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**HRM and front line managers: the influence of role stress**


**Introduction**

Despite considerable research exploring the relationship between human resource management (HRM) and performance, the literature remains inconclusive about the process by which HRM has an impact on performance (Guest, 2011). Previous work has largely focused on the organizational level of analysis and underplayed the critical role of line managers (Brewster, Gollan and Wright, 2013). This is despite evidence that they act as key agents in the delivery of HRM and are highly influential in employee performance outcomes (Alfes, Truss, Soane, Rees and Gatenby, 2013; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; Hutchinson and Purcell, 2010; Gilbert, De Winne and Sels, 2011).Moreover, little is known about the human resources (HR) role and experiences of line managers.  This in in part due to previous research focusing on the problems associated with devolution, rather than exploring what influences line managers to make the decisions they do when enacting HRM (Becker and Gerhart, 1996; Brewster et al, 2013). Some studies have considered factors such as the leadership style of line managers (e.g. Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; Harney and Jordan, 2008; Hesselgreaves and Scholarios, 2014; **V**ermeeven, 2014), and their adjustment of HR policies to suit different work settings or for personal gains (Boxall and Purcell, 2011), but continue to neglect any detailed analysis of their HR role


In the framework of intended, actual and perceived HRM (Nishii and Wright, 2008) line managers are recognized as critical agents in the HRM process. Despite empirical studies citing line managers as a contributing factor in the gap between intended, implemented and perceived HRM (e.g. McGovern, Gratton, Hope-Hailey, Stiles and Truss, 1997; Gratton and Truss, 2003; Khilji and Wang, 2006; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; Snape and Redman, 2010; Hutchinson

and Purcell, 2010; Woodrow and Guest, 2014) little is known about what influences their implementation of HRM. There is a particular lack of focus on any detailed analysis of their HR role or associated role stress (Gilbert et al, 2011). Such role stress can manifest from contradictory, abstruse or onerous demands being made of the role holder (Orqvist and Wincent, 2006). Meanwhile, research has found that role stress is often associated with lower performance levels in the role holder (Showail, McLean Parks and Smith, 2013). As such, we argue that bringing a role theoretic framework to HRM research will help to clarify the relationship between line managers and their implementation of HRM to improve our understanding of the mediating factors between HRM and performance.

Furthermore, very few of the studies on line managers and HRM make any delineation between the hierarchies of management, meaning that front line managers (FLMs) have been overlooked in the HRM literature (Hutchinson and Purcell, 2010; Sanders and Frenkel, 2011; Teague and Roche, 2012). These managers are distinctive from line managers because they are the first level of management to whom only non-managerial employees report, rather than holding a more intermediary management position within an organization's hierarchy. As such, they are the "final frontier" in an organization's managerial structure for the implementation of HRM policy (Hales, 2005: 473) and play a critical role in both the implementation and effectiveness of HRM (Hutchinson and Purcell, 2010). The role of FLMs has long been accompanied by conflict and pressure (Roethlisberger, 1945; Patten, 1968; Child and Partridge, 1982; Hales 2006/7). Their unique position in the organizational hierarchy, acting as the broker between front line employees and the organization has been found to heighten their propensity for work role stress (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek and Rosenthal, 1964; Wong, DeSanctis and Staudenmayer, 2007). More recent research outlines how FLMs have experienced increases in their responsibilities and tasks with a commensurate decline in their quality of work (Townsend

and Russell, 2013). While the literature confirms that role stress undermines performance (e.g. Showail et al 2013; Kauppila, 2014), less is known about its effect on HRM. Thus, our argument, and contribution, is as follows. In bringing role stressors into HRM research we argue that if role stress is known to lower overall performance then FLMs' exposure to work role stress could undermine their ability to effectively perform one of their key responsibilities - HRM - and implement policy as intended. Therefore, it is imperative to more closely examine the impact of FLMs' role stress on their implementation of HRM. To explore this further, we interviewed FLMs working in the retail industry to study how their work role stressors may be a contributing factor to any variability between intended and implemented HRM.

The paper is structured as follows. A review of the existing literature on role theory, the devolution of HRM to line managers, and the context of front line management in the retail industry is presented. This is followed by an outline of the research methods and presentation of the findings. The article concludes with a discussion of these findings and our contribution, which is twofold. Firstly, we respond to calls in the literature for greater attention on the role of FLMs in the HRM process (e.g. Hutchinson and Purcell, 2010; Townsend, Wilkinson, Allan and Bamber, 2011; Townsend, Wilkinson and Allan, 2012). Secondly we employ a role-theoretic framework to explore what influences FLMs in their implementation of HRM because the link between role theory and HRM has, until now, remained relatively unexplored. In doing so, our study found that FLMs experience role stress from a variety of sources and respond by engaging in role-making and deviating from intended HRM policy. Consequently, we argue that FLMs' experiences of work role stressors challenge the notion that HRM is routinely implemented as intended. As such, the role stressors of FLMs are a contributing factor in the gap between intended and implemented HRM and should be further studied in future research as a potential mediating factor in the link between HRM and performance.

**A role-theoretic framework for the analysis of front line management and HRM**

Drawing on theoretical work on HRM, empirical work on line managers and HRM, and previous research on role stressors (e.g. Slattery, Selvarajan and Anderson, 2008) we argue that a role-theoretic framework will help to clarify the relationship between FLMs and their implementation of HRM and improve our understanding of the mediating factors between HRM and performance. Within the HRM literature there is both theoretical and empirical agreement that line managers are key agents in the HRM process and can play a role in the gap between intended and implemented HRM. However, only an emerging body of literature is focused on FLMs as a distinct category of management (e.g. Nehles, Riemsdijk, Kok and Looise, 2006; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; Teague and Roche, 2012; Townsend et al, 2011, 2012), with just two studies exploring notions of role stress and front line management (Hutchinson and Purcell, 2010; Gilbert et al, 2011). Hence, our study uses a role theoretic framework to analyse the relationship between FLMs' experiences of role stress and their implementation of HRM and any relationship between this and the gap between intended and implemented HRM.

Common across role theory literature is that a role is associated with expectations that generate behaviour to induce conformity (Biddle, 1986). This paper draws on organizational role theory which views organizations as systems of roles whereby a role is defined as comprising a set of normative expectations corresponding to the incumbent's position within the organization (Katz and Kahn, 1966; Biddle, 1986). Such a position involves interactions with individuals occupying other related positions who define the expectations of behaviour for the role holder and are referred to as 'role partners' (Merton, 1968). For FLMs we identify these role partners to include senior managers, HR professionals, co-workers and front line employees. Role

theory depicts how various features of an organizational role can expose an individual to stress so that when the expectations of the role holder are "conflicting, ambiguous, or overloading, the focal person will experience role stress" (Ortqvist and Wincent, 2006:399). The theory distinguishes between a variety of sources for role stress, including role conflict, role overload and role ambiguity (Katz and Kahn, 1966; Merton, 1968; Rizzo, House and Lirtzman 1970; Turner, 1978). Role overload occurs when there is an incompatibility between the volume of work and the time available to complete the work. Role conflict relates to inconsistencies in the expectations of role incumbents such that compliance with one expectation would make it difficult or impossible to fulfil other requirements of the role. Role ambiguity follows when there is little or no information about role expectations, or the role expectations lack clarity.

Role stress has been related to several negative performance outcomes including reduced levels of work commitment and overall willingness to make an effort (Anton, 2009); increased labour turnover and intention to quit (Hang-Yue, Foley and Loi, 2005); stress and frustration in the role (Deery, Iverson and Walsh, 2002; Tubre and Collins, 2000); lower job satisfaction and performance (Harris, Artis, Walters and Licata, 2006; Showail et al, 2013; Kauppila, 2014); and less confidence in decision-making (Rizzo et al, 1970). Structural role theory asserts that individuals accept such role stressors (Biddle, 1979, 1986), whereas process role theory contends that role holders engage in behaviour that defies the expectations placed upon them as a response to role stress (Turner, 1962). This behaviour has been termed role-making, or role renegotiation, and tends to correlate with the degree of discretion over how to accomplish work tasks whereby a higher level of job autonomy "enables workers to role make, to negotiate the expectations that role partners attempt to impose" (Troyer, Mueller and Osinsky, 2000:414). Related to HRM, empirical studies show that line managers have a significant degree of discretion in their HRM responsibilities (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007), which we

argue enables them to role-make their HR responsibilities when they experience conflicting, overloading or ambiguous expectations.

Previous work on HRM and line managers has implied that role stress can be a contributing factor to the problems associated with devolving HRM to the line, although this is often presented as an aside to the main analytical perspective so only tentative conclusions can be drawn. Role overload through organizational delayering, increased general workloads and time pressures of line managers have been presented as reasons for not fully implementing HRM as intended (McGovern et al, 1997; Hutchinson and Purcell, 2010; Gilbert et al, 2011). Role conflict has also been implicated in some studies with evidence of tensions between different role expectations (Hutchinson and Purcell, 2010). Role ambiguity has been found to occur where line managers lack institutional support and an effective HRM department to provide adequate training to develop their HR competencies, a clear definition of their HR role, or advice on managing the different expectations of their role partners (Renwick, 2003; McConville, 2006; Hutchinson and Purcell, 2010). Perceptual divergence between line managers and HR professionals has also been identified as having a negative impact on business performance (Maxwell and Watson, 2006).

While the literature alludes to line managers' role stressors influencing their implementation of HRM, there remains an inclination to treat line managers as a homogenous group without differences in hierarchy. The exceptions to this are the work of Hutchinson and Purcell (2010) and Gilbert et al (2011) and who use FLMs as a distinct category of management within a framework of role theory. However, Gilbert et al's (2011) study is limited to role ambiguity and role overload, excluding any consideration of role conflict. They examined how FLMs are affected by HR devolution and the impact of this on their perceptions of role ambiguity and role overload. What distinguishes our study from theirs is that they did not investigate the

converse relationship of how FLMs' role stressors may influence their implementation of HRM. Correspondingly, our study responds to their call for future research that studies the impact of FLMs' role stressors on their HR role effectiveness. We also use a qualitative interpretative research approach, which is in contrast to Gilbert et al's (2011) quantitative methods and regression analysis, and so brings a richness of data to our study. The work of Hutchinson and Purcell (2010), which focused on ward managers in the National Health Service (NHS) did find aspects of role conflict, ambiguity and overload influencing FLMs' implementation of HRM, but the NHS is a specific context and much of the recent research published on FLMs and HRM is also confined to the health sector (for example, Townsend et al, 2011, 2012; Woodrow and Guest, 2014). The need for contextual sensitivity is vital when exploring why individuals behave as they do and without research beyond the health sector on FLMs and HRM we remain limited in our knowledge of how FLMs deliver HRM. To address this, our study was conducted in the retail industry and so makes an empirical contribution by focusing on an industry that has received little attention in the line management-HRM literature to date.

**Front Line Managers and HRM in the Retail Industry**

The retail industry is the UK's largest private sector employer with many of its organizations operating on an international basis (Skillsmart, 2013). Yet, despite the significance of the industry to many countries, and its people-oriented nature, research on HRM in retailing is limited (Marchington, 1996; Grugulis, Bozhurt and Clegg, 2011). This paper investigates retail FLMs whose role has been identified as demanding significant HRM skills and expertise (Freathy and Sparks, 2000; Netemeyer, Maxham and Lichtentein, 2010; Grugulis et al, 2011). Consequently, FLMs can be regarded as critical to the effective delivery of HRM in retail organizations. In addition, the organizational position of retail FLMs means they act as

intermediaries between the corporate organization, senior management, HR professionals, front line employees, store operations, and customers. This exposes them to a myriad of role partners and such a boundary spanning role has been found to increase an incumbent's susceptibility to role stress (Troyer et al, 2000). Within a customer service environment this has been found to have a greater influence on employee performance than either skill, motivation, personal aptitude, or organizational factors (Churchill, Ford, Hartley and Walker, 1985). Added pressure emanates from corporate strategies of productivity and quality that are characteristic of the service sector (Korczynski, 2002). These are common retailer strategies that have been found to exacerbate work role stress for employees (Arnold, Flaherty, Voss and Mowen, 2009; Luria, Yagil and Gal, 2014). However, the literature lacks any clear conceptualization of how the role stressors of service positions affect organizational performance with no research conducted on HRM outcomes (Troyer et al, 2000). In addition, most studies focus on front line employees and neglect the impact on managers (e.g. Troyer et al, 2000; Deery et al, 2002; Arnold et al, 2009; Luria et al, 2014). Our study therefore makes a key contribution to the literature in using a role theoretic framework to focus on both managers and HRM in the retail industry.

Along with many service sector industries, we argue that FLMs working in retailing have a high propensity for role stress because of the interplay between the service context in which they work and their organizational position, which subjects them to a wide variety of role partners. In line with process role theory, we contend that FLMs' propensity for role stress, combined with their high level of both responsibility and discretion in the HRM process, can trigger role-making behaviours in their HRM tasks, thus influencing their implementation of HRM. For this reason we propose that FLMs' role stress could be a factor in the known gap between intended and implemented policy and as such, this relationship warrants further

investigation through empirical research. Our study focuses on the relationship between FLMs' experiences of role stress and their implementation of HRM using the following research questions:

1. What are the roles and responsibilities of FLMs working in the retail industry?

2. To what extent do FLMs in the retail industry experience role stress?

3. How does the role stress of FLMs influence their implementation of HRM?

**Methods**

The aim of our research was to examine the relationship between FLMs' experiences of role stress and their implementation of HRM. Case study research was conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of organizational and managerial processes (Neuman, 2006; Yin, 2014). Qualitative methods were used to generate rich data and complement the positivist approach of previous studies of either HRM-line management, or role stress (e.g. Watson, Maxwell and Farquharson, 2006; Gilbert et al, 2011; Teague and Roche, 2012; Vermeeren, 2014; Azmi and Mushtaq, 2015). Multiple case studies are often regarded as more robust, so a number of retail organizations were approached to participate. The participating companies were selected on the basis of operating multi-store retailing involving the superstore format. This facilitated some logic of replication related to size, organizational structure and operational demands. Nonetheless, the qualitative, interpretative methods used to address the research questions means that our study was designed to extend theory where existing theory has not been sufficiently formulated, rather than to draw statistical generalisations (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

Companies were approached via a postal invitation to the HR Director outlining the nature of the study, a request to conduct interviews with store level managers and access to relevant

company documentation. Only three organizations agreed to participate in the project which limited any pre-determined selection of cases to represent either diverse or extreme situations to extend theory, or similar contexts to produce literal replication and authenticate existing theory (Eisendhardt, 1989). The case study organizations operated in two distinct retailing sectors, Groceryco and Superco were in the grocery market, while Homeco was in the home improvement sector. The organizations were major employers concentrated in the superstore sector of retailing, which enabled an opportunity for literal replication, while the differences in sectors offered the prospect of contrasting results for theory expansion. For each case study organization, two stores were selected for data collection to allow for comparability between stores within the same organization and increase validity by collecting data from a greater number of similar sources. The selection of individual stores was agreed through negotiation with the initial gatekeeper for the project, but was essentially determined by the organization.

Both Superco and Homeco were considered the top performers for their respective retail sectors in terms of market share, with Groceryco held third position in the grocery sector. Therefore, all three organizations were significant players in the retail industry and representative of large scale retail operations with corporate strategies of productivity and quality. The data was collected using face-to-face interviews with a selection of managers at Head Office, Regional and store level operations including both operational and HR professionals.

A description of each case study can be found in Table 1, which also details the number of respondents in each case study. A total of 75 semi-structured interviews were conducted with managers, of which 41 were with FLMs. Given how little is known about the HR role and experiences of FLMs (Hutchinson and Purcell, 2010), this paper focuses primarily on these managers, with insights from other interviewees used to cross-check and understand their

responses. Access was granted to all managers at store level and interviews were conducted over a fourteen-month period. All interviews were one-to-one with no other persons present and carried out by a sole researcher. A range of secondary sources including corporate websites and company documentation were also studied.

The interview questions covered a range of topics including organizational context, corporate strategies and policies, the HRM systems and processes, HRM policies, the role of HR professionals, the role of FLMs including their HR responsibilities, and FLMs' perceptions of role stress. Without access to employees, our study could not readily explore Purcell and Hutchinson's (2007) notion of 'people management' so we did not include questions about leadership behaviours or organizational climate. Similarly, we did not explore factors such as motivation, HR competencies or individual personality because the qualitative nature of the study did not facilitate controlling for such factors, notwithstanding role stress having been identified as having a greater influence on individual performance in this type of role than other such factors (Churchill et al, 1985). Interviews were recorded, transcribed and then analysed using a thematic analysis in line with the topics identified above. Further analysis of the data was then conducted to identify FLMs' experiences of role stress categorised into role overload, role ambiguity and role conflict and the extent to which this encouraged or impeded their implementation of HRM.

**INSERT TABLE 1 HERE**

*Superco Case Study*

Superco operates in the grocery retail sector with over 7000 stores across 12 countries. This research study is focused on their UK operations, which has over 700 superstores. The

company has a customer service centred strategy alongside aggressive cost reduction goals centred on improved productivity and efficiency, which were operationalized through comprehensive performance targets. The company had recently undertaken a restructuring exercise which halved the levels of management hierarchy within stores. Section Managers functioned as FLMs and each was responsible for an individual department acting as the first level of management to whom front line staff reported. Section Managers reported to a Senior Management team comprising of General Manager, Customer Services Manager, Fresh Foods Trading Manager, Ambient Trading Manager, and Human Resources Manager.

*Groceryco Case Study*

Groceryco operates in the grocery retail sector with over 400 stores in the UK. The company has a strategy positioned around a commitment to customer service and a reduction in costs with a goal to improve average sales by 20 per cent while making £60 million cost savings over a period of three years. Within each store a senior management team oversaw operations, supported by Controllers who took responsibility for individual departments. A recent restructure of store operations had resulted in the removal of up to three levels of store management hierarchy. For the purpose of this research study, Controllers were defined as the FLMs operating at the juncture between front line staff and the organization.

*Homeco Case Study*

Homeco operates in the decorative and DIY sector of multiple store retailing across 10 different countries, with 350 stores based in the UK. Homeco was expanding its operations through a store opening and refurbishment programme in conjunction with improvements to operational efficiency and customer service. The company was struggling to maintain profitability after the recent recession, while experiencing significant HR challenges of employee retention and

performance, although competitive pressures appeared to be less demanding in this sector. At store level, different organizational structures were applied to different store formats. In our study, Store E was classified as a 'Traditional' store with three levels of management and Supervisors taking the role of FLMs. Store F was termed a 'Renewal' store that had undergone renovation and only had two levels of management – a senior store management team and Department Managers, who for the purpose of our study are defined as the FLMs, being the first reporting line for front line staff.

**Findings**

To address the first research question, FLMs were asked about their role set and responsibilities. FLMs across all three organizations had significant HRM responsibilities as well as being responsible for the delivery of customer service targets and management of financial budgets. They acted as the interface between the organization, HR professionals, and front line employees, as well as dealing directly with customers. In terms of HRM, their role covered the recruitment & selection of new staff, performance management and staff appraisals, on-the-job training, staff scheduling, workload allocation, and staffing budgets. Both Superco and Groceryco employed in-store HR managers, but the recent restructuring exercise had re-designated this role to include Duty Manager with very little operational time devoted to HRM. This prompted many in-store HR managers at Groceryco to resign:

> Those who were doing the job because they wanted to progress specifically in personnel weren't happy when the re-structuring happened. What it meant was that the job became more retail oriented…we lost a lot of HR managers who left for personnel-specific jobs, often with non-retail companies." (Store HR Manager, Store D, Groceryco).

The in-store HR managers at Superco and Groceryco undertook responsibility for HR tasks which tended to be more centralised including induction training, delivery of training programmes such as equality and diversity, pay and rewards, grievance and disciplinary procedures. Unlike Superco and Groceryco, Homeco did not employ in-store HR managers, which left FLMs with a significant role in the implementation of HR policies at store level:

> We don't really get much support or direction from the company and you can't really keep asking them up at Head Office for advice on everything so we just get on with it as best we can. (FLM, Store E, Homeco)

Standardised HR policy areas at Homeco included recruitment methods, pay and reward, grievance and disciplinary procedures, equality policies and some training programmes. For any HR advice or support FLMs had to consult with their own line manager or contact the HR department at Head Office. HR professionals across the three organizations were able to confirm their minimal involvement in the HR operations of stores:

> We don't really associate directly with store level managers. We only really get involved if there seems to be an obvious problem or something is brought to our attention. (HR Regional Officer, Groceryco)

While there was evidence of centrally designed HR systems with associated processes and policies, particularly in the two grocery retailers, FLMs had a demonstrable degree of autonomy in their role. As such, they were key players in the HRM process in each of the case study organizations.


### Role stress, FLMs and HRM

FLMs reported experiences of role stress associated with the demands inherent within their jobs and the organizational context in which they operated. Therefore, to explore our second and third research questions a closer examination between the role stress of FLMs and their

implementation of HRM was conducted for each source of role stress: role overload, role conflict and role ambiguity.

*Role overload*

Role overload through an increased remit of overall responsibilities caused FLMs to cite a lack of time as a factor that limited their ability to fully implement their HR responsibilities:

> I simply have too many staff and too much to do. How am I supposed to sit down with each and every one of my employees on a regular basis to map out their performance and plan their development? I just can't do it, so I don't do it. (FLM, Store B, Superco)

The recent downsizing exercises at Groceryco and Superco had increased spans of control, which caused a direct increase in FLMs' workload with experiences of role overload being reported. FLMs at Homeco had smaller spans of control and were less likely to cite experiences of role overload.

Compounding the increased spans of control at Superco and Groceryco was a change in role of the in-store HR manager, which subsequently placed a greater onus on FLMs to deliver HRM:

> Now that the HR Managers don't really do much HRM and aren't really any more knowledgeable than me anyway, then I'm drowning in HR stuff with not enough time to do it all. (FLM, Store D, Groceryco)

Some FLMs expressed their frustration about the impact of role overload on their ability to effectively carry out their HR responsibilities:

> Since the restructuring my job has become a joke. I just can't get everything done so something has to give and that tends to be the HR stuff as it doesn't get measured and isn't so closely monitored. It is frustrating because I want to be a good manager and I

try my best, but I just can't do everything that's expected of me unless I work 24/7. (FLM, Store D, Groceryco)

I'm not willing to work longer hours myself in order to properly do all my staff appraisals, development plans and work to the other policies such as scheduling and work life balance. I already work ridiculously long hours. (FLM, Store A, Superco)

Our findings show how a combination of organizational restructuring, increased general workloads and subsequent time pressures for FLMs were related to perceptions of role overload.

### *Role conflict*

FLMs experienced conflict in their role caused by the tension between delivering high levels of customer service at the same time as achieving significant operational efficiencies. This had a considerable impact on employee resourcing activities such as workforce planning, staff scheduling and workload allocation:

We're supposed to give all sorts of advanced notice of a change in shift pattern, think about work-life balance and all that, but the truth is that I can't deliver on my targets if I stick to those policies. I'll always try and accommodate what my staff need, but at the end of the day the needs of the business come first. (FLM, Store B, Groceryco)

Role conflict was also cited as a reason for gaps between intended and implemented equality policy at Groceryco. One store had an older age profile of cashiers and while these employees offered a high level of customer service they did not deliver the speed of throughput required at the checkouts, causing the store to miss its performance targets:

The older ones are going as fast as they physically can, although they do tend to stop and chat to customers a lot. But then they're giving a really good level of service so you're asking them to sacrifice service for speed. It doesn't add up to the grand customer service pledges the company makes, but I'm the one left to manage that problem so I've decided that it's best I avoid recruiting any more older workers now – I just can't hit my targets otherwise. (FLM, Store D, Groceryco)

Another source of role conflict for FLMs was evident at Superco and prompted by Head Office's preference for full time employees to deliver the customer service strategy, which FLMs claimed made it impossible to meet their staffing budgets. Therefore, they continued to rely heavily on a part time workforce to better manage costs and ensure flexibility in the resourcing of their department, despite this being contrary to central policy.

Experiences of role conflict amongst FLMs seemed largely attributable to corporate strategies focused on maximising customer service within a context of declining resources, which became a factor in FLMs' willingness to fully implement all HR policies:

I have greater HR responsibilities at the same time as more staff to manage, lower budgets, longer opening hours and higher performance targets. While I don't dispute the value of equality, work-life balance, appraisals and training I just can't do it justice because I wouldn't be able to meet my targets if I did. (FLM, Store B, Superco)

Where FLMs believed that a HR policy would conflict with the achievement of tangible performance targets they were less committed to implementing such policies as intended:

It's the needs of the business and my targets that count. As much as I want to do the best by my staff it doesn't add up to meeting my targets. Something has to give and quite often it means cutting corners on the HR stuff. (FLM, Store A, Superco)

Instead FLMs re-negotiated their HR responsibilities where they had greatest discretion to do so and were less likely to be discovered by senior management:

> Officially we're not supposed to use overtime in the store because there's a complete ban, but unofficially yes we do use it. (FLM, Store F, Homeco)

> A lot of what I do is unofficial with regards to HR. But I'm not checked up on too much and as long as I keep within the staffing budgets no one seems to ask any questions. At the end of the day the company is here to make money so my job is to make sure that they do. (FLM, Store C, Groceryco)

Role conflict was cited more frequently as a source of role stress for FLMs working in the two grocery retailers, and although not completely absent at Homeco it seemed less of an issue, possibly because the organization was pursuing a less aggressive strategy of cost reduction and customer service.

### *Role Ambiguity*

FLMs who described a lack of clarity in organizational strategy, or limited guidance and support in their HRM role, were more likely to talk about feelings of role ambiguity:

> I've no idea what they really want us to do as it changes all the time. The company is really short sighted and so only ever follows trends, but that makes it difficult for us to know what's important and should be prioritised. (FLM, Store E, Homeco)

Role ambiguity was cited more frequently by FLMs working at Homeco, where a lack of centralized control led them to describe the culture as "informal", "very laid back", and "different according to different stores". In line with this, the devolvement of HRM to FLMs was accompanied by few policies or clear processes, which while giving FLMs a high level of discretion in how they executed their HR responsibilities, also compromised their ability to

consistently implement HRM as intended. Consequently, there were reports of FLMs' HR decisions contravening formal organizational policy. Examples included a central HR policy to increase labour flexibility through the employment of part timers, but one FLM reported:

> We're under no pressure to employ part timers over full timers or anything. It is all down to the personal preference of the manager. (FLM, Store E, Homeco)

Adherence to the company's equality opportunity policy was also nominal:

> The least flexible workers are women with children and it's a difficult decision when you are faced with a very capable person who can do the job well, but can't offer you the flexibility you need. If you do offer them the job you usually end up shooting yourself in the foot so I generally steer clear of working mums. (FLM, Store E, Homeco)

The policy of using temporary contracts to cover seasonal fluctuations in trade was also undermined at store level:

> They should theoretically work, but the problem is we can't get people to apply so we just find ways round it like offering permanent contracts and hoping that a lot of them will leave quickly as we tend to have such a high labour turnover. (FLM, Store E, Homeco)


A lack of clarity in FLMs' HR role and in-store support for HR resulted in variability in HR practice not just between intended and implemented HRM, but also across different Homeco stores:

> Employment decisions depend very much on the store managers…..so it's all different depending on which store you're working in. (FLM, Store E, Homeco)

This left FLMs unsure of their HR decision making competencies:

I've no idea how we come to a decision when we're interviewing for staff.  It does worry me a bit because how can we be sure that we're being fair and abiding by the law, but we've not got into trouble so far so I can only assume that we're doing OK. (FLM, Store E, Homeco)

FLMs at Superco and Groceryco were less likely to mention role ambiguity as a cause of work role stress and seemed clearer about their role expectations:

I don't think HR is rocket science – I don't need lots of guidance or help. I've had some training, which has helped, but I know what I'm supposed to do.  It's more that I don't have the time to do it as HR, but the job is stressful enough without trying to follow HR policies to the letter. (FLM, Store C, Groceryco)

In both these organizations FLMs had budgets and targets that were clearly aligned to corporate strategy and tightly monitored by Head Office. FLMs also had in-store HR managers to seek clarification of policy and process, which may have been a contributing factor to lower perceptions of role ambiguity.

**Discussion**

Our research responds to calls in the literature to consider FLMs as a distinct category of management and more closely examine their role in the HRM process. Our findings show how the process of HRM in each of the case study organizations reflected the model of intended and actual HRM (Nishii and Wright, 2008) and confirms the critical role of FLMs in the implementation of HRM. The HR responsibilities of these managers covered a wide range of areas including recruitment & selection, performance management and appraisals, training and development, staff scheduling, and workload allocation. In addition to their HR role, FLMs also had considerable customer service and budgetary responsibilities and were accountable to

a wide range of role partners, including front line employees, co-workers, senior managers, HR professionals and customers, thus confirming the range of HR roles and wide remit of FLMs' responsibilities found in previous studies (e.g. Hutchinson and Purcell, 2010; Townsend et al, 2011; Townsend and Russell, 2013).

Further analysis of our data identified a variety of work role stressors for FLMs. Role overload was primarily caused by organizational strategies that reduced resources and increased responsibilities through larger spans of control, reduced staffing budgets, intensified customer service requirements, and increased HRM duties. Role conflict was triggered by corporate strategies of productivity and quality that demanded FLMs delivered high levels of customer service and implemented HRM policies whilst concurrently securing cost savings and increased productivity. Previous research has found that such strategies exacerbate work role stress for front line employees (Arnold et al, 2009; Troyer et al, 2000; Luria et al, 2014), whereas our study establishes that FLMs are as susceptible as their employees to role overload and conflict. FLMs also experienced role ambiguity citing a lack of clarity in organizational strategy and limited support from HR professionals. This was particularly apparent at Homeco where FLMs did not benefit from in-store HR support and complained of a lack of clear HR systems and processes. These findings confirm the importance of the context of HR devolution as found in previous research (e.g. Maxwell and Watson, 2006; McConville, 2006), especially clear organizational strategies combined with effective and supportive HR professionals to reduce experiences of role ambiguity for FLMs.

In establishing the role stressors of FLMs in our study we sought to explore how this influenced their implementation of HRM. We found that work role stress was a contributing factor in variability between intended and implemented HRM in each of the case study organizations.

This was attributable to FLMs role-making in their HR responsibilities, which was facilitated by high discretion combined with a lower emphasis on productivity related outcomes in their HR tasks (in comparison to other responsibilities in their role set, such as budget management and customer service provision). While the literature already identifies how a role holder's more discretionary expectations offer greater opportunity for role-making (Troyer et al, 2000), this has not previously been empirically proven for FLMs and HRM. In establishing that FLMs do not always accept the role stressors associated with their organizational position, but instead renegotiate the expectations imposed upon them, our study shows that process role theory is relevant for this category of management and their implementation of HRM.

The final contribution of our research study is how FLMs' responses to work role stressors differed according to the source of role stress. Role overload compelled FLMs to enact their role set according to the resources available to them, with a lack of time commonly cited as a reason to neglect some HR tasks. Hence, role overload impeded their ability to implement HR as intended. Where strategies of quality and productivity provoked role conflict, FLMs prioritised their tangible and measureable responsibilities, which often lead them to disregard any longer term, high-road HRM policies. Such responses were facilitated by FLMs' autonomy in their HR role with no tangible redress from either senior management or HR professionals when they did deviate from intended HR policies. A lack of clarity in organizational strategy and limited support for FLMs' in their HRM tasks brought about reports of role ambiguity, which was particularly apparent at Homeco. Consequently, there were considerable inconsistencies in HR practice across different Homeco stores and a lower level of confidence amongst FLMs in their HR role. Role ambiguity left FLMs unsure as to how the organization wanted HR to be implemented, or what to prioritise, compromising their ability to implement HRM as intended.

In presenting our findings we acknowledge that our research has certain limitations. Firstly, the study is carried out in only one industry setting and adopts a qualitative approach. It is therefore limited in its applicability to other industries and sectors. Also, in focusing on collecting data from managers and not employees, our research cannot explore the impact of FLMs' role stress on 'experienced HRM', or any more tangible measurements of performance.

**Conclusions**

Despite the critical role of line managers in the implementation of HRM, the link between role theory and HRM has until now remained relatively unexplored, both theoretically and empirically. In addition, FLMs have been largely neglected within the HRM-performance literature with little detailed analysis of their role or their contribution to the gap between intended and implemented HRM. We have argued that it is imperative to explore the relationship between FLMs and HRM to enhance our understanding of the mediating mechanisms between HRM and performance. Through drawing on role theory we can improve our understanding of this process that is also more reflective of practice.

Our study confirms the critical role that FLMs play in the HRM process and provides additional insights into the HRM process whereby FLMs operate within HR systems, but have a relatively high level of responsibility and discretion in their HR role. By conducting a detailed analysis of their HR role and studying what influences their implementation of HRM we have been able to explore the role stressors of FLMs and the impact of these on HRM. Our findings show how their experiences of role stress challenge any notion that HRM is routinely implemented as intended. In doing so, we extend the work of Gilbert et al (2011) by using qualitative methods to provide greater insight into the complex nature of the FLMs' role and the consequences of

this for HR effectiveness. We present how the role stress experienced by FLMs in the retail industry influences their implementation of HRM and typically undermines their HR role effectiveness.

Our study highlights how the organizational context is a major influencing factor with FLMs working in the service sector juggling a myriad of role partners and corporate strategies that demand both productivity and quality. Consequently, any study of the HRM-performance link should take account of the organizational context in which HR processes are operating. Our study also makes a clear distinction between different sources of role stress and how these produce different responses from FLMs with a range of consequences for the implementation of HRM. Role overload and conflict often brought about a renegotiation, or even total neglect, of more intangible or costly HR policies, whereas role ambiguity challenged their ability to consistently and confidently implement HRM policies. Nevertheless, all sources of role stress for FLMs tended to result in variability between intended and implemented HRM.

In using a role theoretic framework to analyse the relationship between FLMs' experiences of role stress and their implementation of HRM, our work has brought together some of the previously disparate studies of line managers and HRM. These alluded to role stress as a factor in problems associated with devolving HRM to the line, but the omission of a role theoretic framework has meant that few definitive conclusions on the influence of role stress on HRM can be drawn from their findings. In bringing role theory and role stressors into HRM research our study shows how the role stress of FLMs is related to the gap between intended and implemented HRM because these managers 'role-made' their HR responsibilities. Consequently, we argue that FLMs' role stressors make a contribution to the gap between intended and implemented HRM and are a potentially mediating factor in the link between

HRM and performance. Hence, we propose that role theory can make a valuable contribution to the literature on line managers, HRM and performance.

The implications of our work are that future research needs to examine the relationship between different hierarchies of management, role stress and HRM in a variety of organizational contexts for a more nuanced understanding of how role-theoretic mechanisms are linked to the gap between intended and implemented HRM. Such research also needs to capture employee experiences of HRM to establish the link between role stress and employee outcomes to more clearly identify the relationship between role stress, HRM and performance. We suggest that future research should consider the interplay between role stress and other potentially influencing firm level factors, such as organizational climate and HR systems, or individual factors such FLMs' leadership behaviours, HR competencies, motivation and personality to develop a more robust, empirically driven theory around the process by which HRM has an impact on performance. For example, recent work has drawn on the Ability, Motivation and Opportunity (AMO) model to explain the effectiveness of line managers' HRM implementation (e.g. Bos-Nehles, Van Riemsdijk and Looise, 2013). Future research that explores the role stressors of FLMs within an AMO framework could add greater insights and facilitate a distinction between role stress and the ability, motivation and opportunities of FLMs as contributing factors in the gap between intended and implemented HRM. We could then more confidently determine if increased HR training of FLMs and subsequent improved HR competencies might ameliorate role stress and improve the conformity between intended, implemented and actual HRM.

The practical implications of our study show that increasing expectations and demands on FLMs influence their ability or willingness to implement HRM as intended. However, we

acknowledge that to simply suggest that organizations reduce the demands they place on FLMs, or put greater emphasis on HRM implementation over output targets, would be somewhat naive. Yet, our research does show how FLMs would benefit from more support and clarity in terms of both organizational strategy and their HR role. Support from HR professionals appears to be a pre-requisite to generating the required behaviours amongst line managers. Consequently, organizations need to improve the support, training and development of FLMs' HR competencies, as well as the relationship between HR professionals and FLMs, to engender greater commonality between different role partners, enable FLMs to perform better in their HR role, and increase the synergy between intended and implemented HRM.

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