HR image and stereotypes: climbing a cool or a shabby career ladder?

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Research aim

Every profession is concerned with its public image that takes place at the intersection of societal culture and individual perceptions.

Representations in popular culture can have a significant effect on any social group, helping to establish and reinforce group stereotypes, mirroring widely held public perceptions and determining social beliefs (Dryer, 1993; Dimnik & Felton, 2006). As prior studies demonstrate, the unfavourable or favourable stereotypes of a profession underlie the career choices (Albrecht & Sack, 2000). The more attractive a profession is the more outstanding students choose to specialize, invest their efforts and develop their careers within that professional domain.

Although some studies on HRM identities and activities identify different HRM purposes and roles (e.g., Ulrich, 1997; Urlich & Beatty, 2001), they do not focus specifically on how an HR identity is constructed and formed (Pritchard, 2010).

The purpose of this paper is to examine how the image of the HR professional is portrayed in popular culture in Southern Europe defining the interaction between the distal social environment and the HR professional career decisions. This aim would seem to be particularly relevant due to the socio-economic crisis and the greater work flexibility and less work security of the labour market that have been significantly affected the image of the HR professional (Kochan, 2004).

Based on an empirical study involving 782 management master students, the analysis considers 98 characters derived from 65 movies, TV series, books and comics. From the preliminary cluster and factor analyses, five HR stereotypes seem to emerge: the idealist, the meticulous, the narcissist, the executor and the superman. From a managerial perspective, the paper provides valuable results on the attractiveness of careers in the HR domain and suggests some guidelines to sustain its popular image and talent attraction. From the theoretical perspective, it enables reflecting on the role of popular culture in shaping individual career decisions and behaviours.

Socio-cultural context and career decisions

A growing number of researchers (Collins, 1990; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Leong, 1996) have indicated the range and complexity of factors that influence career decision-making and the need to consider a much broader range across various disciplines at both the individual and environmental level. For instance, Lent, Brown & Hackett (1994, 1996)

identify factors such as gender, race, disability and status as relevant to explaining career decision-making processes in addition to contextual variables such as skill development opportunities, cultural and gender-role socialization processes, emotional and financial support, job availability in the preferred field and socio-cultural barriers. Other researchers such as Rounds & Hesketh (1994) list variables such as gender, professional prestige and equal work opportunities. Lent, Brown and Hacket (2002) identify six categories that influence career choices: interests, direct and vicarious exposure to work-relevant activities, work conditions, considering oneself good at an activity and leisure experiences, while other categories such as family, friends and teachers influence positive or negative choices. They conclude that choice barriers or supports include generic factors in function of an individual's social and cultural experiences.

These results are consistent with social learning and social cognitive theories in the career decision-making process (e.g., Krumboltz & Nichols, 1990; Lent, Brown & Hackett, 1996). These theories address the interaction of social and cultural factors on decision-making, acknowledging that they become enmeshed in an individual's identity. Social and cultural experiences are thus an integral part of the career decision-making process itself and evolve across individual lives. This approach emphasizes that learning experiences (both direct and vicarious) shape people's vocational interests, values and choices.

According to Bright and colleagues (2005), the social and cultural experiences that influence the career decision-making process can be subdivided into proximal and distal socio-environmental influences. The former include parental and family influences, friends, teachers and trainers while the distal social environment is defined by information deriving from the media including cinema, television, the internet and other printed sources (Bright, Pryor, Wilkenfeld & Earl, 2005).

These arguments support the relevance of social and cultural processes as factors that influence the career decision-making process.

Professional image and career attractiveness

The construction of a professional image has significant implications in achieving social approval, power, well-being and career success (Baumeister, 1982; Ibarra, 1999; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Rosenfeld, Giacalone & Riordan, 2001; Schlenker, 2003) and individuals invest a considerable amount of energy in enhancing and developing their careers also in relation to their professional image.

Professional image is "*the aggregate of key constituents' perceptions of one's competence and character*" (Morgan Roberts, 2005). This definition refers to reflected appraisals (how individuals think others perceive them) rather than self-image (how one perceives oneself) or the actual perceptions of others (Ibarra, 1999; Tice & Wallace, 2003). According to this definition, the professional image is shaped not only by personal identity traits but also by the characteristics of social identity groups. Social identity refers to "*that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from [his or her] knowledge of [his or her] membership in a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership*" (Tajfel, 1978: 63). Social identity theory suggests that the importance given to any particular collective identification is determined by how similar people believe they are to the groups that they are part of (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Social identities influence the perceived professional image; individuals categorize, stereotype and interpret each other's behaviours according to their expectations of the social identity groups (Tajfel, 1978; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987).

In view of the significance of cultural representations and stereotypes for any social group, career researchers have devoted much attention to investigating the public image of various professions (Dans, 1998; Asimow, 2001; Greenfield, 2001; Walker & Lawson, 1993; Dimnik & Felton, 2006). Furthermore, behavioural studies have heightened this interest by suggesting that individuals effectively base their career selections on their impressions of vocational stereotypes (Holland, 1973).

These arguments support the relevance of shared social professional image as factors that influence the career attractiveness

The present study attempts to investigate some of the social and cultural factors and public representations that a) influence the career decisions of individuals in the HR professional domain and b) contribute to defining the public image of HR professionals and shaping the HR group social identity. Specifically, the paper aims to identify the HR job stereotypes that are formed and reinforced by the media including cinema, television and literature.

HR stereotypes and popular entertainment

The career decisions and actions of individuals are influenced by pre-existing stereotypes. Stereotypes are defined as a collection of attributes believed to describe the members of a social group (Lippman, 1922) and typify people in general and conventional terms rather than in personal and individual terms (Brehm & Kassim, 1993; Myers, 1994). Such typifications

are often criticized as over-simplified and misrepresentative, yet the typification processes underlying stereotyping are not only inevitable but also potentially useful. The positive potential of social learning arises from imitating role models. Stereotypes are used *"to form and identify social groups and influence our interaction with those identified as group members"* (Oakes, Haslam & Turner, 1994: 1). Oakes et al. (1994) describe the stereotyping process as an enriching mechanism that enables individuals to systematize their environment and preserve social values.

From this perspective, stereotypes help individuals form and identify different groups and contribute to the development of beliefs that help explain events, justify collective actions and to maintain positive intergroup distinctiveness.

As Fowler (1994), Ulrich (1997), Torrington and Hall (1998), and Gibb (2000) attest, the history of HRM and personnel management is characterized by different images of HR professionals, which are at times controversial, at times positive, at times negative (e.g., Gibb, 2000; Hallier & Summers, 2011). Although various studies on HRM identities and activities identify different HRM purposes and roles, they do not focus on how practitioner constructions of the HR identity are formed. Thus, the aim of this paper is to identify HR job stereotypes and how these are shaped and reinforced by popular culture through cinema, television and literature.

Research design

Popular media can be considered an effective barometer of changes in attitude towards particular professional groups since the entertainment industry and popular literature respond to the demands of their audiences (Dimnik & Felton, 2006). Smith & Briggs (1999) and Dimnik & Felton (2006) provide examples of professional stereotypes in short stories, novels, movies and television. In literature and fiction, a stereotype is constructed through a few immediately recognizable and defining traits that identify the general and recurrent features of a specific social group (Dyer, 1993). Popular media such as films, TV series and novels are especially effective in reinforcing social stereotypes because they encourage character identification and engage the audience (Grant, 1986).

Identifying HR characters in popular imagination

To identify the HR professional stereotypes that currently influence career decisions and behaviours, 782 master students in management (resulting in 146 teams) attending HRM and International HRM courses were invited to participate in a study over a period of 11

semesters (from late 2007 to mid-2013). In one of the assignments in the first part of the course, we asked them to provide the names of characters identified as HR employees or professionals from films, TV series, novels and different forms of popular imagination. Thereafter, we used their suggestions during lessons as an opening to discuss the roles of the HR department and subsequently the strategic HRM perspective. We continuously updated the list of nominated characters through the e-learning environment adopted in each course to confirm which characters had already been proposed and encourage participants to be original and find new characters. The assignment also required narrating under which circumstances they "bumped into" that specific piece of popular imagination. The purpose of this was to enable us to consider the fictional characters that actually contribute to shaping young people's idea of working in the HR department.

Overall, the students nominated a list of 84 artistic pieces from movies, TV series, novels, theatrical performances and comics from mainly Italy, the US, France, Spain and the UK. We cross-referenced and revised the list by checking the descriptions of the characters in internet databases (particularly *imdb.it*, *mymovies.it*, *it.wikipedia.org*), movie reviews in newspapers and periodicals, and through discussions with two managers of BiblioLavoro[1], which is a non-profit cultural organization that manages a library, historical and video archives on labour and trade union activities.

The aim of this revision was to verify that the proposed films, series and books had at least one character who actually worked in an HR department and that the selected performances were available in video/film and manuscript format. This process resulted in 65 outlets containing 98 HR characters. Among these, we viewed 68 movies, and TV series and red 15 novels and 1 comic strip.

Our study includes Italian as well as foreign outlets (French, Spanish, English, German, Swiss and American) mainly distributed in Italy and translated into Italian or, in a few cases, transmitted on satellite TV in the original language (Italians often watch these to improve their English). The presence of some French and Spanish outlets is due to the fact that these countries are culturally very close to Italy and influence our popular image. The presence of US outlets, instead, reflects the heavy presence of the American media and entertainment industry in Italy.

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[1] http://www.lombardia.cisl.it/biblionew.asp?menu=16&voce=Libri (November 2014).

Data gathering

At the end of each semester, the authors skimmed the list of outlets provided by students and considered the newly reported outlets. Thereafter, we separately watched or read these and coded the HR characters. To describe the traits of the characters, we adapted and slightly modified the coding table proposed by Dimnik and Felton (2006). In particular, we adapted the scale of some characteristics and changed others, coding each character on 43 characteristics. In view of the specificity of the HR department within the organization (i.e., dealing with and looking after people in the organization and thus having regular contact with line managers), we decided to add three characteristics to the original coding table: the prevalent type of coordination used by the HR character (either mainly hierarchical, hierarchical and horizontal or mainly horizontal), the changing rate of the organizational context, the complexity (in terms of relationships) of the organizational context.

The formalization of the meaning of each scale allowed addressing the potential problems of inter-coder reliability and reliability over time (Dimnik & Felton, 2006). Moreover, the authors periodically met to compare and discuss the coding of characters and to make a final decision on these. To find a common view of coding characters who dramatically changed during or at the end of the story, we preliminarily agreed to consider the prevalent characteristics that distinguish them in most of the plot.

Data analysis

To find a more manageable set of characteristics, we carried out a factor analysis using principal components and varimax rotation. Nine factors were extracted from the observed 43 characteristics. The analysis passed both the Bartlett test of sphericity (chi-square significance of 0) and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (0.706). The results identified nine factors as relevant and explained 69% of the variance of the characteristics. We labelled these factors as: warmth, charm, spirit, competence, success, analysis, appearance, ascendancy and context. We used the nine factors to perform the cluster analysis (K-means algorithm) and to find the HR stereotypes. The solution maximizing both the internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity identified five clusters: 19 characters were classified as idealists, 19 as meticulous, 17 as narcissists, 32 as executors and 11 as supermen.

Preliminary findings

From the analysis, most of the HR stereotypes that emerged have negative and unappealing meanings, and this negative image is also reinforced in more recent outlets:

public representations prevalently portray HR professionals as unscrupulous and impassive, or as boring and bunglers.

Stereotype # 1: The idealist. These have the highest score for warmth and the lowest for success. Idealists are genuine, oriented towards other people and sincerely worried about the feelings and situations of others. These characters are often charming and invest energy and passion in their work activities. They are generally depicted as having jobs that entail relations with others, they are sympathetic and empathic but with little organizational authority and personal power. They show romantic optimism and are pleasant, easy-going and calm and, finally, they are described as quite competent but not successful. They seem to put much of their efforts into ideal issues, with low effectiveness and credibility in their careers.

Stereotype # 2: The meticulous. The meticulous have the highest mean score for analytical attitude and the lowest mean score for spirit. They have little humour, are sloppy, boring, unattractive and unappealing. They pay attention to detail, but are not entirely successful and have a low average ascendancy. In many ways, the meticulous are defined by their working context that is presented as stable, dark and boring and which sometimes they would like to escape from. They do not have influence and are not critical to organizational performance.

Stereotype # 3: The narcissist. Narcissists have the lowest mean scores for warmth, ascendancy and competence and the highest for charm. They are more worried about their appearance than their knowledge. They tend to manipulate and are almost incompetent. In terms of success, they are pictured as neutral. They are all smoke and no fire.

Stereotype # 4: The executor. Executors are cold perpetrators. They have the lowest medium scores for charm and appearance and the highest for spirit. They are usually called on to deal with 'dirty and unpopular situations' and act in a very sarcastic, unsympathetic and emotionless way. Executors are bad looking and strongly conform to doing what is asked of them. They are presented as quite successful at work although not loved by others. Their overall image is mostly negative due to their cynical and indifferent and sarcastic behaviour, frequently imposed by the actual economic crisis where they are called on to fire, manipulate and exploit others.

Stereotype # 5: The superman. Supermen have the highest mean scores for three factors: success, appearance and competence. They are professional, skilled and competent, very successful and emotionally balanced. They face complex environments. Expert knowledge and extraordinariness are the professional traits of this stereotype. They are the most positive and successful amongst the other HR characters.

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