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## HR managers' talent philosophies: prevalence and relationships with perceived talent management practices

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### ABSTRACT

HR managers have different beliefs about the nature, value, and instrumentality of talent—referred to as ‘talent philosophies’. In line with cognitive psychology, we reason that talent philosophies are similar to mental models that influence how HR managers interpret and use talent management (TM) practices within their organizations. In this article, we explore the prevalence of four different talent philosophies (exclusive/stable; exclusive/developable; inclusive/stable; inclusive/developable) in a sample of 321 HR managers. We then explore how talent philosophies relate to organizational context (i.e. size, ownership form, multi-national orientation) as well as to HR managers' perceptions of their organization's TM practices. Cluster analysis corroborated the presence of the four talent philosophies in our dataset. All four talent philosophies were represented almost equally often in the overall dataset. Organizational size was found to be related to talent philosophies, such that HR managers who worked in smaller organizations were more likely to hold an inclusive talent philosophy. We also found support for the relationship between talent philosophies and perceptions of the exclusiveness or inclusiveness of the organization's definition of talent, and its degree of workforce differentiation. Contrary to expectations, results did not support a link between talent philosophies and perceived talent identification criteria.

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## Introduction

Practitioners and academics agree that talent management (TM) is one of the top priorities for HR professionals. However, they often disagree on the exact meaning of the construct (e.g. Dries, Cotton, Bagdadli, & Oliveira, 2014; Lewis & Heckman, 2006). The different meanings ascribed to TM can be attributed to differences in individual perspectives on the nature, value, and instrumentality of talent (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & González-Cruz, 2013; Swailes, Downs, & Orr, 2014)—referred to as ‘talent philosophies’ (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014). Talent philosophies have been proposed to vary along two dimensions. The first dimension captures the assumed rareness or exclusiveness of talent, ranging from the assumption that very few people are talented (exclusive) to the assumption that everyone has ‘a talent’ (inclusive) (Iles, Chuai, & Preece, 2010; Stahl et al., 2012). The second dimension captures the assumed malleability of talent, with the assumptions that talent is either a stable (innate) or a developable (acquired) construct at the two extremes of the continuum (Howe, Davidson, & Sloboda, 1998). The combination of these two dimensions leads to four distinct talent philosophies that all have different implications for the nature of TM: the exclusive/innate, exclusive/developable, inclusive/innate, and inclusive/developable talent philosophy (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014).

The first aim of the present article is to investigate these talent philosophies empirically by exploring whether all four talent philosophies can be found among HR managers of different organizations in different countries. This aim is relevant because we cannot understand managerial actions without understanding the individual manager’s mental models (i.e. talent philosophies) (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). Similarly, the strategy-as-practice literature advocates that we need to look into the perceptions, discourses, and actions of individual managers (strategists) to fully understand strategy (Whittington, 1996). Second, we investigate three organizational context factors (i.e. size, ownership form, multinational orientation) that may be related to managers’ talent philosophies. The bulk of TM research has been conducted in US-based, large, private sector, multinational organizations (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016), and it remains to be seen whether the dominant exclusive TM paradigm that is found there can also be found in other types of organizations. Third, we investigate whether an HR manager’s talent philosophy is related to his or her perception of the organization’s TM approach, that is, the organization’s definition of talent, degree of workforce differentiation, and the degree to which the process of talent identification relies on the assessment of stable, foundational criteria, such as intelligence, or

on the assessment of criteria that indicate an individual's capacity to grow such as adaptability (Silzer & Church, 2009).

Empirically testing the prevalence of talent philosophies is a necessary step to gain a more thorough understanding of TM as a practical phenomenon. To date, only few other studies have addressed practitioner perspectives on talent and TM (e.g. Festing, Schäfer, & Scullion, 2013; Iles et al., 2010), and these studies have typically relied on qualitative research designs and focused on organizational TM approaches within one specific (cultural) context. A thorough understanding of TM in practice, however, is direly needed to inform and direct the academic discourse on the nature of TM. This discourse has repeatedly attested to different conceptualizations of TM (e.g. Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Dries, 2013; Lewis & Heckman, 2006), but now gravitates towards an exclusive TM conceptualization following Collings and Mellahi's (2009) seminal work (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016). The present empirical investigation into TM in practice will elucidate whether this exclusive conceptualization of TM needs to be complemented by other scientific perspectives. Ultimately, this will help TM scholars to develop more refined and nuanced theories regarding antecedents and outcomes of TM.

## **Theoretical framework**

### ***Talent philosophies***

Talent philosophies can be defined as the 'fundamental assumptions and beliefs about the nature, value, and instrumentality of talent that are held by a firm's key decision makers' (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014). In other words, talent philosophies capture how senior (HR) managers define talent, who they regard as talented, how valuable they consider talented employees to be, and how they think talented employees should be deployed to maximize performance. As such, talent philosophies resemble mental models that have been extensively researched in the area of cognitive psychology and cognitive science (e.g. Craik, 1943). Mental models are cognitive representations of reality that influence individual reasoning, decision-making, and behavior. In addition, they serve as selective filters that determine an individual's perceptions and interpretations of events. In line with the idea that cognitive representations of reality differ per individual, Dries (2013) has pointed out that talent philosophies tend to vary considerably between individual managers. Most notably, individuals disagree on whether talent is either rare or common (exclusive versus inclusive), and on whether talent is determined by either nature or nurture (innate versus developable) (Howe et al., 1998; Meyers, van Woerkom, & Dries, 2013; Stahl et al., 2012).

Based on these two areas of disagreement, Meyers and van Woerkom (2014) developed a conceptual framework of four distinct talent philosophies that vary along the two dimensions exclusive/inclusive and innate/developable (see Figure 1).

The *exclusive/stable talent philosophy* reflects the managerial belief that only a small percentage (< 20%) of employees are talented and that nature has provided these employees with special skills, capabilities, or 'gifts' (Tansley, 2011). As a consequence of this belief, HR managers divide the workforce into a small group of employees possessing talent (i.e. A players, star performers), and a much larger group of employees not possessing it (i.e. B and C players) (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001). Their basic assumption is that only the former group is likely to make substantial contributions to organizational performance (Becker, Huselid, & Beatty, 2009) triggering these managers to fight the 'war for talent' (Michaels et al., 2001). That is, they provide favorable treatments to talented employees within the firm (e.g. bonuses, quick advancement) to bind them to the organization, while also trying to identify and headhunt talented employees working for competitors.

HR managers who hold an *exclusive/developable talent philosophy* believe that talent is a rare and latent construct that can be wasted if it remains undiscovered, and that will only result in excellent performance if it is systematically developed (Gagné, 2004). Employees will be considered as talented if they show the potential or promise to perform in a more challenging position at a higher hierarchical level in the future (Altman, 1997; Silzer & Church, 2009). When belonging to the 10–15% of employees who are commonly credited with this 'high potential', employees are provided with a variety of developmental opportunities and assignments for the purpose of unlocking their potential.

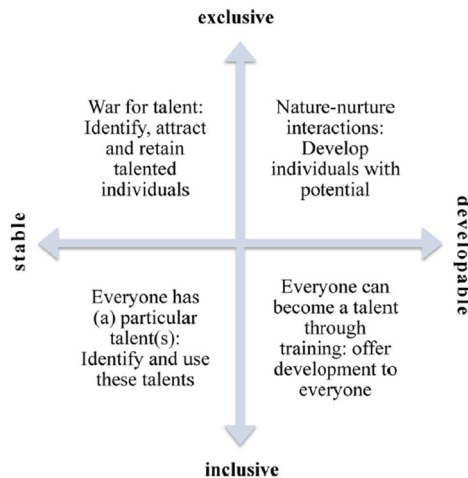


Figure 1. Talent philosophies according to Reprinted from Meyers and van Woerkom (2014).

The *inclusive/stable talent philosophy* builds on positive psychology and the inherent assumption that every individual possesses stable, positive traits referred to as ‘strengths’ (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychologists suggest that individuals who are able to use their strengths will not only be happy, but will also perform at their personal best (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In line with this reasoning, managers holding an inclusive/stable talent philosophy appreciate the strong points of all employees, as diverse as they may be, and aim to increase person-job fit so that employees work on tasks that play to their strengths.

Individuals who hold an *inclusive/developable talent philosophy* assume that all seemingly ‘ordinary’ people can become extraordinary performers through dedicated training (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Minhas, 2011; Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993). This philosophy reflects a deep-seated belief in the human capability to change and grow (c.f. growth mindset; Dweck, 2012), and is, in organizational practice, associated with a strong focus on the training and development of all employees. Managers holding this philosophy believe that leaders and other incumbents of key organizational positions hold these positions because of their accumulated experiences and lessons learned, and not because they were ‘born’ to be there (Ericsson, Prietula, & Cokely, 2007).

### **Talent philosophies in relation to context**

Up to now, empirical talent-management research has not paid much attention to the role of the organizational context. However, it has been argued that we cannot discuss definitions of talent (or, talent philosophies) without discussing the context in which talent is situated (Nijs, Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & Sels, 2014; Thunnissen, Boselie, & Fruytier, 2013). The context may actually determine who and what we consider to be a talent. This reasoning can also be underpinned by mental model theory, proposing that our mental models are dynamic entities that can be adjusted in response to exposure to different environments (Hodgkinson & Johnson, 1994).

To date, most talent-management research has been conducted in large, private-sector, and multinational corporations, and scholars often apply the findings of this research to all other organizations without contemplating whether this is feasible (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016; Thunnissen et al., 2013). We therefore explicitly consider the following three context factors: organizational size, ownership form (public/private), and status as a multinational enterprise (MNE) in this research.

As existing research in large, private MNE’s often points to exclusive TM as the leading paradigm (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016), we

reason that these context factors may be related to talent philosophies, most notably to beliefs about the inclusiveness of talent. The relationship between organizational size and inclusiveness may be explained by the fact that customized HR solutions for every single employee are required to do justice to the belief that all people possess valuable talents. Per employee, one needs to identify his or her talents, and find a suitable position that allows him or her to use them (Swales et al., 2014). While these customized solutions may be feasible in small organizations, they are much more difficult to realize in large organizations. In line with this idea, Festing et al. (2013) found that CEO's and owners of small and medium-sized organizations (SMEs) were likely to use an inclusive talent-management approach, contrary to the more exclusive approaches in larger organizations. A similar reasoning applies to the relationship between MNE's and inclusiveness: Compared to domestic organizations, MNEs are more inclined to implement standardized HR approaches to realize economies of scale, which makes the use of customized trajectories per employee unlikely. Finally, the relationship between ownership form and inclusiveness can be explained in relation to hard versus soft approaches to HRM. The exclusive understanding of talent is often associated with a 'hard', instrumental HR approach directed at performance increases, whereas the inclusive understanding is more closely associated with a 'soft' approach directed at facilitating employees in their talent development (Thunnissen, 2016). The exclusive understanding of talent may therefore also be more closely aligned with the competitive, and performance-oriented culture of private organizations, whereas the inclusive understanding may fit within public sector organizations that protect the interests and rights of their employees.

In line with this reasoning, we formulate the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1:* HR managers who work in (a) relatively larger, (b) private-sector, and/or (c) multinational organizations are more likely to identify with an exclusive/developable or an exclusive/innate talent philosophy than HR managers of relatively smaller, public-sector, and/or domestic organizations.

*Hypothesis 2:* HR managers who work in (a) smaller, (b) public-sector, and/or (c) domestic organizations are more likely to identify with an inclusive/developable or an inclusive/innate talent philosophy than HR managers of relatively larger, private-sector, and/or multinational organizations.

### **Talent philosophies in relation to talent management practices**

Understanding HR managers' talent philosophies is relevant in light of mental model theory (Craik, 1943) proposing that individuals' cognitive representations of the world influence how they perceive and act upon

things. Prior research has already applied mental model theory to the strategic management domain. Managers' mental models of their competitive environment, for instance, have been found to determine which strategic events they perceive and how they respond to them (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Hodgkinson & Johnson, 1994; Kaplan, 2011). Building on this, we suggest that talent philosophies form an important part of a manager's mental model of the TM domain, which, in turn, influences his or her perceptions of and strategic actions regarding TM. The relevance of understanding the cognitions and actions of individual managers has been highlighted by the strategy-as-practice literature (Björkman, Ehrnrooth, Mäkelä, Smale, & Sumelius, 2014; Whittington, 1996). This literature proposes that a firm's strategy is not only captured in official organizational policy documents, but first and foremost in the actions of organizational strategists, that is, managers. The strategic behavior of managers is illustrated by the tools or practices they use. Even if managers use the official organizational practices (e.g. HR or talent-management practices), they will infuse them with their own meaning depending on their beliefs and intentions (Jarzabkowski, 2004). In other words, the meaning of a practice only manifests itself in the intention with which it is used. In this article, we build on the strategy-as-practice literature to argue that talent philosophies that capture HR managers' inherent beliefs about the value and instrumentality of talent (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014), will influence how they perceive, interpret, and/or use (organizational) TM practices, most notably the official organizational definition of talent, the degree of workforce differentiation, and used criteria for talent identification.

### ***The relationship between talent philosophies and perceived organizational definitions of talent***

There are different ways to explain the relationship between the definition of talent held by an HR manager and the 'official' definition of talent used by the organization (s)he is working for. HR managers might be hired due to an initial fit between their own beliefs about talent and the organization's beliefs (Bowen, Ledford, & Nathan, 1991), they might adapt their own beliefs during the socialization process to reflect the organizationally accepted beliefs (Meglino & Ravlin, 1998), or they might gradually change the organizational beliefs about talent to match their own talent philosophy. The latter process is most likely to be initiated by highly senior HR managers who are part of the 'dominant coalition' and who can actually influence an organization's strategy (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Paauwe, 2004). Whatever the direction of influence may be, when we ask HR managers about their organization's talent



definition—which is what HR and TM scholars commonly do when they want to assess organizational HR/TM practices (Arthur & Boyles, 2007)—their answer will always be permeated by their own sense making processes (i.e. talent philosophies) (Björkman et al., 2014). This sense-making process, in turn, is strongly influenced by the manager’s mental models serving as interpretative filters (Kaplan, 2011). We thus reason that HR- or talent managers who believe that only few people are talented are prone to indicate that the organization’s TM approaches are also directed at those few employees only. Parallel to this, we assume that HR managers who believe that all employees are talented will indicate that the organizational talent definition reflects the inclusive nature of talent. We therefore formulate the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 3:* The exclusive/innate and the exclusive/developable talent philosophies are positively, and the inclusive/innate and the inclusive/developable talent philosophies negatively, related to a perceived, exclusive organizational definition of talent.

### ***The relationship between talent philosophies and perceived workforce differentiation***

The essence of workforce differentiation is investing disproportionately in employees who are expected to generate disproportionate returns for the company (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005). Workforce differentiation will therefore only be a sensible strategic choice for HR managers who perceive that employees differ greatly in their contribution to overall company performance. This is the case for managers with an exclusive talent philosophy who believe that talents, by definition, contribute much more to a firm’s performance than average employees (Becker & Huselid, 2006; Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005; Michaels et al., 2001). HR managers with an inclusive talent philosophy, by contrast, believe that all employees possess unique talents that allow them to make equally valuable contributions to an organization (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014). In line with the idea that our cognitive representations of the world influence how we perceive and act on it (cf. Hodgkinson & Johnson, 1994), we reason that HR managers’ inclusive or exclusive talent philosophies are related to the degree to which they report to perceive workforce differentiation within their organization. This relationship may, on one hand, be explained by a predominantly cognitive process during which the managers’ mental models of talent serve as filters that determine which factual information regarding workforce differentiation is perceived and stored. On the other hand, the relationship may be explained by a behavioral process in which the managers’ cognitive

framework of talent inspires his or her behavior, and thus, the implementation of workforce differentiation (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). Consequently, we formulate the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 4:* The exclusive/innate and the exclusive/developable talent philosophies are positively, and the inclusive/innate and the inclusive/developable talent philosophies negatively, related to the perceived degree of workforce differentiation within an organization.

### ***The relationship between talent philosophies and talent identification: Reliance on growth or foundational dimensions***

Organizational representatives have reported to identify employee talent based on a variety of criteria including leadership competencies, performance records, potential, career drive or motivation, mobility, adaptability or flexibility, specific experiences, learning abilities, personality, and commitment to the company (Silzer & Church, 2009). These criteria can be categorized into a foundational- and a growth dimension (Silzer & Church, 2009). The foundational dimension captures stable traits that can directly contribute to career success, such as cognitive abilities and personality. The growth dimension, by contrast, encompasses relatively stable criteria such as adaptability, learning orientation, and motivation that contribute to career success indirectly by facilitating personal development and growth.

There appear to be large inter-organizational differences in the policies that are used for identifying organizational talents (Pepermans, Vloeberghs, & Perkisas, 2003), and, arguably, in the importance attached to either the growth- or the foundational dimension in this regard. We reason that these differences are related to the talent philosophies of HR managers who are often responsible for designing organization-wide models for talent identification and -development (Ulrich, Younger, Brockbank, & Ulrich, 2012). Again, as cognitive representations of reality, talent philosophies infuse managerial perceptions and actions (Hodgkinson & Johnson, 1994).

The exclusive/stable talent philosophy delineates talent as particular (rare) personality traits or superior intelligence, criteria belonging to the foundational dimension (Silzer & Church, 2009). The inclusive/stable talent philosophy, similarly, delineates talent as individual strengths defined as stable character traits (also belonging to the foundational dimension; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). When holding either of these two philosophies, managers would therefore likely perceive that talent can be assessed directly by measuring the respective stable (foundational) criteria associated with talent.

Conversely, HR managers holding the inclusive/developable or exclusive/developable talent philosophy will likely perceive that talent is measured in a different way. By definition, the term potential, that is used interchangeably with talent by holders of an exclusive/developable talent philosophy, is a mere promise or something that has not yet materialized (Altman, 1997). As a consequence, potential cannot be measured directly, but has to be evaluated based on a number of criteria that indicate an individual's ability to grow in the future—that is, criteria belonging to the growth dimension such as learning agility (Silzer & Church, 2009). Similarly, holders of an inclusive/developable talent philosophy commonly interpret talent as a manifestation of outstanding performance, which can be reached by all individuals who invest sufficient time in training (Ericsson et al., 2007). Training investments, in turn, are likely to depend upon an individual's motivation, willingness to make personal sacrifices (Ericsson et al., 2007), learning orientation, drive, and openness to feedback, all of which appertain to the growth dimension (Silzer & Church, 2009). Building on this, we propose that advocates of the exclusive/developable and inclusive/developable talent philosophy are more likely to perceive that talent is identified based on criteria of the growth- than of the foundational dimension, leading to the following research hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 5:* The exclusive/innate and the inclusive/innate talent philosophies are negatively, and the inclusive/developable and the exclusive/developable talent philosophies positively, related to the extent to which talent identification is based on growth criteria as opposed to foundational criteria.

## **Method**

### ***Sample and procedure***

Data were collected by means of an online survey which was sent to HR directors or senior HR managers of companies operating in countries all over the world. In order to increase the number of responses, respondents were asked to forward the survey to other senior HR managers in their network (i.e. snowball sampling) resulting in 321 complete responses. 62.3% of the respondents were female and their mean age was 59.56 years. On average, respondents had 12.25 years of experience in an HR function. Respondents had 44 different nationalities and worked in 49 different countries. Additional sample characteristics are summarized in [Table 1](#).

### ***Measures***

#### ***Talent philosophy: belief that talent is innate***

The belief that talent is innate was measured using the item 'To what extent do you believe that talent is something people are born with?' The

**Table 1.** Overview of sample characteristics (total  $N = 321$ ).

Multinational	<i>N</i>	%	Company size (number of employees)	<i>N</i>	%
Yes	186	57.9	<100	52	16.2
No	135	42.1	100–500	40	12.5
			501–1000	29	9.0
			1001–5000	57	17.8
Company ownership form			5001–10,000	29	9.0
Private	262	81.6	>10,000	114	35.5
Public	59	18.4			
Cultural background (GLOBE dimension) <sup>a</sup>			Sector		
African	6	1.9	Manufacturing	48	15.0
Anglo	93	29.0	Professional, scientific, technical services	37	11.5
Confucian	4	1.2	Finance/insurance	35	10.9
Eastern European	23	7.17	Educational services	31	9.7
Germanic	86	26.8	Health care and social assistance	21	6.5
Latin American	18	5.6	Information	12	3.7
Latin European	70	21.8	Retail trade	9	2.8
Nordic	10	3.1	Other	128	39.9
Southern Asian	10	3.1			

Note: <sup>a</sup>10 dimensions of culture that originated from the GLOBE [Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness] study drawing on a sample of over 17,000 managers working in 62 different societies (House et al., 2004).

answer scale reached from 0 to 100% (0–100%), and participants were instructed to drag a bar in order to indicate their response to this question. Descriptive analyses revealed that respondents used the whole range of the scale (minimum value = 0; maximum value = 100;  $M = 55.60$ ;  $SD = 22.88$ ).

### ***Talent philosophy: belief that talent is inclusive***

The belief that talent is inclusive (i.e. that everyone has talent) was measured using the item ‘What percentage of all the employees within your company do you, personally, consider ‘talented’?’ The same answer scale from 0 to 100% as for the variable ‘belief that talent is innate’ was used. Again, descriptive analyses revealed that respondents used the whole range of this scale (minimum value = 0; maximum value = 100;  $M = 51.65$ ;  $SD = 32.28$ ).

### ***Perception of one’s organization’s definition of talent***

In order to measure whether the respondents perceived that the organizations they worked for used an inclusive versus exclusive definition of talent, a six-item scale was developed that reflected the descriptions of inclusive and exclusive approaches to TM proposed by Iles, Chuai, and Preece (2010). We asked respondents to indicate whether items such as ‘Everybody has a certain talent (reverse coded)’, ‘A talent is not something that everyone possesses, but just the lucky few’, and ‘A talent is a special individual that can make a significant difference to a company’ reflected the official position of their company. Responses were given on

a 5-point Likert scale from one (1 = Not at all the position of my company) to five (5 = Completely the position of my company). Principal component analysis (PCA) revealed that the five items loaded on one factor with factor loadings of .36 or higher. Internal consistency of the scale proved to be adequate ( $\alpha = .67$ ).

### ***Perception of one's organization's degree of workforce differentiation***

The perceived degree of workforce differentiation within the company was measured by a self-developed 7-item scale. Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with statements such as 'A high potential is treated differently from other employees within the organization' and 'A high potential gets more opportunities for training than other employees within the organization' on a 5-point Likert answer scale from one (1 = do not agree at all) to five (5 = completely agree). PCA revealed a clear one-factor structure with all seven items displaying factor loadings of .59 or higher. The scale had a good internal consistency ( $\alpha = .79$ ).

### ***Perception of one's organization's focus on growth versus foundational criteria for talent identification***

To measure this variable, nine pairs of identification criteria were presented to the respondents. Within each pair, one identification criterion belonged to the growth-, and one to the foundational dimension. All identification criteria were based on the classification developed by Silzer and Church (2009). Examples of pairs are 'cognitive abilities' (foundational dimension) versus 'learning orientation' (growth dimension), and 'sociability' (foundational dimension) versus 'adaptability' (growth dimension). For each pair of identification criteria, respondents were asked to select the one that they considered more important for talented employees. Per pair, we assigned the value 1 if respondents selected the criterion of the growth dimension or the value 0 if they selected the criterion of the foundational dimension. The scores of the nine pairs of variables were then added to form the overall scale score ranging from 0 to 9.

### ***Statistical analysis***

We conducted cluster analysis in SPSS 19 on the two variables reflecting the belief that talent is innate and the belief that talent is inclusive to explore whether our data corroborated the existence of the four different talent philosophies proposed in the literature (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014). To this end, we followed the two-step approach recommended by Burns and Burns (2008). In the first step, we used hierarchical cluster

analysis following Ward's method (Ward, 1963) to determine the number of clusters represented in the data. Similarity between two data points was measured by squared Euclidian distances, the appropriate technique for data in which the elevation of scores (low versus high) is a relevant grouping criterion (Clatworthy, Buick, Hankins, Weinman, & Horne, 2005). The number of clusters was assessed based on the dendrogram and agglomeration schedule (Clatworthy et al., 2005). In a second step, we used k-means clustering as an iterative partitioning method to form the previously indicated number of clusters. The resultant clusters were then compared on a range of control variables (e.g. gender, age, experience in HR, cultural background) to examine their validity. In addition, the clusters were compared in terms of company size, status as multinational (yes/no), and ownership form (public/private) to investigate Hypotheses 1a–c and 2a–c.

To test whether the proposed clusters were related to the perceptions of the organization's definition of talent, workforce differentiation, and talent-identification focus (Hypotheses 3–5), sequential multiple regression analyses were conducted. Dummy variables were created representing the clusters.

## Results

Results of the hierarchical cluster analysis following Ward's method, in which we clustered the data based on the two variables 'belief that talent is innate' and 'belief that talent is inclusive' (these variables were uncorrelated;  $r = .06$ ,  $p = ns$ ), revealed that there were indeed four substantial clusters in the data. Based on this information, we formed four clusters through K-means clustering. As can be seen in Table 2, the four clusters represent the four talent philosophies proposed. Cluster 1 ( $N = 80$ ) encompasses respondents who scored low on the belief that talent is innate and high on the belief that talent is inclusive (inclusive/developable philosophy). Cluster 2 ( $N = 84$ ) comprises respondents who scored high on the belief that talent is innate and low on the belief that talent is inclusive (exclusive/innate philosophy). Cluster 3 ( $N = 71$ ) represents respondents with an inclusive/innate philosophy, indicated by high scores on both variables. Finally, Cluster 4 ( $N = 84$ ) encompasses respondents who scored low on the belief that talent is innate and low on the belief that talent is inclusive (exclusive/developable philosophy). One-way analyses of variance corroborated that the means of the variables belief that talent is innate ( $F(3315) = 255.62$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and belief that talent is inclusive ( $F(3315) = 387.89$ ,  $p < .001$ ) differed significantly between the four clusters. Conform to expectations, Tukey post-hoc tests indicated

**Table 2.** Characteristics of clusters.

	Cluster 1 Incl/dev	Cluster 2 Excl/inn	Cluster 3 Incl/inn	Cluster 4 Excl/dev	Total
Talent philosophy					
<i>N</i>	80	84	71	84	319
Belief that talent is innate	39.02 (12.94)	74.20 (10.44)	76.61 (11.48)	35.01 (14.30)	$F(3315) = 255.62, p < .001$
Belief that talent is inclusive	81.85 (14.94)	26.85 (16.28)	81.65 (15.06)	22.32 (13.49)	$F(3315) = 287.89, p < .001$
Individual characteristics					
Gender (%)					$\chi^2(3319) = 1.18, p = ns$
Male	35.0	34.5	40.8	40.5	
Female	65.0	65.5	59.2	59.5	
Age	62.09 (10.91)	57.16 (9.51)	59.77 (11.56)	59.11 (9.83)	$F(3216) = 2.18, p < .10$
Experience in HR	14.56 (9.27)	12.65 (8.32)	12.18 (7.20)	12.98 (8.80)	$F(3215) = .79, p = ns$
Cultural background (GLOBE) (%)					$\chi^2(9319) = 49.48, p < .001$
Anglo	36.3	28.6	33.8	17.9	
Germanic	33.8	22.6	42.3	11.9	
Latin European	10.0	27.4	16.9	31.0	
Other	20.0	21.4	7.0	39.3	
Organizational characteristics					
Ownership form (%)					$\chi^2(3319) = 1.98, p = ns$
Private	82.5	85.7	77.5	79.8	
Public	17.5	14.3	22.5	20.2	
Company size (%)					$\chi^2(15,319) = 28.15, p < .05$
< 100 employees	23.8	10.7	23.9	7.1	
100–500 employees	10.0	19.0	7.0	13.1	
501–1000 employees	5.0	10.7	11.3	9.5	
1001–5000 employees	18.8	15.5	11.3	25.0	
5001–10,000 employees	8.8	14.3	7.0	6.0	
>10,000 employees	33.8	29.8	39.4	39.3	
Multinational (%)					$\chi^2(3319) = 5.77, p = ns$
Yes	57.5	61.9	46.5	64.3	
No	42.5	38.1	53.5	35.7	

that both innate clusters (Cluster 2 & 3) had higher mean scores on the variable ‘belief that talent is innate’ than the two developable clusters (Cluster 1 & 4), and that both inclusive clusters (Cluster 1 & 3) had higher mean scores on the variable ‘belief that talent is inclusive’ than the two exclusive clusters (Cluster 2 & 4).

We compared the four clusters on a number of variables reflecting characteristics of the respondents (see Table 2). We started by comparing the clusters on the control variables gender, age, and experience in HR. Results indicated that the clusters differed neither in terms of gender nor in terms of respondent experience in HR. We found a marginally significant difference in terms of age ( $F(3216) = 2.18, p < .10$ ), reflecting that respondents who were categorized as belonging to Cluster 1 were, on average, slightly older than respondents in Cluster 2. We also explored whether talent philosophies were associated with the respondents’

cultural background. As it was not feasible to analyze all 62 nationalities prevalent in our dataset separately, we bundled countries according to the GLOBE dimensions (cf. House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004) and used these country dimensions as proxies for cultural background. In particular, we focused on respondents from the Anglo, Germanic, and Latin European GLOBE dimension, as they were most strongly represented in our dataset (cf. Table 1). Those three dimensions were compared to all other cultural backgrounds combined (comprising the African, Confucian, Eastern European, Latin American, Nordic, and Southern Asian GLOBE dimension). A Pearson's chi-square test revealed a significant association between the talent philosophies and GLOBE dimensions ( $\chi^2(9319) = 49.48, p < .001$ ). More specifically, we see that HR managers from the Anglo and Germanic GLOBE dimension are strongly represented in Cluster 1 (inclusive/developable); HR managers from the Anglo and Latin European dimension are strongly represented in Cluster 2 (exclusive/innate); HR managers from the Germanic (and Anglo) GLOBE dimension are strongly represented in Cluster 3 (inclusive/innate); and that HR managers from the other GLOBE dimensions are strongly represented in Cluster 4 (exclusive/developable).

With regard to the organizational variables, we did not find a significant association between the talent philosophies and respectively ownership form (public versus private) and multinational (yes/no). This led us to reject Hypothesis 1 b, 1c, 2 b, and 2c. We did, however, find a significant association with company size ( $\chi^2(15,319) = 28.15, p < .05$ ) and a closer inspection of results revealed that Cluster 1 (inclusive/developable) and Cluster 3 (inclusive/innate) encompassed a higher proportion of companies with less than 100 employees than the other two clusters. In Cluster 2 (exclusive/innate), a slightly higher proportion of companies with 5000 to 10,000 employees was found than in the other three clusters, and Cluster 4 (exclusive/developable) included the highest proportion of companies with 1000 to 5000 employees. These findings corroborate Hypothesis 1a and 2a.

The correlations between all study variables are reported in Table 3.

Table 4 shows the results of three sequential multiple regression analyses which we conducted to predict the perceived exclusiveness of an organization's definition of TM, the degree of workforce differentiation, and the focus of talent identification by membership of one of the four talent philosophy clusters (with the inclusive/innate talent philosophy as reference category). In all analyses, we controlled for gender, age, experience in HR, company size, ownership form, and status as multinational.<sup>1</sup>

While none of the control variables exerted a significant influence on the perceived exclusiveness of the organization's talent definition in the



**Table 3.** Means, standard deviations, and correlations between study variables.

	M	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.
1. Gender <sup>a</sup>	59.56	10.52	—											
2. Age	13.25	8.61	-.21**	—										
3. Experience in HR	—	—	-.13	.73**	—									
4. Ownership formc	—	—	.07	.09	-.02	—								
5. Multinationald	—	—	.09	.09	.01	.33**	—							
6. Company size <sup>e</sup>	3.98	1.89	-.07	-.04	.10	-.07	-.60**	—						
7. DUM incl/devf	—	—	.03	.15*	.10	-.02	.01	-.06	—					
8. DUM excl/innatef	—	—	-.04	-.02	-.01	.03	-.08	.09	-.35**	—				
9. DUM excl/innatef	—	—	.04	-.13*	-.04	-.07	-.05	-.02	-.35**	-.36**	—			
10. Exclusiveness of organization's talent definition	2.58	.68	.03	-.15*	-.09	.01	-.09	.10	-.12*	.21**	.19**	—		
11. Workforce differentiation	3.38	.66	.00	.05	.16*	-.05	-.26**	.23**	-.07	.12*	.14*	.31**	—	
12. Talent identification (growth versus foundational)	5.04	1.47	-.01	-.02	.06	-.01	-.00	.12*	.04	-.05	.00	-.06	-.06	—

Note: <sup>a</sup>Gender (1 = male; 2 = female).

<sup>b</sup>Higher values indicate a fixed mindset.

<sup>c</sup>Ownership form (1 = private company; 2 = public company).

<sup>d</sup>Multinational (1 = yes; 2 = no).

<sup>e</sup>Company size (treated as a continuous variable with higher values indicating bigger companies).

<sup>f</sup>Dummies for talent philosophies (1 = belonging to this cluster; 0 = not belonging to this cluster).

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .



**Table 4.** Results of sequential multiple regression analyses predicting the organization's definition of talent, workforce differentiation, and the identification of talent based on the growth versus foundational dimension.

	Exclusiveness of organization's talent definition			Degree of workforce differentiation			Focus on growth versus foundational identification criteria		
	B(SE)	$\beta$	B(SE)	B(SE)	$\beta$	B(SE)	B(SE)	$\beta$	B(SE)
<i>Step 1</i>									
1. Gender <sup>a</sup>	.01(.10)	.01	.01(.09)	.05(.09)	.04	.05(.09)	-.06(.22)	-.02	-.08(.22)
2. Age	-.01(.01)	-.15	-.01(.01)	.00(.01)	-.07	-.00(.01)	-.02(.02)	-.11	-.02(.02)
3. Experience in HR	.00(.01)	.02	.00(.01)	.02(.01)	.21*	.01(.01)	.02(.02)	.12	.02(.02)
4. Ownership form <sup>b</sup>	.08(.13)	.04	.07(.12)	.07(.12)	.04	.07(.12)	-.09(.29)	-.02	-.08(.29)
5. Multinational <sup>c</sup>	-.09(.13)	-.06	-.01(.12)	-.30(.12)	-.23*	-.26(.12)	.36(.28)	.12	.36(.29)
6. Company sized	.02(.03)	.06	.03(.03)	.03(.03)	.08	.03(.03)	.13(.07)	.17	.14(.07)
<i>Step 2</i>									
7. DUM incl/deve			.25(.13)			.13(.13)			.14(.31)
8. DUM excl/deve			.60(.13)			.33(.13)			-.15(.30)
9. DUM excl/innate <sup>e</sup>			.58(.13)			.36(.13)			-.01(.31)
	$R^2 = .03$		$\Delta R^2 = .12^{**}$	$R^2 = .10$		$\Delta R^2 = .05^*$	$R^2 = .03$		$\Delta R^2 = .01$

Note: <sup>a</sup>Gender (1 = male; 2 = female).

<sup>b</sup>Ownership form (1 = private company; 2 = public company).

<sup>c</sup>Multinational (1 = yes; 2 = no).

<sup>d</sup>Company size (treated as a continuous variable with higher values indicating bigger companies).

<sup>e</sup>Dummies for talent philosophies (1 = belonging to this cluster; 0 = not belonging to this cluster).

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

first regression analysis, adding the three dummy variables led to a significant increase in R square ( $\Delta R^2 = .12, p < .001$ ). Both the exclusive/developable ( $\beta = .38, p < .001$ ) and the exclusive/innate cluster ( $\beta = .37, p < .001$ ) were significant predictors of the degree to which an organization's talent definition is perceived as exclusive, thereby supporting Hypothesis 3.

In the second regression analysis, the control variables experience in HR and multinational were found to be significant predictors of perceived workforce differentiation. In particular, results reveal that higher degrees of workforce differentiation were reported by HR managers who were more experienced ( $\beta = .21, p < .05$ ), and who worked for internationally operating companies ( $\beta = -.23, p < .05$ ). Adding the dummy variables in the second step of the regression analysis led to a significant increase in explained variance ( $\Delta R^2 = .05, p < .05$ ). Supporting Hypothesis 4, the exclusive/developable ( $\beta = .21, p < .05$ ) as well as the exclusive/innate cluster ( $\beta = .24, p < .01$ ) were significantly related to higher degrees of workforce differentiation.

Finally, the third regression analysis revealed that none of the control variables had a significant influence on the perceived focus of talent identification (growth versus foundational dimension). Adding the three talent philosophy dummy variables in the second model did not lead to a significant increase in explained variance ( $\Delta R^2 = .01, ns$ ), rejecting Hypothesis 5.

## Discussion

The present article aimed to shed light on the talent philosophies held by HR managers, as well as on the relationships between talent philosophies, context, and perceptions of TM practices. Analyses indicated that HR managers' ideas about talent differed markedly (Dries et al., 2014), reflecting the prevailing ambiguity about the construct talent within the scientific literature (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). In line with the framework of talent philosophies proposed by Meyers and Van Woerkom (2014), we found that combinations of beliefs about the innateness and exclusiveness of talent can be clustered into four different talent philosophies. More specifically, we found that HR managers either believe that talent is rare and innate (exclusive/stable philosophy), that talent is rare but can be developed (exclusive/developable philosophy), that talent is common and innate (inclusive/stable philosophy), or that talent is common and can be developed (inclusive/developable philosophy).

Most notably, we found that all four talent philosophies occurred with almost equal prevalence in our sample. This is surprising because one might intuitively assume that the two dimensions we used to construct the four philosophies are interrelated in such a way that a stronger belief in the possibility to develop talent would lead to a more inclusive understanding of the construct, and that, vice versa, a stronger belief in innate talent would be related to a more exclusive understanding. Furthermore, given that the bulk of the academic literature conceptualizes TM in an exclusive way (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016), one would assume that the exclusive understanding of talent is also predominant in practice. However, our findings show that the inclusive understanding is just as common, indicating that HR managers may hold distinctly different mental models of talent. This opens up an interesting area for future research because strategy scholars have long suggested that managers' mental models of aspects such as the organization's competitive environment influence their strategic actions (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Hodgkinson & Johnson, 1994). Strategic actions of individual key decision makers, in turn, are important to understand the overall organizational strategy (Jarzabkowski, 2004; Whittington, 1996), and ultimately organizational performance.

While the cross-sectional nature of this research does not allow us to draw conclusions about causal antecedents or consequences of talent philosophies, it does allow us to map a network of related factors. In line with the idea that mental models are dynamic and context-dependent (Hodgkinson & Johnson, 1994), we found some evidence for significant relations between the four talent philosophies and contextual factors. First, although not explicitly hypothesized, we found evidence for cultural differences in the four talent philosophies. HR managers from Anglo countries (including the US, Canada, the UK, and Australia) showed an almost equal representation in three out of four talent philosophies, but were under-represented in terms of the exclusive/developable philosophy. This underrepresentation in comparison to the exclusive/innate talent philosophy may be explained by the idea that these managers are mainly exposed to the US-centric literature on the war for talent (Michaels et al., 2001), advocating that organizations need to identify, attract, and bind the few employees with innate talent. However, we cannot clearly explain why managers from this GLOBE dimension are also very likely to hold one of the two inclusive talent philosophies. HR managers from the Germanic GLOBE dimension (including Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland) were most strongly represented in the two inclusive talent philosophy clusters. This is in line with research findings by Festing et al. (2013), which were explained by the

idea that the inclusive talent philosophy is rooted in the German educational system that emphasizes the equal development of all. In contrast to this, HR managers who originate in Latin European countries (e.g. France, Italy, Portugal, and Spain) were most likely to hold one of the two exclusive talent philosophies, which is in line with findings by Valverde, Scullion, and Ryan (2013). The authors explained their findings by the Latin European tradition of closely valuing in-group or family- members, while showing little concern for others. In companies, talented employees will be seen as an elite group of in-group members that merit special treatment, while other employees are disregarded (Valverde et al., 2013).

Second, we found that HR managers of relatively smaller organizations were more likely to hold an inclusive talent philosophy, whereas HR managers of larger organizations were more likely to hold an exclusive talent philosophy. This may be related to their respective exposure to inclusive TM in smaller organizations (Festing et al., 2013) or exclusive TM in larger organizations (Krishnan & Scullion, 2017). Such exposure can affect mental models which are shaped in constant interactions between individuals and the environments they are in (Hodgkinson & Johnson, 1994). However, our findings suggested that neither status as multinational nor ownership form (public versus private) are linked to any of the talent philosophies. Insignificant findings regarding status as MNC may be explained by its conceptual overlap with organizational size. Not finding differences in the talent philosophies of managers who work in public- as opposed to private sector organizations may indicate that the assumptions about the public sector as more 'soft' are obsolete. In line with this, Thunnissen's (2016) qualitative work in academia highlights that an exclusive, very competitive talent-management system is used for at least some employees, that is, academics who occupy an assistant professor position or higher. It may be that organizations, independent of the sector, use exclusive TM approaches for employees who are of high strategic value. This is also in line with the finding that many organizations try to implement hybrid TM approaches, with exclusive TM for the upper echelons, and inclusive TM for the rest (Stahl et al., 2012)

In line with the idea that mental models determine individual perceptions, decisions, and behavior (Craik, 1943), we furthermore found significant associations between managers' talent philosophies and their perceptions of organizational TM. HR managers who held either an exclusive/developable or an exclusive/innate talent philosophy were more likely to indicate that their organization applied an exclusive definition of talent and made use of workforce differentiation. These findings might be explained by either the influence of an HR manager on HR-related policies and practices (Paauwe, 2004), the influence of organizational context

factors on values, norms, and, beliefs of the managers (Meglino & Ravlin, 1998), or on a perceptual bias on the side of HR managers causing them to interpret the actual organizational practice in line with their own values and ideas (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988). Both the mental models- and strategy-as-practice literature actually combine these different explanations assuming that managers influence organizational praxis through who they are, how they act, and how they interpret and use practices, while the wider social and organizational context simultaneously exerts an influence on them (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007). Whatever the exact direction of influence may be, the strategy-as-practice school advocates that we need to study the perceptions and actions of HR managers to fully understand any HR-related strategy at the organizational level (Björkman et al., 2014). In this regard, talent philosophies may be studied as mental models that provide HR managers with a cognitive frame of reference that guides their talent-related perceptions and actions.

Contrary to what we expected, we did not find relationships between the exclusive/developable and inclusive/developable clusters and the degree to which HR managers perceived growth as opposed to foundational criteria to be important for talent identification. On one hand, this finding might be related to the measurement of the latter variable by means of a forced choice scale. Such scales rely on the assumption that a pair of variables encompasses two opposites and that both choices are equally socially desirable, but it is difficult to ascertain whether these assumptions have been met (Ray, 1990). This, highlights the necessity to develop valid and reliable scales to measure core constructs in the TM domain. On the other hand, there might be less variation than assumed in the actual talent identification procedures that organizations use. Prior research has indicated that past performance is the most important criterion for talent identification in many organizations (Dries & Pepermans, 2007). Given that identifying different forms of talent is a complex endeavor (cf. Silzer & Church, 2009), HR managers may rely on performance as a generic, easily accessible criterion instead of trying to align their talent identification procedure with their view on talent.

### **Limitations and future research**

The research at hand is subject to four major limitations. First, we present results of cross-sectional research which does not allow drawing conclusions about cause and effect relationships. The question whether managerial beliefs influence perceptions of organizational practices or whether perceptions of organizational practices influence managerial beliefs cannot be conclusively answered by the results of this study.

Second, the use of single-item measures to determine talent philosophies can be criticized. However, prior research has shown that single-item measures often represent an economical, valid, and reliable alternative to multiple-item measures (Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001). Third, the results of our study rely on single-source data. While it is appropriate to measure talent philosophies at the level of the individual manager, other sources might be used to measure organizational TM practices in future research. Ideally, both the perceptions of employees and other senior managers would have been measured in the present study. However, it has been recommended, and established as common practice to use (senior) HR managers as key informants in HRM research, most notably, when assessing HR practices (cf. Arthur & Boyles, 2007). In general, we reason that the same recommendation holds for TM research. However, to move TM research forward, we need to open up an academic discussion on the valid and reliable measurement of key TM constructs (intended, actual, and perceived) at different levels of analysis (organizational, team, and individual-level). Fourth, while we did target HR directors or the most senior HR manager in an organization, the use of snowball sampling limits the control we had over the sampling procedure and we do not know for sure how much power our respondents had and whether they can be considered real strategists (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). Based on the respondents' average age of 59.56 years and an average experience in HR of 12.25 years, we can, however, assume that most of our respondents were indeed senior HR managers. Nonetheless, it remains to be questioned whether even senior HR managers hold 'absolute' power over organizational approaches to TM. It is likely that other senior managers and/or the board of directors exert an influence on intended HR practices, while line managers influence the actual implementation of practices on the shop-floor. Moreover, the power of an HR manager will also depend on whether he or she is located at the headquarters or at a subsidiary of the organization. To gain a complete understanding of an organization's approach to TM, we would therefore have to question or observe each of these TM 'strategists' and we would need to gain additional information on their strategic position within the organization.

Future research should address the limitations mentioned above by making use of longitudinal designs in which both HR manager- and objective organizational data are collected over a period of at least one but preferably several years. Moreover, future research might aim to gain insights into the links between talent philosophies and employee outcomes such as perceptions of HR practices, employee well-being, and engagement. Meyers and van Woerkom (2014) have, for instance,

proposed that inclusive philosophies affect employees in a more favorable way than exclusive philosophies, but this hypothesis still remains to be investigated by means of a multi-level study. This multi-level study would ideally include objectively measured organizational performance to explore whether different talent philosophies affect organizational outcomes differently. However, conducting such a study is easier said than done. Given that many variables have an effect on organizational performance, scholars would need to ensure to include, relevant proximal outcomes in this study—instead of only distal outcomes such as financial performance. Examples are staff turnover, career progress, retention, and the fulfilment of individual and/or team assignments. Another valuable addition to future research might be to collect data on the talent philosophies of line managers instead of HR managers because literature on SHRM highlights that the responsibility for managing the workforce gets more and more devolved from the HR department to the line (Becker & Huselid, 2006).

### **Theoretical and practical implications**

In response to theoretical papers in which the persisting ambiguity of the constructs talent and TM was highlighted (Dries, 2013; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013; Tansley, 2011), this article aimed to shed light on the nature of these ambiguities in organizational practice. We found that HR managers from various organizations had divergent ideas about the degree to which talent is innate and the degree to which talent is exclusive. This indicates that HR managers hold different mental models of talent. Different mental models, in turn, indicate that different actual models of TM exist because mental models affect the strategic actions of individual managers (Kaplan, 2011). In more detail, the strategy-as-practice literature (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007), suggests that managers will infuse HR practices with meaning depending on their own beliefs and ideas (in interaction with situational factors). In other words, the beliefs and ideas of HR managers influence which practices they will use and how they will use them (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). Overall, this implies that TM theorizing can be refined by paying more attention to cognitive processes among managers. This is particularly relevant because actions of HR managers have a trickle-down effect to middle- and line management, which ultimately influences how employees perceive and respond to managerial actions (Paauwe, 2004).

In conclusion, our results regarding the diversity of talent philosophies call for an explicit consideration of different forms of TM in future research. It appears indispensable to complement the predominant,



exclusive TM literature with different (more inclusive) perspectives to do justice to TM as a practical phenomenon. In line with Boudreau (2013), we therefore reason that the diversity in the literature as well as in practice should be embraced as a resource that can help to increase our understanding of TM and the processes and outcomes it triggers.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interests was reported by the authors.

### Note

1. We also ran all regression analyses with three dummy variables representing the three biggest GLOBE dimensions as additional control variables (Anglo, Germanic, and Latin European; with all other GLOBE dimensions combined as reference category). As the results remained largely unchanged when adding these dummies, and as none of the dummy variables displayed a significant relationship with either outcome variable, we report the results without controlling for the respondents' cultural background.

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