

Conceptualization in HRM Research and Conceptualization of HRM Research: A Simplified Conceptual Study

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Abstract

Doing research has become a valuable duty of academics, a mandatory requirement to be met by the students pursuing Bachelor's Honours Degrees, Research Master's Degrees, and Doctoral Degrees, and an emerging responsibility, if not a duty, for practitioners. Conducting Human Resource Management (HRM) research is daunting and laborious, particularly for beginners and less experienced researchers. Surprisingly, little research has been conducted with regard to conceptualization in HRM research and conceptualization of HRM research particularly in Sri Lankan context, and perhaps even the broader Asian context. Adopting the authority method and the desk research strategy this study makes a systematic attempt to address this gap to some extent. The study yielded a comprehensive synthesis of conceptualization in HRM, which refers to the essential activity of making abstract, unclear, or general concepts used in conducting HRM research definite, clear, or specific, and conceptualization of HRM research, which refers to not an activity in researching but defining and understanding the meaning of HRM research itself.

Key Words: Conceptualization, Definition, Human Resource Management, Researching, Research Methodology, Research Methods

Introduction

Doing research has become a regular duty of Human Resource Management (HRM) and related academics or university teachers (may be designated as Lecturers, Senior Lecturers, Associate Professors, Full Professors, Senior Professors, and Chairs of HRM). One of the essential fields of the discipline of Management Studies or Management Education in Sri Lanka is HRM education and it occurs at the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels (Opatha and Amaratunge, 2021). A considerable number of students want to get employed as professionals in HRM, and In Sri Lanka, HRM is becoming one of the most important functional

fields in organizational management (Arulrajah and Opatha, 2012). Students who read for Honours/Special Bachelor's Degrees, Master's Degrees, and Doctor's Degrees in HRM or related fields are required to engage in research to complete the relevant academic requirements for the award of the relevant degrees. HRM consultants and senior managers may engage in research to perform their duties and responsibilities. To practice evidence-based HRM, doing research or using research information (findings) has become a duty to be performed by managers who want to make good and better decisions to solve HRM problems.

Research has generally been accepted as a major method of obtaining information in the decision-making process (Davis and Cosenza, 1985). In fact, the role of HRM research is to provide the decision maker or makers with relevant, accurate, and useful information with which to make decisions to solve various HRM problems and issues. It is indispensable for a researcher to acquire a good understanding of research including conceptualization. To function effectively professionals must have some knowledge of research (Tuckman, 1972). Knowledge of research is important for HRM practitioners and researchers alike (Schmitt and Klimoski, 1991).

This paper is a research article that attempts to answer a set of theoretical questions specifically. The theoretical research questions are:

1. What is the meaning of the term 'Conceptualization'?
2. Why is it essential?
3. What is Conceptualization in HRM Research?
4. What is Conceptualization of HRM Research?
5. How does the Conceptualization of HRM Research differ from the Conceptualization in HRM Research?

It is hardly noticeable that there is a study giving answers to the above-mentioned theoretical research questions specifically, lucidly, and sufficiently. There is a theoretical gap in answering a set of theoretical questions of the above nature in Sri Lankan context, perhaps in the Asian context. In addition, to engage in a study of generating distinct answers to questions of such theoretical nature in research methodology is curious scholastically and interesting. The objective of the research paper is to find rich (specific, lucid, and sufficient) and acceptable answers to those five research questions.

Method

As applied in the recent research papers written by the author, the method called Authority was adopted to do this theoretical study and the resultant paper. As mentioned in those research articles, the authority method is non-scientific and can be applied to acquire knowledge. According to classic research methodology authors namely Ary, Jacobs, and Razavieh (1996, original edition published in 1972), authority is a very useful source of knowledge. The method as a source of knowledge involves the seeking of answers from experts on a specific subject (Davis and Cosenza, 1985; Nazario-Romero, 2016). The

appropriately and highly qualified authors of the relevant textbooks which had been perceived as authoritative textbooks, were predominantly considered as the experts. Further, the recognized dictionaries as sources of expertise were utilized. Thus, the research strategy adopted to conduct this non-traditional and theoretical study was the desk research strategy.

A rigorous attempt was made to explore the definitions and other relevant contents from the textbooks which were physically available to the author to achieve the objective of the study to the extent that is reasonably adequate. Descriptive and integrative approaches were adopted, rather than the critical and prescriptive ones, in order to find answers to the research questions systematically. Refer to Exhibit 1, which presents information that includes the names of the author or authors, year of publication, country published, availability of separate detailed discussion of conceptualization, and non-availability of separate discussion of conceptualization in respect of the main Research Methods/Methodology textbooks utilized for this study. An examination of the Exhibit reveals a surprising result that the majority of the textbooks on Research Methods or Research Methodology do not have a detailed discussion of conceptualization. Why? Finding an explanation is beyond the objective of this study. Indeed, all the books were instrumental in developing this research article even though only four books had detailed discussions of conceptualization.

Exhibit 1. Information about the Main Research Methods Textbooks used for this Study

No.	Author/s	Year	Country Published	Availability of Separate Detailed Discussion of Conceptualization	Non-availability of Separate Detailed Discussion of Conceptualization
1	Tuckman	1972	USA		X
2	Babbie	1986	USA	X	
3	Emory and Cooper	1991	USA		X
4	Sekaran	1992	USA		X
5	Ary, Jacobs, and Razavieh	1996	USA		X
6	Schutt	1996	USA	X	
7	Vaus	2001	UK	X	
8	Opatha	2003	Sri Lanka	X	
9	Cooper and Schindler	2006	USA		X
10	Taylor, Sinha, and Ghoshal	2006	India		X
11	Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill	2007	UK		X
12	Bryman and Bell	2011	UK		X
13	Salkind	2012	USA		X
14	Sekaran and Bougie	2016	USA		X

The Meaning of Conceptualization and Its Essentiality

First dictionary definitions are presented. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, conceptualization is *the act or process of forming an idea or principle in your mind*. Thus, conceptualization is an act or a process of developing an idea or principle. Merriam-Webster Dictionary gives two meanings to the word (verb) 'conceptualize': (1) *to form a concept of*, and (2) *especially, to interpret conceptually*. Collins Dictionary defines the word (noun)

'conceptualization' as the process or result of forming a concept or concepts out of observations, experience, data, etc; and the word (verb) 'conceptualize (or conceptualise)' as to form (a concept or concepts) out of observations, experience, data, etc. According to Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, 'conceptualize' refers to forming an idea of something in your mind. An examination of the above definitions reveals that conceptualization means an act or process of developing a concept or concepts/an idea or ideas out of observations, experience, data etc in the mind of the conceptualizer (the person who does the conceptualization).

The examination of the textbooks on Research Methods which are physically available to the researcher revealed a surprising result that is: no direct discussion of the term 'conceptualization' has been given in all the textbooks except two textbooks (Babbie, 1986; Schutt, 1996). Babbie (1986, p. 98) defines: "*Conceptualisation is the process through which we specify precisely what we will mean when we use particular terms*". Further, he defines that conceptualization is the refinement and specification of abstract concepts. In the glossary, Babbie (1986, p. 554) defines conceptualization as: "*The mental process whereby fuzzy and imprecise notions (concepts) are made more specific and precise. So you want to study prejudice. What do you mean by prejudice? Are there different kinds of prejudice? What are they?*" Thus, conceptualization of a concept is the process of specifying what the researcher will mean when using that concept. In other words, the meaning of the concept needs to be precisely specified by the researcher. It is not possible to study meaningfully the question without some precise working agreements as to the meaning of the term (Babbie, 1986). Thus, conceptualization is a process that involves developing precise working agreements in respect of the meaning of the term/concept/variable. Those working agreements will allow the researcher to work on the research question/s to achieve the research objective/s.

Schutt (1996, p. 69) defines conceptualization as "*The process of specifying what we mean by a term. In deductive research, conceptualization helps to translate portions of an abstract theory into testable hypotheses involving specific variables. In inductive research, conceptualization is the process used to make sense of related observations.*" Further, he (1996, p. 69) writes the importance of conceptualization in the way: "*After the concepts in a theory are defined, variables corresponding to the concepts can be identified (if the concept refers to a variable phenomenon), and measurement procedures can be developed. But we can't develop measures until we have defined the concepts on which the measures are based. We cannot expect others to understand our research, nor can we understand the research of others, unless the concepts are clearly defined.*" Thus, conceptualization becomes essential to define the concept under study, and then to identify the variable that corresponds to the concept being considered. Then, it becomes needed to develop a measurement procedure or an instrument to measure the variable to collect data. Furthermore, he stresses that it is not only possible for others to understand our research but also possible for us to understand others' research if a conceptualization has been done.

Thus, conceptualization refers to making an abstract, unclear, or general concept definite, clear, or specific. It makes a vague concept understandable so that the researcher and others do not misunderstand the meaning of the concept by ensuring the clarity of the full or exact

meaning. A right and sufficient conceptualization of a concept (for example, Labour-Management Relationship or Job Performance) provides the same meaning to the researcher and others by avoiding a situation where the same word gives different meanings to different persons. Further, it provides comparability enabling the researcher to do a comparison of his or her research study with the studies done by others in a meaningful way.

Here there are three associated words, i.e., term, concept, and variable. Collins Birmingham University International Language Database (Cobuild) English Language Dictionary (1987) gives several meanings to the word 'term', and the relevant meaning in this context is *"a word or expression with a specific meaning, especially one that is used in a particular variety of English or in relation to a particular subject."* Thus, a term is a word that gives a specific meaning used in a particular subject. The relevant meaning for 'term' given in the Oxford Paperback Dictionary (1979) is: *"a word or phrase considered as the name or symbol of something."* Thus, a term refers to a word used as a name for something.

Davis and Cosenza (1985, p. 20) write: *"Concepts are the basic building blocks of scientific investigation. They are creations of the human mind that are used in the classification and communication of the essence of some set of observations."* According to them, a concept is a creation of the mind of the researcher that is used to classify and communicate the essence of a set of observations; it is an abstract idea generalized from particular facts (things or phenomena believed as true) which are determined from reality through observations; and without concepts, there can be no theory. Babbie (1986) presents three main points relating to concepts: (1) Concepts are mental images used by us as summary devices for bringing together observations and experiences that seem to have something in common; (2) Our concepts do not exist in the real world, so they cannot be measured directly; and (3) It is possible to measure the things that our concepts summarize. Thus, a concept is a mental image used by the researcher as a summary device for bringing together his or her (and other researchers') observations and experiences that seem to have something in common, and it is impossible to measure the concept as it does not exist in the real world but it is possible to measure the things that are summarized in the concept. Emory and Cooper (1991, p. 49) write: *"If one is to understand and communicate information about objects and events, there must be a common ground on which to do it. Concepts are used for this purpose. A concept is a bundle of meanings or characteristics associated with events, objects, conditions, situations, and the like. Concepts are created by classifying and categorizing objects or events that have common characteristics beyond the single observation."* Thus, concepts are used for understanding and communicating information about objects, events, conditions, and situations. Schutt (1996, p. 69) defines a concept: *"A mental image that summarizes a set of similar observations, feelings, or ideas."* Accordingly, a concept is a summarized image developed by the researcher and it is in his or her mind. Concepts are basic building blocks of theory and represent the points around which business research is conducted, and a concept represents a label that we give to elements of the social world that seem to have common features and that strike us as significant (Bryman and Bell, 2011). According to the two authors, a concept can be considered as a basic idea that is used in theories and research. It is a basic idea given to things in the social world that share common features and are seen as important to us.

It is hardly found simple examples of concepts that are in line with the definitions given by the above authors. Refer to Exhibit 2 which provides three simplified examples of concepts in HRM.

Exhibit 2. Three Simplified Examples of Concepts in HRM

<p>Example 1: Concept is Leadership</p> <p>Leadership describes people who influence others to achieve their goals by using some sort of power. Different leaders may act differently, but it is possible to group them under the concept of leadership because they share common features such as directing, advising, and commanding in organizations and society.</p>
<p>Example 2: Concept is Job Performance</p> <p>Job performance describes the extent to which employees perform their jobs successfully. Different employees may perform in different ways and their performance can be evaluated based on different criteria such as quantity of work, quality of work, attendance, discipline, cooperation etc. These different degrees of performing on the different criteria can be grouped under the concept of job performance.</p>
<p>Example 3: Concept is Selection</p> <p>Selection describes choosing the most appropriate job applicant to fill the job vacancy from a pool of job applicants. There can be different ways of selecting the right candidate such as application evaluations, interviews, examinations, background investigations, and assessment centres to fill a job vacancy, but these different ways can be grouped under the concept of selection because they share common features such as choosing the most appropriate person and filling the job vacancy from the applicants.</p>

It seems that one classification of concepts presents two types, i.e., concrete concepts and abstract concepts. Though the writing made by Schutt (1996) does not directly present these two types of concepts, it indirectly does so. Based on his writing, concrete concepts are not hard to define and are familiar (e.g., childhood, aging, gender roles, and means of transportation) while abstract concepts are hard to define and unfamiliar (e.g., poverty, alienation, depression, and organic solidarity). Further, he points out that the concepts that are both most challenging and most important are abstract ones.

There is a word called 'construct'. Constructs are also concepts. Constructs are specific types of concepts which exist at higher level of abstraction; are invented for some theoretical purpose; generally are not directly tied to observables, instead are inferred by some indirect method, such as paper and pencil questionnaires; and examples include satisfaction, brand comprehension, and attitude (Davis and Cosenza, 1985). A construct is an image or idea specifically invented for a given research and/or theory-building purpose according to Emory and Cooper (1991). They (1991, p. 51) write: "*We build constructs, which are more complex, by combining the simpler concepts, especially when the idea or image we intend to convey is not directly subject to observation.*" Examples of constructs in HRM include job satisfaction, job involvement, job performance, greening, ethicality, coherence, integration, alignment, etc. and they exist at high level of abstraction. According to Emory and Cooper (1991), some concepts are more concrete, more likely to be observable, and have meanings more easily

agreed upon while others are combinations of concepts, that is, “constructed types,” which are more abstract, and therefore difficult to secure agreement on their meanings. According to them, constructs are less likely to be observable and have meanings which are more difficult to be agreed upon by different researchers.

Davis and Cosenza (1985, p. 20) write: *“It is difficult to talk about concepts and constructs in a research setting without referring to the term variable. A variable is simply a symbol or a concept that can assume any one of a set of values. The concept of variable is extremely important in measurement because it sets the limits on the range of values a measurement may take.”* Variables are the concepts which are considered for empirical investigations. They take a range of values. A variable is anything that can take on differing or varying values (Sekaran, 1992). Emory and Cooper (1991, p. 55) write: *“Scientists operate at both theoretical and empirical levels. At the theoretical level, there is a preoccupation with identifying constructs and their relations to propositions and theory. At this level, constructs cannot, as we’ve said before, be observed. At the empirical level where the propositions are converted to hypotheses and testing occurs, the scientist is likely to be dealing with variables. In actual practice, the term variable is used by scientists and researchers as a synonym for construct or the property being studied.”* As per the writing, a construct or a concept is named by the researcher as a variable at the time of an empirical investigation. There are different types of variables such as independent, dependent, intervening (mediating), moderating (contingent), and control variables (discussion of which is beyond the objective of this article).

All the concepts may not be variables because there are some concepts which are named as constants. Schutt (1996, p. 70) writes: *“Note that a concept ‘covers’ a set of observations, feelings, actions, or ideas that are similar in some respect, but that might or might not vary in a study.”* According to him, a concept may refer to either a constant or a variable in a study. By giving an example of a variable and an example of a constant, he (1996, p. 70) writes: *“For example, if the term age is defined as ‘the number of years since people were born,’ it brings to mind a continuum; age would be a variable in the general population. But if we study a sample of 80-year-olds in nursing homes, age would not be a variable since everyone is 80 years old, age is a constant.”* Thus, when a concept is defined as something that can take at least two attributes or values, it is a variable. If a concept is defined as something that does not change during the study (allowing the researcher to investigate the impact of other variables such as independent and dependent variables), it is a constant. Ary, Jacobs, and Razavieh (1996) write that a variable reflects or expresses some concept or construct and it takes on different values; the opposite of variable is constant which is a fixed value within a study. An example from HRM is: a study is done to compare the attitudes of employees who plan careers with those who do not plan careers. Employees are a constant. The attitudes and whether or not they plan careers are variables (the former is the dependent variable and the latter is the independent variable).

Conceptualization in HRM Research

Conceptualization in HRM is one step to be carried out in doing HRM research. It is the act of conceptualizing in researching of HRM aspect, aspects, or a problem. Researching involves a series of actions or activities which will be specified in a later section of this article. HRM researching involves a specific activity called conceptualization which involves making an abstract, unclear, or general HRM concept definite, clear, or specific.

Performing the Task of Conceptualization of A Concept or A Construct

How to perform the task of conceptualization of a concept or a construct? The literature examined does not suggest a particular way of conceptualizing a concept or a construct. However, it is essential to give a **working definition** to the concept or the construct being considered. Babbie (1986, p.102) defines: *“A nominal definition is one that is assigned to a term. In the midst of disagreement and confusion over what a term really means, the scientist specifies a working definition for the purposes of the inquiry.”* As per Babbie (1986), a working definition is alternatively named a **nominal definition**. A nominal definition is the specific definition given by the researcher in order to accomplish his/her research objectives. It works until the research ends. For example, a nominal definition of the variable *Labour-Management Relationship* is the perceived degree of how well labour unions and managers in an organization feel and behave towards each other. This definition encompasses how each party (i.e., labour and management) feels about (i.e., their attitudes such as trust, respect, or hostility) and acts towards (i.e., their behaviours such as cooperation, communication, or conflict) the other party. It reflects the subjective evaluation of the quality of the relationship, whether it is harmonious, adversarial, collaborative, or indifferent. This definition is constructed to suit the specific objectives of particular research, and it is not necessarily a universal or operational definition, but one that serves the research context by providing a focused and measurable construct.

A successful conceptualization should result in formulating a working definition for the concept or the construct. Each concept or the construct needs to have a working definition in order to avoid disagreement and confusion among the researchers. Another purpose of having a working definition is to ensure consistency throughout the research study with regard to the meaning of the concept or the construct. The purpose of conceptualization is to formulate a working definition. How to develop a working definition? A simplified way is to consider definitions given in the recognized dictionaries and, then to form a working definition by basing on those definitions or an analysis of those definitions.

Refer to Exhibit 3 for an example of a simplified way of developing a working definition based on the dictionary definitions. It is possible to utilize the definitions given by the noted authors to the concept or the construct. It is suggested to use several definitions, if not a considerable number of definitions such as 10 or 15 definitions because the use of only one definition is more likely impossible for the researcher to understand the domain of the meaning of the concept. In this regard a definition called a **constitutive definition** applies. Davis and Cosenza (1985, p. 22) write: *“Constitutive definitions define concepts with other concepts and constructs. It sets the domain of interest for the concept of interest.”* Refer to Exhibit 4 for an example of

a brief conceptualization that has a working definition derived from the definitions given by the noted authors.

Exhibit 3. An Example of A Simplified Way of Developing A Working Definition

Concept of Economic Satisfaction of Workers:

According to the Oxford Paperback Dictionary (1979), the verb ‘satisfy’ means to give a person what he wants or demands or needs, to make pleased or contented. The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English (1948) defines satisfaction as the state of being satisfied, pleased or contented; act of satisfying. According to the Dictionary of Personnel Management (Ivanovic, 1988), satisfaction is feeling of being happy or good feeling of happiness and contentment. Based on the above definitions, worker satisfaction at work is defined as follows:

“The degree of happiness and contentment which a worker feels in relation to the fulfillment of his/her needs at the work”.

Source: Opatha (1998)

Exhibit 4. An Example of A Brief Conceptualization

Concept of Work-Family Balance:

The concept of WFB is indeed an abstract one and it is possible to define it by different scholars differently. Also, there are different terms associated or used interchangeably with WFB. Work-Life Balance, Work-Family Fit, and Work-Family Integration are three alternative terms. It is possible that a professional has a life that has several aspects including work, family, social, spiritual, and other ones. In this study, work aspect and family aspect were considered.

Greenhaus et al (2003, as in Rantanen et al, 2011) define WFB as the extent to which an individual is equally engaged in-and equally satisfied with-his or her work and family role. Sekaran (1992) has defined work-life balance as healthy management of the work and nonwork spheres of life without experiencing undue stress. Work-life balance is the ability to meet commitments at home and at work (Guest, 2002, as in Nelson and Lyubomirsky, 2015). WFB is defined as the degree to which one fulfils demands coming and responsibilities arising from his or her employment and family (adapted from Opatha and Teong, 2014). According to Nelson and Lyubomirsky (2015) achieving work-life balance involves finding a happy medium in which one can meet the responsibilities of both work and home.

If an accounting professional fulfils the respective demands in the way that generates satisfaction, it is possible to say that he or she has a right balance between work and family. If an accounting professional cannot meet the respective demands and the relevant parties are dissatisfied, it is possible to say that he or she has an imbalance between work and family. The working definition of WFB is *the ability of an accounting professional to meet his/her employer’s expectations and his/her family members’ expectations to the extent that makes them happy*. It involves meeting commitments at both work and home through the use of sufficient time, energy, and competencies.

Source: Adapted from Opatha and Perera (2017)

One of the classic authors on social science research methodology is Vaus (2001), and, according to him, concepts do not have a fixed meaning, different definitions produce different findings, and consequently, defining concepts is a crucial stage of research. Further, he writes that defining concepts needs to be done deliberately and to be systematically and

carefully justified. There are three steps in developing and narrowing down a nominal definition that specifies the meaning of the concept but remains abstract, and they include (1) Obtain a range of definitions (looking at review articles, discipline dictionaries, encyclopaedias, and journal articles); (2) Decide on a definition (selecting one definition or creating a better definition from the common elements of several definitions, and then explaining and justifying your approach); and (3) Delineate the dimensions of the concept (spelling dimensions out as they can help to further refine the defining). Delineating dimensions comes under the next act called operationalization, however, it is possible to mention here that this third step by being the final step of the act of conceptualization (according to Vaus, this is clarifying concepts) will be the first step of the operationalization. Indeed, both conceptualization and operationalization are interconnected.

Giving a nominal definition to a variable does focus on the researcher's observational strategy, but it does not allow the researcher to observe (Babbie, 1986; Opatha, 2003). Therefore, there is a need of developing an operational definition to the variable. The process of developing an operational definition to the variable is referred to as operationalisation (Opatha, 2003). Babbie (1986, p.117) defines: *“Operationalization is the development of specific research procedures (operations) that will result in empirical observations representing those concepts in the real world.”* Sekaran (1992, p. 150) defines: *“Operationalizing or operationally defining a concept so that it becomes measurable, is achieved by looking at the behavioural dimensions, faces, or properties denoted by the concept, and categorizing these into observable and measurable elements. This involves a series of steps.”* A discussion of operationalization is beyond the objective of this research paper. For detailed examples of conceptualization and operationalization, vide Opatha and Ismail (2001); Opatha and Serasinghe (2011); Iddagoda, Opatha, and Gunawardana, (2016); Iddagoda and Opatha (2018); and Iddagoda and Opatha (2020).

Conceptualization of HRM Research

Conceptualization of HRM Research is a systematic attempt to specify the meaning of HRM research. First, an attempt is made to specify the meaning of research in general through an analysis of the definitions given in some of the textbooks on Research Methods utilized to write this research article. Then, the meaning of research in specific, i.e., HRM research is specified.

“Research is a detailed study of a subject or an aspect of a subject. When you do research, you collect and analyse facts and information and try to gain new knowledge or new understanding” (COLLINS Birmingham University English Language Dictionary, 1987). According to the COLLINS Birmingham University EL dictionary, a detailed study of a subject or an aspect of that subject is research that involves collecting and analysing facts and information. Furthermore, research is done to gain new knowledge or new understanding.

Tuckman (1972) wrote a textbook titled *“Conducting Educational Research”*, and he writes (p. 1) *“Research is a systematic attempt to provide answers to questions. Such answers may be abstract and general as is often the case in basic research, or they may be highly concrete and*

specific as is often the case in demonstration or applied research. In both kinds of research, the investigator uncovers facts and then formulates a generalization based on the interpretation of those facts." As per this writing, research is a systematic attempt and it is done to provide answers to questions. Furthermore, it has two types, i.e., basic research and applied research, and both types have a formulated generalization based on the interpretation of facts uncovered. One premise of Tuckman (1972) is that research is a useful tool for educators because its logical nature is essential for uncovering causal relationships and extremely useful for problem-solving.

Emory and Cooper (1991) define that research is a systematic inquiry aimed at providing information to solve problems. They consider that research includes reporting as well as descriptive, predictive, and explanatory studies. Further, they assert that research is always problem based: whether pure or applied, simple or complex, all research should provide an answer to some question. Thus, there is no research without a problem to be addressed to find an answer. Therefore, a research study cannot exist without a problem that needs an answer.

Cooper and Schindler (2006, p. 24) define research as any organized inquiry carried out to provide information for solving problems. As per this definition, research is any organized inquiry the purpose of which is to provide information that is useful to solve problems. Further, they (2006, p. 24) write: *"Business research is a systematic inquiry that provides information to guide decisions. More specifically, it is a process of determining, acquiring, analyzing and synthesizing, and disseminating relevant data, information, and insights to decision makers in ways that mobilize the organization to take appropriate actions that, in turn, maximize business performance."* Business research is a particular type of research and it is done to provide information (including facts) useful for making better decisions to maximize business performance.

Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2007, p. 5) define research as *"something that people undertake in order to find out things in a systematic way, thereby increasing their knowledge"*. According to them, the definition has two important phrases, i.e., 'systematic way' and 'to find out things'. As per their writing, 'Systematic' suggests that research is based on logical relationships and not just beliefs; involves an explanation of the methods used to collect the data, argues why the results obtained are meaningful, and explain any limitations that are associated with them. 'To find out things' suggests a multiplicity of possible purposes for research such as describing, explaining, understanding, criticising, analysing, and answering to a question or number of questions.

Sekaran (1992) defines research as a systematic and organized effort to investigate a specific problem that needs a solution. Further, she writes that research is a series of steps designed and followed, with the goal of finding answers to the issues that are of concern to us in the work environment. Thus, according to Sekaran (1992) research is an effort done in a systematic and organized way to solve a specific problem that exists in the work environment. In a recent edition, Sekaran and Bougie (2016) define business research as a systematic and

organized effort to investigate a specific problem encountered in the work setting, which needs a solution. Thus, business research is a type of research done to solve specific problems at work in business organizations. Further they (2016, p. 2) clearly and distinctly write: *“It (business research) comprises a series of steps that are designed and executed with the goal of finding answers to the issues that are of concern to the manager in the work environment. This means that the first step in research is to know where the problem areas exist in the organization, and to identify as clearly and specifically as possible the problems that need to be studied and resolved. Once the problem is clearly defined, steps can be taken to determine the factors that are associated with the problem, gather information, analyze the data, develop an explanation for the problem at hand and then solve it by taking the necessary corrective measures.”* When this writing is examined, it signifies business research done by applying the survey method. Of course, they mainly focus on the survey research in their classic book, experimental research is also detailed.

Salkind (2012) defines research as an organized process for collecting knowledge. Also, he (2012, p. 2) defines: *“Research is, among other things, an intensive activity that is based on the work of others and generates new ideas to pursue and questions to answer.”* An important feature of this definition is that research is a thorough activity based on the work done by others. Another feature that is common with the general defining of research is that research is done to generate new ideas to pursue and questions to answer. Furthermore, he presents 8 attributes of high-quality research which are interesting to mention here: (1) is based on the work of others, (2) can be replicated, (3) is generalizable to other settings, (4) is based on some logical rationale and tied to theory, (5) is doable, (6) generates new questions or is cyclical in nature, (7) is incremental, and (8) is an apolitical activity that should be undertaken for the betterment of society.

A brief content analysis of the above defining of the term Research and Business Research yields the following ten aspects of the meaning of research:

1. It is a detailed study of a subject or an aspect of a subject.
2. It involves collecting and analysing facts and information and trying to gain new knowledge or new understanding.
3. It is a systematic attempt to provide answers to questions.
4. It may be basic (fundamental or pure) or applied (practical or demonstration).
5. it is done at least by a researcher or an investigator who uncovers facts and then formulates a generalization based on the interpretation of those facts.
6. It is an organized inquiry carried out to provide information for solving problems.
7. It has a type called Business Research which is a systematic inquiry that provides information (including facts) useful for making better decisions to maximize business performance.
8. It is something undertaken to find out things in a systematic way, thereby increasing knowledge.
9. It is a series of steps designed and followed to accomplish the goal of finding answers to the issues that are of concern to us in the work environment.

10. It is an intensive activity that is based on the work of others and generates new ideas to pursue and questions to answer.

Now an attempt is made to conceptualize HRM research. HRM research refers to research done in the academic and professional field of HRM. HRM research is a systematic activity to find answers for specific questions in relation to a particular human resource management problem that has been specified lucidly (Opatha, 2003). As per this definition, it needs a certain HRM problem that has been clearly expressed and made easy so as to understand without confusion. This problem is broken into several specific questions which are to be answered through a planned and carefully completed activity. HRM research is defined as the systematic enquiry into HR issues to increase knowledge and underpin effective action (Anderson, Fontinha, and Robson, 2004). According to this definition, HRM research is a systematic enquiry or inquiry into issues in HRM for the purposes of increasing HRM knowledge and supporting or justifying HRM action. Further, they mention that HR research is about 'advancing knowledge' in a way that is relevant to changing organisational priorities, solution of HR problems and the continuous development of organisations involved in the research process itself. Through HRM research, HRM knowledge gets advanced and added (new) knowledge is useful for changing organizational priorities, solving HRM problems, and developing organizations. An HRM classic and popular UK author namely Armstrong (2009) defined that research is concerned with establishing what is and from this predicting what will be. Further, he writes that research is about the conception and testing of ideas. Forming HRM ideas and then testing these ideas in reality are in HRM research.

The above-mentioned ten aspects of the meaning of research can be applied to HRM research. HRM research is a type of research and it is a major type of business research. The term 'RESEARCHING' is analysed in the following way (using each letter of the verb or the term) so as to present activities to be done in doing a research study:

R = Reaching relevant records of concepts, principles, facts, etc. /literature to find gaps, state the problem, and formulate research questions
 E = Establishing objectives
 S = Seeking conceptualization and theorizing
 E = Engaging in operationalizing, instrumentation, and data collection
 A = Analyzing
 R = Reaching findings
 C = Communicating results
 H = Holding the discussion
 I = Implying/Indicating
 N = Noting future opportunities for research
 G = Generating/Giving rise to continuity

These activities can be perceived as steps to be carried out in doing an HRM research which applies a hypothetico-deductive approach. In the case of an HRM research study that applies

a qualitative approach, S and E get adjusted in the way, i.e., Seeking conceptualization of the main concepts and Engaging in data collection.

Why is HRM research done? Several reasons can be given to highlight the importance of HRM research. Sound research is needed for solving organizational problems, developing knowledge and theory of HRM, and for data-based HRM which is superior to intuition-based HRM (Schmitt and Klimoski, 1991). Generally, many problems are susceptible to occur in organizations if managing people at work is unsound (Opatha, 1994; Akuratiyagamage and Opatha, 2004; Opatha, 2009; Opatha, 2025), and they need to be solved efficiently and effectively in order to avoid many negative consequences such as low job satisfaction, low job performance, high absenteeism, high dysfunctional turnover, and low profitability or no profitability. Accurate solutions to HRM problems require accurate information which is primarily acquired through HRM research. Five reasons that highlight the importance of conducting HRM Research are given below (Adapted from Opatha, 2003):

1. To find out the truth that is hidden or that has not yet been discovered in relation to aspects of HRM.
2. To expand the existing body of knowledge of HRM.
3. To understand the basic everyday phenomena which need to be handled in managing people at work.
4. To provide the basis for right HRM decision-making.
5. To generate empirical support for a theory of HRM.

Five reasons why HR academics should engage in doing HRM research are:

1. To gain practical exposure to a theoretical issue in order to enhance the understanding of practice.
2. To publish research in academic and professional journals, thereby contributing to expand the existing body of knowledge of HRM.
3. To adopt various research findings to enhance the practice of teaching to students who read for degrees at different levels.
4. To work successfully as a research supervisor at the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels.
5. To improve self-esteem and career through obtaining promotions.

Five reasons why HR managers should know about HRM research are (Adapted form Opatha, 2003):

1. To identify and solve problems in managing personnel in the organisations.
2. To understand the published research and apply relevant important findings and suggestions to solve problems in HRM or enhance HRM phenomenon.
3. To assist in relating to a hired researcher or consultant more effectively or to share information that is relevant with the researcher/consultant more effectively.
4. To work as a management consultant in the future.

5. To improve self-esteem by having the ability to research systematically and scientifically.

They can be different types of HRM studies. Classification of HRM research may vary from one author to another. Refer to Exhibit 5 for a classification of HRM research.

Exhibit 5. A Classification of HRM Research

Type	Description
HRM Theory Based Audit	A formal attempt to examine the HRM systems in order to make sure that they have been formulated correctly. Here 'correctly' means the way that has been prescribed theoretically by highly qualified well-known author/s of HRM. The key question is: "Is the HRM system in line with the theory?"
HRM Planned Practice-Based Audit	A formal attempt to examine the HRM systems in order to make sure that they have been implemented correctly. Here 'correctly' means the way that has been prescribed officially by the chief officer in HRM (with the official approval of the CEO) for the purpose of implementation by all the managers of the organization. The key question is: "Is the carried out or implemented HRM system in line with the prescribed or planned practice?"
HRM Survey	A detailed investigation of a certain HRM phenomenon which may be a particular attitude of something or someone (e.g. job satisfaction), a particular employee behaviour (i.e. organizational citizenship behaviour), and a particular HRM result (i.e. job performance).
HRM Experiment	A systematic and scientific study to find out causation between two variables, one being dependent and the other being independent. This attempts to get a definite answer for the question: "Does variable X cause variable Y significantly and in a way that is either positive or negative?"
HRM Qualitative Study	Qualitative research usually emphasizes words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data (Bryman and Bell, 2011). It is a detailed investigation of a certain HRM phenomenon in the way that is predominately done without numbers, hypotheses and statistical analyses, but with verbal data.

Source: Adapted from Opatha (2024)

One associated term is HRM Analytics or HR Analytics (HRA). HRA is not HRM research, however, it includes HRM research. According to King (2016), HRA provides an evidence-based approach to HRM decision making, and it is a logical method that enables technological manipulation of information to provide insight on relevant issues. As per the writing done by Jayani Opatha (2021), HRA is the quantitative side of HRM and it provides descriptive, predictive, and prescriptive analytics for business decision makers so that more efficient and effective decisions are made. HRA has been discussed as an approach to evaluation of HRM

or the HRM function which is defined as the systematic attempts to measure and then further improve the contributions that HRM can give for the organization, the employees, and the society (Opatha, 2024). Opatha (2024, p. 609) writes: “*HRM analytics is a specific approach of evaluating HRM that focuses on the systematic identification and quantification of the employee-related drivers of business performance for the purpose of making better HRM and business decisions. It is a statistical and analytical approach to managing people at work. It is not only a major tool for evidence-based HRM but also a process that includes exploring, identifying, measuring, describing, explaining, predicting, and controlling employee-related drivers (i.e. employee engagement, employee commitment, employee absenteeism etc.) of strategic business success (i.e. profits, sales, customer satisfaction etc.)*”. As per the writing, HRA includes doing HRM research, thus HRA and HRM research are interrelated.

While the conceptualization of HRM research is not a specific activity in doing an HRM research study, conceptualization in HRM research is indeed a specific activity in doing an HRM research study. If an HRM research study involves five constructs, the activity of conceptualizing all of the five constructs has to be performed. The conceptualization of HRM research involves an attempt to understand what a research study in the field of HRM means. However, the conceptualization in HRM research involves an attempt to specify precisely what the researcher will mean from all the variables being studied under the HRM research.

Concluding Remarks

Five questions were formulated for the study which resulted in this conceptual paper. The first research question finds the answer that conceptualization refers to making an abstract, unclear, or general concept definite, clear, or specific. It is a process of making a vague concept understandable for the researcher and the reader. The second question is about the essentiality of conceptualization and the revealed finding is that conceptualization becomes essential owing to the reasons that the researcher and others do not misunderstand the meaning of the concept being studied or studied by ensuring the clarity of the full or exact meaning; it provides comparability of the researcher's research study with the studies done by others in a meaningful way; and it provides a working definition to avoid disagreement and confusion among the researchers. The finding regarding the third research question reveals that conceptualization in HRM is a specific and essential step to be carried out in doing HRM research, and it is the act of developing definite, clear, and specific working definitions for the concepts or variables being considered under a particular HRM research. The fourth research question is in respect of the conceptualization of HRM research, and the answer found is that conceptualization of HRM research is a systematic attempt to specify the meaning of HRM research, and being a type of business research, HRM research includes the yielded ten aspects of the meaning of research. The fifth question seeks an answer about how the conceptualization in HRM research differs from the conceptualization of HRM research. The finding is that the former is a specific activity in doing an HRM research study while the latter is not a specific activity in doing an HRM research study, but an act of defining what HRM research means. Research for the first time can be a daunting prospect (Taylor, Sinha, and Ghoshal, 2006). Hopefully, this article contributes, to some extent, to the beginners to realize that doing research is a journey of discovery and can bring considerable personal satisfaction

too. It is believed that the paper will be of utility for beginners who intend to do research in HRM and for junior academics who are supposed to engage continuously in researching for professional purposes.

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