

DECENTERING WESTERN HRM: AN INDIGENOUS EPISTEMOLOGY APPROACH TO HUMAN RESOURCE PRACTICES

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Abstract

The dominance of Western human resource management (HRM) frameworks has long shaped organizational practices globally, often promoting standardized, efficiency-driven approaches grounded in individualism and rationality. However, increasing cultural diversity and globalization have exposed the limitations of these universal models, particularly in non-Western contexts where local values, traditions, and social structures differ significantly. This study explores how indigenous epistemologies can serve as an alternative foundation for HRM, offering more contextually relevant and culturally embedded practices. Using a conceptual and interpretive qualitative approach, the research synthesizes insights from HRM literature, ethnographic studies, and indigenous knowledge systems. The findings highlight that indigenous approaches emphasize relationality, community orientation, and holistic well-being, which can enhance employee engagement and organizational effectiveness. The study also identifies key challenges, including institutional resistance and the difficulty of integrating indigenous and modern HR practices. A conceptual framework is proposed to illustrate how culturally aligned HRM practices can improve organizational outcomes. The article contributes to the discourse on decolonizing management knowledge and advancing pluralistic approaches to HRM. It concludes that integrating indigenous epistemologies is essential for developing inclusive, adaptive, and sustainable HR practices in diverse organizational contexts.

Keywords: *Indigenous epistemology; human resource management; cultural diversity; decolonizing HRM; context-specific practices*

INTRODUCTION

The field of human resource management (HRM) has long been shaped by Western theories and practices that emphasize efficiency, rationality, and standardized systems. These models, developed primarily in North America and Europe, have been widely adopted across global organizations as best practices (Budhwar et al., 2018). As a result, Western HRM frameworks have become dominant in both academic literature and organizational application. They often prioritize individual performance, formal structures, and measurable outcomes. While these approaches have contributed to organizational effectiveness in many contexts, they are not universally applicable. Their global diffusion has led to the assumption that HRM practices can be standardized across cultures (Anderson et al., 2024). However, this assumption increasingly overlooks the complexity of diverse cultural environments.

At the same time, there is a growing recognition of cultural diversity in management and organizational studies. Scholars and practitioners are increasingly questioning the relevance of one-size-fits-all approaches in a globalized world (Wickert et al., 2024). Organizations operating across different cultural contexts encounter varying values, norms, and social structures that influence employee behavior and expectations. This has led to a shift toward more context-sensitive and culturally embedded management practices. The recognition of diversity highlights the importance of understanding local knowledge systems and practices. It also emphasizes that effective HRM must be aligned with the cultural realities of the workforce (Cseh & Crocco, 2020). Consequently, there is a need to move beyond purely Western-centric perspectives.

Despite this growing awareness, a significant problem remains in the continued reliance on universal HRM models. These models often fail to account for the social, cultural, and historical contexts of non-Western societies. In many cases, the application of Western HRM practices can lead to misalignment, reduced effectiveness, and unintended consequences (Houdek, 2023). For example, practices that emphasize individual achievement may conflict with collectivist cultural values. Similarly, standardized performance systems may not resonate with local understandings of work and relationships. This limitation highlights the inadequacy of universal approaches in addressing the needs of diverse organizational contexts. It also raises concerns about cultural bias and the marginalization of indigenous knowledge systems (F. Cooke et al., 2020). Addressing these limitations is essential for creating more inclusive and effective HRM practices.

In response to these challenges, this article aims to explore how indigenous epistemologies can reshape HR practices and contribute to more contextually relevant management approaches. Indigenous epistemologies emphasize knowledge systems rooted in local culture, traditions, and community relationships. By integrating these perspectives, organizations can develop HR practices that are more aligned with the values and expectations of their workforce. The article seeks to examine how such approaches can enhance employee engagement, organizational effectiveness, and sustainability. It also aims to contribute to the broader discourse on decolonizing management knowledge. By bridging Western and indigenous perspectives, the study offers a more holistic understanding of HRM. Ultimately, the goal is to promote a more inclusive and culturally responsive approach to human resource management.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Western HRM Paradigm

The Western HRM paradigm is grounded in theories developed primarily in industrialized economies, particularly in North America and Europe. These frameworks are influenced by classical management theories, economic rationalism, and organizational efficiency models. At their core, Western HRM practices assume that organizations operate best when processes are structured, measurable, and aligned with strategic goals (Schotter et al., 2021). Key functions such as recruitment, performance management, and compensation are designed around formal systems and standardized procedures. The emphasis is on maximizing productivity and aligning employee performance with organizational objectives. These practices are often supported by quantitative metrics and data-driven decision-making. As a result, Western HRM has become widely institutionalized as the dominant approach in global organizations (S. B. Banerjee, 2021).

A defining feature of Western HRM is its emphasis on rationality, individualism, and standardization. Rationality is reflected in the use of formal rules, objective performance measures, and systematic decision-making processes. Individualism is evident in practices that focus on personal achievement, merit-based rewards, and individual accountability (Ali et al., 2025). Standardization ensures consistency across organizational processes, enabling scalability and control. While these characteristics can enhance efficiency, they may not align with the values of all cultural contexts. In collectivist societies, for example, group harmony and shared responsibility may be more important than individual performance. Similarly, rigid standardization may overlook local nuances and cultural practices (Bruton et al., 2021). These limitations highlight the need to critically examine the assumptions underlying Western HRM.

Critique of Universalism in HRM

The assumption of universal applicability in HRM has been increasingly challenged in the context of globalization and cultural diversity. Universalism suggests that management practices developed in one context can be effectively applied across different cultural and institutional environments. However, research has shown that HRM practices are deeply embedded in social, cultural, and historical contexts. When Western HRM models are applied in non-Western settings, they may fail to produce the intended outcomes (Malik et al., 2022). Differences in values, communication styles, and social norms can significantly influence how employees perceive and respond to these practices. As a result, universal models may lack relevance and effectiveness in diverse contexts. This has led to a growing call for more context-specific and culturally sensitive approaches to HRM (F. L. Cooke et al., 2019). In addition to issues of applicability, universal HRM models are often criticized for cultural bias and contextual mismatch. Western frameworks tend to reflect the values and assumptions of the societies in which they were developed, such as individualism and market-oriented thinking. When these models are imposed on non-Western contexts, they can marginalize local knowledge systems and practices (Peretz & Knappert, 2021). This creates a form of epistemological dominance, where Western perspectives are prioritized over indigenous ways of knowing.

Such bias can lead to misunderstandings, reduced employee engagement, and ineffective management practices. Furthermore, contextual mismatch can result in resistance from employees who perceive these practices as incompatible with their cultural values (Hack-Polay *et al.*, 2020). Addressing these challenges requires a more inclusive approach that recognizes and integrates diverse perspectives.

Indigenous Epistemology

Indigenous epistemology refers to systems of knowledge that are rooted in the traditions, cultures, and lived experiences of local communities. Unlike Western epistemologies, which often prioritize objectivity and abstraction, indigenous knowledge systems emphasize relational, holistic, and context-specific understanding. Knowledge is often transmitted through oral traditions, storytelling, and experiential learning rather than formalized documentation (AL-NAKEEB & GHADI, 2024). These epistemologies are deeply connected to the social and cultural fabric of communities, reflecting their values, beliefs, and ways of life. They prioritize interconnectedness between individuals, communities, and the environment. As a result, indigenous epistemology offers a fundamentally different perspective on knowledge and management (Ojha & Venkateswaran, 2023). It provides valuable insights into how organizations can operate in culturally meaningful ways.

A key characteristic of indigenous epistemology is its grounding in local culture, tradition, and community relationships. Decision-making processes often involve collective input and consensus, reflecting the importance of social harmony and shared responsibility. Learning is viewed as a continuous and communal process, rather than an individual pursuit (Murphy, 2023). Additionally, indigenous approaches often integrate spiritual and ethical dimensions into organizational practices. These perspectives challenge the dominant assumptions of Western HRM and offer alternative ways of understanding work and management. By incorporating indigenous knowledge systems, organizations can develop HR practices that are more culturally aligned and inclusive (Horwitz & Ronnie, 2021). This approach not only enhances organizational effectiveness but also supports the preservation and recognition of diverse knowledge systems.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a conceptual and interpretive qualitative research design to explore how indigenous epistemologies can inform and reshape human resource management practices. Given the theoretical and context-sensitive nature of the topic, a conceptual framework approach is used to integrate insights from multiple disciplines, including HRM, anthropology, and cultural studies. The research draws on a diverse range of sources, including academic literature, ethnographic studies, and indigenous knowledge materials, to ensure a rich and nuanced understanding. Source selection is guided by relevance to HRM practices, cultural contexts, and indigenous epistemological perspectives. By incorporating both scholarly and context-based knowledge, the study aims to bridge theoretical and practical insights. This approach allows for a deeper exploration of how cultural values and traditions influence HR practices. As a result, the study provides a holistic and contextually grounded perspective on HRM.

The analytical approach is based on thematic and interpretive synthesis, which involves identifying key patterns, concepts, and relationships across the selected sources. This method enables the integration of diverse perspectives into a coherent framework that highlights the role of culture, community, and relational values in HRM. However, the study is subject to certain limitations. The context-specific nature of indigenous knowledge systems means that findings may not be easily generalizable across all settings. Additionally, the reliance on secondary and interpretive data may introduce subjectivity in analysis. Variations in cultural practices and interpretations can also affect the consistency of findings. Despite these limitations, the methodology provides valuable insights into alternative approaches to HRM. It also offers a foundation for future empirical research that can further validate and expand upon these concepts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reframing HRM through Indigenous Epistemology

Reframing HRM through indigenous epistemology requires a fundamental shift away from universal, standardized models toward context-specific practices that reflect local cultural realities. Traditional Western HRM assumes that practices can be applied uniformly across different settings, but indigenous perspectives emphasize that knowledge and practices are deeply rooted in specific social and cultural contexts. This shift involves recognizing that effective HRM must be adapted to the values, traditions, and lived experiences of local communities (Xu, 2025). Organizations adopting this approach prioritize flexibility and responsiveness over rigid standardization. By doing so, they can design HR systems that are more relevant and meaningful to their workforce. This transition also

challenges the dominance of Western frameworks and encourages pluralism in management practices (Uslu & Özutku, 2025). Ultimately, moving toward context-specific HRM enhances organizational alignment and cultural relevance. A key aspect of this reframing is the emphasis on relational and holistic approaches to managing people. Indigenous epistemologies view individuals as interconnected with their communities, environment, and social networks. As a result, HR practices are designed to foster relationships, collaboration, and collective well-being rather than focusing solely on individual performance. Holistic approaches also consider emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions of work, which are often overlooked in Western models (Khassawneh et al., 2025). This perspective encourages organizations to view employees not just as resources but as integral members of a broader community. By incorporating relational values, organizations can build stronger trust and cohesion within teams. Such approaches also support long-term sustainability by aligning organizational goals with community well-being. Therefore, reframing HRM through indigenous epistemology promotes a more inclusive and human-centered approach (S. Banerjee, 2021).

Table 1. Reframing HRM: A Comparison of Western and Indigenous Epistemological Approaches

Dimension	Western HRM Approach	Indigenous Epistemology Approach	Outcomes/Implications
Knowledge Orientation	Universal, standardized models	Context-specific, culturally embedded knowledge	Greater relevance and alignment with local contexts
HRM Focus	Individual performance and efficiency	Relational, collective well-being	Stronger collaboration and team cohesion
Management Perspective	Rational, formal, and structured systems	Holistic, flexible, and adaptive approaches	Enhanced responsiveness and cultural sensitivity
View of Employees	Employees as resources or human capital	Employees as community members and social beings	Increased trust, engagement, and sense of belonging

The table 1 highlights a fundamental paradigm shift from traditional Western HRM models to indigenous epistemology-based approaches, emphasizing differences in knowledge orientation, management focus, and employee perception. While Western HRM relies on standardized, universal practices centered on individual performance and formal structures, indigenous approaches prioritize context-specific knowledge, relational dynamics, and holistic understanding of employees (F. Cooke et al., 2019). This contrast illustrates how indigenous epistemologies embed HR practices within cultural, social, and community contexts, leading to stronger alignment with local values. The table also shows that viewing employees as community members rather than mere resources fosters greater trust, engagement, and cohesion (Anderson et al., 2024). Additionally, the shift toward flexible and adaptive management enhances organizational responsiveness and inclusivity. Overall, the comparison underscores the limitations of one-size-fits-all models and the value of integrating culturally grounded approaches. It reinforces the idea that effective HRM must evolve toward more human-centered and contextually relevant practices (Wickert et al., 2024).

Indigenous HR Practices

Indigenous HR practices differ significantly from conventional approaches, particularly in areas such as recruitment. In many indigenous contexts, hiring decisions are influenced by community relationships, social networks, and shared values rather than purely formal qualifications. Recruitment processes may involve consultation with community leaders or consideration of an individual’s reputation within the community (Cseh & Crocco, 2020). This approach ensures that new hires are not only skilled but also aligned with the cultural and social expectations of the organization. It also strengthens social cohesion and trust within the workforce. By prioritizing relational factors, organizations can create a more harmonious and supportive work environment. However, such practices may challenge conventional notions of meritocracy and require careful integration with formal systems (Houdek, 2023). Training and development in indigenous contexts often emphasize experiential and collective learning rather than formal, classroom-based methods. Knowledge is typically transmitted through observation, participation, and shared experiences, reflecting the importance of community-based learning. This approach fosters practical skills and deep understanding, as employees learn by engaging directly with real-world situations (F. Cooke et al., 2020). Additionally, leadership in indigenous HR practices is grounded in values such as respect, responsibility, and shared accountability. Leaders are often seen as facilitators who guide and support rather than control. This form of leadership encourages participation and collective decision-making. By integrating these

practices, organizations can create more inclusive and culturally aligned HR systems. These approaches highlight the importance of aligning HR practices with local traditions and values (Schotter et al., 2021).



Figure 1. Double Radar Chart of Indigenous vs Conventional HR Practices

Cultural Embeddedness and HRM Effectiveness

Cultural embeddedness plays a critical role in enhancing the effectiveness of HRM practices. When HR systems are aligned with local values, norms, and traditions, they are more likely to be accepted and embraced by employees. This alignment ensures that practices resonate with employees' beliefs and expectations, leading to greater consistency between organizational policies and individual behaviors (S. B. Banerjee, 2021). For example, in collectivist cultures, HR practices that emphasize teamwork and community engagement are more effective than those focused solely on individual performance. Cultural embeddedness also reduces resistance to organizational initiatives, as employees perceive them as legitimate and relevant. By integrating local cultural elements, organizations can improve the effectiveness of their HR strategies (Ali et al., 2025). This approach highlights the importance of context in shaping organizational practices.

The impact of culturally embedded HRM extends to employee engagement and organizational performance. Employees who feel that their cultural identity is recognized and respected are more likely to be motivated and committed to their work. This sense of inclusion fosters higher levels of engagement, collaboration, and job satisfaction. In turn, these factors contribute to improved organizational outcomes, including productivity and innovation (Bruton et al., 2021). Additionally, culturally aligned HR practices can enhance organizational reputation and strengthen relationships with local communities. This creates a positive feedback loop, where organizational success reinforces cultural alignment. Therefore, cultural embeddedness is not only a matter of inclusivity but also a strategic advantage. It enables organizations to achieve sustainable performance in diverse contexts (Malik et al., 2022).

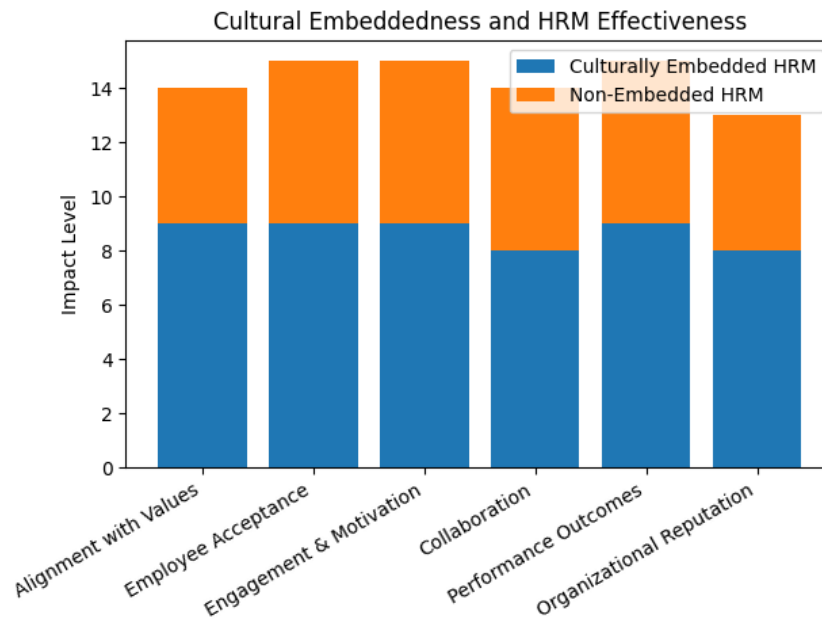


Figure 2. Double Stacked Bar Chart of Cultural Embeddedness and HRM Effectiveness: Embedded vs Non-Embedded HRM

Challenges in Decentering Western HRM

Despite its potential benefits, decentering Western HRM presents several challenges, particularly in terms of institutional resistance. Many organizations operate within global systems that prioritize standardized practices and efficiency. As a result, there may be reluctance to adopt alternative approaches that deviate from established norms. Managers and stakeholders may perceive indigenous practices as less formal or less effective, leading to resistance (F. L. Cooke et al., 2019). Additionally, multinational organizations often face pressure to maintain consistency across different regions, which can limit the adoption of context-specific practices. These challenges highlight the tension between global standardization and local adaptation. Overcoming institutional resistance requires a shift in mindset and greater openness to diverse perspectives. It also involves demonstrating the value of indigenous approaches in achieving organizational goals (Gerhart & Fang, 2005).

Another significant challenge is the difficulty of integrating indigenous and modern HR practices. While indigenous approaches offer valuable insights, they may not always align seamlessly with existing organizational systems. For example, community-based recruitment practices may conflict with formal hiring procedures, and experiential learning may be difficult to standardize (Anderson et al., 2024). Balancing these differences requires careful design and adaptation to ensure compatibility. Organizations must find ways to combine the strengths of both approaches without compromising their effectiveness. This may involve developing hybrid models that integrate traditional and modern practices (Houdek, 2023). However, achieving this balance can be complex and requires ongoing experimentation and learning. Despite these challenges, successful integration can lead to more inclusive and effective HR systems.

CONCLUSION

The analysis presented in this study underscores the importance of rethinking dominant HRM paradigms by incorporating indigenous epistemological perspectives. The findings demonstrate that Western HRM models, while effective in certain contexts, are not universally applicable and often fail to capture the cultural and relational complexities of non-Western environments. By reframing HRM through indigenous knowledge systems, organizations can develop practices that are more contextually relevant, culturally embedded, and socially inclusive. Indigenous approaches emphasize relationality, community, and holistic well-being, offering a valuable counterbalance to the individualistic and standardized orientation of traditional HRM. These perspectives not only enhance employee engagement and organizational effectiveness but also contribute to more sustainable and ethical management practices. As organizations continue to operate in increasingly diverse and globalized settings, embracing multiple knowledge systems becomes a strategic necessity rather than an optional consideration.

From a practical and theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to the growing discourse on decolonizing management knowledge and promoting pluralism in HRM. It highlights the need for organizations to move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches and adopt flexible, culturally responsive HR practices. However, the process of decentering Western HRM is not without challenges, including institutional resistance and the complexity of integrating diverse systems. Future research should focus on empirical validation of indigenous HR practices and explore hybrid models that combine the strengths of both Western and indigenous approaches. Additionally, greater attention should be given to the role of leadership and organizational culture in facilitating this transition. Ultimately, recognizing and valuing indigenous epistemologies can lead to more inclusive, adaptive, and resilient organizations. This shift is essential for aligning HRM practices with the realities of a culturally diverse world.

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