes that investigating the influence of these factors on 'would be a profession' may also shed some light on how an emergent profession can be a unique product of its environment to provide an essential service needed by the broader society that, besides official agencies, grants to its activity (i.e., known as social recognition). On the same point, this line of inquiry may also examine how some social aspects can impact reforming the regulated professions and professional activities. These societal factors may include the rise of service users' expectations and ratings, ranging from evaluating the service quality provided to assessing professionals' expertise or their level of Knowledge.

*HR Service Users' Views*: This researcher found that the development of HR throughout history was mainly influenced by external factors, such as the shift caused by the Industrial Revolution and government intervention, as well as the need for the practice to adapt to a certain change such as systematising management and the emergence of scientific management. However, when considering the current wave of HR professionalisation, it becomes apparent that this process only represents HR as a change-maker or implementer. To illustrate, examining and evaluating the HR professionalisation process from an HR service user's perspective would be significant. This line of inquiry may explain how employees and stakeholders can influence HR formation or reformation, especially considering their expectations of HR orientation and service quality.

*Gender Disparity in HR*: Various organisations and reports have long recognised and highlighted this issue. For instance, the Global Recruitment Trends 2018 report pointed out the alarming gender exclusivity in HR and urged hiring more male workers to achieve gender balance. The CIPD's report for 2017 revealed that females constituted a significant majority of its members at 79.34%, while males made up only 20.45%, and 0.21% were unknown. The same report for 2020 showed that females still dominated the practice at 79%, while males made up only 19.62%, and 0.72% were unknown. Such data raises critical questions about HR efforts to promote gender diversity and inclusivity. Similarly, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reported in 2016 that 72% of HR managers were women. In 2017, PayScale reported that the gender imbalance persisted, with 86% of HR generalists being women and only 14% being men. These figures highlight the need for a concerted effort to address the gender imbalance in HR and promote gender diversity at all levels of the industry. Consequently, this researcher suggests further studies on the impact of HR's gender imbalance on employees' perceptions of the practice, how the gender gap may increase the talent scarcity in HR, and how this may influence HR career entry for the opposite sex.

## 6.6 Reflection and Personal Development

Embarking on a PhD journey can be a daunting life experience, and as you approach the end, the pressure to finalise everything can feel overwhelming. Throughout this journey, I've encountered numerous challenges, some invisible to others and beyond my control. Balancing personal commitments, family responsibilities, work, and other life challenges has been a constant struggle. Still, it has also taught me valuable lessons in balancing wants and commitments, self and others around me. These challenges have also transformed my perspective from doubt and uncertainty to determination and resilience. The knowledge and personal growth I've gained along this journey are priceless. The unwavering support and encouragement from the university staff have been a source of inspiration and motivation, fuelling my drive to continue and succeed.

Looking back on my early years, I can see the remarkable transformation that has occurred in me, personally and professionally. This journey has been nothing short of life-changing, putting me back on track and setting me on a path towards another goal. Despite starting out in various labour jobs, cleaning, labour in a steel factory, etc., I was determined to make up for my lack of academic environment by engaging in extensive reading and self-study. As time passed, I began to notice a significant shift in my perspective. I went from doubting my abilities to approaching challenges with a newfound sense of "I can, I will" and determination.

Reflecting on my journey, I can see how much I have grown and learned. This experience has taught me that anything is possible with the support of others and a belief in oneself. As the saying goes, "Good people inspire themselves, but great people inspire others." I am grateful to those who have inspired, believed in, and supported me throughout this long but rewarding journey.

Throughout my journey, I have come to appreciate the value of knowledge and the importance of considering different perspectives. I have learned that recognising my weaknesses is the first step towards personal growth. I have also realised that knowledge is a powerful tool that illuminates the path to success. The more you share it, the more you gain it, and the more you need it. For me, obtaining a PhD, if it happened, is just the beginning of my learning journey. I am grateful to be surrounded by supportive, knowledgeable colleagues who continue to inspire me to learn and grow.

I still have room to grow professionally. I need to learn more, read more, publish my work, and share what I have learned. Perhaps others can benefit from my lived experiences and know that life is not just about living but also about challenging and changing. I have realised the importance of connecting with academics and professionals and learning from them. Additionally, I need to develop my presentation skills as I am still experiencing some confidence issues. Gradually, I hope to overcome this.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: The Ethical Approval

University of Sunderland

Downloaded: 14/08/2024
Approved: 17/09/2020

Abbas Alkhidir
Sunderland Business School
Programme: PhD

Dear Abbas

**PROJECT TITLE:** The Evolving Professionalisation of HR: Impact on Role, Function and Organisational Influence
**APPLICATION:** Reference Number 007623

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 17/09/2020 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form 007623 (form submission date: 17/09/2020); (expected project end date: N\A).

If during the course of the project you need to deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation please email ethics.review@sunderland.ac.uk

For more information please visit: https://www.sunderland.ac.uk/research/governance/researchethics/

Yours sincerely

Appendix B: Samples of Life History Responses

Title of the Study: *License to Practice: Reconsidering HR as a Profession, Role, and a Function*

The following is a life history for my PhD, where I am exploring the perception of HR; this study explores attitudes, perceptions, debates, and insights regarding whether HR is a role, function, or profession.

This life history is to start a conversation around this debate. As participants, would you answer the following questions:

1. From your own perspective, how would you define HR?

   For me, Human Resources (HR) can be defined as a department within an organisation and a branch of knowledge. As a department in an organisation, it can be said to be the department that is tasked with the responsibility of managing the workforce within the organisation in order to ensure their productivity and the organisation's productivity at large. Such responsibilities include but are not limited to recruiting and selecting competent personnel(s), training the workforce, onboarding, promoting the well-being of the employees, improving employee relations, and ensuring that the payments and compensations of the employees are effectively and promptly done. Furthermore, HR is responsible for developing and implementing policies and procedures that will help the organisation achieve its aim and keep its employees engaged while enforcing these organisational policies.
   As a branch of knowledge, it can be said to be a field that educates people on the models, practices or principles involved in managing an organisation's workforce. It involves having an understanding of concepts such as employee engagement, performance management, employee motivation, compensation, etc.

2. Based on the previous answer, why is HR misunderstood?

From my perspective, I feel HR has been misunderstood for several reasons, particularly stereotypic reasons, and the lack of proper knowledge of what HR is all about. Regarding the stereotype, HR has always been painted as the bad or if I may say, the wicked branch in an organisation because the department is responsible for calling to order the employees who do not keep to the policies and the procedures in the organisation, or who are involved in any form of professional misconduct in the organisation. This stereotype has made people see HR in a bad light, such that if HR calls an employee or sends a mail to an employee, the first thing that comes to the employee's mind is ‘What have I done wrong’. This shouldn’t be so because the people who think this way forget that HR is also responsible for carrying out the positive aspects of the job like appraisals, performance reviews, benefits, compensations, etc.

In relation to lack of knowledge, a lot of people have little or no knowledge of what HR entails and may feel that HR is only concerned with administrative duties like paperwork, without knowing that HR is the department that strategically plans everything that concerns the employees. This lack of knowledge makes some people feel that all that the HR department does is sit in the office, look at documents and fire whoever does anything wrong.

3. Briefly illustrate your understanding of the term “profession”?

I would say that a profession is a career that one does in order to earn a living, especially that which involves the acquisition of special knowledge and skills. Also, for a job to be considered a profession, it must have certain codes of conduct and ethical standards that guide it. For instance, being a medical doctor is a profession because it involves years of learning and training to acquire the knowledge and skills required for the job, and codes of conduct guide the job.

4. How does HR conform to your understanding of a ‘profession’?

Based on my understanding, HR conforms as a profession because it involves the acquisition of special knowledge and skills in order to provide the service which it requires. Furthermore, since HR deals with managing people, it has several codes of conduct and ethical standards that guide it, and this makes it a profession because delivering the service that it entails must be done in accordance with these codes of conduct and ethical behaviours.

5. Describe the professional identity of an HR practitioner.

   The professional identity of an HR practitioner involves the practitioner having good knowledge and experience in HR practices such as developing HR policies and procedures, talent management and talent development, etc. In addition to this, it also involves the practitioner being a strategic thinker, and obeying the code of conduct which governs HR.

6. From your own perspective, how would you define HR?

**Answer:** I view Human Resources (HR) as a multifaceted and indispensable function within organizations that is primarily concerned with the management of the workforce. HR involves a diverse set of responsibilities and activities aimed at recruiting, developing, overseeing, and retaining employees to facilitate an organization's objectives and maintain a thriving and efficient work environment. Also, HR for me, acts as a vital link between organizations and their employees, ensuring that the workforce is well-prepared, motivated, and compliant with regulations to assist organizations in reaching their goals. Nurturing a positive workplace culture, aligning the workforce with organizational objectives, and promoting diversity and inclusion are also pivotal roles HR plays in organizational success.

7. Based on the previous answer, why is HR misunderstood?

**Answer:** HR is often subject to misunderstanding, and these misconceptions can be attributed to various factors, such as perceptions, historical norms, and communication challenges. Several reasons contribute to this misunderstanding. Firstly, people may struggle to fully comprehend the depth and intricacy of HR functions, leading to misinterpretations. Additionally, negative stereotypes play a role; HR is sometimes unfairly perceived as ‘policy enforcers’ and ‘compliance police’ within organizations, fostering negative impressions as employees may believe HR prioritizes the organization's interests over their own. Furthermore, communication breakdown between HR and employees, as well as between HR and other departments, can fuel misunderstandings among the workforce. Failure of HR to effectively communicate policies, procedures, and initiatives can result in perplexity. Lastly, inconsistent practices within HR departments or among different HR professionals in organizations can create confusion and misunderstanding when policies are not consistently applied across various departments.

8. Briefly illustrate your understanding of the term “’ profession”?

**Answer:** I would say that a profession is any occupation that requires specialized knowledge, training, and expertise in a specific field, while abiding by ethical codes of conduct and standards of practice.

9. How does HR conform to your understanding of a ‘profession’?

**Answer:** In my perspective, HR largely embodies the traits of a profession. It necessitates specialized expertise, adherence to ethical principles, a dedication to serving others, the availability of certification pathways, a measure of independence, and a steadfast commitment to ongoing learning. HR experts typically possess specialized knowledge encompassing various domains, including employment regulations, workforce oversight, talent recruitment, employee interactions, compensation and benefits administration, and organizational advancement. Many HR practitioners have received formal education in HR-related fields and may hold professional certifications to validate their proficiency.

Additionally, HR commonly subscribes to established ethical codes of behavior and conduct, which are often established by professional organizations like the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) and the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). These codes serve as guiding principles for HR professionals, promoting ethical conduct and ensuring equitable employment practices. HR professionals also enjoy a degree of autonomy in their roles, particularly in functions such as managing employee relations, overseeing talent development, and shaping organizational growth. They shoulder the responsibility of upholding legal and ethical standards while making decisions that impact the workforce. Moreover, HR practitioners are compelled to engage in continuous learning and professional development to remain well-versed in the ever-evolving landscape of labor laws, industry best practices, and emerging trends. This unwavering commitment to ongoing education underscores the hallmark of a true profession.

5. Describe the professional identity of an HR practitioner.

**Answer:** The professional identity of an HR practitioner emerges from a blend of factors, encompassing their education, experience, values, and job responsibilities. Regarding their educational background, HR professionals typically receive formal training in HR-related domains. This education can span from undergraduate degrees in HR, business, or related fields to more advanced qualifications such as Master's degrees in HR Management or MBAs with an HR specialization. Many HR experts also pursue certifications like PHR (Professional in Human Resources) or SPHR (Senior Professional in Human Resources) to enhance their knowledge and validate their credentials. HR practitioners possess specialised expertise across various facets of HR, including employment law, talent acquisition, compensation and benefits, performance management, organisational development, and employee relations. This specialised knowledge equips them to tackle intricate HR challenges and provide valuable guidance to their organisations. Integrity and adherence to ethical standards are foundational to the professional identity of HR practitioners. They are entrusted with upholding ethical codes of conduct, emphasising fairness, and championing diversity and inclusivity in the workplace. Ethical decision-making is paramount, particularly when addressing sensitive matters such as employee relations and data privacy.

A dedication to continuous learning and ongoing professional development is integral to HR practitioners. They remain current with evolving HR trends, legislative changes, and best practices to deliver pertinent and effective solutions to their organisations. Effective communication and conflict resolution skills are central to HR's professional identity. HR professionals frequently mediate disputes, facilitate dialogue between employees and management, and cultivate an environment of open communication within the workplace. Furthermore, HR professionals bear the responsibility of ensuring their organisations adhere to labour laws, regulations, and industry standards. This encompasses managing issues related to equal employment opportunity, workplace safety, and employee rights. Many HR practitioners assume a strategic role within their organizations, aligning HR practices with overarching business strategies. They actively contribute to workforce planning, talent management, and organizational development, all geared towards the achievement of the organisation's objectives. In essence, the professional identity of an HR practitioner mirrors their role as custodians of the organisation's most invaluable asset: its workforce.

1. From your own perspective, how would you define HR?

HR refers to the department within an organisation tasked with managing and coordinating numerous tasks linked to human resources. It involves recruitment, selection, onboarding, training and development, performance management, employee relations, pay and benefits, and adherence to employment rules and regulations.

2. Based on the previous answer, why is HR misunderstood?

HR is a vast and complicated field and frequently suffers misunderstanding and false beliefs. This is as a result of poor communication, various functions, negative stereotypes, low visibility and varying practices.

3. Briefly illustrate your understanding of the term “’ profession”?

A profession is a calling or occupation that calls for specialised training, know-how, and experience in a given sector. It often entails the application of sophisticated and specialised knowledge to offer others assistance, direction, or answers. A dedication to moral principles, a code of conduct, and a sense of obligation to customers, society, or the profession itself define professions.

Formal education and training requirements, such as academic degrees, certifications, and licences, are frequently included in professions. They are directed by organisations or professional bodies that set norms for professional performance and competence. A wide range of disciplines, including medicine, law, engineering, accountancy, and teaching, might be included in a profession.

4. How does HR conform to your understanding of a ‘profession’?

By incorporating specialised knowledge, ethical standards, independent decision-making, ongoing learning, a service-oriented focus, and accountability, HR complies with the definition of a "profession." In order to meet the organization's demands for human capital, foster a pleasant workplace culture, and guarantee the success of the organisation as a whole, HR experts provide their skills.

5. Describe the professional identity of an HR practitioner

The professional identity of an HR practitioner encompasses the knowledge, skills, values, and behaviours that define their role and distinguish them within the field of Human Resources. It reflects their expertise, professional development, and commitment to ethical practices. Components such as expertise and knowledge, ethical standards, professional culture, problem solving, continuous learning and development etc contributes to the professional identity of an HR practitioner.

Sincerely

Abbas Alkhidir
PhD student
Business School
University of Sunderland
Director of Study: Dr Paul-Alan Armstrong