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Relational HR Practices in Malaysian SMEs: An Ethics of Care Perspective

Wee Chan Au[1] · Siân Stephens[2] · Pervaiz K. Ahmed[3]

Abstract
Adopting an Ethics of Care theoretical framework, this paper aims to investigate the way in which the owner-mangers (OMs) of small and medium-sized enterprises in Malaysia engage in human resource management. Based on in-depth interviews with 48 OMs, the findings show that HRM practices occur within the remit of management but are described by the managers in terms of relational obligations and cannot be fully accounted for using a strategic, instrumental, or critical lens. The present study highlights the importance of the caring attitudes of OMs who adopt a humanistic management approach, responding to the varied needs of their employees and the obligations which are inherent to relationships between humans.

Keywords HRM practices · Ethics of care · Small and medium-sized enterprises

Introduction

At the heart of human resource management (HRM) is a human encounter between the manager and the managed. To fully understand instances of HRM, we must pay attention to policies and practices, the people involved, and their relationships with each other. Mainstream theoretical perspectives allow us to understand HRM practices as strategic, or at least instrumental, endeavours (Greenwood, 2002; Guest, 2002) and offer insight into how firms can and do implement HRM strategies in the furtherance of their aims. On the other hand, critical responses to mainstream HRM tend to focus

on the impact of these policies and practices on employees (e.g., Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Zhang et al., 2013) and allow us to better understand HRM from the perspective of those being managed. These two approaches offer insight into the ways in which HRM can be used in furtherance of a firm's interests and insight into the consequences of this pursuit, but the emphasised distinction between the aims of the manager and that of the managed means that relationality inherent in the practice of HRM is left unexplored. In this paper, we propose applying an alternative theoretical framework, that of the ethics of care (EoC), to allow a re-direction of analytic attention to the relational aspects of HRM. In so doing, we hope to better understand instances of HRM practices which occur within the remit of management but are described by the managers in terms of relational obligations and cannot be fully accounted for using a strategic, instrumental or critical lens. Accordingly, we are motivated to seek answers to the following question 'What is the role of care arising from relationality in the HRM practices of SME owner-managers?' With this question we endeavour to explore the relational aspects of HRM by considering the caring disposition of those engaged in HRM.

In this paper, we apply an EoC lens to the findings of our work with owner-managers (OMs) of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Malaysia, examining the way in which the OMs provided HRM within their organisations. It was anticipated that the EoC perspective would add insight into the experiences of managers as

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carers in providing HRM within a relatively small team. Relational aspects of management are particularly important for SMEs as within smaller firms, it is likely that OMs are also responsible for most or all HRM for the firm, and that they have a direct, personal relationship with each member of staff. Within the EoC approach, ethicality can be identified in the feeling and attitudes of the one caring toward those with whom they have a relationship (Noddings, 2013). As such, our enquiry considers the experiences of OMs as the one-caring in virtue of their role as HRM providers to a small team.

In Emerging Market Economies such as Malaysia, where SMEs are the main source of employment (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2018), HRM practices will have the potential to positively contribute to the personal and professional development of a significant portion of the country's population (Croucher et al., 2013). It should also be noted that competitive emerging markets are less likely to have extensive employment protection legislation in place (Olney, 2013), which means the OMs of SMEs have significant discretion in the extent to which they provide for the rights of their employees. Therefore, the personal relationships between OMs and employees may have a significant role to play in the way in which employees are cared for at work. Drawing on data collected through qualitative interviews with 48 OMs, we present their experiences of caring and concern for their employee's work-life balance and wellbeing. While it is evident that the OMs are mindful of the impact of a caring approach on the success of their business, the accounts offered are not of purely instrumental HRM. Nor are they instances of soft HRM, which is strategic in that it is adopted to achieve specific business outcomes. Instead, it is suggested here that relationality between manager and employees produce the 'pre-act consciousness' (Noddings, 2013) of care, which infuses the caring actions of their HRM practices with an ethical dimension. This insight adds depth to our understanding of HRM as it allows us to recognise better the reality that HRM is an inherently human-centric practice with an ethical aspect. While we present these findings in the context of the HRM literature and aim to address a gap in extant research, particularly in the conception of HRM as either instrumental or 'soft', we do not offer the EoC as an alternative HRM strategy. Rather, it is here maintained that the EoC allows us to recognise the ethical, human dynamics at play regardless of the more strategic aims of any specific HRM approaches or provisions. In the following section, we briefly review the HRM field and introduce the theory of the EoC. We then offer context for our fieldwork with a discussion of HRM in SMEs and HRM in Malaysia. We present our analysis and findings, and offer some implications of this work for future research.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The Human as a Resource

For the purpose of this research, we adopt the broadest definition of HRM: 'A commonly reflected description for a range of practices associated with managing work and employment relations' (Collings & Wood, 2009, p. 5). We adopt this inclusive definition to avoid orienting ourselves within any existing HRM perspective, allowing us to consider all practices which fall within the various HRM perspectives as well as other practices which can reasonably be described as the management of employees. We do this to allow scope for the application of a new theoretical framework and avoid aligning our analysis too closely with the perspective of strategic management or critical responses from the perspective of employees. The meaning and nature of HRM have evolved over time and are not without contestation. Very broadly, the term has historically been applied to management practices designed to ensure that people working for a company make the greatest possible contribution to the company. There are different approaches to achieving this, but they all share an emphasis on utilising the human as a resource for enhancing firm performance (Boxall & Purcell, 2000). Within the field of HRM, there is a distinction between the more obviously instrumental aspects of the practice and an ostensibly more human-centric approach, a contrast between treating the human as any other resource or as a particular kind of resource. The former is associated with the more traditional 'hard' or 'control' approach to HRM, while the latter is associated with the more contemporary 'soft' or 'commitment' approach to HRM. It is argued that while 'hard' approaches adopt HRM as a cost-minimisation tool to maximise shareholder values (Baird & Meshoulam, 1988; Legge, 2005); 'soft' approaches seek to influence employee's behaviour by investing in management practices which will elicit hard work and compliance through self-regulation (Boselie et al., 2009; Truss et al., 1997). In close alignment with this distinction, control-based HRM refers to practices which are typified by the close monitoring of employees and a management approach designed to maximise employee compliance through goals-based rewards systems (Arthur, 1994), and commitment-based HRM refers to practices which are designed to foster the sense of a long-term reciprocal relationship between manager and employee which is exemplified by the desired employee behaviour (Kehoe & Wright, 2013; Sun et al., 2007).

These practices might include welfare-focused provisions such as sick leave and sick pay, childcare leave

and other interventions designed to address the needs of employees. Many of the provisions considered within soft HRM could be categorised as care in the performative (rather than ethical) sense, and where care has been explored in the context of HRM, this is done within the context of strategic considerations, e.g. the impact of care on employee retention (Saks, 2022).

The move away from hard, control-based HRM towards more seemingly humane practices raised questions among critical scholars regarding the true extent to which manager's approach to employees had softened (e.g. Guest, 1987, 1990; Legge, 1995, 2005). Some point out that employees are in a disadvantaged position regardless of whether the approach is hard or soft, as both are attempts to use the human as a resource for the sake of the firm (Guest, 1999, 2002; Legge, 1998). These critical responses to mainstream HRM offer valuable insight into the exploitative nature of instrumental HRM practices, where management treats workers as expendable tools of production. However, the management of people by people is inherently relational and as we hope to show this relationality implies a moral dimension to the human interaction that is management. Regardless of whether some of the specific actions and decisions of the manager are taken with a view to instrumentality or reciprocity, there will be an ethical relationship at play that will also lend itself to specific actions and decisions. Because managers at work will take these ethically driven actions, they can sensibly be categorised as dimensions of HRM but cannot be meaningfully understood as strategic.

SMEs and HRM

Employees are an SME's key stakeholder group; there are, by definition, relatively few of them, and investment in any one employee typically represents a significant investment for the firm. The expenses associated with a high staff turnover will be a particular burden for smaller firms, which is an incentive to ensure employee satisfaction. The HRM practices of SMEs are likely to be different to those adopted in larger firms, and SME HRM may be more informal and ad hoc (Cardon & Stevens, 2004; Kotey & Slade, 2005; Mayson & Barrett, 2006), which suggests that theories of HRM which assume or imply a strategic approach are less likely to account for the practices adopted in SMEs. The EoC, however, may offer the opportunity to better understand the management of employees within SMEs, as the emphasis on relationality and partiality in the EoC may better reflect the immediacy of the relationship between managers and those being managed within smaller firms (Spence, 2016).

The Malaysian Context

National and developmental contexts are also very likely to shape the HRM practices of a firm (Soundararajan et al., 2018). It is likely that our understanding of how best to manage people is culturally bound and that the dominant discourses regarding HRM are not able to account for the wide range of diverse practices which can be found globally (Jackson, 2004). There is an extant literature which examines the domestic HRM practices of firms in countries outside of Europe and North America (Ayentimi et al., 2018; Dibben et al., 2017; Jackson, 2002), which shows that local and national contexts shape HRM practices, and this is likely to be particularly true for domestic SMEs, free as they are from the managerial legacy of foreign ownership or the institutionalising pressures of competing with MNCs. However, the literature which considers the efficacy of the HRM practices of SMEs in non-Western contexts (Croucher et al., 2013; Ogunyomi & Bruning, 2016; Zheng et al., 2006) tends to adopt the instrumental approach, focussing on the relationship between practices and firm outcomes, and does not offer a consideration of instances where managers employ HRM practices for anything other than strategic purposes. And yet, as shall be shown, such instances occur.

Malaysia is a developing country with an aspiration to attain developed country status. Like many emerging economies, the country's enterprise profile is dominated by SMEs, which comprise 98.5 percent of business establishments (SME Corp. Malaysia, 2018). SMEs contributed to 66 percent of total employment in the country in 2017, which increased from 56.4 percent in 2012 (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2018). While SMEs are a dominant employer in Malaysia, the Malaysian workforce has access to a wide choice of employers due to the growing presence of MNCs. In 2018, Malaysia attracted RM80.5 billion (equivalent to $19.4 billion) in foreign direct investment (FDI) (MIDA, 2018), and many large corporations, especially prominent MNCs, have selected Malaysia as the location of choice to establish their regional or global operations. Consequently, the Malaysian workforce has access to foreign firms and large local firms, providing robust financial rewards and a structured approach to career development through the deployment of well-developed HRM practices. SMEs, which lack the resources and institutional heft to compete with the formal provisions of MNCs, may be offering their employees something else of value. Furthermore, to support the Malaysian government's drive to become an industrialised nation with a skilled and knowledge-based workforce, human resource development in terms of education, training and development has been the main focus of HRM in Malaysia (Malek et al., 2013; Mellahi & Wood, 2004).

In developed country contexts, the role of employers in facilitating worker's wellbeing is a matter of much public concern, which has driven many developed nations to not only legislate for, but also to invest in and incentivize a range of initiatives, such as the provision of childcare and parental-leave rights for people at work. In contrast, there is only limited government provision in Malaysia, which leaves such accommodations largely to employer's discretion. MNCs operating in Malaysia often offer provisions such as parental leave, but this is likely to be tied to the legal requirements and/or social expectations of the company's home country, but when SMEs offer such provisions, it is in the absence of legal or institutional requirements to do so. Domestic SMEs in Malaysia do offer caring provisions to their employees, such as childcare leave, sick leave, or other forms of support. Such provisions could be interpreted as evidence of soft HRM in action, i.e., we could assume that employers are motivated to provide care and support for their employees in the expectation that this will be met with increased commitment and performance. However, given the evolution of this theory, which is rooted in Western business culture and practice, there may be value in considering alternative perspectives. In particular, a theory such as the EoC, which can account for the provision of care based on more than the expectation of improved business performance, may be better able to account for the ad hoc and informal care behaviours of SME OMs in Malaysia. A greater understanding of the role of care in such practices may allow us to develop HRM theories which are applicable to a more diverse range of national and organisational cultures.

The Ethics of Care and HRM

The 'Ethics of Care' is a theory of ethics based on a feminist account of moral decision-making. The origins of the theory can be found in Carol Gilligan's response to what she argues is an implicit assumption of earlier psychological theorists that the male experience of moral development is the norm (Gilligan, 1982). Gilligan argues that while male moral development is coloured by the experiences of individuation and separation (because boys must identify themselves as 'different' to their mother in terms of sex and gender), the morality of girls and women is rooted in relationality because they do not have to separate themselves from their primary caregiver in the same way (Gilligan, 1982). Because of these early psychological experiences, the male experience of moral development—and that which is reflected in mainstream psychology—is one which champions individual rights. The feminine approach, however, is one which is 'rooted in reciprocity, relatedness and responsiveness' and where 'relation will be taken as ontologically basic and the caring relation as ethically basic' (Noddings, 2013, p. 3). While the EoC theory's origins entail an appeal to gendered

differences in psychological development, as Gilligan makes clear in the introduction to 'In a Different Voice', the account of morality she offers is intended as an account of an alternative 'mode of thought' rather than a 'generalisation of either sex' (Gilligan, 1982, p.2). Therefore, while the EoC is championed as a significant development which offers a much-needed feminist perspective to psychology and moral philosophy, the theory can be applied beyond gender and can be used to explore other contexts where the individuals involved do not hold individuation as their primary value.

The EoC takes as a starting point the understanding that our existence is inherently relational; that is, we can and do only exist in relation to others, and that relationality is a fundamental aspect of our being. The EoC allows us to consider the moral implications of our natural and inherent connectedness with other humans. It maintains that morality lies in one's impulse or attitude towards those to whom one exists in relation. In particular, the EoC ascribes moral value to our impulses and attitudes of care in our encounters with a needful other. It draws attention to the call to care we experience when confronted with a need which we are positioned to meet (Noddings, 2013). In applying this perspective to management, and in particular, to the management of people by people, we are inviting consideration of the way in which managers may have attitudes or impulses towards their employees that are rooted in care, whether or not acting on such impulses serves the interests of the business.

The EoC Theory has been widely applied in fields which are easily recognised as 'care work' such as nursing (Allmark, 1995; Nortvedt et al., 2011), caring for the elderly (Molterer et al., 2020), social work (Lloyd, 2006; Meagher & Parton, 2004; Parton, 2003), and informal domestic care (Whitmore et al., 2015). The value in applying the theory to these fields is clear; those who are professionally tasked with providing health and social care to vulnerable people are directly encountering the needs of other people; the fulfilment of their duties clearly relies on their response to this encounter, and the EoC provides a lens for understanding this experience. The EoC has been observed in the HRM practices of Social Enterprises (Magrizos & Roumpi, 2020) and has been applied to the fields of business and management (André, 2013; Burton & Dunn, 1996; Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019; Paillé et al., 2016; Simola, 2003; Spence, 2016) where there has been a focus on the relationality of managers and leaders to a firm's stakeholders. This growing literature demonstrates that there is scope for applying this theory to understand the way in which people interpret and apply their caring responsibilities in a professional context and suggests that the EoC theory can be usefully applied to human encounters beyond more obvious contexts of care, such as nursing and social care. When applied to a business practice (that is to say, to a practice which can only occur within a business setting), the EoC allows us to explore the

symbiosis between the instrumentality of managing people at work and the relational dimension of humans managing humans. While it has been established within the literature on soft HRM that the provision of care can positively impact firm outcomes, the EoC invites us to consider the ethical dimension of care within one's relationality with another. Directing our attention in this way allows for a fuller understanding of managers' motivations and emotional experiences as they encounter employees as needful humans.

Methodology

Sample

Data were collected from 48 SME OMs, all owning at least 50% of the company and playing an active managerial role in the business. By the use of the term in Malaysia, SMEs were operations with fewer than 200 (manufacturing sector) or 75 employees (service sector) (SME Corp. Malaysia, 2013). Most participants held the position of Director ($n = 11$) or Managing Director ($n = 22$), with 15 holding other senior managerial roles, such as CEO, founder, or centre manager. The sample included OMs from various industries, including manufacturing, wholesale, retail, and service, and each firm employed between 3 and 130 employees. The oldest business was established in 1981, and the youngest was established in 2015.

We initially recruited participants using business directories, and the sample snowballed as some participants extended the invitation to other OMs who fit the criteria. Participants were first contacted via email, and a thorough explanation of the study's purpose and the procedure was sent to them subsequently. Finally, interviews were conducted once informed consent had been obtained.

Data Collection

The semi-structured interviews conducted for this project were initially designed to investigate the work-life balance experience of OMs. However, a dominant theme emerged after the first three interviews, in which participants reflected on actions and attitudes derived from care for their employees, such as a concern for employees' work-life balance, development and wellbeing. To ensure our interviews were designed to capture the data most pertinent to the subjects' experiences (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we amended our interview schedule, and three questions were added to the interview guide (Questions 7, 8 and 9 in Appendix I). Questions 1 and 2 focused on the OM's personal backgrounds and motivations to initiate a business, and questions 3 to 6 centered on our participant's work-life balance experiences as business OMs. These additions were designed to allow participants to expand on the aspects of their management that reflected their concerns for employees, as identified in the initial interviews. It should perhaps be noted that while responder bias is inevitable in qualitative data collection, the unanticipated emergence of themes relating to care lends weight to our interpretation of the data. Interviews were all conducted by an author of this paper, who is a multi-lingual academic based in Malaysia. Most interviews were conducted in English ($n = 34$), which is a widely used language in Malaysia, and a number of interviews were conducted in Chinese ($n = 7$) and Malay languages ($n = 7$). On average, each interview lasted approximately one hour. With the participant's permission, all interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Approaching the interview data with the EoC lens, the research team paid close attention to the lived experiences of the OMs, aiming to understand the role of care arising from relationality in the HRM practices of SME OMs. As a team, we read the interview transcripts multiple times to familiarise ourselves with the data and develop an initial list of common categories. Meanwhile, the team also engaged in their theoretical understanding of EoC while analysing the interview data. Subsequently, we identified several main themes. While themes were identified inductively, this was done from an identified theoretical perspective. Therefore, a combination of deductive and inductive thematical analysis was undertaken (Collins & Stockton, 2018; Graebner et al., 2012). While the coding process progressed, the initial codebook was also amended accordingly. Once the initial categories were established, we proceeded to higher levels of abstraction (second-order themes). In this step, we moved away from the exact words the interviewees used and adopted themes that were conceptually meaningful. New themes emerged throughout the process, and some themes were split and merged accordingly. The data were coded using NVivo 10 by the first author, although decisions about defining and naming the themes were made as a team. The data were analysed in an iterative manner, also as a team, in order to confirm agreement on the themes identified in the data analysis. While two of the three first-order themes (T1—'The shared implications of care' and T2—'Growth & development through care') could sensibly be categorised into further subthemes (ST1.1—'The shared implications of care' and ST1.2—'Care beyond the realm of work'; ST2.1—'The people and company grow together', ST2.2—'The relationship between growth in work and personal growth' and ST2.3—'Caring for the individual'), the third theme, T3—'Outcomes a caring relationship', was supported with data that did not lend itself to further subdivision.

To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the study, the first author, who conducted the interviews, kept a reflective journal, which is a valuable tool in guiding and documenting the reactive process of interpreting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Thorne et al., 1997). Field notes detailing the fieldwork context were also kept to help the team better understand the participant's experiences (Dreher, 1994). Peer debriefing also took place between the two authors based in Malaysia after each interview to seek constructive feedback to improve the data collection.

Findings

Our data structure (Fig. 1) is the graphical representation of the chain of evidence, which illustrates how we moved from interview data to theoretical dimensions (Gioia et al., 2013; Pratt, 2009). Figure 1 presents the structure and order of the data from first–order categories (as close to the informant's illustration) to second-order themes (researcher-induced) (Gioia et al., 2013). Because of their direct relevance to managing through caring, the second-order themes served as the basis for the subsequent aggregate dimensions of caring

management in SMEs. The findings of our study point to three prevailing themes that emerged from the data: the shared benefits of care, growth and development through care, and outcomes of a caring relationship.

In this section, we will discuss the themes that emerged from the data analysis, along with representative supporting quotations from the interview transcripts. Please refer to Appendix II for additional quotes for illustration purposes.

Theme 1: The Shared Benefits of Care

A dominant theme in our analysis relates to the way in which caring through work relationships has positive consequences beyond those for the cared-for (in this context, the employee). Our interviewees identified both the wider benefits of caring for their employees within the work context and care beyond the realm of work as significant aspects of their care for employees. Our interviewee's awareness of the consequences of care could add evidence of a more strategic application of HRM. The first subtheme within this theme: 'the Shared Implications of Care' certainly reflects our interviewees' awareness that they will benefit from behaving well towards their employees. The second subtheme:
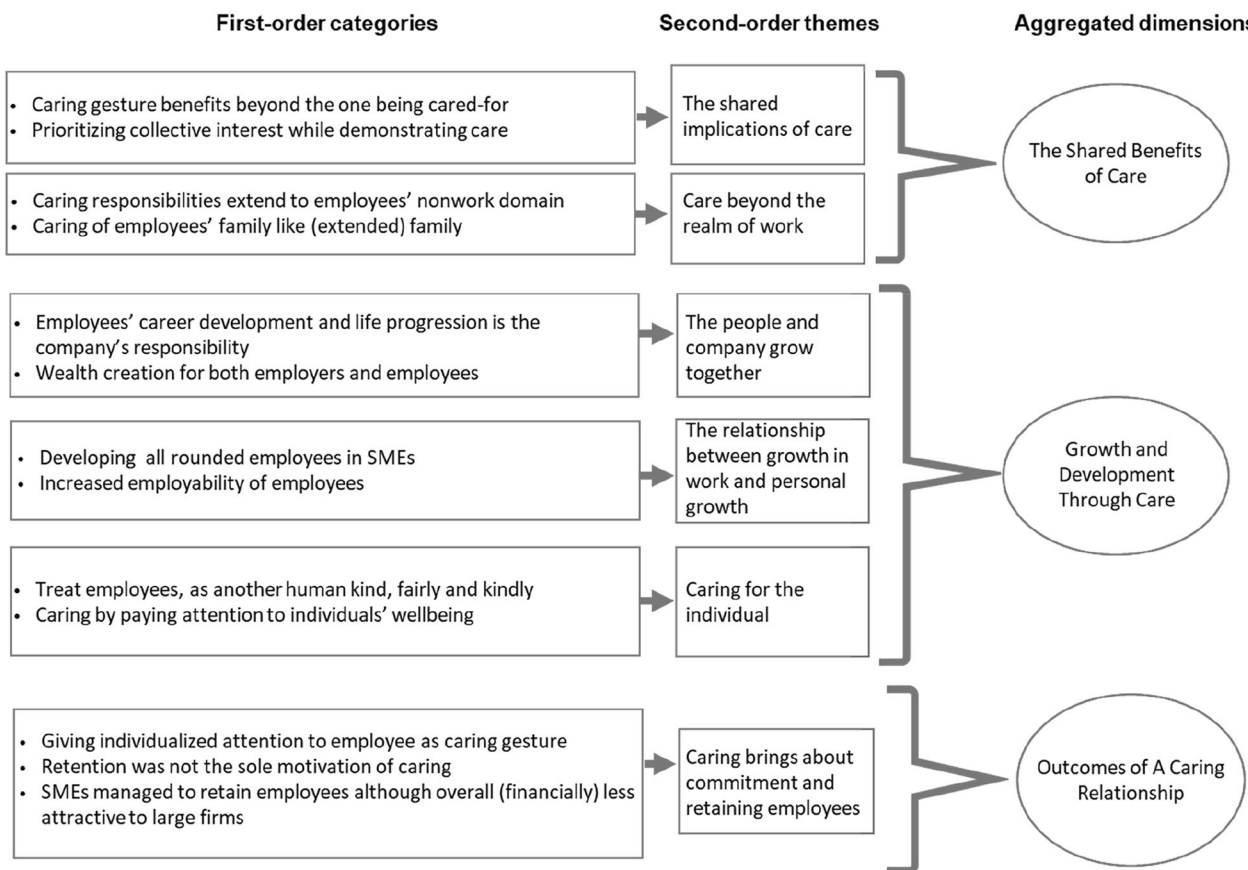

Fig. 1 Data structure

'Care beyond the Realm of Work', however, demonstrates caring attitudes which do not have to do with benefits to the one caring. Instead, our interviewees describe a caring impulse directed at their employees as ends in themselves, with their own caring relationships beyond the work sphere. Here, there is little evidence of instrumentality but a sense of family like bonds rooted in relationality. With this data, we see evidence of an ethic of care, as the one-caring responds to the perceived need of those with whom they have a relationship.

Subtheme 1.1: The Shared Implications of Care

The OMs shared their understanding that performances of care will have implications beyond the cared-for and that these should be considered when delivering care for employees. On the whole, these implications were positive and included boosted employee commitment and improved outcomes for the firm resulting from caring for the individual:

> Treat employees as one of the family. Because if I take care of them, they will care about the customer, they will care about the company, and they will care about the company's future. It's all together. (OM39, industry robotic consulting)
>
> When a company is pushing for a [job] tender, staff should not think about work-life balance. If the company wins the tender, then everybody wins. Salary wise, reward wise… [will be raised] … then they can have their balance, by having days off, enjoy their holidays. (OM7, training provider)

However, the collective nature of working in a team meant that collective interest should be prioritized over the interest of any individual or group of individuals. OM36, who operates an apparel factory, shared that while the importance of taking care of individual employees was recognised, a fundamental requirement for such care is that the interest of the SME and other employees is not put at risk. OM6 described the balance between meeting the needs of the cloth cutters and the sewers (who need the cut cloth to sew) and the overall needs of the SME:

> I was telling one staff how to take care of each other's rice bowl […] "The company can only help you this much. Now you have to sort something out. Otherwise, you have to stop working". Because our cutting was behind, we couldn't cut enough for our sewers to sew. Nobody had enough work to do, and the rest of the cutters were on overtime to fill this gap. So it came to the point when I must step in, and I knew I couldn't be too kind anymore. (OM6, apparel manufacturer and retailer)

Therefore, the natural response to the needful other is tempered by the OM's awareness of the implications of their responsibility for the company and other employees within the firm.

Subtheme 1.2: Care Beyond the Realm of Work

The OM's care for their employees often reflected a holistic understanding of their employees and their existence beyond the realm of work. Some of our participants explicitly claim caring responsibilities toward their employee's families, which cover both time and financial support. These caring practices address employee's non-work (especially family) interests and are mainly informal and personal. In terms of time, some OMs offer flexibility to allow their employees to attend to ad hoc family chores. For example, OM14, whose employees are mainly women, describes making adjustments to accommodate employees' family commitments (working from home is not a common practice in Malaysia, where being visible in the workplace is still highly valued). It should be noted that the reasons offered by the OM for the provision are couched in terms of the benefit to the employee and their family, based on the insight and understanding of the OM of the needs of the others.

> We provide maternity benefits—an additional month where they work from home. We also offer flexibility. If their kid is not well, they can work from home. So, they can attend to their children. If their domestic worker is on leave or anything else, then "okay, you can stay at home, work from home". (OM14, apparel manufacturer & retailer)

The OMs also demonstrate care towards their employee's families by providing a wide range of financial aid. This ranges from small acts, such as buying clothes and offering personal loans, to paying deposits for assets such as motorcycles, cars, and even a house. This demonstration of care is coherent with the contextual conditions of Malaysia, where the income level of the workforce is generally quite low. Workers' incomes are only sufficient to cover daily expenses and do not allow them to save for unplanned costs or large expenditures. The OMs configure personalized support, which demonstrates care for their employees.

> If they need help in their family matters and it is within our reach, we will help them... Especially financially, if I am able to help, I will help… say during Raya (Eid), I buy them clothes; if their parents want to go to Makkah (Islam's holiest city), I give them money... we go beyond the office, we care about their family. (OM25, legal service provider)

The small size of the companies enables the OMs to build very close and personal relationships with their employees.

They tend to know most of their employees personally and cultivate family like relationships within the company, indicative of a relationship which extends beyond the formal bond of employer and employee. A number of respondents, particularly the older OMs, identify themselves as 'father' or 'mother' figures to employees, while the younger OMs identify themselves as the 'brother' or 'sister' of their employees. Within these familial roles, the OMs demonstrate their concern for employees beyond the realm of work by offering support in protecting and enhancing the quality of life of their employees. Such responsibility is not explicit, but it is understood, and most participants seem very happy to accept it.

> We have a little bit more experience [in life], then we would advise them... This is our advice as a sister to them […] "these are the things that you should plan, savings, education..." So, things that we could advise, we will… This is how we take care of our staff. As close as a sister. (OM14, apparel manufacturer & retailer)

Theme 2: Growth and Development Through Care

The OMs described their care for the growth of their employee as people rather than simply employees. Our interviewees expressed concern for their employee's personal and professional development and a desire to contribute to this. The first subtheme: 'The people and the company grow together', indicates an understanding that the growth of the business and the growth of the individuals working there are complementary. It should be noted, however, that generally, the interviewees discussed how the company's growth benefits the employees rather than the other way around. Within the second subtheme are discussions of the way in which the OM can provide their employees with opportunities for growth, including the opportunity to gain skills and experience which allow them to leave the firm. Here again, we see evidence that the caring impulse of the OM is in response to their opportunity to help those with whom they have a relationship rather than more strategic, business-oriented reasons. The third subtheme relates to the way in which the OMs notice and respond to the individual needs of their employees, facilitating their growth and development through personal attention well beyond what is required by the formal OM-employee relationship.

Subtheme 2.1: The People and Company Grow Together

The relationality between the OMs and their employees was apparent in the way in which the OMs described how their employees' growth and that of the firm often progressed in tandem. The interviewees considered their employees' career and life development as part of their responsibility and the purpose of their business:

> If the company is progressive and proactive, we would be able [to] assist them [the employees] to move and steer towards a direction they want while benefiting them and the company. (OM44, creative and advertising agency operator)

While wealth creation is one of the key motivations for OMs seeking to initiate and grow a business, some of the OMs identified the importance of helping their employees to benefit financially and thus improve their quality of life. OM2, who owned a handicraft factory and showroom, shared the sentiment of mutual growth in life for themselves, their business and their employees:

> My motivation in life is to see my business grow, and the people around me also grow […] It's a very good environment that we are trying to give them (the employees). I want to progress [in life]; they want the same thing too. As we expand, we also want their life to grow better. (OM2, handicraft manufacturer & retailer)

Subtheme 2.2: The Relationship Between Growth in Work and Personal Growth

The OMs care about the personal growth as well as the career development of their employees. Given the nature of SMEs, which have only a small number of employees, employees who are multi-skilled are very helpful in supporting the overall business operation, and the development of such employees represents a significant investment. However, the OMs demonstrate consideration of how they could contribute to the employee's development for the sake of the employees rather than that of the firm. For example, OM1 shared how the employees were transformed into better-skilled workers while working in the company.

> I make sure they (the employees) are not staying in the same position. I want to grow them, making them multi-skilled […] I told them, "When I take you in, if you can't speak English, that's ok. But I hope that one day, when you leave this company, you can speak well in English, write [a] report in English". I want to bring them up. (OM1, electrical appliances manufacturer)

Multi-skilled employees tend to be independent and able to support the overall business operation, which is valuable in SMEs. However, it also means that the employability of employees is increased both within and outside of the company. While the OMs highlighted the importance of retaining talent, some were delighted to see their

employees' advancement in career and life beyond the OM's company, either moving on to be employed by other companies or by starting their own businesses.

> Their end game is not this [company]. Their end game should always be something bigger […] I said, "Use me as a stepping stone because what I can provide you is [an] invaluable experience", especially when engineering expertise is [the] technical stuff that they can carry with them when they leave us. "Prior to that, you give me your heart and soul" (OM35, telecommunication service provider)

Subtheme 2.3: Caring for the Individual

The OMs view their employees as equal to themselves and having the same needs in life. They emphasized that their employees are human beings who should be treated fairly and kindly. For example, some OMs take care of their foreign labourers personally, even when there are line managers and supervisors with direct managerial responsibility:

> I make sure they [the foreign labourers] have comfortable accommodation; I see their food is organized; I take them to the bank to open an account. I organize the money changers to come and send their money home to India, Bangladesh, [the] Philippines… From the beginning, they call me mother; they call me mum. (OM22, apparel manufacturer)

An awareness of the needs and vulnerabilities of their employees was present in the caring gestures described by the interviewees. While resource constraint is common in the SMEs context, the OMs were careful in ensuring their employees were not overloaded. Their constant monitoring of employees' progress and providing support demonstrates that the wellbeing of employees was taken seriously, even while the companies were striving for business growth.

> I realized that even I would have an issue handling so many [projects] as well, what more him, with his [little] experience. So, I straight away stepped in to put in a bit more time. So, I dedicated extra time to help him with the projects and to help him finish and complete them so he could rest. (OM41, interior design and construction operator)
>
> As an employer, I can't say, "you are my worker, so all of your time belongs to me" … So, I have to arrange their jobs properly. I want all of my workers to come to work happily and go home happily. If my workers are feeling mad every day and bring negative emotions back home on a daily basis, then I am a sinful boss. (OM27, furniture manufacturer)

Theme 3: Outcomes of a Caring Relationship

While the SMEs could not offer the higher pay, better incentives, and more sophisticated HR practices offered by larger firms, the caring management approach has proven helpful among the OMs in retaining their employees. The small scale of operations within SMEs allows the OMs to respond quickly to employee needs, and individualized attention becomes a bridge-builder of deep relationships between the OMs and their employees. The care demonstrated in themes one and two leads to a stable and productive workforce, and the OMs appreciate the positive outcomes of leading and managing by caring. For example, OM2, who owns an interior design and construction firm, shared how when employees started to assume ownership and responsibilities on assigned renovation and construction jobs, he could be free from routine operational decisions and focus on important strategic decisions.

> When we are away or when we are busy, we don't need to look over our shoulders. We don't need to keep worrying about what they are doing; they can operate semi-independently for the best interest of the company. (OM2, interior design and construction operator)

However, while the OMs were aware that caring for their employees was likely to lead to positive outcomes for the firm, this was not their sole motivation. Instead, their motivation is at least partly the provision of care and pursuit of collective growth, evidenced in themes one and two. OM8 proudly shared that the herbal medicine factory's operation supervisors decided to stay with the small firm, even when competitors offered more attractive remuneration:

> I'm very happy with the working environment I created for them…Ya even some (of) the supervisors told me a lot of other factories are trying to take them away (laugh). Higher pay, much higher than my factory, but they don't want to go. They still stick with me because they like working in this company and with me. (OM8, herbal medicine manufacturer)

Thus, the objectives of soft HRM are realised, but this is not necessarily the aim of the OMs. It may well be the case that more strategic HRM is evidenced by the inadvertent positive outcomes of ethically caring at work. While our interviewees took pride in the environment their engagement with ethical caring had produced, when considered in tandem with the preceding themes, it is clear that the experiences present in our data cannot be fully accounted for by either hard or soft HRM as they have been traditionally understood. We therefore propose that there is an ethical dimension to HRM which can be best accounted for by a relational ontology; while HRM practitioners may be, to some extent, performing care for strategic reasons, it will

also be the case that they are inevitably responding to the relevant employees as humans to whom they exist in relation. Applying the EoC lens allows us to more fully appreciate the complex dynamic at play in this relationship and to understand the ethicality of the care our interviewees described feeling for their employees.

Discussion

In examining the human relations of HRM within a framework which allows for the consideration of HRM as a human-centric relational experience, we are invited to consider limitations to the way in which more dominant accounts of HRM can fully account for the diversity of approaches to HRM. While there is evidence of strategy and instrumentality in the approach of the interviewees, there is also evidence of the 'pre-act consciousness' of care, and a good reason to believe that many of the provisions accounted for in the interviews are a response to the ethical call to care implied by a relational ontology. The first theme identified in our data describes both strategic and care-based HRM. The reciprocal nature of the care described in the first subtheme could be interpreted as strategic; certainly, the interviewees were mindful of the positive impact of their care on their own interests, and the first subtheme relates to the positive outcomes for both the firm (and therefore the OM) and the employee resulting from the care they provide at work. The experiences categorised within the second subtheme, however, can be best understood as instances of care resulting from a natural and spontaneous response to the perceived need of employees and their families, resulting from the relationality of the employee and employer—not simply that they know each other, but that they exist in relation to each other. The OMs do not describe these acts as altruistic, rather they are investments made for the benefit of the group, and the family metaphor offers an insight into how this might be understood; when one invests in the wellbeing of a child or close family member, it does not feel like altruism, but it is not selfishness either. The flourishing of those we consider to be 'ours' contributes to our own flourishing, and this is described by the interviewees who understand their own interests, the interest of the firm and the interests of the employees to be congruent.

In pursuing and promoting the wellbeing of employees, the OMs are, in fact, pursuing and promoting a collective good from which they themselves will benefit. While it is not uncommon for firms to use familial language in their HR policies (Casey, 1999), it is notable that the family metaphor, when used by our interviewees, was not being invoked to explain the ties of employees to the firm, but to explain the obligations of employers to employees. This is not to be confused with social exchange; the OMs are not giving to

get. Rather they believe that they are giving to themselves when they give to their own.

The second theme evidences the OMs caring impulse elicited through relationality. While the data in subtheme one demonstrates a perception of a positive relationship between caring acts and the growth of the firm, subthemes two and three present evidence that this is not the 'reason' for the caring attitudes and motivations described. The OMs in our study provided care for their employees because they experienced care, in the ethical sense, for their employees. Encouraging personal and professional growth (even if this means losing valuable staff) and anticipating the needs and vulnerabilities of employees serve no strategic aim. Instead, they are manifestations of an ethical call to care experienced by the OMs in response to their relationality with their employees. More traditional approaches to HRM account well for the relationship between managers and employees, and the humanity of those involved is implicit in these discussions. Our findings here demonstrate that the human encounter at the heart of management is worthy of explicit consideration.

The third theme entails an acknowledgement that the provision of care to employees benefits the firm but that the productivity and loyalty of the employees are valued by the OMs as indicators of their good care rather than solely as ends in themselves. The pride expressed by the OM in describing how an employee turned down a more lucrative offer elsewhere was not pride at having managed an employee well but pride at the evidence that they had cared for their employee well. The firm is the context in which these relationships obtain. So, the flourishing of the firm is an indicator of the flourishing of the relationships and the individuals. Still, when considered in totality, the themes indicate that the OMs consistently consider the flourishing of the firm in tandem with the flourishing of people.

It should perhaps be noted that while the original purpose of the primary research presented here was to explore gendered differences in management within SMEs, none was found. EoC theorists have maintained that while the more traditional accounts of moral development have perhaps missed the care perspective due to a failure to consider the experiences of women (Gilligan, 1982), the EoC is applicable to all genders (Held, 2006; Noddings, 2013).

The definition of HRM which was adopted for this paper includes, amongst other things, 'areas not directly governed by the employment contract to make working life more agreeable and/or to genuinely empower people' (Collings & Wood, 2009, p. 4), and the practices described by the interviewees are consistent with this definition. However, when considering the motives and morality discussed in the interviews, it becomes apparent that the human management approach being described cannot be fully accounted for as soft or hard HRM. It would be possible to raise the

objection that this is, in fact, not HRM at all, and to adopt a narrower conception of the term, which entails the intention of fulfilling the strategic objectives of the firm. However, to adopt such a narrow perspective would be to risk adopting a large-firm-centric position, as the firms being discussed in the interviews did not have any formalised HRM practices which could be explicitly linked to the firm's strategic objectives. To discount provisions such as child-care leave and professional development opportunities as something other than HRM because it has not been incorporated into an HRM strategy would be to deny that smaller firms, which are less likely to have resources for HRM roles and strategies (Cardon & Stevens, 2004; Mayson & Barrett, 2006), engage in HRM at all. Doing so would be counter-intuitive and create an unnecessary requirement to invent a new term for HRM when it does not conform to the structure of larger firms with formalised HRM approaches.

Therefore, we must consider that our interviewees are discussing HRM, but that the practices to which they refer cannot be understood solely through the lens of strategic HRM literature, whether it is the hard/soft or control/commitment approach (Boselie et al., 2009; Guest, 1999). Instead, we propose that elements of our findings are best understood with the EoC lens, indicating as they do, awareness among the OMs of the humanity of their human resources and the moral obligations inherent to the relationship between the managers and the managed. Our analytic lens allowed a focus on instances of care which were common but not ubiquitous. We cannot therefore conclude that all HRM is caring, or ethical, but we do believe that the inherent relationality of HRM is evident. We hope, therefore, to draw attention to the ethical dimension of HRM practice and the ethical experience of HRM practitioners, which may be used to augment our understanding of HRM in any form by allowing for the consideration of the humans involved in HRM.

Conclusion

The opportunities offered by the EoC in the business context extend beyond human resources management, as it can be meaningfully applied wherever there is an interaction between people. However, application to practices which can be considered HRM is particularly illuminating given the tendency to perceive such practices as inherently instrumental and potentially exploitative. There is, of course, an element of instrumentality in the management of people at work, but as reflected by our interviewees, it is not possible to interact with other human beings in total ignorance of their humanity, regardless of the context. There are implications of this

for the way in which we understand HRM, and we propose that the EoC lens points to opportunities for a more holistic understanding of the way in which people manage people, and that this might be particularly relevant in the context of smaller businesses.

Our findings add evidence to assertions that there is an inherent ethical element to management when the manager conceives of themselves in the work context as existing in relation with their employees (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019). The implications of this for the future of work include opportunities for the value of co-creation between managers and employees (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019; Parsons et al., 2021), a better understanding of management approaches consistent with the aims of organisations with a social purpose (Magrizos & Roumi, 2020) as well as positive outcomes for the firm (e.g., Saks, 2022). We have here addressed only the ethical experiences of the one-caring, but there is great scope for future research considering the impact of the way management approaches consistent with the EoC on employees, businesses, and society. Valuable future research in this area may explore other business contexts where care is apparent and other manifestations of care at work. In building a body of evidence that care is practiced in businesses, we may contribute to a greater understanding of the inherent humanity at play in all business phenomena.

Appendix I

Interview Protocol

1. Please briefly introduce yourself.
2. Please share with me your experience to start as an entrepreneur. In particular, what makes you become an entrepreneur?
3. What is the role of work-life balance in your decision to start a business and become an entrepreneur?
4. How is your life as an entrepreneur (work-life balance in particular) similar or different from what you have initially expected?
5. What are your challenges in balancing your work/business with family commitment?
6. What is the role of family obligations in your decision to expand your business?
7. As a business owner, what is your role in your employees' work-life balance?
8. How do you perceive employees' work-life balance as part of employers' responsibilities?
9. What initiatives/practices are in place (if any) which are beneficial to your employees' work-life balance?

Appendix II

Illustrative Quotes for Second-order Themes from OMs

Second-order themes	Illustrative quotes
The shared implications of care	So I have to work. I have to work hard to pay, to pay their salary. This is the commitment of being an entrepreneur. I have to think about my employees first, not myself. (OM2, handicraft manufacturer & retailer)
	Employees are like [my] children. You need to take care of them, feed them. They have emotions, they will have bad moods, be emotional, and you have to care about them. It's just like taking care of our children. If you can treat your employees like half of your own children, then you are [a] successful [entrepreneur]. (OM16, furniture manufacturer)
Care beyond the realm of work	If they have a problem like they need borrowings for the family. We give loans, personal loans. We offer, and they pay back every month. For example, say they borrow one thousand (ringgit), they pay (back) 50 ringgit per month. (OM2, handicraft manufacturer & retailer)
	I'm managing a small team. I try to treat them [the employees] like my brothers. So when they are my family, how can I treat them? (OM39, industry robotics consultant)
The people and company grow together	Seeing my salon grows and being able to help others (employees) to go into business, especially the ladies, I'm very motivated… in fact, convincing my employee cum partner to start her own business was satisfying because I'm helping someone. She is a very smart lady, but she lacks experience in doing business and confidence because she's a divorcee. When you're divorced, you lack confidence and you feel that you're not wanted in your life, but actually, it's not true at all. (OM29, beauty salon owner)
	To have a sense of ownership. That means employees own every task they do. The only way you can get this [sense of] ownership [is to] treat them as adults and give them the flexibility they want. Once they understand that, they understand what we want. (OM35, telecommunication provider)
The relationship between growth in work and personal growth	I had 3 (former) employees who (I helped to start their businesses). I am very proud of them. I am very happy for them. […] They learnt how to manage the business, manage the money [from me]. From an employee to a business owner […] Like this shop in ABC Mall, Madam ABC, most people here know that ABC worked for OM19 before. That makes me proud. "OM19 groomed ABC from an employee to a business owner" that's a huge accomplishment. (OM19, jewellery retailer)
	I hope that they can have a good family relationship. When they are working, we try to provide whatever they need; when they need help in their family matters, and it is within our reach, we would help them. If they tell me their problems honestly, I will try to help them. Especially financially, if I can help, I would help. (OM25, legal service provider)

Second-order themes	Illustrative quotes
Caring for the individual	I always feel that foreign labours are also human. They want to be treated equally. Especially when they are away from home, they're very lonely. So they need to be given attention. (OM13, plastics manufacturer)
	Being a small company, we cannot afford to pay extra for maternity leave and cover all the hospital expenses. Yet out of our own effort, we visit them, give what we can, and support them. We try our best to make them happy. (OM19, accessories retailer)
	We as bosses wish to live in this kind of environment, so we thought the employees would feel the same way. (OM36, eco-farm and eco-tourism operator)
Outcomes of a caring relationship	They don't just do what you tell them to do; they're also thinking about [improving] the [company's] product as well. (OM37, online recruitment platform operator)
	We are a small company. We are not like Intel or big companies who give a lot of huge incentives, so how do we motivate the employees? It's by giving them trust and by [being] sincerely caring for their welfare and understanding their work environment. So that has helped us over the past eight years, yea. (OM14, apparel manufacturer and retailer)
	I am putting down the deposit for their [the employees'] house. Most companies won't do that. But for me, we feel that is not an issue. Their salary comes from us anyway; I can always deduct it from the salary [if they don't pay back in time]. They are not going to run away. We always have that support in place. But from their point of view, it is a big thing to take out RM1000-RM2000, especially for those coming from countries like Indonesia and India, they do not have that amount of cash setting aside. So for us, we feel it is ok, but for them, it is "My goodness, this company is doing me a huge favour. I have not seen this before. They have so much trust in me; I should do the same (treat the company well) for the company". (OM35, telecommunication provider)

Declarations

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