

# **Antecedents and Performance Consequences of Talent Management**

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## Synopsis

### 1 | TALENT DEFINED

*“Between the continuous war for talent (which has only increased in urgency rather than decreased [...]), the changing demographic nature of the workforce, the aging of the boomers and entrance of the millennials, and the ever increasing pace of change in technology and the financial marketplace, organizations and their leaders are under tremendous pressure to get the talent equation right.”*

—(Church & Waclawski, 2010, p. xvii)

Multiple macro-environmental developments urge today’s organizations more than ever to focus their attention on those employees who can make a true difference to organizational success—talent. But these macro-environmental developments merely accelerate what is inherent to the ‘war for talent’ (Aguinis, Gottfredson, & Joo, 2012): First, only few individuals possess the characteristics required to be considered as ‘top human capital’; second, these talented individuals contribute disproportionately to organizations’ overall success, generating a great deal of revenues and profits (O’Boyle Jr. & Aguinis, 2012). But what does ‘talent’ mean? Any explanation of how organizations can take advantage of the capacity of talent to contribute to organizational success requires a shared understanding of “assumptions and beliefs about the nature, value, and instrumentality of talent” (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014, p. 192). Several conceptual reviews have been devoted to identifying and comparing notions of what constitutes ‘talent’ in the organizational realm, drawing attention to the multi-faceted nature of talent which varies as a function of theoretical perspective (Dries, 2013; Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & González-Cruz, 2013; Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014; Meyers, van Woerkom, & Dries, 2013; Nijs, Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & Sels, 2014). Meyers et al. (2013) identify three core constructs that surround definitions of talent in human resource management (HRM) research: (Meta-) Competencies, high potential, and high performance.

In the organizational context, the constructs defining talent are closely interrelated (cf. Nijs et al., 2014). *Individual potential* can be described as “[...] the possibility that individuals can become something more than what they currently are” (Silzer & Church, 2009, p. 379).

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Accordingly, attributing high potential to employees is typically based on a judgment of their endowment with *meta-competencies* (Silzer & Church, 2009, p. 380). These meta-competencies may encompass cognitive abilities, social competence, personality traits, and growth- and learning competencies, all of which are considered to contribute to exceptional current and future individual performance (Finkelstein, Costanza, & Goodwin, 2018). Research on human performance has particularly emphasized the role of general mental ability (GMA)—“the ability to learn” (Schmidt, 2002, p. 188)—in assessing employees’ potential since GMA facilitates the acquisition of lower-level competencies (Briscoe & Hall, 1999)—knowledge, skills, abilities, and other personal characteristics—so as to increase the prospects of *high performance* in strategically important positions in the future (Silzer & Church, 2009, p. 380). Moving up the organizational hierarchy involves successively greater task complexity owing to the uncertainty associated with more encompassing and turbulent environments (Osborn & Hunt, 2007), such that GMA becomes all the more important as a predictor of job performance (cf. Ones, Viswesvaran, & Dilchert, 2005). Meta-competencies such as GMA that lend employees the potential to succeed in strategically important positions occur at a low natural rate, such that talents’ human capital can be described as inherently scarce (Chadwick, 2017).

## 2 | THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF TALENT MANAGEMENT

Drawing on the categorization of talent philosophies by Meyers and van Woerkom (2014) along the lines of rareness (exclusive vs. inclusive) and malleability (innate vs. acquired), the interrelations between (meta-)competencies, potential, and performance described above suggest conceiving of talent as an ‘exclusive/innate’ construct. The conception of talent as exclusive and innate bears important implications for the capacity of firms to derive a competitive advantage from human capital resources. Resource-based view (RBV) perspectives (Barney, 1991; Barney & Wright, 1998; Wright, Dunford, & Snell, 2001) posit that competitive advantage may only be achieved by creating value via resources that are not

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only of strategic value to the firm, but which are also rare and difficult to imitate or substitute. *Human capital* resources are generally assumed to fulfill these criteria, which is particularly true of talent; but since this type of resources cannot be ‘owned’ (Coff, 1997), a competitive advantage from human capital resources can only be sustained when these human capital resources are subjected to HRM policies and practices which ensure the continued commitment of employees to the firm and increase social complexity, causal ambiguity, and path dependence so as to prevent imitation (cf. Coff & Kryscynski, 2011). Therefore, firms need to actively manage talent in order to generate competitive advantage.

But how can talent be managed? To answer this question, we first need to understand what talent management (TM) is and what it is not. Although conceptualizations of TM vary between disciplines and even within the field of TM itself (cf. Dries, 2013; Gallardo-Gallardo, Nijs, Dries, & Gallo, 2015), a recent review by Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2015) identifies the RBV (Barney, 1991) as the most commonly used theoretical framework. Furthermore, reviews by Cappelli and Keller (2014) and Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen (2016) note an increasing dominance of exclusive approaches to TM in the literature, whose conception of TM advocates disproportionately allocating resources to talent to maximize firms’ return on investment (Cappelli & Keller, 2014, p. 307f.). Such an exclusive approach to employee development corresponds to the view that talent is of rare occurrence (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014) and accommodates empirical evidence on productivity in more complex and autonomous jobs being concentrated among a small number of individuals at the right tail of a power law distribution (Aguinis, O’Boyle Jr., Gonzalez-Mulé, & Joo, 2016). Thus, TM is distinct from HRM systems such as high-performance work systems (HPWS; Posthuma, Campion, Masimova, & Campion, 2013) with respect to the scope of targeted employees—few high-potential employees (TM) vs. all employees (HRM) (Adamsen & Swailes, 2019).

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The notion of disproportionate investment in talent is apt to be misunderstood as a sole managerial focus on an organizational elite not only at the expense, but to the complete neglect of the vast majority of employees in a firm's workforce. Albeit largely overlooked by most strategic HRM (SHRM) research, it is a common phenomenon that firms engage in *workforce differentiation* (Guest, 2011), acknowledging that different employee groups require different levels of investment and hence different HRM policies and practices based on their strategic importance to the firm as captured in the *architectural theory of HRM* (Lepak & Snell, 1999; Lepak & Snell, 2002). Therefore, exclusive TM merely introduces a particularly elitist status dichotomy into a larger system of status dichotomies, but which is less elitist in that a differentiated HR architecture distinguishes between broad categories of workers such as core and peripheral staff (Lepak & Snell, 1999). At that time being a controversial idea, Lepak and Snell suggested that "the most appropriate mode of investment in human capital will vary for different types of human capital" (Lepak & Snell, 1999, p. 32)—namely, based on the value and uniqueness of human capital resources. In the meantime, the notion of workforce differentiation has been recognized as a key theoretical development in SHRM research (Cappelli & Keller, 2014, p. 307). This development mainly owes to the adaptations by Huselid, Becker, and Beatty (Becker & Huselid, 2006; Huselid, Beatty, & Becker, 2005; Huselid & Becker, 2011) and Collings and Mellahi (2009) who popularized the notion of workforce differentiation within SHRM and TM research, respectively.

Huselid, Becker, and Beatty took the McKinsey-advocated TM ideology of disproportionate investment in 'A-Players' as a starting point to argue that firms should focus on positions rather than people (Huselid et al., 2005). The subtle difference between their account on employee investment and that of Lepak and Snell (1999) concerns the fact that the latter authors built their architectural theory of HRM inter alia from human capital theory and therefore did not explicitly differentiate between people and positions. However, similar to the

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architectural theory of HRM, the workforce differentiation approach to HRM advocates for a portfolio approach to investment in employees. Specifically, Huselid et al. (2005) argue that positions differ in their strategic importance for value creation by means of their centrality to strategy execution and the variability in performance between incumbents as an indicator of ‘upside potential’. These two dimensions are essentially compatible with Lepak and Snell’s dimensions of value—which these authors also conceived of as potential to create value for the firm—and uniqueness—which, on the long run and apart from short-term labor market fluctuations, is entirely determined by the natural rate at which exceptional abilities occur (i.e., the prevalence of talent).

Collings and Mellahi (2009) were the first to propose the notion of workforce differentiation as a theoretical lens to investigate the performance implications of TM (cf. Meyers, van Woerkom, Paauwe, & Dries, in press). In a sharpened version of their original theoretical account on the workforce-differentiation approach to TM with a particular focus on multinational companies (Collings, Mellahi, & Cascio, 2019), the authors propose TM to consist of three pillars or organizational routines: First, the routine of identifying pivotal positions (and periodically reevaluating where these positions are located within the organization) in terms of the above mentioned centrality to strategy execution and performance variability (e.g., Becker & Huselid, 2006). Second, the routine of identifying and developing talent pools comprised of high-potential and high-performing incumbents. This routine includes developing competencies in talent that are in line with the organization’s values so as to be useful across a wide range of positions; by this means, this second routine accommodates the requirement to flexibly build, integrate, and reconfigure human capital resources to match dynamically changing business environments (Linden & Teece, 2014). Third, the routine of developing a differentiated HR architecture that leverages the firm’s most important human capital resources so as to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. In recognition of the



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potential imitability of human capital resources, this third routine aims at increasing the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other performance-related characteristics of the talent pool, matching employees with critical positions, and ensuring their sustained motivation and commitment to the firm.

The workforce differentiation approach to TM is generally ascribed the genuine feature of advocating a focus on positions rather than people (Cappelli & Keller, 2014). However, as can be seen from the description of the third routine, the workforce differentiation approach to TM acknowledges the importance of both positions and people. On the one hand, the workforce differentiation approach to TM emphasizes the role of people in arguing that firms need to build talent pools comprised of high-potential and high-performing employees (i.e., talent). On the other hand, the workforce differentiation approach to TM emphasizes the role of the firm in matching talent to positions where they can best leverage their potential to contribute to organizational success.

### **3 | RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Despite the rapid growth of empirical TM research in recent years (Gallardo-Gallardo, Thunnissen, & Scullion, in press), reviews of the TM field have repeatedly observed and acknowledged that our knowledge about the implications of TM for organizational performance is severely limited (Collings, 2015; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015; Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016; McDonnell, Collings, Mellahi, & Schuler, 2017). Hence, TM research has thus far failed to achieve consensus on the question whether TM is an appropriate means to achieve greater organizational performance—the TM-performance hypothesis (Collings, 2015), which is key to the workforce differentiation approach to TM and as such (mostly implicitly) underlies much if not most research on TM. Moreover, a recent review by Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen (2016) noted that it remains elusive in both theoretical and empirical respect whether the effectiveness of the exclusive approach to TM in enhancing

organizational performance is subject to boundary conditions. Hence, in my dissertation I ask *“How effective is the exclusive approach to TM in enhancing organizational performance, and under what boundary conditions?” (Research Question 1)*. Concerning the role of boundary conditions, Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (in press) call for a contextual perspective on TM, acknowledging that internal (e.g., a firm’s strategy, structure, culture, and key decision-makers’ coalitions) and external factors (e.g., ‘competitive’ market forces) influence TM systems and their effect on organizational performance, consistent with the extant contingency-based theorizing in the field of SHRM (e.g., Paauwe, 2004).

Therefore, we might not only ask under what conditions exclusive TM is most effective in enhancing organizational performance, but also under what conditions firms strategically choose to engage in TM activities in the first place. An important, if not the most important, element of the TM process by which organizations attract, identify, develop, and retain those employees who are deemed to have the highest potential to succeed strategic positions in the organization is the use of *high-potential schemes* (Finkelstein et al., 2018). A core feature of high-potential schemes is to designate these employees as ‘high-potentials’ or ‘talent’—a tangible manifestation of the power, status, and prestige differentials accompanied with exclusive approaches to TM. The power, status, and prestige differentials resulting from high-potential scheme use raise ethical questions (Swales, 2013) that organizational decision-makers likely take into account when deciding for or against the use of high-potential schemes. Therefore, a second yet unanswered research question in the field of TM guided this dissertation: *“Under what conditions do firms strategically choose to use high-potential schemes to develop their high-value, high-uniqueness employees?” (Research Question 2)*.

#### **4 | RESEARCH AIMS AND CONTRIBUTIONS**

The present dissertation comprises four individual studies that complement each other in answering the two overarching research questions so as to enhance our knowledge about the

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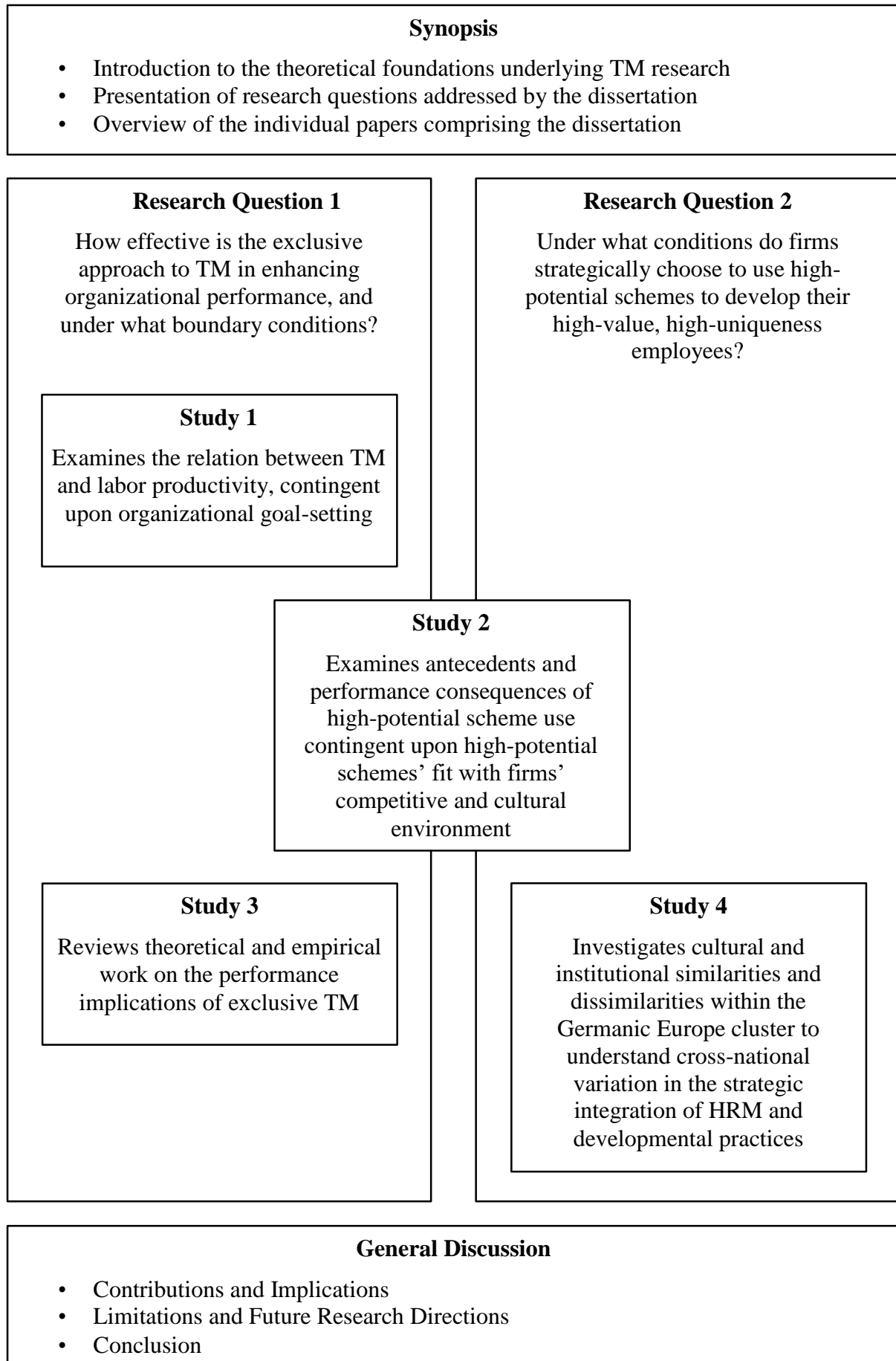
antecedents and performance consequences of exclusive, workforce differentiation-based TM. This Synopsis and a General Discussion of the findings detail how the four studies relate to Research Questions 1 and 2. Figure 0-1 on page 9 illustrates the outline of the dissertation and relates each study's research aims to the research questions presented above. In the following, I will briefly outline each study's theoretical background, link to the general research questions, methodology, results, and contributions. In addition, Table 0-1 on page 15 provides an overview of the studies' titles, research aims, contributions, theoretical perspectives, core constructs, methodologies, and samples (if applicable).

#### **4.1 | Study 1: Talent Management and Labor Productivity: The Moderating Role of Organizational Goal-Setting**

Study 1 (co-authored) addresses Research Question 1 by examining the relationship between TM and labor productivity and how organizational goal-setting (Young & Smith, 2013) moderates this relationship. The basic tenet of our theory is that TM generates higher levels of labor productivity, but which relationship is hypothesized to be contingent upon organizations' emphasis on setting specific, difficult and temporally proximal goals to provide talent with the ability, motivation, and opportunities (via incentivizing senior managers to develop talent) to fully exploit their competencies (Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg, Kalleberg, & Bailey, 2000). We test our hypotheses using panel data from an international sample of 1,997 manufacturing firms nested in 115 3-digit Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) industries drawn from the World Management Survey (Bloom, Genakos, Sadun, & Van Reenen, 2012). Using multilevel analysis, we take advantage of a unique feature of panel data on firms that is commonly overlooked in management research, namely the researcher's ability to differentiate between- and within-organization effects (Certo, Withers, & Semadeni, 2017).

**FIGURE 0-1**

## Outline of the Dissertation



Referring to the between-organization effect of TM, we found that firms with higher average levels of TM across the observation period had higher average levels of labor productivity across the observation period. Referring to the within-organization effect of TM, we found that firms which improved TM (relative to their average level across the observation period) experienced increased labor productivity (relative to their average level across the observation period) only when the improvement in TM was matched with improvements in goal-setting practices toward setting more specific, difficult, and temporally proximal goals. Adding to the debate on the performance implications of TM and the boundary conditions under which the TM-performance relationship exists, our findings contribute to answering Research Question 1. The results of Study 1 support the proposition by McDonnell et al. (2017) that the organizational context in which talent is deployed determines the influence of TM on organizational performance. Specifically, the results of Study 1 suggest organizational goal-setting practices to support the alignment of firms' talent pool strategies with their organizational goals (Collings et al., 2019) so as to enhance the impact of TM on labor productivity. Our estimates of the effect of TM on labor productivity indicate that investments in TM generate sizeable returns, suggesting that firms should invest in their most valuable and unique human capital resources—especially when considering that CEOs worldwide perceive talent shortages to limit growth (PwC, 2014). Moreover, our finding of temporally persistent differences between firms with respect to TM suggests that firms may be able to sustain a competitive advantage from superior TM.

#### **4.2 | Study 2: Antecedents and Performance Consequences of High-Potential Scheme Use: The Role of Firms' Competitive and Cultural Environment**

Study 2 (single-authored) investigates antecedents and performance consequences of high-potential scheme use and hence addresses both Research Questions 1 and 2. Drawing on competitive- and culture-based contingency logic (cf. Lepak & Shaw, 2008; Vaiman &

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Brewster, 2015), Study 2 hypothesizes that firms more likely use a high-potential scheme to develop their most valuable and unique employees and to benefit to a larger extent from such a scheme with respect to organizational performance when high-potential scheme use fits their competitive and cultural environment. I test my hypotheses using a multi-industry sample of private firms from 23 countries drawn from the 2014-2016 survey of the Cranfield Network on International Human Resource Management (Cranet; Reichel, Farndale, & Sender, 2017), to which I contributed through my capacity as coordinator of the data collection in Germany.

The results on the antecedents of high-potential scheme use generally support a contingency perspective but show a complex pattern of practice adoption. The findings highlight the importance of differentiating between firms' decision to implement a high-potential scheme and the decision concerning the extensiveness to which such a scheme is used for the development of high-potential employees. The relationship of high-potential scheme use with organizational performance was found to be significant and positive, but contrary to expectations did not vary as a function of competitive and cultural contingency factors. Therefore, Study 2 provides important implications with respect to the role of contextual factors in determining both the use and effectiveness of high-potential schemes as a core element of exclusive approaches to TM, hence answering the call by Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (in press) for a contextual perspective on TM. Specifically, while contingency factors internal and external to the firm may incentivize organizational decision-makers to a higher or lesser degree to implement a high-potential scheme, once implemented, firms benefit from higher organizational performance irrespective of these contextual factors.

### **4.3 | Study 3: The Relationship between Talent Management and Performance**

Written as a stand-alone review on the link between TM and performance, Study 3 (co-authored) addresses Research Question 1 from a bird's eye-view, examining previous theoretical and empirical work to determine the current state of knowledge about the

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performance implications of TM at both the individual and organizational level. Owing to the nascent state of the literature, this review takes into consideration both the academic and practitioner literature on individual and organizational outcomes of TM, including related streams of research such as those on intra-organizational status and leadership development. Study 3 diverges from previous reviews of the TM field (e.g., Cappelli & Keller, 2014; De Boeck, Meyers, & Dries, 2018; Tarique & Schuler, 2010; Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2019) in two significant respects. First, Study 3 is exclusively concerned with research speaking to the TM-performance relationship such that it delves more deeply into individual- and organization-level theory and evidence and their links with each other to inform our understanding and knowledge about the performance implications of TM. Second, Study 3 is intended as a selective review of research that explicitly or implicitly (based on our reading) conforms to TM defined as the practice of disproportionately investing resources in an exclusive subset of employees with the requisite abilities and competencies to succeed in strategically valuable positions in the future (Finkelstein et al., 2018), consistent with the workforce differentiation approach to TM (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Collings et al., 2019).

Study 3 is divided into two parts, one focusing on individual-level research and the other focusing on organization-level research. With regard to individual-level research, Study 3 provides an overview of relevant theoretical perspectives on the reactions of talent and non-talent employees to TM and summarizes the current state of empirical knowledge. The section on theoretical perspectives also extends to the organization-level implications of TM by means of discussing the potential of the often-assumed detrimental effects of TM on excluded employees to permeate higher levels of analysis so as to affect organizational outcomes—which have analytical primacy over individual outcomes in management research (B. Schneider, 2018). With regard to organization-level research, Study 3 briefly outlines the workforce differentiation approach to TM as the predominant theoretical framework on the

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organization-level relationship between TM and performance before turning to examining the current state of evidence on this relationship. Study 3 also provides an extensive discussion of future research directions, building on both theoretical and methodological shortcomings of previous individual- and organization-level research on the performance consequences of TM.

#### **4.4 | Study 4: Human Resource Management in the Germanic Context**

Study 4 (co-authored) attends to Research Question 2 from a more general view compared to Study 2. Specifically, Study 4 adopts a comparative perspective and examines cultural and particularly institutional similarities and dissimilarities within the Germanic Europe cluster as defined by the GLOBE study (Gupta & Hanges, 2004, p. 191) to understand cross-national variation in the approach of firms to the strategic integration of HRM and developmental HRM practices, including high-potential schemes. British and US-American multinational companies are commonly viewed as pioneers of the strategic integration of HRM and innovative HRM practices by international HRM scholars (Brewster, 2004; Ferner & Quintanilla, 1998), which is why we used firms from the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) as a benchmark. Although rather homogeneous in cultural respect, a comparison of societal cultural practices among Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland still shows meaningful differences concerning in-group collectivism, future orientation, and performance orientation which divide the Germanic Europe cluster into Germany and Austria on the one hand and Switzerland and the Netherlands on the other. From a varieties of capitalism perspective (Hall & Soskice, 2001), this divide is paralleled by the classification of Austria and Germany as coordinated market economies (CMEs) on the one hand, and Switzerland and the Netherlands as resembling more closely liberal (rather than coordinated) market economies (LMEs) on the other, which type is exemplified by the US and the UK (M. R. Schneider & Paunescu, 2012).



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Using data from the three most recent Cranet survey rounds in 2004/2005, 2009/2010, and 2014-2016 (Parry, Stavrou-Costea, & Morley, 2011), we show that the institutional and, to a lesser extent, cultural divide in the Germanic Europe cluster, positioning the Netherlands and Switzerland closer to the (traditionally more innovative and progressive) Anglo-Saxon countries, mirrors in the degree to which HRM is strategically integrated. Specifically, Austria and Germany, as CMEs, significantly lag behind their LME-type counterparts, Switzerland and the Netherlands, which more closely resemble UK- and US-based firms in this regard. Concerning developmental HRM practices, we found much more similarities among the Germanic cluster countries and a higher level of professionalization, which might trace back to common external factors such as labor shortages, high export orientation, and high international orientation, all of which incentivize managers to invest in developmental HRM. With respect to high-potential scheme use in particular, we found that US-based firms even have to be considered as laggards compared to firms from the Germanic Europe cluster. Our findings indicate that cross-national differences in the strategic integration of HRM and developmental HRM practices are partially time-invariant, owing to persistent differences in the institutional environment and path dependence. Our findings therefore contribute to the literature on the diffusion and adoption of HRM policies and practices from a comparative perspective (e.g., Brewster, Brookes, & Gollan, 2015; Gooderham, Fenton-O’Creevy, Croucher, & Brookes, 2015; Mol, Brewster, Wood, & Brookes, 2014).

**TABLE 0-1**  
Overview of Studies

Title	Research Aims	Contributions	Theoretical Perspective(s)	Core Constructs	Method	Sample
<b>Study 1:</b> Talent Management and Labor Productivity: The Moderating Role of Organizational Goal-Setting	Investigate the relationship between TM and labor productivity contingent upon organizational goal-setting practices	Provide large-scale evidence on TM's performance implications Open up debate on the boundary conditions under which the TM-performance relationship varies	Workforce differentiation Goal-setting theory	TM Goal specificity/ difficulty/ proximity Labor productivity	Linear mixed-effects regression analysis	1,997 manufacturing firms (115 3-digit SIC industries, 10 countries)
<b>Study 2:</b> Antecedents and Performance Consequences of High-Potential Scheme Use: The Role of Firms' Competitive and Cultural Environment	Investigate the strategic use of high-potential schemes contingent upon its fit with firms' competitive and cultural environment Examine whether a fit of high-potential schemes with environmental contingency factors enhances its effectiveness	Provide large-scale evidence on the performance implications of high-potential schemes as a core element of exclusive TM Highlight the role of contextual factors in determining cross-cultural and between-firm variation in high-potential scheme use	Workforce differentiation Contingency theory System justification theory	High-potential scheme Organizational performance <b>Cultural/competitive contingency factors:</b> GLOBE cultural practice dimensions Strategic importance of HRM Market growth	(Two-part) Linear and logistic mixed-effects regression analysis	1,808 firms (diverse industries, 23 countries)
<b>Study 3:</b> The Relationship between Talent Management and Performance	Evaluate and synthesize the current state of theoretical and empirical knowledge about the performance implications of exclusive TM	Identify explicit and implicit theoretical assumptions underlying TM research regarding TM's performance implications Identify most pressing caveats of previous research and propose directions for future research	<b>(Non-)Talent status:</b> e.g., social comparison- and organizational justice theory <b>TM practices:</b> Workforce differentiation	Talent status Non-talent status TM practices Work attitudes/ behaviors Organizational performance	Literature review	–
<b>Study 4:</b> Human Resource Management in the Germanic Context	Examine cultural and institutional similarities/ dissimilarities within the Germanic Europe cluster to explain cross-national differences in strategic integration of HRM and developmental practices	Benchmark strategic integration of HRM in Germanic cluster against UK/US firms (HRM pioneers) Show divergence/convergence among culturally similar, but institutionally heterogeneous economies	Comparative HRM Varieties of capitalism theory	GLOBE cultural dimensions Institutions Strategic integration of HRM Developmental practices (incl. high-potential schemes)	Literature review Descriptive and linear regression analysis	German, Austrian, Swiss, and Dutch firms (sample size varies by analysis)

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## **Talent Management and Labor Productivity: The Moderating Role of Organizational Goal-Setting**

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## **Antecedents and Performance Consequences of High-Potential Scheme Use: The Role of Firms' Competitive and Cultural Environment**

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## **The Relationship between Talent Management and Performance**

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## **Human Resource Management in the Germanic Context**

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## General Discussion

### 1 | CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Despite repeated calls from observers of the field, the extant talent management (TM) research has failed to provide empirical evidence for a positive relationship between TM and organizational performance and to which boundary conditions this relationship might be subject (Collings, 2014, 2015, 2017; Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016; McDonnell, Collings, Mellahi, & Schuler, 2017). Knowledge of boundary conditions is important for theory advancement (Aguinis, Gottfredson, & Culpepper, 2013; Mathieu, Aguinis, Culpepper, & Chen, 2012) and provides more precise practical guidance to decision-makers concerning the effectiveness of management practices and other organizational interventions (Gonzalez-Mulé & Aguinis, 2018); hence the importance of answering Research Question 1, *“How effective is the exclusive approach to TM in enhancing organizational performance, and under what boundary conditions?”*, which follows the predominant exclusive conception of TM as the disproportionate investment of scarce resources in a select group of employees expected to provide the greatest return on investment (Cappelli & Keller, 2014). The first three studies of the dissertation complement each other in answering Research Question 1 by evaluating and synthesizing previous theoretical and empirical work on the performance implications of TM at the individual and organizational level (Study 3); by examining the within- and between-firm effects of TM on labor productivity (Study 1); and by examining the relationship between high-potential scheme use and organizational performance from a contextual perspective (Study 2).

Designed as a selective review with a focus on theoretical and empirical work on the TM-performance relationship that conforms to an exclusive definition of TM (cf. Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014), Study 3 showed that empirical research on the performance consequences of TM has almost exclusively addressed individual employee responses to talent

status or non-talent status. As Study 3 concludes, this stream of research has produced evidence of largely positive differences between talent-designated employees and comparison groups of non-talent-designated employees on favorable work attitudes and behaviors. Although valuable contributions to a not-yet-mature field of study (Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2019), an overreliance on cross-sectional survey research in producing this evidence precludes any causal inference on the effect of TM (through the assignment of talent status and, presumably, additional developmental resources) on these attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. Moreover, this individual-level stream of research has thus far neglected to differentiate between the effects of talent status per se and the TM practices subjected to those with talent status. Study 3 also supports the observation by De Boeck, Meyers, and Dries (2018) that there is a lack of empirical evidence on the repercussions of *non-talent* status, in particular concerning employees who are principally ‘eligible’ to be included in the firm’s talent pool and hence apt to compare themselves unfavorably with talent-designated employees.

In consideration of potential adverse effects of TM on excluded employees (e.g., feelings of exclusion and injustice; Swailes, 2013), but also talent-designated employees (e.g., increased levels of stress; Tansley & Tietze, 2013), which may act to the detriment of overall organizational performance (Marescaux, De Winne, & Sels, 2013; Pfeffer, 2001), researchers have raised doubts as to whether TM is universally effective in enhancing organizational performance (Collings, 2015; Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016). On the one hand, Study 3 points out that, from a social comparison perspective (cf. Buunk & Gibbons, 2007), (upward) comparisons of non-talent with talent may not necessarily cause adverse responses in non-talent. Specifically, comparisons with higher-achieving referents may also have inspirational value so as to motivate non-talent employees to improve their performance (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). On the other hand, Study 3’s literature review also identified an organization-level study on the relationship of TM with innovation and turnover suggesting that TM might

be a ‘double-edged sword’ in that firms simultaneously benefit from higher innovation but also suffer higher turnover (Son, Park, Bae, & Ok, in press). Thus, although Study 3 found that evidence supportive of a positive relationship between TM and organizational performance is beginning to accumulate, the evidence for this relationship remains far from conclusive.

In contrast to the studies identified by Study 3 that directly examined the organization-level relationship between TM and organizational performance (Glaister, Karacay, Demirbag, & Tatoglu, 2018; Latukha & Veselova, 2019; Son et al., in press), Study 1 examined the TM-performance relationship using an objective measure of labor productivity as an indicator of organizational performance which captures the overall efficiency with which a firm deploys human capital resources to produce output (Kim & Ployhart, 2014). Being related to profit growth, but only marginally affected by external factors, labor productivity lends itself as a particularly useful indicator of organizational performance to both HR managers (Kim & Ployhart, 2014) and strategic HRM researchers (e.g., Chadwick, Super, & Kwon, 2015; Datta, Guthrie, & Wright, 2005; Shin & Konrad, 2017). Exploiting the potential of longitudinal data to differentiate between- and within-firm effects (Certo, Withers, & Semadeni, 2017), the results of Study 1 support the TM-performance hypothesis with respect to the (positive) association of between-firm differences in TM with between-firm differences in organizational performance. In addition, we could show that the effect of TM on labor productivity is practically meaningful, with estimates suggesting a firm which had a one-*SD* higher TM score than the ‘average’ firm to benefit from 8.31 percent higher labor productivity.

Study 1 also highlights important boundary conditions of the TM-performance link in that firms in our longitudinal sample only realized gains in labor productivity from improvements in their approach to TM when they adjusted their goal-setting practices toward goal specificity, difficulty, and proximity. Since the simultaneous improvement of TM and organizational goal-setting practices is more demanding (and hence more difficult to imitate)

than improving either of these sets of practices individually, our results suggest that firms have a reasonable opportunity to realize a sustainable competitive advantage from above-average levels of TM. Our finding from post-hoc analyses that almost three quarters of variance in TM scores are attributable to differences between (rather than ‘within’) firms—suggesting a strong persistence of differences in TM between firms over time—lends further support to our assertion that TM has the potential to offer firms a sustainable competitive advantage. Our findings also support the proposition by McDonnell et al. (2017) that individual performance does not unfold in isolation but in interaction with the organizational context, such that an explanation of the relationship between TM and organizational performance necessarily requires taking organizational contextual factors into account. Specifically, our findings indicate that organizational goal-setting practices help align TM with organizational goals so as to enhance the positive effect of TM on labor productivity.

Despite the finding by Son et al. (in press) that TM negatively relates to firms’ turnover rates, which in turn have been shown to negatively relate to organizational performance (Park & Shaw, 2013), the findings from Study 1 (Study 2) indicate that the potential negative effects of TM on non-talent are outweighed by the positive effects on talent as far as firms’ overall productivity (performance) is concerned. This is an important practical implication for organizational decision-makers considering that firms often strategically choose to remain ambiguous in communicating about their TM efforts (Church & Rotolo, 2013; Sumelius, Smale, & Yamao, in press)—despite that these firms likely sacrifice the motivational effect of talent status on talent-identified employees (i.e., Pygmalion effect; Swailes & Blackburn, 2016) and the inspirational value of upward comparisons with talent by promising candidates for upcoming talent reviews. Moreover, the finding from Study 1 that TM interacts with goal-setting practices that emphasize goal specificity indicates the importance of openly and precisely communicating about organizational goals so as to ensure organizational goal clarity

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among managers (Kellermanns, Walter, Lechner, & Floyd, 2005) and employees (Gonzalez-Mulé, Courtright, DeGeest, Seong, & Hong, 2016).

Despite that Study 1 and Study 2 found exclusive TM to be positively associated with organizational performance, this evidence does not eliminate concerns on the ethicality of exclusive TM with regard to employee well-being (cf. Swailes, 2013). Specifically, the findings of Study 1 and Study 2 do not rule out that TM's contribution to maximizing organizational performance conflicts with enhancing employee well-being (Van De Voorde, Paauwe, & Van Veldhoven, 2012), the dual goal of responsible organizations being to 'do good *and* do well' (Aguinis, 2011). Put differently, exclusive TM deserves our attention as management scholars because of its capacity to leverage high-potential employees' ability, motivation, and opportunities to contribute to organizational performance, but warrants further research to probe more deeply into the conditions under which TM enhances performance without compromising on employee well-being. While several theoretical articles have been devoted to exploring the ethical dimension of TM (O'Connor & Crowley-Henry, 2019; Painter-Morland, Kirk, Deslandes, & Tansley, 2019; Swailes, 2013), there is a dearth of empirical research on policies and practices designed to circumvent possible detrimental effects of TM on employee well-being. High-involvement work practices, designed to grant employees at all levels more decision-making power and responsibility for organizational functioning and success (Guthrie, 2001), might prove useful in mitigating feelings of 'us' and 'them' as a result of the differentiation between talent and non-talent.

By investigating antecedents and performance consequences of high-potential scheme use from a contextual perspective, Study 2 ties in with three limitations of Study 1 in answering Research Question 1. First, although the measure of TM used in Study 1 *inter alia* captured the extent to which senior managers are evaluated and rewarded for their efforts in building a strong talent pool, this measure did not allow us to isolate the effect of firms' formal

differentiation of talent-designated and non-talent-designated employees in terms of talent pool membership as reflected in the use of talent programs or high-potential schemes<sup>1</sup> (see, e.g., Dries & De Gieter, 2014; Swailes & Blackburn, 2016). Second, examining cultural contingencies of the TM-performance relationship was beyond the scope of Study 1 and also precluded by the limited number of countries included in the sample for Study 1. And third, although the World Management Survey provides a rich source of data (cf. Bloom, Genakos, Sadun, & Van Reenen, 2012), the data did not allow us to account for firms' internal and external competitive environment.

By offering a theoretical framework to complement previous exploratory investigations into the antecedents of TM (e.g., Ewerlin & Süß, 2016; Festing, Schäfer, & Scullion, 2013), Study 2 (together with Study 4) also contributes to answering Research Question 2, *“Under what conditions do firms strategically choose to use high-potential schemes to develop their high-value, high-uniqueness employees?”*. Study 2 and Study 4 address the criticism by Gallardo-Gallardo, Thunnissen, and Scullion (in press) that the impact of contextual factors on the conception and implementation of TM is under-researched despite the fact that research has been conducted in a wide variety of contexts with respect to firms' external (e.g., competitive, cultural, and institutional) and internal environment (e.g., strategy, structure, and organizational culture). Sparrow (2019), in his historical analysis of critiques in the TM debate, even states that the entry of international HRM researchers was necessary for the field to acknowledge that the current understanding of TM practice suffers from a ‘geographical narrowness’ which is commonly attributed to the role of North American thinking and research in shaping the theoretical foundations of the field (Collings, Scullion, & Vaiman, 2011).

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<sup>1</sup> As was evident from a comment of the Journal of Management's Editor on the TM measure used in Study 1, strategic HRM scholars working outside the field of TM commonly equate TM with high-potential schemes. Therefore, I deemed it important to complement the findings of Study 1 with another large-scale study on the performance effects of high-potential scheme use.



Addressing the criticism by Thunnissen and Gallardo-Gallardo (2019) that empirical TM research has little to offer concerning the contextual factors that affect the implementation and effectiveness of TM, Study 2 and Study 4 contribute to our understanding of how TM works in practice. Specifically, Study 2 and Study 4 complemented each other in identifying competitive, cultural, and institutional environmental factors that encourage or discourage organizational decision-makers from implementing high-potential schemes (Larsen, London, Weinstein, & Raghuram, 1998). Even more importantly, Study 2 demonstrated that high-potential schemes are positively associated with organizational performance irrespective of the contingency factors that promoted or inhibited high-potential scheme use in the first place. Paralleling meta-analytic evidence on a uniformly positive relationship between high-performance work systems (HPWS) and organizational performance across 29 countries (Rabl, Jayasinghe, Gerhart, & Kühlmann, 2014), the results of Study 2 support the conclusion drawn by the authors of this study that the conventional assumption of comparative HRM research that maximum effectiveness requires full alignment of HRM practices with firms' cultural environment may need to be adjusted.

Study 2 also bridges Research Questions 1 and 2 and hence adds complexity and nuance to the study of TM by demonstrating that the antecedent factors causing high-potential scheme use in the first place may not necessarily correspond with the behaviors assumed to be encouraged by high-potential schemes, thus posing a puzzle to existing theory. For example, Dries and Pepermans (2007, p. 761) speculate that the competition induced by high-potential schemes might encourage individualistic behavior. Yet, Study 2 shows that high-potential schemes are more common in societies with collectivist cultural practices, contradicting conventional contingency reasoning that elitist TM is more acceptable in individualistic societies (Son et al., in press; Valverde, Scullion, & Ryan, 2013). Since the available evidence precludes any speculation about the explanation of these seemingly paradox findings, future

research should delve more deeply into the motives of managers underlying their decision to implement a high-potential scheme, in particular in environments that de-emphasize behaviors that are encouraged by the development of high-potential employees via formal schemes.

With regard to Research Question 1, Study 1 and Study 2 complement each other in supporting the hypothesis that an exclusive approach to TM is effective in enhancing organizational performance, and whose validity remains one of the most pressing questions in TM research (e.g., Collings, 2015; Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016; McDonnell et al., 2017). Specifically, Study 3 accounts for the potential confounding of the relationship between high-potential scheme use and organizational performance by firms' general approach to HRM and slack resources owing to past profits. Capitalizing on its longitudinal research design, Study 1 complements the cross-sectional evidence from Study 2 by demonstrating that actual improvements in TM (beyond static between-firm differences in TM) enhance labor productivity, which evidence is of greater value to organizational decision-makers in guiding interventions to improve upon TM. In this regard, Study 1 and Study 2 refute reservations about the relevance and rigor of empirical TM research (Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2019), highlighting that TM deserves consideration in the broader literature on strategic HRM, over and above the study of high-performance work practices (cf. Posthuma, Campion, Masimova, & Campion, 2013) with their focus on the entirety of a firm's workforce (Adamsen & Swailes, 2019).

## **2 | LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

Despite the novel findings of this dissertation, it is not without limitations. Future research has yet to examine the interplay of TM with firms' overarching HR architecture. While Study 2 showed that high-potential scheme use is positively related to organizational performance over and above calculative and collaborative HRM practices (Gooderham, Nordhaug, & Ringdal, 1999), it was beyond the scope of Study 2 to examine potential

complementarities of high-potential schemes with basic HRM practices (that cover larger numbers of employees). Specifically, the configurational perspective assumes that HRM practices are maximally effective when bundled so as to achieve ‘horizontal’ or ‘internal fit’ (Lepak & Shaw, 2008). Among the HRM practices covered by the calculative and collaborative HRM constructs used in Study 2, performance appraisal systems certainly stand out with respect to the horizontal fit with TM because of the instrumentality of performance appraisals for talent identification (see, e.g., Dries, Vantilborgh, & Pepermans, 2012; Pepermans, Vloeberghs, & Perkisas, 2003). Specifically, the best predictor of future performance is past performance (cf. Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). In light of Study 4’s finding of substantial cross-national variation in the prevalence of performance appraisal systems even within a culturally homogeneous cluster, it is plausible to not only assume between-firm differences in the ability to identify talent, but also cross-national differences. Therefore, future research could investigate whether countries differ in the extent to which they exploit their national ‘talent base’ due to institutionally patterned differences in the use of complementary HRM practices such as performance appraisal systems.

Another potentially fruitful avenue for future research concerns TM’s role in ensuring a ‘vertical fit’ between the HR architecture and organizational goals. Although the findings of Study 1 suggest that firms should set specific, difficult, and proximal organizational goals to reinforce a shared understanding of organizational goals to the benefit of TM effectiveness, more research is needed to examine the performance consequences of aligning TM and organizational strategy. For example, TM may serve as a vehicle to equip a firm’s most valuable and unique employees with targeted abilities required to execute the firm’s strategy that cannot be developed through generic HRM practices. Specifically, focusing on market entry timing mode as a key element of business strategy, Han, Kang, Oh, Kehoe, and Lepak (2019) propose that a generic HPWS is less useful to resolve the technological and market

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uncertainties faced by first-movers (vs. fast-followers) compared to more targeted HRM practices that foster experimentation and sourcing external knowledge (Kehoe & Collins, 2017).

Future research should also more closely examine the macro-micro-macro mechanisms by which the relationship between TM and organizational performance is thought to be mediated. From a methodological individualist perspective on social action, relationships between macro-level phenomena such as TM and organizational performance can only be fully understood when specifying and testing situational (macro-micro), action-formation (micro-micro), and transformational mechanisms (micro-macro) as captured in Coleman's 'bathtub' model (Coleman, 1990; Hedström, Swedberg, & Hernes, 1998). Similar to most research on the HRM-performance link (for an exception, see Messersmith, Patel, Lepak, & Gould-Williams, 2011), data restrictions limited the ability of Study 1 and 2 to empirically validate that TM in general and high-potential schemes in specific enhance the ability, motivation, and opportunities of talent-designated employees to perform at high levels (situational mechanisms) so as to encourage desired role behaviors such as productivity and discretionary effort in talent-designated employees (action-formation mechanisms) which aggregate to the organization-level in terms of enhanced organizational performance outcomes through matching talent to strategic positions (transformational mechanisms). Multi-unit firms which give their unit managers significant leeway in designing and implementing TM policies and practices could provide a useful setting to examine these mechanisms, allowing the researcher to collect data on TM by key informants for each unit (macro); ability as indicated by supervisor competency ratings, and motivation and opportunities to perform as perceived by (talent-designated) employees (micro); desired role behaviors (e.g., task performance) as rated by supervisors (micro); and unit-level performance (e.g., labor productivity). The corresponding

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research model could also be extended to incorporate an additional layer of the ‘bathtub’ model that captures the consequences of TM for employee well-being.

Apart from the limitation that Study 1 and Study 2 are restricted to examining the macro-macro link between TM and performance, these studies share one limitation with virtually all HRM-performance research (with the notable exception of Chadwick, Ahn, & Kwon, 2012), namely the neglect to account for the costs incurred by HRM policies and practices (Chadwick, 2017). Specifically, the RBV has dominated research on strategic HRM (Boon, Eckardt, Lepak, & Boselie, 2018) as well as research on the performance consequences of TM (McDonnell et al., 2017), but the RBV has been formulated to explain *when* firms generate rent rather than to explain *who*—shareholders, employees, customers etc.—will capture this rent (Coff, 1999). Highlighting the role of value appropriation in determining rents from human capital resources, a meta-analytic investigation of HPWS-performance research found support for HPWS shifting the bargaining power of stakeholders to the benefit of employees (Steigenberger, 2013). Specifically, this study found greater returns of HPWS to operational performance measures such as labor productivity and innovation, which are unaffected by the bargaining power of internal stakeholders, rather than financial performance measures such as return on equity (ROE) and Tobin’s *q*, which capture the value appropriated by shareholders (Steigenberger, 2013).

As a consequence, the finding of Study 1 that TM is positively associated with labor productivity suggests that TM creates value to the firm, but which evidence does not allow for inferences on the relative share of the value created that is appropriated by shareholders vs. (talent-designated) employees. Quite the contrary, talent status might serve as a signal of the value and uniqueness of an employee similar to that of promotions (cf. DeVaro & Waldman, 2012), thus reducing the information asymmetry between an employee’s current employer and potential employers so as to enhance the bargaining power of talent-designated employees and

hence the value they appropriate. From a shareholder perspective, this reservation equally applies to Study 2. However, an RBV perspective that focuses on how to improve firm performance relative to competitors (rather than on how to appropriate a larger share of the value created) might be of more immediate concern to organizational decision-makers, and for which Study 2 offers important practical implications. Specifically, finding that high-potential scheme use is positively associated with performance relative to competitors across diverse cultural and competitive environments, Study 2 suggests that firms can create a competitive advantage vis-à-vis their direct competitors from investments in their high-potential employees. Nevertheless, future research could explore the role of complementary idiosyncratic firm resources such as organizational reputation in enhancing the share of value created that is appropriated by shareholders vs. talent-designated employees. Specifically, job candidates have been found to sacrifice pay to work for a reputable firm (Cable & Turban, 2003), which tendency should be particularly pronounced for strongly career-oriented individuals such as talent who more readily forgo current rewards in favor of developmental opportunities.

### **3 | CONCLUSION**

This dissertation set out to enhance our knowledge about the antecedents and performance consequences of exclusive, workforce differentiation-based TM. The individual studies included in the dissertation provided theoretical insights into the performance consequences of TM at the individual and organizational level (Study 3), critically evaluated and synthesized (Study 3) as well as furthered our empirical knowledge about the organization-level relationship between exclusive TM and performance and its boundaries (Study 1, Study 2). In particular, by offering evidence of positive performance implications of TM, Study 1 and Study 2 contribute to establish the academic legitimacy of TM research (Collings, Mellahi, & Cascio, 2019). The second focus of this dissertation concerned the role of firms' competitive,

cultural, and institutional environment in determining firms' use of high-potential schemes and related developmental HRM practices (Study 3, Study 4), adding to an under-researched area of the TM field (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., in press). I hope this inquiry stimulates further efforts to understand how contextual factors affect managers' decision to employ exclusive approaches to TM and how TM in turn interacts with contextual factors to shape performance outcomes.

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