The London School of Economics and Political Science

**Considering the Talent in Talent Management:**

**Consequences of Strategic Talent Management for the Employee Psychological Contract and Individual Outcomes.**

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## Declaration

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# Abstract

Strategic talent management aims to contribute to organisational competitive advantage through the differentiated management of employees identified as "talent". However the nascent talent management (TM) literature is under-theorised and little is yet known about the mechanisms through which the path to talent-advantage may occur. While recent research has begun to consider the employee in talent management, a notable lack of conceptual and empirical investigation of the employee perspective persists.

Considering the talent in talent management, the focus of this thesis is to examine the employee response to exclusive talent management and individual-level outcomes, bringing the employee perspective into central focus in the literature, a shift from the organisational perspective and organisational-level focus dominant in the literature.

This thesis draws on psychological contract, social exchange and human resources attribution theories to investigate the mechanisms through which exclusive TM effectuates outcomes. An exploratory convergent empirical strategy and mixed-methods are used to consider these research questions: How do employees experience talent management? What are the consequences of talent management for the psychological contract and individual outcomes?

Two empirical studies are presented. First, a qualitative inductive study. Through interview of a purposeful cross-organisation sample of employees identified as elite talent by their organisations, to capture the "voice of talent", evidence highlights the consequences of talent status, the complexities of the talent-organisation relationship, and the central, dynamic involvement of the psychological contract.

Second, through integration of HR attribution theory into the TM literature, the influence of employee talent management attributions on individual outcomes is examined, finding that psychological contract fulfilment is a central mechanism through which the influence of employee attributions of talent management on outcomes is mediated. A large-scale quantitative study (n=1561) was conducted.

Examining the perspectives of both talent-identified employees and the wider workforce, this dissertation contributes a deep empirical investigation of the employee experience of talent management to the rapidly developing literature.

# Acknowledgements

*"The more one knows, the more one comprehends, the more one realises that everything turns in a circle." (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe)*

My journey as a doctoral candidate in the Department of Management at the LSE has been a most memorable one, encompassing experiences broad, deep and diverse, far too many to mention here. Throughout, I have been fortunate to learn from many scholars, business professionals, research participants. Here, I can recognise only a few.

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Throughout the doctoral work, the learning has been significant with many liminal phases of the unknown, only to arrive at its end with conscious incompetence. "The more you know, the more you know you do not know" (Aristotle) and so I look forward to many more questions.

Finally, in this thesis, all mistakes are my own.

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## List of Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| AC | Affective commitment |
| CET | Crucial exchange theory |
| HC | Human capital |
| HR | Human resources |
| HRA | Human resources attribution theory |
| GTM | Global talent management |
| LMX | Leader-member exchange |
| MTM | Macro talent management |
| MNC | Multi-national corporation |
| OB | Organisational behaviour |
| OCB | Organisational citizenship behaviour |
| PC | Psychological contract |
| PSS | Perceived supervisor support |
| PTS | Perceived talent status |
| RBV | Resource based view of the firm |
| SET | Social exchange theory |
| SHRM | Strategic human resource management |
| TM | Talent management |
| TOR | Talent-organisation relationship |

# 1. Chapter 1. Introduction to the Dissertation

## 1.1. Chapter Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to investigate the employee experience of talent management (TM) to deepen our understanding of the influence of talent management on the employee-organisation relationship, its consequences for the employee psychological contract (PC) and individual outcomes. By considering the talent in talent management, this research contributes evidence of the employee perspective and individual-level outcomes to the under-theorised literature providing balance to the organisational perspective and firm-level orientation of the extant literature.

The notion of "Talent" has taken centre stage in the business community today. As one component of human capital (HC) strategy, talent management has driven the people agenda into increasing focus in the board and executive teams (Collings, McDonnell, & McMackin, 2017). Talent management has been characterised as *the* dominant topic in human capital research of the 21st century (Cascio & Aguinis, 2008), the meaning of which "sparks intense disagreement" (Cascio & Aguinis, 2008, p. 1069) and is a topic which some argue has been "hijacked by management gurus" (Economist, 2006a, p. 11). In the context of increasing globalisation and labour mobility since the turn of the millennium, the concept of organisational "talent" has emerged through a competitive focus on the need for organisations to reliably attract, select, develop and retain a high performing workforce, one which is able to contribute towards robust competitive advantage for enhanced firm growth. Talent is seen as a form of strategic capital, as illustrated by the resource based view of the firm (RBV) (Barney, 1991; Barney, Wright, & Ketchen, 2001), whereby human resources possess the characteristics of being valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable (Wright, McMahan, & McWilliams, 1994). These resources are thereby viewed as resources of competitive advantage to the firm. A simple Google search of "talent management" returns more than 479 million items, indicating current visibility of the concept. Reflecting on a "decade of debate and hype" (Dries, 2013a, p. 272), more than 7000 articles on talent management exist, although mainly located in the practitioner literature (Dries, 2013c).

In contrast, the scholarly talent management literature had been almost non-existent until its rapid emergence in the past decade (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen,

2016) and while it has been largely conceptual (Dries, 2013a), the literature is increasingly empirical in focus. Dominated by organisational (Gallardo-Gallardo, Nijs, Dries, & Gallo, 2015) and managerialist (Thunnissen, Boselie, & Fruytier, 2013b) perspectives until recently, the scholarly literature on the topic of talent management overlooked consideration of the employee (Björkman, Ehrnrooth, Mäkelä, Smale, & Sumelius, 2013), despite being its central participant (King, 2015). Responding to calls for a greater focus on the employee psychological response to talent management (Dries, 2013a; Ehrnrooth et al., 2018; Swailes & Blackburn, 2016), a stream of research has recently been developing which considers the employee reactions to talent identification, a central component of exclusive talent management (Mäkelä, Björkman, & Ehrnrooth, 2010). Despite its rapid development, the talent management literature remains fragmented and requires "fundamental theoretical scaffolding" (Morley, Valverde, & Farndale, 2017, p. 2). While a specific stream has emerged which now considers the employee within talent management, this focus remains significantly under-theorised (Dries, 2013a).

The definition of talent management continues to be debated in the nascent literature. A simple conceptualisation of talent management posits that "talent management is the differential management of employees according to their relative potential to contribute to an organisation's competitive advantage" (Gelens, Dries, Hofmans, & Pepermans, 2013, p. 342). While this definition points to two important aspects of talent management, that of differential management and differential identification (as inferred by the reference to relative potential), this definition overlooks the use of a differentiated human resource (HR) architecture (Collings & Mellahi, 2009) and of key positions (Huselid, Beatty, & Becker, 2005), to which talent-identified employees are deployed and through which differentiated firm value is created. In this thesis, therefore, I adopt the definition of <u>strategic talent management</u> (STM) as introduced by Collings and Mellahi (2009). Therefore in this thesis, use of the phrase talent management refers to a strategic use of talent management.

> The "activities and processes that involve the systematic identification of key positions which differentially contribute to the organisation's sustainable competitive advantage, the development of a talent pool of high potential and high performing incumbents to fill these roles, and the development of a differentiated human resource architecture to facilitate filling these positions

*with competent incumbents and to ensure their continued commitment to the organisation."(Collings & Mellahi, 2009, p. 305).*

The notable and essential components of this latter definition are threefold. First, that talent management is a systematic approach whereby both individuals and key positions are identified, rather than solely on the individuals identified as talent. Second, that talent management is supported by a differentiated HR architecture. The HR architecture refers to a set of HRM programs, policies and practices specifically for the purpose of talent management (Huselid & Becker, 2011; Lepak & Snell, 1999), and recognises that the extant strategic human resource management (SHRM) architecture which is applied to the wider workforce is not, alone, sufficient for the strategic management of talent. Organisations which adopt exclusive talent management therefore require a differentiated HR architecture (Lepak & Snell, 2002) to manage talent (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). Third, that talent management is focused on both high performance today and the potential for high performance in future, thereby integrating a time orientation to the definition. This time orientation is consistent with the notion of competitive advantage which infers a future-orientation. Both of the definitions represent an exclusive view (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014), in that talent is seen as a differentiated resource rather than a reference to the general workforce.

In this thesis I further develop the definition of strategic talent management (STM) by extending the Collings and Mellahi (2009) definition through specifying a fourth component: the imperative of a high degree of direct management involvement as a form of governance. Taking the view that talent management is a strategic imperative which involves the control and management of firm assets for strategic intent, with board-level visibility, I argue that talent management requires management involvement differentiated from human resource management. I therefore further develop the definition with the following extension:

> *"Strategic talent management is a management imperative anchored in direct management involvement with board-level visibility as a form of governance and control of the organisation."*

Within the scholarly talent management literature, varying philosophical approaches exist. Some firms apply an exclusive model of talent management (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014) in which workforce differentiation is used to identify talented

employees for inclusion into the organisational talent pool, consistent with the focus on "A players" (Huselid, Beatty, et al., 2005). The exclusive philosophy of talent management is a strategic management practice which directs a disproportionate amount of firm resources to talent-identified employees and those included in one or more talent pools or who hold pivotal positions (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Lewis & Heckman, 2006). However significant further research is required to examine its influence on both organisational outcomes (Schuler, Jackson, & Tarique, 2011) and individual employee outcomes in the workforce (Dries, 2013a). Others adopt an inclusive model (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014) whereby all employees are viewed as being talented (Lewis & Heckman, 2006; Stahl et al., 2012). Talent can also be defined by the object or subject view whereby talent refers to the capabilities which employees hold or to the employees themselves (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & González-Cruz, 2013). In this thesis, I adopt the subject view, consistent with the aim of this thesis to position the employee perspective centrally within the conceptual and empirical work.

In this thesis, I consider the employee response to talent management in the context of an exclusive talent management philosophy. The degree of exclusivity (Collings et al., 2017) of organisational talent management is one of the pivotal debates in the extant literature. Adopting a focus on exclusive talent management is important to the work of this thesis because it is the exclusive philosophy of talent management which we know the least about. It is also the type of talent management which is theorised to offer the greatest strategic advantage, however this approach may risk unintended, but significant, consequences, of which there is limited understanding currently. First, based on the definition of STM by Collings and Mellahi (2009), which I adopt in this thesis, the exclusive form of TM is the form of talent management which can be described as the philosophy of TM which is most differentiated from SHRM. The inclusive philosophy of talent management has been compared to "good HR management" (Lewis & Heckman, 2006). In contrast, exclusive TM differs notably from SHRM in these three ways: use of a differentiated HR architecture specific to TM; a differentiated and prioritised focus on key positions; and a focus exclusively on selected pools or individuals identified as talented within the workforce. Therefore, I argue that to assume that the mechanisms which underlie the functioning of exclusive TM are already understood within the scope of the SHRM scholarly literature is not a valid assumption. Secondly, in keeping with the definition adopted in this thesis, exclusive

TM involves workforce differentiation through use of the relative identification of talent and the assessment of relative potential amongst employees in a given workforce. Workforce differentiation is widely used in practice but remarkably under-examined empirically such that the consequences of this practice are largely unknown. Urgent calls in the literature for examination of the psychological consequences of exclusive TM for employees identified as talent (Dries, 2013a) and for consideration of employees in the wider workforce (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016) (Ehrnrooth et al., 2018) reflect the seriousness of this limitation, to the extent that the ethical implications of this practice are in question (Swailes, 2013a).

In this first chapter of the thesis, I begin by introducing the dissertation topic, talent management, followed by a statement of the purpose and intended contribution of the thesis in section 1.2. I then briefly explain my motivation to undertake the dissertation in the domain of talent management, in section 1.3. Finally, in section 1.4, I present the structure of the dissertation.

## 1.2. Purpose and background

The focus of this dissertation is the employee within the talent management literature and the consequences of talent management at the individual level. This thesis responds directly to calls in the literature for greater consideration of a relational orientation to talent management (Al Ariss, Cascio, & Paauwe, 2014), the employee's psychological response to talent management (Björkman et al., 2013; Dries, 2013a) and empirical study of individual-level (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015) and proximal outcomes (Collings & Mellahi, 2009) of talent management. This thesis further responds to calls for consideration of the consequences of talent management for the wider workforce in response to talent management (Becker, Huselid, & Beatty, 2009), which may be considered the "excluded majority" (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016), particularly as the use of exclusive talent management in practice may be perceived to be incongruent with aims to establish inclusion in the workplace (Daubner-Siva, Vinkenburg, & Jansen, 2017). In this thesis I explore these central research questions throughout the thesis:

> *What is the employee experience of talent management? How do employees perceive talent management and to what do they attribute its meaning and purpose? What are the consequences of talent management for the employee psychological contract and the individual outcomes?*

While the TM literature has only recently begun to consider the employee in talent management, the employee has not overlooked organisational talent management. Perhaps not surprisingly, given the visible focus on talent as a board-level concern and a top management priority in organisations today, the notion of talent has also become a concept of significant visibility to the employee within their world of work. A recent study has found that employee psychological contract fulfilment is positively associated with the number of talent management practices which the organisation implements (Sonnenberg, van Zijderveld, & Brinks, 2014), suggesting that employees take note of their organisation's use of talent management. Navigating their careers within and across organisational boundaries in protean careers today (Hall, 2004), employees will undoubtedly be exposed to competitive attraction and recruitment campaigns under the umbrella of "talent management", and its associated rhetoric (Dries, 2013a), regarding the importance of talent to business today. As the contractual employment relationship draws on the ability of an individual to contribute to the performance of organisation through the individual's competence, knowledge, skills, and abilities, the talent which the employee possesses will enable (or not) their individual opportunities for employment and subsequent career progression. Correspondingly, the notion of talent and the concept and practice of organisational talent management can both be seen as centrally relevant to the employee's perceptions of their own employment and career opportunities and the corresponding quality and outcomes of their experience of employment. Even in the context of today's boundaryless careers (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), whereby employees move between organisations and are expected to take a much greater lead in their own career management (Hall, 2004), employees still seek organisational support for their careers (Sturges, Conway, Guest, & Liefooghe, 2005). Aspects of careers today rely on the perceived talent which an individual may possess and which thereby may enable ability to offer talent in service of their organisation's priorities. Given this, it is not surprising then that the notion of being identified as talent by one's organisation has been theorised to be a meaningful event in the employee-organisation relationship (Björkman et al., 2013; Dries, 2013a; King, 2016).

Further, as sense-makers (Weick, 1995), employees seek to understand the organisations in which they work and how they may contribute their individual talent. In exclusive talent management, when an organisation identifies individual employees as having talent of relevance to an organisation, the organisation makes corresponding

talent-specific investments in the employee (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Sparrow & Makram, 2015), such as the inclusion of the employee into a talent pool, development of the employee in fast track or leadership development programs, and through differentiated rewards. Therefore the use of talent management may be interpreted as a promise to the employee which has the potential to influence the employee psychological contract, centrally involved in the employee-organisation relationship. Early studies in this stream of the TM literature have considered the influence of perceived talent status (that is, the perception of being seen as talent by the organisation) and found it to influence the psychological contract (Höglund, 2012), both in terms of psychological contract obligations (Björkman et al., 2013) and of psychological contract fulfilment (Sonnenberg et al., 2014). Yet the TM literature remains under-developed and our understanding of the employee response to this highly differentiated but often strategically ambiguous (Dries, 2013a) workforce management practice remain significantly limited. While recent studies within the talent management literature have begun to consider the employee directly, this recent extension of the literature has not been sufficient to establish our understanding of the employee response to talent management. Yet in the extant literature there is astonishingly little empirical evidence regarding the employee perspective of talent management, whether exclusive or inclusive.

Addressing this gap in the literature allows scholars to move from assumptions of presumed value through exclusive talent management towards an informed view of the mechanisms through which the path to value may be operationalised at its most foundational level, the employee. The forward development of the talent management literature is constrained by its dominant interest in the organisational perspective (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015), without consideration of the individual employee (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016), and by its measurement at the organisational level (Thunnissen, 2016), including a narrow focus on firm performance outcomes (Collings, 2014c), without sufficient consideration of individual-level outcomes (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016). Indeed, the development of a causal model which links firm performance with HR management systems is one of the most significant tasks in the current SHRM literature with regard to workforce differentiation, in order to bridge the macro (strategic) and micro (functional) domains (Huselid & Becker, 2011). In this thesis I investigate the influence of organisational strategic

priorities (macro) for talent management with the individual response to exclusive talent management practices (micro) by unpacking the "black box" of exclusive TM at the individual level. This investigation aims to shed light on individual mechanisms through which this organisational intention is operationalised, building bridges between the macro and micro domains in the TM literature.

Without an understanding of the employee response to talent management, the literature remains reliant on the presumed, but largely unexamined, individual-level outcomes of talent management and remains fixed at the organisation-level of measure. Indicative of this is the narrow conceptualisation of organisational-level performance outcomes of TM as firm performance or as shareholder returns, highlighting the lack of research exploring employees as stakeholders of organisational talent management and hence the need for consideration of employee-level outcomes (Collings, 2014c). Thus the individual-level mechanisms through which organisation-level strategic talent management contributes to proximal outcomes of value to the firm, is largely under theorised and under examined. Further, as workforce differentiation is increasingly adopted by organisations, its potential to strategically and advantageously influence employee attitudes and behaviours of strategic relevance, such as trust and engagement must be better understood. Further research which examines the impact of differentiation on employee level outcomes is required (Huselid & Becker, 2011). The lack of consideration of the impact of talent management on the wider workforce of non talent-identified employees (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016) is also a visible gap in the literature. It is upon their continuing engagement and contribution that the organisation relies (Becker et al., 2009), but ironically they whom may be under-recognised, sometimes referred to in the literature as "B-players", in contrast to the top talent referred to as "A players" (DeLong & Vijayaraghavan, 2003). I argue that the employee response to organisational talent management is the central individual-level route through which talent management is expected to generate competitive outcomes and therefore further theoretical and empirical investigation of such mechanisms is crucial. Further, considering exclusive talent management as a workforce differentiation practice, little is known regarding the psychological consequences of such practices for the employee (Becker et al., 2009). Research on the psychological consequences of exclusive talent management, for both those employees identified as talent (Dries, 2013a) and for those

employees who comprise the wider workforce is urgently required (Becker et al., 2009; Ehrnrooth et al., 2018; Swailes & Blackburn, 2016).

## 1.3.    Contribution to the literature

In the adjacent strategic human resource management (SHRM) literature, an extensive focus on process rather than on the participants of SHRM process (Wright & McMahan, 2011) has been a noted gap in the literature. Not dissimilarly, in the extant talent management literature, the participants have not been of central concern. As a consequence of the rapid development, the literature is unintegrated (Morley et al., 2017) and significant gaps exist, one of which is consideration of the employee within the developing body of TM literature. Consistent with the SHRM literature which has called for a priority focus on "putting human back into human resource management" (Wright & McMahan, 2011, p. 93), the scholarly TM literature has only recently turned its attention to consider the employee in talent management. In this thesis, I argue that further conceptual and empirical work to consider the "talent within talent management" is imperative if to advance the TM literature and correspondingly, I place the employee at the heart of this study, centrally positioning the employee as the subject of this dissertation.

To investigate the research topic, I adopt a mixed methods empirical strategy, using an exploratory convergent design, which is presented in detail in chapter four of the thesis. Drawing primarily on theories of social exchange (Blau, 1964), psychological contract (Rousseau, 1995), and HR attributions (Nishii, Lepak, & Schneider, 2008), I theorise and present the main components of the research conceptual model and conduct two complementary empirical studies. The use of mixed-methods, and specifically a mix of qualitative and quantitative, is called for in the study of workforce differentiation at the employee level of measurement (Huselid & Becker, 2011) and is recognised to be valuable in the exploration of concepts new to the literature (Creswell & Clark, 2017), as is relevant here.

Despite relatively rapid development in recent years, given the extraordinary lack of both conceptual and empirical work at the individual level in the extant literature, I first conduct an exploratory study using qualitative inductive methods. In the first study, I draw on a purposeful sample of employees who have experienced "elite status" or "top talent" status or been identified as "stars" in their organisation over an extended period

of time. In this interview-based study, I investigate the perspectives of talent-identified employees, to examine their experience of being top talent in their organisations.

In the second study, I theorise and test a measurement model which examines core components of the conceptual research model though a large-scale quantitative study. Drawing on a random sample of employees (n=1561) in a large multinational financial services firm, I examine whether employees attribute meaning and purpose to their organisation's use of talent management and how varying attributions explain variance in organisationally-preferred outcomes of talent management. Further, I empirically examine the role of the employee psychological contract as a central mechanism through which this effect functions.

Finally, while both drawing on the employee as the subject of the empirical work, the two complementary studies differ in the intention to investigate the employee perspective. The first study exclusively considers the perspectives of top talent-identified employees and the second widens the scope of employee views to consider the perspectives of the wider workforce including both talent- and non talent-identified employees. Together the two studies consider the complementary perspectives of at least two segments of the workforce. First, those identified formally as the organisation's "Talent", who are included in defined talent pools for strategic, differential management and investment, through highly selective, relative practices of talent identification and potential assessment. Second, employees of the wider workforce often collectively referred to as the organisation's "talent".

This thesis and the empirical work which is presented herein, will contribute to the literature in five ways. First, this thesis reorients the talent management literature by its uncommon focus on the employee as the central actor within the talent management literature. This supports the re-positioning of the talented employee within the talent management literature, in contrast to the prevailing organisational perspective. This shifts the focal orientation of the literature from the dominant organisational perspective (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015), and offers a degree of balance to the TM literature through consideration of the employee perspective, further inviting the voice of the employee into the TM literature. This shift extends the newly developing stream in the literature which directly considers the employee perspective in talent management. Extending this new stream, this thesis contributes findings from empirical study of both

elite talent and of the general workforce further diversifying and balancing the range of perspectives available within the scholarly literature. The consideration of TM consequences for the wider workforce, looking beyond exclusively talent-identified employees, responds to urgent calls for consideration of the psychological consequences of the employee (Dries, 2013a), whether talent-identified or not, in the context of exclusive TM (Ehrnrooth et al., 2018). This thesis presents a rare large-scale study of employee TM perceptions across the workforce, thereby representing the potentially "excluded majority" (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016, p. 114). This contributes to our understanding in the literature of the possible unintended consequences of exclusive TM. In particular, it sheds light on whether exclusive talent management is received by employees as a practice of exclusion, given the possible perception of talent management as being a practice of exclusion rather than one of inclusion, from a diversity management perspective (Daubner-Siva et al., 2017). In the first study, through the use of interview-based and inductive methods, the findings represent the "voice of talent" which contributes to a reorienting and rebalancing of the TM literature. In the second study, by empirically investigating the impact of workforce differentiation on the wider workforce, this thesis responds to a crucial priority (Becker et al., 2009; DeLong & Vijayaraghavan, 2003) in the forward development of the literature.

Second, this thesis deepens the extant talent management literature by shifting the level of measurement from the organisation-level to the individual-level, through empirical investigation of individual-level outcomes. More specifically, this direct investigation of the individual-level mechanisms through which talent management functions to generate differentiated outcomes represents an unpacking of the "black box" of TM. This shift to consider the employee experience of and response to talent management sheds light on the variance in employee outcomes in the assumed route to competitive value through talent management. This also supports consideration of possible unintended consequences in what is largely assumed to be positive outcomes (Ehrnrooth et al., 2018), by directly engaging the voice of the employee. Doing so responds to calls in the literature for consideration of individual level (Thunnissen, 2016) and more proximal outcomes of TM (Collings, 2014c). Building on the findings of the literature review (presented in chapter two), I theorise and develop a conceptual research model (presented in chapter three) in which I locate the employee centrally, arguing that the proposed path to competitive firm level value is foundationally reliant on the

employee experience of talent management and its associated individual-level mechanisms. Considering the intended strategic purpose of talent management at the individual level, I focus on individual level outcomes which are of strategic import to the organisation, as identified in review of the extant literature. Further, this thesis supports future research through presentation of a comprehensive review of the extant talent management literature and development of a conceptual research model of the employee experience of talent management. In addition to moving from organisational to individual-level measures, this thesis supports the talent management literature in bridging the macro (strategic) and micro (functional) domains (Huselid & Becker, 2011) in talent management. By considering the organisational strategy for talent in the construct of HR attributions of commitment and of control and the individual-level response, the findings shed light on the influence of organisational-level variables on individual level outcomes in talent management.

Third, this thesis expands the talent management literature through synthesis of human resource attribution theory (HRA) (Nishii et al., 2008) into the talent management literature and in doing so, introduces the concept of employee talent management attributions. In this thesis I argue that employees, as sense-makers, observe and make sense of the adoption of exclusive talent management strategy in their organisation and in doing so, attribute meaning and purpose to the use of exclusive TM. Further, I argue that variance in employee attributions of the meaning of organisational talent management will predict variance in individual level outcomes of talent management. This is a novel contribution in the talent management literature. Drawing on signalling (Spence, 1973) and sense-making (Weick, 1995) theories and drawing on the highly limited extant HRA literature, this thesis presents a first conceptualisation and empirical study of the relationship between employee talent management attributions of commitment and of control and individual outcomes. Integrating Heider's work (Heider, 1958) in the topic of commitment and control orientations and drawing on the seminal work of Nishi, Lepak, and Schneider (Nishii et al., 2008), I develop a new measure of employee TM attributions. In the empirical work of this dissertation which follows, employee TM attributions of commitment and of control are each shown to directly and indirectly influence organisationally-preferred outcomes of talent management. This explains that employees interpret their organisation's use of talent management as being purposeful and as a signal of organisational intent such that variation in the interpretation

of intent can effectuate variation in employee outcomes of TM. In light of the strategic ambiguity in talent management communications (Dries & De Gieter, 2014), the empirical link between employee TM attributions and individual-level TM outcomes extends our understanding of the effects of organisational level signalling and communication with regard to talent management outcomes at the individual level.

Fourth, this thesis further extends our understanding of the central role of the psychological contract in talent management as a mechanism through which the influence of talent management on employee outcomes functions. Building on the initial work of scholars who have theorised the centrality of the employee psychological contract in TM (Höglund, 2012), the influence of TM on psychological contract inducements (Ehrnrooth et al., 2018), and on fulfilment of the psychological contract (Sonnenberg et al., 2014), this thesis extends our understanding of the central role of the psychological contract in the talent management literature. Psychological contract fulfilment is shown to indirectly carry a portion of the effect of employee TM attributions to a range of individual-level employee TM outcomes. Given the involvement of psychological contract fulfilment as a mediating mechanism in the talent-value path, this evidence sheds light on the importance of maintaining psychological contract fulfilment when exclusive talent management is undertaken in the organisation. As evidence from the large-scale study which considered the wider workforce and was not limited to views of elite talent only, this finding is also represents the influence of workforce differentiation practices on the psychological contract of employees in the wider non talent-identified majority of the workforce. Doing so, this contributes to calls for consideration of the ethics (Swailes, 2013a) by a closer understanding of the involvement of the psychological contract, central to the ongoing employee-organisation relationship.

Fifth, this thesis extends the TM literature through the consideration of context in talent management, as called for in the literature (Thunnissen, 2016), by introducing a contextually-anchored conceptual model and measured variables. By presenting empirical evidence that talent management is inherently contextually-embedded and using this evidence to explain how employee interpretations of the purpose of talent management in the organisation correlate with variance in outcomes, this thesis has shown that variance in context is associated with variance in the individual-level outcomes of talent management. This extends the TM literature by introducing an

empirical model which, as a function of the construct measures, accounts for the organisationally-specific context in which talent management is undertaken, thereby introducing and testing a contingent model of talent management. Further, by integrating both the employee and the organisational perspective into the variables considered with the quantitative measurement model, this thesis has contributed to calls for a more pluralistic approach to talent management (Thunnissen et al., 2013b).

Additionally, this thesis aims to contribute to management practice. The introduction of employee attributions of talent management to the scholarly literature is supportive of management's design and implementation of talent management in practice through drawing attention to the importance of the employee perceptions of organisational talent management in practice. While management is understandably hesitant with regards to potentially sensitive communications regarding talent management as a differentiated workforce management practice (Becker et al., 2009), the empirical work presented herein illustrates the importance of employee attributions of meaning to their observations of organisational talent management. Through intentional communications with regard to the strategic purpose of talent and the intention of management to enact specific priorities (such as to both control the talent requirements for the organisation while also supporting employee careers), management can more effectively enable talent management outcomes through clarity in talent management purpose. Finally, this thesis supports management with empirical evidence that the dual purposes of commitment and of control are each significantly associated with positive organisationally-preferred, individual outcomes, in talent management. In the quantitative study, evidence indicates that the use of TM as an enactment of both commitment and of control are complementary purposes for management adoption of TM as a human capital strategy. Evidence indicates that these purposes are significantly related with organisationally-desired outcomes of TM in practice and that they are not mutually-exclusive.

## 1.4. Motivation of the researcher

My motivation to undertake doctoral studies in the realm of strategic talent management originates in my prior professional experience in international human resource management and global talent management. During this time, both the global HR function and the corporate HR teams in which I held leadership roles experienced

significant change. Two key changes were the introduction of talent management as a core competence and the continuing devolution of former HR functional activities into the line (Cappelli, 2013). To be effective in managing global talent in practice, it was imperative to increasingly demonstrate impact through evidence-based management (Rousseau & Gunia, 2016). However the available guidance from the scholarly talent management literature was limited or non-existent at the time. Given the continuing issues reported by top management (Cappelli, 2013), and the noted challenges of consistency in the implementation of global HRM practices (Morris et al., 2009), it became apparent that the advancement of empirical research could offer important insight. It was through this professional experience that my research in international HR management, human capital, and global talent management originated. As the scholarly research in talent management continues to develop, consideration of its relevance and potential impact is an important factor in enabling the use of empirical insight by evidence-based management practitioners.

### 1.5.    Structure of the dissertation thesis

Following this introduction chapter, in chapters two, three, and four, I present the review of the literature, the conceptual research model, and the dissertation methodology, respectively. In chapter two which follows, I present a comprehensive review of the body of scholarly literature on the topic of talent management. Beginning with a review of the wider talent management literature, I find that the reported dominance of the organisational perspective of talent management (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015) is clearly evident. To more closely consider the imbalance of perspectives in the literature, I locate and review the very limited volume of work which considers the employee in the TM literature and present the findings of my review. Evidencing the persistent under-development of the topic within the TM literature, I confirm the focus of the thesis as the employee psychological response to talent management.

In chapter three, I introduce an overarching conceptual research model, for the study of the employee response to talent management at the individual-level, which comprises five components. The components consider: the meaning which employees attribute to TM, the influence of TM on the employee psychological contact, the individual outcomes of TM, the contextual factors which influence TM and finally, the individual differences which are theorised to influence the employee experience of TM.

Further, in chapter three, I then theorise and present the dissertation conceptual research model. Drawing on HR attributional theory (Nishii et al., 2008), I extend the TM literature by introducing the concept of employee talent management attributions. That is, interpretations of meaning which employees attribute to their organisation's use of talent management. I also draw on psychological contract theory (Rousseau, 1995) to theorise the functional role of the psychological contract as a central mechanism through which employee outcomes result. I draw on the talent management literature, to identify and theorise organisationally-desired TM outcomes.

In chapter four, the main methods chapter of this thesis I introduce the dissertation empirical strategy and my choice of an exploratory-convergent mixed methods design. Drawing on the workforce differentiation literature, I apply a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods fitting with the evaluation of workforce differentiation impact (Huselid & Becker, 2011), as a largely unexamined topic. I then present the detailed empirical designs for each of the two complementary empirical studies included in the scope of this thesis: the first, a qualitative inductive study and the second, a large-scale quantitative study.

In chapters five, six and seven which follow, I then present the full body of empirical work of the dissertation. In chapter five, I report, interpret and discuss the findings of the first of two studies in this thesis. Drawing on qualitative methods to present an immersive view of the employee experience of "Being Talent", in this study the focus exclusively considers the experience of employees identified as elite talent by their organisation. I present six themes which emerge from the research which highlight the consequences of top talent status for employees, their psychological contract and the ongoing talent-organisation relationship.

In chapters six and seven, I report the results of the large-scale quantitative study: "The Employee Experience", which considers the employee response to talent management across the wider workforce and tests the newly introduced empirical measure of employee talent management attributions. In chapters six and seven I report tests of direct relationships between employee talent management attributions and the identified organisationally-desired outcomes of TM. Drawing on the work of Heider (Heider, 1958), I develop the concept of employee attributions of the meaning of the organisation's use of talent management proposing discrete enactments of commitment

and of control. Hypothesising the role of psychological contract fulfilment as a mediator in the model, I conduct tests of mediation by employee psychological contract fulfilment to explain the indirect influence of psychological contract fulfilment in the outcomes. I provide evidence that varying employee attributions of the purpose of their organisation's use of talent management will be associated with varying outcomes and of the contribution of psychological contract fulfilment as a mediator in the relationships.

In the final chapter in this thesis, eight, I present a detailed discussion of the dissertation, the findings of the empirical studies, the limitations of the thesis, the contribution to the theoretical and empirical literature and propose future research directions.

## 1.6. Chapter conclusion

In this chapter I have introduced the topic of this thesis and its central focal orientation: the talent within talent management. Arguing the imperative to more sufficiently understand and explain the consequences of organisational talent management at the individual level, this thesis considers the employee perspective in talent management and individual-level mechanisms: the "black box" of talent management. The empirical work of this thesis is designed to contribute directly to the under-theorised and under-developed extant literature.

Through conducting the empirical work of this thesis it contributes to the scholarly literature in five ways. First, it reorients the TM literature by adopting an uncommon focus on the employee as the subject of empirical study and the central actor within the literature, tilting the balance in the TM literature relative to the prevailing organisational perspective. Second, this thesis deepens the TM literature by redirecting the level of measurement from the established focus on the organisation-level to the individual-level, by empirical investigation of individual level outcomes. Third, this thesis expands the extant literature through synthesis of the theory of human resource attribution (Nishii et al., 2008) into the talent management literature and introduction of the concept of employee talent management attributions. Fourth, this thesis further extends psychological contract theory in the TM literature providing evidence of its role as a central mechanism in the individual-level outcomes in talent management. Fifth, this thesis extends the TM literature through the conceptual and empirical integration of

context in talent management, introducing and testing a contingent model of talent management. In the balance of the thesis which follows, I present the conceptual and empirical work followed by a discussion of the contribution of this thesis to the nascent talent management literature.

# 2. Chapter 2. Talent Management and the Employee: A Review of the Nascent Literature

## 2.1. Chapter Introduction

Having emerged essentially within the past decade, the scholarly talent management (TM) literature has undergone rapid recent development such that it has become one of the fastest growing bodies of academic work in management sciences in the past decade (Collings, Scullion, & Vaiman, 2015). A recent review noted that prior to 2010 the empirical scholarly literature in the field of talent management was nearly insignificant (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016). Despite a number of recent reviews of the literature (reviewed in this chapter), the talent management literature remains highly fragmented (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016; Morley et al., 2017) and the dominance of the organisation level focus and managerial perspective remains notable (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016). Consideration of the employee within talent management has been largely ignored (Björkman et al., 2013) until recently and yet remains highly limited. Recently a sub-stream of literature has developed which directly considers the employee psychological response to talent management, confirming the theorised importance of understanding the employee in talent management as a central actor (King, 2015), however in the total of 208 papers which were identified in the talent management literature for this review, only 24 considered the employee in talent management in their empirical study. This represents a commendable volume of individual level studies which have been conducted and reported in a relatively brief period of time, in terms of the development of scholarly literature. However our scholarly understanding of this topic remains limited and a broad landscape for future study which bridges multiple other fields awaits researchers.

The purpose of this chapter is threefold. First, in section 2.3, I present a review of the extant talent management literature broadly, in order to present a synthesis of what is known and what is not known. Second, in section 2.4, I then sharpen the focus of the review to present a review of the literature which specifically considers the employee within talent management. Third, in section 2.5, I present a summary of the findings of this review and locate the specific focus of the dissertation. In doing so, I aim to "join the conversation" already underway amongst the scholarly community (Huff, 1999) with

regard to talent management. In chapter three which follows, I introduce a conceptual research model and present the thesis research questions.

## 2.2. Review Strategy

In conducting this review I consider the literature in light of this focus: the employee as the central actor within talent management. To do so, I first start with a wider review of the extant literature asking the questions "*What is talent management? What is talent? What are the expected outcomes?*" I then further sharpen the focus of the balance of the review to consider these research questions: *What do we know with regard to the employee and the employee psychological response to talent management? What do we still need to know? Why are these current limitations of interest?*

A number of review papers have been published in the domain of talent management in recent years, not unexpected with researchers seeking to make sense of an emerging body of literature. While these reviews do not directly address the research question of this dissertation and are therefore not available as a substitute for the current review, they are included as relevant within this overall review. To locate the literature for review, I conducted a search of electronic databases. Recognising the limitations of database searches (Briner & Denyer, 2012), I conducted a manual search of highly ranked management sciences journals and reviewed the references listed in existing reviews to identify any further possible studies of interest to this review. As talent management is a bridging topic which spans other literatures, I drew on the SHRM, OB, workforce differentiation, global mobility, stars and status literatures as needed to interpret and complete the review. In the original sample, upon close review, it was clear that a number of papers which used the term "talent" as a generic word only and within such papers there was no indication of content which could be distinguished from HRM, consistent with one of the criticisms of the field of TM (Lewis & Heckman, 2006). The final sample of 208 scholarly papers for review included 101 empirical papers among the other conceptual work, reviews and book chapters of which only 24 considered the employee. This indicates an expansion of the literature in recent years relative to the sample of 62 scholarly papers and book chapters which were reported in a review in 2013, of which one third (approximately 20) were identified as empirical studies (Thunnissen, Boselie, & Fruytier, 2013a). In a prior review of employee reactions to talent identification, authors presented a review of 17 empirical studies (Meyers, De

Boeck, & Dries, 2017). These studies are included within the scope of this wider review which considers the employee more broadly within talent management, not limited to talent identification. However since the former review in 2016, empirical studies which focus on the employee within talent management have not increased notably in number.

Adopting a systematic approach to the review (Briner & Denyer, 2012) consistent with recent impactful review papers, the review is organised to address the research questions specified, includes both general management and specialist journals, and results are synthesised in a structured way to address the research question (for examples see (Mellahi, Frynas, Sun, & Siegel, 2016) and (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016)). Systematic review methods support management scholars to use current literature-based evidence to arrive at science-based findings (Rousseau, Manning, & Denyer, 2008) and are central to the development of a base of evidence (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003), in contrast to non-systematic reviews which are limited by lack of syntheses (Rousseau et al., 2008). Although management sciences have only recently adopted the practice of systematic reviews (Briner & Denyer, 2012), this approach has been shown to increase the rigor of management sciences reviews, to reduce the risk of researcher bias (Tranfield et al., 2003), to support evidence-based approaches to management (Briner & Denyer, 2012) and to maintain methodological transparency (Aguinis, Ramani, & Alabduljader, 2018) by presenting a replicable, scientific and transparent process (Tranfield et al., 2003), fitting for the currently fragmented TM literature.

## 2.3. Talent Management: A Review of the Emergent Body of Literature

### 2.3.1. What is Talent Management?

Strategic talent management is concerned with the organisational management of employees identified as talent and their contribution to business performance through critical roles (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Lewis & Heckman, 2006), as one element within a business strategy which seeks to generate competitive advantage through human capital (Becker et al., 2009). Talent management is undertaken for the purpose of facilitating overall company performance or competitive advantage (Khoreva & Vaiman, 2019). Concerned with managing the firm's strategic human capital resources (Wright, Dunford, & Snell, 2001) which are seen to be rare, valuable and difficult to imitate, based on the resource based view (RBV) of the firm (Barney, 1991), this

strategic workforce differentiation practice (Becker et al., 2009) is expected to deliver value to the organisations which adopt it (Sparrow & Makram, 2015) and doing so requires heavy management effort and cost (Pfeffer, 2001). The central premise of talent management is the presumed value achieved through the focused management of talent, as a differentiated resource of the firm (Barney, 1991; Wright et al., 1994). However mechanisms by which management operationalises talent resources have only recently been conceptualised, such as through talent decision making (Vaiman, Scullion, & Collings, 2012) and talent value creation (Sparrow & Makram, 2015). Given that only a portion of the workforce is identified as high potential, talented employees are a scarce resource (Ulrich & Smallwood, 2012), viewed as key to organisational effectiveness (Collings & Mellahi, 2009) and organisations take the view that investing in the management of talent will lead to increased levels of human capital (Cappelli, 2008b; Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Tarique & Schuler, 2010).

As presented in the introduction chapter of this thesis, a simplified definition of talent management posits that it is the "differential management of employees according to their relative potential to contribute to an organisation's competitive advantage" (Gelens et al., 2013, p. 342). However, I adopt the extended definition by Collings and Mellahi (2009) which further incorporates the use of differentiated TM architecture and consideration of key positions within talent management as it more sufficiently reflects the scope of talent management by including the differentiated TM architecture and the focus on key positions. In practice, organisations often use a hybrid approach such that the wider workforce is valued as talent within which a differentiated segment are invested and managed differentially by the organisation along with their deployment into key positions. By definition, a hybrid approach does not limit the integrity of the scope of the exclusive approach but may be an effort to be inclusive of emergent talent in the wider workforce not yet visible for consideration of key positions.

Seen as the mandate of senior management, talent management has sustained its importance and relevance as a top management priority (Cappelli, 2008b; Cappelli & Keller, 2014), in part supported by the urgency of addressing scarce managerial labour (Mackey, Molloy, & Morris, 2013). In those organisations which operate multi-nationally, organisations seek to translate their corporate talent strategies across their multinational enterprise while adapting to differing local economies and cultures (Beamond, 2016). The search for global competence (Cascio & Boudreau, 2016), that

is, for talent who have competence to deliver high performance in a global environment is in part driven by the growth of global MNCs. This includes the race for competitive value through strategic outsourcing and offshoring to access competitive advantage through innovative talent strategies (Lewin, 2009) while striving to retain talent (Allen, 2010). Given that talent attraction and retention has become highly competitive, one commonly used strategy which firms have adopted is the use of non-competition clauses in legally binding employment contracts as an attempt to retain talent or prevent them from being hired away (Garmaise, 2011).

As the body of academic literature on the topic has emerged rapidly (Collings et al., 2017; Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016), unsurprisingly, the talent management literature is as yet seen as fragmented (Morley et al., 2017). Although talent management is in part recognised to be a phenomenon-driven field (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015), its rapid development has established a degree of legitimacy of talent management as a topic of academic enquiry (Collings et al., 2015), beyond the initial practitioner-literature-led focus. Still in relatively early development (Thunnissen et al., 2013a) and far from mature (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015), a number of recent reviews have considered development of the talent management. They include reviews of its basis in scientific literature (Lewis & Heckman, 2006), the meaning of talent (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013), the psychology of talent (Dries, 2013b), the measurement of potential (Nijs, Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & Sels, 2014), the boundary between talent and global mobility (Cerdin & Brewster, 2014), consideration of the generation of organisational value through talent (Sparrow & Makram, 2015), and the introduction of a macro perspective (Khilji, Tarique, & Schuler, 2015), as was also called for in SHRM (Wright & Boswell, 2002). The topic of talent management has been introduced to the literature, however as a field of scholarly work, it bridges a number of adjacent literatures.

### 2.3.2. Where is talent management located in the scholarly literature?

Talent management is a bridging topic of relevance to a number of proximal management literatures including strategy, international management (McDonnell, Lamare, Gunnigle, & Lavelle, 2010), human capital (Aguinis & O'Boyle, 2014), international human resource management (Tarique & Schuler, 2010), global mobility (Cerdin & Brewster, 2014; Collings, 2014b; Vaiman, Haslberger, & Vance, 2015),

organisational behaviour (Dries, 2013b; Höglund, 2012; King, 2016; Thunnissen et al., 2013a), and employer branding (Bhattacharya, Sen, & Korschun, 2008) or industry branding (Wallace, Lings, & Cameron, 2012). A review in 2013 noted the wide distribution of the current literature across a broad range of scholarly journals as "remarkable" and an indication of the relevance of the topic across a wide audience in management and beyond (Thunnissen et al., 2013a, p. 1747). As with the topic of strategic human capital, of interest to both strategy and human resource management literatures (Wright, Coff, & Moliterno, 2014), and social exchange theory, interdisciplinary in nature (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), strategic talent management is also of relevance to other scholarly fields. Most notably, talent management is related directly with strategic human resource management (SHRM) literature in their mutual consideration of workplace human resources practices (in this case, talent) and their influence on both the employee and the organisation.

The topic of talent management is of specific relevance to SHRM in the use of high performance work practices (HPWP) (Kehoe & Wright, 2013), to business strategy in its focus on value creation (Sparrow & Makram, 2015), to organisational behaviour (OB) through its influence of employee job attitudes and behaviours in the workplace including the psychological contract (PC) literature (Björkman et al., 2013; Dries, 2013b; King, 2016), and even to corporate social responsibility (CSR) literature in terms of an organisation's attractiveness to talent which can reciprocally contribute strongly to the CSR agenda (Bhattacharya et al., 2008). Despite its close proximity to SHRM literature, talent management has been argued to differ from HRM in a number of ways. These include the greater scope and composition of stakeholders of talent management, the differentiated focus of talent management on specific segments of the workforce, the differentiation of talent management practices, from those of the wider human resource management activities and the extension of the people-management agenda from the HR function into organisational governance and board level oversight (Vaiman & Collings, 2014).

The TM literature also draws on a number of foundations from other topics. A recent review of the talent management literature (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015) identified the dominant theoretical foundations on which the TM literature draws to date as being: the resource-based view (Barney, 1991), social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), psychological contract theory (Rousseau, 1989) and institutional theory. While the topic

has become an established topic of scholarly interest, the talent management literature is yet under-theorised (Lewis & Heckman, 2006) and improved theoretical framing is required (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015), to provide critically required "theoretical scaffolding" (Morley et al., 2017) in order to address the current lack of a solid foundation in theory (Thunnissen, 2016). One of the main points of focus in the developing literature is the notion of talent.

### 2.3.3. What or who is talent?

At the essence of talent management is the argument that competitive advantage is accessed through talent (Vaiman & Collings, 2014). This is expected to be driven, at least in part, by the differentiated focus on those individual employees who are identified as "talent", that is deemed to possess "talent" and therefore have the "potential" to contribute sustained high performance today and into the future, in service of the firm's purpose. The question then is: Who or what is talent? In a review of the meaning of talent, scholars identified two approaches. First, the subject approach, which considers talent as the person. Second, the object approach, which considers talent as an object, that is, something which an employee possesses, such as a competence or skill (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013).

In the subject approach (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013), talented employees are those employees who are expected to be able to create "extra value" for their organisation (Sparrow & Makram, 2015). Employees identified as "talent" by their organisation, are high performing employees recognised as having high potential for future advancement in the organisation (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Huselid, Beatty, & Becker, 2005; Lewis & Heckman, 2006), often through the organisation's deployment of them in pivotal positions which disproportionately influence or contribute to the firm's success (or hinder it) (Huselid, Beatty, et al., 2005). In keeping with the person or subject approach, the psychology and HRM literatures have operationalised talent in several ways: as representing individual differences in the industrial and organisational psychology literature; as giftedness in the educational psychology literature; as related to self-concept in the vocational psychology; as strengths in the positive psychology literature; and finally also as a social cognition of the assessor in the social psychology literature (Dries, 2013a). Talented employees are not only seen as tomorrow's drivers of business competitive advantage, they are also seen as today's high performers (Dries,

2013a) and those whose performance is highest rated in their organisation's appraisal of employee performance (Stahl et al., 2012). This is not surprising as an evidence-based approach to HRM (Rousseau & Barends, 2011) would argue for the consideration of evidence today and input to talent management decisions of possible high performance tomorrow. In the exclusive approach, talented employees are those who demonstrate the highest levels of potential to contribute differentially to the organisation's aims and performance. Different from their peers, this is either through their immediate contribution or through long term development of their potential capacity for future performance (Tansley, Kirk, & Tietze, 2013).

In the object approach, drawing on human capital theory and considering the employee within strategic human resources management (Wright & McMahan, 2011), by virtue of their individually-specific knowledge, skills and abilities, then, "talented" employees are deemed to have the human capital or potential to contribute to the firm's performance, differentially from their peers. In keeping with the object approach (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013), the HRM literature has conceived of talent as capital (Dries, 2013a). Four types of capital which talent offers are specified as human capital, social capital, political capital and cultural capital (Farndale, Scullion, & Sparrow, 2010). As a consequence of being seen as a scarce resource, scholars have recommended proactive recruitment of talent when possible, to avoid vacancy-driven recruitment for key roles which specifically require above average performance contribution (McDonnell & Collings, 2011).

Talent may be seen as both subject and object. Often seen as "stars" (Kehoe, Lepak, & Bentley, 2016), and associated with a differentiated status in the organisation, the contributed performance of a "talented" employee to their firm in future, is expected to be disproportionate, when compared to the wider workforce population. Stars are described as employees who are highly productive (Kelley & Caplan, 1993) and who demonstrate performance higher than peers (Kelley and Caplan 1993). Research indicates that for organisations employing exclusive talent management, between 1 and 5% of employees in the workforce are identified as "high-potentials" in a given year of talent assessment (Dries & De Gieter, 2014).

However there is risk inherent in hiring "star" talent such that the external recruitment of star talent may result in detrimental consequences for the organisations

who hire them. In a sector-specific study of star analyst talent, researchers found that both the performance of the group to which they joined declined as did the subsequent valuation of the overall company (Groysberg, Nanda, & Nohria, 2004). Performance of the "star" employee declined upon changing employment to a comparable position in a different firm, a decline which persisted for beyond a five year period (Groysberg, Lee, & Nanda, 2008). A further study examined the change in individual performance of high status analysts as a consequence of employment moves from one organisation to another and found that the higher the status of the hired analyst, the greater the decline in the profitability of the incumbent analyst's investment recommendation and that this decline was moderated by the status of the internal incumbent analyst (Prato & Ferraro, 2018). These findings indicate that buying star talent into one's organisation, whether adopting the subject or the object view of talent, may not reliably deliver a performance advantage.

Business requirements for talent and the resulting view of "what" talent is has also evolved as the business context evolves and factors influence what is meant by talent. Specifically, demographic changes (Schuler et al., 2011) and changes to the characteristics of talent required for the transition to a knowledge-based economy and away from a product-based economy in recent years also influence organisational decisions regarding the talent it competes for, requires and prioritises (Vaiman et al., 2012). While the pool of emerging leaders is frequently assumed to be the talent pool of most priority in an organisation, scholars also recommend a contingent approach to talent identification by considering the specific competence required by the organisation for a given role now or in anticipation of future needs (McDonnell, Hickey, & Gunnigle, 2011). Having considered who or what is recognised as talent, in the next section I present a review of why organisations adopt talent management?

### 2.3.4. Why do organisations undertake talent management?

In the pursuit of strategic advantage through strategic human resource management, competitive outcomes have long been in focus and the "black box" of how strategic HRM architecture generates such outcomes (Becker & Huselid, 2006) has been the focus of much conceptual and empirical study. HR practices have been theorised to facilitate individual and organisational outcomes through an HR architecture (Lepak & Snell, 2002). Within the HR architecture, for specific management of talent, a

differentiated architecture has been theorised which is used to manage one or more segments of the workforce identified as talent and to manage pivotal roles which are expected to contribute differentially to performance (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). Roles in focus are seen as strategic roles (Becker & Huselid, 2006) which contribute greater impact to the organisation than others (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005). The talent architecture then, includes the management of one or more talent pools and pivotal positions, which draw on both the organisational internal and external labour markets to secure the organisation's requirement for skills and competence (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). Talent management is expected to generate differentiated value through the contribution of individuals who possess human capital, which is differentially identified and managed through the TM architecture, different than the strategic HRM architecture. Human capital resources are defined as "individual or unit-level capacities based on individual knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs) that are accessible for unit-relevant purpose" (Ployhart, Nyberg, Reilly, & Maltarich, 2014, p. 371) and are expected to be developed through an organisation's use of TM.

A number of organisational outcomes of talent management have been investigated to explore the theorised link between strategic performance and competitive advantage (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005; Cappelli, 2008a), however empirical evidence of the relationship between strategic talent management and outcomes is limited (Boudreau & Cascio, 2017; Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005). In one study of organisational level outcomes (using a sample of 138 small, medium and large-sized firms which adopt formal talent management systems), researchers found evidence for the link between the use of corporate-strategy informed talent management practices and positive outcomes of company attractiveness, customer satisfaction and corporate profit (Bethke-Langenegger, Mahler, & Staffelbach, 2011). In a further study of the reliance of organisations on offshore talent for growth, which examined the influence of talent management and external knowledge on performance, findings indicated that talent management mediates the relationship between firm use of external knowledge through offshore IT service providers and performance (Chadee & Raman, 2012). Considering the influence of TM practices aimed at developing workforce networks and social capital specifically on performance, evidence has been found that such practices mediated the relationship between HRM and firm performance (Glaister, Karacay, Demirbag, & Tatoglu, 2017). However the measure of TM practice use in this study did not include

any measure of differentiation by high potential talent or pivotal roles and therefore may be limited in its delineation from overall SHRM practices. Considering the role of a high performing organisational culture, a measure of effective talent management was found to be related with talent retention and talent attraction outcomes (Kontoghiorghes, 2015). Finally, a qualitative study found that talent management is associated with knowledge management outcomes and may create advantage through knowledge acquisition external to the firm and its internal dissemination, through distinctly differing groups of talented employees (Whelan, Collings, & Donnellan, 2010).

However, there are recognised challenges in the generation of expected value outcomes through talent management. Scholars have identified failure in talent management systems of multi-national enterprises (MNCs) whereby barriers limit the advancement of talent management (Mellahi & Collings, 2010). Global talent challenges have been identified including talent shortage and surplus, the demands of relocating talent globally and the issues of top talent compensation (Schuler et al., 2011). The challenges of open labour markets and issues of retention which are impacting talent management effectiveness (Cappelli & Keller, 2014) add further complexity to the pursuit of advantage through talent. TM effectiveness is limited by the narrow conceptualisation of talent management outcomes as mainly shareholder returns and therefore a broader consideration of outcomes and of stakeholders of TM (Collings, 2014c) is called for. Research which considers proximal measures of SHRM outcomes is needed (Paauwe, Wright, & Guest, 2013). Further research which examines a range of mediating variables is required to explain how attitudes and behaviours of the organisation's talent influence outcomes (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). Finally, examination of cross level effects of talent management is also required to better understand talent outcomes (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013).

In summary, early studies indicate that talent management, when viewed as bundles of strategically aligned TM practices (Stahl et al., 2012), have been found to positively support  generation of differentiated obligations of performance and alignment to strategic objectives for those identified as talent (Björkman et al., 2013) and on job satisfaction and motivation (Bethke-Langenegger et al., 2011). However, more recently a study of firms in South Korea has found that use of talent management may result in both advantageous and disadvantageous outcomes (Son, Park, Bae, & Ok, 2018). In a cross-organisation firm-level study, researchers found that the effects of

implemented TM vary by organisational context and may create advantageous innovation effects while also associated with increased voluntary turnover (Son et al., 2018). As with the HRM-performance linkage (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004), there is an argued path to strategic advantage through talent management, however further theoretical and empirical investigation is needed. To access the expected advantage through talent, organisations adopt differing approaches to talent management and several types of talent management have emerged in the literature.

### 2.3.5. What types of talent management exist?

**Inclusive versus exclusive talent management.** Conceptually, the literature makes several distinctions in the field of note. First, the literature distinguishes between two main philosophies of talent management, that of inclusive and of exclusive talent management (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014), and further, as an exclusive subject approach recognising talent as a select group of people in the workforce (Dries, 2013a). Exclusive talent management is the approach to talent management by which only a sub-set of the organisation's workforce is identified as talented or having the talent required for differentiated management as high potential employees and is in contrast to inclusive talent management which is an approach whereby all employees are viewed as the organisation's talent (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014). Many organisations use a hybrid of both philosophies (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014). Up to 60% of companies globally have been estimated to have "high potential" programs in place for management of their most talented employees (Pepermans, Vloeberghs, & Perkisas, 2003). One study found a difference in the preference for talent management philosophy which varied by organisation size. A study of small to medium sized enterprises in Germany found that German SME's indicate a preference for the inclusive approach to TM considering the bulk of their workforce to be the organisation's talent whereas German multi-national enterprises (MNCs) prefer exclusive talent management which differentially identifies only a small proportion of the workforce as talent (Festing, Schäfer, & Scullion, 2013; Thunnissen, 2016).

**Global versus local talent management.** Second, the literature also distinguishes between global talent management and strategic organisational talent management. Strategic talent management is described by the definition by Collings and Mellahi (2009) presented earlier in this section. That is, talent management is framed as

a strategic activity of the firm to manage its differentiated human capital resources. Global talent management (GTM), is concerned with talent management in organisations which operate as multinationals (MNCs) of their talent. GTM is concerned with "all activities for the purpose of attracting, selecting, developing, and retaining the best employees in the most strategic roles (those roles necessary to achieve organisational strategic priorities) on a global scale" (Scullion, Collings, & Caligiuri, 2010, p. 106). Scholars argue that GTM should be configured to align with the MNC's strategy such that a range of talent portfolio configurations may be preferred in order to access competitive advantage (Morris, Snell, & Björkman, 2016). GTM frequently includes the management of expatriate talent as organisations actively seek to manage their performance through the mobility of key talent and their appointment in key positions throughout their multi-national organisational landscape to directly influence organisation performance. GTM is therefore inter-related with the adjacent global mobility (GM) literature (Collings, 2014b).

**Micro versus macro talent management.** Third, the literature distinguishes between macro talent management and micro talent management. A focus on the firm-level commonly referred to as micro talent management, has been most central in the literature to date. However more recently, the topic of macro talent management was introduced (Khilji et al., 2015). Macro talent management is concerned with the wider macro level context within which organisational talent management operates and includes the activities which influence the quality and quantity of talent within a given national or regional context and is comprised of three elements: context, processes, and outcomes (Khilji et al., 2015). Scholars point out that organisational decision making regarding talent management at the organisational level is influenced and shared by macro level factors such as significant demographic changes and increased diversity of national or regional workforces, the intensifying rates and volumes of workforce mobility, and the presence of multi-generations in the workforce to extents not seen previously (Khoreva & Vaiman, 2019), in part related to the changing nature of employment relationship and of human longevity. The country's reputation, an example of a macro level factor, has been shown to be a significant factor in a study of migration of skilled talent in Asia (Harvey, 2015).

### 2.3.6. What streams are emerging in the developing scholarly literature?

As the body of theoretical and empirical literature continues to evolve, there are a number of streams currently taking shape within the rapidly developing TM literature. I present an overview of six streams in the literature briefly, the sixth of which is an emerging body of work which considers the employee in talent management. Following this wider review, I then present a focused review of the stream which considers the employee in talent management in section 2.4, as the focal orientation of this dissertation.

**Global talent management and global mobility.** First, one stream of the talent management literature considers global talent management (Scullion et al., 2010), the role of talent management in the multinational enterprise and the interface with global mobility. As explained briefly, GTM is the exclusive management of talent-identified employees across the multi-national enterprise, is applied across the full employee lifecycle from attraction to retention, and includes specific consideration of their deployment to the roles which are seen as strategic or pivotal. GTM is a form of strategic talent management as it includes the use of a differentiated talent management architecture (Mellahi & Collings, 2010). The domain of GTM has been theorised to share international HRM activities of attracting, developing and retaining talent (Tarique & Schuler, 2010). GTM has also been defined as the combined management of high potential development and global careers (Cerdin & Brewster, 2014) as it involves a significant focus on management of career advancement, development and mobility by the organisation. Scholars link human capital and social capital closely with GTM and the organisational routines which are used to manage global staffing flows in order to maximise the impact of global talent and their mobility in the multi-national organisation (Collings, 2014b). In examining the effectiveness of global talent management, a study of 18 in-depth cases presented a set of six principles underlying effective GTM implementation (Stahl et al., 2012). They are: alignment of GTM to strategy, internal consistency in GTM implementation, embedding the practice of GTM within the organisational culture, the involvement of management in GTM implementation, attending to a balance of both global and local needs in GTM and the link between employer branding and TM (Stahl et al., 2012). The corporate HR function is seen to be closely involved in the supporting global talent management including the identification of global talent in MNCs (McDonnell et al., 2011) and advocating the use of processes

which support GTM (Farndale et al., 2010). However, notable challenges face GTM and include both the shortage and surplus of talent which varies by region, sector and organisation, and the issues of managing the mobility of talent to meet those requirements (Schuler et al., 2011).

**Multi- and cross-level talent management.** There is a second stream taking shape which considers the influence of macro talent management on the micro level organisational talent management and the cross-level interactions of talent management. As briefly explained, macro talent management is the consideration of the context, processes and outcomes which establish and continue to shape the national or regional context of talent management within which organisations operate (Khilji et al., 2015). Macro talent management contexts vary by country (Vaiman, Schuler, Sparrow, & Collings, 2018) and multi-national enterprises must consider multiple national talent contexts (what is known as the macro level) (Khoreva & Vaiman, 2019) if to be effective in their organisational talent management (what is referred to as the micro level). The use of both local adaptation and global assimilation in TM in practice supports its effective implementation (Sidani & Al Ariss, 2014). In part to better examine the generation of competitive outcomes through talent management, scholars have begun to consider cross-level mechanisms although the empirical literature is almost non-existent across levels currently. Organisational routines for management of talent across and within headquarters and subsidiaries are expected to influence MNC performance across levels and organisational units (Collings, Mellahi, & Cascio, 2018). Recent conceptualisations include a multi-level framework for global talent management systems which manage high talent expatriates across the subsidiaries of multi-national enterprises (Tarique & Schuler, 2018) and a multi-level perspective on the intended strategic links between global talent management and organisational performance (Collings et al., 2018). This is consistent with calls for further cross level research in talent management (Thunnissen et al., 2013b), however the literature remains largely at a single level of measurement currently.

**Implementation of talent management in practice.** Third, a stream in the literature which is concerned with the design, implementation and practice of talent management and its effectiveness has developed recently. Research has shown that the extent of coverage of talent management practices is positively related with psychological contract fulfilment (Sonnenberg et al., 2014). That is, the more talent

management practices an organisation is perceived to be using, the greater psychological contract fulfilment employees perceive and report. Justice and fairness also play a meaningful role in talent management implementation in practice such that employees perceptions of distributive justice are involved significantly in the relationship between their identification as talent and their level of job satisfaction (Gelens, Hofmans, Dries, & Pepermans, 2014b). This highlights that the practice of talent management has consequences for employee job attitudes and perceptions. The management of talent also involves career management and scholars argue that further consideration of the career management literature may support effective TM in its aim to retain and engage talent (De Vos & Dries, 2013). However as talent management and diversity management may reflect contradictory principles, further consideration of the influence of TM on diversity management is required (Daubner-Siva, Ybema, Vinkenburg, & Beech, 2018).

The implementation of talent management is fraught with multiple challenges including managing the intense competition for talent and talent scarcity (Bhattacharya et al., 2008), managing multiple generations in the workplace which is largely unprecedented (Festing & Schäfer, 2014), the complexities of global mobility (Collings, 2014b), moving from rhetoric and myth to good practice (Minbaeva & Collings, 2013), the challenges of shifting to a service and knowledge economy and of globalisation (Stone & Deadrick, 2015), multiple endogenous and exogenous GTM challenges such as global demographics and the demand-supply gap (Tarique & Schuler, 2010), and the need to further evidence the HRM-performance link (Guest, Paauwe & Wright, 2012), including the talent-performance argument. To cut through the issues related to the implementation of talent management in practice and to help address talent risks during uncertain markets, a reductionist view of TM has been proposed arguing that TM is essentially a matter of anticipating demand and planning to meet that demand with suitable supply of talent (Cappelli, 2008b), such as through a supply-chain approach for the provision of talent on demand to meet business requirements (Cappelli, 2009). A focus on the retention of highly sought after top performers through effective performance management is also proposed as a response to the talent scarcity challenge (Aguinis, Gottfredson, & Joo, 2012). These challenges present multiple opportunities for the corporate HR function including the need to demonstrate leadership in talent management (Farndale et al., 2010).

**Identification of talented employees, high potentials, talent pools.** A fourth stream has developed which considers the identification of talent and the assessment of potential. This stream includes a review of the meaning of talent in the world of work (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013) and of the operationalisation of talent assessment in practice (Nijs et al., 2014). In some instances, multi-national enterprises apply a two-step approach to identify talent first through current in-role performance within the line using an evidence-based performance appraisal and second, by use of a cognition-based appraisal to identify talent for inclusion into the organisational talent pool (Mäkelä et al., 2010). Talent may be identified as types of talent specific to the business requirements for value creation through human capital (Sparrow & Makram, 2015). Talent may also be seen as pools of talent in the organisation, particularly with regard to future potential, such as graduate talent pools (Clarke, 2017; McCracken, 2016). However challenges exist in both the retention of identified-talent and in managing the contribution of talent through pivotal roles. The lack of explicit identification of pivotal roles (McDonnell et al., 2011), and the increased mobility of qualified talent (Cerdin, Diné, & Brewster, 2014), present practical challenges for both the identification and the retention of talent. The integration of concepts from other research may be of value to the identification, conceptualisation and measurement of talent (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015). For example, the question of person-organisation fit, common to the SHRM literature, is also relevant to the identification and selection of talent, particularly in the context of small to medium sized organisations (Krishnan, 2017). Persistent themes in the literature include the issue of a shortage of talent (Economist, 2007), a war for talent (Axelrod, Handfield-Jones, & Welsh, 2001), and a race for talent (Lewin, 2009), although some scholars have challenged this as simply a mismatch of supply and demand (Cappelli, 2015).

**The contextual nature of talent management.** Fifth, a stream concerned with the contextual nature of talent management and its application in sector, industry, or nationally-specific contexts is also now developing. A study of GTM in MNCs has confirmed that the context within which an organisation operates is of central relevance to how talent management is implemented and whether the approach is centralised or decentralised in the global organisation (Sparrow, Farndale, & Scullion, 2013). A number of country or region-specific contexts have also been considered very recently. For example, in the Gulf Coordination Council (GCC), regional differences influence

how local and expatriate talent are managed while overall, a lag in the establishment of TM processes and a focus on how to support female talent are both future requirements of TM in the region (Sidani & Al Ariss, 2014).

Other contexts have also been considered. The rapid development of Indian firms and the shortage of available professional employees has been investigated (Tymon, Stumpf, & Doh, 2010) whereby researchers found that the use of intrinsic rewards can improve the effectiveness of talent management, where pecuniary retention tactics are assumed to be the norm (Tymon et al., 2010). In a study of gender differences in talent development practices in business schools in Africa, researchers found an under-representation of women in their programs, consistent with many international businesses highlighting the need to consider gender diversity in talent development programs (Ibeh & Debrah, 2011). Within national contexts, there is evidence of variance in talent management approaches. In an empirical study of organisational approaches to talent management in Australian organisations, researchers have found a wide spectrum of approaches ranging from an exclusive individual approach to a more inclusive organisationally focused approach which prioritises competence development (Jones, Whitaker, Seet, & Parkin, 2012). In a comparison of MNCs and local firms in Turkey, researchers found that the talent management practices implemented by MNCs are more robust than those of local firms such that local firms took a more tactical approach to talent management (Tatoglu, Glaister, & Demirbag, 2016).

In the context of China specifically, which has simultaneously the world's largest national population base and a documented shortage of talent, talent management is not yet embraced as a strategic practice, with MNCs struggling with turnover rates higher than in their home countries and only a minority of MNCs studied (three of seven) using pivotal role identification within their TM (Hartmann, Feisel, & Schober, 2010). Within China, TM varies with context. In Beijing, a study of seven MNC's confirms a range of perspectives on TM exist including an exclusive focus on people or on positions, an inclusive focus on people and a focus on social capital (Iles, Chuai, & Preece, 2010). A comparison study of companies in China and India through the perspectives of non-HR managers confirmed that challenges in talent management are strongly influenced by the institutions, cultures, industries and the organisational contexts in which they operate (Cooke, Saini, & Wang, 2014). One size clearly does not fit all in talent management.

Greater consideration of a wider range of contingent and contextual influences on talent management (Thunnissen et al., 2013b) will be important to future research. The multi-generational workforce presents challenges for talent management such that the training and development priorities of generations X and Y will require more extensive TM activities if to be effective than for the "baby-boomer" generation (Festing & Schäfer, 2014). The continuing fundamental evolution of the workplace such that 40% of an organisation's work today is now led by individuals not employed by the organisation (Cascio & Boudreau, 2016), also presents an important contextual consideration in organisational use of talent management. As organisations seeks greater workforce and numerical flexibility through outsourcing, offshoring, and non-traditional employment relationships such as interim management, the questions of who is talent, which organisation in the wider organisational ecosystem directly employs the talent relied upon, and who therefore manages the organisation's talent may each now transcend the conventional boundaries of the organisation itself. A recent review of the literature prioritised three contingencies for focus in future research in talent management. They are: the identification of talent without reliance on performance ratings; the "gig" economy (that is, where contingent employment, temporary work and contract positions are more prevalent); and in the context of lean management (Collings et al., 2017).

**The employee perspective of talent management.** Finally, a sixth stream in the literature has recently emerged which specifically considers the perspective of the employee within talent management. Despite relatively rapid development of the talent management literature in recent years, questions still remain as to whether it has yet moved beyond its infancy as a body of knowledge (Thunnissen et al., 2013a) and what it would take to establish talent management as a definitive literature with conceptualised boundaries of its own (Morley et al., 2017). Such little is yet known about the employee experience of talent management, consideration of the impact of talent identification (Dries, 2013a) and the response of non-talent identified employees to talent management is required (Huselid, Beatty, et al., 2005; Swailes, 2013a). Calls for further research seek much greater focus on the employee perspectives (Björkman et al., 2013; DeLong & Vijayaraghavan, 2003; Dries, 2013a; Young, Morris, & Scherwin, 2013), as a central participant (Björkman et al., 2013; King, 2015). This is consistent with calls in the neighbouring SHRM literature, for greater consideration of the

employee in the implementation of SHRM, as the "human" in human resource management (Wright & McMahan, 2011). A closer consideration of the employee in talent management could address these constraints.

Acknowledging the limited consideration of the employee perspective in the talent management literature (Björkman et al., 2013), a new research stream has emerged, focused on employee reactions to talent identification and to talent status. Several recent studies began to consider employee reactions to talent identification. Examining employee responses to perceived talent identification, Björkman et al. (2013) found that employees who perceived they had been identified as talent by their organisation were more likely to accept increasing performance demands, to have increased commitment to building their skills, and to actively support the strategic priorities of their firms, than those who did not perceive talent status or who did not know (Björkman et al., 2013). Prior to recent work, the perspective of the employee had been neglected (Collings et al., 2015) and overlooked (Björkman et al., 2013). In contrast to the largely managerialist (Thunnissen et al., 2013a) and organisational perspectives (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016) in the extant literature, and the primary focus on the organisational performance agenda (Collings et al., 2015), this new stream takes an individual-level focus and now considers the employee psychological response to talent identification (Dries, 2013a). This is in direct response to calls for closer consideration of the employee psychological response to talent management and talent identification (Dries, 2013a), and of the non-talent-identified majority of the workforce (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016).

It is this final stream in the talent management literature that I locate the topic of this dissertation. Considering the employee as the central subject in the literature, for the balance of this dissertation, I adopt the subject view of talent management (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). In the next section, 2.4, I present a focused review of the employee within talent management.

## 2.4. Talent Management and the Employee: What we know and do not know

As found in a recent review (Festing & Schäfer, 2014), research on the employee perceptive of talent management is scarce. In this section, 2.4, I sharpen the focus of this literature review to specifically consider the employee in talent management. In appendix 1, I present a summary overview table of the empirical studies within the

current talent management literature which specifically consider the employee perspective of talent management. They number 24 in total at the time of this review mid-2018. The sample of 24 is extracted from the overall review of 208 papers identified, based on three criteria: First that the paper presents an empirical study, second that the research questions directly consider the employee within talent management, and third, that the empirical work adopts an individual level of measurement. In this section I now consider the contribution of these studies drawing on wider literature as required to present their relevance to this review.

### 2.4.1. Exclusive talent management

Talent management is a topic which has garnered significant executive attention and one which has secured the people agenda as a top management priority (Collings et al., 2015). Talent management is based on the view that "talent" must be identified, nurtured, and managed differentially in order to access the promise of competitive advantage through human capital (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005). In organisations which apply an "exclusive" approach to talent management (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014), the practice of workforce differentiation is applied (Becker et al., 2009), such that talent is assessed or identified and then subsequently managed and developed by their organisations, often both as individual talent and in the management of talent as cohorts or pools. Through this differentiation, organisations aim to access the individual human capital resources (Ployhart et al., 2014) held by the talented individual employee, for use in the serving the business purpose and its strategic priorities. This differentiated management of talent-identified employees constitutes a significant and disproportionate effort and allocation of resources on the part of the organisation (Cappelli, 2008b). Context has also been argued to be an important factor which enables the performance of individuals differentially identified as talent (Sparrow & Makram, 2015) and have argued for the specification of talent in alignment with strategy (Sparrow & Makram, 2015).

Scholars explain that exclusive talent management is not only about "A players", but also about the pivotal positions which those individuals are deployed to (Huselid, Becker, & Beatty, 2005a, p. 1). "A positions" are those which vary from others in their strategic impact and performance and this is not simply a measure of the hierarchy of these roles within the organisation (Huselid, Beatty, et al., 2005). They argue that lack

of differentiation of people and their management (reward, investment, development) can result in departure of A players, discouraged by their non-differentiated treatment and the retention of C players (those with low perfomance) (Huselid, Beatty, et al., 2005). Evidence has supported the disproportionate impact of a small number of employees on overall firm performance (Aguinis & O'Boyle, 2014).

Talent management then is concerned with where and how to invest the firm's limited resources in order to maximize the contribution to business outcomes through talent and its management (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). Up to 60% of global companies are estimated to have high potential programs (Pepermans et al., 2003), which is one part of an exclusive talent management strategy and practice. However scholars argue that the non high potential employees in the workforce are important supporting actors (DeLong & Vijayaraghavan, 2003). Perhaps not surprisingly then, two criticisms of the talent management literature have been raised. First, that it is largely managerialist, in that TM focuses primarily on how to meet the needs of the organisation; and second, that the literature is unitarist, in that TM focuses on how management can achieve strategic goals without consideration of employee of the employee's goals (Thunnissen et al., 2013a).

In contrast to the exclusive approach to talent management, it has been noted that inclusive talent management may be difficult to differentiate between inclusive talent management and effective HR management (Swailes, 2013b). Scholars who question the suitability of differentiation seek to understand the consequences of its use vis a vis the wider workforce (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016), including employee perceptions of justice related to differentiated talent management (Gelens et al., 2013) and the risk of exclusion (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016). Indeed scholars make the case that to not differentiate the organisation's investment in employees when employees differentially contribute to organisational performance may in itself be unethical (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016) and argue that "disproportionately investing in your A positions and players doesn't mean you ignore the rest of your workforce" (Huselid, Becker, et al., 2005a, p. 6). The differentiation through exclusive talent management is not argued to be a reduction in investment in the wider workforce, nor in establishing low-commitment HRM. Rather, scholars have argued that exclusive TM is built on a baseline investment in organisational HRM (Collings & Mellahi, 2013).

Workforce differentiation may appear paradoxical. Arguing that the contributions of non talent-identified employees should not be ignored (Guthridge, Komm, & Lawson, 2006), researchers explain that the contribution of B players provides critical support to the ability of A players to perform in strategic positions (Huselid, Beatty, et al., 2005) and that the long-term performance of companies is, perhaps paradoxically, also crucially reliant on the commitment and contribution of B players (DeLong & Vijayaraghavan, 2003). This reliance also points to the risk of inadvertent exclusion of employees who are not included in the talent pool (Swailes, 2013a). The coherent integration of organisational priorities for diversity and inclusion together with talent management's use of differentiated identification of top talent is required. Lack of coherence may present a further paradox (Daubner-Siva et al., 2017). To add further complexity, being talent may also mean being willing to be seen as differing from one's peers in the team or workforce. While differentiation is an essential component of exclusive talent management practices, research has indicated that being different may be associated with fear such that individuals mute one or more aspects of their identity in order to maintain sameness with others but in doing so, significantly undermine the sense of self (Kenji & Smith, 2014). In the context of talent management in academia, contrasting tensions of transparency versus individual autonomy and of equality versus homogeneity are noted (Van Den Brink, Fruytier, & Thunnissen, 2013) which may be difficult to reconcile.

The presumed positive consequences of talent management require further investigation. Scholars caution that unintended consequences may occur. For example, by focusing on select individuals, the organisation may overlook the contribution of others to team performance which exists beyond the contribution of a single individual (Pfeffer, 2001). However, given that there is some evidence that use of talent management, across a range of possible strategies has a positive effect on individual motivation (Bethke-Langenegger et al., 2011), more research is required to better understand the possible negative consequences for the broader workforce. Consideration of a diversity of perspectives and approaches to talent management is required as a convergent view of talent management may limit its opportunity to create value (Boudreau, 2013). Scholars call for urgent empirical examination of the effect of workforce differentiation from the perspective of employees (Huselid & Becker, 2011) and of the effect of exclusive talent management on the individual level outcomes

(Swailes, 2013a; Swailes & Blackburn, 2016) including the employee's psychological response to talent management (Dries, 2013a).

### 2.4.2. Factors leading to talent identification

Potential is a concept which is not new (Silzer & Church, 2009a). Between one and five percent of the workforce is identified as 'high-potentials' in organisations which use talent identification processes (Dries & De Gieter, 2014), that is, employees who are deemed to have the potential to contribute in roles of increasing responsibility in future in the organisation. However the operationalisation of talent as an identifier in the workplace is not well defined (Nijs et al., 2014) and the tendency of managers in HRM selection processes, to rely on subjectivity and intuition (Highhouse, 2008) is an evident risk to the effective use of talent identification as a strategic practice. Researchers have considered what talent means (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013), how talent is measured and how potential is assessed (Dries & Pepermans, 2012), how individuals are selected into MNC talent pools within the organisation (Mäkelä et al., 2010) and whether or to what extent, talent may be innate or acquired (Meyers, van Woerkom, & Dries, 2013), which is akin to the classic nature versus nurture line of enquiry which has long been considered in the leadership literature. Researchers have confirmed that the use of talent identification and workforce differentiation methods are becoming commonly used such as the identification of talent and assessment of potential (Dries, 2013a; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013) and the segmentation of talent pools within workforces (McDonnell et al., 2011).

The factors or predictor variables which lead to talent status identification also require consideration and have correspondingly come into recent focus in the literature. Identifying star performers is seen as one component of effective talent management (Bish, 2014). Star employees are those who demonstrate disproportionately high performance sustained over time, who have heightened visibility in the organisation and hold relevant social capital which supports their performance (Call, Nyberg, & Thatcher, 2015). Empirical studies to date have mainly considered talent status of employees either exclusively in the group of employees identified as talent or a comparison of those identified as talent and those not. However the factors which contribute to the initial identification of an employee as one or other form of talent to their organisation have not been extensively considered to date. One study considered two antecedents of high

potential identification, that of career orientation (an individual difference) and of supervisor-rated employee performance and found that the latter is the most significant predictor of the organisation's rating of the employee as talent which in turn was a factor in the subsequent career path available to the employee (Dries, Vantilborgh, & Pepermans, 2012). In practice, organisations often use talent review processes and meetings as an organisational process to identify talent (Mäkelä et al., 2010), however the assessment methods and their validity are not necessarily well established or tested. Further research is required on varying approaches to talent management and the implementation of TM practices including calls for including managerial rational behind approaches to talent management (Dries, 2013a). Research has shown that managers tend to perceive exceptional performers as those who demonstrate performance, are self-directed and show willingness to lead (Bish, 2014). However, scholars caution that a singular reliance on performance assessments as a talent identification method may result in halo effects (Dries et al., 2012). Rather than reliance on assessments of current performance, the use of more valid measures of potential is required along with further empirical study.

### 2.4.3. Talent status

The reaction of employees to exclusive status as "talent" in their organisation has recently come into view in the literature. Talent identification is theorised to be a significant event within the employment relationship (King, 2016), one which changes the terms of exchange in the employee-organisation relationship through the psychological contract (Höglund, 2012; King, 2016). Perceived talent status is the perception by an employee that he or she has been identified as talent by their organisation and appears as yet infrequently in the talent literature. When measured in the extant literature, the employee's perception of their talent status is rarely triangulated with the organisation's view of the individual's status (or not), although issues of asymmetry (Dries & De Gieter, 2014) and incongruence of talent status awareness between employees and their organisation (Sonnenberg et al., 2014) have been theorised. Research has found that talent status generates both increased obligations to one's organisation and increased expectations. A study of the use of high performance HRM practices related to the careers aspects of talent management found that employer inducements resulted in employee motivation to develop their skills consistent with the talent qualities required by the organisation which is also partially mediated through the

role of psychological contract obligations which the employee forms (Höglund, 2012). A further study found that employees who perceived they were identified as talent were more likely than those employees who do not know whether they are seen as talent, to accept increased demands for their performance, to commit to building competence, and to support strategic priorities of their organisation, (Björkman et al., 2013). These outcomes support the argument for the expected motivational influence of communication of talent status through social exchange. However, perhaps unsurprisingly, employees can be expected to generate reciprocal expectations. A study of employee participation in high potential programs found that talent-identified employees expect greater investment by their employers in their future career (Dries & De Gieter, 2014). With regard to turnover intention, the difference is not found as employees are as likely to leave the organisation, whether they perceived they were identified as talent or did not know (Björkman et al., 2013).

However, not all findings have been positive in study of the influence of talent status on employee perceptions. Incongruent perceptions of talent status, that is the perception of the individual that they are talent while their organisation does not hold that view, can have negative consequences for psychological contract fulfilment (Sonnenberg et al., 2014), and individuals who are aware of their talent status have been found to be more sensitive to their company's talent inducements, such as development (Ehrnrooth et al., 2018). These findings call into question the presumed positive framing of employee awareness of their talent status (Ehrnrooth et al., 2018) and highlight the need for further empirical study.

Consistent with these concerns, some scholars have cautioned there are risks in the use of workforce differentiation through talent identification. High status distinctions may under-value other talent and may inadvertently establish unhelpful internal competition, or when recruiting externally, may signal the lesser value of internal talent, resulting in a hazardous impact to the organisation's overall success by compromising team work in favour of championing the individual (Pfeffer, 2001). Studies examining the hiring of star talent into an organisation have shown evidence of the recruitment being followed by steep declines in both the star performer who was hired and the group into which they were recruited (Groysberg et al., 2004). When firms engage in competitive lateral hiring of talent between firms (lateral hiring or poaching), one study has found that existing employees in the firm into which talent has been hired are more

likely to attempt to enhance their visibility and career marketability (Amankwah-Amoah, 2017). These are examples of unintended consequences of TM. In terms of the wider workforce, scholars caution that talent identification may have unintended consequences for those who are not included in talent pools, who comprise the majority of the workforce (Swailes, 2013a) and call for consideration of the impact of talent differentiation on the wider workforce (Becker et al., 2009; Swailes & Blackburn, 2016). In terms of the individual talent themselves, scholars also caution that the idealisation of talent and the identification of such an idealised image by the talent themselves can have a destructive effect on the individual who bears the uncertainty of their future outcomes which are as yet uncertain and therefore persistently at risk (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2017).

Social comparisons can be problematic and can reduce the effectiveness of performance appraisals (Greenberg, Ashton-James, & Ashkanasy, 2007). Where identification of talent is used, social comparison mechanisms may be actively involved. As organisations have a moral obligation to consider the wellbeing of their wider workforce (Groysberg et al., 2008), the impact of talent identification on the wider workforce must be better understood. Related calls in the literature include those for clarification of talent for what purpose (Thunnissen, 2016), for clear specification of talent for a value based strategic purpose (Sparrow & Makram, 2015), for improved understanding of the effect of talent management on the wider workforce (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016), the use of reliable and valid assessment measures (Dries & Pepermans, 2012; Nijs et al., 2014) and consideration of organisational justice (Gelens et al., 2013) in the use of exclusive talent management.

Recently, scholars have presented an early exploration of a more balanced view of employee reactions to talent identification. A small-scale interview based study considered the variance of reactions by employees to being included in talent management pools (or not) (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016). Findings indicate that when employees were included in the organisation's talent pool, they reported more positive views of their future career opportunities than employees not included in talent pool. Further, when excluded from the talent pool, employees reported lower levels of perceived organisational support and were more likely to report perceptions of unfairness (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016). Finally, while the use of technology-based tools provide some degree of objectivity in talent assessment, a wide range of contingent

factors (including the context-specific definition of talent) warrant further consideration to support effective technology-enabled talent identification (Wiblen, Dery, & Grant, 2012).

These studies indicate the need to better understand the influence of implemented talent management and perceptions of talent status on both talent-identified employees and the wider workforce. Specifically, further examination of the consequences of the communication of talent status or lack of communication (Björkman et al., 2013; Ehrnrooth et al., 2018), the impact of asymmetry (Dries & De Gieter, 2014) and incongruence (Sonnenberg et al., 2014), whether intentionally for strategic ambiguity or unintentionally. Further research could also consider the influence of talent management in terms of status, social comparison theory (Greenberg et al., 2007), and leadership charisma and mystique (Young et al., 2013).

### 2.4.4. Talent management practices

In the SHRM literature, it has become clear that employee perceptions of HRM practices and their reactions or response to those practices are important determinants of the success of the practices. This is in part due to the known intended-actual gap, whereby the organisation's intended bundle of implemented HRM practices is likely to vary from the actual set of practices which is implemented (Nishii & Wright, 2008). Such variability then means that employee perceptions of what is, in their view, actually in place in terms of HRM practices, is of greater importance than what organisations may have intended to be implemented as it is the employee perception upon which the employees subsequence cognitions, emotions, and actions are then based. Employees interpret HR practices as signals, whether intended or unintended, of the desired behaviours of the organisation and how those behaviours will be rewarded (D. E. Guest, 2008). High commitment HRM that is an orientation of HRM towards a mutual investment with the employee (Walton, 1985), is also referred to as high performance work practices and is expected to be a signal of the organisation's commitment to employees (Baron & Kreps, 1999). High performance work systems have been shown to influence positive outcomes for the organisation including reduced turnover, increased productivity, and improved corporate financial performance (Huselid & Becker, 1997) which indicates that there is some influence on the employee through perceptions of those practices. In a study of talent development practices in Lebanese

organisations, researchers found that talent development practices were positively related with intention to stay, moderated by affective commitment (Chami-Malaeb & Garavan, 2013).

Research has indicated that it is the employee's perception of HRM practices, rather than the practices themselves, which are the route to the effectiveness of those practices and that employees will react to practices in differing ways (Wright & Nishii, 2007). For example, researchers argue the need to understand the underlying employee processes which occur in response to HRM practices (Boxall & Macky, 2009), the employee's views of the purpose of their organisation's use of the practices (Nishii et al., 2008), much of which may be influenced by their line manager's implementation of these practices (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). Research has shown that employees perceive SHRM practices as "meaning-creating device" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007) and that employees attribute meaning to their organisation's use of practices which explain "why" they believe their organisation uses such practices (Nishii et al., 2008).

Only a limited few studies have yet considered employee observations of talent management practices. In the context of talent management, research has shown that employees make observations about the extent to which the talent practices are fair or just. One study has found that employees who are identified as talent by their organisation are more likely to perceive distributive justice in their organisation's use of talent practices (Gelens et al., 2014b). This same study found that these perceptions of distributive justice mediate the relationship between the employee's identification as talent and their job satisfaction (Gelens et al., 2014b). In a study of talent management practices and employee psychological contract fulfilment, researchers found that increased volumes of TM practices were associated with higher levels of psychological contract fulfilment (Sonnenberg et al., 2014). In a study of the use of talent management in university departments which compared the views of the employee with those of the organisation, researchers found that employees perceive TM as mainly intended to support the professional development of academic staff in their department in contrast to the university-reported economic goals for their use of TM practices (Thunnissen, 2016). Employee perceptions of the extent to which their organisation's TM practices are effective have been found to be positively related with their commitment to leadership competence development (Khoreva, Vaiman, & Zalk, 2017). In a study of talent management activities in diversity training and placement agencies in India,

researchers found that contextual adaptation of practices was important to support inclusive identification of talent (Kulkarni, 2015).

Talent management is undertaken by organisations for a range of organisational goals including the aim of controlling the business, the need to respond to client demands and the management of cost (Li & Scullion, 2010). Some organisations access further control in their management of talent through flexibility in their TM policies (Farndale, Pai, Sparrow, & Scullion, 2014). While research has begun to consider the employee in the practice of talent management, such as finding that the number of TM practices used is positively related with psychological contract fulfilment (Sonnenberg et al., 2014), the meaning and purpose which employees attribute to those practices is not yet understood. Employees attribute meaning to their organisation's use of HRM practices (Nishii et al., 2008), and research on HR attributions has been called for in the literature (Hewett, Shantz, Mundy, & Alfes, 2017). However employee attributions of talent management practices are not yet explained. The variance between intended and actual (Nishii & Wright, 2008) implementation of talent management in practice is also of interest for further research. Organisational signalling through the use of HRM practices (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994) is intended to convey the strategic purpose of talent management, however what employees actually perceive and interpret about talent management in practice may not be aligned to what their organisation intends.

Individual outcomes of talent management may not always be positive ones. In an auto-ethnographic study of the author's own experience as being identified as talent in their organisation, talent identification has been described as a double-edged sword in that identification offered both opportunities and exposure which resulted in insecurity and powerlessness (Daubner-Siva et al., 2018). Extending the categorisations of innate and acquired, a typology of talent management in practice was proposed arising from a study of 56 organisations in Sweden which identified humanistic, competitive, elitist and entrepreneurial types of TM in practice (Bolander, 2017). Given the range of differing approaches an organisation may adopt in implementation of TM in practice, consideration of the employee response to talent practices is important.

### 2.4.5. The psychological contract and talent management

Psychological contracts, at their essence, are concerned with the individual's cognitions about the future (Rousseau, 2011). Anticipated future exchange and exchange

conditions have power to motivate the employee's judgment and their behaviour in the present (Rousseau, 2011). When the employee perceives their relationship with the organisation to be one of mutual investment or even over-investment, outcomes are more likely to be favourable for the organisation including increased task performance, affective commitment and OCBS (Tsui, Pearce, Porter, & Tripoli, 1997).

Talent management is a topic associated with differentiated investment (Becker et al., 2009) in the segments of workforce differentially identified as talent. As such talent management is expected to influence employee perceptions of exchange (Höglund, 2012), in the context of the wider social exchange (Blau, 1964) based relationship. As with other HR practices which have been shown to act as communications by the organisation which shape the employee's psychological contract and are systematically processed over time (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994), talent management is theorised to signal investment by the organisation (Dries, 2013a). As the psychological contract has been shown to be involved in talent management (Björkman et al., 2013), the way talent management is perceived by employees is important to understand the impact of TM on the employee-organisation relationship, however this is as yet under theorised.

Talent identification has been theorised to be a significant event in the employee organisation relationship which modifies the terms of exchange (King, 2016), as a crucial exchange event (Ballinger & Rockmann, 2010). The individual's cognitions regarding what a significant event means to them is the foundation of their response and their psychological contract (Rousseau, 2011). Therefore the influence of talent management, and more specifically, of talent identification, on employee perceptions of their relationship and its balance (or lack of) may be material to the effectiveness of implemented talent management. Höglund (2012) introduced a study which empirically linked the employee psychological contract to talent identification and found that talent management leads to human capital development through inducements to develop skills operationalised through psychological obligations (Höglund, 2012).

In modern work context of I-deals, that is, personalised work arrangements which are negotiated by individual employees and allocated on a discretionary basis by the organisations to some individuals and not others (Rousseau, Ho, & Greenberg, 2006), differentiation as talent may hold even more promise for employees. Research

has shown that, regardless of whether an employee expects their current employment will last indefinitely, referred to as a protean career or a career for life (Böhmer & Schinnenburg, 2016), employees continue to develop expectations of career management assistance from their employers (Sturges et al., 2005). As talent management also involves career management and career consequences, talent management is relevant to employees in today's protean careers. In a study of employee reactions to talent management, researchers found that employees who have been included in their organisational talent pool are more positive about their future career opportunities in the organisation than those who are not included in the talent pool who report lower perceptions of support from the organisation (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016).

Given the possible sensitivity to differentiation and associated risks of unfairness, researchers have hypothesised that procedural and distributive justice will influence individual employee outcomes (Gelens et al., 2013). In a subsequent empirical study, researchers confirmed the mediating role of distributive justice in the relationship between talent status and two individual outcomes, that of job satisfaction and work effect, which was additionally moderated by perceived procedural justice in talent management (Gelens et al., 2014b). This was further evidenced in a study which found that employees who were not involved in their organisation's talent pool reported stronger feelings of unfairness (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016). These early studies in the employee perceptions of talent management implementation suggest that the way in which talent management is implemented will impact organisational access to advantageous outcomes.

Aside from the risk of perceptions of lacking procedural justice in the implementation of talent management and identification practices which has been theorised in the literature (Swailes, 2013b; Swailes & Blackburn, 2016), it is very possible that employees hold different interpretations of their organisation's view of them as talent or not, compared with the organisationally-held talent status for a given employee. A study by Dries and de Gieter examined a sample of 20 high potential employees and found preliminary evidence that where information asymmetry exists in high potential programs, such that the employee and the organisation hold different information about the employee's status as talent (or not), there is a risk of psychological contract breach (Dries & De Gieter, 2014). A further study has shown that the use of TM practices is associated with psychological-contract fulfilment but that fulfilment is

negatively affected by asymmetry in perceived talent status, also referred to as incongruence (Sonnenberg et al., 2014). Researchers have hypothesised generational differences will also influence the type (relational or contractual) and state (fulfilled, violated or breached) of the employee psychological contract in the context of talent management, however this has yet to be empirically examined (Festing & Schäfer, 2014). One study has found support for this asymmetry in perceived talent status occurring such that organisations may be unintentionally limiting their talent practice effectiveness (Björkman et al., 2013). While strategic ambiguity in talent communications may be preferred by the organisation to avoid raising expectations of the individual employee, such ambiguity can result in asymmetry of talent status perceptions between individuals and their organisations such that psychological contract breach becomes a risk (Dries & De Gieter, 2014).

As shown in the study by Zhang et al. (2014), top management can use differentiated employment practices to induce commitment or to induce performance and may choose to do so for differing purposes (Zhang, Song, Tsui, & Fu, 2014). In a recent study of talent reactions to their awareness of talent status researchers found that employee awareness of their status as talent will moderate the relationship between employer inducements and the obligations which the talented employee forms but that this influence varies and is not always a positive effect (Ehrnrooth et al., 2018). In terms of talent and career outcomes, researchers have found that the talented employee's experience and expertise both predict outcomes of promotion confirming that managerial skills are important for promotion to managerial roles (Claussen, Grohsjean, Luger, & Probst, 2014).

### 2.4.6. Individual outcomes of talent management

Much is yet to be considered with regard to the employee and talent management in both the consequences for the psychological contract and for subsequent individual outcomes. Researchers call for further investigation of the employee psychological response to talent management is needed (Dries, 2013a) and the influence of incongruence of talent status perceptions (Dries & De Gieter, 2014). Research on the consequence of workforce differentiation (Becker et al., 2009) is lacking, both for employees identified as talent (Ehrnrooth et al., 2018) and consequences for the wider workforce (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016). Consideration of whether or not psychological

contract breach occurs in the talent-organisation relationships and its associated consequences (Thunnissen, 2016) is required. Little is yet understood about the consequences of status differentiation for employees identified as talent (and those not, see Swailes 2016), and its expected influence on the employee and their organisational relationship outcomes, in the context of strategic talent management. Further research is required to contribute to insights about the link between TM and employee outcomes (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013).

Investigation of how employees interpret and attribute meaning to HR practices (Nishii et al., 2008), in the specific context of talent management is needed. The way talent management is perceived by employees is important but is as yet under theorised. Research has found that employees demonstrated several desirable outcomes including task performance, affective commitment and OCBS when their employee-organisation relationship was deemed as one of mutual investment or even over-investment by the organisation rather than when in a quasi-spot investment or under-investment relationship (Tsui et al., 1997). Therefore the influence of talent management on employee perceptions of their relationship and its balance (or lack of) may be material to the effectiveness of implemented talent management.

The influence of talent management on employee outcomes requires attention. Scholars have called for consideration of individual level and proximal outcomes of talent management and cross-level effects of talent management (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016). In a questionnaire-based study by Zhang et al. (2014) of a sample of Chinese companies aiming to explore the effects of differentiated employment-relationship practices on employee outcomes, one key finding was that empowerment is motivational to non-traditional employees. This highlights the importance of considering individual differences in the use of TM practices in future and the influence of talent management on organisational climate, which is, at its most simple, an individual-level psychological climate (Ostroff, Kinicki, & Muhammad, 2013).

Future research should consider communication regarding talent management and specifically talent status in order to shed light on the potential unintended consequences of talent status communication for employees. Questioning the current view of presumed positive outcomes of talent management (Björkman et al., 2013), scholars have presented evidence of negative consequences for employees of talent

identification and talent status or inclusion in talent pools. In their work with employees identified as future leaders or included in the fast-track careers in their investment banking and various multinational organisations, scholars have described the "talent curse" as being a psychological response which involves the destructive combination of idealising and identifying with the status of being talent while suffering from perceptions of being persistently tested which resulted in insecurity and acceptance of excessive work demands (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2017).

### 2.4.7. The role of other employee-actors in talent management

Multiple actors have also been theorised in the implementation of HRM (Bos-Nehles & Meijerink, 2018). Likewise, in strategic talent management, multiple actors have been conceptualised (King, 2015; Thunnissen et al., 2013a). In this section, I review the literature's consideration of the supervisor and leaders, the role of the HR manager and consideration of team members in talent management.

First, the supervisor is seen as a primary actor in the HRM-performance causal pathway with a central role in HRM implementation (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). The supervisor is theorised to be the "missing link" in SHRM implementation whose influence is expected to shape psychological contract development and fulfilment (McDermott, Conway, Rousseau, & Flood, 2013). As the role of the supervisor is theorised to be central to talent management the supervisor's provision of support is expected to influence the employee's experience of talent management (King, 2015, 2016). However as with any SHRM practice which is subject to variance between what was intended and what is actually implemented (Björkman et al., 2013), variance between intended and actual talent management practice is expected. For example, research indicates that supervisors often communicate the organisational view of talent status to talent-identified employees, even when the policy is not to communicate status (Dries & De Gieter, 2014). Scholars have noted that there are constraints in how leaders use, deploy and share talent as a scare resource which may vary within and across their respective business units. For example, leaders in a given unit may be reluctant to release talent for deployment in another as they value the talented employee's exemplar performance in the current business unit, although this may be inconsistent with the HR functional view that talent is expected to be mobile within the enterprise (Boudreau, 2013). Finally, scholars have noted the risk that managers often "veil their most talented"

employees, that is, reduce the visibility of their top talent in organisational talent decision making, often by recommending an alternative candidate to meet a requirement for talent (Mellahi & Collings, 2010, p. 146). This is an example of intended-actual variance.

Second, the role of HR managers in talent management has also been considered in the literature. Scholars have argued there are important and significant roles for the corporate Human Resource function (Farndale et al., 2010) and for HR generally in the effective talent management implementation, including their involvement in the identification of talent (McDonnell & Collings, 2011) and their design of talent management decision systems (Vaiman et al., 2012). In consideration of the management of the psychological contract from the organisation's perspective, scholars have shown that HR managers are actively involved in the organisation's communication of promises and commitments and therefore have influence over the managements of the psychological contract (Guest & Conway, 2002). Little is yet known of how either HR managers or line manager shape the psychological contract in talent management implementation or what more could be done to support development of a balanced psychological contract and fair exchange in the context of talent management.

Finally, the question of the influence of talent management within the context of teams has yet to gain significant focus in the literature. One study of large Spanish companies found that the use of team-based talent management supports organisational learning and is particularly influenced by team autonomy and creativity (Oltra & Vivas-López, 2013), although the definition of talent management in this study is not notably delineated from employee training. A qualitative study of talent management implementation in the context of university departments, (Thunnissen, 2016), found that TM implementation in departments was most influenced by the intentions and actions of the primary managers of talent in that context, the full professors, which is early evidence of the role of line manager involvement in effective implementation of talent management and their influence in a talent-group context.

Research calls for further investigation of the role of the supervisor or line manager in HRM implementation (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007) and of the line manager in talent management (King, 2015). In addition to the scarce empirical research on the

individual in talent management, the literature's investigation is also insufficient in consideration of the impact of talent management on the perspectives of varying stakeholders (Collings, 2014c; Dries, 2013a), such as the wider workforce (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016). Finally, particularly in the context of globally mobile talent, the consideration of individuals other than the employee is also warranted. For example, research considering top athletes has shown that when considering possible expatriation, top talent make decisions based on the particular needs of their spouses (Mutter, 2017).

## 2.5. Discussion and Findings of the Review

In this chapter I have first presented a broad review of the emergent talent management literature, followed by a focused review of the limited extant literature which considers the employee perspective in talent management. Overall, the talent management literature is advancing notably in three ways: in the volume of literature; in the degree of specification of sub-streams within the literature, and in developing theoretical foundations. However much more development is required to establish the literature as a mature body of scholarly enquiry. First, the volume of literature is exploding in recent years and by indication of the multiple streams emerging, it is becoming established as a distinct body of scholarly literature. Second, the delineation of multiple streams within the literature is evidence of the complexity and nuances which exist within the topic and underscore the degree to which presumed strategic advantage through talent is a long way from being well evidenced. Third, while talent management is recognised as a bridging topic by many scholars, the limited theoretical linkages on which it is founded require further structural work if to support a robust scholarly field. Essential foundations currently include the conceptual and empirical use of social exchange and of psychological contract theory, however both require much closer empirical examination and additional theoretical foundations could arguably be drawn upon to further architect and strengthen the literature's forward development (Morley et al., 2017).

Looking closely at the employee him or herself within the talent management literature, overall, it is clear that substantial further conceptual and empirical research on the employee perception of and response to organisational talent management, particularly to exclusive talent management is required urgently. More specifically, there are four main findings arising from this review of the consideration of the

employee within the talent management literature with corresponding future research required.

First, antecedents of the employee experience of talent management are largely unexamined. This may include both the organisational context which influences the employee experience of talent management and the individual differences which influence the individual's participation in their organisation's talent pool and talent programs. While the adjacent SHRM literature considering employee perceptions of SHRM practices has expanded substantially in recent years, as yet, very little is known about how employees perceive their organisation's use of talent management, along any point on the continuum from inclusive to exclusive. More specifically, how employees interpret and attribute purpose and meaning to those practices is not materially in focus in the literature, reinforcing the dominant organisational perspective on TM. The employee's experience of organisational and supervisor support are contingent factors of interest. Further, the individual differences which may be antecedent to an employee's identification as talent by their organisation require further conceptual and empirical focus. These may include individual views of self, identity, organisational identification, the saliency of career goals, individual orientations towards status and towards justice.

Second, influence of talent management on the employee and talent-organisation relationship (TOR) requires further consideration. The employee-organisation relationship is known to be fundamentally underpinned by the psychological contract and yet its definition, content, quality and status are not clearly presented in the literature for either employees identified as talent or for the wider workforce experiencing talent management in their organisation more broadly. While some early studies in this stream of research have begun to consider the influence of talent identification on psychological contract expectations, obligations and fulfilment, there is much yet to be examined and understood with regard to the psychological contract as a central mechanism through which organisational aspirations of talent management may be operationalised to facilitate differentiated competitive outcomes at the individual level. Further, the consequences of workforce differentiation practices through talent management and more specifically, through talent identification, for both the talent-identified employee and those not talent-identified in the workforce, is as yet in its earliest phases of development, both conceptually and empirically. Close consideration of the psychological contract is warranted, as a theorised central component of the talent-

organisation relationship, including further examination of psychological contract expectations, obligations and of the conditions of fulfilment, violation and breach.

Third, examination of variance in proximal outcomes of implemented talent management are needed, through further conceptual and empirical study of employee job attitudes and behaviours which are currently highly limited in the exclusive talent management literature. At the individual level, outcomes related to the differentiated contribution of individually-held human capital resources, the discretionary contribution of innovative and proactive behaviours in favour of the organisation's advantage and the use of problem-solving and other organisationally supportive behaviours would be of great interest to explore whether differentiated talent management indeed facilitates any notable differentiated proximal individual–level outcomes. At the team level, empirical study of the consequences of implemented talent management on team cohesiveness, team human capital composition and team conflict are of interest, both in terms of inclusive and exclusive talent management. At the organisational level, proximal outcomes such as workforce perceptions of the validity, effectiveness and strategic alignment of TM philosophy and practices, and consequences of TM on organisational climate are of interest to further develop the literature with regard to the presumed talent-advantage argument.

Fourth, cross-level research which considers TM practices, singularly and in strategic bundles, the use of TM across individual, team, and firm-level outcomes and the identification of conditions under which implemented TM is most effective in achieving preferred outcomes such as retention of the talent pool and team-specific outcomes related to supervisor influence on talent management effectiveness are of interest. Further, the influence of talent management on climate is yet to be examined. Climate is an individual level construct which, when aggregated at the team and firm level becomes a shared climate (Ostroff & Bowen, 2000). In a separate paper, I have theorised the influence of talent management on individual psychological climate and its contribution to an organisational level climate supportive of talent development through establishment of a strong talent system, however this has not been empirically tested (King, 2017).

In summary, there remains scarce insight into the employee response to talent management strategy and associated practices. A total of 24 papers have been located in

the wider literature review of 208 papers which meet the inclusion criteria for scholarly material on the topic of talent, talent management, high potential and star talent. Even within this sample of 24 empirical papers which consider the employee within talent, only a sub-set consider the employee specifically in the context of exclusive talent management or differentiated talent status. This shortfall of empirical focus on the employee as the central actor within exclusive talent management is particularly interesting because of the strategic advantage argued to be central to the use of strategic talent management, whether global or local and whether exclusive or inclusive. The overall body of talent management literature is still largely emergent and remains rather fragmented (Morley et al., 2017). Applying a critical, systematic review method (Davis, 1971; Whetten, 1989; Whetten, Felin, & King, 2009) to review the extant talent management literature, this review has maintained methodological transparency (Aguinis et al., 2018), minimised bias in the findings (Tranfield et al., 2003), and avoided the known researcher bias of "cherry-picking" preferred evidence to the exclusion of other non-preferred but relevant evidence (Briner & Denyer, 2012). The findings presented in this chapter now establish the departure point for the dissertation empirical work which follows.

## 2.6. Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented a review of the talent management literature and then sharpened the focus to present a review of the stream in the literature which directly considers the employee in talent management. In so doing, I have identified that, while the literature has recently acknowledged the employee as a central participant and central actor in organisational strategic talent management, both conceptual and empirical work in this stream is as yet highly limited and requires substantial further conceptual and empirical development. It is this stream in the talent management literature to which this dissertation centrally contributes.

This limitation is a crucial constraint in the developing talent management literature. If talent management is to deliver on its promise of competitive advantage to the organisation, we must understand how implemented talent management influences the individual employee, the employee-organisation relationship and the differentiated outcomes which are facilitated through talent identification and management. Importantly, the underdevelopment of the current literature means that not only is the

operationalisation of talent identification and management currently largely opaque in its functioning, but the influence of this strategic practice on both the talent-identified employee and the wider workforce is largely unexamined and under-theorised reinforcing the dominant organisational focus and relying heavily on limited theoretical foundations.

In chapter three which follows, I theorise a conceptual research model and identify and present the dissertation research questions centrally focused on the employee experience of talent management.

# 3. Chapter 3. Theoretical Framework and Dissertation Research Model

## 3.1. Chapter Introduction

In the review of the talent management literature, presented in the preceding chapter, I identified that both the theoretical conceptualisation and the empirical examination of the employee response to talent management remain insufficient in the extant talent management literature. Despite the positioning of the employee as the central actor upon which strategic talent management is intended to direct differentiated outcomes, empirical consideration of employee reactions to talent management remains highly limited. As this limitation constrains the extant literature, addressing this limitation will support its forward development. In this dissertation I seek to unpack the "black box" which is the under-examined employee experience of and response to talent management.

This limitation is particularly acute given the central argument underlying the topic of talent management, that the management of talent is a strategic human resource management intervention intended to contribute to an organisation's competitive advantage through the differentiated management of strategic human capital resources in order to achieve differentiated outcomes. That is, organisational value, through differentiated performance, is expected to be created and captured through the pool of employees identified as talent by their organisations (Sparrow & Makram, 2015), however the individual-level mechanisms by which this occurs are as yet opaque as found in the literature review presented in the previous chapter. Likewise, there is very little yet known of the outcomes for the employee in the reciprocity-based talent-organisation relationship. Correspondingly, calls for further research include consideration of the individual in the context of SHRM implementation (Wright & McMahan, 2011, p. 2); consideration of the individual's psychological response to talent management (Björkman et al., 2013; Dries, 2013b), examinations of the micro-foundations of human capital (Coff & Kryscynski, 2011), and investigation of more proximal outcomes of talent management (Collings, 2014a) such as the influence of exclusive talent management on both talent-identified and non-talent identified employees in the wider workforce (Ehrnrooth et al., 2018; Swailes & Blackburn, 2016).

Responding to these calls, I investigate the employee response to talent management, the consequences of talent management on the employee-held psychological contract and its association with employee attitudinal and behaviours outcomes which are of direct importance to the intended leverage of human capital through strategic talent management.

Theories and empirical work are interesting when assumptions are reconsidered, re-evaluated or denied (Davis, 1971). The use of talent management as a business strategy to access differentiated business advantage rests on a somewhat vague but inferred assumption. The implied assumption is that through this practice of identifying individuals as talent or as having high potential, the organisation will access and leverage human capital resources held by the individual which may not otherwise be offered in service of firm priorities. This assumption is not yet tested and the mechanisms through which this occurs are not yet specified. Yet while the practice of talent identification and differentiated management of talent-identified employees or pools of employees has become increasingly common in practice (Gelens et al., 2013) and even seen as best practice (Stahl et al., 2012), the consequences of this activity are not clear, as discussed in the prior chapter. Even in practice, the outcomes achieved by organisational talent management are not clear and often questioned (Cappelli & Keller, 2014). At the organisational level, management continue to report issues with talent management operationalisation (Cappelli, 2015; Nilsson & Per-Erik, 2012) and at the individual level this includes the unintended turnover of talent-identified individuals, arguably a loss of strategic human capital for the organisation. It is therefore conceivable that "talent identification" is a variable which does not function as we expect it to in practice. That's interesting. Further, current assumptions are such that strategic talent management is seen to be of such potential advantage to the firm that any risk of unintended consequences for the wider workforce resulting from exclusive talent management are assumed to be sustainably outweighed by the added value achieved by the exclusive practice. Given that talent management practices are frequently recognised to be poorly communicated, sometimes intentionally due to strategic ambiguity (Dries & De Gieter, 2014) or even secrecy (Meyers et al., 2017), employee observations of, interpretations of and attributions of the meaning of such practices remain correspondingly clouded. This dissertation is a close examination of the influence of perceived talent status as a

central variable, to understand its influence on the intended but often unachieved outcomes of talent management implementation.

The aim of this chapter is to direct the focus of this dissertation and to define its scope. In doing so, I present the conceptual research model and the dissertation research questions. I begin in section 3.2, by conceptualising the research model: the employee experience of talent management, for qualitative investigation in the first of two complementary studies in this dissertation followed by quantitative investigation in the second study. This is consistent with a mixed-methods exploratory-convergent design, presented in detail in the main methods chapter, four, which follows. In section 3.3, I then discuss theoretical foundations from which the research model is developed. In section 3.4, I present the conceptual research model. In section 3.5, I present a brief mapping of the dissertation chapters to the empirical work as a preliminary introduction to the reader of my approach to the empirical work in this dissertation. In chapter four which follows, the main methods chapter, I present the overall methods along with detailed research designs specific to each of the two studies.

## 3.2. Research Topic: The employee experience in talent management

The resource based view of the firm (Barney, 1991) posits that the firm possesses human capital within its workforce which offers a unique source of competitive advantage to the firm and its performance. Human capital, as a resource of the firm (Barney et al., 2001), is expected to create value (Wright, Dunford, et al., 2001), through differentiated management of talented employees (Collings & Mellahi, 2009) and through delivery of strategy (M. A. Huselid, Becker, & R. W. Beatty, 2005b), and to ultimately drive unit level performance outcomes through adoption and implementation of strategic talent management practices. SHRM practices are expected to deliver sustained competitive advantage through the performance of employees (Boxall, Ang, & Bartram, 2011), which offers an organisational advantage which cannot be readily mimicked by other firms (Wright et al., 1994). Talent management is one such strategic practice applied to the organisation's workforce however the mechanisms through which differentiated performance is achieved by organisational talent management remains largely under-theorised as yet (Collings, 2014a). If this logic is to produce the intended outcomes, then the mechanisms through which this positive performance-advantage effect is generated and occurs at the individual level must be better understood. Simply

stated, the logic underlying this expected value path is that, the strategic use of human capital, including its attraction, development, accumulation and deployment, is facilitated in large part by strategic talent management practices. Further, through this strategic TM, the firm, will create preferred individual and organisational outcomes such as performance at each level of measurement which then leads to competitive advantage for the firm. Yet the individual-level mechanisms through which this presumed differentiated outcome occurs is not yet well theorised nor sufficiently examined.

Empirical examination of the employee response to talent management can further inform human resource management literature and practice (Collings & Mellahi, 2009), however until recently the focus of the SHRM literature has been as an HR process (Wright & McMahan, 2011) rather than on participants of SHRM activities themselves which has meant until very recently, little light had been shed on the commonly adopted practice of talent management. Recently, as reviewed in the prior chapter, an emerging stream in the TM literature has developed in which several studies have begun to examine the employee response to talent identification practices, prior to which point the lack of consideration of the employee in talent management had been a notable omission (Björkman et al., 2013). To respond to these limitations and to contribute to the early development of this stream of research, I position the employee as the central actor in talent management (King, 2015). Positioning the employee at the heart of talent management and its promise of value to the organisation, directs the focus of the dissertation on the employee experience of and then subsequent response to implemented organisational strategic talent management. At its essence then, the focus of this dissertation is examination of the individual level mechanisms through which strategic talent management influences differentiated individual outcomes, to unpack the "black box" of talent management. Figure 3.1 presents a highest level conceptualisation of talent-advantage logic path.

Figure 3.1 Talent-Advantage Logic Path: Accessing strategic firm advantage through

management of talent



| Strategy for Human Capital advantage through Talent | Talent Management Practices Implementation | The Employee Experience of and response to Talent Management | Individual & Organisational Outcomes | Competitive Performance & Advantage |
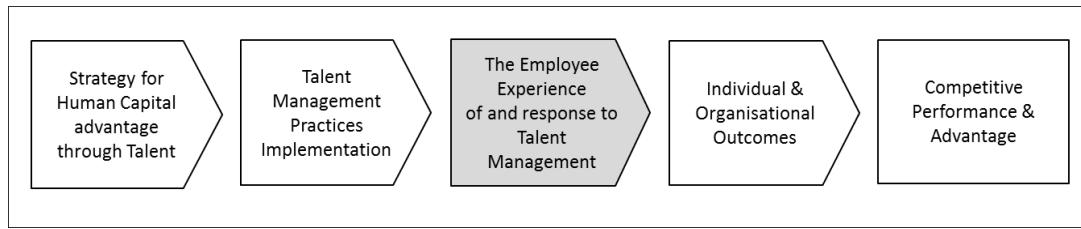
My main goal in the dissertation is to examine the employee experience of and response to talent management in order to further develop the under-theorised topic of talent management and to extend the linkage of talent management literature to the psychological contract literature and advance the TM literature. This extension has begun recently by scholars including Höglund (Höglund, 2012), Bjorkman et al. (Björkman et al., 2013), Dries (Dries, 2013b), and Ehrnrooth et al. (Ehrnrooth et al., 2018). The scope of the dissertation is the employee's perceptions of implemented talent management practices, their attributions as to the "why" and "for what purpose" talent management is undertaken in their organisation and the influence of talent management on the employee-held psychological contract and resulting outcomes (the "what" of talent management). Within this is also an examination of the employee response to the practice of talent identification, a central activity in the management of talent (Dries & Pepermans, 2012), whereby organisations identify those employees they perceive to be "talent". That is, those employees who are identified as high performers with the potential to further develop skills and capabilities required for performance in more senior or critical roles in the organisation in future (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). (Collings & Mellahi, 2009)

Conceptualising the organisational use of strategic talent management as a system (King, 2015), the employee experience of talent management occurs within the context of the organisational talent system. This is defined as the structured, within-organisation system through which talent management is implemented as a strategic intervention intended to systematically generate differentiated firm outcomes through differentiated management of and investment in talent, pools of talent, and pivotal roles (King, 2015). I argue that the employee experience of this implemented system must be examined, in order to investigate the effectiveness of the talent system in achieving its

strategic aim, and therefore in this dissertation I position the employee as a central actor in this strategic system (King, 2015).

Further deepening the conceptual lens beyond figure 3.1, figure 3.2 presents a further level of conceptualisation of the dissertation research model. This cross-level conceptualisation illustrates the intended organisational-level use of talent management as a strategy to achieve firm-level competitive advantage as operationalised through individual-level mechanisms. That is, the implementation of talent management within-organisation effectuates individual-level outcomes which contribute to organisational-level advantage. The facilitation of individual-level outcomes which contribute to firm-level competitive advantage is then contingent on the employee experience of talent management generating favourable or preferred outcomes of talent management. Preferred outcomes of talent management have been identified in the literature as including organisational effectiveness in attracting and retaining talent-identified employees and workforce attitudes and behaviours including retention and performance. Other desired workforce outcomes such as innovation or proactive behaviours and, as with any strategy, are likely to be firm-specific in degree of prioritisation. "Preferred" talent outcomes will be discussed shortly in this chapter. As conceptualised in figure 3.2, I examine the research topic through examination of the employee individual-level experience in response to the implemented and operationalised talent strategy in order to illuminate the relationship between implemented TM, the employee experience of those practices and the outcomes for both the individual and the organisation.

Figure 3.2 Employee Experience of Talent Management: Unpacking the "black box"
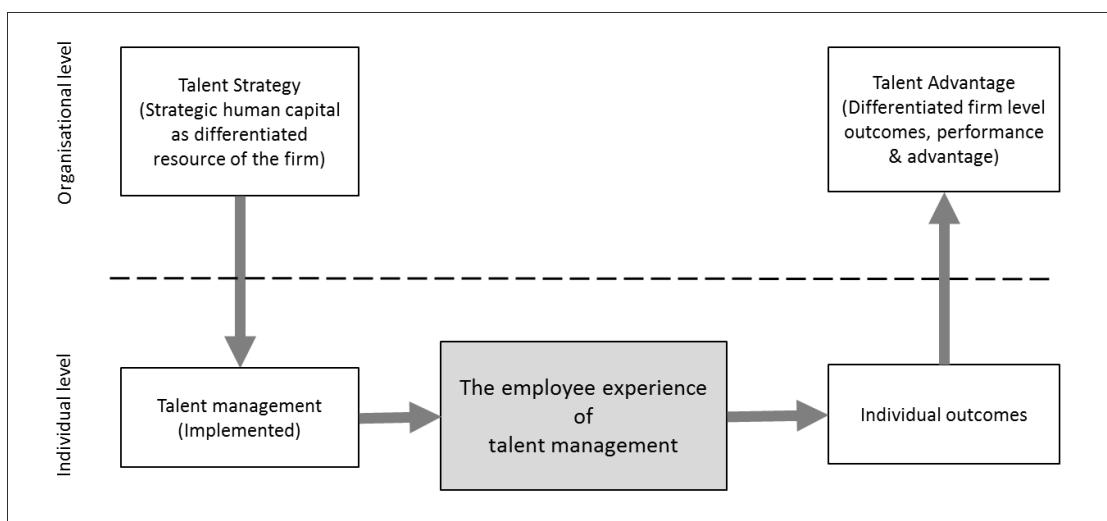
The intervening process which explains the employee experience of and response to talent management is the focus of the studies within this dissertation. The employee experience of talent management refers to employee observations and interpretations of implemented talent management in the organisation. The employee response to talent management refers to the consequences of talent management implementation, including talent identification (or not), on the employee-held psychological contract and job attitudes and behaviours. The next step then is to theorise the components of the employee experience of talent management. To do so, I aim to examine and unpack what might be considered the "black box" of talent management. Conceptual and empirical development of the employee TM experience can help to explain the mechanisms by which implemented talent management may facilitate preferred talent outcomes, addressing what has been until very recently, a limiting focus on organisational level measures (Thunnissen, 2016).

Moving from focus on the organisational level talent system to the individual-level employee experience of the implemented talent system is necessary to explain the mechanism by which talent management is expected to generate competitive outcomes. Doing so responds to calls in the literature to move to more proximal outcomes measures of SHRM (Paauwe, 2009; Paauwe et al., 2013) and TM away from the distal focus on organisational performance (Collings, 2014c) to consider proximal individual-level outcomes of implemented TM in order to deepen our understanding of talent management in the literature. As with implemented SHRM practices at the organisation level whereby the employee perceives SHRM practices at the individual level (Ostroff & Bowen, 2000), organisational level talent practices are then theorised to be experienced at the workforce level by individual employees which, as with any workplace practices, as theorised in the strategic talent management architecture (Collings & Mellahi, 2009) which are expected to be associated with a range of attitude and behavioural outcomes. However in the case of talent management, the mechanism through which organisational TM generates differentiated competitive outcomes through individual attitudes and behaviours responses is under-theorised.

As talent management occurs within an implemented within-organisation system (King, 2015), context matters in talent management (Thunnissen et al., 2013b) and contextualisation is an important criteria for the evaluation of evidence (Rousseau et al., 2008). The implementation of talent strategy through a set of talent practices in the

organisation is enacted through the action and behaviours of a set of inter-dependent actors in the talent system, including the line manager, the leadership, human resources professionals and the employee (King, 2015). Through the actions of these multiple actors, talent management, a strategic business activity, is operationalised day to day in the organisation and across workplaces such that talent management becomes visible to employees, whether consistently or inconsistently, as influenced by the multiple actors involved in its implementation. As with other SHRM practices for which variance is recognised to exist between the intended practices and the actual implemented practices (Nishii & Wright, 2008), variance in the implementation of talent management is also to be expected (King, 2015) and such variance may indeed serve or dis-serve organisational priorities which vary within-organisation. The line manager or supervisor is theorised to be central to the implementation of talent management and to the employee's experience of talent management (King, 2015). In practice, line managers frequently have primary accountability for identification of talent potential in their employee direct reports and the ongoing development and performance support and management of talented employees is the remit of the manager in addition to the firm leadership (King, 2015). Therefore, as a contextually-anchored phenomenon, the employee experience of talent management is expected to be influenced by various contextual factors including employee perceptions of the support they receive from their supervisor and organisation.

Before proceeding with specification of the components of the conceptual research model, I consider guidance from the literature with regard to model development. Guidance from experienced academic researchers in the literature provides some essential recommendations as to how to develop a research model which can make a contribution to the literature. Of note, Whetten (1989) considered three core building blocks necessary to make a theoretical contribution in developing one's theory or model (note that Whetten explicitly states that he does not distinguish the two). They are: the what, the how, and the why (Whetten, 1989). Extending Whetten's framework, to five core blocks, I consider the "when" and "for whom". Moderating variables help to explain "when" the effect will be stronger or less so. In the case of talent management, identification as talent (or not) is a significant moderator of the employee response to talent management as shown in the few existing studies of employees identified as talent. For example, empirical study has found that when employees are identified as talent,

they are more likely to accept increasing performance demands and to report alignment to their organisation's strategic priorities (Björkman et al., 2013).

The "what" is the set of variables and constructs which should be included in order to explain the phenomena of interest in the research (Whetten, 1989). Researchers should be mindful of being both comprehensive and parsimonious, however, recognising that ideas in research are refined over time, researchers should prefer use of too many variables over too few (Whetten, 1989). This guidance is particularly welcomed in the exploration of this dissertation topic as the void in the literature is significant while the assumed value of talent identification as a strategic business activity through workforce differentiation is high and as such there is arguably much to be better understood. I argue that the "what" of the employee experience of talent management spans the purpose and practice of talent management, the employee's formed views of talent management and their psychological response which includes attitudes and subsequent behaviours of interest.

The second core building blocks of model or theory development is the "how" which presents the theorised relationships between the variables or the "boxes" in the model (Whetten, 1989). In the context of the employee experience of talent management, the "how" is theorised in detail in the model which follows. At its most basic, the theorised model conceives that at the outset, employees observe talent management practices in their organisation and interpret them to form a view as to their purpose ("why" and "for what") in the organisation. Within this organisational context, employees hold views of themselves and their perceptions as to whether or not they are seen as talent by their organisation. These views are then theorised to influence their resulting psychological contract formation and content, and related or consequential job attitudinal and behavioural outcomes.

The third core building blocks of model or theory development is the "why" which described as the "theoretical glue that welds the model together" (Whetten, 1989, p. 491) and is the logic which underlies the theorised model. In the case of the employee experience of talent management, the dissertation model is based on four theoretical foundations: social exchange, psychological contract, identity theory and systems theory. The model logically conceives that the employee observes and responds to talent management as part of the social exchange they experience in the exchange-based

employee-organisation relationship within an overall organisational system. Further, the employee forms a psychological contact based on their perceived identity within their understanding of the organisation's talent management practices and its contextually-anchored purpose.

A further, fourth, core building block which I consider is that of "when" implemented talent management matters most. In this model, I argue that the individual experience of talent management will help us to explain "when" talent management will make the most difference to preferred outcomes. I suggest that the employee's perception of their status as talent and the extent to which the employee perceives the support of their line manager are two factors of interest. The support of the supervisor is of particular interest as the employee's direct supervisor is recognised to be a key link in HRM implementation (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007).

Finally, the conceptual research model considers a fifth component, "for whom" or "who" the employee is in the experience of talent management. As talent status requires a differentiation of some employees compared with others, it is likely that a combination of both context and individual differences will be antecedent to talent identification. Talent identification practices consider employee high performance and potential for future performance as antecedent to inclusion in a talent pool (Mäkelä et al., 2010). Individual differences are further theorised to be antecedent to talent identification including analytical skills, learning agility, drive, and emergent leadership (Dries & Pepermans, 2012). Other individual differences likely also contribute but talent identification is as yet under-theorised.

Together, these five components constitute an effective model in that they describe the what, how and why which presents both a description and an explanation (Whetten, 1989). These components will be theorised and presented in detail in section 3.4. First, I review the theoretical foundations of the employee experience in talent management.

### 3.3. Theoretical Foundations and Conceptual Research Model

### 3.3.1. Talent management occurs within a context of ongoing social exchange

Social exchange theory (SET) (Blau, 1964) is a foundational theory which underlies much of what is understood about workforce behaviour (Cropanzano &

Mitchell, 2005). Based on the principle of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), social exchange theory explains that interactions generate a sense of obligation between individuals, that these interactions occur over time but are seen as interdependent and that individuals develop a sense of obligation to reciprocate in future based on their interactions today (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The employee-organisation relationship is seen as ongoing exchange in the context of the workplace and employment relationship and HR practices have been shown to predict employee outcomes based on SET (Gould-Williams & Davies, 2005). Talent management is centrally constructed on foundations of social exchange which occur within the context of the employee-organisation relationship, or the "talent-organisation" relationship. Significant literature exists which considers the employee and their relationship to the organisation through the lens of social exchange. As a result, the work attitude-behaviour link has been empirically tested to explain a range of exchange-based responses in the workplace (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000). However in the specific case of talent management, as reviewed in the previous chapter, limited empirical examination of how talent management influences exchange between the employee and the organisation has yet been presented. In this dissertation, I examine talent management as an extension of the ongoing social exchange between the organisation and the employee, arguing that through talent management, expectations of future social exchange are heightened by both the employer and the employee. The underlying theoretical framework then is that of social exchange which is theorised to be operationalised through the employee-held psychological contract and is differentiated in the context of workforce status differences in talent management.

### 3.3.2. Talent management involves differentiated employee obligations and expectations

Psychological contract (PC) theory explains that employees form and hold beliefs about their ongoing exchange with their employer in the context of the employee-organisational relationship such that they form obligations towards their employer and form expectations of their employer's reciprocal obligations towards them (Rousseau, 1989). As discussed, consideration of the employee within the talent management literature is a new and very recently development stream of research. Researchers in this stream have drawn on psychological contract theory as an anchor through which to explain the effects of talent management on the exchange between talent-identified

employees and their organisation (Björkman et al., 2013; Höglund, 2012). Consistent with early conceptualisations by Höglund (Höglund, 2012) of the inducements within the psychological contract which relate to talent dimensions (specifically career and promotion), I also argue the psychological contract, its development and its fulfilment in the context of exclusive talent management to be of central relevance to TM outcomes and in the model which follows. I theorise psychological contract fulfilment to be a central mechanism through which the influence of talent management is operationalised at the individual level. In doing so, this study builds on prior studies which examined the link between skill-enhancing HRM practices and psychological contract inducements to develop their skills (Höglund, 2012); the commitments which employees differentially form dependent on whether the employee perceives they are included in an organisation's talent pool (Björkman et al., 2013), and the influence of employee knowledge of their talent status on their psychological contract fulfilment (Smale et al., 2015). As much of the promised benefit of talent status for the individual may lie in their expected outcomes of future exchange with their organisation, the individual is reasonably likely to develop expectations of fairness and of trust that their contributions will be fairly reciprocated. This line of argumentation is consistent with the argument that research in the psychological contract must acknowledge the context in which it is dependent and also of the wider issues of trust and of fairness within which it is managed over time (Guest, 2004).

### 3.3.3. Talent management signals a management strategic priority and tactic

Signalling theory in the context of organisations explains that information is imperfect or asymmetrical, and that in this context individuals will send and interpret signals from others and from their organisation (Spence, 1973). Observing their organisation, its representatives and the human resource practices used in their organisation, employees engage in sense-making (Weick, 1995) to interpret the meaning and use of such practices. Leaders have been identified as sense-givers in that leader behaviours help to signal the characteristics of the HR system in which employees participate and are managed (Nishii & Paluch, 2018). In doing so, leaders help to signal or give sense to the systems which employees experience around them. In the context of talent management which is often highly visible but often intentionally ambiguously communicated (Dries & De Gieter, 2014), the use of talent identification and management by an organisation is a signal by the organisation of its priorities for talent

in the organisation and may be interpreted by the employee as individually-specific signals of the employee's status and position (Dries, 2013a; King, 2016) within that strategic context and talent agenda.

### 3.3.4. Identification of talent is differentiation of the workforce

Workforce differentiation is an approach to differentiated HRM which considers both strategic capabilities and strategic jobs (Huselid & Becker, 2011). Talent management is a workforce differentiation practice in that it involves the disproportionate investment of resources by the organisation from which it expects to achieve disproportionate returns (Becker et al., 2009) through a focus on specific segments of the workforce and on specific positions within the organisation. The differentiated management of talent then, known as the exclusive approach to talent management and defined recently as "the differentiated management of employees according to their relative potential to contribute to an organisation's competitive advantage" (Gelens et al., 2013, p. 342) is a workforce differentiation strategy. Based on the notion of human capital, that is, the idea that employees hold knowledge or skill based resources which are valuable and inimitable (Lepak & Snell, 1999), talent management is often labelled "strategic" and talent itself as "scarce" (Ulrich & Smallwood, 2012), and not surprisingly, exclusive talent management may be criticised as being "elitist" with risk of perceptions of injustice (Swailes, Handley, & Rivers, 2016).

Talented employees are a scarce resource and only a very limited proportion of the workforce is identified as talent or high potentials by organisations using exclusive talent management practices (Ulrich & Smallwood, 2012). Talent identification is accepted to be a central tenet of differentiated workforce practices in that organisations must "find" the talent within their organisation in order to then actively manage and develop talent. Talent identification involves the assessment of identification of individuals the organisation deems to have potential (Dries, 2013a; Dries & Pepermans, 2012) to contribute to competitive advantage (Collings & Mellahi, 2009) and in practice involves management involvement to validate the identification and selection of talent in the organisation (Mäkelä et al., 2010; Silzer & Church, 2009a).

Differentiation makes a difference. Identification of talent by one's organisation, is expected to change the terms of exchange in the exchange based employment

relationship through influence on the psychological contract (Höglund, 2012), and to create new expectations of social exchange (Björkman et al., 2013). Early studies have shown that for a range of individual level outcomes, employees who perceive talent status will differ from those who do not. The use of inducements by the employer, such as offering leadership development practices, for example, has been shown to create differentiated obligations in employees who perceive they are identified as talent (Ehrnrooth et al., 2018). For example, evidence indicates that employees who perceive they are identified as talent by their organisations are more likely to form additional psychological contract obligations than employees who do not (Björkman et al., 2013).

### 3.3.5. Employee attributions of the meaning of talent management

HR attributional (HRA) theory explains that employees will observe HR practices in their organisations and make attributions regarding the purpose and reasons why their organisation adopts such practices (Nishii et al., 2008). I draw on HR attributional theory (Nishii et al., 2008), to apply it to talent management and introduce the concept of TM attributions, that is, employee attributions of meaning of their organisation's use of talent practices, arguing that employees are observing and interpreting the talent management practices which take place in their organisations and attributing meaning to them which has consequences for both the employee and the organisation's resulting access to differentiated outcomes through talent management.

Although the employee psychological response to talent management is now in focus within the TM literature, consideration of the wider influence of the implemented talent system is warranted. Recent examples of studies examining the employee perspective of talent management beyond the focus on talent identification have emerged. The Sonnenberg et al. study (Sonnenberg et al., 2014) also examined employee talent status in light of the employee's views of their company's talent program as being either inclusive or exclusive (that is, open to all employees to participate, or open only by invitation to a small group of employees) and its effects on psychological contract fulfilment and argue that clear communications to all employees is important, particularly when the talent strategy is an exclusive one. A study by Khoreva et al. (2017) examined talent management practice effectiveness from the employee perspective and found that perceived effectiveness of TM practices was related to commitment to develop leadership competence (Khoreva et al., 2017). Also within this

stream, scholars, such as Swailes and Blackburn (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016) have argued the importance of considering the perspectives of the majority of employees who are not identified as talent. However whether many practices or few, inclusive or exclusive, effective or ineffective (all of which warrant further empirical investigation), understanding what employees interpret as the overarching intended purpose or meaning of such practices is an imperative for the developing literature, that is, the "why" of talent management, remains unexamined.

The introduction of HR Attribution theory into the SHRM literature by Nishii et al. (Nishii et al., 2008), presented an important conceptual foundation for SHRM scholars to consider employee perceptions of HRM practices and to examine the meaning which employee attribute to such practices. However, since its conceptualisation, HRA theory has been applied in the HRM literature only a handful of times. (These studies will be reviewed in this chapter). Moreover, in the talent management literature, attributional theory has yet to be applied to the strategic practice of talent management. Although one conceptual paper has theorised employee possible attributions of one aspect of talent management, the use of high potential programs, employee attributions of the overarching purpose of talent management have not yet been examined. In their paper titled "High potential programs, let's hear it for B Players" (Malik & Singh, 2014), Malik and Singh make the first conceptual association between attributional theory and employee perceptions of high potential programs, which is yet to be empirically tested.

Limited theorisation and empirical examination of employee attributions of talent management is a notable limitation in the talent management literature. Talent management is seen as a human capital strategy intended to effect competitive outcomes through highly differentiated workforce management practices. Given that HRM practices have been shown to function as communications signals and processes of organisational priorities to employees (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994), to signal the preferred and rewarded behaviours (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004), and to influence psychological contract formation (Suazo, Martínez, & Sandoval, 2011), it is crucial that we understand what meaning employees attribute to talent management practices used by their organisations. To not have sight of employee interpretations of the strategic intent and purposes of such differentiation practices, that is, "why" their organisation undertakes such strategic workforce differentiation practices, is a crucial limitation which

contributes directly to the underdevelopment of the emergent talent management literature.

In attributing meaning to the use of HRM or talent practices, the organisational context is relevant and the support which it provides for the employee. Organisational support is a concept which is well established in the SHRM and OB literatures and refers to the beliefs formed by employees as to the extent to which their organisation cares about their well-being and values their contribution (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). In the wider organisational context, perceptions of organisational support have been positively associated with employee responses of organisational commitment (Kim, Eisenberger, & Baik, 2016). Drawing on organisational support theory, in the context of talent management, I consider the role of line manager in enacting organisational talent management and examine the influence of perceptions of supervisor support in the model. Arguing the line manager or supervisor's influence on the employee experience of talent management, as an actor in a position of central influence to the employee-organisation exchange relationship (Eisenberger, Stinglhamer, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades, 2002) and causal influence of the employee's perceptions of HR practices (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007), including their experience of performance management (Farndale & Kelliher, 2013) and of talent management (King, 2015), I hypothesise the importance of perceptions of supervisor support as a contextual factor in the talent-advantage chain. Finally, I also draw on the status literature, to examine the influence of employee perceptions of differentiated status, that of being seen as talent by their organisation, in order to examine the variance in outcomes which a range of status perceptions may influence.

In the remainder of this section, I present the conceptual research model, developing the model through five components as introduced briefly earlier in this chapter.

### 3.3.6. Employee attributions of talent management ("why")

I argue that employee attributions of talent management practices, that is the "why" and "for what purpose" talent management is undertaken in their organisation, is a central variable to understanding the employee experience of talent management. Employee interpretations of the talent practices which they observe implemented in their organisation is necessary to understand what they attribute the purpose of such talent

management practices to be. Employee attributions of HR practices have recently begun to draw greater interest and attention in the SHRM literature (Nishii et al., 2008) as a possible route to explaining why and how HR practices influence employee behaviour, such as the positive relationship between employee well-being attributions and the employee outcomes of high performance work practices. In the case of HR attributions, researchers have defined HR attributions as "causal explanations that employees make regarding management's motivations for using particular HR practices". As such HR attributions are concerned with the specific attributions of meaning which individuals make in their observations of HR practices (Nishii et al., 2008, p. 507).

For example, employee attributions of HR practices to the purpose of supporting employee well-being have been positively associated with organisational commitment and lower levels of job strain (Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015). According to signalling theory (Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011; Spence, 1973), perceptions of being regarded by one's organisation as talent may be interpreted as signal to an individual (Dries & De Gieter, 2014), that the organisation intends to differentiate their management of and corresponding investment in that individual. Employees form global beliefs about the organisation's commitment to them and infer to what extent the organisation is ready to reward their increased efforts (Eisenberger et al., 1986). However the purposes for which employees interpret their organisations to be communicating these signals, particularly in the domain of talent management, remain insufficiently examined to understand the influence of attributions on the employee's response. Considering employee observations of HR practices, one study has shown that "talent inducements" (that is, the view by employees that the organisation has made commitments to provide career opportunities if they develop their skills) has been shown to have positive effects on motivation to develop skills (Höglund, 2012). However the perceived purpose of the talent inducements, as attributed by the respondents was not measured. Empirical testing of employee attributions of HR practices has shown that within a given organisation, employee attributions for commonly observed HR practices vary and that the corresponding individual outcomes also vary (Nishii et al., 2008).

In the case of talent management practices, which may be interpreted to be signals of the organisation's readiness to differentiate performance and potential amongst employees or segments of the workforce, employee attributions of the "why and for what purpose" of talent management may directly or indirectly influence the

effectiveness of these practices. Yet while HR attributions research is still only developing, the TM attributions research is even less developed. Given that talent management is often defined and implemented in an "exclusive" model, such that not all employees would meet the criteria for identification as talent, employee attributions of the purpose of talent management can be expected to influence their response to those practices. For example, a commitment-based attribution of purpose may be described in this way: "talent management here is for the purpose of developing everyone to their best potential". Alternatively, a control-based attribution of purpose for use of talent management may be described candidly in this way by an observing employee: "talent management here is for the purpose of getting the most work out of the top performers". While HR practice coverage has been examined in a limited number of studies to date (Shantz, Arevshatian, Alfes, & Bailey, 2016; Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015), the coverage of talent management practices along with the employee attributions of the purpose of those talent practices has not yet been empirically examined.

An employee's attributions of the purpose of talent management in their organisation can be expected to influence the employee's workplace job attitudes and behaviours, including the formation of psychological contract obligations. For example, if an employee perceives that an organisation's purpose for implementing talent management is primarily for the purpose to control the workforce costs or to constraint employee behaviour, the attributions of control may limit the extent to which the employee would be willing to offer discretionary performance or organisationally-supportive behaviours to their organisation. Whereas if an employee attributes the purpose of talent management in this organisation to be for the purpose of supporting their employees in successfully achieving their performance objectives or meeting performance demands or further, as an investment in supporting the development of the individual's potential, an employee may be more likely to form heightened commitments to their organisation. Therefore, employee attributions of commitment as the organisation's main purpose of talent management would be expected to foster reciprocal formation of psychological contract commitments by the employee in favour of the organisation.

The way in which talent management happens also matters. For example, evidence in one study has shown that employees observe their organisation's use of talent management as exclusive or inclusive and observe the volume of TM practices

used such that increased volume of TM practices leads to psychological contract fulfilment (Sonnenberg et al., 2014). A further study found that perceptions of distributive justice were significantly higher for employees who identified as high potential by their organisation compared with not identified as high potential (Gelens et al., 2014b). However, this may not be unexpected in that high potential employees, as a differentiated segment in the workforce, would be unlikely to be overlooked during resource allocation even in conditions of constrained resources.

The meaning which employees attribute to workforce management practices also matters. The SHRM literature explains that HR practices are, effectively, communications (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994) and presents evidence that employees interpret HRM practices as communications which act as signals of their organisation's priorities (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994). Such signals then indicate the behaviours which will or will not be rewarded (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). Further, HR attribution theory explains that employees attribute meaning to the HR practices which they observe and experience (Nishii et al., 2008). Although the empirical literature is as yet sparse in examination of HR attributions, attributions, have been shown to influence employee outcomes. For example, a study by Shantz et al. evidences the differentiated relationship between HR attributions of performance and employee outcomes of emotional exhaustion (Shantz et al., 2016). A study by Van de Voorde and Beijer (Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015) has examined differing employee HR attributions of high performance work systems and found that HR well-being attributions are associated with higher levels of commitment. This attributions-outcomes link is further influenced by the involvement of organisational actors, such as the line manager, as literature has shown that the line manager is a central influencer of employee outcomes through HRM implementation (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007).

In the talent management literature, however we have as yet no examination of what meaning employees attribute to such practices. In this dissertation, I argue that employees not only observe talent management practices but also attribute meaning to their organisation's use of talent practices and that attributions of TM influence the employee's evaluation of their psychological contract fulfilment such that talent outcomes are influenced. I further argue that this mechanism is moderated by the employee's perceptions of their talent status (or not) and of their supervisor's support (or lack of). As illustrated by the findings of the previous study, employees readily

observe the use of talent management practices by their organisation and make interpretations as to "why" and "for what purpose" their organisations adopt talent management practices, attributing meaning and strategic purpose to their organisation's use of talent management. As employees with talent status, participants of the previous study confirmed their involvement (in contrast to that of their peers) in a wide range of differentiated practices, programmes and rewards and career outcomes evidencing their access to differentiated investment by their organisations. This active and high investment management of talent was frequently articulated as heightened expectations but correspondingly included references to heightened work opportunities, accelerated career development, differentiated management support and highly competitive rewards. Such investment and support can be articulated as a strategy of commitment to the talented employee, in contrast to that of enforcement of control.

The distinction of commitment and control was originally made by Heider in his theory of attributions (Heider, 1958). This was extended to the HR domain by Arthur who conceptualised that HR Practices and systems can be categorised into commitment practices and control practices (Arthur, 1994). Such contrasting commitment and control strategies have been considered in the prior literature for strategic human resource management practices, by Nishii et al (Nishii et al., 2008) although not previously for talent management practices. Overall, research on HR attributions has indicated that when employees attribute commitment-focused meaning to their interpretations of HRM practices, they are more likely to reciprocate with positive or organisationally-supportive behaviours (Chen & Wang, 2014; Nishii et al., 2008). The same has been shown for well-being attributions in contrast to performance attributions (Shantz et al., 2016). Likewise, social exchange theory explains that when organisations invest in their employees, employees will be likely to reciprocate positively through their own "investments" in their organisation (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

In summary, the following research questions are identified:

*To what purpose or meaning do employees attribute their organisation's use of talent management? How do varying attributions of meaning or purpose influence employee outcomes?*

### 3.3.7. Contextual factors which influence the employee experience ("when")

I now turn to a consideration of the conditions under which talent management would most be expected to effectuate differentiated outcomes, the "when" of the employee experience of talent management.

**Employee perceptions of their status as talent (or not).** In undertaking talent management, organisations apply an identification process or method to identify employees as "talent" or "high potentials" for inclusion in organisational talent programs and for future advancement in the organisations including promotion to positions of increasing importance to the firm's overall performance (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Vaiman & Collings, 2013). Talent identification may include ranking of individuals as "A players" (Huselid, Beatty, et al., 2005) or as part of a cadre or "talent pool" of employees (Cappelli, 2008a; Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Lewis & Heckman, 2006).

Talent identification usually involves a two-step process (Mäkelä et al., 2010). The line manager or supervisor making observations of the employee's performance and potential for development and thereby determining a talent rating of the employee's potential for future advancement in their career in the organisation (Mäkelä et al., 2010). Talent assessment ratings are subsequently confirmed by management for each individual and collectively comprise the organisation's talent pool or pools (Mäkelä et al., 2010). While talent management practices vary by organisation in their maturity and degree of formalisation, talent identification remains central to both the conceptualisation of talent management and to its operationalisation in practice. In fact, the extent to which the talent identification process is formalized, has been shown to be the most significant determinant of HR practitioner perception of talent programs as satisfactory (Kotlyar & Karakowsky, 2014).

The disclosure of talent or potential ratings is often viewed as potentially problematic in organisations (Swailes, 2013a) and, unsurprisingly, the decision whether or not to disclose talent ratings to the individual varies by organisation (Dries & De Gieter, 2014). Even the use of talent differentiation itself may be seen as problematic if argued to be unethical as a result of procedural injustice (Swailes, 2013a). Even amongst organisations which maintain an exclusive talent management practice, (whereby some employees are assessed as talent and others not) (Stahl et al., 2012), as justifiable differentiation of talent potential within the workforce, the decision whether or not to

disclose talent ratings to employees varies (Dries & De Gieter, 2014). Recent estimates indicate only one third of organisations transparently communicate their talent programs to their employees (Dries & Gieter, 2014). Maintaining an approach of non-disclosure of talent ratings (to the individual talent-assessed employees themselves) has drawn criticism that the practice of talent management may be subjective or procedurally unjust (Swailes, 2013a, 2013b). Employees interpret HR practices as communications and signals from their organisations indicating the organisation's priorities and subsequently interpret what this means for them as an employee (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994; Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015).

As with HRM practices, which are seen as communications by organisations to their employees (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994), talent management practices are also signals by the organisation which are interpreted by employees in their making sense of day to day practices in their organisation. Importantly, in the context of talent management, beliefs regarding the obligations with their organisation for future exchange may be explicit or implicit (Rousseau, 1989). I argue that the perception of being seen as talent by one's organisation is the variable of interest to this model. In contrast to an organisationally-reported measure of official talent status for a given individual employee, the employee's own self-reported talent status represents their perception, which is integrally related to the formation of the employee's beliefs in the formation of the psychological contract. Therefore, regardless of whether there is formal disclosure of talent ratings to the employee or not, employees will interpret talent management practices as signals and form a view of whether or not they are seen as talent by their organisation. Hence the significance of the specific variable of "perceived" talent status in this model.

A crucial consideration then, is whether or not the employee perceives him or herself to be identified as "talent" or "high potential" by their organisation that is, differentially recognised as an employee having potential to contribute to the future performance of the organisation through performance in roles of increasing responsibility and influence (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). As "talent" identified employees in the organisation are expected to deliver differentiated contribution to the organisation, employees who perceive they are talent-identified would reasonably be expected to form stronger commitments for future exchange with their organisation than those who do not perceived they are viewed as talent by their organisation.

In this thesis, I define "perceived talent status" as the perception by an employee that they are seen by their organisation as having "talent" or "potential" for development and advancement within the organisation. Whether or not that perception is validated by the organisation through formal disclosure, PTS is theorised to exist and be measurable. In contrast, formal talent ratings generated by the organisation (not generated as a formed perception by the employee), may be described as "organisationally-reported talent status", that is, the talent status for an individual which is reported by the organisation as an outcome of the formal organisational talent assessment process. This "organisationally-reported talent status" may or may not be disclosed to the employee him or herself, either formally of informally. This is distinctly different from the construct of "perceived talent status" (PTS), which is a perception held by the employee and which is not necessarily congruent with the organisation's view of assessed or rated talent status for that individual. That is employee-perceived talent status and organisationally-reported or "official" talent status may not be consistent. Therefore, perceived talent status is the variable of central relevance to this model.

Employee perceptions of talent identification have been shown to be positively correlated with psychological contract commitments and with organisational identification and negatively associated with turnover intentions (Björkman et al., 2013). Accordingly, it is expected then in the current dissertation model, that perceived talent status (PTS) will be positively associated with psychological contract obligations. In a separate study, attitudes of perceived distributive and procedural justice were compared between two groups based on company reported talent ratings or status (Dries & De Gieter, 2014). This study's main finding was that perceptions of distributive justice were significantly higher for individuals who were identified by the company as talent compared with individuals who were not identified as talent (Dries & De Gieter, 2014).

In summary, the following research questions are identified:

*How do employee perceptions of talent status influence the employee experience of talent management and associated outcomes? How does perceived talent status influence talent management outcomes?*

**Employee perceptions of the line manager or supervisor support.** Talent management is not simply the labelling or categorising of employees as talent (or not) (Höglund, 2012) but also signals an expected reciprocal response from the employee. In

the ongoing management of the talented employee, the employee's supervisor is important (Asag-Gau & Dierendonck, 2011) and seen as a central actor (King, 2015). Given the expectation of differentiated performance from individuals identified as talent, it is reasonable for employees to expect the support of their supervisor in order to meet job demands which are exceptional or beyond those of their peers. In this ongoing management and support of talent, signals of support from the organisation to the employee will be important to the individual's understanding of and contribution to strategic priorities. Signalling of organisational and supervisor support to talented employees could contribute to differentiated performance, yet research has found evidence of some degree of opaqueness, even intentional ambiguity (Dries & De Gieter, 2014) in talent management. As sense-givers (Nishii & Paluch, 2018), the role of the supervisor in signalling support to the talented employee is expected to be important in talent management.

Given the priority of talent to business today and the high prevalence of differentiated talent practices, management are expected to be directly involved in talent management as an activity. Correspondingly, management involvement is identified as a factor in effective talent management (Stahl et al., 2012). Despite the focus on talent management as of specific concern to the top management or "C-suite" in organisations today, it is clear that talent management involves multiple actors (Thunnissen et al., 2013a; King, 2015). The line manager is agent of the organisation and represents the strategic priorities and communicated directives of management directly to their direct reports (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). Rapidly evolving in recent years, the supervisor's role now entails significantly more involvement in historically HR-led activities and this is notably the case with talent management (Cappelli, 2013). Yet, the literature has identified significant issues with the practical implementation of strategic HRM practices such that what was intended is not consistently what organisations find to be implemented in practice (Nishii & Wright 2008).

This divergence between intended and actual practices is noted by researchers (Nishii & Wright 2008) and calls for greater insight into the influence of the line manager in the implementation of SHRM practices have emerged (McDermott, Conway, Rousseau, & Flood, 2013a). As with SHRM practices which are often limited in practice by implementation issues resulting in an intended-actual gap (Nishii & Wright, 2008) or inconsistencies as is often the case for SHRM implementation across

organisations (Morris et al., 2009), talent management effectiveness may be also be subject to a talent-specific intended-actual gap through problematic implementation. As human resource practices have been increasingly devolved from the HR function to line management, supervisors are involved increasingly in the implementation of HRM practices (Cappelli, 2013). HR practices have been shown to act as signals by which organisations communicate priorities and preferred behaviours to their workforce (Farndale & Kelliher, 2013). Yet many organisations struggle with implementing HRM processes consistently (Morris et al., 2009), resulting in noted variation in HRM practices and thereby contributing to the "intended-actual" gap (Nishii & Wright, 2008) such that intended practices (such as talent strategy for example) may not be what is in fact implemented. As organisations find themselves in a "vicious cycle of reliance on external hires" (Cappelli, 2013, p. 27) when internal management of talent is a purported management priority, the intended-actual gap becomes evident. The line manager is increasingly in focus in SHRM literature as a key actor in the implementation of SHRM practices such as in performance management (Farndale & Kelliher, 2013), including talent management (King, 2015). The support of the supervisor therefore, as the within-business manager of talent on behalf of the overall organisation (King, 2015), presents a significant opportunity to influence the effectiveness of talent management in implementation, in part, through the provision of employee support.

The importance of the employee's line manager or supervisor in managing the organisation's talent cannot be overstated. An employee's line manager is uniquely positioned to provide support to the employees they manage, whether for management of performance in-role today (Farndale & Kelliher, 2013) or for development for future roles, as a key point of communications (Sonnenberg et al., 2014). The line manager is a representative of HR practices and priorities of the organisation (Kerstin Alfes, Truss, Soane, Rees, & Gatenby, 2013). As such the line manager may also negatively impact the employee's psychological contract and its fulfilment if the employee's cognitive expectations of exchange are not met (Sonnenberg et al., 2014). Line managers are uniquely positioned to provide support to the employees they manage, whether for management of performance in-role today (Farndale & Kelliher, 2013) or for development for future roles, as a key point of communications (Sonnenberg et al., 2014) (Sonnenberg, van Zijderveld, & Brinks, 2014).

Employee perceived supervisor support has been shown to contribute to perceived organisational support which in turn predicts retention (Eisenberger et al., 2002), of relevance to the aim to retain top talent. The supports of one's supervisor has been shown to be important to employee access to the resources and support they need to implement ideas which makes the implementation of highly creative ideas more possible (Škerlavaj, Černe, & Dysvik, 2014). This may be particularly relevant to managing talent in the business given that innovation is a source of competitive advantage and the implementation of highly creative ideas is less likely without supervisor support.

In supervising the work of others, the line manager is the individual who is best positioned to identify both high performance and the potential of individuals to develop and to advance into roles with greater responsibility (King, 2016). As "talent-spotters" (Fernández-AráOz, 2014), line managers are involved in the process of talent identification (Dries & Pepermans, 2012) whereby organisations identify individuals to be included in the talent pool (Collings & Mellahi, 2009) to be developed for future roles of increasing responsibility in the organisation. Line managers are seen as agents in the causal link between HRM practices and performance and are directly involved in HR practice implementation (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). Line managers are the representative of the organisation with whom the employee has the most proximal relationship and through whom resources are accessed (Alfes et al., 2013; Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000).

The direct supervisor has such influence in the employee-organisation relationship as to shape the development and fulfilment of the employee psychological contract (McDermott et al., 2013). This link offers potentially even greater value to the organisation in the context of being a central actor in talent management (King, 2015) given the expected link to competitive value. Clearer communication by organisations with their employees is associated with perceptions of fairer exchange and less frequent psychological contract breach (Guest & Conway, 2002) which have been theorised to be a risk related to differentiated talent identification (Dries, 2013a; King, 2016). Therefore the opportunity for a supportive superviser to positively influence the contribution of the talented employees they manage should not be overlooked despite frequent positioning of talent management as the remit of the C-suite. Employee perceived supervisor support has also been shown to contribute to perceived

organisational support which subsequently supports retention (Eisenberger et al., 2002), an organisationally-prioritised outcome of talent management. Increasingly, as the supervisor implements HR practices in the line of business, the supervisor acts as gatekeeper to HR process-based recognition, rewards and career opportunities, a sub-set of which are contingent upon talent status or identification. Further, supervisor support has been found to be positively associated with performance (Dysvik & Kuvaas, 2012; Eisenberger et al., 2002). This PSS-performance link is of particular interest to talent management research given the heightened performance expectations of high potential and talent-identified employees differentially beyond that of their peers. However examination of the specific relationship between supervisor support and talented employee performance has not been reported in the literature.

Recognising the organisation seeks differentiated performance and contribution from a talent-identified employee, employees would reciprocally expect their work environment and context to be supportive of them in order to achieve and sustain high performance. In order to establish high performance and sustain it over time, employees may reasonably expect the support of their supervisor and their organisation. This could for example, be experienced through supervisor involvement in their work, regular access to performance feedback and development coaching, access to work resources to support high performance or access to development programs to support development of talent potential. Perceived supervisor support is therefore expected to positively moderate the relationships between the model's independent variables and the employee's formed psychological contract commitments. Indeed I argue that for top talent, the focused and closely managed nature of ongoing exchange between the line manager and the employee establishes a "micro climate of exchange". Within this micro climate, the talent-identified employee aims to deliver higher-than-peer performance on a sustained basis and would thereby reasonably expect to draw on extended supervisor support to enable such.

In summary, the following research questions are identified:

*How do employee perceptions of supervisor support influence the employee experience of talent management and associated outcomes?*

### 3.3.8. The psychological contract as the central mediating mechanism ("how")

The second component of the research model is the mechanism through which the influence of talent management on employee outcomes can be explained. Talent management is a strategic organisational activity designed to access differentiated contribution to the firm through differentiated identification of employees in the workforce as "talent" who demonstrate high performance today and have the ability to develop their potential for future contribution for the organisation's competitive advantage (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). In response to differentiated identification and investment as talented employees, the aim of the organisation then is to generate heightened or differentiated performance or other value-enhancing contribution by the talent in their workforce. I argue that the mechanism through which differentiation facilitates a differentiated employee response in exchange is the psychological contract. That is, via the employee-held psychological contract, which is the beliefs that an employee holds about their employment relationship and the commitments which they believe they have made to their organisation (Rousseau, 1995).

Psychological contracts which are relational in nature, are anchored in expectations of future exchange rather than a transactional focus on near-term exchange (Shore, Tetrick, Lynch, & Barksdale, 2006). Psychological contracts are hypothesised to vary for specific groups of employees such as high potential employees (Dries & Gieter, 2014) and talent relationships require further empirical examination as they are not based on simple economic exchange (Thunnissen et al., 2013a). Certainly economic exchange is expected to be of value to all employees in the organisations to extents which vary by individual. However, organisations who undertake talent management as a strategic business activity would not likely do so with the aim to generate increased expectations solely of financial exchange as this risks becoming an unwinnable strategy if based solely on incentivising through increasing compensation. As employee-held psychological contracts which are transactional in nature are focused primarily on economic exchange (Brockner et al., 2007; Rousseau, 1995), transactional psychological contracts can be seen as inconsistent with the nature of talent management being characterised by longer-term focus (deferred future benefits of career development and advancement) and mutual investment (whereby heightened contribution today is not simply balanced with financial reward in the near-term). As exchange which occurs in the context of social relationships is reciprocal (Blau, 1964), employees form beliefs

about what commitments their organisation has made to them (Rousseau, 2011). Psychological contracts can comprise expectations of both economic and social exchange, can be either relational or transactional in nature, and can change over time, enduring or resulting in breach (Rousseau, 1995).

The foundations of the employee's experience of talent management rest centrally on the influence of organisational talent management on the employee-held psychological contract and on the ongoing social exchange which occurs between employees and their organisations (Blau, 1964), within the wider context of the employee organisation relationship (EOR) (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000). Based on systems theory applied to the context of management of organisations (Johnson, Kast, & Rosenzweig, 1964), it is evident that this ongoing exchange and exchange-based employee-organisation relationship exist within an overall organisational system and context. I argue that, in the social exchange-based relationship, the employee experience of talent management will generate differentiated obligations in the employee psychological contract, such that the psychological contract becomes the mechanism through which the differentiated outcomes are accessed. The content of the employee's psychological contract would be expected to be supportive of the employee's differentiated contribution to the extent that their experience of talent management has influenced the formation of heightened commitments. This is consistent with the view that the psychological contract is context-dependent and is based on trust (Guest, 2004) and that future exchange will be commensurate with the talented employee's contribution today.

In this dissertation, I argue that the underlying mechanism through which the organisation may access heightened performance contribution by an employee is through the employee's formed obligations of commitment to and expectations of exchange with their organisation today and in future. At its essence, talent management is based on the premise that over time, its workforce, differentiated through careful identification and management of its talent, will deliver competitive advantage and performance. Talent management adopts a strategic long-term focus in nature as opposed to a transactional, short-term orientation and aims to generate competitive advantage through employee contribution over time. Talent management is a recognised to be a strategic activity of importance at the highest levels in the organisation (Cappelli & Keller, 2014) and one in which organisations invest in and reward employees

differentially (Collings, 2014c). For example, this heightened and differentiated investment in "talent" in the workforce may include elite leadership development programs (Khoreva & Vaiman, 2015), performance appraisal and rewards for high performance (Ehrnrooth et al., 2018) and opportunities for career development and advancement (Clarke, 2017), investments which are differentially applied to talent-identified individuals or employees included in the organisational talent pool. In organisations which practice talent management, the retention of "top talent" of "high potentials" for their performance both today and in future is of key focus to management (Stahl et al., 2012).

Employees who experience talent management would then reasonably expect to associate talent identification with the promise of increased exchange and ongoing longer-term exchange between the employee and the organisation. That is, employees would reasonably expect that talent identification by their organisation will be, over time, associated with increased future exchange by their organisation, whether financial or other. As social exchange is by definition two-sided (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) and as talent management adopts a strategic long-term focus in nature, talent management is reasonably expected to facilitate heightened commitments for future exchange between the employee and their organisation, aimed to access heightened investment and benefits for each party in the mutual exchange relationship. Employees who perceive they are talent-identified by their organisation, would then reasonably be expected to develop stronger psychological contract commitments.

Prior studies have considered talent management within the wider context of the social exchange based employment relationship and in doing so, examined employee psychological contract content (Björkman et al., 2013). The nature of the commitments theorised to be of most relevance to the organisation are those which access the employee's unique talent, align that talent with the performance priorities of the organisation, and which continue to develop the identified potential of the employee to serve the organisation's priorities in future performance. Several such psychological contract commitments have been theorised and tested in the literature and found to be differentiated for talent-identified employees as described in the Bjorkman et al (2013) study. They are the psychological contract commitments to: perform, to develop one's potential, and to align with the organisation's strategic priorities. I hypothesise a fourth psychological contract obligation to be of relevance to the talent-organisation

relationship, that of the obligation to apply one's individually-held human capital in service of the organisation's priorities. Related to talent management in its focus on development, but not measuring talent identification in the study, a further study found that the relationship between talent inducements (described as organisation having made commitments to provide career opportunities based on skills development) and human capital was partially mediated by psychological contract obligations to develop one's skills (Höglund, 2012). This further supports the mechanism of enhanced psychological contract commitments of employees who perceive they are involved in a promise of future career advancement, such as in talent management.

In summary, the third component of the model is the mechanism through which the organisation fosters greater employee commitments, the psychological contract. The following research questions are identified:

*How do varying employee talent management attributions influence employee psychological contract fulfilment? How does psychological contract fulfilment influence talent management outcomes?*

### 3.3.9. Preferred outcomes of talent management ("what")

The last component of the research model is the outcomes expected of talent management. Talent management is expected to achieve desired outcomes for the firm, through individual behaviour. Organisations which adopt strategic talent management practices do so in order to gain competitive performance advantage through people, their talent. The extent to which the individual uses their differentiated "talent" or capacity for the benefit of the organisation is of therefore of interest as a key outcome in this model. If an organisation's identification of an individual as "talent" is intended to be recognition of a differentiated ability of the individual employee to contribute to organisational outcomes, then behavioural outcomes at the individual level of measurement are key measures for indication of a differentiated contribution through the talented workforce or workforce segments identified as talent.

As a starting point for qualitative empirical enquiry, I identify four outcomes of specific interest in talent management, or "preferred talent outcomes", of interest within this dissertation model. They are drawn from the literature and based on the logic of advantage through talent: the employee's emotional attachment to their organisation (affective commitment), the employee's contribution of behaviours which are

supportive of their organisation, the retention of talent by the organisation in order for the individual to develop their potential and the organisation to benefit from their continued contribution of individual human capital resources and differentiated individual performance.

**Affective commitment.** Affective organisational commitment is defined as an emotional attachment to one's organisation (Meyer & Allen, 1991) and has been shown to predict attendance, organisational citizenship behaviours, and performance and is associated with reduced turnover intention, reduced turnover, which is of particular interest to organisations seeking to retain their talent (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002). As work experiences are a known antecedent of affective commitment (Meyer et al., 2002), the differentiated investments associated with organisational talent management would be expected to contribute to the positive outcomes of employees reporting attachment to their organisation by way of affective commitment, at least for those who perceive talent management to be an indication of a positive influence on their work experiences. A recent study in the TM literature has confirmed that talent development practices (defined in a way which is consistent with inclusive talent management) are associated with affective commitment and intention to stay (Chami-Malaeb & Garavan, 2013). Given that affective commitment represents a positive emotional orientation toward the organisation (Meyer et al., 2002), affective commitment may be of particular interest to strategic talent management in that it represents an affective orientation towards the talent-organisation relationship rather than a transactional orientation which may be important in securing the talent-employee relationship through heightened performance demands over time beyond what would be reasonably contracted in a strictly economic exchange.

**Organisationally supportive behaviour.** Organisational citizenship behaviours (OCB) were originally described by Organ (1988) as behaviours which are extra-role in that they were not expected as a core requirement of the employment contract and were therefore not rewarded by the organisation (Organ, 1997).  Candidly, an employee who offers supportive behaviours to their organisation in this way has been called "the good Sam" or "good Samaritan" (Organ, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006). More recently, OCB has become more broadly conceptualised as the nature of work has evolved. The concept of OCB's is now viewed as being part of work and defined as "any discretionary individual extra-role behaviour advantageous to the organization" (Van Dick, Grojean,

Christ, & Wieseke, 2006, p. 284), whether within-role, extra-role, rewarded or not rewarded. Importantly, OCB's are understood to represent a "a category of performance called citizenship behaviour (which) is important in organizations and not easily explained by the same incentives that induce entry, conformity to contractual role prescriptions, or high production" (Smith, Organ, & Near, 1983, p. 653). In today's context of differentiated performance through differentiated talent-identification, understanding the category of performance which is not easily explained by financial exchange is of relevance to understanding the expected discretionary performance premium by talented employees. This is consistent with earlier hypotheses that employees experiencing talent management will form obligations of commitment to the organisation which are longer-term in nature and less transactional, based on social exchange and moving beyond simple economic exchange.

Organisational citizenship behaviours have been positively associated with employee perceptions of HR high performance work practices (Kehoe & Wright, 2013) and with both workplace environment and with individual personality (Smith et al., 1983). The influence of distinct practices and the influence of those practices on the employee's work environment, are both of interest in my research model. Leadership supportiveness (Smith et al., 1983), and organisational supportiveness (POS) (Wong, Wong, & Ngo, 2012) have been identified as antecedents of OCB. In this model, the support of the organisation via the supervisor is theorised to moderate the formation of psychological contract commitments, to subsequently lead to OCB's.

An employee who has formed psychological contract commitments for performance, development and alignment to strategic priorities of their firm may offer support to their firm when opportunities arise to do so in order to support its achievement of those strategic priorities along with their own individual outcomes such as career advancement and recognition. When examining the employee response to high performance HR practices, researchers have noted that "organizational citizenship behaviours provide a straightforward means for committed employees to make such optional contributions to the firm" (Kehoe & Wright, 2013, p. 373). As with high performance work practices, I hypothesise that organisational talent management practices also aim to access the high performance of employees. Given the hypothesised alignment of employees with firm strategic priorities through talent management it is further hypothesised that employees who have formed psychological commitment

obligations to contribute to the performance of the firm will subsequently offer discretionary behaviours which further support their organisation and its successful outcomes. Therefore demonstration of organisational citizenship behaviour in support of the organisation as an expected outcome of talent management. OCB can be seen as an organisationally-preferred outcome.

**Proactive behaviours.** Proactivity, defined as proactive action which is motivated, conscious, and goal directed (Parker, Bindl, & Strauss, 2010) and which is characterized by actions which are self-directed, change oriented, and anticipatory in nature (Griffin, Neal, & Parker, 2007). "Being proactive is about taking control to make things happen rather than watching things happen. Proactivity has three key attributes: It is self-starting, change oriented, and future focused" (Parker et al., 2010, p. 828). In contrast to the idea of proactive personality, which is a trait held by an individual describing their tendency to be proactive (Crant, 1995), proactivity here is concerned with proactive behaviours of employees in the workplace. That is, the behaviour which employees demonstrate proactively, as a result of their formed psychological contract commitments in the context of talent management. In today's organisations, there is an increasing requirement for proactivity to respond to the demands in the global economy for competitive innovation and organisations increasingly expect proactive behaviour from their employees, such as to apply judgement and take initiative in pursuing entrepreneurial opportunities within their business (Campbell, 2000).

Increased psychological contract commitments aligned with the organisation's priorities may also facilitate greater use of proactive behaviours in order to support the organisation's achievement of those priorities. Proactivity is not expected to be limited to the individual's own performance goals but rather in support of the organisation, given the employee's expected broader identification with the firm and its values. Proactivity has been positively associated with a range of desirable work outcomes for both the individual employee and the organisation. For example, proactivity in relationship building has been positively associated with social integration, role clarity, job satisfaction, and intention to remain with the organisation (Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000). Proactive behaviours have been shown to support individual employee wellbeing and career advancement (Parker & Bindl, 2016). Proactive behaviours have also been associated with tangible benefit for the organisation such as higher sales performance outcomes through the proactive behaviour of managers to establish

increasingly challenging goals for their businesses (Crossley, Cooper, & Wernsing, 2013) and has been positively associated with team innovation, organisation innovation (Parker & Bindl, 2016) and are therefore a valuable indicator of the potential value of outcomes of talent management at the individual level if proactive behaviours can be generated through talent management.

   **Talent management as a path to performance.** Underlying the concept of strategic talent and its value to the organisation is the competitive advantage expected through the development and deployment of human capital as a differentiated resource of the firm (G. S. Becker, 2008). Adopting a resource-based view of the firm (Barney et al., 2001), a firm's human resources are viewed as strategic and of competitive advantage to the organisation's performance and strategy (Wright, Dunford, et al., 2001) which requires a differentiated HR architecture to manage in practice (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Huselid & Becker, 2011). Studies have shown that indeed human capital moderates the relationship between strategy and firm performance (Hitt, Biermant, Shimizu, & Kochhar, 2001) reinforcing the strategic importance of human capital. Management of a firm's unique human capital is expected to be leveraged through a differentiated practice of talent management (Collings & Mellahi, 2009) as one component of the firm's approach to human resource management. It is through this strategic use of human resources including talent which is expected to influence organisational performance (Becker & Gerhart, 1996) and create value for the organisation (Sparrow & Makram, 2015). Enhanced performance then, is one of the organisationally-desirable outcomes expected to result from a systematic and differentiated approach to management of talent in the organisation.

   The impact of SHRM activities on performance of the organisation is argued to be at least in part influenced by the decisions made in managing human resources, however a number of unresolved questions remain (Becker & Gerhart, 1996). Indeed despite decades of research on the link between SHRM and performance, evidence remains limited (Guest, 2011). Value is expected to be created through the differentiated use of select human resources in the form of talent management (Sparrow & Makram, 2015) and yet how talent management influences future performance and value is not yet well explained in the literature and remains at least partially encased within the TM "Black Box".

Performance can be considered at multiple levels including the individual, the unit or team, and the firm level. At its core, talent management is presumed to differentially identify individual employees, sometimes known as "A players" or "stars" (Huselid, Beatty, et al., 2005; Mankins, Bird, & Root, 2013) who demonstrate high performance relative to their peers and who also demonstrate the potential for advancement within the company to perform in positions with greater contribution to overall firm performance (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). As the focus of my research model is the individual employee's experience of talent, it is performance at the individual level which is of interest for measurement.

**The retention of talent.** Talent management is purported to be of competitive advantage to firms who employ a differentiated HRM strategy effectively (Cascio & Aguinis, 2008) and yet its early foundation in literature continues to be scattered and fragmented (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016) and in practice, organisations continue to struggle even with agreement of the use of the term talent (Economist, 2006b). Nevertheless, a central assumed ambition of organisational talent management is to achieve competitive advantage through the performance and contribution of talented employees. To do so, the organisation must both facilitate differentiated performance today and they must retain their talented employees tomorrow.

As the management of organisational talent is oriented toward the sustained contribution of high performing high potential employees for future benefit to the organisation (Collings, 2014a) as a strategic human capital resource of the firm (Wright & McMahan, 2011), retention of talent in the organisation is strongly implied. Further, in practice, retention of "top talent" is a priority theme for top management (PwC, 2017) and HR practitioners alike (CIPD, 2011) based on the logic that talent in the organisation possess some degree of inimitable human capital which is of competitive advantage to the firm and therefore should be retained. There are also significant costs and organisational resource allocation associated with high levels of turnover and so particularly with regard to an organisation's talent-identified employees, retention is central to the value proposition through talent.

However, in the context of ongoing social exchange, employees continue to re-evaluate and re-balance their obligations and contributions to their employer (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000). Psychological contract breach can occur when expectations

are not fulfilled (Dulac, Coyle-Shapiro, Henderson, & Wayne, 2008) following which employees may adjust their commitments, such as through psychological withdrawal behaviours or by the decision to leave their organisation (Podsakoff, LePine, & LePine, 2007). Talent status may also influence retention of talented employees. Prestige and advancement opportunities have been cited by high performers as reasons staying with their employing organisation (Hausknecht, Rodda, & Howard, 2009). However given the variation which occurs in the implementation of SHRM practices from what was intended (Nishii & Wright, 2008), and the sense making which occurs at the individual level (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005), varying interpretations may result from the implementation of talent practices. Further, organisations vary in their approach to talent management implementation in terms of whether to explicitly disclose talent status to employees (Swailes, 2013a).

In the context of exclusive talent management, employees may perceive talent status to be a "promise" of future exchange with the organisation whether or not implicitly or explicitly confirmed with their organisation. In a separate paper, I have theorised the employee's development of heightened expectations of future exchange based on perceived talent status, to be the "talent deal", whereby employees have intensified expectations of exchange (King, 2016). This poses a potential risk to organisations in the implicit nature of psychological contract formation coupled with the practice of non-disclosed talent potential assessments or ratings (King, 2016). Likewise, it may pose risk to the employee, if expectations of future exchange are not reciprocated by the employer. Cautioning management against creating employee perceptions of organisational promise, Coyle-Shapiro (2002) explains that although short term perceptions of future benefits can facilitate organisational citizenship behaviours, employee perceptions of promise can cause perceptions of breach of psychological contract if expectations in the exchange based relationship is not fulfilled (Coyle-Shapiro, 2002). An employee's intention to remain employed with the organisation presents a proximal measure of talent management outcomes at the individual level in this model. Intention to remain with the organisation has been recently examined in a study of employee perceptions of HR Practices, which found that commitment fully mediated the relationship between HR practices and intention to remain with the organisation (Kehoe & Wright, 2013). Employee perception of talent identification by their organisation has been shown to be negatively related with turnover intention

(Björkman et al., 2013). These findings have important parallels with the current study in that employee perceptions are centrally in focus and that both performance and proximal attitudinal outcomes are of interest.

In summary, the following research questions are identified:

*How do employee talent management attributions of commitment and of control interact with employee assessments of psychological contract fulfilment to influence talent management outcomes?*

However there may be other factors which influence the employee's differentiated contribution to their organisation which may exist in the form of individual differences.

### 3.3.10. Individual differences ("who")

A fifth component of the conceptual research model is individual differences. Talent management is a strategic business activity which is, by design, largely reliant on the individual to deliver the expected differentiated contribution to the organisation. However, independent of an organisation's practice of talent management, differences exist at the individual level which will influence the extent to which the organisation's practice of talent management will be effective in achieving its intended outcomes of differentiated performance through identification of talented and high potential employees. I theorise that three main differences will influence the employee's response to talent management. Specifically, the extent to which an individual identifies with their organisation, the saliency of their individually-held views of themselves in their future career, and their individual orientation towards exchange with their organisation, are antecedents to their experience of talent management which will shape the extent to which the employee psychological contract is influenced by organisational talent management practices. I theorise each of these three individual differences below.

**Identification with the organisation.** Identification is a central concept in organisational talent management as it relates to the organisational activity of "finding" their talent, whether external to or within the organisation, and the subsequent hiring and or retention of that talent. Identification is also a concept relevant to the employee experience in talent management as "identification by" one's organisation has been found to be associated with differing individual outcomes. Interestingly, individuals also

seek to "identify with" their organisation. The concept of organisational identification ("organisation with", in addition to identification as talent ("identification by") is theorised to be relevant to the employee experience of talent management.

Individuals who identify with their organisations do so on the basis of shared values with their organisation, known as organisational identification (Reade, 2001). The individual established a bond psychologically with their organisation when the values they hold are aligned to those of their organisation and this has shown to be positively associated with organisational commitment (Reade, 2001). In their study, Bjorkman et al (2013) measured the relationship between organisational identification and psychological commitments and found that to be greater for employees who believe they were formally identified as talent by their company than the group whom did not perceive they were identified as talent (Björkman et al., 2013). The extent to which the employee identifies with their organisation based on shared values will positively relate to the extent to which they form psychological contract commitments. For example, where an employee identifies strongly with their organisation, employees would perceive themselves as aligned with the values of their organisation and be supportive of its success in future, therefore heightened commitments for performance, for development and for contribution of unique human capital resources would reasonably be formed.

**Future work self.** Future work self is a concept which describes "an individual's representation of himself or herself in the future that reflects his or her hopes and aspirations in relation to work" (Strauss, Griffin, & Parker, 2012, p. 580). When an employee's view of their future work self is clear and accessible as a view or representation they hold, this is understood to be salient, such that the clearer their representation of their future self and the greater extent to which this representation is accessible to the employee, the greater the saliency of the individual's future work self (Strauss et al., 2012). As the employee him or herself is the actor within talent management within which the differentiated potential is identified and by whom the differentiated performance is sought (King, 2015), an employee's view of his or her self is centrally relevant to the expectations which they form as part of their ongoing exchange-based relationship. Distinct from their perceptions of talent status currently in the organisation, the employee view of his or future work self is a future-orientation,

whether that future self will exist within or outside of their current organisation is as yet unknowable.

Future work self is relevant to my research model in several ways. First, talent management adopts both a current and future orientation, in the identification of talent now and of potential for development in future. Future work self has been shown to be positively related to individuals' proactive career behaviour (Strauss et al., 2012) and is therefore of interest to talent management which seeks to develop employee potential within their careers inside the organisation. The proactive behaviour of employees to develop their careers and thereby to increase their capacity for performance contribution, would be an organisationally-desired outcome of talent management. Second, talent management is a strategic endeavour seeking to retain employees for future contribution of individual human capital in service of the firm's performance objectives. To the extent an individual perceives a clear and accessible view of their future self within the current organisation, the organisation may benefit from retaining that individual and accessing their continued contribution.

Third, like perceived talent status, future work self is an employee-held view of self, however in contrast to PTS, FWS is liberated from dependency on the current organisational context because the employee can hold this view regardless of the organisation's current context or even the organisation's view of the individual's future possible work outcomes. Whereas, perceived talent status (PTS) is theorised to be context-specific as in the definition presented earlier which considers "in this organisation". Therefore FWS can be examined in this model as a possible alternate explanatory variable of interest in the experience of talent management. The saliency of the future work self to an individual is expected to inform and shape the commitments the employee holds regarding future exchange with the organisation (i.e. the psychological contract commitments). For example, if the extent to which an individual has formed clear and accessible views of who they will be in their future is limited, it may be that their willingness to create heightened psychological contract commitments in service of the organisation is also limited as the employee is without a defined view that the current career trajectory is consistent with their view of self in future at work. Alternatively, when salient, an individual's view of their future work self has the potential to be informative in the individual's decisions with regard to employment and career choices within their current organisation. Therefore when salient, future work self

would be expected to further reinforce individual commitments to the organisation which the employee has already joined in order that their commitments are rewarded and facilitate ongoing exchange with the organisation towards the aim of fulfilment of the salient future work self.

**Exchange orientation.** The concept of exchange ideology was introduced by Eisenberger et al (1986) and describes the orientation towards exchange which an employee forms (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Based on the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), one's exchange ideology varies between weak and strong such that a strong ideology prefers the transaction of work for rewards and a weak ideology would be less oriented towards the exchange of work for rewards themselves (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Empirical testing has shown that when an exchange orientation is high, support from the organisation (perceived organisational support) is less influential in reducing absenteeism than for those with a weak exchange (Eisenberger et al., 1986).

Organisations undertake talent management to achieve goals such as competitive advantage through differentiated performance (Cappelli & Keller, 2014; Stahl et al., 2012), however the individual's goals also require consideration (Farndale et al., 2014). It is possible the individual's orientation towards exchange with their organisation may be incongruent with their organisation's aim to induce commitment for performance and contribution of their individually-held human capital resources beyond the essential transactional expectations of the employee's employment contract. It is the individual's orientation towards exchange which may influence the extent to which the employee forms psychological contract commitments in the experience of talent management. In the context of talent management, which is inherently longer-term and relational in its strategic objective to facilitate ongoing exchange with "top talent", a strong exchange orientation would then be expected to be less likely to be influenced by commitment-based practices such as talent management. For example, for employees with weak exchange orientation, the support of one's supervisor is expected to facilitate greater psychological contract commitments, whereas for an employee with a strong exchange orientation, which favours the exchange of value in the exchange, organisational talent management practices may be less effective in securing those commitments. In summary, the fifth component of the model is concerned with the individual differences which may influence the employee experience of and response to talent management.

In summary, the following research question is identified:

*How do individual employee differences influence the employee response to talent management?*

In this section I have proposed five components of a conceptual research model considering the employee within the talent management literature and the employee experience of talent management. In the following section, I briefly explain how the research model presented in this chapter is subsequently further developed through the progression of the dissertation empirical work, first examined in the qualitative inductive study and subsequently in the quantitative study, in keeping with the exploratory-convergent dissertation research design.

## 3.4.    Dissertation Scope and Mapping to Empirical Chapters

Thus far, I have proposed a conceptual research model of the employee experience of and response to talent management. Within this overarching research agenda, using the two empirical studies which follow, I explore each of the components theorised. To do so, I employ a mixed-methods exploratory-convergent design in the dissertation work, directly informed by the research questions presented. The methods and choice of empirical strategy are presented in detail in the main methods chapter four which follows. Briefly here, I present a mapping of the empirical work to the dissertation chapters, for the reader's awareness. In the first small scale study I explore each of the components theorised using a strategic sample of only elite talent, identified by their organisation exclusively as "talent", considering the influence of talent status ("when") on the employee experience and response to talent management ("how" and "what") along with individual differences ("who"). Consistent with the convergence design, I then further focus the empirical examination of the model in the use of the quantitative study. In the second study, I specifically consider the wider workforce, to introduce and examine the construct of employee attributions of talent management, and in doing so, focus the study on three components of the overall conceptual model: the relationship between employee TM attributions ("why") and preferred talent outcomes ("what") considering the influence of the psychological contract ("how"). The overarching empirical design then includes two studies: a qualitative study followed by a quantitative study. Table 3.1 presents an overview of the empirical work, in sequence, mapped to the dissertation chapters, for the reader's awareness.

Table 3.1 Dissertation empirical research: Mapping to dissertation chapters

| Scope of the study | Empirical dissertation work | Study | Sample | Chapter |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| The full conceptual model | Exploratory analysis of theorised core components and key variables in the proposed conceptual model | Qualitative, inductive Interview-based study | Cross-organisation, small scale, purposeful sample | 5 |
| Focused measurement model | Development of the quantitative measurement model and hypotheses. Reporting of descriptive statistics and regression of direct effects. | Quantitative  Within-organisation study | Within-organisation, large scale, random sample | 6 |
| | Testing of the hypothesised mediation model | | | 7 |

## 3.5.    Chapter Conclusion

Talent management is expected to contribute strategically to business value and competitive outcomes, yet the talent management literature remains under-theorised and how the talent-value path effectuates differentiated outcomes is yet largely unexamined. In this chapter I have considered why this cavity in the current literature is meaningful and argued the imperative to investigate. I have conceptualised the employee experience of talent management as the individual-level component, central to the cross-level talent-value path through which the firm's human capital strategy is intended to achieve competitive outcomes (figure 3.1). In doing so, I have presented a cross-level illustration of the value path from human capital strategy at the organisation level, through the "black box" of the employee experience at the individual level, which then contributes to aspirational outcomes at the organisational level (figure 3.2). However, I have argued that to empirically investigate how employees experience and then respond to talent management, a closer empirical investigation at the individual level and of the employee perspective is warranted. I have then reviewed how theoretical foundations in the social exchange, SHRM, psychological contract and workforce differentiation literatures shape the employee experience of implemented talent management. I then proposed the

conceptual dissertation model, considering the employee experience of talent management specifying five components. They are: what outcomes are of interest, how employees perceive talent management and to what they attribute its purpose, how talent management engages the psychological contract as a mechanism to generate differentiated outcomes, individual differences (for whom) which may influence variance in outcomes, and what conditions (when) talent management may facilitate differentiated exchange by the employee.

In this chapter, I have presented the overarching dissertation research model, in such a way that it can then be suitably examined in the qualitative study which is the first of two studies in the empirical work of this dissertation. I have presented a preliminary overview of the empirical work, mapped sequentially to the dissertation chapters, for the reader's awareness. In chapter four which follows, I present the dissertation empirical strategy and overarching methodological approach in detail along with detailed designs of each of the two studies.

# 4. Chapter 4. Methodology

## 4.1. Chapter Introduction

In this chapter I present the detailed empirical strategy and methods for the body of empirical work undertaken in the scope of this dissertation and explain their fit with my research aims. I present the methods used in the dissertation in sufficient depth and detail such that the measurement, design and analysis used, described as the research trinity by Kline (Kline, 2008), is clearly and transparently evidenced. To empirically locate, investigate, and measure the employee experience of talent management, I adopt a mixed-methods design for this dissertation, closely aligned to the aims of the research model presented in the preceding chapter. Based on the core assumption that the combined use of qualitative data and quantitative data strengthens the research in order to support the researcher in arriving at an improved degree of understanding of the research topic than use of just one or the other method would achieve independently (Creswell, 2015), I use mixed-methods to access a deeper understanding of the employee experience of talent management than either method alone would achieve. The empirical strategy for the dissertation is essentially comprised of two studies as introduced briefly in the prior chapter. First, I conducted a qualitative inductive study (which will be presented in chapter five) to explore the experience of talent management for employees identified as elite talent by their organisations across the broad components of the conceptual research model. Second, I then conducted a quantitative study of a sample of employees from the wider workforce to investigate the effect of employee talent management attributions on employee outcomes through a large scale within-organisation study (presented in chapters six and seven).

In the thesis I present an integrative empirical examination of the employee psychological response to talent management as a single manuscript. The current chapter is the main methods chapter for this dissertation in which I present the overall dissertation empirical strategy, design and methods used in the dissertation. Following this introduction section 4.1, I present the empirical strategy in section 4.2. I then present detailed research study designs for the qualitative and quantitative studies in 4.3 and 4.4 respectively.  In section 4.6 I discuss the overall suitability and possible limitations of the dissertation empirical approach, following conclusion of the chapter in 4.7. In doing so, I present sufficient detail in order to achieve "methodological transparency" (Aguinis

et al., 2018). That is, to present a "degree of detail and disclosure about the specific steps, decisions, and judgment calls made during a scientific study" (Aguinis et al., 2018, p. 84) such that the dissertation methods presented are sufficiently transparent and can be judged to suitably support the body of empirical work and findings presented in the dissertation.

## 4.2. Empirical Strategy

### 4.2.1. Epistemological and ontological approaches

**Theory as guiding explanation.** Importantly, in social sciences research, the researcher's epistemological approach is founded in theory. Using theory as a basis for my research, I draw on existing theoretical foundations to guide the research questions (Creswell & Clark, 2017) and to underpin empirical studies. Considering the talent within talent management, I draw on the theories of social exchange (Blau, 1964), psychological contract and HR attribution as the theoretical foundations upon which the research model was theorised in the preceding chapter. Social exchange theory is important to this research as it explains the ongoing and dynamic exchange between the employee and the organisation reciprocally over the duration of the relationship. Psychological contract theory (Rousseau, 1989) is relevant here as it explains the beliefs regarding the obligations and expectations which the employee in talent management holds regarding their reciprocal exchange with the organisation. The psychological contract explains the central mechanisms through which exchange-based commitments and reciprocal expectations of exchange are at play within organisational talent management. I further draw on HR attribution theory (Nishii et al., 2008) in order to provide a theoretical framing for the employee's formed attributions of the purpose and intent of their organisation in undertaking strategic talent management. This framework is important as attributions have been shown to predict individual-level outcomes and influence their variance in the HRA literature. More broadly, I locate organisational talent management within a contextually-anchored system and therefore I adopt a systems-based perspective such that implemented talent management becomes an implemented organisational "talent system" arguing that the employee experience is shaped by their experience of the talent system. These frameworks provide the epistemological "overarching guiding explanation" (Creswell & Clark, 2017) in this thesis.

**Choices on the epistemological continuum**. The question to be answered here is "What is the relationship between the researcher and that being researched?" (Creswell & Clark, 2017, p. 38). Epistemology is the "theory of knowledge" and can be seen as a spectrum (Henderson & Horgan, 2011) such that scholars caution researchers, particularly in mixed-methods research, not to view epistemological choices as dichotomous or forced-choices (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2006). Adopting a mixed-methods approach I acknowledge the epistemological issue recognised in the literature with regards to the balance of focus between the humanistic aspects of qualitative research and the scientific knowledge demands of statistical quantitative research (Gephart, 2004). I adopted a pragmatist view, frequently adopted in mixed-methods research (Creswell & Clark, 2017; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). Concerned with how knowledge and action interact (Goldkuhl, 2012), pragmatism fits well with the study of employee perceptions of "knowing" about talent management as a phenomenon in their workplace and their subsequent thoughts and actions. I accessed employee views of talent management through engaging directly with the employee, to conduct the research within the highly contextualised conditions within which it occurs, allowing greater consideration of the wider context and not simply reducing the investigation to isolated measurement of individual mechanisms.

In the qualitative study specifically, I investigated the employee experience across the full research model, consistent with interpretivist view, whereby researchers approach the research with one or more default theories already in view (Mir & Watson, 2000), sometimes described interchangeably as constructivist (Schwandt, 1994). Qualitative research is inherently humanistic in its focus which is well suited to real-life organisational settings (Gephart, 2004) and therefore well suited to the exploration of the employee experience of talent management. I develop a conceptual understanding of the employee psychological response to talent management and its influence on their attitudes and behaviours, indicative of a rational constructivist approach to my own learning in this research. My epistemological approach, particularly for the qualitative work, can therefore be argued to be a form of constructive interpretivism (Goldkuhl, 2012) as it has allowed me to explore the multiple components of the conceptual model. In the quantitative study specifically, I adopt a positivist epistemology. In doing so, I hypothesise and test expected relationships, based on theoretical foundations, between distinct known variables, characteristic of a positivist approach. In the quantitative study

I consider the findings of the quantitative employee-level measures in light of the contextually-based findings of the qualitative pilot study with leaders in the organisation, whereby the triangulation of evidence and consideration of context (Rousseau et al., 2008) is considered, consistent with critical realism. Throughout both of the studies in the dissertation empirical work, I adopt a critical perspective, to examine phenomenon of talent identification and its effect on employee attitudes and behaviours to deliver any evidence of advantage to the firm. Critical realism is particularly relevant in management and organisation research (Rousseau et al., 2008) as talent management is by nature, part of the "human-made world of organisations" (Rousseau et al., 2008, p. 30).

Overall, I strove to achieve balance in drawing on the continuum of epistemological approaches across these two studies, in two ways. First, I balance both an interpretivist and a positivist epistemological approach. The qualitative research, in particular, required interpretation and represented multiple individual perspectives and meanings, which can present challenge to a given research model (Yin, 2014). The second balance which I strove to achieve in my epistemological approach is that of balance between idealism, critical realism, and rational constructivism. Constructivism is argued to be helpful in examining strategic management practice as it allows the researcher to examine what is taking actually place in practice in the organisation and not just how it is perceived (Mir & Watson, 2000). In the empirical work I therefore consider the idealised purpose of strategic talent management to achieve the purported talent-value advantage while also developing the theoretical foundations of talent management, which is key to constructivism (Mir & Watson, 2000). In summary then, I adopt an epistemological approach in the dissertation which necessarily falls across multiple points on the epistemological continuum in this mixed-methods design, but which draws primarily on interpretivist, constructivist, and critical realism while adopting a pragmatic approach to methods through which I access, observe and measure the voice of the employee in talent management.

**Ontological approach.** Finally, in this dissertation, I adopt both a mechanistic and a social ontology. Specifically, the study of ontology is the philosophical study of being or existing. First, this study of talent management entails considering the mechanism through which employees experience it and second, it also notably occurs within the context of social exchange and socially constructed views of the individual

as talent (or not). The social exchange context influences individual outcomes related to who the individual believes they are in their career or are becoming in their organisation in future with regards to how both they and their organisation define talent.

### 4.2.2. Empirical approach: Mixed methods

Investigating the purposeful phenomenon of strategic talent management, I adopt a mixed-methods approach to achieve the research aim of a deepened understanding of the employee experience. The empirical strategy is anchored in three criteria: requirements, characteristics and purposes.

First, in the empirical work I aim to access a broader set of data than one study would provide, consistent with the choice of a mixed-methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2017). I use qualitative interviews to measure the experience of individuals identified as top talent which serves to access a deep immersion in the experience of the individual. This voice is central to the aim of the dissertation as the talented employee has largely been ignored and given that the use of quantitative methods alone could potentially reduce the "voice of the talent" to the limited set of constructs chosen for quantitative measure. However, noting that an exclusive use of qualitative methods would overlook the utility of validated standardised measures, the combined use of qualitative and quantitative methods achieves a broader and richer data set for analysis and interpretation. Second, in the empirical work, given that the employee experience of talent management under-theorised as yet, there is a need to first explore the experience qualitatively before then specifying the quantitative study measurement model. Mixed-methods approach is fitting as it allows the researcher to first explore the topic before then subsequently applying more specified data collection instruments (Creswell & Clark, 2017). Third, mixed-methods designs enable further explanation of the findings of quantitative research (Creswell & Clark, 2017). In this dissertation, insights and data from the qualitative interviews of top talent support a deeper interpretation of the quantitative results.

**Characteristics of the research design.** In adopting a mixed methods strategy, four core characteristics of robust mixed-methods designs (Creswell, 2015) are used. First, the dissertation research questions were examined by the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data. Second, the qualitative and quantitative methods selected were both rigorous, as reported in the detailed designs which are presented in

subsequent sections of this chapter. Third, the empirical work allows the combination and integration of the findings from the complementary quantitative and qualitative studies, for interpretation. Fourth, the dissertation research model is framed by and grounded in established theoretical foundations. Use of mixed methods leveraged the advantages of qualitative and quantitative approaches while thereby addressing the limitations of each (Creswell, 2015).

**Purposes underpinning the mixed methods design.** Three purposes underpin the dissertation empirical work and align closely to the purposes of mixed-method empirical designs (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989). First, a development purpose (Greene et al., 1989). That is, the aim of this dissertation to conduct a deep and broad examination of the employee experience to further develop the conceptual research model and the literature. Second, the purpose of complementarity (Greene et al., 1989). That is, complementarity increases the interpretability of findings by using different methods to measure overlapping themes and constructs and allows the researcher to examine different degrees of a phenomenon, analogised as "peeling back the layers of an onion" (Greene et al., 1989, p. 258). Third, the purpose of expansion. That is, mixed-methods serve to "expand the breadth and range of enquiry" (Greene et al., 1989, p. 259) by using different methods for different aspects of the topic enquiry. While a mixed-methods empirical strategy is well suited to the current empirical research purpose and to the nascent development of the topic in the literature, it is perhaps noteworthy that only 20% of empirical studies in the talent literature use a mixed-methods approach (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016) and therefore the current work contributes positively to the developing literature.

**Empirical journey and research progression.** The path of empirical enquiry in the dissertation took on two main phases, corresponding to the two dissertation studies. In the first study, I gained a deep immersion in the topic and its multiple related constructs at the outset of the empirical work, using a purposeful cross-organisation sample and qualitative inductive method. Deep immersion in the topic from the outset, using a focused sample and adopting qualitative methods afforded me a close consideration of the relevant constructs for use in the subsequent study.

At the outset of the empirical work, I began the line of empirical enquiry with an inductive study conducted through qualitative interviews with a small participant sample

to gain insights into the employee perception of talent systems and practices and their attitudinal and behavioural response in the context of talent management. This empirical approach provided me with valuable insight in further conceptualising and theorizing the dissertation research model and preparing for the subsequent study.

In the second study, designed as a large-sample within-organisation study, my empirical focus transitioned from a "small n" sample of individuals from a range organisational contexts, to a "large n" sample of individuals who share an organisational context. Moving from a sole reliance on qualitative tools in the first study, the addition of validated quantitative measures directly enabled my further examination of overlapping constructs. In this quantitative study, I conducted a deep investigation of the employee response to talent management in a single organisation and accessed a large random sample. I used this study to examine the employee response within the wider context of a single organisation in order to measure individual differences within a common context. This study was primarily quantitative, but also included a focused set of qualitative interviews with the executive team members at the outset, in order to develop a foundational understanding of the organisationally-specific context for talent management and, importantly, the leadership intention for implemented talent management. From the outset and throughout the study, I established and maintained ongoing collaboration with the participating organisation which involved regular meetings, presentations and the reporting of findings in multiple phases of formal reporting. This was valuable to triangulate my understanding of the organisation through the use of both formal (executive interviews at the outset) and informal (ongoing coordination meetings) discussions. This ongoing collaboration also supported continued development of knowledge and findings for use by the organisation, contributing to the bridging of the "academic-practitioner divide" commonly referred to in management sciences (Anderson, 2007; Anderson, Herriot, & Hodgkinson, 2001; Cappelli & Keller, 2014).

The two empirical studies are complementary but contrast in two main ways: sample and context. The qualitative study employs a focused sample of top talent identified employees and captures employee perspectives across varying organisational contexts. The quantitative study employs a broad random sample of employees across the workforce, including talent and non talent identified employees, within a common organisational talent context.

### 4.2.3. Empirical design elements

In the following section I describe the core elements used in the mixed-methods research design, a summary list of which are presented here in table 4.1. The full research designs for each study are then presented in sections which follow.

Table 4.1 Core elements of the mixed-methods design, by empirical study

| Empirical Overview | Qualitative cross-organisation (study 1) | Quantitative within-organisation (study 2) |
|---|---|---|
| Title | Being Talent | The Employee Experience of TM |
| Chapters | Chapter 5 | Chapters 6, 7 |
| Focus | Individual experience | Individual experience |
| Approach | Inductive qualitative | Quantitative |
| Level of measurement | Individual level | Individual level |
| Sample size & type | Small-scale, cross-organisation | Large-scale, within-organisation |
| Sampling method | Purposeful, criteria-based | Random sampling |
| Data collection | Semi-structured qualitative interview | Quantitative online survey |
| Data analysis | Inductive thematic analysis | Regression and conditional process analysis |
| Collection tools | Interview guide questions | Itemised survey questionnaire, via survey platform |
| Analytical tools | NVivo software | SPSS, conditional process macro |
| Theoretical foundations | Social exchange theory, psychological contract theory attribution theory, workforce differentiation | |
| Ethics & informed consent | Individual informed consent Organisational authorisation and researcher access permission research ethics policy adherence | |

**Theoretical framing.** As described earlier, the theoretical foundations underpinning the research model for this dissertation are social exchange, psychological contract and HR attribution theories, drawing on the workforce differentiation, SHRM and talent management literatures.

**Type of mixed-method design**. The specific design adopted in this dissertation is an exploratory-convergent design (Creswell & Clark, 2017), characterised by the use of one strand of data and analysis to integrate with another for integrated analysis of at least two strands of research, including qualitative and quantitative (Creswell & Clark, 2017). This dissertation adopts both an exploratory and convergent design as the design includes two complementary studies while allowing for qualitative exploration of the research model prior to final specification of the within-organisation quantitative model.

**Level of measure.** The focus of this dissertation is the employee experience of talent management and therefore the individual level of measurement is adopted for all empirical work as the appropriate unit of measurement. This is consistent with the use of individual level measurements for early studies examining the employee response to talent management such as Bjorkman et al. (Björkman et al., 2013) and Gelens et al. (Gelens, Hofmans, Dries, & Pepermans, 2014a).

**Context.** Context matters in talent management. This is increasingly recognised in the literature and calls for examination of talent in context, whether within organisation or in the national macro context (Khilji et al., 2015). Talent management is a differentiated strategic human resource management practice (Collings & Mellahi, 2009) which occurs within the organisational system and therefore the employee experience of talent management examined in the empirical work of this dissertation is located within the context of the organisation(s) in which the employee has experienced TM.

**Data sources.** This dissertation makes use of multi-source data to triangulate (Gaskell and Bauer, 2000) for increased quality of interpretation (Myers, 2013). As complementary studies, findings from both the qualitative and quantitative study are integrated into the dissertation findings. In the quantitative study specifically, employee self-report data is collected along with organisationally-reported individual data and triangulated with the findings of the pilot qualitative study which framed the context in which talent management occurs.

**Ethical research.** This research was conducted as a body of dissertation research overseen by the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and therefore was subject to the Ethical Research Policy of the LSE requiring that all activities conducted met the School's Ethical Standards (LSE, 2018).

**Informed consent.** The request for an individual's consent to participate in research, also known as "informed consent", is a crucially important step in the process of conducting research with human participants. Informed consent is described as "giving sufficient and appropriate information about the research, to allow participants to make a meaningful choice about whether or not to take part" (ESRC, 2018). In each instance of engaging an individual research subject in the studies presented within this dissertation, consent to participate was secured in advance of beginning the individual enquiry. Whether during in-person interview, telephone interview or through online questionnaire, a statement of the aims of the research, confirming the confidentiality and anonymity of all research participants was presented (either verbally, in writing or both) to each participant before proceeding with the research enquiry. For each of the individual interviews, consent to participate was verbally secured. Consent to use an audio-recording device was also requested and confirmed verbally prior to use of the audio-recording device and then subsequently restated at the start of the live recording together with the participants verbal re-approval. Audio-recordings were used for the stated purposed of accurately capturing and transcribing the collected interview data. In the case of online surveys, consent to participate was secured at the outset of the survey, through a clearly presented statement on the survey landing page, which is the page first visible to the potential participant and requested their consent prior to proceeding with the survey. In all instances, whether in person interviews, interviews by phone, or participation via online survey questionnaires, individuals were informed that participation was voluntary and of their choice to withdraw at any time. Access to engage participants in the empirical studies was established in different ways. In the case of the inductive study, the researcher contacted the interview candidates directly through a purposeful sampling approach. Informed consent was then requested and secured individually. In the case of the within-organisation study, access to the organisation was provided by the executive leading organisational talent management and an organisationally-specific non-disclosure agreement was signed by both the researcher and the organisation.

**Sampling approaches.** Specific sampling approaches were used for each of the two studies and are presented later in this chapter. Briefly, for the first study, a qualitative inductive study, I used a purposeful sampling approach, as the small sample specifically required individuals which meet the criteria of having experienced exclusive talent

management practices over an extended period in their careers. For the second study, the within-organisation study, I used a systematic random sampling method in order to access a wide and deep representation of the workforce for the quantitative measurement by survey. This sampling method allowed the inclusion of both talent and non talent-identified employees in the sample.

**Data collection methods.** I used two main data collection methods for this dissertation. In the first study, I used qualitative semi-structured interview questionnaires which provided flexibility to accommodate a wide range of themes presented by the interview participant. In the second study, I used a structured quantitative online questionnaire for the collection of validated employee job attitude and behavioural measures. Interviews were face to face where possible and by telephone only by exception. I developed a semi-structured interview guide to provide some degree of consistency between interviews, in keeping with other empirical qualitative TM studies such as Dries and De Gieter (Dries & De Gieter, 2014). I collected organisationally-reported data from the participating organisation via the Human Resources organisational representative with authority for the research project.

**Measures.** Open-ended questions were used in the qualitative study. Quantitative measures were used for hypothesis testing of the specified measurement model using selected standardised measures which exist in the literature. Where existing measures were not available, I developed and tested a limited set of measures. The set of quantitative measures are included in the detailed research designs which follow along with tests of reliability.

**Data analysis and integration**. I planned for analysis of the data collected in keeping with the type of data collected (Creswell, 2015). In the thesis empirical work I collected three forms of individual-level data: self-reported qualitative data; self-reported quantitative data; organisationally-reported quantitative data. I used primarily two forms of data analysis methods to analysis the data collected. To analyse the collected qualitative data, I used inductive thematic analysis and for the collected quantitative data I use regression analysis and conditional process analysis (Hayes, 2017) supported by SPSS software using the Hayes Process Macro (Hayes, 2017). To integrate the use of data from one or more source which vary in type, a core characteristic of mixed-methods research (Creswell, 2015), I used a complementary exploratory-

convergent design (Creswell, 2015), such that the findings of both studies are integrated into the discussion and findings of the overall dissertation. While the studies were conducted sequentially and the first study served to confirm some of the key components of the employee experience of talent management, the design of the second study was not, in the main, reliant on the findings of the first. That is, the use of an exploratory-convergent design is in contrast to that of an exploratory-sequential design whereby the design of the second study is dependent on and directly informed by the findings of the first study (Creswell, 2015). Figure 4.2 presents an illustration of the exploratory convergent mixed-methods design.

Figure 4.1 Dissertation research design: Exploratory convergent mixed-methods
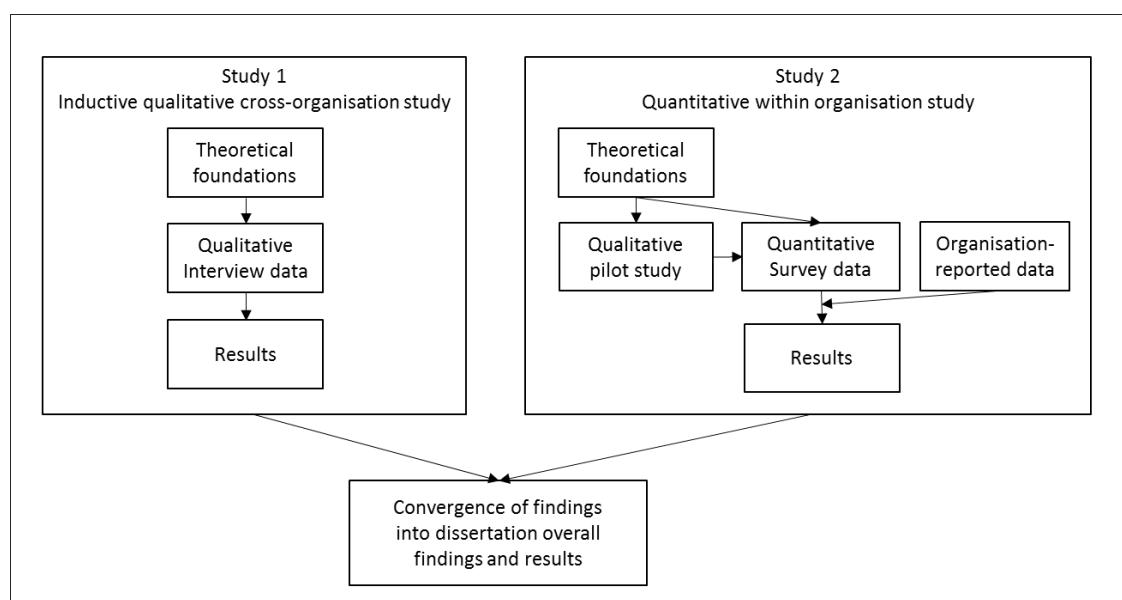


Having presented the dissertation empirical strategy and design, before proceeding to the detailed designs for each of the studies, it may be helpful to address how this dissertation is designed in contrast to that of a case study design. Case studies are recognised as often including qualitative research questions and methods and often involve a single organisation study (Creswell, 2015; Yin, 2012). The within-organisation study in some ways resembles a case study, however while conducted within a single organisation, the research is primarily between-individual in focus, rather than collectively as a case organisation. The inductive study indeed does consider cases, that is, individuals who have experienced talent management as individual cases of the employee experience of talent management. However, it is not presented here as a comparative case study, as the purpose of the qualitative study is to sample the

experiences of individuals using qualitative methods in order to access a greater depth of understanding rather than to present a cross-individual analysis of their case by case experiences. While the inductive study is a person-centric investigation in that the employee is of central focus, it is not a person-centred approach which defines consistency as a measure of the individual (Furr & Funder, 2004). In contrast, for this study I adopted a variable-centred purpose such that the consistency (or variance) between individuals is a measure of behaviour (Furr & Funder, 2004).

## 4.3.    Qualitative Research Design: Being "Talent". A Qualitative Investigation of the Employee Experience of Elite Talent Status.

The aim of this study is to twofold. First, to engage directly with the subject of this dissertation, the talented employee, to "capture the voice of talent" to examine the psychological experience of talent management. Second, to further focus and inform the design of the subsequent large sample within-organisation study. I argue that employees are the heart of the talent system (King, 2015), and therefore I have selected the entry point for the empirical work in this dissertation to begin at the very centre of the talent management system through a first study which looks deeply into the individual experience of talent management, thus finding a way to "enter" the talent system and to invite the "voice of talent" into the literature.

The design of this study serves this aim in three ways. First, by investigating the experience of talent identified employees, the factors, processes and mechanisms through which talent management influences the employee and their outcomes are identified for further development in the modelling. Second, by using qualitative methods, a rich immersion in the topic is used in order to deepen understanding beyond what currently exists in the literature or what is possible through quantitative methods alone. The exploratory approach provides the opportunity for the researcher to "travel" with the talented employee on their career journey and probe for meaningful events and influences which shape the experience, the psychological contract and outcomes. Third, a small scale qualitative study enables a more considered approach to support the relatively un-developed body of literature. In doing so, this design responds to guidance of Guest (Guest, 2011) who has pointed out that SHRM research on performance and outcomes has been limited by problems in the measurement of performance. Moving away from a "big research" (Guest, 2011, p. 10) approach towards a more considered

approach including the use of qualitative methods, allows a more careful consideration of HR implementation (Guest, 2011).

Consistent with the use of a convergent mixed methods design (Creswell, 2015), and drawing on the conceptual research model presented in chapter three, I developed qualitative research questions as the underlying framework for my reference during the interview. These research questions are intentionally phrased as general questions and make use of action-oriented exploratory verbs (Creswell, 2015), developed with the aim to access deeper understanding of the variables and their interaction. Rather than restricting the conversation to a fixed and fully-structured interview, the questions were designed to be a reference guide for me as a researcher to support my generation of probing questions real-time during the interview and phrased as open-ended. The interview guide is presented in appendix 2.

### 4.3.1. Sampling strategy

**Sampling strategy**. For the qualitative exploratory study, I used purposeful sampling to identify a suitable sample of participants for this study. This sampling method describes an approach whereby the "researchers intentionally select participants who have experienced the central phenomenon or key concept being explored in the study" (Creswell & Clark, 2017, p. 176). The use of a predetermined criteria for selection which is relevant to the defined research objective (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006) is common to purposeful sampling. As the aim of the study specifies the criterion of being "talent-identified", a purposeful sampling strategy is suitable. The method could further be described as homogeneous purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2017) as the participants in the sample all belong to an identified sub-group; "talent-identified" employees. The sample also represents significant variation by participant, company and sector.

In contrast to "convenience sampling", which is the selection of individuals who happen to be available and is weakened by its lack of random selection (Creswell & Clark, 2017), purposeful sampling in this study is a direct sampling of one or more "talent pools". As required to meet the aims of the study and by the convergent design of this dissertation, the current sample is not required to be a sub-set of the sample in the subsequent study. In contrast to the subsequent within-organisation study, the current study does not require a common organisational talent management context, but rather the current purposeful sample is advantaged by being a cross-organisation sample

affording a wide lens on the employee experience of individuals whose experience took place across multiple organisations and their respective contextual talent systems.

**Sample selection.** Three predetermined criteria were used for selection into the purposeful sample. First, the individual must have perceived or been identified by their organisation as "talent", "high potential" or having "potential" to advance their career in their organisation. Second, the participant must have experienced some discernible form of talent management practices in their organisation, whether such practices are formally referred to as "exclusive" talent management or not. Third, the participant must have freely provided their informed consent to participate in the study, and confirmed their understanding of the conditions of the study (that participation is voluntary, all individual data is confidential, the purpose of the study and how their responses would be used).

**Sample size and saturation.** While sample size for qualitative studies is often debated, (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016), guidance in the qualitative methods literature suggests that the size for the qualitative component of the study be much smaller than for that of the quantitative data collection (Creswell & Clark, 2017), whether a convergent or sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The objective for sample size determination is that the resulting collected dataset must be large enough to allow for the emergence of themes which can be used subsequently in the mixed methods empirical work to contribute to the explanation of quantitative results (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The most commonly adopted principle for determining sample size in qualitative studies is the concept of saturation, a term introduced by Glazer (1967), which refers to the point in the collection of data that no additional data will be found that adds new information to the enquiry of that topic (Glaser & Strauss, 2017), however unclear guidance on sample size sufficiency has been challenged in the qualitative research literature (Francis et al., 2010; Malterud et al., 2016; O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). As scholars argue neither a "one-size fits all" (Francis et al., 2010) nor a formulaic approach is suitable to confirm the saturation point in qualitative sampling (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013), sample size is still best determined by the researcher rather than via a prescribed formula or calculation. However without sufficient sampling, the sample may not have achieved content validity which presents a scientific issue to the subsequent interpretation of the data (Francis et al., 2010). A related concept, recently introduced to address inconsistencies in use of saturation, is the idea of "information

power" which is dependent on five factors: aim of the study, sample specificity, use of established theory, dialogue quality, and strategy for analysis (Malterud et al., 2016).

In management sciences, and more specifically in theory-based interview studies (as in this study), the use of principles for reporting data saturation has been proposed by Francis et al (2010) who propose four principles for sample size saturation. First, that there is an initial sample analysis; second, the use of a stopping criterion informed by theory rather than observation; third, that coding is conducted by two coders; fourth, that saturation methods are reported (Francis et al., 2010). More specifically, in theory-based studies where conceptual categories are already established, a more focused two-principle approach to saturation is sufficient (Francis et al., 2010). First, that a minimum sample size is established for initial analysis; second, the specification of a stopping criterion which is the number of interviews which will be conducted following the point at which no materially new information is collected. The two-principle approach to sample size determination (Francis et al., 2010) is therefore suitable for the current theory-based study.

Over a period of fifteen months in 2015 to 2017, I contacted individuals through networking in a number of professional networks in which I participate. This included a corporate alumni network, a graduate school alumni network, a chamber of commerce network, a business association network. I sought examples of individuals who could meet the inclusion criteria explained earlier. A total of fourteen interviews were conducted in order to reach the saturation point. In keeping with the first principle, I determined that five interviews would be a suitable minimum sample size for the initial analysis. This was based on the rationale that five interviews would allow me to determine whether my selection process to that point was functioning as expected in meeting the criteria and to critically consider to what extent each interview was subsequently widening the capture of new categories of data or whether the theorised concepts in the model were already appearing quite readily and repeatedly. In applying the second principle, I established a maximum of three as the number of interviews which would be conducted following the point at which I perceived that further data had not returned any materially new information or information categories. In this study, applying these two principles, the collection of data became saturated at fourteen in-depth individual semi-structured interviews. While it became clear that further collection of individual interviews would serve to capture highly engaging and individually unique

stories, when the core categories of variables were extracted from the data, the emerging themes had evidently become consistent and comparable from the completion of the eleventh interview. Following that, 3 further interviews were conducted from which common themes continued to emerge. Throughout the sampling, I strove to engage a highly diverse sample. Diversity in the interview sample is recognised as method to "triangulate" across the interview participants, which aims to access a broader opinion than would be possible through a less diverse sample (Myers, 2013, p. 131). In this case, the sample is diverse to some extent by organisation, sector, career competence, job grade, position, age, gender, and nationality.

**Sample summary.** In total fourteen interviews were included in the final sample, thirteen of which were conducted in-person, with one interview conducted by phone. Table 4.2 presents an anonymised list of participants.

Table 4.2 Anonymised list of interview participant sample

| Interview | Industry / sector | Position title | Gender | Age range |
|:---:|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | professional services | partner | male | 40-45 |
| 2 | research & higher education | professor, dean | male | 50-55 |
| 3 | research & higher education | professor, dean | female | 55-60 |
| 4 | professional services | associate partner | male | 45-50 |
| 5 | professional services | director | female | 40-45 |
| 6 | professional services | associate partner | male | 45-50 |
| 7 | public sector organisation | regional director | male | 35-40 |
| 8 | energy, financial services | chief information officer | male | 50-55 |
| 9 | private sector organisation | CEO | male | 45-50 |
| 10 | natural resources | vice president | female | 40-45 |
| 11 | biotech, pharmaceuticals | senior director | male | 45-50 |
| 12 | energy | director | female | 40-45 |

| 13 | energy | senior manager | male | 35-40 |
| 14 | public sector | director | male | 35-40 |

Interview duration ranged between sixty and ninety minutes. Participants held organisational roles ranging from individual contributor roles to c-level executive positions, with or without people management responsibility and ranged in age from 36 to 57 years of age. The interview participants included ten male and four female. All participants confirmed their organisation's use a practice of differentiated talent identification. In the two cases of interviewees in the higher education sector, reference to the "tenure" career path is understood to be the terminology conventionally used in reference to the organisation's (university) "top talent". The interview data-set represented eight sectors, nine job categories, genders male and female, and five age range categories between 35 and 60 years of age.

### 4.3.2. Data collection

I used a semi-structured questionnaire as a guide to my enquiry, which makes use of some pre-written questions but does not require strict adherence to them, allowing the researcher to maintain a degree of consistency across the set of interviews within a sample while also allowing flexibility such that the interviewer can formulate new or probing questions as the interview proceeds (Myers, 2013). The questionnaire was designed as a fifty-five minute interview comprising four parts. The four parts of the interview were structured and sequenced as follows. First, I enquired about the individual's current role and their views of work and career in their current organisation along with their observations of their relationship with their organisation, probing to understand tenure in the current role and organisation and when they last made a change in employment. I then enquired about the individual's observations and views of talent management in their organisation asking the participant to describe their observations about how talent management happens in their organisation and what that means for them and their career, why they believe talent management is used and how that compares with their observations of talent management in previous organisations they may have worked in. I then enquire about their career journey to date and their experience of being identified as talent at one or more organisations. I probed to explore some of the key events and changes which have taken place in their career over time leading up to the current role and ask them to describe any changes or events which have

happened which have shaped their career, particularly with regard to the context of being identified as talent by their organisations. Finally, I invite any further comments or observations which the participant thinks relevant or would like to share. This is to invite their contribution of other views or experiences which may not yet have covered but which may be meaningful to the employee themselves and would be therefore unfortunate to overlook.

Consistent with an exploratory strategy, throughout each interview, my utmost aim was to open a broad discussion with the participant, to invite their contribution of voice on the research topic. At the outset of each interview, I explained the research purpose, the planned use of response data, confidentiality and LSE ethical research policy adherence, and confirmed their informed consent to participate. I also requested and confirmed their permission to use an audio recording device to aid with subsequent transcription for analysis.

### 4.3.3. Data analysis

**Variance versus process.** In the current study, I investigate the variance in a range of factors which shape the employee experience of talent management and how changes in one or more aspect of their experience effects outcomes. I also consider what events occur which shape the experience of talent management over time. Literature explains that, in contrast to variance theories which explain the relationships between variables, process theories explain phenomena in terms of a series of events leading to an outcome (Mohr, 1982) and that understanding patterns in events is important to developing research insights (Langley, 1999). However events occur at differing levels or in greatly varying timeframes (Langley, 1999), and that is the case in the current dataset, with talent events taking on a range of timeframes. Unsurprisingly then, process data is often complex as it mirrors the complexity of the organisational phenomena (Langley, 1999). Therefore in this study, I consider both variance and process approaches during coding and analysis in order to distil insights which are then helpful in further developing the subsequent quantitative variance-theory-based study.

**Inductive open thematic coding.** My aim in coding was to apply codes which are "essence-capturing and essential elements of the research story" (Saldaña, 2015, p. 9) which when aggregated into categories, is the basis for my interpretation and identification of associations between these elements. My approach to the coding was to

use an exploratory approach, taking a flexible position as to what might be observed and what might not be and open to finding the unexpected (Jebb, Parrigon, & Woo, 2017). I drew on aspects of grounded theory using open coding (Glaser & Strauss, 2017) at the outset and then as I proceeded I used codes which represented theoretical concepts and constructs where relevant (A. Strauss & Corbin, 1997). I made use of vocabulary from the extant literature in choice of code names as supported where theory-based research questions are being examined (Murphy, Klotz, & Kreiner, 2017). This approach is consistent with calls in the SHRM literature for use of more exploratory data analysis and of inductive methods, in balance to the existing use of deductive methods (Jebb et al., 2017). As the researcher's own experience and knowledge of the phenomena being studied can be beneficial in the data collection through being able to identify what is relevant and in data analysis to understand its meaning (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017), my prior experience in organisational talent management was valuable to make sense of interviewee narratives (Langley, 1999). Coding and analysis is a cyclical process and dynamic process in which "heuristic fluidity" is required in order to not reduce the process to only a mechanistic validation of findings but to allow the researcher to discover insight through analysis (Saldaña, 2015, p. 9). Therefore, to transform the data from the raw qualitative data into the resulting themes, I applied a step by step method.

Step one; at the outset of the study, I began to collect interview data during which the process of reflection and analysis began. During the interviews, I made written notes in addition to the audio recording and developed preliminary codes and made specific note of memorable moments or codable moments (Boyatzis, 1998) where specific information appeared notable. This is consistent with advice in the literature to take advantage of opportunities to pre-code the data (Saldaña, 2015), to use research memos to theorise about the relationships and to apply preliminary codes as and when they become apparent during data collection (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). I prioritised a descriptive approach to note taking as recommended (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2001) and made notes of interpretation where memorable or for clarification. Further, during the interview I checked my understanding with participants to clarify or to further probe, as is recommended (Ezzy, 2013). Step two; following the principle described earlier, on completion of 5 interviews, I then transcribed and read through the full text. I confirmed that interviews were generating themes of relevance to the research model. Continuing

the data collection, I referred to my research aims and model as a method to further focus my coding decisions (Saldaña, 2015) as recommended.

Step three; for all remaining interviews I applied the preliminary coding process as described, coding and analysing as the data was collected, an ongoing iterative process consistent with other studies (Clark, Gioia, Ketchen, Jr & Thomas, 2010), using the principle of constant comparison by which the new primary data is viewed in consideration of what has already been identified (Murphy et al., 2017). This was valuable in determining when the saturation point had been achieved and did not limit the addition of new codes as required. Step four; once the full dataset was collected, I proceed with a second round of coding. I first took a descriptive approach to coding but rapidly found that that description generates a substantial volume of codes as labels without any inherent value as to how the codes represented what was happening in the employee experience. I then adopted a combination of inductive coding, which is also known as In-vivo coding as it reflects the views and experiences of the participant (Saldaña, 2015), concept coding, and provisional coding, which fit the exploratory aims of this study.

Step five; following completion of data collection, I repeated the coding by re-reading the full dataset and revising or refining the codes based on my evolving understanding of the content. This is consistent with guidance that there is no formulaic method to code correctly from the outset (Saldaña, 2015) but rather deep consideration of emerging patterns in qualitative research is required. This third round of coding is expected to lend some degree of objectivity to the analysis (Saldaña, 2015), particularly in a single-researcher study where repeated coding and inter-coder reliability is not applied. To support data management, I relied on the functionality of NVivo software tool (QSR International, 2010) and note here that this software does not conduct analysis but rather is only a tool which the researcher uses to conduct the analysis.

**Theoretical thematic analysis**. Following the coding process, I then analysed the categories resulting from the coding and identified themes emerging. The method of thematic analysis is used to identify, analyse and report patterns observed within the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, any given theme identifies a pattern in the data which holds meaning relative to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and when driven by the researcher's analytical and theoretically-based interest, is further

defined as theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Using theoretical thematic analysis, I identified themes which emerged as patterns indicative of meaning in this study and of central relevance to the research questions of the employee experience of talent management. I adopted the framework of Saldana (Saldaña, 2015) which considers how themes can be identified by moving one's view of the data from the particular and real (in this study, the real experience of an individual "talent" case) to the abstract and general (in this study, the overarching themes regarding the employee experience of talent management).

### 4.3.4. Data coding and thematic importance

In my analysis, the question of thematic importance required consideration, that is, to what extent a particular theme is more or less important than any other theme, given the overall dataset in which two or more themes have been identified. Drawing on guidance in the literature, I applied the example of Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) who adopted and applied their assumption that thematic importance is indicated most effectively by the frequency of the theme being raised independently by a number of individuals in the sample, rather than the absolute frequency of that specific theme in the coded data (Guest et al., 2006). This is also consistent with Braun and Clark's view (2006) that the extent to which a theme is regarded as key is more related to its relevance to the research questions than to it its frequency in the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore in my analysis, themes which emerged more widely across individuals in the cross-organisation sample were identified as of more thematic importance in the analysis than themes which were raised more frequently overall, but by fewer individuals. Further, themes which were more closely relevant to the research questions were identified as meaningful. This removed what might be pragmatically referred to as the "squeaky wheel issue", such that where a theme was more "loudly" visible in the data, I did not necessarily assume that its higher frequency inherently indicated "greater thematic importance". Rather, I considered how widely the specific theme appeared in the aggregate dataset relative to other themes and how relevant it was to the research questions, in order to understand its relative importance and meaningfulness. Investigating the themes emerging from the interview data analysis, there is evidence of the themes identified being frequently shared across individuals, while also some variance in themes by individuals. The results of this study are presented in chapter five.

**4.4. Quantitative Study Research Design: The Employee Experience of Talent Management.**

**4.4.1. Overview of empirical approach**

To examine the measurement model, I conducted a quantitative study, comprised of an employee survey questionnaire complemented by organisationally reported demographic, performance and talent status data. The quantitative study was preceded by a preliminary study comprised of meetings with the Human Resources management and a set of qualitative interviews with the executive management in which I sought to establish an understanding of the context and purpose of talent management from the perspective of organisational representatives or the "owners" of the talent system. Employee response data was collected from 2230 employee respondents to the confidential online survey and from seventeen executive participants in the qualitative interviews. After applying listwise deletion, that is, removal of those individual cases within the dataset for which an individual's response to one or more items in the questionnaire was missing, a final sample size of 1561 responses was used. Measures used included both existing validated measures and the development of new measures where existing measures were unavailable. Reliability testing was conducted to examine the reliability of each measure used. The research took place over two phases, the preliminary qualitative interview study with executive participants and the main quantitative employee survey. In total, the collaboration took place over eighteen months and represented a substantial proportion of the overall dissertation focus. In the balance of this section, I present the methods for this study in detail.

**4.4.2. Study context**

To examine the relationship between employee attributions of the "why" of talent management in their organisation, employee perceptions of talent status, psychological contact fulfilment and the hypothesised individual outcomes, a population of employees who experience their organisation's practice of talent management relatively comparably to one another is required. Therefore a single organisation is required in order to reduce the variance which would reasonably result from cross-organisation differences in talent practices. Therefore this study is designed as a single-organisation study in which the full sample of respondents are members of the same organisation and thereby subject to a common organisational practice of talent management. The single

organisation study method is well used in empirical research regarding employee behaviour within an organisation and in exploring newly emerging concepts in the literature (Yin, 2014). Given the limited understanding of the influence of talent management on the employee psychological contract and the absence of any prior empirical work on employee attributions of talent management, use of a single organisation study is suitable for testing of this model. Situated within the boundaries of a single organisational talent system allowed both examination of attributions and of outcomes for employees experiencing talent management within the same organisational talent system.

### 4.4.3. Selection of the participating organisation

The participating organisation was selected based on four criteria. First, an organisation which has implemented talent management, such that employees could reasonably be expected to have made some observations about the organisation's use of talent management, whether from direct involvement or not. Second, an organisation which applies talent management as a strategic workforce differentiation activity, such that some employees are assessed or identified or selected as talent, while others are not.

Third, an organisation that would facilitate researcher access to a sample of both talent identified employees and those not identified as talent in order to examine between group differences. Scholars have noted that organisations participating in research on exclusive talent management practices may be reluctant to provide researchers with direct access to "B" players based on the assumption that enquiring about B player perceptions of exclusive talent practices or programmes may risk negative feelings among the B players whom in fact form the majority of the organisation's workforce (Gelens et al., 2013). Fourth, an organisation which would collaborate with the researcher in order to support the aims of the research project and to provide organisationally-reported data in supplement to the employee self-report data. There were no other selection criteria applied to either the organisation or the participating employees and therefore the study was open to organisations of any industry sector and national location and to participants of all national origins, ethnicities, and gender. The organisation selected to participate in this study met these requirements.

Over the first two years of the dissertation work, I met in person with leadership team members of approximately two dozen organisations to invite their interest in a

collaborative research study of talent management, designed to focus on the complementary interests of organisational talent priorities together with the research study priorities. During this period of time, a number of organisations indicated potential interest in the research and we explored collaboration opportunities in greater detail, resulting in the confirmation of one organisation.

### 4.4.4. The context of talent management in the participating organisation

The participating organisation is a multi-national financial services organisation with more than 90,000 employees in total. The organisation business strategy is an active growth strategy through which the organisation has achieved significant market strength and continues to advance within the top rankings in its respective national positions. Much of their brand value growth in the past decade has been founded on competitive acquisition of smaller competitors, attraction of external high performing talent from other financial services institutions and a long standing tradition of strong customer loyalty. The organisation has grown substantially in the past fifteen years and as such has seen an influx of high performers and executive staff from other strongly competitive organisations, many of which also employ strategic talent management. The sector itself, financial services, is known to be undergoing extensive evolution with the adoption of disruptive technologies, and as a consequence of the global financial crisis in 2008.

The organisation operates across multiple international jurisdictions with national headquarters in each of its national domains and is subject to country and regionally specific regulation and business practices which require its talent to be knowledgeable of these distinctions. Although it is a company seeking continued growth in a highly competitive sector, there is also substantial change underway in its current organisation structure and workforce given the increasingly technology-enabled delivery of core financial services, the expanding customer-self-service model in financial services, and the ready comparability of financial service organisations and their market offers to customers, which risk impacting both the business performance and customer retention. The current degree of business sector and organisational change is seen as an engaging career opportunity to talent and high potential talent however the dynamic nature of the sector means that external career opportunities may also appear compelling and competitive. The corporate brand is strongly associated with service to their customers (both retail and commercial banking) and the impact of the performance

of their workforce on customer relationship management and the brand is of utmost value.

The talent management philosophy in the company is to highly differentiate talent, representative of an exclusive talent philosophy (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014) and is consistent with the sector, where competition for talent is amongst the highest in any sector, given the perceived relatively high compensation and career advancement opportunities. Coupled with the prevalence of protean careers (Hall, 2004) in organisations today, the need to retain key talent in highly competitive markets is a priority for this organisation.

The organisation's talent management practices were comprised of a core set of activities and investments. They included: identification of employee potential for development and future career advancement, identification of business talent requirements and critical roles which required differentiated management of successors, the use of job assignments and appointments into developmental roles in order to develop leadership potential, the use of annual management and executive talent review processes with corresponding resulting action plans and strategies to continuously improve the identification, development mobility and retention of talent and the use of leadership development programs aimed at specific levels of leader development to support competence development, retention and performance impact. Such practices are consistent with differentiated investment in talent as evidenced in the literature (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016).

Taken together, this dynamic, competitive, and evolving context and customer orientation is one in which the organisation is focused on high performance through talent and one which was interested to gain greater insight into how their talent management practices were currently functioning in order to protect or enhance their use of talent management. The organisation selected their operations based in the United States, of approximately 30,000 employees, to participate in the study. The employee survey questionnaire was distributed to approximately 3800 employees across multiple lines of business and locations. This opportunity for strategic insight was the organisation's reported central reason for interest in the empirical study.

### 4.4.5. Collaboration with human resources team

Following preliminary discussions with the executive responsible for talent management in the organisation, a small project team was established to act as a liaison between myself as researcher and the Human Resource functional team members involved in implementing the study within the organisation. The project team included individual HR specialists involved in the annual talent management review process, leadership development programs and senior HR professionals in business partner roles, responsible for advising business executives and their leadership teams on the implementation of talent management in their businesses day to day. Through this team, and in concert with the HR executive team, objectives and scope for the collaborative research were agreed and the preliminary interview study and the quantitative survey were implemented. As the collaboration proceeded, I met with the project team weekly, and provided debrief of findings to the project sponsor throughout, along with formal reporting to the executive management team and HR functional leadership teams.

### 4.4.6. Pilot qualitative interview-based study with executives

As argued in the literature, there is a need for multiple sources of information about the use and implementation of strategic HRM practices (Guest, 2011), in order to more closely interpret outcomes of implemented HR practices, in this case talent management practices. Single respondent measures of HR practices have been associated with measurement error (Wright, Gardner, et al., 2001) and therefore to sufficiently understand the practice of talent management at the company and to inform the design of the main study, a preliminary study was conducted and the use of selected organisationally reported measures was also planned. I adopt guidance from the literature to include the use of qualitative data in order to support a more considered examination of the implementation of HR practices and their outcomes (Guest, 2011).

The pilot study was conducted through a focused set of qualitative interviews with management members, with the aim to establish an understanding of the purpose and context of talent management within the organisation, from the perspective of the executives as "owners" of the talent agenda for the enterprise. Seventeen semi-structured interviews were held with executive participants including the CEO, CFO, and the executives responsible for talent management and for diversity. The qualitative data collected served to confirm the purpose and context of talent management in the

organisation, centrally relevant to this study which considers employee attributions of TM practices, and to familiarise myself with the organisation structure, business purpose, use of performance management, exclusive talent management and associated frameworks and terminology. This approach to a preliminary study is consistent with good practice in the literature as used in other studies such as Höglund et al who used a small sample of qualitative interviews (n=17) as a preliminary study in advance of a quantitative survey questionnaire to a larger sample (n=126) (Höglund, 2012).

### 4.4.7. Measures and questionnaire distribution planning

To test the measurement model, a questionnaire was developed. The questionnaire and corresponding communications plans were developed in consultation with the organisation and approved by the project sponsor before distribution internally by the HR department. Employees received the survey invitation by email, with secure link to the Qualtrics survey platform on which the online questionnaire was hosted, and the online survey remained open for ten business days to allow for sufficient access for employees. The full set of measures is presented below. Appendix three presents the list of items used in the employee survey questionnaire.

For all self-reported variable measures, a Likert scale was used which measures attitudes or degree of acceptance for a given statement along a continuum from disagree to agree. A 7-point Likert-type scale was used (for all measures except where noted), where scale anchors ranged from one (strongly disagree) to seven (strongly agree). Selected variables were organisationally-reported for the sample. They included the measures of employee performance and talent status and demographic data. Each measure is presented below. Reliability and correlations tables are presented in the descriptive statistics table within chapter six.

**Employee attributions of talent management practices.** In efforts to demystify the "black box" of the HRM-performance chain, and to shed light on the "intended-actual" gap which persists in HRM in practice (Nishii & Wright, 2008), a number of recent studies have begun to examine employee perceptions of HRM practices. To do so, in the HRM literature, several studies have first measured employee perceptions of HRM practices, such as Alfes, Shantz, Truss, & Soane (2013) and Alfes, Truss, Soane, Rees, & Gatenby (2013). HRM researchers have also examined the coverage of such practices in an organisation, that is the extent to which such practices

are used in the organisation, and the type of practices, such as high performance work practices (HPWP), as in the study of HPWP by Van de Voorde and Beijer (Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015). In the talent management literature, owing to the topic being directly related to workforce differentiation, researchers generally include a measure of the type of practices as being for "everyone" or only for "some" employees as in the Sonnenberg et al (2014) and Stahl et al (Stahl et al., 2012) studies, which both measured the type of talent management practice as exclusive or inclusive. Employee perceptions of the effectiveness of talent management practices have been measured in a recent study (Khoreva et al., 2017). The Sonnenberg et al study (Sonnenberg et al., 2014) also asked employees to indicate talent-related practices from an inventory or checklist of possible practices.

In the current study, however, the measure of interest is a measure of the employee's attribution of meaning for their organisation's use of talent management practices, rather than a count of observed practices. Study of employee attributions of HRM practices has been called for in the literature (Hewett et al., 2017) and would measure the meaning which employees attribute as the reason "why" their organisation undertakes specific HRM practices. Attributions have yet to be measured in the talent management domain of literature.

In their seminal paper arguing the need to consider an employee's attributions of meaning to an HR practice or bundle of practices, Nishii et al (Nishii et al., 2008) developed a measure of employee attributions of HR practices using two opposing potential attributions: commitment and control. Their design of the measure allowed the concurrent measurement of employee attributions of both possible goals of the organisation with items written to measure employee views on each rather than forcing a dichotomous choice in the response. The reliability for the measures of attributions of control and commitment presented in their study were 0.71 and 0.91 respectively (Nishii et al., 2008). The original measures were shown to predict differences in employee attitudinal outcomes of commitment and satisfaction, which in turn were shown to be shared within teams and related to unit-level organisational citizenship behaviours and customer satisfaction (Nishii et al., 2008).

Since then, as reviewed earlier in this chapter, only a modest number of studies have applied HR attributional theory in empirical measurement. In the Shantz et al

(2016) study, which measured two discrete HRM attributions, attributions were hypothesised to be independent variables and were measured using two newly created variables, HRM performance and HRM cost attributions, in keeping with the Nishii et al (Nishii et al., 2008) approach and found to function reliably (Shantz et al., 2016). In the Van de Voorde and Beijer (2014) study, two discrete HR attributions of employee well-being and performance, hypothesised as mediating variables, were measured using two newly created variables, following the approach by Nishii et al (Nishii et al., 2008)and found to be reliable. Chen and Wang (2014), in their study of HR attributions of commitment and control in the context of organisational change, used an adapted version of the Nishi et al (2008) measures for commitment and control and reported satisfactory reliability. One further study also measured two HR attributions of commitment and control, consistent with Nishii et al (2008), while using a selected sub-set of the measure items reliably to examine the influence of employee HR attributions on their commitment to their employing company and the client company which they supported as outsourced information technology (IT) service providers (Fontinha, José Chambel, & De Cuyper, 2012). In their study on workplace partnership, Valizade et al (2016) measured two discrete employee HRM attributions, that of indirect participation and direct participation, as independent variables and used a 3-point scale asking respondents to identify the attributed effects of the participation method, as being negative effect, no effect, or positive effect.

As the current study presents the first study of employee attributions of talent management practices, newly developed measures were required. Building on the approach used by Nishii et al (Nishii et al., 2008), two measures were developed which presented two possible management purposes for talent management; that of control and of commitment. In order to then test them in terms of talent management, three main talent management practices by the organisation were identified as central to the measure. They are: the company's management of employee performance, identification of talent and development of employees to develop potential for future performance. These are consistent with the primary criteria identified within definitions of talent management in the literature which focus on differentiated performance, the development of employee competence and careers and the identification of talent (Becker et al., 2009; Collings & Mellahi, 2009).

The two attributions were measured, against each of the three organisational TM practices. Importantly, as argued by both Nishii et al (2008) and by Van de Voorde and Beijer (2014), this design allows employees to attribute multiple goals to each of the three talent management practices rather than requiring the respondent to reduce their view about each practice to a forced single attribution of either commitment or control but not allowing both. The use of two measures then, rather than a dichotomous measure of TM attributions, allows for empirical examination of the resultant relationships for each attribution (commitment and control) relative to the other variables in the model rather than reducing the relationships to either and or.

For each of the three talent management practices, employee attributions of talent management (each of commitment and of control) were measured using a set of six statements (which appear below). The result was a set of three questions, which each contain the attribution measures of control and commitment. This question structure mirrors the Nishii et al calculation of the values of the two measures (employee TM attributions of commitment and TM attributions of control), which were both found to be reliable with Cronbach's Alphas of 0.91 and 0.97 respectively. I also examined the inter-correlation of the two discrete attribution measures as they are new measures. Testing confirmed the correlation between the two measures of attributions (commitment and control) was 0.35, well within the guidance threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1973). The three talent management practices used in this question set are 1) employee performance management, 2) employee career development and 3) talent identification. The structure of the question set and the six attribution statements are presented below.

(Company) manages (TM practice 1, 2, 3) the way it does in order to:

- Promote employee well-being by feeling valued by their company (commitment)

- Support employee competence and career development (commitment)

- Support employee delivery of quality service to customers (commitment)

- Try to keep costs down (control)

- Promote company reputation (control)

- Get the most work from employees (control)

**Affective organisational commitment.** Affective commitment was measured using the 6-item scale introduced as part of the 3-part organisational commitment scale by Meyer and Allen (Meyer & Allen, 1991) which included measures of affective, normative and continuance commitment. The original scale had a published reliability of α= 0.77. Since then, meta-analytic evidence has been presented for the scale's high reliability and predictive validity (Meyer et al., 2002) and the scale has been widely used. The 6-item affective commitment scale has been used independent of the full 3-part measure in numerous studies including for example, Sturges et al (Sturges et al., 2005) and Kim, Eisenberger and Baik (Kim et al., 2016), where the reported reliabilities were 0.83 and 0.77, respectively. Examination of reliability in the current study confirmed a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.89.

- I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization.

- I really feel as if this organization's problems are my own.

- I do not feel a strong sense of belonging to my organization.

- I do not feel emotionally attached to this organization.

- I do not feel like part of the family at my organization.

- This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me.

**Organisational citizenship behaviours.** Organisational citizenship behaviours have been measured extensively in the literature. Drawing on the review of organisational citizenship behaviours by Podsakoff et al (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000) which included discussion of a number of measures and in keeping with the sub-set of items used by Kehoe and Wright (2013) in a study on employee perceptions of HR practices (Kehoe & Wright, 2013), this study used a 6 item measure as presented below. When tested in the Kehoe and Wright study (2013) the reliability of this measure was reported as 0.79 (Kehoe & Wright, 2013). Examination of reliability in the current study confirmed a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.83.

- I provide constructive suggestions about how my department can improve its effectiveness.

- For issues that may have serious consequences, I express my opinions honestly even when others may disagree.

- I "touch-base" with my co-workers before initiating actions that might affect them.

- I encourage others to try new and effective ways of doing their job.

- I help others who have large amounts of work.

- I willingly share my expertise with my co-workers.

**Intention to remain with the organisation.** Intention to remain has been measured in a prior study of employee responses to HR practices using a 4 item measure which was shown to have a reliability of 0.83 and to be correlated with employee perceptions of HR practices, mediated by organisational effective commitment (Kehoe & Wright, 2013). This measure was selected for use in the current study and is presented below. It was measured using a 7-point Likert scale rather than the 5-point in the prior study. When tested in the current study, the reliability was confirmed by a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.87. The 4-item scale measure used is as follows.

- I would turn down a job with more pay in order to stay with this organization.

- I plan to spend my career at this organization.

- I intend to stay at (Company) for at least the next twelve months.

- I do not plan to look for a job outside of this company in the next six months.

**Task performance.** Individual task performance in the current performance year, was measured by the organisation as part of the annual performance management assessment and rating activity, one of the core people management practices routinely applied in practice in the organisation. This is not a new practice in the participating organisation and the organisational human resources representatives confirmed that managers receive training for both year-end assessment of performance and the use of such a rating method as well as training for the ongoing management of performance through the performance year.

The annual performance rating practice involves the individual line manager's assessment of individual performance by the employee, using a 4-point rating scale, which is then subsequently reviewed by next level leadership and confirm (or adjusted if required following review). Guidance which is based on a framework of ratings and performance level descriptions is provided to all people managers in an effort by the organisation to standardise the ratings to the extent possible. The review of ratings (and revision where deemed required) by next level management also serves as a mechanism to calibrate the use of the ratings.

The participating organisation employed a 4-point scale measure of performance, as is relatively common in organisations as a central component of the employee performance appraisal method. The rating categories are presented from lowest relative performance to highest relative performance ranking. The measure of 2017 performance was measured by the organisation approximately four months following the employee participation in the survey.

1. Improvement – Performance improvement required

2. Meets expectations – Performance meets expectations

3. High – Performance is higher than expected

4. Exceptional – Performance is exceptionally higher than expected

**Psychological contract fulfilment.** Psychological contract fulfilment was measured using three items from the original 6-item psychological contract breach scale developed by Robinson and Morrison (2000) which measures employee perception of the extent to which their psychological contract has been fulfilled or breached by their employer (Robinson & Morrison, 2000). The extracted 3-item scale measure for fulfilment has been used reliability in previous studies such as Khoreva et al (2017) and Tekleab et al (2005) which reported a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.95 (Khoreva et al., 2017) and of 0.83 (Tekleab, Takeuchi, & Taylor, 2005) respectively. When tested in the current study, the reliability was confirmed by a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.97. The 3-item psychological contract fulfilment scale measure used is as follows.

- Please indicate the extent to which you think your employer has fulfilled its commitments to you.

  - All the promises made by my employer during recruitment have been kept so far.

  - I feel that my employer has fulfilled the promises communicated to me.

  - So far my employer has done an excellent job of fulfilling its promises to me.

**Control variables.** In this study, I control for age, gender and tenure (measured as years of employment with the company), in order to examine the theorised measures in the quantitative model of the employee experience of talent management, without influence of extraneous variables. Age and tenure have been found to be associated with career progression in prior studies and as talent status may reflect more experienced

employees, controlling for age and tenure is necessary. This approach is in keeping with other studies examining talent perceptions, including Sonnenberg et al (Sonnenberg et al., 2014) and Ehrnrooth et al (Ehrnrooth et al., 2018) which controlled for age, gender and tenure. Although age and gender are linked to affective commitment, evidence in the literature confirms the relationships are not strong and are inconsistent (Meyer & Allen, 1991). However for consistency, I maintain these as controls across all testing.

Employee tenure with the organisation would conceivably be related to the employee's increased awareness of or exposure to their organisation's talent management practices. This awareness would be expected to increase with their own career progress over time. With progression to higher roles or advancing degrees of responsibility, the employee may have greater visibility of their organisation's talent practices, may have been identified as talent or experienced exclusive talent management practices in terms of their own career and employment as "talent" in their company. Indeed with increasing tenure, an individual may have become an organisationally representative actor in the implementation of talent management in their organisation, such as in the role of line manager to another employee or employees at some point. With regard to age, given that as careers progress, employees are often given additional responsibility to oversee the work of others which may involve one of a number of HRM practices and may include talent management activities or practices. As age is positively correlated with tenure in this organisation, I would therefore expect that both age and tenure with the organisation are significant in this model. Different than models which consider employee job attitudes which may occur independent of time or tenure, such as engagement or justice perceptions, an employee's attention to and interpretation of their organisation's talent management strategy, purpose and practices could conceivably be significantly related to the degree to which they have experienced careers (their age) or have experienced talent practices during their employment with their company over time (tenure).

### 4.4.8. Participants and procedure

For the preliminary study, a purposeful sample (as described in the qualitative inductive study design) (Creswell & Clark, 2017), was used to identify a sample of executives in the organisation for participation in semi-structured interviews. Within this organisation, the management team and senior executives are responsible for the HR

strategy and for the talent strategy and oversee talent management implementation in the business. To avoid duplication of individuals within the two samples, executive interview participants were excluded from the employee survey invitation. The survey questionnaire was sent to all employees in professional grades in the organisation. That is, the portion of the workforce who are in salaried positions and to whom the talent management practices and identification processes are applied. This distribution approach provided for a respondent sample which was random and included both talent identified and the respondents which were non-talent-identified respondents. The sample excluded hourly based customer service roles on the basis that this workforce segment would not reasonably had any exposure to exclusive talent management.

### 4.4.9. Data analysis

To analyse the quantitative data, "conditional process analysis" was used (Hayes, 2017). This analytical method allows the estimation of the theorised mediation model through linear regression and is increasingly recognised in the literature to be of value in estimating. The software packaged tools used to support the analysis were IBM's SPSS Statistical Software (version 23) and Hayes' Process macro (version 3.0) installed and enabled for this specific purpose, both in the most recent version issues.

Until very recently, the preference in the literature had been to adopt the Baron and Kenny method (Baron & Kenny, 1986) for analysis of mediation. This method, also known as the causal steps method, computes mediation by estimating each of the paths in a given model and then determining whether a specific variable functions as a mediator by meeting a specific test of mediation. Specifically, in a simple mediation model where a is the path between the independent variable and mediator, and b is the path between the mediator and the dependent variable, and c is the direct path, and c prime is the mediated path, if both the paths a and b are statistically significant and if the direct path c is closer to zero than c prime, then the variable M is considered to be a mediator of the X-Y relationship (Baron & Kenny, 1986). However, more recently, the limitations of the Baron and Kenny (1986) approach are now more visible, including its low predictive power such that the method is no longer accepted as a sufficient test of mediation (Hayes, 2009). The Sobel test has also been argued to be flawed as it makes the assumption that the product of the paths a*b is normally distributed, when that has been shown to not be a valid assumption following repeated sampling of the populations

of a and b (Hayes 2009). In contrast, the Hayes Process method measures the indirect effect and uses bootstrapping to estimate the model instead of reliance on normal distribution (Hayes, 2017). Therefore to analyse the data collected for measurement of the theorised mediation model, conditional process analysis is employed using the Process macro (Hayes, 2017) in the SPSS software package. Numerous recent published peer-reviewed studies have demonstrated the effective use of this method.

In the talent management literature specifically, while this method differs from the few studies which exist to date on talent perceptions, (such as Sonnenberg et al 2014 which applies the Baron and Kenny method for mediation testing), one study in the TM literature tests a moderated mediation model of employee reactions to high potential identification (Gelens et al., 2014a) using the Hayes conditional process analysis method and confirms that the method was effective in the estimation of the model. In the HR attributions literature, one study (Shantz et al., 2016) illustrates the effective use of conditional process analysis in testing of employee attributions of HRM.

### 4.4.10. Data management and preparation for analysis

Upon completion of the survey data collection phase, the data file was downloaded from Qualtrics and uploaded to SPSS. In order to prepare the data for detailed analysis, the following steps were taken, using SPSS syntax files written specifically for this purpose and this study. Data preparation steps involved: Renaming each questionnaire item for readability corresponding directly to the measurement model and to allow accuracy checks when computed; applying value labels to each possible answer option, labelling variables for readability in the output, reverse coding values for each item written in the negative, selecting variables types (nominal, ordinal, scale) to ensure accuracy, computing variable measures using mean calculations where variables were measured by multiple questionnaire items. I then reviewed the dataset before use in analysis, checking descriptive statistics to spot and correct errors in data management.

I then applied listwise deletion in SPSS to exclude cases which contained missing responses to finalise sample set for use in analysis and reporting. The listwise deletion instruction in SPSS identifies cases in the initial dataset which have a missing value in at least one of the specified variables and excludes those cases from the dataset thereby reducing the dataset to only cases which report responses for all variables. Given the length of the questionnaire, I opted to use "requested response" functionality in the

Qualtrics survey software platform, rather than using "forced response" which allows the participant to progress to the next question only once an answer is entered for the current question. I did so to support a more engaging and positive survey respondent experience. However allowing the participant to elect to opt out of a given item may be a factor contributing to the count of incomplete case answer sets. Following listwise deletion of missing responses, the final sample count for use in the analysis and reporting was reduced to 1561, meaning that the analysis which I present in the findings (chapters six and seven) relates to this consolidated sample containing only complete cases.

### 4.4.11. Company reporting

Following the implementation of the study, company reporting on the interviews and the surveys occurred over a further nine month period and no individually-identifiable responses were shared with the company at any time with anonymity of respondents maintained. Company reporting provided an important contribution to the company of insights from their organisation's participation in the study and also supported an ongoing dialogue which was supportive in further interpreting the qualitative and quantitative findings in their organisation-specific context. Company reporting also provided an important triangulation exercise for me to test my understanding of the context, talent identification practices, and current talent priorities in the business with representatives from the organisation. Their critical review of the reporting and confirmation that it aligns with their deep knowledge and understanding of the company context for talent management was an important confirmation of my understanding of their organisation's approach to talent management.

### 4.5.    Discussion of the Mixed-Methods Empirical Approach

### 4.5.1.  Anticipated methodological challenges

There are three methodological challenges anticipated in applying this dissertation design, which I sought to address as the dissertation work proceeded.

**Access to research data**. A first limitation was data access. This is two-fold and included access to research participants both outside of organisations (in the inductive qualitative study) and within an organisation (in the quantitative study). Access to research participants and data was supported by the design of sampling and researcher engagement with organisations as presented in the research designs.

**Empirical measurement.** A second limitation was the need to empirically measure the set of variables theorised in the research measurement model as presented in chapter three which included selected specific variables which had not been measured previously in the literature. While in the case of some variables in the measurement model, existing measures are available and suitable for use, in the case of other variables, such as talent management attributions, talent climate, perceived talent practices and psychological content measures for human capital resource contribution, no measures currently exist in the literature. Further, in the case of other measures, such as perceived talent status, where an existing measure exists in the literature, the existing measure is very limited and requires further development to strengthen the measure for its sufficient contribution to the dissertation measurement model. Therefore in this dissertation it was anticipated that the set of measures would include both qualitative and quantitative, a sub-set of each which either currently existed and was sufficient, currently existed and was not sufficient thereby requiring further development or did not exist and therefore required development and validation. The use of existing measures and the development and validation of new measures was presented in the research designs earlier in this chapter.

**Thematic coding**. Third, the use of coding to facilitate the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data. The practice of applying coding to qualitative data in the method of thematic and inductive analysis requires that codes be validated through a repeat coding exercise. Generally this is done by a second coder in the research team who, independently, repeats the coding of the data to validate or further refine the coding used (Francis et al., 2010). In this dissertation, as this is the work of a single researcher, the full coding is undertaken by a single researcher and therefore rather than engaging a second rater, I therefore repeated the coding myself.

### 4.5.2. Additional methodological considerations

In addition to the three main methodological challenges presented above, there are two specific considerations also of note in this dissertation design.

**Qualitative interviewing sample saturation.** By design, the first study in this dissertation draws upon qualitative interviewing for data collection. The quantity of interviews to be conducted is a consideration for researchers and the advice and guidance in the literature is not absolute (Creswell & Clark, 2017), but rather context and content

specific and matters to both of these studies as effective measurement is inherently inter-related with quality research as part of the "research trinity" (Kline, 2008). As explained earlier, saturation is the concept that there is a point in the data collection at which there is no new information to be gained by further data collection in terms of the enquiry into that topic (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). If sample size saturation is not reached, then measurement is arguably not effective. To address this limitation, a set of principles for determining sample size saturation was introduced by Francis et al (Francis et al., 2010). I applied this approach in the determination of sufficient sample size in this dissertation. I present the actual sampling methods carefully in the chapters which follow in order to confirm how the potential limitation of sample size was addressed and how saturation was achieved in the qualitative interview sample for the inductive study.

**Researcher's prior knowledge of topic**. As researcher, it is not entirely possible to separate one's own experience and self from the research activity (Yin, 2012), particularly if using a constructivist approach (Mir & Watson, 2000), as I have, and therefore it is important to be aware of and understand one's own motivations and perspectives when embarking on the research. This may be particularly relevant where qualitative and inductive methods are used, such as in this dissertation and where the researcher has direct knowledge of the topic from prior experience in management practice. Also, as researcher's note, the training and skills which a researcher has can influence the choice of research topic and the approach to investigation of it (Buchanan & Bryman, 2007). In my case as a dissertation researcher, my prior experience in and knowledge of workforce differentiation practices (talent management in former career roles in global talent management and international human resource management) formed an integral part of my motivation for this empirical research. In complement to my aims to contribute to the scholarly literature, I also seek to contribute meaningful and relevant findings in order to support rigor in management practice through improved empirical analysis.

First, it is therefore important to acknowledge the interpretations in this dissertations are the researcher's own, and while they result from the application of robust methods, both in design and in analysis, interpretations rest with me as the researcher and with my accrued and collective knowledge of this topic domain. Second, my prior knowledge of talent management within organisational practice may both help and hinder the dissertation. Such prior knowledge can be helpful as it serves to inform

my research and allows me to readily engage with organisational leaders on the topic in the context of their management practice and its relevance to their priorities as management practitioners. In a sense therefore, having prior knowledge of the challenges in talent management in practice enabled me to communicate with executives of companies potentially interested in collaboration on this research that I may understand the challenges they describe. In fact, researchers have argued that a researcher's relational practices, such as networks and interpersonal skills, are critical to the design and implementation of interesting organisational research (Dutton & Dukerich, 2006). Prior knowledge can also be helpful to navigate the engagement process with a potential organisational partner in order to find common expected value and benefit which then supports a shared interest in collaboration in a research study. However a researcher's prior knowledge may hinder as there can be assumed meaning or default interpretations which need to be carefully avoided in both conducting the study and interpreting the data.

At the close of the dissertation, in chapter eight, I present a detailed discussion of the strengths and limitation of the mixed methods design and of the dissertation contribution.

## 4.6. Chapter Conclusion

This chapter is the main methods chapter in this integrated dissertation manuscript, and as such, in this chapter I have presented the overall empirical strategy, design and methods used in this dissertation. I have also presented the detailed research design for the two empirical studies including the measures for the quantitative study, the descriptive statistics for which are reported in the study in chapter six directly. My aim in this chapter was to present the full dissertation methodology in substantial detail in order to provide the required methodological transparency (Aguinis et al., 2018) which is often insufficient in the presentation of qualitative empirical work as noted in the literature (Aguinis et al., 2018; Pratt, 2009).

In the empirical chapters which follow, I present the full empirical studies. In chapter five, I present the first of the two complementary studies, the qualitative inductive study. In the subsequent chapters six and seven, I present the quantitative study.

# 5. Chapter 5.  Being "Talent": A Qualitative Investigation of the Employee Experience of Elite Talent Status

*"Great talent finds its happiness in execution." (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe)*

## 5.1.  Introduction

At the essence of talent management is the argument that competitive advantage is accessed through talent (Vaiman & Collings, 2014). This is expected to be driven, at least in part, by the differentiated focus on those individual employees who are identified as "talent", that is deemed to have "potential" to contribute sustained high performance today and into the future, in service of the firm's purpose. It is the experience of being "top talent" as a central participant in organisational talent management which is the focus of this first study. Development of the conceptual and empirical literature to examine the consequences of talent management through examination of the employee psychological response is a pressing need in the literature (Dries, 2013a; Ehrnrooth et al., 2018). Therefore, in this study, I investigate these research questions to investigate the experience of employees who are identified differentially with elite status in their organisation:

> *How do employees identified as "star talent" or "top talent" by their organisations experience talent management? What are the consequences of organisational talent management for the employee-held psychological contract and associated individual outcomes?*

To do so, I conduct an exploratory inductive qualitative study designed to explore the perspectives of "top talent", employees who have experienced being "talent" and having a form of "elite status", being managed as talent in their organisation over time with the aim to understand how talent management influences the employee, their relationship with their organisation and outcomes for both. As the first of two complementary dissertation studies, this study is framed in two dimensions (as explained briefly in sections 4.2 and 4.3): It adopts a wide scope of focus across the conceptual research domain presented in the preceding chapter regarding the employee's experience of talent status while also adopting a narrow and exclusive focus on only those employees who have experienced the highest levels of talent status in their organisations. Following presentation of the exploratory-convergent research design in the preceding

main methods chapter four (section 4.3), I now present the findings of this study in this chapter. In section 5.2, I present the data structure, followed by reporting of detailed findings in section 5.3. In section 5.4, I discuss the findings and the implications of this study for the subsequent empirical study and conclude the chapter.

## 5.2.    Data Structure

There are six emergent themes. Figure 5.1 presents the data structure, illustrating the transformation of the qualitative data from first order codes, to second order categories, from which aggregate thematic dimensions are identified, as emergent themes meaningful to the research questions of this study. An explanation of the themes and the data transformation process which was applied follows after figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1 Data structure: Transformation of the qualitative data into thematic dimensions

| First-Order Codes (44) | Second-Order Categories (22) | Aggregate Thematic Dimensions (6) |
|---|---|---|
| • Awareness of company aims and priorities<br>• Observations about organisational culture | Organisational strategy, culture, context for talent | Talent management is contextually-embedded |
| • Being supported by supervisor (or not)<br>• Exposure to or direct work with leadership | Support of manager, leaders, organisation | |
| • Observations about talent management<br>• Interpretations of talent practices | Attributions of talent meaning and purpose | |
| • Use of evidence in talent, decisions | Reviews, decisions, signalling by the organisation | |
| • Awareness or perceptions of talent status<br>• Interpretations of status, sensitivity | Perceived talent status | Identification as talent is a crucial event of status distinction |
| • Exposure to strategic projects, roles, work<br>• Partnering with management on priorities | Differentiation from peers | |
| • Descriptions of differentiation from peers<br>• Participation in talent programmes<br>• Sponsorship by supervisor or leader | Sponsorship & partnering with senior actors | |
| • Attention to future career, career intentions<br>• Competence development, intention<br>• Developmental experiences in role, stretch<br>• Statements about career plans, ambitions, next roles, required career steps | Signalling and self-management of career | |
| | Identification of self as talent, in career future | Talent status is a dynamic component of identity, self and career |
| • Identification with company<br>• Attachment to brand or to clients or teams | Development of self, others, potential | |
| • Statements of obligations<br>• Statements of effort on organisation behalf<br>• Prioritisation of organisational goals<br>• Brand championship, representation, Acceptance of work demands, strain<br>• Accountability to champion change, motivate, lead others, deliver targets | Perceived change in status | |
| | Identification of self with organisation | |
| | Increased complexity / magnitude of exchange | PC based exchange is characterised by increased complexity, magnitude, sensitivity |
| • Saliency of expectations for differentiated of progression, reward, opportunity<br>• Increased sensitivity to exchange, justice | Signalling expectations, increased sensitivity to exchange | |
| • Performance exceeding expectations, peers | Obligations of delivery, value, contribution | |
| • Proactivity work, citizenship, commitment<br>• Influencing, contributing via performance<br>• development, customer management<br>• Leadership behaviours, people management | Advantage-enabling job attitudes and behaviours | Talent status broadens the focus of contribution beyond the role to organisation and its people |
| • Management of work uncertainty, change | Sustained high impact, relationship and career during ongoing uncertainty | |
| • Relationship continuance, re-evaluation, adjustment or end, intention to stay /leave | Relational employment relationship qualities | |
| • Statements about relationship with supervisor, company, organisation, clients<br>• Investing in relationship, time horizon<br>• Fairness, trust, justice, unfairness, breach | Repeated re-evaluations of talent-organisational relationship | Talent-organisation relationship is characterised by increased relational orientation, acceptance of uncertainty, risk |
| • Experiences of notable events (+ /-)<br>• (re) Evaluations of relational status | Dynamic shifts in relationship quality, durability and resilience | |
| • Descriptions of risk, balance or imbalance<br>• Experience of events, meaning, violations<br>• Statements regarding relationship change<br>• Individual outcomes, promotion, reward<br>• Job & employment change or disruption | Orientation to ongoing exchange, reward, risk | |
| | Trust-based communications in uncertain context | |

The data structure is an "organising figure" (Pratt, 2009, p. 860) which illustrates how the methodological process occurred and is presented here to support methodological transparency in keeping with acknowledged good practice in the literature. (For examples, see Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann (2006), Grimes (2015), and by Yagil and Medler-Liraz (2013), Demetry (2017) and Birkinshaw, Crilly, Bouquet and Lee (2016) (Birkinshaw, Crilly, Bouquet, & Lee, 2016; Demetry, 2017; Grimes; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006; Yagil & Medler-Liraz, 2013)). The detailed findings of this study are now reported.

The six emergent themes are as follows: First, talent management is contextually-embedded. Second, identification as talent is a crucial event of status distinction. Third, talent status is a dynamic component of identity, self and career. Fourth, psychological contract based exchange in the context of talent status is characterised by increased complexity, magnitude, sensitivity. Fifth, talent status broadens the focus of contribution beyond the role to organisation and its people. Sixth, the talent-organisation relationship is characterised by an increased relational orientation, acceptance of uncertainty and risk.

As described in the preceding main methods chapter four, the qualitative methods applied in this study included inductive thematic and open coding followed by thematic analysis. The process used to transform the qualitative data into the aggregate thematic dimensions as follows. I first coded the raw data drawing on themes existent in the theoretical foundations which underlay the conceptual research model. In doing so, I arrived at 44 first order codes. I then used an inductive thematic approach to aggregate the first order codes into second order categories resulting in 22 categories. I then interpreted the verbatim data evidence associated with these categories to explain the main themes arising from the data, which confirmed six emergent aggregate thematic dimensions. These are the thematic dimensions which represent the coded qualitative data and are of greatest relevance and meaning to the research questions.

A summary of the six themes, an explanation of each, along with a mapping to the second-order categories which underlay each theme is presented in table 5.1. In section 5.3 which follows, I then interpret these themes and report them together with supporting verbatim evidence.

Table 5.1 Summary of Findings: Six emergent thematic dimensions and underlying secondary codes

| Thematic dimension | | Explanation of the theme | Second-order categories underlying theme |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Talent management is contextually-embedded | Being talent is about being talent 'here'. Employee attributions of talent management and the experience of organisational support are context-specific influences on the experience of talent management. The employee experience of talent management is embedded in an organisationally-specific context, definitions of and requirements for talent. | • Organisational strategy, culture, context for talent<br>• Support of manager, leaders, organisation<br>• Attributions of talent management meaning and purpose<br>• Reviews, decisions, signalling by the organisation |
| 2 | Identification as talent is a crucial event of status distinction | Being identified as talent indicates perceived value and planned investment. Perceived talent status signals a crucial change in organisational status and a distinct differentiation from peers. | • Perceived talent status<br>• Relative differentiation of the individual<br>• Sponsorship & partnering with senior actors<br>• Signalling and self-management of career |
| 3 | Talent status is a Dynamic Component of Identity, Self and Career | Being talent is a contextually-anchored evolving identity: An employee's identity as talent evolves as their career progresses and is shaped by their re-interpretations of it in light of the company, the self and the future. | • Identification of self in as talent, in career future<br>• Identification of self with organisation<br>• Development of self, others, potential |

| Thematic dimension | | Explanation of the theme | Second-order categories underlying theme |
|---|---|---|---|
| 4 | Psychological contract based exchange in the context of talent status is characterised by increased complexity, magnitude, sensitivity | Employees differentially identified and managed as talent experience a more complex exchange with their organisation which moves beyond a simple linear increase in obligations and expectations, but rather the "talent-organisation" relationship entails marked differences in complexity, magnitude of contribution and sensitivity to exchange. | <ul><li>Increased complexity and magnitude of exchange</li><li>Signalling expectations, intensified, heightened, sensitivity to exchange</li></ul> |
| 5 | Talent status broadens the focus of contribution beyond the role to organisation and its people | While grounded in expectations of high impact task performance in-role, the expected contribution of top talent to the organisation involves a markedly broadened set of obligations to the organisation often including representation of the organisation's priorities, principles, performance aspirations and organisational climate well beyond the scope of the individual role. | <ul><li>Obligations of delivery, value, contribution</li><li>Advantage-enabling attitudes and behaviours</li><li>Extra-role performance</li></ul> |
| 6 | The talent-organisation relationship is characterised by an increased relational orientation, acceptance of uncertainty and risk | Organisationally-identified talent status is characterised by uncertainty, risk and imbalance of exchange which is associated with widely varying outcomes of mutual benefit, enhanced relationship resilience, but also, individual strain, career disruption, psychological contract violation and relationship fracture | <ul><li>Sustained high impact relationship and career during ongoing uncertainty</li><li>Relational employment relationship qualities</li><li>Shifts in balance, trajectory, durability, quality of relationship</li><li>Dynamics shifts I relationship quality, durability and resilience</li><li>Repeated re-evaluations of relationship</li><li>Orientation to ongoing exchange, reward, risk</li><li>Trust-based communications in uncertain context</li></ul> |

## 5.3. Findings

There are six main findings from this study which correspond with the six thematic dimensions presented in the previous section (figure 5.1). For each of the six findings, I present and interpret the finding, supported by one or more examples of evidence of the theme. For each, I present examples of raw primary qualitative data (Gephart, 2004) in the form of verbatim quotations extracted from the interview dataset, selected for their representation of the wider theme and anonymised, consistent with exemplary work in qualitative research.

### 5.3.1. Talent management is contextually-embedded

**Explanation of theme:** Being talent is about being talent 'here'. Employee attributions of talent management and the experience of organisational support are context-specific influences on the experience of talent management. The employee experience of talent management is embedded in an organisationally-specific context, definitions of and requirements for talent.

The interpretation of talent management by the employee clearly matters. Exclusive talent management represents a close partnering by the organisation with individuals who are expected to maintain a deep knowledge of and close alignment with its purpose, priorities and an active prioritisation of their efforts to support achievement of those priorities. Employees are sense-makers who observe their workplace environment and seek to interpret their organisation's use of talent management, together with the significant events which the employee experiences, and in so doing make attributions of purpose along with their interpreted status and contribution to that purpose. Emerging from the review and analysis of interview data, it is clear that employees are making observations of their organisation's use of talent management practices (and sometimes the absence or insufficiency of those practices). This provides evidence consistent with the literature which has argued that talent management practices may be a form of signal to employees (Dries & De Gieter, 2014) and that perception that one has been identified by one's organisation as talent may be a form of promise or commitment about future career intentions by the organisation (Dries, 2013a).

**Attributions of talent management meaning and purpose**. As with other strategic human resource practices for which employees have been shown to interpret the practice and make attributions of its purpose (Nishii et al., 2008), such as high performance work systems (Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015) and job-performance improvement focused HRM practices (Shantz et al., 2016), evidence from this study indicates that, with regard to talent management, employees are not only observing talent management practices but also interpreting their organisation's use of and purpose for these practices as to identify individuals who will differentially contribute to and drive the performance of the business. For example, an interview response which illustrates employee attributions of their organisation's use of talent management as intending to facilitate organisational performance:

> *"(Once identified as talent) there was more pressure, to not only play a substantial role in winning projects, and winning sizeable projects, but also to really get involved with the internal management of the team and play a prominent role in that, and also to really, really demonstrate strong networks and relationships across the business." (Interview 5)*

**A relational, investment-based commitment orientation.** Overwhelmingly, "top talent" hold a relational view with their organisation and expect the horizon of this relationship to be longer-term in nature, despite today's boundaryless careers in which employee turnover may reasonably be expected. Top talent make investments in their organisation which cannot be sufficiently reciprocated solely through transactional means. The discretionary effort invested is rewarded by differentiated rewards packages, however their notable focus on and adoption of organisational priorities as their own cannot fully be recognised by a compensation structure. Top talent are personally invested in their organisation's ambitious strategies and outcomes. One interviewee's comments on her interpretation of the strategic aims of talent management are reflective of many of the interpretations recorded. Specifically, that organisations implement talent management as a practice or strategy to access the contribution of their employees towards business outcomes and that there is a spoken or unspoken understanding that this contribution will come from some employee's more so than from others. Interviewees indicate that these individuals are those who are the organisation's "talent" and can be expected to perform at exceptional levels and likewise, have expectations about their status and access to support, their reward for work delivered, and their future career progression.

**A transactional, control orientation.** However an important finding is that top talent also recognise another purpose for talent management in the organisation, that is, control of the workforce and the organisation's access to the skills and expertise it requires to meet organisational priorities and performance goals. For most interviewees, a balance of both views existed concurrently, neither was an exclusive interpretation of their organisation's talent purposes.

An example of a more transactional view of the purpose of talent management appears in the remarks by this interviewee (11) who had recently made a change in his employment. After more than a decade of being recognised as talent by his organisation including promotions within his career path and talent pool vertically, as well as appointments laterally into other non-core competence roles in which he further developed, he experienced several successive events which he perceived as serial indications of a breach of support. Following these events he made the choice to leave the organisation and accepted employment with a direct competitor in the sector. In describing his experience of talent management, following these events, he described talent management from a notably transformed perspective as realist and pragmatist, in his orientation towards the continuing relationship and any future exchange, as described below. This indicated a psychological adjustment to his reflections on what the purpose of talent management was in his organisation. He adopted a more transactional and pragmatist view, saying:

> *"The intention (of talent management) is pretty classic here: To identify the best performers and create opportunities for them to grow so that they can deliver more to the business and as the development continues, they get more attached to the company, then they don't leave. You develop people so you get performance returns and they get something in return so they don't leave"* *(Interview 11)*

For another interviewee, his organisation's focus on talent was also more transactional. This is specifically drawing on his perspective of his current role, in which he reports he was hired for a fixed purpose, rather than for development and progression. He explained that in this specific context, he perceived that he was viewed as a specialist, recruited for a specialist role within the sales organisation, and that the purpose and focus on talent was simply to achieve sales performance, not for the purpose of ongoing potential development, or some longer-term organisational advantage, but rather a simple current focus on high sales deliver, describing talent management as transactional

and impermanent. Differing substantially from the organisation in which he was employed as a Director previously, whereby the "talent" was central to the organisation's future growth and competitive market development, this organisation's view of talent was for now, not necessarily for the future. Nonetheless, this evidences the employee's sense making of the purpose of talent practices in their organisation. He describes his interpretation of talent management in his current organisation, which evidences the varying purpose of talent management dependent on the organisation and context in which it occurs:

> *"It was an investment decision. I was part of an investment programme our business was making. We were all brought in, you know, having had a long career, to now do a specialist, senior job, and the pathway within the organisation is not clear, if you look at my organisation there are two parts: one is software development, and the other is sales, and anything else, you know, doesn't matter. I think, certainly in a sales organisation, it is transactional. If you don't make your numbers for more than, you know, two quarters, you're out." (Interview 1)*

**Organisational strategy, climate, culture and context supportive of talent.**
Analysing the data, it became clear that employees also make observations of the organisational climate around them and the extent to which they or other employees experience or perceive they have the support of the organisation. Support, of the organisation and by the line manager, are of central relevance to the talented employee, such that the perceived absence of support by an organisational actor (direct line manager or indirect leader), may be associated with withdrawal behaviours. This is consistent with the literature on the positive association between perceived organisational support and perceived supervisor support and a range of organisationally-supportive employee outcomes (Eisenberger et al., 2002; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). These findings indicates that a supportive organisation context and climate is particularly relevant for the talent-identified employee given the differentiated performance and organisationally-supportive behaviours expected of the talented employee. For example, one interview participant reported having been identified as talent very early in his career, not long after the start of his now 21 year employment in his current firm. Reflecting on his durable talent status within his long-standing employment relationship, his comments were in direct reference to his first line manager, of more than 15 years, evidencing the importance of support being extended to him as emerging young talent at the time.

*"(My manager) was just a genius to work for. He just had it nailed as far as leadership goes. There was complete and utter trust and reliance on him, but absolute freedom to go and do whatever you want to do, and to learn, and he just always had your back". (Interview 4)*

However for another interview, the absence of organisational support to underscore the expectations of talent as a strategy, was not evident. This interviewee explained she understood she was identified as talent from both explicit and implicit signals from both her direct line manager and others, consistently over a period of years. However her observations looking back following her voluntary departure from the organisation was that while the promise of developing people as talent was repeatedly communicated in one way or another, the supportive organisational mechanisms were not necessarily in place.

*"There are often some leadership programmes and things that people can go on, but it's more that ongoing support and coaching and mentoring, and also being provided with opportunities that can help people develop skills, to say these are the areas you need to develop, this is the opportunity for you, and we are going to support you - we're not just going to throw you in the deep-end. It's like we try and get a person's name somewhere in a box, send them on some training course, and then we don't really know what else to do with them." (Interview 5)*

A further example of the importance of support of the organisation was conveyed in the comments by this interviewee who explained that, in a consulting firm, senior talent are expected to generate business for the organisation. This interviewee, in a leadership role in a consulting business, described the expectations of him to perform at high levels if to continue to progress in senior leadership roles, with the aim of achieving the promotion to partner as the immediate next career step. He described seeking empowerment, which he interpreted as a broad form of organisational support, and held the view that as performance increases, empowerment of the talented employee increases. Empowerment could then also be seen as a signal or recognition of competence or performance capability. However, the interviewee also explained that the reverse was true in his experience. That is, when one's performance on behalf of the business is not as successful as expected, there is less empowerment or "space" to make decisions needed to perform. Upon deeper probing, and consistent with other interviews, "empowerment" here also includes the authority and resources to deliver on extended performance commitments.

*"What I really seek is empowerment, you know, so, you know, that you can make…and that's…that's what I've enjoyed over the last sort of 10 to 15 years, is running your own part of the business and getting that sort of space to make decisions - as long as you're successful. If you're not successful, obviously, em…yeah, you get less empowerment." (Interview 6)*

**Sponsorship and partnering with senior actors.** Consistent in each of the interviews was the perception and experience of sponsorship. That is, having one or more organisational leaders or managers who actively presented the individual's work and capability to do future work to the organisation in consideration of both current work and future career opportunities. One illustrative example of the positive presence of sponsorship, in this case which began in the original recruitment to the organisation:

*"There was a huge degree of uncertainty…. They were open enough to bringing talent and creating roles that could actually have an impact but could also leverage the capability of an individual and that's really rare to find, because usually you have a role, and it's a box. Instead, it was very much that 'We know you can help us with this (business challenge), the role will be something around (specific focus). Come join us, we'll figure it out together'". (Interview 11)*

A further example, from the same interview, in regards to a later appointment within the same organisation:

*"When I was asked to do this new role, like everything in my career, it was a leap of faith from the person I was working with because I was doing something totally different and I've never worked in (the function of the new role), but she worked with me and she rated my capability and said, look, I have a role and I know you can do it, would you <u>like</u> (emphasised by interviewee) to do it?" (Interview 11)*

Individuals across this sample indicated that either the presence or absence of sponsorship (or both) made a material difference to their experience as talent. As sense makers, employees are interpreting what talent management means for themselves and their organisation and signals from a range of stakeholders are repeatedly sought and evaluated as indications of both the value of the work contribution and their own continued exchange within more specific and limited exchange networks. Amongst the most prioritised exchange is with the direct line manager, consistent with the literature that line managers are agents of their organisation's HRM (in this case talent management) (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). This is also supported by evidence that the particular interaction of leaders and followers shapes performance through the three-

way interaction of leader-member core self-evaluations and leader-member exchange (Soane, Booth, Alfes, Shantz, & Bailey, 2018).

In summary, these findings indicate that employees actively observe and interpret the use of strategic talent management by their organisation. Further, being talent is a contextually-anchored concept and involves intense partnering with and expected support from organisational representatives (line manager and sponsors) and alignment to the purpose and priorities of one's organisation.

### 5.3.2. Identification as talent is a crucial event of status distinction

**Explanation of theme:** Being identified as talent indicates perceived value and planned investment. Perceived talent status signals a crucial change in organisational status and a distinct differentiation from peers. Rather than an indication of having "arrived" at one's career destination, talent status identification is just the beginning of a journey of intense partnering with the organisation beyond simply being an employee and when self and organisation views are not consistent, employees seek congruence, often by moderating views of self 'here' or by moving somewhere where they are talent 'here.

**Perceived talent status.** In addition to interpreting their organisation's practices related to talent management, employees are also interpreting signals and making sense of what these practices mean for themselves within the organisation. More specifically, evidence from this study indicates that employees are interpreting signals from a range of sources in understanding their possible status as employees identified as talent.

Employees perceive their status as talent; that is, employees develop views of their identification as talent (or not) through interpretation of both explicit and implicit signals from their organisations signalling some degree of differentiation from peers and this is associated with future intentions of exchange, both contributing and receiving value. For example, in the case of an experienced female manager in an energy corporation (interview 10) which practices exclusive talent management formally including the disclosure of talent status to talent-identified employees, the employee reported having been advised of her talent status on numerous occasions over her employment with the organisation which spanned her career to that point. This was associated with a differing degree of investment in her development and of access to

senior management and high profile projects, all of which directed firm resources towards her performance today and development for career advancement tomorrow at levels which were disproportionate to the experiences of her peers.

A further interviewee reported receiving, recognising and interpreting having been identified as talent through several mechanisms, including investment in her development through a fast track development program which was not available to non-talent-identified peers. This is consistent with prior studies which found a relationship between participation in fast track programs and perceived talent status (Clarke, 2017). The interview participant commented:

> *"All the indications were that this was the path that I was heading towards to become Partner. I was invited to attend a women's leadership programme, targeted at female Directors, as one of the 10 out of the entire (organisation). So, that was a very, very clear signal that, there was potential for me to take the next step to partnership because that was what this programme was all about."* (Interview 5)

Despite this perceived clarity of organisational signals that she was viewed as talent by her organisation, it became clear subsequently in the interview that somewhat later in her career-tenure with the employing organisation, there was inconsistency in the signals related to status across a range of organisational representatives. This indicates impermanence and instability of talent status. It is also consistent with the prior research which indicates that informational asymmetry may exist between the individual's awareness of their talent status and the official organisational view of their status (Dries & De Gieter, 2014) and with evidence that communication of talent status is problematic, often approached with strategic ambiguity (Dries & De Gieter, 2014) or secrecy (Meyers et al., 2017).

**Perceived differentiation from peers.** In another example, a seasoned director in a consulting firm explained that the opportunity to assess oneself against one's peers is a vital activity in understanding one's talent status, independent of a formal disclosure by the organisation (interview 6). Interviewees are report that they perceive participation in targeted talent development programmes to be an indicator of having been identified as talent by their organisations (as evidenced in interviews 5, 6 and 12). In describing how talent management takes place in their organisation, this interviewee explained the

importance of individuals being aware of peer performance as an organisation indicator of their own standing.

> *"I think the other thing that's really important, with the whole talent process, particularly in the talent reviews, (is that) they're in with other peers, so that they understand, you know, that they are competing with others for similar roles. They can learn from each other, they can support each other, but it is generally a very competitive environment, you know." (Interview 6)*

Perceiving the relative nature of exclusive talent identification, and interpreting signals from executives in the business which encourage the differentiation, by way of informal coaching, this interviewee remarked:

> *"It starts to become clear then, as an individual, sort of how you fit within your peer group, and also, one of the explicit signals was being identified as one of 10 in the whole (business line) to participate in that (talent) program, but also your very clear coaching to kind of step out and widen and network across the business." (Interview 5)*

A further example, reflecting the relative nature of exclusive talent identification, this interviewee described a formal talent acquisition strategy as a recruitment programme to complement the organisation's internal talent pools. Her comments are reflective of what it meant in her experience to be considered talent internally versus externally and also refers to the investment she perceives having made in order to demonstrate her obligations. Her comments raise the concept of risk in talent status as well, in her view that joining an organisation as externally-hired "talent", although identified as "talent" by the organisational representative who hired her, individuals brought in as incoming talent is not always readily accepted. Her comments indicate that even when formally identified as talent through a focused bespoke talent recruitment strategy, once inside the organisation, her acceptance as talent within the differentiated talent pool of her peers was not yet established. She commented:

> *"They bring in top talent from outside….but the culture here is so strong that it doesn't always work out. It can be, em, like organ rejection. I was hired as an experienced hire, part of (an intentional) global talent hiring programme. It's taken a lot of time and effort to fit in here. I know I take on a lot more (work obligations) than many of my internal peers. I'm not sure I will achieve the promotion I'm hoping for but with all the changes I'm happy just to stay. I know I'm rated as talent but I think they just see me as a specialist from outside." (Interview 12)*

In sum, being talent involves alignment with a typically visible differentiation from one's peers or from the wider workforce and involves navigation through adjustments and reiterations of that status over time through career and organisational events and through continued delivery of differentiation contribution.

### 5.3.3. Talent Status is a Dynamic Component of Identity, Self and Career

**Explanation of theme:** Being talent is a contextually-anchored evolving identity: An employee's identity as talent evolves as their career progresses and is shaped by their re-interpretations of it in light of the company, the self and the future.

The consideration by elite talent-identified employees as to "Who I am, who I am here, now, and in my career future" is the product of a dynamic co-creation by the talented employee with the organisation, is impermanent and contextually enabled (or constrained). In addition to finding evidence that employees interpret their organisation's use of talent management and as well as their own status within the organisation related to its prioritised focus on talent, evidence from the study also supports other notable forms of identification by employees. For example, employees interviewed referred to their identification with their organisation and their views of themselves in their career in future, known as "future work selves" (Strauss et al., 2012). These two constructs are both recognised in the interview data collected. Identification with the organisation was evidenced by interviews 4, 6, 7, and 13 and reference to one's future self in the context of work and careers, was evidenced by multiple interviews.

**Identification with the organisation.** The extent to which individuals identify with their current organisation is relevant to the individuals interviewed in this study. For example, this individual, having progressed from early career entry to a senior leadership position, and now supervising and managing others, described his identification with the organisation.

> *"I'm driven very much by…I think, it's the brand of the organisation, the interesting work, working with clients, and also, I'm quite loyal to both the organisation and the team, and I do take an interest in actually promoting talent, you know, doing the right thing, particularly for those progressing from (junior roles)." (Interview 6)*

**Identification of self as talent in career and future.** For some employees, their experience of having made visible distinct contributions to their organisation over time

has become very clearly embedded in how they see themselves and might be described as a "personal brand" in terms of their career. For example, when employees have been actively moved and appointed by their organisation into "stretch" assignments or roles which were crucial to the current issues the company faces, when successful in those roles, their success becomes intertwined with their perceived capacity as talent. For example, interviewees spoke of moving across discipline and across business unit, within organisations.

> *"Because of my brand, my personal way of working, people realise very quickly that I am very agile and I can be deployed in many different ways, so that's what happened (in this most recent move), I've been offered opportunities that probably someone else has not been offered, because I have been able to demonstrate constantly that I can do something new, I can learn very quickly, I can deliver something." (Interview 11)*

A comment from this same interview further illustrates the experience of many of the interviewees who have self-initiated a move outside the organisation when no further opportunities to develop and progress appear to be available within organisation.

> *"Even if you were moving, they were not career progressions or higher level, they were always at the same level and I didn't want to do that anymore". (Interview 11)*

One particular excerpt (interview 8), is a useful illustration of the relevance of future work self to the employee's experience of talent management. This interviewee envisioned a future career self which was no longer congruent with the context of the changed organisation and its new leadership, which appeared to not be demonstrating support for talent but rather focused on pressing cost issues at the expense perhaps of longer term strategic decisions about c-suite talent. As a seasoned leader with C-level (management team) experience in leading the information technology (IT) function, this interviewee had designed and implemented a successful functional transformation agenda resulting in top-decile peer-benchmarked performance of the IT function. In doing so, the interviewee reports his performance had exceeded agreed targets for organisational effectiveness and efficiency. He reports having been highly engaged in the role and investing proactively in opportunities to advance the company's overall transformation objectives. However, as the company transformed, the interviewee reported that the nature of executive performance became transactional and limited to a cost focus rather than a strategic orientation. It became, somewhat frustratingly, clear to

this interviewee that his own views of his future career and work self were no longer consistent with the organisation's future.

> *"I always aim to further my career and work experience, but in this (re) structure there is no future now. I would have stayed because I have a lot of ideas about innovation for our business. There's a lot we can do now with new methods and acceleration centres in IT and innovation brings real impact to our business but our (new) leadership is basically saying leave innovation to someone else, just take care of the printers. That is not me." (Interview 8)*

This evidence indicates that the employee-held view of the self, both attached to who they are in the organisation (talent or not) and who they are in their own lives (the individual aspiring to a future version of their work self) are both factors which are interacting with their experience of talent management. This is consistent with employees holding a view of their "future work self" as introduced in the literature (Strauss et al., 2012). It is evident that for top-talent-identified employees, the future work self is highly salient such that their repeated and ongoing (re)evaluations of current self are contrasted with the future work self. In the case of the executive interviewed (interview 8), both strong identity in current work self as well as high saliency of future work self appear to be involved in the evaluation of psychological contract breach and the resulting decision to leave the organisation. Combined with the talented-employee's perception of heightened performance expectations, the formation of obligations for heightened performance contributions and proactive support of the organisation's priorities are not surprising in the evidence found. Such obligations are representative of the employee-held psychological contract, which indicates that, at least for some period of time, talent-identified employees are willing to acknowledge the differentiated performance demands which are explicitly or implicitly conveyed to them and to form commitments to invest in that level of contribution.

**Signalling and self-management of career.** The findings indicate consistently that employees who have experienced being "talent" in their organisation are skilled in career management and take initiative as individuals to manage their career proactively. This theme was visible across all of the participant sample, whether under negative or positive circumstance, the theme is consistent, that a proactive orientation to their career and self-management of its progression is an accepted element of being talent rather than the perhaps assumed view of a management-by the organisation, the talented employee engages in directing their own career.

*"You open conversations, about what's next and what you want to do. You signal that you want to do something different if you've been in a role for 12 to 18 months and because my performance was very good and you are rated as talent, you are put in a box, there is a scale. You know where you are, therefore you can aspire for something different." (Interview 11)*

In sum, these findings indicate that the employee's identity is involved in their experience of talent management. This is consistent with identity literature which recognises the role of identity in the workplace. However in the context of talent status, identity is under frequent (re) consideration in terms of changing business requirements and is persistently examined by individuals holding top talent status. The interaction of current work identity and the saliency of future work self is an ongoing and dynamic reinterpretation. This appears to have less stability than talent identification might be presumed, if talent identification is interpreted as indicating a rather "elite" status in the organisation (Swailes, 2013a). As a consequence, employees identified as talent appear to have developed a more acute understanding of their selves as talent, now, or in prior roles and in possible future roles; here or in another organisation; and whether and to what extent the within-organisation talent identity reconciles with their view of themselves in their future-oriented career aspirations.

**Perceived change in status.** Another interview participant, reported having been identified as talent over a period of years by the organisation as communicated by successive line managers in the annual talent assessment and rating activity within the annual performance cycle. Her views of self in future work were reported as wholly embedded within the organisation. This absence of consideration of leaving the organisation is consistent with prior research indicating that intention to turnover is negatively associated with perceived talent status (Björkman et al., 2013). To that point, she reported strong identification with the organisation and described ways in which she was embedded within her job and with organisation, such as having supportive and long-standing social relationships engrained within her networks with co-worker.

However at a subsequent point in her employment with the organisation, she was advised by her supervisor, that her assessment as "talent" had been reversed, based on her performance in the past year and the changing views of the organisational leadership. She reports that, to that point, she identified strongly with the organisation and she did not consider working anywhere else for the remainder of her career. Following the

crucial event of change in official talent status, she articulated having consciously adjusted her view of herself within the organisation in order to accept her modified standing. However over time, she elected to move out of the organisation, something she had not considered previously. She attempted to accommodate a revised "identity" of herself in the organisation but eventually elected to accept an outside executive-level appointment.

> *"I had been there for nearly 16 years, sometimes in expat roles, I knew everyone. It felt like home, some of my co-workers there are still close friends. Then I was told I wasn't (any longer) rated as talent. I was still seen as a valued contributor, but not talent, and without any progression opportunities. I had to re-evaluate everything. It changed who I thought I was there. It took me a while to come to terms with this. I think I accepted it. Eventually I decided to leave. I accepted a more senior role where I am now." (Interview 10)*

### 5.3.4. Psychological contract based exchange is characterised by increased complexity, magnitude, sensitivity.

**Explanation of theme:** Employees differentially identified and managed as talent experience a more complex exchange with their organisation which moves beyond a simple linear increase in obligations and expectations, but rather the "talent-organisation" (TOR) relationship entails marked differences in complexity, magnitude of contribution and sensitivity to exchange.

Perceived talent status strengthens expectations of reciprocal exchange such that employees identify a greater obligation and expectation of exchange when regarded as "talent" by their company or its leaders. Talent status identification modifies the terms of exchange, establishes increased, expanded and differing obligations and heightens employee sensitivity to exchange (or the lack of expected exchange).

**Increased complexity and magnitude of exchange with the organisation.** In analysing the data, it became evident that the experience of talent management by employees directly shapes and informs the individual's perceptions of what the organisations is asking of them, by way of a range of performance behaviours such as taking on additional work demands, accepting the accountability to champion and drive change across teams or groups or parts of the organisation in order to achieve performance goals beyond simply their own targets, and the genuine adoption of the organisation's priorities and goals as one's own. Employees repeatedly made statements

of obligation towards their employer and the organisation's priorities. One interviewee, when referring to the additional role and performance demands she felt obligated to accept and actively pursue, used the phrasing "took it on-board" (Interview 5), which was figuratively illustrative of the employee actually carrying the load that the organisation placed upon her as "top talent". For most, obligations and the acknowledgment that as "talent", these must be accepted and pursued, often at pace, has emerged as a core concern of employees identified as talent. For many, self-identified work priorities, initiated by the individual, were part of the overall obligations, but it was evident that even when self-imposed, such "stretch" targets were invariably "expected" by the organisation of the talent-identified employee.

Employees who perceive talent status and experience talent management practices have not only interpreted the importance of the contribution of talent-identified employees, but formed obligations to contribute to that performance. Illustrative of this is an excerpt from interview 5, where a talent-identified Director acknowledges the additional work effort, business priorities and leadership behaviours which are expected of her and she reports having invested focused effort to perform at this level, despite notable differences from the performance of her non-talent identified peers. As a newly promoted Director, this interviewee explained the tangible increase in intensity of obligations and her proactive efforts to invest in achieving these organisational goals.

> *"There was more pressure, em, to not only play a substantial role in winning projects, and winning sizeable projects, but also to really get involved with the internal management of the team and play a prominent role in that, and also to really, really demonstrate strong networks and relationships across the business. (Interview 5)*

She went on to explain she perceived the expectation of the organisation that she readily adopt increasing demands and that there was clear differentiation of those demands from those which her peers were accepting.

> *"I definitely was pushed quite a bit to build networks, and I did take that on board and really went out and did that, and saw that, you know, my peers weren't necessarily doing that, those that were not necessarily identified as…as…talent in the team". (Interview 5)*

**Signalling expectations and increased sensitivity to exchange** In analysing the data in this study, there is evidence that employees who perceive they are seen by their

organisation as talent or as having potential to advance in the organisation to further significant contributions in future are not only forming extra-ordinary performance and contribution obligations but also hold significant expectations of exchange from their organisation. Statements of expectations are represented throughout the data sample and include expectations of access to senior stakeholders and leadership in order to enable delivery of performance obligations to varying extents, expectations of a relational orientation by their manager to the individual (as opposed to a transactional orientation for the management of the individual), expectations of recognition and reward, while acknowledging that such reward may be delayed, expectations of sponsorship and of exposure to senior leadership or others who may make decisions about the individual's career, reward or progression. One example of an expectation to access opportunities for continued development is represented in this response:

> *"After (my last role), they offered me something in a completely different field and I said yes of course I will do that. Either you grow always in the same field or you have to move around and reinvent yourself. For me, moving around is what interests me because then you get exposed to different parts of the business, new functions, new capabilities, you have to figure things out, that's what's exciting, otherwise its gets very stale very quickly. One cycles, two cycles, three cycles. How many brand plans can you deliver?" (Interview 11)*

Signalling is a two-way, dynamic endeavour in talent management with uncertain outcomes. Employees who form extra-ordinary obligations to contribute to their organisation's performance and then subsequently perceive they are contributing or have "delivered", reasonably hold expectations of being managed fairly, whether that refers to ongoing sponsorship, financial reward, ongoing employment, or progression. This excerpt illustrates the mutual signalling of the organisation to the employee (in this instance, through being identified as talent) and the employee's signalling to the organisation that of their interests for further advancement. For example, when approaching the end of an out of country assignment, this interviewee explained:

> *"The conversation would have been either 'There isn't a job or you have to exit the organisation or are you open to figuring something out?'. I signalled that I was open to consider many different things. They were not wanting to lose talent, they offered me something in a completely different field and I think it was great." (Interview 11)*

In summary, employee-formed obligations for heightened exchange with and support for the organisation which regards them as talent are central foundations on

which their talent-organisation relationship is established. This is consistent with studies which have found perceived talent status to be associated with increased support of their organisation's strategic priorities (Björkman et al., 2013) and acceptance of increased demands (Khoreva, Kostanek, & Zalk, 2015). Further, the reciprocal expectations of employee identified as talent, while often accepted as significantly deferred to future, are nonetheless significant in their formed psychological contract. This is consistent with prior studies which have found that perceived talent status is associated with increased expectations of career advancement (Dries & Pepermans, 2007).

### 5.3.5. Talent status broadens the focus of contribution beyond the boundaries of the role to obligations of contribution to the organisation and its people.

**Explanation of theme:** While grounded in expectations of high impact task performance in-role, the expected contribution of top talent to the organisation involves a markedly broadened set of obligations to the organisation often including representation of the organisation's priorities, principles, performance aspirations and organisational climate well beyond the scope of the individual role.

The employee's experience of exchange in the context of their talent status is associated with their subsequent attitudes and behaviours, such as intention to stay with the organisation. Organisational talent management is a strategy which at its essence, seeks to positive empower, shape and influence the attitudes and behaviours of employees in the workforce who hold knowledge, skills and ability to contribute human capital of differentiated value to the performance (or future performance) of the firm. Therefore a corresponding range of organisationally-supportive job attitudes and behaviours would be anticipated outcomes of an effective talent management practice.

**Advantage-enabling job attitudes and behaviours.** At minimum, an experience of effective talent management should therefore generate an intention amongst talent-identified employees to remain with the organisation and to contribute strongly to its continuing success, in part because it also becomes the employee's success through reward and advancement towards the desired future career self. Analysis of the interview data from this study confirms that experiencing talent identification is associated with positive employee job attitudes such as commitment (interview 3,6), pride (interview 2,3,4,6), willingness to develop one's potential (1,4,5,6,7,8,12) and confidence in one's work ability (interview 2,4).

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In addition to positive job attitudes, organisationally desired outcomes of effective talent management include those behaviours which will tangibly shape and influence its competitive advantage and performance. In this study, a range of such organisationally-supportive behaviours was also evidenced as related to the employee's experience of talent management. These included: willingness to take on additional work responsibilities (interviews 1,2,3,5,8), adoption and promotion of the organisation's strategic priorities as one's own (interviews 1,4,5,6,8,9,13), remaining with the organisation, and in some instances despite significant negative events (interviews 6, 12, 13) and, importantly, in-role and extra-role performance (evidenced in all interviews).

### 5.3.6. The talent-organisation relationship is characterised by an increased relational orientation, acceptance of uncertainty and risk.

**Explanation of theme:** Organisationally-identified talent status is characterised by uncertainty, risk and imbalance of exchange which is associated with widely varying outcomes of mutual benefit, enhanced relationship resilience, but also, individual strain, career disruption, psychological contract violation and relationship fracture.

**Sustained high impact over time.** First and foremost, it's clear in the findings that heightened performance obligations and obligations to take on and deliver performance outcomes which extend well beyond one's formal role are a consistent theme in the study. However there is risk that the expected above-peer levels of performance may not be suitably recognised nor rewarded, indeed as a number of interviewees reported. For example, this interviewee (interview 9) described his experience in international assignments over 8 years of employment in his organisation as a recognised leader with potential for further advancement. He described the importance of international assignments for career progression in that organisation. He described experiencing a career delay, despite having delivered above-expectations performance consistently. He commented:

> *"After three years of outstanding performance, way beyond (what was expected in) the job, I took a (short term bereavement) leave. When the next promotion window came up, they completely forgot about me coming back. I basically lost a whole year in my career (advancement)." (Interview 9)*

**Repeated re-evaluations of the employment relationship.** The findings from this study indicate that talent identified employees generally report they intend to stay with their organisation. This is not inconsistent with the wider workforce who, having made a decision to accept an employment offer with an organisation, could be argued to have demonstrated intention to be employed with that organisation. What may differ however, is the extent to which this intention is influenced by their ongoing exchange with the organisation given the heightened obligations of and expectations of exchange which have been generated as a result of the employee's differentiated high performance and identified potential. Also differing is the talented employee's relatively heightened awareness of external opportunities and their awareness of their "market value" along with relatively recent reflections on the relative cost of leaving, which is part of an employee's continuance commitment (Meyer et al., 2002).

> *"You own your own career. It's an internal job market. You have to find a job. Even if there is a process in place (to manage talent) and you are defined as a high potential, unless you ask and push, and it's all about who you know, it's not going happen." (Interview 11)*

There is evidence that talent status is dynamic and subject to change. The findings indicate that when an individual either is no longer seen by their organisation as talent (as in interviews 1 and 13) or no longer perceives a fit with their future work self within that organisation (as in interview 8), the individual may elect to leave the organisation, which in the end is a departure from all previously held obligations. This is consistent with the literature whereby, over time, individuals reinterpret and re-evaluate the extent to which their psychological contract is fulfilled and make adjustments in their contribution accordingly (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000). Research has shown that asymmetry in talent status information presents a risk for psychological contract breach (Dries & De Gieter, 2014) such that if perceived talent status is not validated by signals of or direct disclosure of organisational official talent status, top talent do actively consider and re-assess the costs and benefits of a possible departure.

There is evidence from this study that individuals who have fundamentally differing or incongruent views than their organisations as to their current talent status or with regard to the potential fulfilment of their future work self may leave the exchange based relationship. This was evidenced in interview 5, where the individual reported

withdrawal behaviours, in interview 8, where the individual reported no longer perceiving their future career to be possible at the current organisation and in interview 14, where the individual's experience of a crucial exchange event, during which he would reasonably have expected to be laid off due to market conditions, led to the individual developing a sense of "I owe them". He explained that his deliberations of possible departure once external markets for talent improved, a move which was expected to have tangible differential value in his employment contract and would have been expected therefore to favour reduced continuance commitment, was outweighed by the his reciprocal valuing of the organisation, in response to the organisation's demonstrated valuing of his continued contribution during challenging events.

> *"Actually, I owe them. If they can see me through that period (of uncertainty), I'm sure I have a future here. I don't know if there's a promotion ahead for me, but I am staying." (Interview 14)*

**Withdrawal behaviours while staying**. Apart from terminating one's own employment as a behavioural outcome relative to their experience of talent management (as in interviews 1, 5, 8, 10), there is evidence that employees have other means of adapting to their experience of talent management. One such example is the use of withdrawal behaviours (and subsequent voluntary departure) by an employee who experienced a series of events in the context of talent management which included stark inconsistency in supportiveness across several leaders, reported experience of discrimination, and procedural injustice in reward allocation (interview 5). The negative experience associated with these events perceived to be crucial exchange events modified the relationship and the individual developed the intention to leave the organisation in which the individual had been previously highly embedded and committed. Such was the perceived breach of psychological contract, the individual reported having refocused efforts on the "day-job", and continued performance of core accountability, while having discontinued discretionary efforts which had previously been associated with "being talent" and were seen as a substantial proportion of effort in addition to and beyond the scope of the role. The employee reported reduced affect for the organisation based on the experience of these crucial events, consistent with the literature whereby affective commitment is negatively associated with withdrawal cognition (Meyer et al., 2002) and with research which explains that employees may curb their contribution while still employed in response to hindrance stressors (Podsakoff et al., 2007).

*"I basically decided that I would just, you know, stop wasting my time building all these external networks outside of my team… It was a huge commitment and extra effort, which I had to fit in on top of an already incredibly (full) day-job, so I stopped doing all of that".* (Interview 5)

In sum, the expectation of differentiated outcomes from employees identified as "talent" are clearly acknowledged by employees who have experienced talent management. These findings indicate that significant contribution is expected from employees viewed by their organisation as talent, that this contribution is differentiated from that of their peers, and that employees identified as talent largely accept and embrace these commitments whether in-role or extra role. However this differentiated contribution is expected to be sustained over time and in the main, frequently included extra-role obligations. Additionally, these expected contributions are influenced by a range of contextual factors as have been raised by the interview study participants (such as economic change, leadership change, business strategy change, and change in the support of sponsors and of managers).

Being talent is complicated. Exclusive talent status involves uncertainty and is accompanied by intangible promises of reward and tangible career and status risk, which combined, have the potential to fracture the talent-organisation relationship or to generate resilience. Over time, employees revisit their relationship with their organisation as "talent" and, in consideration of the events they have experienced, make determinations of the expected continuance of their current career path and status within the organisation (or not). Owing to the knowledge that "the power of promises and commitments lies in the capacity that anticipated future conditions have to motivate current judgement and behaviour" (Rousseau, 2011, p. 196), the signals the employee has received and interpreted indicating their status as "talent" would suggest that a heightened investment in performance by the employee is rationally warranted and that such heightened investment will be rewarded, thereby reducing the risk of loss of that investment. However across a number of the interviews, some degree of imbalance to the understood investment-return or risk-reward is evident. In one case, there is evidence of financial risk shared by the organisation with the employee such that unexpected international relocation costs were borne by the organisation (interview 1). However in most examples described by interviewees, the degree of risk appears to be more so borne by the employee.

**Experiences of exchange, change, risk and crucial events.** In the context of heightened obligations and commitments, the notion of intense or memorable events, whether positive or negative, appears to be a common theme in the experience of talent-identified employees. Likely based on the heightened expectations and obligations which underscore the relationship when an employee perceives talent identification as described earlier, there are events which correspondingly appear to influence employee perceptions with heightened impact, even relating to the unforeseen end of employment. An example of this was seen in Interview 1, when a relocation move and promotion fell apart and the decision was reversed 18 months later due to external events outside of the employee's influence. This is an example of psychological contract breach which the employee experienced. The employee described being let down by the organisation emotionally along with the complete rupture of the employment contract. He commented:

> *"This promotion caused me a lot of personal complexities and risk. When the deal was gone, the narrative was friendly but clear: there were no further opportunities for me. After 8 years (with the organisation), I had to think "What do I even want to do now?" (Pause) Believing they would retain me as talent was naive." (Interview 1)*

Such events may be recognised as crucial exchanges in the ongoing exchange between the employee and the organisation which "punctuate" the ongoing employment relationship (Ballinger & Rockmann, 2010) and thereby become memorable in the overall horizon of the relationship. In this study, these events appear to have material relevance to the employee's expectations of ongoing exchange with their organisation. "Responses to such events are rooted in the cognitive architecture of psychological contracts" (Rousseau, 2011, p. 196), and therefore it is unsurprising that these events appear to be able to strongly reinforce (as in interview 13) or to strongly undermine (as in interview 1) the employee's relationship with their employer, which in itself is a cognitive conceptualisation of the employment contract.

**Crucial exchanges and risk, failures.** Even when there is strong organisational identification, a crucial exchange, such as in the case of interviewee 7, where he perceived that organisational support for him and his family during the secondment fell terribly short of what was expected, can disturb the employee's identification with the organisation and its shared values and the obligations for future exchange, as indicated

by his persisting consideration of not returning from the external, organisationally-supported secondment. This case illustrates the fragility of the talent-organisation relationship whereby the firm expects heightened performance but can appear to be less than sufficiently loyal to its reciprocal commitments to the employee, in response. The employee, with long-standing explicit identification as talent by his organisation, self-facilitated an organisationally-endorsed external secondment in which he represented his home organisation. However, the employee experienced a significant failure by the organisation to consider and accommodate his family's needs and requirements in the course of the transfer. The result was a dramatic shift in his orientation towards ongoing exchange with the organisation, shifting from a strong commitment-based relationship and demonstration of proactive organisationally-supportive behaviours, to an increasing detached relationship and heightened consideration of voluntary turnover. He explained:

> *"There's a real sense of cohesiveness and belongingness here, but the way people progress varies in the organisation. It was basically about career self-management, so I accepted a secondment outside (representing my organisation), but (due to) the lack of support for me and my family, (pause), I feel deeply let down. I'm still thinking about whether or not I'll go back."* (Interview 7)

A further example of the complexity of top talent-organisation exchange is visible in the case of interview 1, whereby the risk-reward balance fell largely to the employee, to take on an organisational politically-framed and highly visible new work mandate. During the appointment, it became clear to the individual that there was insufficient organisational sponsorship to mitigate external disruptive events which eventually caused the complete fracture and termination of the relationship, both psychological and contractually.

**Crucial exchanges and resilience.** Crucial exchanges whereby the employee perceives an imbalance in the exchange such that their organisation appears to make an investment in them or to support them in a way which was not readily expected, further strengthens the relationship, through generating future obligations, such as through commitment or performance or intention to remain with the organisation. One such example of a crucial (and positive) exchange event appears in interview 14, whereby a newly-appointed Director reportedly took on extensive extra-role work in order to contribute to his employer's performance challenges in a period of work shortage and downsizing in recognition of his employer's investment in retaining him when others

were made redundant. Several years following the challenges he reported continued "fit" between his career future and whatever his career opportunities at the organisation develop (or not). This sense of "fit" may be an indication of person-job fit or personal-organisation fit, which could be conceptualised as boundary conditions for talent identification. During organisational downsizing and cost reduction measures, the employee described feeling vulnerable to redundancy given his limited experience and tenure in his role at the time. This case demonstrates not only the unexpected investment in the employee (a perceived imbalance in the exchange in favour of the employee) but also the resulting generated enhanced obligations by the employee, including obligations for heightened performance. Further, of note, is that such crucial exchanges can be a source of influence on the quality of the relationship, as in this case, which generated adaptability, resiliency and commitment to the employing organisation. Had the organisation not taken action in order to retain this talent-identified employee for the long-term future benefit of the organisation, his career with that organisation would have ended promptly, as it did in those days of downsizing for many of his peers. He explained:

> *"(The company) did a lot for me. When our sector was working through significant reductions in our workforces, I was still relatively new at the director level, in fact I'd only just been promoted the year prior. They could have easily said goodbye but they kept me on and let me work in whatever capacity I could just to keep adding value. A lot of it wasn't work I enjoyed but I was working. I knew at the time I was lucky, others were made redundant, but looking back I am grateful. It's for this reason, in the main, that no matter what I struggle with at work, I have no plans to leave this place." (Interview 14)*

**Crucial exchanges and balanced outcomes.** Finally, a further example of a crucial exchange, this time, whereby the employee perceives the extra-ordinary effort they themselves invested in the organisation in order to eventually achieve a promotion. This is an example of the memorable nature of crucial exchange events, which had a material impact to the individual's employee relationship (in this case a career promotion) which resulted in strengthening the relationship. Of note is the extent to which emotion is present in the individual's statements despite the event having occurred 6 years prior. This interviewee described the level of effort, degree of time and individual focus required to achieve a promotion to a leadership position in the professional services organisation he worked in, which was an activity he describing having taken several years and was in effect, addition to his core work obligations of

serving clients and leading client service project teams. This intense investment is balanced with an expectation of the substantial reward of the promotion to Director in that organisation. In reference to future promotions, he added the second comment, which may in part recognise the extensive investment expected prior to the anticipated future exchange. He commented:

> *"When I look back at it now, the Director role was a very different role and was a big step. So, getting through that Director process was quite something. It was like a year of (ongoing) assessment. I look back now and I kind of go, oh, (pause), how did I survive that? Because I really should have keeled over and died at some point." (Interview 4)*

**Crucial exchanges and modified expectations**. Interestingly, this same interviewee, 6 years after this event, has experienced a subsequent crucial exchange event, in the form of a conversation with his leadership team member and was advised that a further promotion (this time, to Partner) is not in view by the organisation, although until that conversation the employee reports that a promotion indeed was still in his view or expected future career path within this organisation. He explained that the rationale for this is not clear but that he feels duly recognized at the level and status which he currently holds. He explains he has revisited his expectations and his comments reflect the stability of the relationship, despite the disappointment of the lack of future progression. This is an example of the employee revisiting the extent to which his psychological contract was breached, and again later, re-evaluating whether it could be viewed as not breached or indeed sufficiently fulfilled. The employee, eventually, arrived at a point of acceptance that their psychological contract had been violated but then re-evaluated the violation as not amounting to a "deal-breaker", albeit not consistent with his original aspirations and expectations. This evidence indicates that the experience of the crucial event modified the employee's perceived exchange however the employee's psychological adaptation to the change enabled him to maintain the relationship rather than confirming earlier, preliminary interpretations of the lack of promotion as indications of PC breach.

> *"I have come to the conclusion now that, you know, that ship has passed, and actually, my gut-feel now is that I don't think I'd want it anyway." (Interview 4)*

A further example of crucial exchanges apparent in the sample of interviews in this study is the dynamic of crucial exchanges in the context of relocations, expatriation

assignments in other countries, cross-business unit transfers, and the organisation's management of these. For example, when returning to a regional role in an MNC after having been on an assignment in its global headquarters, this employee experienced lack of forward planning in addition to recognising the need to make psychological accommodations to adjust to the changes.

> *"When you move from a region to the headquarters, the expectation is that once you are there, then you should stay there. 'Why would you want to come back?' is the mind-set. Poor planning. Why did you guys move me and then not (expect) me to want to come back. You move somebody, you invest so much , you create these opportunities and then you're not going to gain any benefit of it, by losing that talent and (another company) gaining all of the experience that person has gained? (In addition), it's not easy to come back and adjust after you've been in the headquarters." (Interview 11)*

**Trust-based communications in uncertain context.** Finally, it's difficult to overstate based on this study, the issues related to ineffective communication between the organisation and the talent-identified employee. The hesitation by organisations to transparently communicate talent status as noted in the literature (Dries & De Gieter, 2014) is only the tip of the iceberg in many ways. Long after talent status identification, employees remain highly overexposed to the organisation's practices of assessment and of differentiated investment as talent. If such practices are not or not perceived to be organisationally just (Gelens et al., 2014b) complications result. Consistent throughout this sample, one example effectively illustrates the magnitude of risk for both the talent-identified employee and the organisation and their future return on mutual investment is presented:

> *"After I handed in my resignation, it was really interesting how the dynamic then changed and how some (leaders) really, really took time to talk to me, give me positive feedback. And the closer it came to the time that I was actually due to leave, really spoke about my value and, you know, my performance in the team, amongst my peers and, just really things that, if they had said two years earlier, and treated me in the way that they treated me in the final months, (pause), I might never have ended up in the position I was in. (pause) I might never have made the decision to leave, actually." (Interview 5)*

In sum, these findings indicate that the employee's experience of ongoing exchange with their organisation in the context of their exclusive status as talent, is persistently uncertain, dynamic and involves risk. "Top talent", in addition to their core performance contributions, differentiated from those of their peers, are further managing

and coping with exchange-related dynamics in their relationship on an ongoing basis. This heightened level of relationally-anchored uncertainty, risk and change in their relationship with their organisation appears to be an ongoing dynamic and may not be stable even in secure employment conditions.

## 5.4.    Discussion

Drawing on an interpretive-constructivist view, I have constructed my understanding of the fundamental components of the experience of employees who have been identified as elite talent within their organisation and sought to bring a thematic framing to the arc of their experiences over time and across organisations. In doing so, I have presented six main findings of this study.

First, being talent is about being talent 'here'. Exclusive talent management represents a close partnering by the organisation with individuals identified as talent. As sense-markers within this contextually-anchored exchange, employee are sense-makers who observe and interpret their organisation's use of talent management and its indications to them of the purpose of talent management and of their own status within that purpose. Top talent develop relational orientations to their work and partner actively with sponsors and with senior organisational stakeholders who together take "leaps of faith" in facilitating business performance through differentiation of talented employees within their workforce. Organisations have been recognised to have poor communications around talent management, such that employees in the organisation (Dries & De Gieter, 2014), and even line managers responsible for people management may be at a loss for information which top talent have other ways to access. It is clear from the current study that, regardless of status, employees are interpreting the purpose for which their organisation undertakes talent management. This is consistent with the introduction of HR attribution theory which found that employees attribute meaning to their organisation's HR practices (Nishii et al., 2008). The development of micro-exchange climates with one's line manager and sponsors appears to serve as a mitigating effect.

Second, being identified as talent is not about having arrived. Talent status identification is an important event in their exchange-based relationship such that it signals the employee's differentiated status to the individual and to others in the organisation. Employees perceive talent status; that is, employees develop views of their

identification as talent (or not) through interpret explicit or implicit signals from their organisations with regard to their differentiation from peers and this is associated with future intentions of exchange. This is consistent with sense-making theory (Spence, 1973) which explains that employees are sense-makers and will perceive signals of high status talent to be a meaningful indication of the way their organisation views them and its ongoing re-assessment of their perceived ability to contribute differentially in future. This is also consistent with recent studies which have found increased expectations of development (Dries, Forrier, De Vos, & Pepermans, 2014) and regular opportunities for career advancement (Dries & Pepermans, 2007) to be associated with official talent status. Status is an important consideration for talent identified employees and perceived or actual signals of change in talent status cause a fundamental re-think by the talented employee of their relationship with their organisation. This is consistent with the importance and instrumentality of talent status to influence expectations such that a change in status is noteworthy to the employee. The significance of the line manager and from senior sponsors in the organisation is visible. As leaders are sense-givers (Nishii & Paluch, 2018), top talent are closely attuned to the signals they perceive from leaders which reinforce current interpretations of their organisational status or call it into question as seen in some of the individual talent cases presented. For the talent-identified employee, there are inherent risks in talent status identification as evidenced in the study. This is consistent with the risks of high status distinctions noted in the literature (Pfeffer, 2001) and an auto-ethnographic study which described talent-identification as a "mixed blessing" associated with both opportunity and risk (Daubner-Siva et al., 2018, p. 74).

Third, being talent unavoidably involves the individual's identity. The identity of top talent is embedded within their organisational context, is dependent upon and further developed through ongoing contribution to the organisation and evolves within the context in which the employee "is being" talent. Talent status can also be re-interpreted by both the employee and the organisation and not always in congruence with the other. Talent status is a product of the employee's performance today and the organisation's perceptions of the employee's potential for future performance (as signalled by talent status) and is both dynamic and contextually enabled or limited. An individual's perception of themselves however is not limited to the current context. While talent-identified employees appear to be intently focused on development of skills, knowledge and experience through rare or exceptional work opportunities, they

are proactive in their career self-management and continue to re-evaluate their status relative to peers on an ongoing basis. Employees in this sample have indicated highly salient views of their selves in their respective future careers and their intentions to access the development to progress towards those future career selves. This is consistent with evidence in the literature that employees expect investment by their employers in their future careers (Dries & De Gieter, 2014).

Fourth, being talent is not just about doing more, doing it better and being rewarded. Talent status has been shown to modify the terms of exchange between the individual and the organisation and its leadership. Specifically, micro climates of exchange may occur whereby the intense partnering between the employee and the leadership or specific sponsors creates mutual expectations of differentiated contribution. These expectations are not notably imbalanced in the current study although other scholars have questioned the risk of demands by high status employees (Smale et al., 2015). Employees engaged in this differentiated exchange appear to become sensitised to the differentiation and conditions of differentiated exchange. These findings are consistent with recent literature which found that individuals who are aware of their talent status may be considerably more sensitive to the inducements which their company offers them which therefore means that the relationship between an organisation and its talent is not a relationship founded on simple exchange (Ehrnrooth et al., 2018).

Fifth, being talent invites (and demands) visibly differentiated contribution. The commitment of top talent to the organisation's priorities, principles, performance aspirations clearly extends well beyond any given role. Top talent understand their own competence and contribution. They take clear ownership of their contribution and their performance. This is consistent with findings in the literature that employees who perceive themselves to have high employability resources demonstrate high levels of self-imposed accountability for their work performance (Dries et al., 2014). Overall, employees who experience talent status are engaged in heightened terms of exchange with their organisation and exaggerated conditions of performance demand and therefore perhaps not unexpectedly such employees have a lot at risk, given the significant discretionary effort they invest in their work, their work identity as top talent and in their company's priorities. Correspondingly then, when crucial events modify the balance of exchange unfavourably, they are closely attuned to what that means for their

status, their continuance with their organisation and the likelihood of the perceived organisational promises being fulfilled in future. The duality of risk and opportunity is one dimension of top talent status, consistent with the paradox suggested in the literature (Daubner-Siva et al., 2018).

Sixth, being talent is complicated. In the current study, it is evident that a number of interviewees have formed obligations which they deem to be substantially different than those of their peers and yet the outcomes of such exaggerated performance demands may not be correspondingly more predictable or secure. Indeed there is significant uncertainty and insecurity in the mandates and portfolios which top talent interviewed frequently report having been allocated, job assignments which are evidently expected to be key to the organisation's strategy. Exclusive talent of "star" status carries with it an expectation and acceptance of exaggerated performance contribution but correspondingly may involve a great deal of uncertainty in the context of the role or work demands. This exaggerated performance demand, notwithstanding the promise of differentiated recognition (at least in rewards terms), may not be a positive condition for the individual or the organisation and yet given its interrelatedness with status and the investments or "empowerment" associated with talent status, the talented employee is unlikely to decline the offer. This is consistent with a recent paper by Erhnrooth et al (Ehrnrooth et al., 2018) which questioned the framing of employee awareness of their talent status in their organisations as simply a positive condition. The uncertainty of enhanced performance demands is both challenging and compelling to top talent in that they face business and organisational problems which are engaging and often require rapid learning of new functional or business knowledge and innovative problem solution to achieve solutions. However the complexities of their work mandates are often accompanied by the lack of transparency in communications regarding talent and future talent status. This may be consistent with the "talent curse" noted in the literature (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2017).

Finally, employees, throughout this relationship, experience events, which are crucial exchanges, as noted in the literature (Ballinger & Rockmann, 2010), but for those who are seen as "talent" or perceive they have "potential" to differentially contribute, such crucial exchanges take on enhanced, even possibly exaggerated, significance and meaning and hold potentially exceptional consequences, whether positively or negatively, for the employee's career and ongoing relationship with the employing

organisation. The opaqueness which has been described by employees interviewed is troubling. Given what is at stake for many of these employees, through heightened obligations and contributions of time and expertise, often in a perceived imbalance with the organisation in real time in favour of future benefit, greater clarity of the reciprocal intentions of the organisation with the employee would be preferable, as the evidence has shown that it is the employee who often bears the greater risk, at least in the short term. Of note, this study also finds that the opaqueness does not dissipate with time as "talent", nor with career experience, nor with seniority of organisational level or grade, but rather the "cloudiness" of talent status may become acute if not well understood, and this may have resulting consequences for both the employee, in their career journey as talent, and the organisation, in its reliable access to talent and the unique human capital resources which they possess. Therefore the employee's expectations of exchange within the context of talent management is important for further empirical examination.

Although "star talent" is frequently sought after externally rather than internally, the status of talent, once hired, inevitably becomes a largely within-organisation identity which is expected to contribute to the differentiated individual and organisational outcomes. That is, the organisation either selectively identifies the employee within the organisation as talent or high potential or the organisation recruits and selects the employee from an external market but in doing so, confers organisationally-specific talent status on them by way of the recruitment transaction. This creation of status occurs in part through the employee's psychological contact. That is, through modifications to both their obligations and their expectations. This is consistent with evidence in the literature that perceived talent status creates enhanced career and development expectations (Dries & Pepermans, 2007) and willingness to accept differentiated obligations for performance, development and support of strategic priorities (Björkman et al., 2013). This is influenced by the extent to which the individual experiences the support of executives or other organisational decision makers who may allocate, enable, influence their status, position and mandate as "sponsors" of their expertise and ability to deliver on the promise of exclusive status. This sponsorship, and the associated decisions which the organisation makes about the talented employee and their status, have been shown to be evidence-based. Top management and other sponsors are seen to be directly involved in the identification and deployment of talent where the decision-makers in the organisation have made calculated guesses of that individual's ability to

deliver in future. The line manager has been shown to be closely involved and provides access to rare and sought-after challenging work assignments and corresponding support but support is not limited to the manager and experienced talent 'signal' their talent status regularly in their ongoing exchanges in their organisations, both in the way they contribute to the current work and the way they seek advancement opportunities. Finally, the talented employee, as with other employees, repeatedly revisit the extent to which their psychological contract is fulfilled and the sensitivity to this exchange is heightened in top talent status. While fractures in the relationship were reported in this study, there is also a balanced view reported that talent management services both a commitment and control function in the organisation and that requirements for talent are in flux in keeping with organisational priorities and purpose. However significant events have been shown to modify the extent to which the relationship is resilient (or less so) as the employee continues to navigate through a highly dynamic, uncertain and evolving series of career and relationship based events.

### 5.4.1. Limitations

The overarching purpose of the dissertation empirical work was to explore and empirically examine the employee experience of talent management, an immersive exploration not possible through quantitative methods alone. This exploratory inductive study, the first of two complementary studies in the dissertation, provided access to an immersive view of the experience of elite talent. It has three main limitations.

First, while the interview participant sample has been carefully selected to meet the predetermined criteria as detailed earlier and although a two-principle approach to sample saturation has been applied, it is possible that the sample is yet not sufficient, as the employee experience described has varied by individual (as reasonably expected) and therefore countless variations on the experience of elite talent status likely still exist external to the data captured in this study. Further, while the study included a sample of top talent which on balance represented greater diversity in gender than the world's top businesses (PwC, 2016), the question of a possible lack of coherence between the priorities of today's organisations for both management of talent and of diversity (Daubner-Siva, Vinkenburg, & Jansen, 2017) are not addressed by the current study.

Second, this study is limited by its use of employee self-reported data which may result in common method variance (Podsakoff, P., MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, N.

2003) and by collecting data from individuals, I did not cross-reference their self-reports of talent status or performance with organisationally reported data. To support my interpretation of the interview data in this study, I contacted several interviewees to check my understanding and interpretation of their reported experience shortly following the interviews. However, I applied strategies to increase qualitative validity in three ways: by drawing on primary data; coding of emergent themes across a diverse sample of individual cases; and by checking understanding with sample members (Creswell & Clark, 2017). Such strategies to increase qualitative validity are also refered to as within-method triangulation (Jick, 1979).

Third, as a single researcher, the coding applied is based on my own interpretation and even with the use of repeated cyclical coding, the findings may be limited by some degree of subjectivity as researchers are inherently tied to their epistemological and theoretical orientations such that data coding is not done in an "epistemological vaccum" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84), although recoding by another person does not necessarily result in increased validity (Pratt, 2009). To support validity, I have applied the use of analytical research memos (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008), which is a valued tool for reflection and further coding. Nonetheless, as applying codes to qualitative data is a form of applying a "personal signature" (Saldaña, 2015), the coding presented inevitably reflects my own signature as a researcher.

### 5.4.2. Implications for the next phase of dissertation research

Consistent with the empirical strategy at the outset of this dissertation to employ an exploratory convergent mixed methods design across two complementary studies, the themes resulting from this study are considered in the design of the second study and in the integrated discussion of the empirical work, to support improved interpretation of the research beyond either study alone (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The use of exploratory and inductive methods, characterised by an openness to emergent themes (Jebb et al., 2017), supports consideration of the themes in the design of the second study.

### 5.5. Chapter Conclusion

Being top talent is a complex experience underpinned by at least one crucial exchange-based event, that of talent identification. However the resultant consequences for the employee, the firm and the talent-organisation are wide-ranging and non-certain.

Talent status is a dynamic and opaque categorisation which modifies the conditions of exchange resulting in heightened expectations of and greater sensitivity to exchange. The promise and potential is significant, but there are inherent risks for both employer and employee alike. Status is an important consideration for talent identified employees and changes in status have been shown to lead to a fundamental re-visiting of the talented employee's relationship with their organisation by top talent. The persistent future focus reported by talented employee is consistent with the strong salience of their future career advancement intentions, however the findings indicate that lack of communication effectiveness and talent decision transparency are particularly impactful to talent status individuals who are sensitive to differentiated exchange.

In this chapter I have presented the first of two studies in the dissertation, which has exclusively considered the experience of being "top talent", confirmed that the psychological contract is of central importance in the heightened exchange of promise, potential, performance and progression which underlies differentiated talent identification. This study has served as a valuable entry point for investigation of the employee experience of talent management in the dissertation, establishing the core themes of interest for the subsequent quantitative study.

In chapter six which follows, I introduce the second of two dissertation studies, a large-scale quantitative study, which intentionally contrasts significantly with the design and focus of the current study, builds on the findings of the current study, and extends the investigation to the wider workforce, beyond the purposeful sampling exclusively of talent-identified employees presented here. In the next study, I theorise and test a model of the influence of talent management on employee outcomes, theorising the psychological contract to be a central mechanism through which the influence of talent management is operationalised.

# 6. Chapter 6. The Employee Experience of Talent Management: Introducing the quantitative study.

## 6.1. Chapter Introduction

The current study is an in-depth quantitative within-organisation study in which I examine the employee experience of talent management. In this chapter, drawing on the conceptual research model presented in chapter three, I theorise a focused model which considers several core components of the conceptual model. Specifically, in the current study, I examine the meaning to which employees attribute organisational talent management practices (the "why"), the outcomes associated with attributions of meaning and purpose in talent management (the "what"), and the role of the psychological contract in shaping these outcomes (the "how").

In this study, I apply attributional theory to talent management to introduce employee attributions of talent management (TM attributions) and then examine the relationship between employee TM attributions and desired outcomes of talent management. I then further consider the hypothesised central role of the employee psychological contract as a central mechanism in generation of desired TM outcomes. The quantitative study is presented in two chapters of this dissertation: chapters six and seven. Following the introduction and development of the measurement model in the current chapter, I present descriptive statistics and results of regression testing for the direct effect of employee TM attributions on employee TM outcomes. In chapter seven which follows I report and interpret tests of mediation to shed light on the involvement of the psychological contract as a central mechanism in talent management. This large-scale quantitative study employs a random sample of responses drawn from within a single organisation in order to examine the employee experience of talent management within a common organisation context.

This study is designed to contribute both theoretically and empirically to the literature in five main ways. First, this study builds and extends the early conceptual and empirical development of the literature through examining the employee psychological response to talent management, responding to calls by Dries (Dries, 2013a), Bjorkman et al (Björkman et al., 2013), Smale et al (Smale et al., 2015). Second, this study further integrates the psychological contract, workforce differentiation literatures and talent

management literatures by examining the influence of differentiation (specifically exclusive talent management) on psychological contract fulfilment and employee outcomes. This is consistent with cautions in the literature regarding the inadvertent setting of heightened psychological contract expectations and the need for deeper understanding in doing so (Coyle-Shapiro & Shore, 2007) and the need to understand the risk of a "disenchanted critical minority" if programs do not meet expectations (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016, p. 123). Third, examining employee attributions of "why" their organisation undertakes talent management, this study applies HR attributional theory to talent management. This is a new focus in the talent management literature, building on the work of Nishii et al (2008) in the SHRM literature and the work of a limited set of studies on HR attributions which followed (these will be reviewed in the following section). This also responds to calls for greater consideration of context in talent management (Thunnissen et al., 2013b). Fourth, the preceding study exclusively sampled the perspectives of employees identified as top talent by their organisations, such that, by design, the perspectives of the majority of employees in a workforce whom are not identified as talent were not considered. This is a known limitation in the talent management literature more generally (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016). In the current study, by examining perspectives of employees in the wider workforce, not limited to elite talent, this study responds to an urgent need for greater consideration of the psychological effects of talent management as a workforce differentiation practice (Dries & De Gieter, 2014; Ehrnrooth et al., 2018; Pfeffer, 2001; Smale et al., 2015) and its consequences for the potentially "excluded majority" (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016). In doing so this also responds to calls in the literature for a relational orientation to talent management (Al Ariss et al., 2014), as the study considers the exchange-based relationship of the employee (talent or not) with the organisation in the context of talent management. Finally, examining proximal employee outcomes of talent management, this study responds to calls in the TM literature for greater focus on proximal outcomes (Collings, 2014c) and in the SHRM literature for more proximal indicators in the HRM-performance link (Guest, 1997, 2011; Paauwe, 2009) and of individual level outcomes in talent management (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013).

The current chapter is presented in five sections. In the following section, 6.2, I develop and present the measurement model, grounded in talent management attributional theory, psychological contract theory and in the talent management

literature on talent identification. Having presented the empirical approach and methods in the detailed research design in the main methods chapter (section 4.5), I then proceed in presenting the results in section 6.3.In section 6.4, I present a limited discussion of preliminary regression testing. Full results of mediation hypothesis testing and the corresponding discussion is presented in chapter seven.

## 6.2.    Measurement Model

In this section, 6.2, I now theorise the measurement model for the second of two studies in the dissertation, and begin with the influence of employee talent management attributions on employee outcomes, as mediated partially through the fulfilment of the psychological contract. Figure 6.1 presents the quantitative measurement model and illustrates the hypothesised relationships between the variables, for empirical testing which are theorised below.

Figure 6.1 The Employee Experience of Talent Management:

Examination of employee attributions of talent management and their influence on the psychological contract and individual level outcomes (a mediation model).



Direct effects are hypothesised in H1,a,b,c,d and H2a,b,c,d
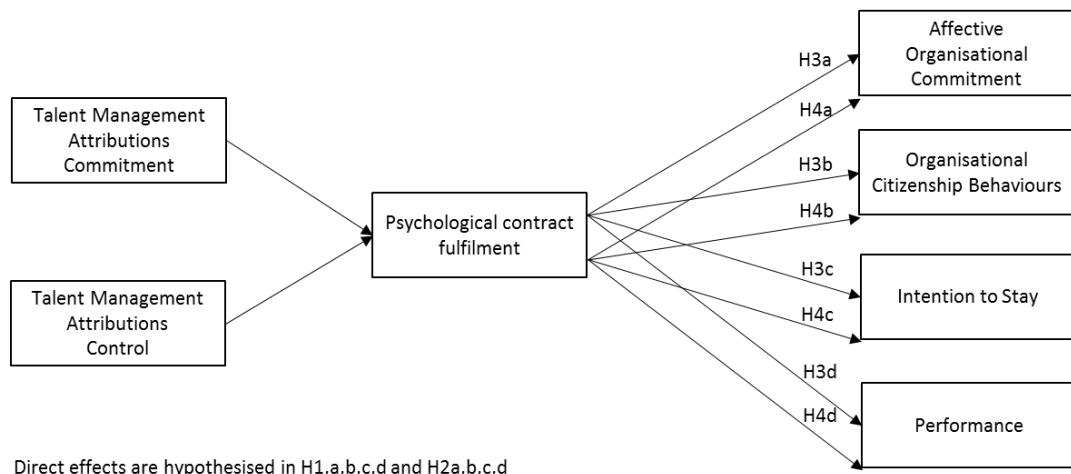
### 6.2.1.    Employee talent management attributions of commitment and of control

HR attributional (HRA) theory (Nishii et al., 2008) explains that employees observe and attribute meaning to the HR practices which their organisation applies in management of its human resources, knowns as attributions. While the HRA literature is as yet limited, studies have shown that HR attributions are differentially predictive of commitment and of satisfaction, as individual level outcomes (Nishii et al., 2008). In

this study, I develop and empirically test whether employee's attribute meaning to their organisation's use of talent management and how such attributions may be associated differentially with individual outcomes of talent management. Drawing on the conceptual research model presented in chapter three, in the current study, I hypothesise and test two discrete attributional goals of organisational talent management: that of commitment to employees in contrast to that of enacting control of the workforce. This is consistent with HR studies reviewed which have adopted a commitment-control orientation, including Nishii et al (2008), Chen and Wang (2014) and Fontinha et al (2012). Consistent with Nishii et al (2008) and Van de Voorde and Beijer (2014), who argued that an employee may hold more than one attribution towards a given HR practice, and given the lack of clarity in communications of talent management (Dries, 2013a) it is possible that an employee may hold more than one attribution regarding a talent management practice and such attributions may influence associated attitudes and behaviour in differing ways. Therefore in this study, rather than constraining the model and testing of hypotheses to allow only a choice of the two possible attributions together (either commitment or control), I test two discrete causal attributions separately (that of commitment and of control) and examine their differential influence on attitudes and behavioural outcomes of the employee.

Looking beyond the single activity of talent identification, the wider bundle of HR practices which constitute talent management are of interest to examine. A set of people management practices which are perceived by employees establish part of the organisational climate (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004) and the particular bundle of practices which an organisation adopts, when aggregated, has a differing power and causal influence than the functional purpose of each practice alone holds (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). Scholars have recommended considering bundles of human resource management practices collectively (Guest, Conway, & Dewe, 2004) to understand their holistic influence. Therefore, when examining employee attributions of talent management, it is important to consider attributions of the TM practices as a bundle to understand its greater influence beyond the single practice and step of talent identification, which may not be relevant to and, by definition, is not experienced by all employees.

Considering what might be desired outcomes of talent management, I reviewed the literature to identify individual-level outcomes of note in the use of talent

management as a strategic workforce management practice, as presented in the conceptualisation of the model in chapter three. These desired talent outcomes are a core set of outcomes of interest to organisations in the use of talent management: the employee's commitment to their organisation, the employee's contribution of organisationally supportive behaviours, the intention of the employee to remain with the organisation, and the employee's task performance.

### 6.2.2. Desired outcomes of talent management

**Affective organisational commitment.** Affect is a fundamental consideration in the relationship which exists between an organisation and its employees, and may be even more relevant in the context of exclusive talent management given that talent-identified employees are expected to sustain contributions beyond those of their peers. If positive regard, or affect, was not evident, the motivation to delivery exceptional outcomes may be out of reach. Affective organisational commitment, which describes the attachment which employees develop with their organisation (Meyer & Allen, 1991), is in part predicted by work experiences (Meyer et al., 2002). In the SHRM literature, affective commitment has been shown to be positively associated with organisationally supportive behaviours and with reduced turnover intention (Meyer et al., 2002), both of which are valuable in organisational management of talent. Affective commitment is also positively associated with internal locus of control (Meyer et al., 2002) which demonstrates its link to individual differences beyond the influence of the workplace HRM practices. In the context of talent management, this may be relevant to the self-initiative required of talented employees to strive for extra-role performance beyond that normally associated with their current position.

In research into specific HRM systems, such as high commitment HRM practices, that is, practices which draw on concepts of high-performance work systems and high-involvement practices (Boxall & Macky, 2009), high commitment practices have been shown to support organisational commitment (Boon & Kalshoven, 2014). In the careers literature, empirical study of career management behaviours has demonstrated a positive relationship between employee perceptions of help from their organisation to manage their career and affective commitment which is mediated by psychological contract fulfilment (Sturges et al., 2005). Further, in the HR attributions literature, a study by Van de Voorde and Beijer has examined differing employee HR

attributions of high performance work systems and found that HR well-being attributions are associated with higher levels of commitment (Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015) and employee perceptions of HR practice outcomes as being favourable is also associated with affective commitment (Marescaux, De Winne, & Sels, 2013). These findings help to explain that an organisational context which is supportive of the employee's career development and their high performance are each associated with reported positive regard for the organisation.

In the talent management literature, scholars have argued that both organisational commitment and citizenship behaviours are valuable outcomes expected of talent management (Collings & Mellahi, 2009) and have found that affective commitment is an outcome associated with participation in talent development programs (Chami-Malaeb & Garavan, 2013). Given the norm of reciprocity within social exchange (Gouldner, 1960) and based on the empirical studies reviewed, it is therefore reasonable to expect that when an employee attributes the purpose of organisational talent management practices as those of commitment to employees, the employee would reciprocally report attitudes of commitment to their employer. In the context of talent management which may be seen to promise heightened investment in employee development and greater opportunities for career development, perception by employees that talent management is an activity supportive of employees, which directs investment towards employees and which offers favourable outcomes, would be more likely to generate affective commitment by the employee in response. In contrast, the use of strategic talent management for the purposes of enacting control, is less likely to be seen as a form of commitment directed towards the employee. When an employee attributes the purpose of organisational talent management practices to be those of enacting control of employees or the workforce, the employee would be less likely to reciprocate with attitudes of commitment to their employer. Therefore, I hypothesise that:

*Hypothesis 1a: Employee TM attributions of commitment will be positively associated with affective commitment.*

*Hypothesis 2a: Employee TM attributions of control will be negatively associated with affective commitment.*

**Organisational Citizenship Behaviours.** In the SHRM literature, organizational citizenship behaviour, has been defined as individual behaviours which promote the organisation's efficient and effective functioning (Organ, 1997) and have

been found to be positively associated with group and organisational effectiveness (Podsakoff et al., 2000). Organisational citizenship behaviours (OCBs) were found to be predicted by a number of antecedents including perceived organisational support and transformational leadership behaviour (Podsakoff et al., 2000). Evidence also indicates that leaders influence OCBs through employee reciprocation of social exchange such that when employees experience supportive behaviour from their leader they reciprocate with supportive behaviour (Podsakoff et al., 2000). Further, OCBs are also found to be an outcome of trust in the organisation (Wong et al., 2012). In a study of employee perceptions of HRM, Alfes et al. (2013) found that an employee's positive perceptions of their firm's HRM practices is positively associated with OCB and negatively associated with turnover intention and both are mediated by employee engagement (Alfes, Shantz, Truss, & Soane, 2013). The relationship between HRM practices and individual employee outcomes has been examined, finding that employee perceptions of HRM practices was positively associated with employee organisational citizenship behaviours (Snape & Redman, 2010). The findings of these studies indicate that positive employee perceptions of the practices which shape their employment relationship are rewarded by the employee's organisationally supportive behaviours towards their organisation.

In summary, where organisations demonstrate support to employees through their workforce management practices, employees are more likely to reciprocate that support through organisational citizenship behaviours. When an employee attributes the purpose of organisational talent management practices as those of commitment to employees, an employee is more likely to contribute discretionary extra-role effort and behaviours in support of their organisation. This may be a way to reciprocate the commitment, support and trust which they receive from their organisation, such as through discretionary organisational citizenship behaviours. In contrast, when an employee attributes the purpose of organisational talent management practices to be those of enacting control of employees or the workforce, the employee would be less likely to reciprocally offer gestures of discretionary effort, contribution or support to their employer in the form of organisational citizenship behaviours. Therefore, I hypothesise that:

> *Hypothesis 1b: Employee TM attributions of commitment will be positively associated with organisational citizenship behaviours.*

*Hypothesis 2b: Employee TM attributions of control will be negatively associated with organisational citizenship behaviours.*

**Intention to remain with the organisation.** In the SHRM literature turnover intention has been shown to be predicted by perceived violations and breach of the employee's psychological contract (Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski, & Bravo, 2007). Turnover resulting from psychological contract breach has been argued to result in high costs to the employer resulting from the lost investments made in the employee leaving and the costs and effort required to secure a replacement (Kacmar, Andrews, Rooy, Steilberg, & Cerrone, 2006). In the case of talent, where employees are identified as talent and are seen as being of unique value to the organisation (Sparrow & Makram, 2015), costs are expected to be significantly greater. Of note, an individual's turnover intentions can be interpreted as an indicator of the employee's psychological attachment to their organisation (Zhao et al., 2007). Conversely, an individual's intention to remain with their organisation is an indication of the extent to which an employee intends to continue in their current employment relationship. Scholars have argued that workforce differentiation of employees is not well understood (Becker et al., 2009) and that talent management may have unintended exclusionary effects (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016) or even result in risk of psychological contract breach due to the asymmetry between employee and organisation views of their talent status (or not) (Dries & De Gieter, 2014).

Therefore, when an employee attributes the purpose of organisational talent management practices as those of commitment to employees, particularly in light of future career benefits as a central tenet of talent management, an employee is more likely to consider remaining with their organisation in the near term rather than seeking employment externally. In contrast, given that use of an exclusive talent strategy may already risk employees feeling excluded (Swailes, 2013a), I argue that employees will prefer their organisation to demonstrate commitment focused TM practices, rather than control focused TM practices. Therefore when an employee attributes the purpose of organisational talent management practices to be those of enacting control of employees rather than of commitment, the employee would be more likely to consider leaving the organisation in favour of working in another, where the other organisation is seen as using talent management as an enactment of commitment to employees, their development of individual potential and their future career. Therefore, I hypothesise that:

*Hypothesis 1c: Employee TM attributions of commitment will be positively associated with intention to stay.*

*Hypothesis 2c: Employee TM attributions of control will be positively associated with intention to stay.*

**Talent management and task performance.** Performance is of central relevance to the strategic human resources literature (den Hartog, Boselie, & Paauwe, 2004; Guest et al., 2013). Performance is also of direct relevance to the talent management literature as a workforce differentiation strategy (Becker et al., 2009), principally aimed at achieving organisational competitive advantage. To better understand the facets of such advantage, scholars have called for a consideration of outcomes beyond simply shareholder value (Collings, 2014c). At the organisational level, talent management is intended to translate into strategic impact (Becker et al., 2009), however researchers have called for more proximal measures of the outcomes of HRM practices in contrast to distal measures of organisational performance (Paauwe et al., 2013), and for consideration of individual level outcomes (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016).

At the individual level, an individual's performance of their core work tasks is expected to be at least one of the mechanisms through which organisational advantage through talent is achieved. Indeed in organisational practice, appraisal of employee performance is one of two primary measures used as part of the selection method (Silzer & Church, 2009a, 2009b), the other being talent potential. Talent potential is distinct from current potential, and refers to the potential of the individual to develop increasing skills and competence, however the two constructs are often conflated in implementation of talent management (Silzer & Church, 2009a). In the academic literature, high performance is a stated component of definitions of talent management, such as in Collings and Mellahi (Collings & Mellahi, 2009) and is implied, such as in the definition by Gelens et al. which refers to "contribution" (Gelens et al., 2013).

Drawing on evidence from the prior study, consistent with expected findings, all of the interviewees reported that positively differentiated task performance obligations were a central component of their formed obligations to the organisation as talent-identified employees and as such all self-reported higher than peer performance, however this was not triangulated with organisationally-reported task performance as this data was not available in the qualitative study. However, in contrast to other desired

outcomes of talent management hypothesised above, performance is also a core tenet of the transactional employment relationship and therefore can be expected to be contractually influenced to a large extent directly by the employment relationship. While talent are often characterised as the highest performers in the organisation, in part due to selection processes focusing on high performance (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Silzer & Church, 2009a), many high performers exist in the organisation who are not likely to be identified as talent, given the high levels of differentiation in the practice of talent identification and given the use of potential as a second factor in identification.

The use of organisational talent management can be considered a control strategy, as reported by the organisation leadership in the pilot study qualitative interviews. Talent management enacted as a management control practice is expected to support organisational aims of high performance through assuring that the right talent and skills are correspondingly allocated to the pivotal positions in which this talent is required to support business performance. Through control and oversight of the activity, talent management is then expected to facilitate performance and other priorities of the firm, such as reducing costs. This is consistent with the line of argumentation in the literature that performance management can be applied as both a strategic and tactical tool to convey performance expectations to employees (Biron, Farndale, & Paauwe, 2011). Therefore when used to enact control of the performance of the workforce strategically and tactically, talent management can be expected to support performance. Therefore, when an employee attributes the meaning of their organisation's use of talent management as an enactment of control rather than commitment, these attributions are also expected to be positively related to performance. Therefore, I hypothesise the following:

> *Hypotheses 1d: Employee TM attributions of commitment will be positively associated with performance.*

> *Hypotheses 2d: Employee TM attributions of control will be positively associated with performance.*

Having theorised the relationship between employee attributions of talent management and a set of expected outcomes of talent management, I now theorise the influence of the psychological contract on the relationship between TM attributions and outcomes.

### 6.2.3. Attributions of talent management and psychological contract fulfilment

The psychological contract is a known mediator in the exchange-based relationship between employees and their organisations. In the SHRM literature, the psychological contract has been shown to be a significant mediating mechanism in the communication of "everyday HR practices…to the interpreting employee" (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994, p. 453). In the careers literature, the psychological contract has been used to examine individual and organisational career management activities and employee outcomes and found that organisational career management assistance was associated with fulfilment of the psychological contract (Sturges et al., 2005). This finding suggests that employees hold expectations related to career management support from their organisation even in the context of today's careers (Sturges et al., 2005) which are often described as "boundaryless". Boundaryless and protean careers (Hall, 2004) are characterised by an awareness that employment for life is no longer available in most organisations and careers (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). Given the persisting expectation from employees for career management support, there is a risk of psychological contract breach (Sturges et al., 2005), if such expectations are not met. In the case of talent-identified employees, turnover of talent-identified employees is of particular concern.

In the workforce differentiation and talent management literatures, the psychological contract has been theorised as a central mechanism which mediates the social exchange based relationship of talent with their organisations (Höglund, 2012). Höglund (2012) examined the link between HRM practices and talent identified employee obligations to develop their skills. Bjorkman et al. (2013) examined the commitments which employees differentially form when they perceive they are included in an organisation's talent pool or not. These included to accept increasing performance demands, to commit to build competencies, and to actively support their firm's strategic priorities, for which the study found evidence that employees who perceive they are identified as talent are more likely to be associated with these attitudes. They concluded that by being informed of their talent status, employees were more likely to form these obligations than those who do not perceive they are identified (Björkman et al., 2013).

Indeed the psychological contract is seen as so central to the exchange-based talent relationship that perceptions of asymmetry in talent status between the organisation and the employees have been associated with perceptions of psychological

contract breach (Dries & De Gieter, 2014). Psychological contract breach is the extent to which an employee perceives that their organisation has failed to fulfil its promises and obligations to them (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Incongruence of talent status is describes as being when an organisation's leadership and an individual hold views of the individual's talent status which differ and are not congruent (Sonnenberg et al., 2014). Talent status incongruence has been associated with negative consequences for psychological contract fulfilment (Sonnenberg et al., 2014). This is consistent with evidence from the prior qualitative study which has shown that perceived talent status is associated with the formation of obligations differentially from those not identified as talent, as described earlier (Björkman et al., 2013).

Workforce differentiation involves disproportionate investments by the organisation which includes a company's greater investment in specific segments of its workforce identified as talent than in non-talent identified employees (Becker et al., 2009). Differentiation through talent identification is therefore argued to be seen as a promise of differentiated investment in the talented employee (King, 2016). Given that not all employees are therefore treated equally in terms of the investments made due to exclusive talent management, differentiated employee responses are reasonably expected. Particularly as the employment relationship is centrally based on commitments of reciprocal exchange (Rousseau, 2011) the extent to which an employee evaluates their psychological contract as having been fulfilled is also of interest in the talent management literature.

The fulfilment of the psychological contract is also of interest in the talent management literature. A recent study found that the increased use of talent management practices, as measured by the number of practices used, was positively associated with perceived psychological contract fulfilment (Sonnenberg et al., 2014). Further, the study found that this relationship was negatively impacted by incongruent perceptions of talent status between the employee and organisation (Sonnenberg et al., 2014). These relationships were hypothesised to result from a better understanding of the terms of the employment relationship and less risk of incongruence due to that greater understanding (Sonnenberg et al., 2014). Further, a study which examined the moderating influence of employee knowledge of their talent status (talent status recognition) on the relationship between their perceptions of their employer's fulfilment of their psychological contract and obligations to perform and develop, found that talent status recognition to positively

moderate the relationship (Smale et al., 2015). A further study examined employee perceptions of talent management practice effectiveness and their associated obligations to develop leadership competence and found that the positive relationship between perceived TM practice effectiveness and commitment to competence development is mediated by psychological contract fulfilment (Khoreva et al., 2017). In a recent study in the TM literature, perceived psychological contract fulfilment was examined as an employer inducement of talent obligations and found to be positively related to obligations but moderated by whether the talent were aware of their exclusive status or not (Ehrnrooth et al., 2018). These studies confirm that the psychological contract is centrally involved in the talent-organisation exchange-based relationship and that its perceived fulfilment has consequences for the employee and their organisation.

The psychological contract, a central mechanism through which employee outcomes are influenced in the social exchange based relationship (Rousseau, 1989), is of central relevance in career management (Sturges et al., 2005), whereby employees increasingly manage protean careers (Hall, 2004), and in workforce differentiation through talent identification (Höglund, 2012), in which heightened sensitivity to psychological contract-based exchange may occur (Ehrnrooth et al., 2018; King, 2016). Consistent with the conceptualisation by Höglund of the psychological contract as central relevance to talent management (Höglund, 2012), in this study I hypothesise that the psychological contract is centrally involved in the employee's experience of talent management. As psychological contract fulfilment is re-evaluated over time by the employee (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000), employees will re-evaluate the extent to which they believe their psychological contract is fulfilled by their employer as a consequence of experiencing organisational talent management and making attributions of its purpose. Through this central mechanism, as a function of the fulfilment of the psychological contract, the employee's perceived obligations to support organisationally-desired talent outcomes will be influenced. Therefore, I hypothesise that the employee's evaluation of the fulfilment of their psychological contract is the central mechanism through which organisational talent management accesses intended differentiated outcomes and will partially mediate the influence of employee attributions of talent management on desired talent outcomes. Therefore, I hypothesise the following:

*Hypothesis 3. Psychological contract fulfilment will partially mediate the hypothesised positive relationships between employee TM attributions of commitment and desired TM outcomes: a) affective commitment, b) organisational citizenship behaviours, c) intention to stay, and d) task performance.*

*Hypothesis 4: Psychological contract fulfilment will partially mediate the hypothesised negative relationships between employee TM attributions of control and desired TM outcomes: a) affective commitment, b) organisational citizenship behaviours, c) intention to stay, and d) performance.*

Figure 6.1, presented at the start of this section 6.2, provides an illustrative summary of the measurement model and hypotheses. Detailed methods for this study were presented in the research design in the main methods chapter four. In the following section, 6.3, I present the results of the preliminary pilot study and of preliminary regression analysis.

## 6.3. Results

### 6.3.1. Qualitative pilot study: Understanding the organisational talent context

In contrast to the study presented in chapter five which adopted an inductive analytic approach, the use of qualitative interviews in the current study was for the purpose of orienting myself as a researcher to the organisation and the context in which talent management was being conducted as a strategic management practice. Additionally, the interviews were used to test the fit of the concepts, questionnaire items and terminology used in the employee survey questionnaire and to gain an understanding of the organisational use of talent management in the participating organisation. The pilot study provided two main benefits. First, through qualitative interviews, I was able to develop a detailed understanding of the organisational talent management system, the use of talent assessment and identification, and the purpose and management intention for the use of strategic talent management in practice. Second, through the interviews, I was able to confirm the fit of the research scope and the suitability of the data collection questionnaire within the context of talent management in the organisation: an exclusive philosophy of talent management (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014). There are four main findings of the pilot qualitative study. They are reported in summary below.

**Talent management is a strategic business priority linked with business priorities.** Talent management is adopted and employed as a strategic management

practice, facilitated through differentiated human resource management, intended to strategically contribute to the organisation's current performance and its long-term competitive success. Consistent with the extension of the definition of strategic talent management which I proposed in chapter 1, evidence in this study confirms that direct management involvement and governance of talent management with board-level visibility and accountability differentiated talent management from general HRM practices in this organisation. Talent management is an explicitly-defined organisational investment in the selection, retention, development of employees identified as talent or with potential and their deployment to positions which disproportionately contribute to the strategic purpose of the firm in the current context. The contextual characteristics of the organisation's requirements for talent were described as needing to be adaptive to changing market priorities, changes in the financial services sector, regulatory change, technical change, including disruptive technologies, and macroeconomic requirements.

**Talent management is adopted for dual purposes of commitment and of control.** Management reports being committed to investment in the development of the current workforce and individual potential. Management interviewees reported that talent management is intended to be a commitment-based practice of investment in the current workforce and the development of individuals for their contribution to the organisation. Management governance of and operational control of the organisational requirements for a skilled and available workforce. Nonetheless, in parallel, it was evident that executive interviewees perceived the activity to fulfil a strategic purpose of ensuring availability and sufficiency of talent in the mix of skills, capabilities and experiences required for the business at any given time. Management team members were clear in their comments linking talent management to their business management accountabilities. Thus, two distinct but complementary purposes of talent management exist in the organisation.

**Exclusive talent management is implemented through workforce differentiation**. Exclusive talent management is the adopted philosophy in this organisation. While all employees in the organisation are highly valued, talent management is described as a differentiated practice and involved distinct policies and practices separate from the core HRM practices which are applied to the full workforce. Talent-specific policies and practice involve the assessment of employee talent potential

relative to their peers and the differential management of talent-identified employees throughout the employee lifecycle.

**Talent management is operationalised as a business-embedded activity through multiple actors.** Talent management is fundamentally viewed and conducted as a business activity and is supported and facilitated by Human Resources representatives. Throughout the annual performance cycle, some events and practices regarding talent management would be reasonably visible to employees such as the guidance which is shared with supervisors as to how to identify talent and the annual management talent review meetings which involve the participation of much of the senior management and thereby become a visible commitment of the management annually. There is no formal disclosure of talent ratings to employees. Supervisors are involved, with increasing responsibility for talent management and development as they advance to management positions. Within this context, supervisor support of employees, within which some will be identified as talent and some not, is expected as part of the people management roles. Supervisors or line managers are directly involved in talent identification as an annual exercise.

This pilot study involved the direct engagement with the CEO, members of the senior management team and other executives. The interviews were undertaken as a further effort to support interpretation of the quantitative findings, particularly with regard to the employee attributions of their organisation's intended purpose in talent management. The use of more than one source of insight in the research is a form of triangulation of findings which draws on different sources of data even when they are not directly comparable (Jick, 1979; Yin, 2013).

### 6.3.2. Descriptive statistics

**Reliability of measures and correlation between variables.** Reliability measures were tested for each construct variable computed, to confirm sufficient reliability of the measure for use in the detailed analysis. Table 6.1 presents the descriptive statistics including the means, standard deviation, reliability for each measure used. Measures were found to meet the reliability threshold of 0.70. Correlations of statistical significance are indicated in the standard approach in the literature such that where a correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed), the use of the symbol "***" is applied, 0.01 level (2-tailed), the use of the symbol "**" is

applied and where a correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed), the use of the symbol "*" is applied. The majority of significantly associated relationships reported here are at the higher levels of significance.

The correlations of all variables with all other variables in the measurement model were tested and reviewed. The bivariate correlations between the independent, mediator and dependent variables are significant. This suggests that these variables are relevant and important in the current study of employee reactions to organisational talent management. Further, as reasonably expected, most variables in the model are significantly correlated with the others and many at the higher degree of 0.01 significance. Correlations are below 0.7 threshold of inter-correlation for all measures which is the recognised guidance in the literature by Nunnally (Nunnally, 1973). Therefore the set of variables in the measurement model can be used for analysis as they do not indicate substantial multi-collinearity. This is also a threshold supported by arguments that substantial collinearity across two or more variables only begins to be indicated by correlations of 0.85 or above (Kline, 2005). The variables within this study are well within the 0.85 threshold. Of note, the two employee talent management attributions measures, that of commitment and of control, are inter-correlated (0.36) which is as expected but at a level which does not indicate risk of collinearity.

Table 6.1 Descriptive statistics, correlations and reliabilities

| | Mean | Standard Deviation | Age in Years | Gender | Years Employed at Company | TM Attributions of Commitment | TM Attributions of Control | Psychological Contract Fulfilment | Affective Committment | Organisational Citizenship Behaviours | Intention to Remain with Organisation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Age in Years | 42.35 | 9.53 | | | | | | | | | |
| Gender | 1.45 | 0.50 | -0.03 | | | | | | | | |
| Years Employed at Company | 9.51 | 7.18 | $0.17^{**}$ | $0.12^{**}$ | | | | | | | |
| TM Attributions of Commitment | 5.36 | 1.11 | -0.03 | $0.08^{**}$ | $0.07^{**}$ | | | | | | |
| TM Attributions of Control | 5.31 | 1.04 | -0.02 | $-0.05^{*}$ | 0.04 | $0.35^{**}$ | | | | | |
| Psychological Contract Fulfilment | 5.14 | 1.56 | $-0.06^{*}$ | 0.03 | 0.04 | $0.61^{**}$ | $0.16^{**}$ | | | | |
| Affective Committment | 5.37 | 1.21 | -0.02 | $0.11^{**}$ | $0.17^{**}$ | $0.61^{**}$ | $0.19^{**}$ | $0.56^{**}$ | | | |
| Organisational Citizenship Behaviours | 6.12 | 0.63 | -0.03 | $0.11^{**}$ | $0.06^{*}$ | $0.28^{**}$ | $0.20^{**}$ | $0.21^{**}$ | $0.35^{**}$ | | |
| Intention to Remain with Organisation | 5.39 | 1.25 | 0.04 | $0.08^{**}$ | $0.14^{**}$ | $0.55^{**}$ | $0.14^{**}$ | $0.56^{**}$ | $0.63^{**}$ | $0.25^{**}$ | |
| Task Performance | 2.77 | 0.73 | 0.02 | $-0.06^{*}$ | $0.07^{**}$ | 0.00 | 0.01 | -0.02 | -0.02 | 0.03 | 0.00 |

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
c. Listwise n=1561

### 6.3.3. Preliminary regression analysis

Prior to testing the mediation model in the subsequent chapter, I conducted conventional regression analysis to examine whether or not direct relationships exist between the variables in the model with a focus on their influence on the four hypothesised dependent variables, the hypothesised outcomes of talent management. The purpose of this preliminary step is to better understand the relationships between the independent and dependent variables and the contribution of the independent variables and the proposed mediator to the overall model. I now present the findings of preliminary hierarchical linear regression analysis which sheds light on the relationships between the variables. In the chapter which follows, I then present the results of the full hypothesis testing of the mediation model using conditional process analysis (Hayes, 2017).

In the current regression testing, I applied three steps in regression analysis. The first step included only the control variables of age, gender and tenure with the company. In the second step I added the two attribution measures of control and of commitment. In the third step I added the mediator, psychological contract fulfilment. The four tables which follow (6.2, 6.3, 6.4, and 6.5), each present a summary of the results of these three steps, corresponding to each of the four outcomes variables.

To interpret the findings of this preliminary regression testing I proceed as follows. First, I examine the relationship between the employee attributions of talent management and the outcome variables to understand if a relationship exists between each of the independent and the dependent variables in the hypothesised model. I then conduct regression analysis of the combined model, without testing specifically for mediation, but rather to examine what effect adding the variable of psychological contract fulfilment had on the attributions-outcome direct relationships identified in the first step. Finally, I consider the behaviour of the control variables in the models. The findings are presented in this sequence.

Before presenting detailed findings, in figure 6.2, I present a summary of the direct relationships tested along with a summary of the outcomes of hypothesis testing for direct effects.

Figure 6.2 Hypothesis testing: Direct effects of employee TM attributions
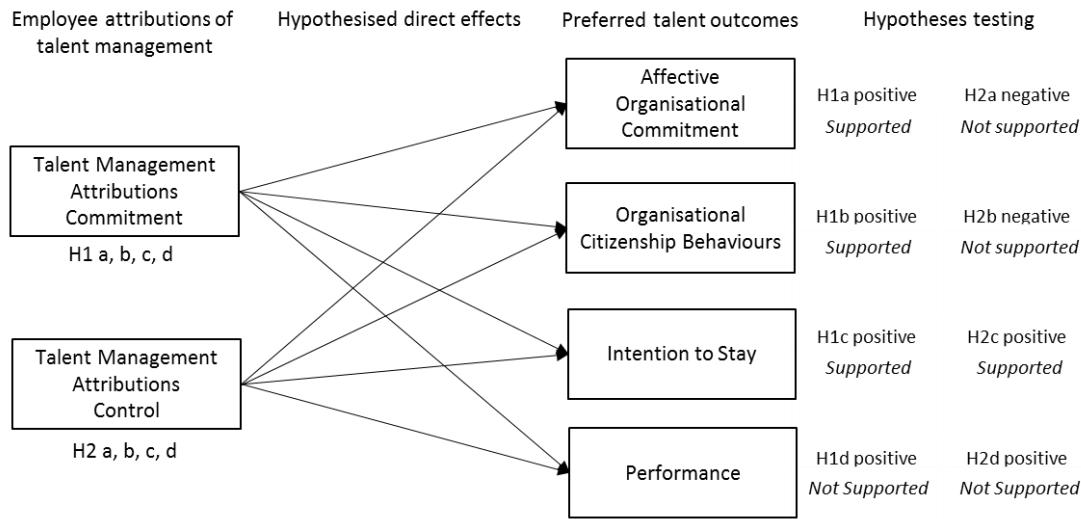


**Direct effects: Employee attributions of talent management and hypothesised outcomes**

**Affective Commitment**. The first of the four dependent variables hypothesised in this model to be desired outcomes of talent management is affective commitment. Table 6.2 below presents a summary of the preliminary regression analysis for the dependent variable affective commitment.

Table 6.2 Dependent variable: Affective commitment

| Affective Commitment | Step 1 | Step 2 | Step 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Controls added | Attributions added | Mediator added |
| | Beta Coefficient | Beta Coefficient | Beta Coefficient |
| Age | -0.04 | -0.01 | 0 |
| Gender | 0.09*** | 0.05* | 0.05** |
| Years Employed at Company | 0.17*** | 0.12*** | 0.12*** |
| TM Attributions of Commitment | | 0.61*** | 0.42*** |
| TM Attributions of Control | | -0.04 | -0.02 |
| Psychological Contract Fulfilment | | | 0.29*** |
| F | 23.27*** | 210.77*** | 217.40*** |
| $R^2$ (Adjusted $R^2$) | | 0.39 (0.39) | 0.44 (0.44) |
| Change in $R^2$ | 0.04 | 0.35 | 0.05 |
| Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Control variables are age, gender, tenure. | | | |

Regression of affective commitment on each of talent attributions of commitment and of control result was tested. As hypothesised, the relationship between employee attributions of commitment and employee affective commitment is positive and statistically significant (Beta = 0.61, $p < 0.001$). This supports hypothesis 1a. Employee talent management attributions of commitment explain 35% of the variation (adjusted $R^2 = 0.39$, change in $R^2 = 0.35$) in the outcome variable, employee affective commitment. Employee TM attributions of control are positively and significantly related to employee affective commitment (Beta = 0.18, $p < .001$), and explain 3% of the variance in affective commitment when attributions of control are not included in the model (adjusted $R^2 = 0.07$, change in $R^2 = 0.03$). Therefore hypothesis 2a is not supported. This means that, as hypothesised, when an employee perceives their organisation's use of talent management to indicate an intention by their organisation to enact commitment for their employees, the employee reciprocally responds with generating affective commitment towards their organisation.

**Organisational citizenship Behaviours (OCB).** The second of the four dependent variables hypothesised in this model to be desired outcomes of talent management is organisational citizenship behaviours. Table 6.3 below presents a summary of the preliminary regression analysis for the dependent variable OCB.

Table 6.3 Dependent variable: Organisational citizenship behaviour

| Organisational citizenship behaviours | Step 1 Controls added | Step 2 Attributions added | Step 3 Mediator added |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Beta Coefficient | Beta Coefficient | Beta Coefficient |
| Age | -0.04 | -0.02 | -0.02 |
| Gender | 0.10*** | 0.10*** | 0.09*** |
| Years Employed at Company | 0.05 | 0.02 | 0.02 |
| TM Attributions of Commitment | | 0.22*** | 0.17*** |
| TM Attributions of Control | | 0.12*** | 0.12*** |
| Psychological Contract Fulfilment | | | 0.06** |
| F | 8.23*** | 34.19*** | 29.45*** |
| $R^2$ (Adjusted $R^2$) | | 0.09 (0.09) | 0.10 (0.09) |
| Change in $R^2$ | 0.02 | 0.08 | 0 |

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Control variables are age, gender, tenure.

When organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB) is regressed on employee TM attributions of commitment and of control, the findings are notably more balanced. First, individually, employee TM attributions of commitment and control are both positively and significantly related to organisational citizenship behaviour (B = 0.27, p < .001 and B = 0.20, p < .001 respectively). When tested in the same model, TM attributions of commitment and of control are positively related to OCB (Beta = 0.22, p < 0.001 and Beta = 0.12, p < .001 respectively). As expected, employees who perceive talent management to be a strategy of commitment are more likely to offer discretionary supportive behaviours in favour of their organisation (and therefore hypothesis 1b is supported). However, in contrast to the hypothesised negative relationship between TM control attributions and OCB (hypothesis 2b is not supported), the current findings indicate that employees who perceive TM attributions of control are also likely to contribute OCB in favour of their organisation. In contrast to what was expected, whether employees perceive TM attributions of commitment or control, they are more likely to demonstrate behaviours which support their organisation (therefore hypothesis 2b is not supported). That is, even when employees attribute the purpose of organisational talent management as directed to the control of costs, performance and reputation (as in the measure), they are more likely to reciprocate with organisationally supportive behaviours, thus supporting the organisation in its efforts related to costs, performance and reputation. Separately, TM attributions of commitment and of control account for 6.7% and 3.8% of the variance in OCBs (adjusted $R^2 = 0.08$, change in $R^2 = 0.07$ and adjusted $R^2 = 0.05$, change in $R^2 = 0.04$ respectively). Together, attributions of commitment and of control account for 8% of the variation in organisational citizenship behaviour measured in the model (adjusted $R^2 = 0.08$, change in $R^2 = 0.08$). This finding will be examined further in the subsequent testing.

**Intention to remain with the company.** The third of the four dependent variables hypothesised in this model to be desired outcomes of talent management is intention to remain with the company. Table 6.4 below presents a summary of the preliminary regression analysis for the dependent variable intention to remain.

Table 6.4 Dependent variable: Intention to remain with company

| Intention to remain with the company | Step 1 | Step 2 | Step 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Controls added | Attributions added | Mediator added |
| | Beta Coefficient | Beta Coefficient | Beta Coefficient |
| Age | 0.02 | 0.05 | 0.06** |
| Gender | 0.07* | 0.03 | 0.04** |
| Years Employed at Company | 0.14*** | 0.10*** | 0.09*** |
| TM Attributions of Commitment | | 0.57*** | 0.33*** |
| TM Attributions of Control | | -0.06** | -.0.04 |
| Psychological Contract Fulfilment | | | 0.36*** |
| F | 16.48*** | 159.40*** | 187.74*** |
| $R^2$ (Adjusted $R^2$) | | 0.33 (0.32) | 0.41 (0.40) |
| Change in $R^2$ | 0.03 | 0.23 | 0.08 |

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Control variables are age, gender, tenure.

Preliminary analysis of the relationship between employee TM attributions and their intention to remain with the company also indicates direct statistically significant relationships. Specifically, as hypothesised (hypothesis 1c), employee TM attributions of commitment are positively and significantly related to an employee's intention to remain employed with their company (Beta = 0.57, $p < 0.001$). Further, as hypothesised, employee TM attributions of control is negatively and significantly related with intention to remain with the organisation (Beta = 0.12, $p < 0.001$), confirming support for hypothesis 2c. That is, when an employee perceives talent management as an enactment of control by their organisation, the employee is less likely to intend to remain employed with their organisation. This is as hypothesised (2c), and confirms that when an employee attributed their organisation's use of talent management as a commitment to them, they are more likely to stay employed in the company and continue their career there. This finding is consistent with evidence in the literature which indicates that affective commitment is negatively associated with turnover intention (Meyer et al., 2002). However, when measured separately, attributions of commitment and control each are found to be positively and significantly related to intention to remain with the company (B = 0.56, p< .001 and B = 0.14, $p < .001$), which does not support hypothesis 2c. That is, employee TM attributions of commitment alone accounts for 29% of variance (adjusted $R^2$ = 0.32, change in $R^2$ = 0.29) in intention to remain with the company, whereas employee TM attributions of control alone, accounts for only 2% of variation (adjusted $R^2$ = 0.05, change in $R^2$ = 0.02) in intention to remain. When

employee TM attributions of commitment and control are both included in the model, the effective of TM attributions of control is a negative and significant relationship (Beta = -0.6, P < .001).

**Task performance.** The fourth of the four dependent variables hypothesised in this model to be desired outcomes of talent management is task performance. Table 6.5 below presents a summary of the preliminary regression analysis for the dependent variable task performance.

Table 6.5 Dependent variable: Task performance

| Task performance | Step 1 | Step 2 | Step 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Controls added | Attributions added | Mediator added |
| | Beta Coefficient | Beta Coefficient | Beta Coefficient |
| Age | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Gender | -0.07** | -0.06 | -0.07** |
| Years Employed at Company | 0.08*** | 0.08** | 0.08** |
| TM Attributions of Commitment | | -0.01 | 0.01 |
| TM Attributions of Control | | 0.01 | 0 |
| Psychological Contract Fulfilment | | | -0.03 |
| F | 4.72** | 2.85* | 2.47* |
| $R^2$ (Adjusted $R^2$) | | 0.01 (0.01) | 0.01 |
| Change in $R^2$ | 0.01 | 0 | 0 |

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Control variables are age, gender, tenure.

Finally, it was hypothesised that each of employee TM attributions of commitment and of control would be positively and significantly related to employee task performance (hypotheses 4a and 4b). However, in the current testing, no significant relationships were identified and therefore hypothesises 4a and 4b are not supported. This finding is unexpected as strategic talent management is purported to facilitate or extract differentiated outcomes of advantage to the firm. However the current evidence does not support performance as one of those outcomes.

**The combined effects of employee attributions of talent management and psychological contract fulfilment on modelled outcomes.** Following preliminary testing of direct effects, I then consider the addition of the theorised mediator to the model and look at each of the dependent variables. When psychological contract fulfilment (PFC) is then added to the regression model for the dependent variable

affective commitment, psychological contract fulfilment is found to be positively and significantly related to employee affective commitment (Beta = 0.29, p < 0.001). The addition of psychological contract fulfilment to the model explains a further 5% of variance (adjusted $R^2$ = 0.05) of affective commitment in the model. This indicates that the psychological contract is involved in the employee response to talent management.

When psychological contract fulfilment is added to the regression model for the dependent variable organisational citizenship behaviour, psychological contract fulfilment is found to be positively and significantly related to OCB (Beta = 0.06, p < 0.05). The addition of psychological contract fulfilment to the model however only explains a further .3% of variance (adjusted $R^2$ = 0.003) of OCB as an outcome in the model. This may indicate that while significantly related to other variables in the model, psychological contract fulfilment is not a strong predictor of OCBs when attributions of commitment and control are in the model.

The addition of psychological contract commitment to the regression model for the outcome of intention to remain with the company, PCF is found to be positively and highly significantly related to intention to remain (Beta = 0.36, p < 0.001). The addition of psychological contract fulfilment to the model explains a further variance of 8% of the change in the employee's intention to remain with their organisation when the employee attributes TM to commitment and control purposes in their organisation. This indicates that psychological contract fulfilment is an active contributing factor in the outcomes of talent management in this model, as hypothesised.

Finally, as expected, following the preliminary analysis presented above, the addition of psychological contract fulfilment to the regression model of task performance on employee attributions of talent management is found to be insignificant. Conversely, significant in this model is the employee's gender (Beta = -0.07, p < 0.01) and the employee's tenure with the organisation (B = 0.08, p < 0.01), where the variable responses were coded as male 1 and female 2.

**Control variables.** As expected and consistent with the rationale presented for control variables (see chapter four, detailed design for quantitative study), the preliminary regression analysis models have confirmed that age and tenure are variables which are significantly related to an employee's intention to remain with the organisation. Additionally, gender is significantly correlated with each of the four

dependent variables tested as desired outcomes of talent management. However, the effects of each are minimal and consistent with evidence in the literature, for example, with regard to the outcome of affective commitment (Meyer et al., 2002). Despite the minimal effects, as these variable are found to be significant in one or more of the eight models tested, the control variables of age, gender and tenure are maintained in subsequent analysis to control for their effect.

## 6.4.    Discussion of preliminary analysis

Following preliminary analysis, it appears that the introduction of the concept and construct of employee attributions of talent management is an important addition to the talent management (and wider strategic human resource management) literature. More specifically, employee TM attributions of commitment have been found to be positive and significantly related to affective commitment, intention to stay and organisational citizenship behaviour. Employee TM attributions of control have been found to be positively related to OCB and negatively related to employee intention to remain with their organisation. Interestingly when attributions of commitment are not in the model, even attributions of control may serve to protect the organisation to a limited extent through a positively significant relationship with intention to remain. The hypothesised negative relationship between attributions of control and of affective commitment was found to be insignificant, such that whether alone or with attributions of commitment, employee TM attributions of control is seen to have a significant positive relationship with affective commitment. The explained variation is only modest at 3%, compared with the power of attributions of commitment which explains 35% of change in affective commitment. Finally, evidence for a statistically significant relationship between attributions (whether commitment or control) and organisationally-reported task performance has not been found in the current testing. Further, these findings indicate that the addition of the psychological contract fulfilment measure to the model improves the model in some instances, such that psychological contract fulfilment is found to be involved in the model, although whether it behaves as a moderator is not yet confirmed. Overall, therefore examination of the employee experience of talent management does warrant consideration of at least two possible types of employee TM attributions as it has been shown that employee TM attributions vary and are associated with varying direct effects on outcomes.

This study is designed to contribute to a number of calls in the literature as outlined in the introduction. The first of which was to extend the recently emerging stream in the literature which examines the employee psychological response to talent management. Second, to further integrate the psychological contract, workforce differentiation and talent management literatures to examine the influence of talent management on the workforce, including a wider consideration of employees beyond just those who are identified as talent or participating in high potential programs. Further, the aim of this study was to introduce, theorise and empirically test measures of employee attributions of "why" their organisation uses talent management and how this influences the employee psychological response.

The preliminary descriptive statistics and conventional regression analysis presented here is intended to provide a preliminary reporting of the model tested using hierarchical linear regression analysis. A detailed discussion of this study will be presented in chapter seven following mediation hypothesis testing for the involvement of psychological contract fulfilment as a partial mediator. However three specific points of note are important to mention here.

First, it is already evident that the newly introduced construct of employee attributions of talent management (TM attributions) is a valuable and informative new construct in the empirical examination of the employee experience of talent management as evidenced by the support for the theorised direct relationships between employee TM attributions of commitment and of control and specified outcomes of interest in talent management. It is evident that employees do observe and interpret their organisation's use of talent management practices and attribute purpose and intent to those practices and that difference in attributions is associated with variance in outcomes, some being more influential and favourable than others in what is a competitive realm of human resources management in practice. Indeed the variance in the predictive power of employee attributions of commitment compared to employee TM attributions of control, for the desired outcomes in this study (with exception of performance), is an important finding for management practice in their opportunity to more carefully articulate the intended purpose of their use of talent strategy and to address possible risks arising from the absence of clear communication. This contributes to the literature in both extending the stream of research examining the employee psychological response to talent management and by introducing attributions of talent management into the empirical

body of literature. It is also evident that the newly constructed measure is functional in empirical testing in the current quantitative study.

Second, as hypothesised, it is evident that the psychological contract is centrally involved in how the employee experiences talent management and the psychological contract is involved, to some extent, in the generation of desired proximal outcomes for the organisation at the individual level. This reconfirms the foundational role of social exchange and the psychological contract in the mechanism underlying effective talent management and helps to further integrate the TM, SHRM, psychological contract and workforce differentiation literatures and responds to the urgent need to consider the consequences of workforce differentiation (Becker et al., 2009) for the wider workforce and not simply limit our attention to the minority (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016) identified as talent or high potentials. The specific function of this mechanism will be examined in the subsequent analysis.

Third, there is evidence that organisationally reported measure of task performance, (measured four months following the employee survey questionnaire self-report measures and using a four-point scale used commonly in practice), is a relatively unhelpful and ineffective measure of the performance-related outcomes of talent management. This is not surprising given the literature indications that challenges persist in the empirical measurement of SHRM-performance value chain outcomes and the call for more proximal measures, both at the individual level in SHRM practice studies (Paauwe et al., 2013) and the call for other non-performance measures of TM outcomes at the organisational level (Collings, 2014c). Consistent with scholars who have called for proximal measures in the employee-performance causal chain (Guest et al., 2013; Paauwe, 2009; Paauwe et al., 2013) and of outcomes of talent management (Al Ariss et al., 2014; Collings, 2014c), the measure of task performance in this model was not found to contribute meaningfully to the findings. Reflecting on this outcome, it is indeed possible that, although an organisationally-reported measure which was used to, in part, address common method variance in the model, such a measure is by design insufficient to report fine degrees of variance which might have provided insight through regression testing. This measure is a four-point scale measure, and when tested both as a categorical variable and as a continuous variable, the results remained the same. Although the measure of performance management is normally distributed, the distribution of the data for this measure is somewhat narrow. From post-analysis discussion with the company

regarding the findings, the organisation also reports limited value in their use of the measure as an employee performance appraisal measure, other than its provision of an outcome measure for distribution of discretionary pay. In light of this, it is unsurprising that performance as an outcome variable is less than helpful in this model. It may also point to a limitation in the use of the task performance measure practice, in that the differentiated performance expected to be associated with talent management may not readily be visible through this measure. A full discussion of the findings will be presented following mediation analysis in the subsequent chapter.

## 6.5. Chapter Conclusion

Following the qualitative study presented in the preceding chapter five, in this chapter I have introduced the quantitative within-organisation study, introducing the role of employee attributions of talent management in the employee experience of organisational talent management. I have theorised the relationships between employee TM attributions and individual outcomes of talent management, arguing that the psychological contract is a central functional mechanism through which differentiated outcomes are generated in talent management. In this chapter I have presented descriptive statistics and preliminary regression analysis of direct effects between hypothesised independent and dependent variables. In the subsequent chapter seven, I conduct tests of mediation and present the findings, followed by a detailed discussion of findings and limitations. In the subsequent chapter eight, I discuss the findings of the empirical work in this dissertation across the two complementary studies and discuss the integrated contribution of the dissertation.

# 7. Chapter 7. The Employee Experience of Talent Management: Tests of Mediation.

## 7.1. Chapter Introduction

As presented in the conceptual model (chapter three), I have hypothesised that employee psychological contract fulfilment is an important factor in the employee response to talent management as a centrally involved mechanism in the relationship between employee talent management attributions and organisationally-desired outcomes of talent management. In the current chapter, I now conduct tests of mediation to investigate the role of employee psychological contract fulfilment. That is, to examine the indirect role of psychological contract as a mediating variable within the direct relationships between employee TM attributions and outcomes as established in the prior chapter. In testing the variable theorised to mediate the relationship, mediation analysis examines the variable as a causal mechanism (Hayes, 2017), whereby the variable is causally involved in the relationship between the two other variables to some measured degree.

This chapter is presented in three sections. First, I briefly present the methods used in mediation testing, in section 7.2. I then present the results of mediation testing and interpret the findings in section 7.3. This is followed by discussion of the findings and conclusion of the chapter. Limitations are discussed briefly and a full discussion of limitations and of the contribution of this empirical work is presented in the discussion chapter eight, which follows.

## 7.2. Methods

To examine the hypothesised model introduced in the prior chapter, I first used conventional regression approach presented in chapter six, which relied on a normal sampling distribution and presented the analysis of direct relationships. In the current chapter, I now use conditional process analysis (Hayes, 2017) using regression to estimate the model drawing on improved computational power through bootstrapping. I employ the same data and measures as previously reported in the chapter prior and now test for mediation using the Process macro (Hayes, 2017) within the statistical analytical software package SPSS, both in the latest available versions 3.0 and 23 respectively.

I use a mediation model with three covariates in conditional process analysis. Since the independent variables are not theorised to be interchangeable and I have previously argued that the attributions of commitment and of control are each important to understand both in literature and in practice, I test the model for each of the two independent variables separately, to understand the influence of each of employee talent management attributions of commitment and of control on the organisationally-desired priority talent outcomes. Therefore each model is tested four times (once for each outcome), for a total of eight models tested. I apply the process model eight times (using each of the theorised two predictor and four outcome variables) in or order to test the full set of hypotheses. Figure 7.1 presents an illustration of the theoretical model whereby employee TM attributions (X1, X2) influence desired outcomes of talent management (Y1, Y2, Y3, Y4), mediated through the mechanism of psychological contract fulfilment (M).

Figure 7.1 Conceptual mediation model
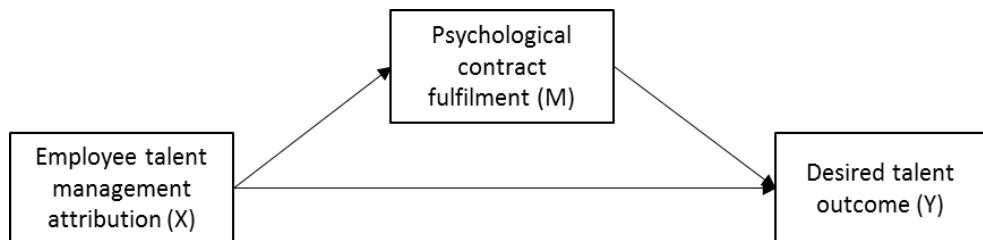


Figure 7.2, presents the statistical diagram of the same model presented conceptually in figure 7.1, using the guidance in the literature from Hayes (Hayes, 2017), where X is the independent variable (for each of two attributions: commitment and control), Y is the dependent variable (for each of four outcomes: affective commitment, organisational citizenship behaviour, intention to remain and task performance), M is the mediating variable and C (not shown in diagram) as the covariate (for each of the control variables: age, gender, tenure).

Figure 7.2 Statistical Model – Simple mediation with 3 covariants
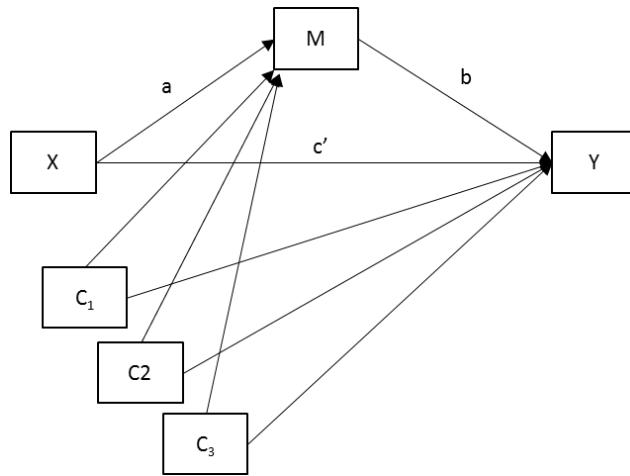


The figure illustrates that the total effect (c, not shown in diagram) of employee TM attributions (commitment X1, or control X2) on the preferred talent outcome (one of Y1, Y2, Y3, Y4) which is the total effect of X on Y when the mediator (psychological contract fulfilment) is not present in the model, is partitioned into two separate effects when the mediator M is added to the model. That is, when the mediator is added to the model the total effect (c) is partitioned into the direct effect of X on Y (c') and the indirect effect of X on Y through the mediator M (the product of a and b). Partial mediation is indicated when the direct effect path (c') is still significant when the mediator is in the model which indicates that the effect of X on Y is occurring only partially through the mediator M. Full mediation is indicated when the direct effect path (c') is no longer significant in the mediated model which means that the effect of X on Y is occurring fully through the mediator M. In the dissertation model, psychological contract fulfilment is hypothesised to partially mediate the effects of employee talent management attributions on organisationally-desired talent outcomes.

Before proceeding to reporting of meditation test results, there are two further points of note with regard to methods. First, with regard to the outcome of task performance. In the conventional Baron and Kenny steps-based method, mediation can only be confirmed when a significant main effect is found; that is, when there is a significant relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable (Baron & Kenny, 1986). In conditional process analysis, mediation can be confirmed even in the absence of significant direct effects (Hayes, 2017; Preacher & Hayes, 2004), overcoming a known limitation in the former method. Therefore, despite the results

reported in the preceding chapter that no direct effect was observed between either TM attributions of commitment or of control and task performance, in the current chapter and analysis, I proceed with testing of psychological contract fulfilment as a mediator in the path to task performance given the advantages of this method to identify evidence of mediation.

Second, with regard to reporting of tests of indirect effects. Historically, one of the methods relied on as a test to estimate the indirect effect and its significance is the Sobel test (Sobel, 1982). Referred to as the normal theory test, a text score Z is reported (calculated as z= (a*b)*(standard effort of a*b)), along with its corresponding p-value indicating significance. However this test is now largely considered to be inaccurate given three main limitations. First, its assumption that the population of a*b are normally distributed; second, that the Sobel test generates confidence intervals of lower accuracy than conditional process analysis; and third, that the test is less likely to detect any indirect effect compared with alternative methods (Hayes, 2017).

Using conditional process analysis increases the accuracy of the test of whether the indirect effect of a*b is significantly different from zero, the test of mediation. It does so by reliance on bootstrapping which is a resampling method which draws on a random sample from the original sample and then samples multiple times (usually thousands of times) to arrive at a bootstrap confidence interval of higher accuracy than without use of resampling, due to the use of resampling (Hayes, 2017). Therefore in this study, I do not conduct or report the Sobel test and corresponding z scores and their significance.

Results of mediation testing are now presented, followed by detailed discussion of the findings.

## 7.3. Results

Descriptive statistics were presented in the preceding chapter along with conventional tests of regression of the direct effects of the antecedent attributions of TM on the theorised dependent outcomes. In the current chapter, I test for mediation and present the results as follows. First, for each of the eight models, I present the results of regression of each of the independent variables on the dependent variables (corresponding to hypothesis 1a through d and 2a through d). Second, I report the tests

of mediation (corresponding to hypothesis 3a through d and 4a through d). I present the results of mediation testing in summary tables and in annotated statistical figure format for each of the eight models tested.

Having presented descriptive statistics and conducting preliminary regression analysis as presented in the prior chapter, the first step in the current analysis was to test the hypothesised direct effects between employee talent management attributions (that of commitment and of control) and each of the priority talent outcomes as theorised in the model. This is represented by the sets of hypotheses 1 and 2. For direct effects testing, the statistical results presented below are, as expected, consistent with earlier findings.

The second step then was to test for theorised partial mediation by psychological contract fulfilment as the hypothesised mechanism through which the employee attributions influence preferred talent outcomes. This is represented by the sets of hypotheses 3 (a, b, c, d) and 4 (a, b, c, d). For each of the eight modelled hypotheses, I first present and interpret the results of direct effects testing and then secondly, of mediation analysis. For each of the eight mediation models tested, I present a summary table of mediation results (tables 7.1 through 7.8) along with a corresponding annotated statistical path diagram (see figures 7.3 through 7.9) to illustrate the findings conceptually. Briefly, additional notation of measures will be presented in tables 7.1 through 7.8 are as follows: iM and iY are regression constants. $f^1$, $f^2$, and $f^3$, and $g^1$, $g^2$, $g^3$ are regression coefficients for the effects of the control variables C1, C2, and C3, on the mediator (M) and on the outcome (Y), respectively.

### 7.3.1. Employee attributions of talent management and affective commitment

First, I consider, direct effects. In a test of hypothesis 1a, employee TM attributions of commitment are positively and significantly associated with affective commitment. (B = 0.45; p < .001). Therefore hypothesis 1a is supported. In a test of hypothesis 2a, employee TM attributions of control are positively and significantly associated with affective commitment. (B = 0.11; p < .001). Therefore hypothesis 2a is not supported, the opposite of what was hypothesised is found. Second, I proceed to tests of mediation.

**Model 1:** In a test of hypothesis 3a, controlling for age, gender, and tenure, the indirect effect (ab) of employee talent management attributions of commitment (X) on affective commitment (Y) through psychological contract fulfilment (M) is positive and statistically significant (point estimate 0.20, at 95% bootstrap confidence interval of 0.16 to 0.25). The indirect effect (ab, which represents mediation in this model) accounts for 31% of the total effect (c) of attributions of commitment on the employee outcome of affective commitment. This is calculated as the proposition of the indirect effect (ab) divided by the sum of the indirect effect and the direct effect (c'), in this case, 0.20 / (0.20 + 0.45) = 31%. Therefore 69% of the influence of employee talent management attributions of commitment on affective commitment is accounted for by the direct relationship (c') in this model. The findings are presented in table 7.1.

Table 7.1 Mediation analysis: Model 1

TM attributions of commitment on affective commitment via PCF

| Predictor (X) TM attributions of commitment | | Mediator (M) Psychological contract fulfilment | | Outcome (Y) Affective commitment |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Antecedent | | Coefficient B | | Coefficient B |
| TM attributions of commitment (X) | a | 0.88** | c' | 0.45*** |
| Psychological contract fulfilment (M) | | -- | b | 0.23*** |
| Age (C1) | $f_1$ | -0.01 | $g_1$ | 0.00*** |
| Gender (C2) | $f_2$ | -0.05 | $g_2$ | 0.13 |
| Tenure (C3) | $f_3$ | 0 | $g_3$ | 0.02** |
| Constant | $i_M$ | 0.73** | $i_Y$ | 1.40*** |
| $R^2$ | | $R^2 = 0.39$ | | $R^2 = 0.44$ |
| F | | $F_{(4, 1656)} = 263.56, P < .001$ | | $F_{(5, 1655)} = 260.83, P < .001$ |

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Control variables are age, gender, tenure.

This confirms that the extent to which the employee perceives their psychological contract to be fulfilled positively mediates the relationship between employee attributions that their organisation employs talent management as an enactment of commitment to the employee and the resulting employee reciprocation of affective commitment. Therefore it is, in part, through the fulfilment of the psychological contract, that employee attributions of talent management as a commitment is operating on affective commitment. Hypothesis 3a is supported.

Figure 7.3 Statistical diagram of mediation model 1
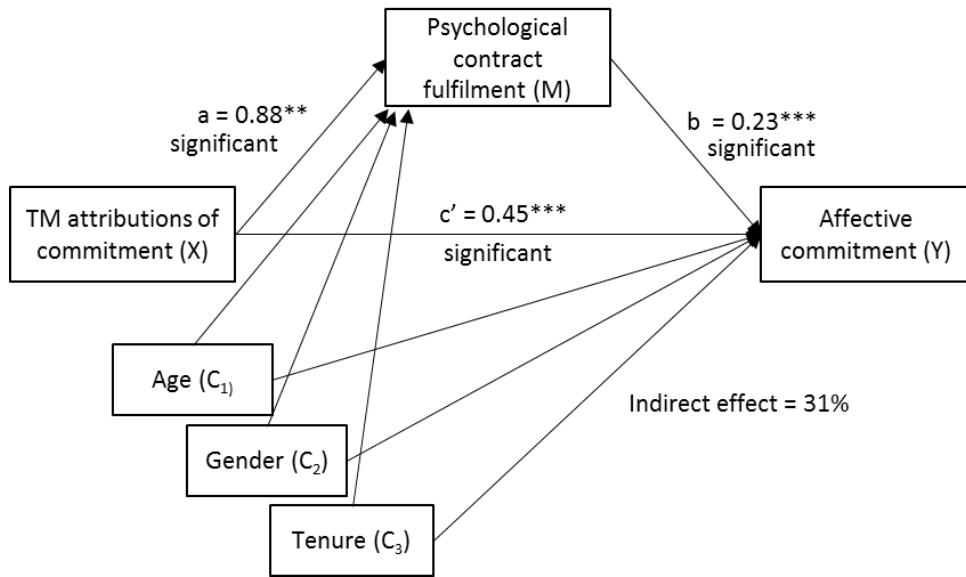


**Model 2:** In a test of hypothesis 4a, controlling for age, gender, and tenure, the indirect effect (ab) of employee talent management attributions of control (X) on affective commitment (Y) through psychological contract fulfilment (M) is positive and statistically significant (point estimate 0.10, at 95% bootstrap confidence interval of 0.07 to 0.13). The indirect effect (ab) accounts for 47% of the total effect (c) of attributions of control on the employee outcome of affective commitment in this model (calculated as 0.10/0.21, the proportion of the total effect, c, of X on Y which ab explains). Therefore 53% of the influence of employee talent management attributions of control on affective commitment is accounted for by the direct relationship (c') in this model. The findings are presented in table 7.2.

Table 7.2 Mediation analysis: Model 2

TM attributions of control on affective commitment via PCF

| Predictor (X)<br>TM attributions of control | | Mediator (M)<br>Psychological contract fulfilment | | Outcome (Y)<br>Affective commitment |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Antecedent | | Coefficient B | | Coefficient B |
| TM attributions of control (X) | a | 0.24** | c' | 0.11*** |
| Psychological contract fulfilment (M) | | -- | b | 0.41*** |
| Age (C1) | $f_1$ | -0.01* | $g_1$ | 0.00*** |
| Gender (C2) | $f_2$ | 0.1 | $g_2$ | 0.2 |
| Tenure (C3) | $f_3$ | 0.01 | $g_3$ | 0.02*** |
| Constant | $i_M$ | 4.08*** | $i_Y$ | 2.19*** |
| $R^2$ | | $R^2 = 0.34$ | | $R^2 = 0.35$ |
| F | | $F_{(4, 1656)} = 14.46, P < .001$ | | $F_{(5, 1655)} = 175.72, P < .001$ |

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Control variables are age, gender, tenure.

This confirms that employee perceptions of psychological contract fulfilment is, in part, the mechanism through which employee attributions that their organisation employs talent management as an enactment of control act to generate affective commitment. Therefore hypothesis 4a, which theorised that the psychological contract fulfilment would mediate the relationship between attributions of control and affective commitment is supported. This means that when an employee perceives talent management is undertaken for the purpose of enacting control, the influence on talent management in generating affective commitment is partially operationalised through the fulfilment of the psychological contract.

Figure 7.4 Statistical diagram of mediation model 2



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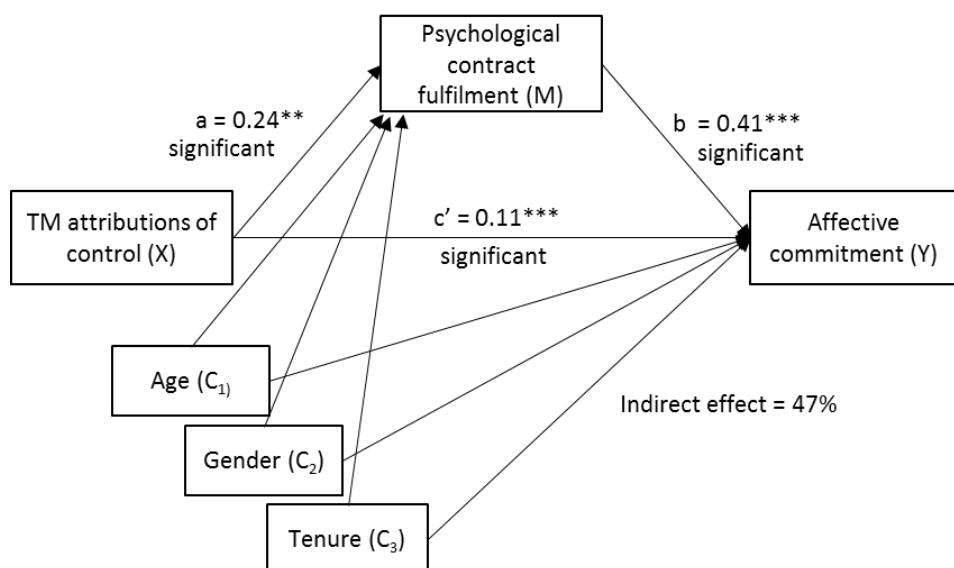
### 7.3.2. Employee attributions of talent management and organisational citizenship behaviour

First considering direct effects, in a test of hypothesis 1b, employee TM attributions of commitment are positively and significantly associated with organisational citizenship behaviours. ($B = 0.13$; $p < .001$). Therefore hypothesis 1b is supported. In a test of hypothesis 2b, employee TM attributions of control are positively and significantly associated with organisational citizenship behaviour. ($B = 0.10$; $p < .00$). Therefore hypothesis 2b is not supported, the opposite of what was hypothesised is found.

**Model 3:** In testing for indirect effects, I first conduct a test of hypothesis 3b, controlling for age, gender, and tenure, the indirect effect (ab) of employee talent management attributions of commitment (X) on organisational citizenship behaviours (Y) through psychological contract fulfilment (M). This is not found to be significant in this model (point estimate 0.02, at 95% bootstrap confidence interval of -0.00 to 0.04). Therefore hypothesis 3b, which hypothesised a significant relationship between employee TM attributions of control and OCB through psychological contract fulfilment is not supported. The findings are presented in table 7.3.

Table 7.3 Mediation analysis: Model 3

TM attributions of commitment on organisational citizenship behaviour via PCF

| Predictor (X) TM attributions of commitment | | Mediator (M) Psychological contract fulfilment | | Outcome (Y) Organisational citizenship behaviours |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Antecedent | | Coefficient B | | Coefficient B |
| TM attributions of commitment (X) | a | 0.89*** | c' | 0.13*** |
| Psychological contract fulfilment (M) | | -- | b | 0.02 |
| Age (C1) | $f_1$ | -0.01 | $g_1$ | 0 |
| Gender (C2) | $f_2$ | -0.05 | $g_2$ | 0.11*** |
| Tenure (C3) | $f_3$ | 0 | $g_3$ | 0 |
| Constant | $i_M$ | 0.72** | $i_Y$ | 5.21*** |
| $R^2$ | | $R^2 = 0.39$ | | $R^2 = 0.08$ |
| F | | $F_{(4, 1652)} = 263.53, P < .001$ | | $F_{(5, 1561)} = 30.16, P < .001$ |

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Control variables are age, gender, tenure.

The model has shown that while employee TM attributions of commitment are significantly and positively related to employee perceptions of psychological contract fulfilment ($B = 0.89$, $p < 0.001$), however the relationship between psychological

contract fulfilment and the outcomes of organisational citizenship behaviour is not significant. This means that while attributions of commitment are an important factor in the perceived fulfilment of psychological contract, and while TM attributions of commitment are positively associated OCB directly (B = 0.13, p < 0.00***), psychological contract fulfilment is not the mechanism through which the influence of TM attributions on OCB's operates. Rather the statistically significant influence of TM attributions of commitment on OCB is direct and positive (B = 0.13, p < .001 at 95% bootstrap confidence intervals of 0.10 and 0.16) rather than partially mediated by psychological contract fulfilment.

Figure 7.5 Statistical diagram of mediation model 3
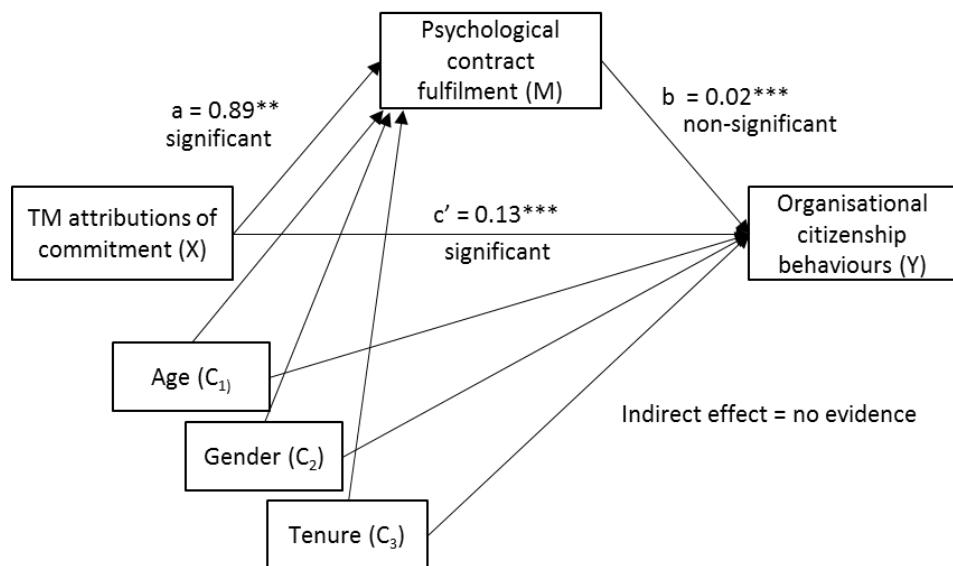


**Model 4:** In a test of hypothesis 4b, controlling for age, gender, and tenure, the indirect effect (ab) of employee talent management attributions of control (X) on organisational citizenship behaviours(Y) through psychological contract fulfilment (M), is positive and significant (point estimate 0.016, at 95% bootstrap confidence interval of 0.01 to 0.02). Therefore hypothesis 4b is supported. The findings are presented in table 7.4.

Table 7.4 Mediation analysis: Model 4

TM attributions of control on organisational citizenship behaviours via PCF

| Predictor (X)<br>TM attributions of control | | Mediator (M)<br>Psychological contract fulfilment | | Outcome (Y)<br>Organisational citizenship behaviours |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Antecedent | | Coefficient B | | Coefficient B |
| TM attributions of control (X) | a | 0.24*** | c' | 0.10*** |
| Psychological contract fulfilment (M) | | -- | b | 0.07*** |
| Age (C1) | $f_1$ | -0.01* | $g_1$ | 0 |
| Gender (C2) | $f_2$ | 0.11 | $g_2$ | 0.14*** |
| Tenure (C3) | $f_3$ | 0.01* | $g_3$ | 0 |
| Constant | $i_M$ | 4.06*** | $i_Y$ | 5.08*** |
| $R^2$ | | $R^2 = 0.03$ | | $R^2 = 0.08$ |
| F | | $F_{(4, 1652)} = 14.403, P < .001$ | | $F_{(5, 1651)} = 28.92, P < .001$ |

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Control variables are age, gender, tenure.

The findings of mediation analysis indicate that employee TM attributions of control are significantly and positively related to employee perceptions of psychological contract fulfilment (B = 0.24, p < 0.001) and that there is a positive and significant relationship between employee psychological contract fulfilment and organisational citizenship behaviour (B = 0.07. p < .001). Together, this indicates that the relationship between employee TM attributions of control and the outcomes of organisational citizenship behaviours is mediated by psychological contract fulfilment. This indirect effect (ab) accounts for 14% of the total effect of employee TM attributions of control on OCBs in this model (calculated as 0.02/0.012, the proportion of the total effect, c, of X on Y which ab explains). This means that the mechanism by which employee TM attributions of control influence the outcome of organisational citizenship behaviour is, in part, functions through the fulfilment of the psychological contract. This is consistent with hypothesis 4b, which hypothesised that the relationship between employee TM attributions of control and OCB is mediated by psychological contract fulfilment.

It is then, in part, through fulfilment of the psychological contract, that employee TM attributions of control have a significant and positive effect on the generation of organisational citizenship behaviour. Reflecting on the support found for psychological contract fulfilment mediation of attributions of control but not of attribution of commitment on employee organisational citizenship behaviour, it appears that psychological contract fulfilment is operational in the relationship only when the employee's attributions are those of a meaning of control rather than of commitment in their organisation's adoption of TM.

Figure 7.6 Statistical diagram of mediation model 4
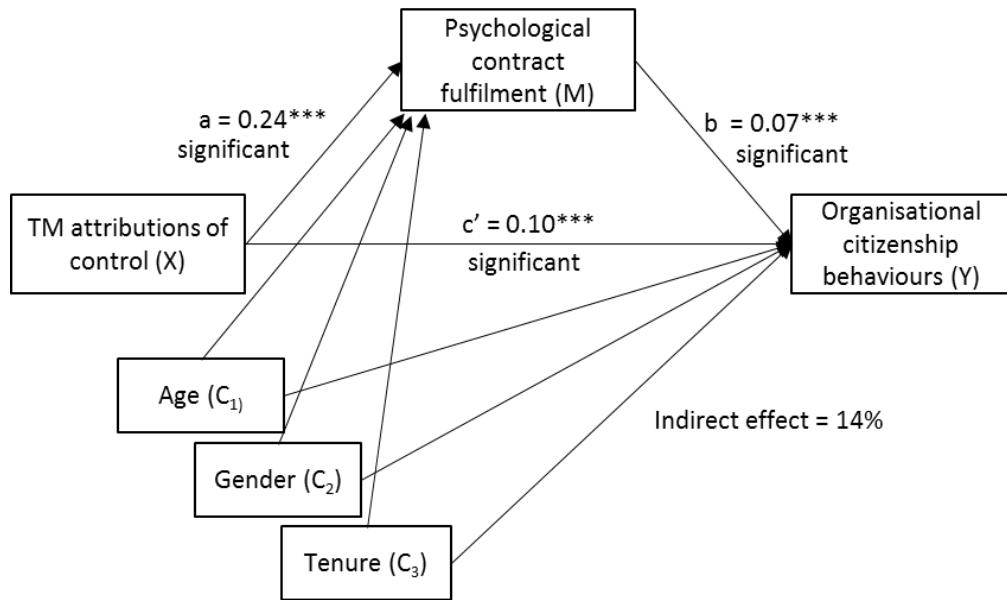


### 7.3.3. Employee attributions of talent management and intention to remain

Considering direct effects, in a test of hypothesis 1c, employee TM attributions of commitment are positively and significantly associated with intention to remain with company. (B = 0.36; p < .001). Therefore hypothesis 1c is supported. In a test of hypothesis 2c, employee TM attributions of control are positively and significantly associated with intention to remain with company. (B = 0.06; p < .001). Therefore hypothesis 2c is supported.

**Model 5:** I then conducted tests of the indirect relationship via psychological contract fulfilment. In a test of hypothesis 3c, controlling for age, gender, and tenure, the indirect effect (ab) of employee talent management attributions of commitment (X) on employee intention to remain employed with the organisation (Y) through psychological contract fulfilment (M), is significant and positive (point estimate 0.26, at 95% bootstrap confidence interval of 0.21to 0.30). The model confirms that employee TM attributions of commitment are significantly and positively related to employee perceptions of psychological contract fulfilment (B = 0.89, p < 0.001) as reported earlier and the relationship between psychological contract fulfilment and the outcome of intention to remain with the company is positive and significant (B = 0.30, p < 0.001). This means that perceived fulfilment of psychological contract is the mechanism, through which, in part, the influence of TM attributions of commitment on employee

intention to remain is operationalised. Therefore hypothesis 3c is supported. The findings are presented in table 7.5.

Table 7.5 Mediation analysis: Model 5

TM attributions of commitment on intention to remain with organisation via PCF

| Predictor (X)<br>TM attributions of commitment | Mediator (M)<br>Psychological contract fulfilment | | Outcome (Y)<br>Intention to remain with company | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Antecedent | | Coefficient B | | Coefficient B |
| TM attributions of commitment (X) | a | 0.89*** | c' | 0.36*** |
| Psychological contract fulfilment (M) | | -- | b | 0.30*** |
| Age (C1) | $f_1$ | -0.01 | $g_1$ | 0.01** |
| Gender (C2) | $f_2$ | -0.05 | $g_2$ | 0.11* |
| Tenure (C3) | $f_3$ | 0 | $g_3$ | 0.02*** |
| Constant | $i_M$ | 0.72** | $i_Y$ | 1.285*** |
| $R^2$ | | $R^2 = 0.39$ | | $R^2 = 0.41$ |
| F | | $F_{(4, 1652)} = 263.53, P < .001$ | | $F_{(5, 1651)} = 224.40, P < .001$ |

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Control variables are age, gender, tenure.

This indirect effect of employee TM attributions of commitment on employee intention to remain with the organisation mediated by the psychological contract accounts for 42% of the total effect of employee TM attributions of commitment on intention to remain in this model (calculated as 0.26/0.62, the proportion of the total effect, c, of X on Y which ab explains). This finding confirms that when an employee attributes their organisation's use of talent management practices to that of commitment, the employee's development of an intention to stay with their employing organisation is to some extent reliant upon the fulfilment of their psychological contract.

Figure 7.7 Statistical diagram of mediation model 5
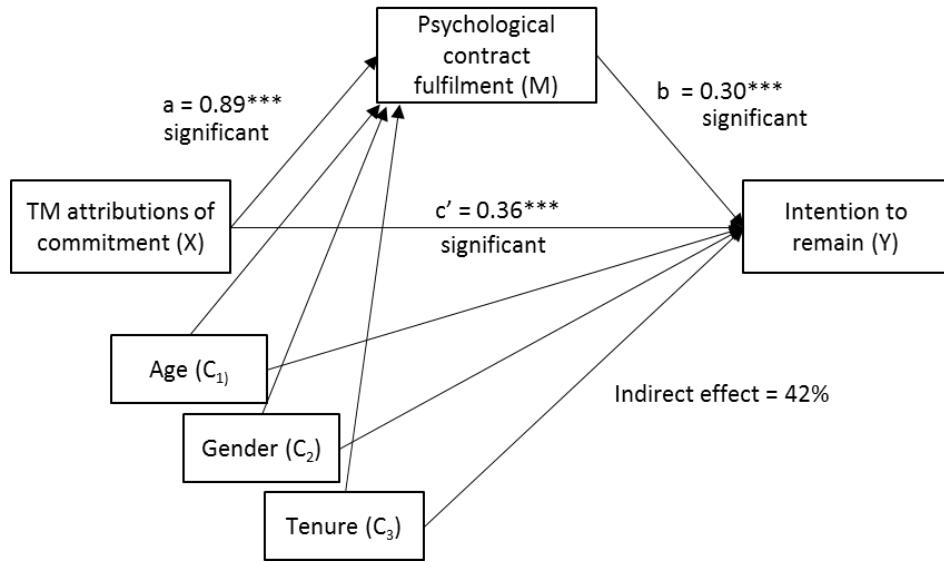


**Model 6:** In a test of hypothesis 4c, controlling for age, gender, and tenure, the indirect effect (ab) of employee talent management attributions of control (X) on employee intention to remain with the company (Y) through psychological contract fulfilment (M), is positive and significant (point estimate 0.11, at 95% bootstrap confidence interval of 0.07 to 0.14). The findings are presented in table 7.6.

Table 7.6 Mediation analysis: Model 6

TM attributions of control on intention to remain with organisation via PCF

| TM attributions of control | | Psychological contract fulfilment | | Intention to remain with company |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Antecedent | | Coefficient B | | Coefficient B |
| TM attributions of control (X) | a | 0.24*** | c' | 0.06* |
| Psychological contract fulfilment (M) | | -- | b | 0.44*** |
| Age (C1) | $f_1$ | -0.10* | $g_1$ | 0.01** |
| Gender (C2) | $f_2$ | 0.11 | $g_2$ | 0.16** |
| Tenure (C3) | $f_3$ | 0.01* | $g_3$ | 0.02*** |
| Constant | $i_M$ | 4.06*** | $i_Y$ | 2.03*** |
| $R^2$ | | $R^2 = 0.034$ | | $R^2 = 0.35$ |
| F | | $F(4, 1652) = 14.40$, P < .001) | | $F(5, 1651) = 174.85$, P < .001) |

Notes: * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p <0.001. Control variables are age, gender, tenure.

The model confirms that employee TM attributions of control are significantly and positively related to employee perceptions of psychological contract fulfilment (B = 0.239, p < 0.001) as reported earlier and the relationship between psychological contract fulfilment and the outcomes of intention to remain with the company is positive

and significant (B = 0.44, p < 0.001) in the model. This means that perceived fulfilment of psychological contract is the mechanism, through which, in part, the influence of TM attributions of control on employee intention to remain is operationalised. Therefore hypothesis 4c is supported.

This indirect effect of employee TM attributions of control on employee intention to remain with the organisation mediated by the psychological contract accounts for 62% of the total effect of employee TM attributions of control on intention to remain in this model (calculated as 0.11/0.12 which is the proportion of the total effect, c, of X on Y which ab explains in this model). This finding confirms that when an employee attributes their organisation's use of talent management practices to that of control, the employee's development of an intention to stay with their employing organisation is to a substantial degree reliant upon the fulfilment of their psychological contract.

Figure 7.8 Statistical diagram of mediation model 6
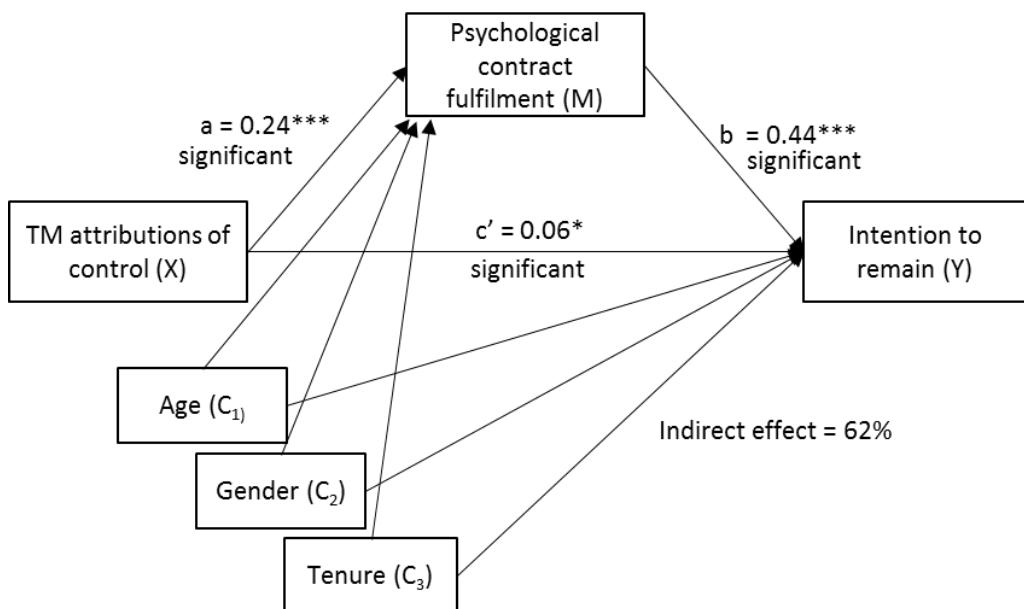


### 7.3.4. Employee attributions of talent management and task performance

First, considering direct effects in the relationship, in a test of hypothesis 1d, employee TM attributions of commitment are not found to be significantly associated with task performance, neither positively nor negatively. (B = 0.01; p = 0.79). Therefore no evidence is found to support hypothesis 1d. In a test of hypothesis 2d, employee TM

attributions of control are not found to be significantly associated with task performance, neither positively nor negatively. (B = 0.00; p = 0.82). Therefore no evidence is found to support hypothesis 2d.

**Model 7:** Turning to mediation in the model, in a test of hypothesis 3d, controlling for age, gender, and tenure, the indirect effect (ab) of employee talent management attributions of commitment (X) on task performance with the company (Y) through psychological contract fulfilment (M), is not found to be significant (point estimate -0.10, at 95% bootstrap confidence interval of -0.04 to 0.02). This model examines the direct effect of TM attributions of commitment on task performance and confirms, as in the prior testing in chapter 6, that there is no significant direct effect (B = 0.01, p = 0.79). Using conditional process analysis, the effect of TM attributions of commitment on perceived psychological contract fulfilment was found to be significant (B = 0.87, p < 0.00***), as reported in the preliminary regression analysis, however the relationship between the mediator, psychological contract fulfilment, and the outcome, task performance was not found to be significant (B = -0.01, p = 0.43). Therefore hypothesis 3d is not supported. The findings are presented in table 7.7.

Table 7.7 Mediation analysis: Model 7

TM attributions of commitment on task performance via PCF

| Predictor (X) TM attributions of commitment | | Mediator (M) Psychological contract fulfilment | | Outcome (Y) Task performance |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Antecedent | | Coefficient B | | Coefficient B |
| TM attributions of commitment (X) | a | 0.87*** | c' | 0.01 |
| Psychological contract fulfilment (M) | | -- | b | -0.01 |
| Age (C1) | $f_1$ | -0.01* | $g_1$ | 0 |
| Gender (C2) | $f_2$ | -0.06 | $g_2$ | 0 |
| Tenure (C3) | $f_3$ | 0 | $g_3$ | -0.10** |
| Constant | $i_M$ | 0.88*** | $i_Y$ | 2.87*** |
| $R^2$ | | $R^2 = 0.39$ | | $R^2 = 0.09$ |
| F | | $F (4, 1571) = 245.70, p < .001$ | | $F (5, 1570) = 2.96, p < .01$ |

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Control variables are age, gender, tenure $p < .01$)

While there is a significant relationship between attributions of commitment and psychological contract fulfilment (B = 0.87, p < 0.001), no evidence of mediation by psychological contract fulfilment on the relationship between employee TM attributions of commitment and task performance is found. Additionally, there is no significant

direct effect between attributions of commitment and task performance, which is consistent with preliminary testing.

Figure 7.9 Statistical diagram of mediation model 7
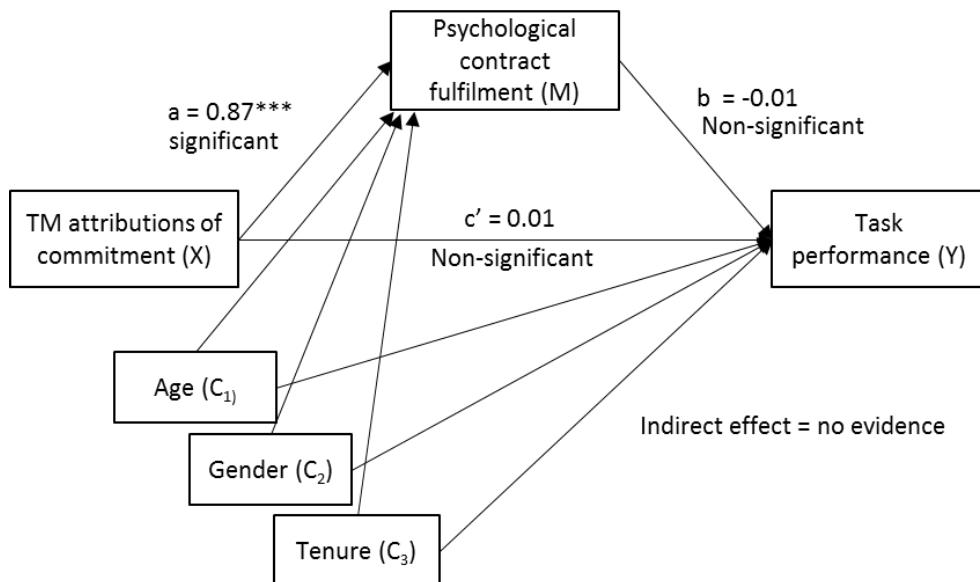


**Model 8:** Finally, in a test of hypothesis 4d, controlling for age, gender, and tenure, the indirect effect (ab) of employee talent management attributions of control (X) on task performance with the company (Y) through psychological contract fulfilment (M), was not found to be significant (point estimate -0.00, at 95% bootstrap confidence interval of -0.01 to 0.00). As reported in the prior chapter, there is no evidence of a significant direct relationship between TM attributions of control and task performance (B = 0.00, p = 0.82). It further confirms that while employee TM attributions of control are significantly and positively related to employee perceptions of psychological contract fulfilment (B = 0.24, p < 0.00***), there is no significant relationship found between the mediator, psychological contract fulfilment and the outcome, task performance (B = -0.01, p = 0.42). Therefore hypothesis 4d is not supported. The findings are presented in table 7.8.

Table 7.8 Mediation analysis: Model 8

TM attributions of control on task performance via PCF

| Predictor (X)<br>TM attributions of control | | Mediator (M)<br>Psychological contract fulfilment | | Outcome (Y)<br>Task performance |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Antecedent | | Coefficient B | | Coefficient B |
| TM attributions of control (X) | a | 0.24*** | c' | 0 |
| Psychological contract fulfilment (M) | | -- | b | -0.01 |
| Age (C1) | $f_1$ | -0.01 | $g_1$ | 0 |
| Gender (C2) | $f_2$ | 0.12 | $g_2$ | -0.10** |
| Tenure (C3) | $f_3$ | 0.01 | $g_3$ | 0.01** |
| Constant | $i_M$ | 4.11 | $i_Y$ | 2.86 |
| $R^2$ | | $R^2 = 0.03$ | | $R^2 = 0.01$ |
| F | | $F (4, 1571) = 12.40, p < .001$) | | $F (5, 1570) = 2.96, p < .05$) |

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Control variables are age, gender, tenure.

This means that while TM attributions of control do positively and significantly influence the employee perception of psychological contract fulfilment, such attributions do not directly influence task performance, nor do TM attributions of control influence task performance indirectly via the mechanism of the fulfilment of the psychological contract.

Figure 7.10 Statistical diagram of mediation model 8
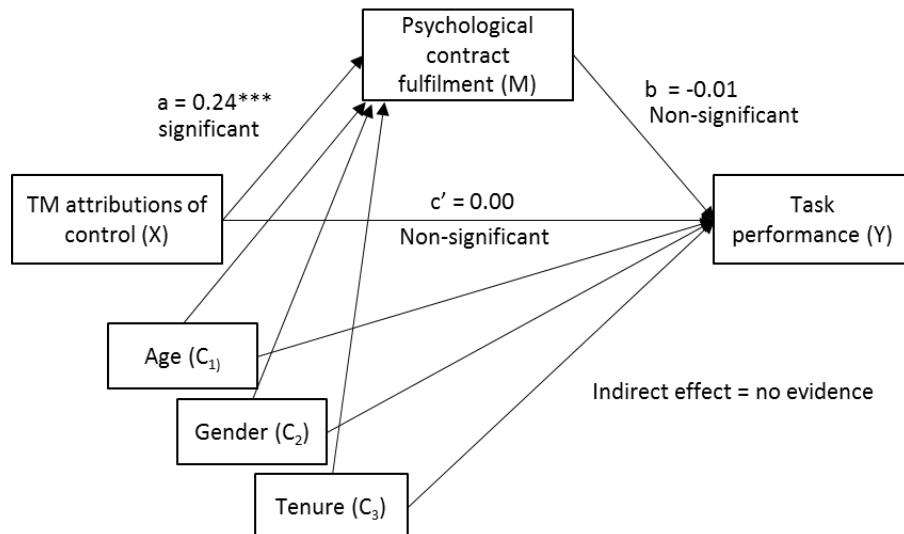
### 7.3.5. Analysis of covariants: Age, gender, tenure

In models 1 and 2, which found relationships between employee TM attributions and affective commitment to be partially mediated, age and tenure were each found to be significant. In the relationship between attributions of commitment and affective commitment, age (B = 0.00***) and tenure were each positive and significant covariants (B = 0.02**). In the relationship between attributions of control and affective commitment, age (B = 0.00***) and tenure (B = 0.02***) were each positive and significant covariants. Thus, with each of increased age or of time employed by the company, employee attributions of their organisation's use of talent management are more likely to be associated with the employee response of affective commitment, whether they perceive TM to be used for commitment or for control purposes.

In the models 3 and 4, gender was the only covariant found to be significant. For TM commitment, where psychological contract fulfilment does not mediate the relationship to OCBs, gender was significant (B = 0.11***). For TM control, where psychological contract fulfilment was found to mediate the relationship with OCBs, gender was significant (B = 0.14***). As gender in this analysis was coded as 1 for male and 2 for female, the finding indicates a slightly stronger relationship reported by female respondents than by male participants of the study in terms of their OCB behaviours in response to TM attributions, whether commitment or control-focused meanings of talent management.

In models 5 and 6, which found relationships between employee TM attributions and employee intention to remain with the company, all of the three hypothesised covariates were found to be significant. In the case of employee TM attributions of commitment, age (B = 0.01**), gender (B = 0.11*), and tenure (B = 0.02***) were each positive and significant covariants in the model predicting intention to remain. In the case of employee TM attributions of control, age (B = 0.01**), gender (B = 0.16**), and tenure (B = 0.02***) were each positive and significant covariants in the model predicting intention to remain. For either of commitment or control attributions, employees who were female were more likely to intend to remain with the organisation.

Finally, in models 7 and 8, which examined the relationship between employee TM attributions and task performance where no evidence of direct relationships nor of indirect relationships was found, tenure was found to be negatively significant as a

covariant in consideration of the outcome of task performance (B = -0.10**) and positively significant as a covariant (B = 0.01**) however in these two tests no relationship between the main variables were found, whether directly or indirectly. Given the limited predictability of performance in this model overall, this findings does not stand out as meaningful.

Overall, these findings do not indicate any significant involvement of the covariants in the relationships hypothesised although, as expected, increasing time with the company is associated with increased likelihood of organisationally-desired talent outcomes of affective commitment and of intention to remain with the company. There are minor differences in gender noted in the relationship between employee TM attributions and the employee contribution of organisation citizenship behaviours.

### 7.3.6. Summary of empirical quantitative results

To examine the measurement model presented in chapter six, in the current chapter, tests of mediation were conducted and reported to examine the hypothesised indirect role of the employee psychological contract fulfilment in the relationship between employee attributions of commitment and of control and the desired outcomes of TM. Eight iterations of the statistical mediation model were tested. Table 7.9 presents a summary of the findings, for each of the models tested.

Table 7.9 Summary of results of mediation testing

| Independent variable | Dependent variable | Model | TM attributions (X) and mediator (M) | Mediator (M) and outcome (Y) | Direct effects TM attributions on outcomes (X on Y) | Indirect effects via psychological contract fulfilment (X on Y via M) | Summary of model findings | Indirect effect (% of total effect) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | a | b | c′ | a*b | | |
| TM attributions of commitment | Affective commitment | 1 | B = 0.88*** a = Significant and positive | B = 0.23*** b = Significant and positive | B = 0.45*** c′ = Significant and positive | a*b = Significant and positive | Hypothesis 3a supported | 31% |
| | Organisational citizenship behaviour | 3 | B = 0.88*** a = Significant and positive | B = 0.02 b = non-significant | B = 0.13*** c′ = Significant and positive | a*b = non-significant | Hypothesis 3b not supported | No indirect effect |
| | Intention to remain | 5 | B = 0.89*** a = Significant and positive | B = 0.30*** b = Significant and positive | B = 0.36*** c′ = Significant and positive | a*b = Significant and positive | Hypothesis 3c supported | 42% |
| | Task performance | 7 | B = 0.87*** a = Significant and positive | B = -0.01 b = non-significant | B = 0.01 c′ = Non-significant | a*b = non-significant | Hypothesis 3d not supported | No indirect effect |
| TM attributions of control | Affective commitment | 2 | B = 0.24*** a = Significant and positive | B = 0.41*** b = Significant and positive | B = 0.11*** c′ = Significant and positive | a*b = Significant and positive | Hypothesis 4a supported | 47% |
| | Organisational citizenship behaviour | 4 | B = 0.24*** a = Significant and positive | B = 0.07*** b = Significant and positive | B = 0.10*** c′ = Significant and positive | a*b = Significant and positive | Hypothesis 4b supported | 14% |
| | Intention to remain | 6 | B = 0.23*** a = Significant and positive | B = 0.44*** b = Significant and positive | B = 0.06*** c′ = Significant and positive | a*b = Significant and positive | Hypothesis 4c supported | 62% |
| | Task performance | 8 | B = 0.24*** a = Significant and positive | B = -0.01 b = non-significant | B = 0.00 c′ = Non-significant | a*b = non-significant | Hypothesis 4d not supported | No indirect effect |
| Significance of p values is noted as: * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p <0.001. | | | | | | | | |

## 7.4. Discussion

There are three main findings of this study. First, as proposed, employee attributions of talent management have been shown to influence employee outcomes both directly and indirectly, through the fulfilment of the psychological contract. The introduction of the concept and empirical evidence of the role of employee attributions of purpose as an individual-level path to talent management outcomes is a novel contribution to the literature. Research on employee TM attributions of the intention and purpose of their organisation's use of talent management have not previously been considered in the literature. This is consistent with the adoption of primarily a managerialist orientation (Thunnissen et al., 2013b) and organisational perspective (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016) in the literature currently, such that implemented talent management and its core purposes had not yet been conceptualised from the employee's perspective. Understanding the consequences of implemented talent management, and within this the use of exclusive talent management, sheds light both on how employees make-sense of these practices and the meaning they attribute to their interpretations (the "why"), and also importantly, how they respond to these practices (the "what"), given their interpretation, and supports a more pluralist consideration of talent management (Thunnissen et al., 2013b). Further the consideration of individual employee attitudes and behavioural outcomes has contributed to unpacking the mechanisms of TM management.

Employee attributions of talent management vary both in their direct influence on outcomes and in their indirect influence on employee outcomes through the role of the psychological contract as the mechanism (the "how") through which the influence of employee TM attributions is operationalised. Overall, whether employees attribute talent management to purposes of commitment or of control, employee TM attributions are positively and significantly associated with a range of priority TM outcomes including affective commitment, organisational citizenship behaviours and intention to remain with the organisation. First, these relationships are direct for each of the hypothesised outcomes, with the exception of performance for which no significant effects were found. Second, for most of the theorised attributions-outcomes relationships, evidence also confirmed the influence of TM attributions occurs indirectly, with the exception of the relationship between employee TM attributions of commitment and OCBs. This confirms evidence of the enactment of talent management

as an implemented strategy which serves to shape and influence key outcomes of priority to the organisation's talent strategy. This evidence extends the literature's consideration of how talent management creates value (Sparrow & Makram, 2015) by shedding light on the talent-advantage value chain which is under-theorised and even challenged as trend (Lewis & Heckman, 2006) or criticised as "vague but appealing rhetoric" (Dries, 2013a, p. 274), or a "repackaging of SHRM" (Iles et al., 2010, p. 179) without sufficient evidence-based argument.

Second, as proposed, employee TM attributions of commitment and of control function in differing ways in the model. Importantly, there is evidence of valued outcomes whether employees perceive commitment or control oriented talent management. Specifically, when employees perceive that their organisation undertakes talent management for the purpose of enacting a commitment strategy, employees are likely to reciprocate with affective commitment ("my organisation is committed to me, I am committed to my organisation"), and employees are more likely to do so than when the attributions they make are of control. However, interestingly, attributions of control also generate affective commitment (counter to what was hypothesised). This is interesting because even when talent management is seen by employees as a strategy to control, employees are still likely to respond with affective commitment. Therefore, use of talent management, even in the exclusive philosophy, may extend our understanding of the use of high commitment SHRM strategies, if we conceptualise TM as one form of high commitment strategy. The literature explains that commitment strategies may generate employee supportive behaviours in response (Baron & Kreps, 1999). More recently, high commitment HR practices have been shown to be positively associated with psychological contract fulfilment (Latorre, Guest, Ramos, & Gracia, 2016). However the SHRM literature also indicates that the implementation of high commitment HRM is complex, costly, and difficult to maintain (Baron & Kreps, 1999).

In the current empirical study, in addition to presenting evidence in support of attributions of commitment, evidence has shown that control strategies, contrary to being in opposition to a commitment orientation, also carry benefit in the employee–organisation relationship and that the generation of a supportive employee response is not limited to the use of a commitment strategy. Consistent with the reports of organisational management in the pilot study that their use of talent management served a dual and complementary purpose in the organisation, these results indicate that TM is

accepted by employees as a control-orientated activity and that the direction of their response is positive and not negative. That is, perceiving control as their organisation's TM purpose does not preclude employees from responding with positive affect and supportive behaviours and indeed does so without unintentionally causing increased intention to leave the organisation.

This particular finding extends our understanding of the importance of alignment in strategic organisational talent management. Scholars have argued that alignment is a core consideration in effective talent management, a matured view of talent management which moves beyond a narrow view of shareholder returns (Collings, 2014c). Yet principle-agent theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976) might argue that the employee's goals in talent management are not consistent with the organisation's goals which may undermine the intended benefit of strategic talent management. Drawing on stakeholder theory (Freeman, 2010), re-conceptualising the employee as a stakeholder of the organisation, may help to resolve the agency problem and explain why attributions of talent management control functions in such a way that it achieves positive value-based outcomes. More specifically, the current attributions of control measure included measures of cost, performance and reputation, consistent with the literature which recognise the control function of the board and management to protect the firm's assets which include financial, profits and brand for future deployment in service of the firm's priorities. Where employees are organisational stakeholders, employee acceptance of management control of cost, performance, and brand or reputation as reasonable objectives of management's purpose for talent management is more likely to result as a function of the alignment of employee perspectives as stakeholders. This is in contrast to a reinforcement of the agency problem. In the current study then, employee acceptance of attributions of control may also be evidence of alignment with management intention for the purpose of talent management as a governance and control mechanism in the organisation in their responsibility to all stakeholders, including the employee. Further, considering the positive influence of TM control attributions, it's possible that the inclusion of reputation in the measure is in part responsible for the generation of affective commitment outcomes because if an employee strongly identifies with their company's brand (such as pride in the company or brand), their company's reputation will be important to them, displayed in affective commitment, an emotion based measure.

For outcomes of organisational citizenship behaviours, the results are similar and confirm that whether employees make TM attributions of commitment or of control, their attributions are positively and significantly associated with employee organisational citizenship behaviours, as reported. Hypothesising that attributions of control would not be seen favourably by employees, I expected TM attributions of control to be negatively associated with employee discretionary supportive behaviours. This was not supported. Rather, even in the context of control attributions, employees were more likely to offer discretionary supportive behaviours in service of their organisation. This may in part be explained by the constructs embedded within the control measure as discussed earlier. Particularly when employees identify with their organisation, whereby the employee's values are aligned with those of their organisation (Reade, 2001), or are strongly attached to their corporate brand, activities which are intended to support the company's reputation may be viewed as positive management efforts consistent with the employees values and thereby would be more likely to generate supportive discretionary behaviours.

Likewise, for outcomes of intention to remain, employees who attribute their organisation's use of talent management as an enactment of commitment are more likely to report the intention to remain with their organisation, than when they attribute their organisation's use of talent management as to enact control, however both are positive relationships, as hypothesised. Retention of much valued talent is a priority outcome in organisational talent management and therefore evidence that talent management, whether attributed to commitment or control strategies will positively influence employee intentions to remain with their organisation is a win for the talent strategy at its most simple interpretation.

More subtly, and more importantly perhaps, this evidence also indicates that the implementation of an exclusive workforce differentiation practice, even when interpreted as a control strategy, is not negatively associated with employee intention to remain. That is, employees are intending to remain, rather than to leave their organisation, even when they attribute the meaning of talent management as being control oriented. Therefore not only is management's intention to use talent management more likely to be associated with increased intention to stay, the use of exclusive talent management is positively associated with employee intention to stay across the wider workforce sample. This is a new finding which extends our understanding of the

response of the wider workforce to exclusive talent management, responding to urgent calls to do so (Ehrnrooth et al., 2018; Swailes & Blackburn, 2016). The findings that employees continue to report positive affect in response to talent management also confirm that the non-talent identified majority of the workforce has not necessarily been excluded as a consequence of exclusive talent-identification practices, which addresses a pressing question in the literature (Swailes & Blackburn, 2016) and is a welcome insight both for management and for the employee. Confirming that employees appear to successfully navigate and make sense of exclusive talent management such that associated outcomes are positive for both the employee and the organisation, is perhaps also a first step in responding to calls to examine the influence of exclusive talent management on the wider workforce and to what extent it may (or may not) present a challenge to achieving an inclusive workplace (Daubner-Siva et al., 2017).

Third, as proposed, the study has shown that the psychological contract is centrally involved in the mechanisms which operationalise expected talent-advantage through implemented talent management. Considering the involvement of the employee's psychological contract, employee perceptions of the extent to which their psychological contract is fulfilled is also of central importance in the context of talent management as hypothesised. Tests of mediation have confirmed that positive and significant relationships exist between both talent management attributions of commitment and of control and all employee outcomes measured (with the exception of performance for which no significant results were found). In this study, psychological contract fulfilment is found to be involved as a mechanism through which employee TM attributions of commitment influences affective commitment and employee intention to remain and through which employee TM attributions of control positively influence affective commitment, organisational citizenship behaviours and intention to remain. More specifically, when attributions are made which signal purposeful management focus on cost, performance and reputation (i.e. control) rather than those which appear to be directly supportive of the employee (i.e. commitment), the employee's interpretation of the control strategy's influence on their outcomes is more reliant on the extent to which their psychological contract is fulfilled (or not), than when the organisation's intention is interpreted as one of enacting commitment towards the employee. Therefore in the context of attributions of control, the employee psychological contract takes on a greater role in mediating the indirect effect than under

attributions of commitment, when the fulfilment of the psychological contract carries a lighter burden of the path to preferred outcomes. This extends psychological contract theory (Rousseau, 2004), as it explains that in conditions when employees perceive management intention is to enact control rather than commitment, the generation of organisationally-desired outcomes of talent management relies to a greater degree, on the employee formation of beliefs that their psychological contract is fulfilled.

In terms of the outcome of organisational citizenship, psychological contract fulfilment has been shown to take on a greater mediation role when employees perceive their organisation's talent management to enact control, compared to when they perceive talent management to enact a commitment strategy, for which no evidence of mediation (indirect effect) was found (hypothesis 3b not supported). That is, while employee attributions of talent management (each of commitment and of control) are both positively and directly associated with organisational citizenship behaviours, it is only employee TM attributions of control which are partially mediated through psychological contract fulfilment. This is also interesting as it sheds light on our understanding of when attributions matter most. To access discretionary citizenship behaviours under attributions of control, management are more reliant on the perceived fulfilment of the psychological contract than under attributions of commitment when the psychological contract is not significantly involved. This extends the psychological contract literature by introducing a talent-strategy contingent view of when the psychological contract is most valuable as a mediating mechanism towards the achievement of organisationally-preferred talent outcomes.

In summary, this study has indicated that the psychological contract is causally involved in the relationship between the employee's perceptions of their organisation's purpose in adopting strategic talent management and the organisation's access to some of the most organisationally-desired outcomes of this strategic practice. Specifically, the perceived fulfilment of the psychological contract as a proximal outcome of employee sense-making in regards to their organisation's use of talent management has been helpful in then subsequently confirming its causal involvement in the generation of preferred outcomes of the practice. While causality is empirically difficult to provide evidence of in the reliance on data at a single time point, scholars can reasonably argue that it is not possible for the mediator to carry a portion of the effect of the predictor variable on the outcome variable if the mediator is not causally involved (Hayes, 2017).

## 7.5. Limitations

This study has three main limitations. First, the empirical model was limited by the absence of an available validated measure in the extant literature. As a research topic and body of literature, talent management is relatively new in management sciences, and HR attribution theory has yet to be empirically examined in the literature. Therefore a new measure was developed. While the construct of employee talent management attributions is newly theorised and its first empirical application here makes a novel theoretical and empirical contribution to the literature, the measure may be strengthened by further conceptual and empirical development. Where possible in the current study, I used readily available, published scales with reported reliability of suitably high strength when tested in previous research. Unsurprisingly, existing measures were not readily available for the measure of employee talent management attributions and therefore development of new measures was required for the measure of employee TM attributions, central to this study. I considered the limited HR attributional literature to locate a possible measure which could be modified, however there are only seven studies identified which employee a measure of HR attributions and no empirical study of employee TM attribution identified as extant in the literature. Correspondingly, I developed and tested a set of 18 employee talent management attribution items for use in this employee questionnaire based study. As guidance suggests, adaption of existing measures is to be done with caution in order to avoid negatively impacting validity and reliability (Kline, 2008), I drew on the measure of employee HR attributions (HRA) tested in the seminal paper which conceptualised and introduced HRA (Nishii et al., 2008). I adapted the measure for use in talent management, adhering closely to its design to limit unintended influence on its predictive power when modified. For each of the 18 items which comprise the two employee talent management attributions measures, reliability testing produced suitable alpha coefficients as reported in chapter six. I designed the new measure to align closely to the three core components of the talent management definition: performance, development, and talent potential assessment or identification. However, as this is a new construct and measure, the talent management attributions measures require further empirical testing for validity and reliability to confirm it measures talent management attributions, distinct from employee attributions of HR.

Second, the main model measures in this study were self-reported by employee participants, with the exception of task performance which was organisationally reported four months following the employee data collection. Therefore the measures are subject to common method variance (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). To establish psychological separation or distance between the measures as recommended (see Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, et al., 2003), in keeping with other studies in SHRM and TM literature (see Alfes et al., 2013), I separated the independent, mediator and outcomes measures in the survey by including other measures which are not reported in this study and by using instructions which signal a differing focus. To address limitations in the use of employee self-reported data such as errors in what can be considered to be objective or factual data (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986), I relied on organisationally-reported demographic data which ensured accuracy of the control variables (age, gender, tenure) and organisationally reported performance, as an objective data measure.

Third, this study was designed as a single-organisation study and as such, it is limited in its generalisability. However, given the research aims of this study to investigate variance in job attitudes of employees experiencing talent management using a sample for which the experience of talent management can be considered relatively comparable, sampling from a single organisational context was warranted. However this therefore did not necessarily access a wide range of possible purposes of talent management which could be extant in other organisational contexts.

In summary, while this study provided evidence of mediation in five of the six models for which a direct relationship was found between the predictor and the outcome variable, additional variables which influence the achievement of organisationally-desired individual-level TM outcomes warrant consideration in future research. For example, as theorised in the conceptual model in chapter three, the supervisor plays a crucial role in the employment relationship and in the implementation of HR practices (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). Therefore the influence of the line manager on the employee experience of talent management is expected to be significant. This influence may occur, for example, through the supervisor's contribution to perceived fulfilment of the employee's psychological contract, which in the current study has been found to be involved in the relationship between employee TM attributions and outcomes. Moderation of the extent to which the psychological contract is fulfilled may then be a

fourth variable in the relationships presented and is an example of moderated mediation (Hayes, 2018) for consideration in future research.

## 7.6.    Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has presented the results of empirical measurement of the theorised model of employee talent management attributions. I have presented empirical evidence that, indeed, employees observe, make sense of and attribute meaning to their organisation's use of talent management, despite the activity often being poorly signalled or communicated by the organisation. Evidence suggests that employees make talent management attributions of both commitment and of control. Further evidence explains that each attribution has important and varying influence on the preferred outcomes of talent management. This study has extended the talent management literature through the integration of HR attributional theory through theoretical development and empirical testing of the concept of employee talent management attributions. The findings of this study also explain the role of employee formed beliefs of their employer's fulfilment of obligations through provision of talent management, differentially dependent upon the attribution of purpose made about the practices. This extends the psychological contract literature. The organisational communication of the "why" of talent management has been shown to be a critical factor in the organisation's access to the strategic advantage through talent (the "what"). As reported, the psychological contract is involved as a centrally relevant and often powerful influencer of the relationship between such attributions and employee outcomes. Notwithstanding the evolution of the employee organisation relationship in today's workplaces, employees are listening, carefully, to what organisations signal as their intention in using workforce differentiation practices and their interpretations, various, varying and multiple, have real consequences for the business.

In chapter eight which follows, I present an integrated discussion of the contributions of the empirical work in the dissertation, its limitations and directions for future research.

# 8. Chapter 8. Discussion.

## 8.1. Chapter Introduction

The purpose of this thesis was to investigate the employee's psychological response to talent management. In particular, I considered these main research questions: *What is the employee experience of talent management? How do employees perceive talent management? What are the consequences of talent management for the employee psychological contract and the individual outcomes?* In doing so, this thesis has positioned the employee at the heart of organisational talent management to directly consider the employee perspective on talent management within the literature.

Through the mixed-methods empirical work in this thesis, the employee psychological response to talent management has been closely examined, deepening the level of focus from the organisational to the individual to examine the mechanisms involved in the path to outcomes of organisational advantage through exclusive talent management. In this thesis I presented the findings of two empirical studies as part of an overall exploratory-convergent empirical design. The empirical work of this dissertation extends the extant talent management literature by presenting an immersive view of the employee perspective in balance to the prevailing managerial perspective in the literature. The introduction of HR attributional theory into the talent management literature through conceptualisation and testing of the new concept of employee talent management attributions is a novel contribution to the extant talent management literature and an extension of the limited HR attributional literature. The conceptual research model presented herein and the empirical work introduce a contingent view of talent management and present findings which provide evidence of the role of context in talent management.

In this final chapter, I first briefly present a summary of findings of the empirical work. I then present a discussion of the five contributions which this thesis makes to the talent management and SHRM literatures. I then discuss the practical implications and the limitations of the thesis. Finally I propose directions for future research and present concluding remarks.

## 8.2.   Summary of the Empirical Findings

Early in this dissertation, in chapter two, I presented a review of the extant literature which highlighted the imbalance of perspectives and a predominance of the managerial view and the limited consideration as yet of the employee perspective in the TM literature. I then developed a conceptualisation of the employee experience of talent management, drawing the point of focus from organisational advantage at the firm level, to the employee as the central participant of value creation at the individual level. In doing so, the conceptual model presented an integrated consideration of the employee involvement in talent management, including their attributions of the meaning of talent management in their organisation, exchange based on the psychological contract, contextual factors such as individual differences and the influence of organisational actors such as the supervisor, and individual outcomes. In the scope of this dissertation empirical work, I examined a number of variables within the conceptual model. Further empirical examination of the model is warranted to extend the now developing stream of research which considers the employee in talent management.

In the first of two studies, I conducted a qualitative inductive investigation of the employee experience of being top or elite talent within their organisation, using qualitative methods in order to explore the conceptual research model. I used the flexibility of the semi-structured interview method to explore and capture a wide range of perspectives from the employee which corresponded to a broad and varying coverage of the conceptual research model. I identified 44 first-order codes in the data of relevance to the employee perspective. I then applied thematic inductive analysis methods to transform the qualitative data into the data structure presented in figure 5.1 in which six aggregate thematic dimensions are visible as follows: First, talent management is contextually-embedded. Second, identification as talent is a crucial event of status distinction. Third, talent status is a dynamic component of identity, self and career. Fourth, psychological contract based exchange in the context of talent status is characterised by increased complexity, magnitude, sensitivity. Fifth, talent status broadens the focus of contribution beyond the individual role to the organisation and its people. Sixth, the talent-organisation relationship is characterised by an increased relational orientation, acceptance of uncertainty and risk. The findings of this study highlight the complexity of "being talent" in the context of exclusive talent management from the perspective of individuals who have experienced relative identification apart

from their peers and correspondingly been managed as talent, including the deployment to pivotal positions which require higher-than-peer contribution well beyond core task performance.

In the second of two studies, I conducted a large-scale quantitative study in which I theorised and tested an empirical measurement model which further examined components of the conceptual research landscape. Specifically: perceptions of employees as to "why" their organisation adopts talent management; "what" outcomes are associated with specific and varying possible attributions of TM purpose; and "how" the psychological contract is involved in the function of this relationship to directly or indirectly influence individual-level outcomes. From this empirical work, I presented these findings of direct effects and of mediation testing of the relationships between employee talent management attributions of commitment and of control and organisationally-preferred outcomes.

First, TM attributions of commitment were shown to be positively and significantly related with employee outcomes of affective commitment and intention to remain with the organisation, and in each case, a proportion of the effect was direct and also indirect, mediated through fulfilment of the psychological contract. Second, employee TM attributions of control were shown to be positively and significantly related with employee outcomes of affective commitment, organisational citizenship behaviours and with intention to remain, and in each case, a proportion of the effect was direct and also indirect, mediated through fulfilment of the psychological contract. Additionally the outcome of task performance was tested, using an objective measure of individual task performance reported by the organisation, however no significant direct or indirect relationships were found. Of note with regard to the relationship between employee TM attributions of control and each of the three outcomes reported, the mediating effect of psychological contract fulfilment is greater than for employee TM attributions of commitment. This indicates that when employees attribute the purpose of organisational talent management to that of control, there is greater reliance on the psychological contract to carry the effect through to organisationally-preferred outcomes, pointing to the central relevance and function of the psychological contract in the individual level mechanism which comprise the "black box" of talent management.

## 8.3. Contributions to the Literature

This thesis makes five contributions to the literature.

### 8.3.1. The employee perspective: The talent in talent management

First, this thesis contributes to the reorientation of the talent management literature to increasingly consider the employee perspective, by its uncommon focus on the employee as the central actor. A notable shift from the prevailing management and organisational perspective (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015), the empirical work presents the voice of the employee. This thesis contributes findings from empirical study of both elite talent and of the general workforce further diversifying and balancing the range of perspectives available within the scholarly literature.

Within this stream, the findings of the qualitative study highlight the wide range of topics of relevance to the employee experience of elite talent status and the consequences for the employee. This first study in the dissertation demonstrated that employees identified as elite talent by their organisations experience talent status as a differentiation from their peers in the organisation such that talent status becomes a component of identity and their status as talent may be internalised as part of their personal brand, which shapes their views of their anticipated future careers. Further, elite talent status employees report strong ownership of their individual performance and seek accelerated development and career advancement opportunities. Learning agility and the importance of challenging work assignments were reported frequently.

By examining the employee perspective, this thesis adopts a relational view, as called for in the literature (Al Ariss et al., 2014), and contributes to the recently developing stream which considers employee reactions to talent management. Evidence from the qualitative study finds that individuals identified as top talent identify strongly with their organisation and work mandates as well as develop a strong relational orientation to their work and the actors, particularly senior management and senior sponsors with whom they collaborate directly and intensively in the their roles. This extends our understanding of the relational nature of exclusive talent management and its influence on the employee.

The empirical findings reported here indicate that the employee response to exclusive talent management was associated with both positive affect and with

supportive organisational behaviours including a reciprocation of commitment to the organisation. Further the use of exclusive talent management is positively associated with employee intention to remain with the organisation, even when the attributions as to the meaning of the use of talent management is for the purposes of control, in contrast to possible attributions of commitment.

The empirical work investigated the consequences of workforce differentiation on the wider workforce, and found that exclusive talent management was acknowledged by employees and responded to with positive, supportive behaviours, whether associated with attributions of commitment or control. The findings have shown that workforce differentiation can be associated with positive individual-level outcomes of organisational citizenship behaviours and of affective commitment when its meaning is interpreted as either for enactment of management commitment or of control. Having employed a large-scale study which sampled the views of employees across the wider workforce, rather than narrowly examining the response of "talent" exclusively, this study responds to the pressing need to more sufficiently understand the consequences on employees of workforce differentiation through talent management (Becker et al., 2009; Huselid, Beatty, et al., 2005; Pfeffer, 2001; Smale et al., 2015), and its consequences for employees who may not be identified exceptionally as talent (Swailes, 2013a). These findings shed light on the influence of workforce differentiation on employees indicating that there are positive outcomes associated with exclusive talent management associated with the majority of employees across the wider workforce including both talent and non talent-identified, thereby responding to a crucial priority (Becker et al., 2009; DeLong & Vijayaraghavan, 2003).

This thesis also contributes to our understanding in the literature of the possible unintended consequences of exclusive TM for employees. In the qualitative study, evidence has shown that employees identified as elite talent hold salient views of their career, now and in future and experience increased sensitivity to the ongoing exchange with their organisation. Findings also indicate that increased complexity in the exchange-based relationship is also related to increased uncertainty and risk. Further, this provides evidence in response to the question of whether exclusive talent management may unintentionally exclude non-talent identified employees, as raised in the literature concerning the possible paradox between the use of exclusive talent management practices and the importance of inclusive workplaces (Daubner-Siva et al.,

2017). These early findings present a complex and diverse range of consequences. For those employees (as in the first study) who have experienced elite status as "star talent", a range of consequences were identified which included both those which we advantageous to the individual (such as status, recognition, reward, career advancement, investment in competence development) and those which were not (such as uncertainty, risk, repatriation issues, career progression constraints). However for employees (as in the second study), who experience talent management in their organisations, the findings presented do not suggest a primarily negative response by employees in the wider workforce to exclusive talent management.

### 8.3.2. Individual level mechanisms in the talent-value path: The black box of TM

Second, this thesis deepens the conceptual and empirical level of measurement of talent management. In chapter three, I presented a conceptualisation of the employee experience of talent management at the individual level. This conceptualised the translation of organisational-level talent strategy into an individual-level path to organisationally-preferred outcomes. In doing so, this thesis deepened the focus of the conceptualisation to the individual level of measurement which supports development of the literature, as an extension of the modelling in the literature, largely established at the firm level of measure currently.

By building on the positioning of the employee as the central subject of this dissertation, the empirical work shifted the level of empirical measurement to deepen the empirical focus from the organisation to the individual and thereby examined individual outcomes. In doing so, this empirical work directly considered the individual-level mechanisms which underlie organisational talent management to explain how talent management generates outcomes at the individual level which contributes to unpacking the "black box" of talent management. This shift to an individual-level focus responds to calls in the literature for consideration of the individual level (Thunnissen, 2016), for greater focus on proximal outcomes in talent management (Collings, 2014c), for more proximal indicators in the HRM-performance link (Guest, 1997, 2011; Paauwe, 2009), and for increased empirical focus on individual level TM outcomes (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013).

Empirical tests of individual level mechanisms in this dissertation have provided support for the argument that organisational-level talent strategy is articulated into

meaning at the individual level through signalling. Employees interpret organisational level talent management strategy as implemented talent management and attribute meaning. This interpretation occurs such that variance in attributed meaning is associated with variance in individual outcomes. Further, in this thesis I conceptualised and empirically tested the paths through which talent management may occur at the individual level. Findings provide support for the argument that attributions of the meaning of TM have both direct and indirect influence on organisationally-desired outcomes of TM, as prioritised in the literature. Further, at the individual-level, the psychological contract was found to be centrally involved, such that, to varying extents, the fulfilment of the psychological contract is one of the individual-level mechanisms through which proportions of the indirect effect is carried from the predictor variable to the outcome variable. This evidence points to the significance of attributions of TM purpose by employees, the influence of the psychological contract and its power in facilitating organisationally-preferred outcomes of talent management.

The studies presented in this thesis have shed light on a wide range of outcomes for the employee in talent management. This thesis has considered possible unintended consequences, in contrast to what is largely assumed to be positive outcomes (Ehrnrooth et al., 2018), and found support for both positive and negative outcomes of exclusive talent management. In the qualitative study, the findings have illustrated a diverse range of outcomes which differ considerably in their degree to which they are positive or negative from the perspective of the employee. The empirical work has shown that, in the case of elite talent particularly, talent status carries a significant burden for the individual employee both in terms of expected exchange with their organisation and also in terms of the psychological uncertainty and effort required to sustain the heightened performance and the talent-organisation relationship (TOR). While this study has illustrated some of the positive outcomes of exclusive talent management at the individual level, a number of outcomes of elite talent status are not unquestioningly positive, and have indeed been shown to be negative, which is consistent with concerns in the literature (Ehrnrooth et al., 2018).

Finally, building on the findings of the literature review which considered the employee in TM as yet limited in the literature, this thesis locates the employee as central subject. In doing so, a conceptualised path to competitive firm level value through talent was introduced, which at its most essential conceptualisation, is directly reliant on the

employee experience of talent management and its associated individual-level mechanisms. The literature review and the conceptual research model presented together shape an agenda for the forward development of this stream in the literature. By moving from organisation-level to individual-level measures, this thesis support the talent management literature in developing the individual-level domain of TM research, and thereby also to bridging the macro (strategic) and micro (functional) domains (Huselid & Becker, 2011) in the forward development of the literature. In the current thesis, by considering the translation of organisation-level talent strategy within the development of the individual-level TM attributions construct and measure, the study contributes to the early development of cross-level models of empirical research. The reported findings provide evidence of the measureable influence of organisational-level variables on individual level outcomes in talent management, thus further unpacking the "black box" of talent management.

### 8.3.3. Employee talent management attributions: Predictors of talent outcomes

Third, this thesis expands the talent management literature through the introduction of human resource attribution (HRA) theory (Nishii et al., 2008). Introducing the concept of employee talent management attributions to the literature, I hypothesised that the meaning to which an employee attributes their organisation's use of talent management will be associated with variance in specified individual level outcomes. Following empirical testing, the dissertation has provided evidence that employee attributions of meaning of the use of TM in the organisation are significantly associated with a range of individual level outcomes. This is a novel contribution in the talent management literature.

As talent management occurs largely today within the context of the "protean career", that is where the career is driven largely by the employee and the employee's decisions rather than those of their organisation (Hall, 2004), it is expected that signals of support from one's organisation are an increasingly important source of meaning for employees as they interpret their organisation's use of talent management. This is because reliance on one's organisation to predictably provide and sustain employment and career advancement over time has diminished substantially in recent decades of globalisation and of internationalisation of firms.

Based on signalling (Spence, 1973) and sense-making (Weick, 1995) theories, to integrate HR attribution theory into the TM literature, this thesis presents a first conceptualisation and empirical study of the relationship between employee attributions and individual level outcomes, further specifying the mechanisms within the black box of TM. This conceptual and empirical work extends both the nascent TM literature through the introduction of HRA theory to TM, and also extends the extant HRA literature, which remains highly limited despite the introduction of the seminal work of Nishi, Lepak, and Schneider (Nishii et al., 2008). Integrating Heider's work (Heider, 1958) in the topic of commitment and control orientations and drawing on the construct design developed and tested by Nishii et al. (Nishii et al., 2008), I conceptualised and empirically tested a new measure of employee TM attributions. Specifically, applying a commitment-control framework to the range of possible attributions, I hypothesised that employee TM attributions of commitment and of control would be associated with specific organisationally-preferred talent outcomes, in part, through the involvement of the psychological contract and its fulfilment. The introduction and empirical testing of the construct and new the empirical measure into the talent management literature is also a novel contribution, supportive of future research.

Empirical evidence of an important link between attributional theories and talent management has been provided, thereby extending the talent management literature and introducing its integration with HR attributional theory (Nishii et al., 2008) to apply HRA to the context of talent management. In doing so, this study has found evidence supporting the hypothesis that employees observe and interpret their organisations use of talent management and make, correspondingly, interpretations of the meaning, intention and purpose (the "why") of talent management. The thesis has presented evidence that varying employee TM attributions have varying influence on outcomes of priority to organisations in talent management and also vary in the extent to which they are operationalised through the mechanism of psychological contract fulfilment. This provides new insights into the consequences of organisational talent management for the employee.

Empirically, employee TM attributions of commitment and of control are each shown to directly and indirectly influence organisationally-preferred outcomes of talent management. These findings explain that employees make sense of their organisation's use of talent management as a conveying and signalling organisation-level intent and

purpose in use of TM. More specifically, the empirical findings presented indicate that talent management strategies which rely on employee interpretations to achieve attributions of commitment rather than, for example, carefully designed communications which intentionally and clearly convey the organisation's intentions use of talent management including the articulation of a purpose of commitment, may indeed place at risk the retention of their talent. Doing so organisations become more dependent on the degree to which the employee perceives their psychological contract to be fulfilled, rather than on the implementation of a commitment-based talent strategy.

### 8.3.4. The psychological contract: Modified in exclusive talent management

Fourth, this thesis extends the limited body of empirical work which considers the central role of the psychological contract within talent management as an individual-level mechanism and its central role in the mechanism through which organisationally valued talent outcomes are generated. Drawing on social exchange theory and extending the early work of scholars who have theorised the centrality of the employee psychological contract in TM such as Höglund (Höglund, 2012) and Dries (Dries, 2013a), the empirical work presented has shown that the psychological contract is centrally involved in the relationship between the employee and organisation in the context of exclusive talent management, whether the employee is talent-identified or not.

In the qualitative study, which considered a purposeful sample of employees identified as top or elite talent by their organisation, one of the main findings was that psychological contract based exchange is centrally involved in how the talent-identified employee perceives their obligations to their organisation. Psychological contract fulfilment-based exchange in the context of elite talent was shown to be characterised by increased complexity, magnitude and top talent indicate greater sensitivity to exchange in light of their talent status. Further, the employee-organisational relationship is characterised by an increased relational orientation, consistent with psychologically-held beliefs about future exchange, in contrast to transactional exchange which may be less relational in nature (Rousseau, 2004). Finally, the individual's identity is also involved in the dynamic and evolving beliefs which the employee holds regarding their current and future obligations and expectations of exchange with the organisation. Consistent with increased sensitivity to exchange, this involvement of the self, self-

identity and a persistent future orientation towards one's career and performance is also notable and reflects the central involvement of the employee's beliefs about the self in the context of being identified as talent in their organisation.

This thesis has illustrated the centrality of the psychological contract and its fulfilment as a mediating mechanism in the talent-value path, pointing to the importance of facilitating and maintaining psychological contract fulfilment when adopting exclusive talent management. In the quantitative study, I theorised the central involvement of the psychological contract as the mechanism through which the individual talent-outcome path is operationalised. The quantitative study found support for the argument that psychological contract fulfilment indirectly carries a portion of the effect of employee TM attributions of commitment and of control to a range of individual-level employee TM outcomes. The role of psychological contract fulfilment as a central mediating mechanism, was demonstrated in both the qualitative study and the large scale quantitative study, across samples of talent-identified employees and the wider workforce. Doing so, this responds to calls for consideration of the ethics of TM (Swailes, 2013a) by presenting a closer understanding of the involvement of the psychological contract, central to the ongoing employee-organisation relationship of all employees not limited to those identified as talent. Findings indicate that rather than negatively impacting the employee psychological contract, exclusive talent management has been shown to be positively associated with psychological contract fulfilment across the wider workforce. Further, evidence has been presented that exclusive TM is associated with positive individual level outcomes both directly and indirectly through the fulfilment of the psychological contract. However in the study of top talent, those employees with an elite status in the organisation as starts, PC breach has been shown to be a potential negative outcome.

This thesis further contributes to the literature by supporting a rebalancing of the psychological contract literature. While the empirical work has directly examined the employee psychological contract and its fulfilment, the empirical work has also taken the organisational perspective and expectations into account through the integration of organisational TM intent into the model, through use of the TM attribution measures of commitment and of control. The thesis therefore considers the often neglected organisational perspective with regard to the psychological contract, often out of balance with the priority of focus on the individual psychological contract (Guest & Conway,

2002). The establishment of the construct of employee TM attributions draws the organisational perspective into the model and provides an empirical framework for future research to consider how the organisational expectations for talent management are interpreted by employees in their psychological contract.

Finally, questions exist regarding the possible reduced relevance of the psychological contract in the context of the new employment relationship (Cullinane & Dundon, 2006). As work and careers now occur across organisations rather than in primarily one organisation, the employee's formation of beliefs about their reciprocal obligations with their employing organisation have been questioned as potentially less relevant today. However, this study has shown that the psychological contract and its fulfilment remains not only relevant, but also of central and substantial influence on employee attitudes in the context of exclusive talent management, increasingly recognised as a tenet of modern organisational management and effective competitive strategy. Specifically, in both the qualitative and quantitative empirical work presented, the positioning of the psychological contract has been shown to be centrally involved in the exchange between the employee and their organisation, whether elite talent or in the general workforce. There is no evidence in the studies presented herein which challenges the relevance or suggests the irrelevance of the psychological contract as a fundamental mechanism within the employee-organisation relationship in today's organisations. Indeed the opposite has been shown. In the case of organisationally-preferred talent outcomes of strategic importance to the firm, the employee psychological contract has been shown to be a central variable and in some cases, accounts for a substantial proportion of the variance explained.

### 8.3.5. Contingent model of talent management: Talent management in context

Fifth, this dissertation extends the talent management literature by directly considering the context in which talent management occurs. As called for in the literature, this modelling represents a consideration of context in talent management (Thunnissen, 2016). In the conceptual and empirical modelling presented I have directly integrated context into the conceptual theorising, the constructs and the measures.

The construct of employee attributions of talent management, by design, considers the context-specific meaning and intended purpose of talent management as signalled by the organisation. By introducing a contextually-anchored conceptual model

and measured variables, this thesis has introduced a contingent model of talent management. In the quantitative study, the design and construction of the empirical measure for the individual-level construct of attributions, took into account the influence of context in the model, resulting in a contingent measure within the model. The findings therefore provide evidence of the contingent effects of talent management, an empirical link between one facet of organisationally-specific talent strategy and individual-level outcomes.

In the qualitative study, context emerged as a central consideration in the employee experience of talent management. Employees reported clear prioritisation of business specific strategies, goals and leadership priorities for performance. In doing so, top talented individuals strove to align their contribution to the priority goals and ambition of their organisations. This highly contextualised view of their performance also indicated that their status of being talent was also largely context-specific and was a within-organisation status, not necessarily transferrable outside of the organisation. The findings of the qualitative study shed light on the contextual nature of talent management such that the requirements of an organisation for value generation through talent are conceptualisations of value and performance which are business-context specific. This is consistent with prior theorising in the literature which considered the business-specific nature of how talent management drives value (Sparrow & Makram, 2015). The findings of the empirical work in this dissertation confirm this conceptualisation of talent-value, as indeed contingent on organisational context and therefore organisation-specific strategy.

In the empirical work presented, the individual-level mechanism which led to valued outcomes in the model were shown to be directly and indirectly associated with the contextually-specific attributions which employees make as to the meaning of the use of TM within the organisation. Further, by considering both the employee and the organisational perspectives in the quantitative measurement model, this thesis contributes to calls for a more pluralistic approach (Thunnissen et al., 2013b).

## 8.4. Practical Implications

Talent management is an activity of central importance to organisations today, seen as the mandate of top management, and imperative in order to access the much sought-after talent advantage (Cascio & Boudreau, 2016). However until recently,

management has had little scholarly evidence to look to on the topic of talent management. As with other SHRM practices, often challenging to implement consistently (Morris et al., 2009), an intended-actual gap, as noted in the SRHM literature (Nishii & Wright, 2008), is also likely to exist in talent management. Indeed persistent issues of implementation and lack of expected results (Cappelli & Keller, 2014) have been evidenced in both practitioner and empirical literature alike, which attest to issues of effectiveness in this resource-intensive management practice. This thesis contributes to management practice in three main ways.

First, this thesis underscores the importance of acknowledging the role of perceived meaning in talent management and the organisational use of signalling to convey this meaning. Management hesitation to communicate talent management, sometimes intentionally as "strategic ambiguity" (Dries & De Gieter, 2014), is understandable given the risk of procedural and distributive justice issues in talent management implementation (Gelens et al., 2014b), which are illustrative of the intended-actual gap. However lack of clear signalling of the "why" of talent management, based on business requirements for workforce differentiation, limits the potential power of employee TM attributions to access valued talent outcomes. Further, lack of clear signalling of commitment enacting talent strategy may reduce the potential impact available through commitment focused attributions. Evidence has shown that employee attributions of control demand a greater reliance on individual psychological contract fulfilment as the mechanism to achieve preferred outcomes. This reliance presents a risk to organisations, given that psychological contract fulfilment is itself subject to variance. Signalling priorities through effective future-oriented communications (Guest & Conway, 2002), is theorised to be an important element of effective talent management (Ehrnrooth et al., 2018; Smale et al., 2015). Recognising that human resource practices act as communications which influence the psychological contact (Guzzo & Noonan, 1994), and since employees intermittently revisit the extent to which their psychological contract is fulfilled by their organisation (Coyle-Shapiro & Shore, 2007), the findings of this thesis underscore the significance of ongoing communications of talent management priorities in the organisation. Regular signalling of the organisational purpose of talent management through a range of communications is therefore recommended. Also, prior studies have shown that procedural justice influences employee outcomes of talent management (Gelens et al., 2014b), therefore

transparency in communicating the purpose and management intention in use of exclusive talent management is recommended to maintain perceptions of fairness. Finally, rather than mirroring competitor best practice (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), management's clear signalling of the various intentions and purposes of talent management specific to the organisation is recommended as attributions of commitment and of control have each been shown to be associated with preferred talent outcomes through psychological contract fulfilment.

Second, the central role of the line manager in talent management warrants closer attention. Line managers act directly in organisational HR implementation (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007), and are indeed "sense-givers" of HRM in practice (Nishii & Paluch, 2018). The line manager is the most proximal actor in the organisation's translation of talent strategy into practice (King, 2015), and is influential in shaping the employee's psychological contract, its perceived fulfilment or possible breach (McDermott et al., 2013). Therefore management attention to the readiness and capability of the line manager to implement and represent the intended purpose of organisational talent management is of utmost consideration in two ways. First, to establish clear signals of the meaning and purpose of TM; and second, to facilitate the psychological contract fulfilment upon which key TM outcomes rely.

Third, the empirical findings have confirmed that attributions of commitment and of control are not naturally opposed, incongruent, inherently counter-functional, nor mutually exclusive. If exclusive talent management is implemented without sufficient clarity in the management intention for talent, adopting a talent strategy which loosely signals "all our employees are talented", is a rhetoric which may have limited effectiveness and risk unintended consequences over time in practice. This may be particularly limiting when employees observe and attempt to make sense of the differentiation of talent in their work environment. An ill-defined and poorly signalled talent strategy may result in perceived lack of management authenticity in light of observed exclusive practices which counter-signal that, indeed only some of our employees are identified as talent. Indeed, scholars have argued that to not differentiate the recognition of employees who have differentiated their performance contribution may be unethical (Swailes et al., 2016). Likewise, to apply broad statements regarding the wider workforce without sufficient declaration of intention of the purpose of relative talent potential identification, may also be problematic in exclusive talent management.

Signalling a balanced range of multiple, complementary purposes of talent management comprised of both commitment and control, may support organisations to move towards a more balanced and secure exchange with their employees, for the mutual benefit of both, the organisation and the employee, as recognised in the literature (Tsui et al., 1997).

## 8.5. Limitations of the Thesis

Reflecting on the empirical work of this thesis, I briefly discuss the fit of the empirical strategy to the aims of this thesis, followed by presentation of four limitations.

### 8.5.1. Reflections on the fit and suitability of the empirical design

The aim of the empirical approach adopted in this dissertation was to conduct a deep investigation of the employee perspective of talent management, currently lacking in the literature. A mixed-methods design was used to leverage the advantages of both qualitative and quantitative methods while overcoming limitations of each (Creswell, 2015). The qualitative study enabled direct access to the "voice of talent", providing an immersion into the experience of elite talent, adding breadth, depth and dimension. The use of an exploratory-inductive design, in contrast to the "hypothetico-deductive approach" (Woo, O'Boyle, & Spector, 2017, p. 244) for this study supported a deeper investigation of the research questions and also responded to calls in the literature for increased use of inductive methods for the study of human resources related topics (Jebb et al., 2017). Although in qualitative management research, there is little consensus on what it is and how to evaluate it (Creswell, 2015), researchers have recently identified a range of archetypes of qualitative management research designs (Johnson, Buehring, Cassell, & Symon, 2007). The archetype which best describes this study is "versehen", that is, trying to see and understand meaning (Johnson et al., 2007). Use of the versehen archetype in this dissertation was consistent with exploratory research with an aim to examine a topic prior to subsequent quantitative research (Johnson et al., 2007). This approach responds to calls in the literature for more considered examination of SHRM through use of qualitative methods (Guest, 2011).

The quantitative study in this dissertation provided a balance to the purposeful sampling and inductive methods used in the first study through a large-scale random sample and rigorous quantitative measurement methods. The quantitative study brought

the "voice of the workforce" into the literature, addressing a limitation in our understanding of the use of workforce differentiation, as called for in the talent (Ehrnrooth et al., 2018; Swailes & Blackburn, 2016) and workforce differentiation (Huselid, Beatty, et al., 2005; Huselid & Becker, 2011) literatures. Both studies captured individual-level outcomes and proximal outcomes (Collings, 2014c), limited in the extant literature. Together, these two complementary studies have contributed a broad range of employee perspectives, a noted gap in the extant literature. Together, the empirical strategy has enabled the direct study of talent within talent management, and thereby also responds to a noted limitation in the study of SHRM whereby SHRM has often prioritised a focus on process over the participants of the process (Wright & McMahan, 2011). This empirical work in TM begins to shed light on the presence of an intended-actual gap (Nishii & Wright, 2008) for talent management specifically. Finally, the research model, as presented in chapter three, was conceptualised with core components which measure the what, how, and why (Whetten, 1989) and was extended to consider the when and for whom, and may serve as a conceptual foundation for future research.

However, while the empirical strategy supported the intended aims of this thesis, there are limitations in the empirical work which I now discuss.

### 8.5.2. Limitations of the empirical work

There are four main limitations in the empirical approach and methods. First, the use of self-reported data is a limitation. When self-reported, employee data, whether self-reported via qualitative or quantitative methods, is nonetheless, self-reported and therefore can be expected to contribute to common method variance (Podsakoff, P., MacKenzie, Jeong-Yeon, & Podsakoff, N., 2003). To mitigate this to the extent possible, two steps were taken. First, the design of the questionnaire was structured to allow psychological separation and distance between key measures in the model. Second, organisationally-reported objective data was also collected (specifically, for measures of task performance, organisational talent status and control variables).

Second, while talent management is recognised to involve multiple actors (King, 2015), multi-source data was not the main nature of the data in this thesis. The exception to this was the organisationally reported variables in the quantitative study (including task performance and control variables). In the quantitative study, organisational data

was collected in the pilot study and integrated into the measure of employee TM attributions, however the employee questionnaire collected employee responses rather than multi-source. Although the supervisor is a causal agent through which the organisation's HR practices lead to performance (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007) and theorised to directly the influence the employee's experience of talent management (King, 2015), the supervisor was not included as a source in this dataset, which is a limitation.

Third, the variable of organisationally-reported talent status was not included in the measurement model. In the absence of this variable, the influence of perceived talent status on the outcomes of the model remains unexamined. As talent identification is known to be a central activity in organisational implementation of talent management (Mäkelä et al., 2010), and given the evidence that employee and organisational views of the employee's status as talent (or not) are known to vary or be incongruent (Sonnenberg et al., 2014), or asymmetric, with risk of psychological contract breach (Dries & De Gieter, 2014), the exclusion of the individual's perception of their talent status is a limitation to the model.

Fourth, two of the quantitative measures may be limited. First, the measure of task performance which was theorised to be a centrally relevant outcome in talent management was not found to be significantly related to other variables in the model. This may indicate the weakness of the measure itself. As reported the measure used was an organisationally reported measure of individual performance collected four months following the questionnaire-based collection of employee data. The measure of task performance is based on a four-point scale and the distribution of values across the sample is very narrow indicating little variance. Constructed as a four-point scale measure, limitations in the quality of the source measure likely contribute to its limited utility to identify significant relationships in the current model. This is also consistent with literature which indicates that individual performance appraisal, through which the rating of individual performance is undertaken by the organisation, can be problematic in practice (Biron et al., 2011). Second, the development and use of a new measures of employee TM attributions. While the attributions measures have demonstrated reliability and utility in the current measurement model, as new measures, they may have other limitations as yet unidentified. Further, while the two attributions measures introduced measured a total of 18 distinct attributions, there are other possible attribution

statements which were not considered in the current design but which may be theoretically relevant to employee attributions of talent management.

## 8.6. Future Research Directions

Looking ahead, as the talent management literature continues to develop, there are many areas of interest for future research. Reflecting on the contributions of the thesis and on the wider research model introduced in chapter three, there are six directions which are compelling for future conceptual and empirical development.

### 8.6.1. Employee talent management attributions and outcomes

First, the introduction of employee talent management attributions presents opportunities for further study, both in consideration of a wider conceptualisation of possible attributions and also in the conceptualisation of individual level outcomes.

With regard to employee TM attributions, within the current design of the construct and its two main orientations, of commitment and of control, six statements which contribute to the two main attributions have been used, in keeping with the original theoretical foundations of the HR attributions theory (Nishii et al., 2008). Future research could investigate the varying influence of these current six purposive statements to further explain outcomes examined in this thesis. Additionally, future research could draw on a wider range of possible employee attributions of meaning in talent management. Building on the commitment-control orientation which has been examined in this thesis, future research could theorise other attributions of specific relevance to talent management. For example, extension of the new construct could consider diversity, engagement, and talent mobility. As the talent management literature is currently limited by its lack of theoretical foundations, this use of HRA theory could be further extended by drawing on other adjacent literatures to further integrate theory into the TM literature.

With regard to employee outcomes of TM at the individual-level, future research is warranted to further theorise and empirically test a wider range of proximal outcomes. While this thesis has presented conceptual and empirical findings of a set of organisationally-desired outcomes of talent management, numerous other outcomes may be theoretically of interest, to expand our understanding of the individual-level mechanisms of talent management and through which the employee centrally

contributes value in the path to talent-advantage at the organisational level. For example, in the conceptualisation of the research model, I discussed the expected relevance of proactive behaviours (Parker et al., 2010) to competitive outcomes in talent management. While this was not examined within the scope of the current dissertation, future research could consider a range of possible attitudinal and behavioural outcomes at the individual-level which may be involved in the generation of competitive advantage through talent. In addition to proactive behaviours, future research could also examine how an extended range of theorised employee TM attributions predict individually-oriented outcomes such as the development of the employee's potential, and organisationally-oriented outcomes such as innovation, and knowledge sharing, which are further examples of theoretically relevant proximal outcomes at the individual level of measurement. Future research of proximal individual-level outcomes of talent management would respond to a noted limitation in the extant literature (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016).

### 8.6.2. Multiple actors and the talent-manager micro-climate of exchange

Second, consideration of the line manager in the individual employee experience of talent management warrants future study. In conceptualising the individual-level research model, drawing on the organisational support literature (Eisenberger et al., 1986), I discussed the role of perceived support of one's supervisor (Eisenberger et al., 2002), and that the direct and ongoing exchange between the employee and supervisor in the context of exclusive talent management is expected to be an important component of the overall talent-organisation exchange, particularly for employees identified as talent. However as the wider exchange between multiple actors in the conceptual research model was not examined within the scope of the current empirical work of this thesis, future empirical studies are required to further theorise and examine the influence of these actors within the conceptual model.

In the qualitative study, findings indicated the significant importance of the line manager in the employee experience of exclusive talent management and the complexity of the exchange between top talent and their most proximal organisational actors. The findings of the qualitative study indicate that what might be described as a "micro-climate" of exchange is established between the elite-talent-identified employee and their manager. The close partnering and intensified exchange within this micro-climate

would be interesting to study further as it is expected to offer insight into how top talent achieve differentiated outcomes. Further examination of this talent-manager micro-exchange climate would also be valuable to shed light on the ways in which the supervisor influences the enactment of organisational talent strategy at the individual level. This would support investigation of a possible intended-actual gap (Nishii & Wright, 2008) in the TM literature and further explain the manager's role as a central actor in causal link to performance (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007) through TM implementation. Both individual and team performance are theoretically and empirically of interest and could help to advance the development of the extant literature.

The literature could be extended by more comprehensive consideration of the psychological contract, which in the current thesis has been shown to be centrally relevant. Prior studies have considered psychological contract inducements (Ehrnrooth et al., 2018), formed obligations (Björkman et al., 2013), psychological contract fulfilment (Sonnenberg et al., 2014) as has also been examined in the current thesis, and the risk of contract breach (Dries, 2013a). However a more integrative, end-to-end theoretical and empirical investigation of these would provide valuable insight into the influence of exclusive talent management on the micro-exchange between top talent and their organisation. As the findings of the qualitative study have pointed to the dynamic and evolving nature of the talent-employee organisation for employees differentially identified as talent, empirical examination of the evolution of the psychological contract composition over time, and in light of crucial events, would be valuable to shed further light on the range of outcomes for the employee in this complex relationship and the mechanism through which talent-value is created at the individual level.

Crucial exchange events, those events which modify the terms of the exchange going forward (Ballinger & Rockmann, 2010), are of relevance in the context of the talent-organisation relationship. Prior work has theorised the risk of psychological contract breach (Dries, 2013a) in talent management and related to talent status incongruence (Sonnenberg et al., 2014). Talent identification has been theorised to be a crucial event (King, 2014) and evidence from the qualitative study supports this argument. As the retention of highly-valued organisational top talent is a recognised priority in exclusive talent management, it would be interesting to draw on job embeddedness theory (Yao, Lee, Mitchell, Burton, & Sablynski, 2004) and the turnover literature to consider crucial events which occur in the talent-organisation relationship

to shed light on the conditions which are more likely to result in psychological contract breach and talent turnover, and when not. Overall, research in this stream would support the extension of a relational view to talent management, a limitation in the current literature (Al Ariss et al., 2014).

### 8.6.3. Individual differences in talent management

As theorised in the conceptual research model presented in this thesis, individual differences are expected to be a core component of the individual-level interactions which explain the advantage accessed through organisational talent management. From the perspective of variance at the individual level, individual differences were directly considered throughout the empirical work in this thesis. Nishi et al (2008) in their seminar paper introducing HR attribution theory explained that employee attributions are indeed individual differences as they represent the differing interpretations and meanings attributed by the individual to observed practices (Nishii et al., 2008).

However considering possible additional variables within the organisational context which comprise an individual difference, the identification as talent is an individual difference of note, which was considered in the qualitative study. Employee perceived talent status and its corresponding (or incongruent) organisationally-reported variable, official talent status, are both measures of a form of between-individual variance of interest to future research. As discussed in the literature review, these have been examined only in limited prior research and warrant further investigation as variables which centrally explain the individual's inclusion in the talent pool (or not). However, while evidence in prior studies has shown that perceived talent status is positively associated with increased obligations (Björkman et al., 2013), in a more recent study, findings have indicated that employee awareness of their organisationally-reported status as talent, does not account for the full effect of talent obligations (Ehrnrooth et al., 2018). This lack of explained variance indicates the importance of individual differences as potential predictors of the variance not explained by talent status awareness.

However there are other individual differences, which might be considered as antecedent in future exploration of the employee experience of talent management, which were not considered in the scope of this dissertation. Consideration of individual differences will support the development of the literature through further integration

with other topics and theoretical foundations, in particular with organisational psychology, social psychology, diversity and inclusion.

Additionally, consideration of individual differences between actors in the model would be of interest, such as manager-employee talent status variance. For example, consideration of the influence of manager talent status would be valuable to extend theoretical and empirical research. Investigation of the influence of differences in talent status between the employee and their manager may help to explain variance in a range of talent outcomes. The qualitative study found that close partnering with the line manager was a factor involved in talent outcomes, such as the delivery of extra-role performance, access to work roles which provided accelerated learning and development, and career advancement opportunities. Drawing on leader-member exchange (LMX) theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) may be particularly relevant in consideration of characteristics of the talent-supervisor dyad based exchange (where dyad refers to a group of two), such as variance in LMX quality and LMX differentiation from non-talent identified peers, as a possible mediator of talent outcomes. As prior research which points to the involvement of social identity within differentiated LMX (Daejeong & Seibert, 2015), social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) may offer further theoretical support to this line of future research. For example, use of social identity theory in the consideration of team-based performance may be useful as talent status reflects assessment of potential relative to others.

A further individual difference of interest to the study of talent management is exchange orientation, described as the orientation which an employee holds towards exchange (Eisenberger et al., 1986). In the conceptual research model, I discussed the relevance of this variable to talent management as it may be useful in explaining variance in individual outcomes. As discussed, the individual's orientation toward exchange may help to explain variance in measures of individual contribution to organisational priorities, and quality of leader-member exchange. Consideration of exchange orientation may also shed light on the extent to which the talent-organisation relationship is characterised by resilience (or not) generally, and more specifically, influence the quality and resilience of the TOR following crucial events which may risk psychological contract breach, limit its fulfilment, or lead to fracture of the contractual employment relationship.

Finally, future research might also investigate the role of individual identity, the salience of future work self (Strauss et al., 2012), and the role of core self-evaluation (Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2003) in the individual-level mechanisms which lead to talent outcomes. The role of individual differences in saliency of future work self (FWS) was theorised in the conceptual model presented earlier. Future research could examine the influence of core self-evaluation (CSE) as a predictor of talent identification and of resilience in the talent-organisation relationship. Finally, integration of the talent management literature with the gender studies and diversity literatures could support empirical enquiry into the role of gender differences in talent management, which is already closely in focus in the adjacent leadership literature. In the current empirical work, gender was found to be statistically significant in the outcomes of the quantitative study and, in the leadership literature, the persisting imbalance of gender in leadership are each indications which suggest that further empirical consideration of gender in talent management, as an individual difference, is warranted.

### 8.6.4. Team and organisational outcomes through cross-level modelling

Finally, there are several interesting themes for future research which extend beyond the individual-level mechanisms theorised and examined in this thesis. Given the evidence herein that the employee experience of and psychological response to talent management takes place within the wider context of the firm, as a contextually-embedded talent system, the inter-action of talent management on employee outcomes across levels from the individual, to the team and to the firm, is also of interest.

Researchers might extend research on the employee perspective of TM from the individual level to the team and workforce levels. Given that talent management represents a strategic workforce practice, a consideration of cross-level mechanisms is needed to advance the literature. Empirical enquiry across individual and team levels to the firm level could extend the literature. For example, researchers could examine the influence of exclusive talent management on individual psychological climate, and on team and organisational climate. In particular, given the noted the conceptual paradox between exclusive talent management and inclusive climate (Daubner-Siva et al., 2017), researchers might consider the consequences of exclusive talent management on inclusion climate (Nishii, 2013). In particular, the influence of employee talent

management attributions on climate outcomes, such as inclusion climate, would be a novel contribution to the literature.

Extending outward from consideration of the employee, to consideration of the proximal exchange in the talented employee-manager dyad, the upward influence of talent management on team level outcomes is of interest to extend the literature. Further consideration of the extent to which the experience of talent management is consistent between individuals and between the individual and a given team, may shed light on the variance in implementation of talent management, comparable to the notion of an intended-actual gap in SHRM (Nishii & Wright, 2008). This would also support empirical investigation of internal system consistency, a factor identified in the literature as a topic for further investigation in talent management (Vaiman & Collings, 2013).

In summary, future research which draws on additional theoretical foundations to consider the employee centrally within the literature has potential to contribute to empirical consideration of outcomes at the individual, team and organisational levels of interest to the developing literature.

## 8.7.    Chapter Conclusion

*"Hide not your talent, they for use were made. What's a sundial in the shade?"*

*(Benjamin Franklin)*

This statement reminds us of the core characteristics of the talent which is managed as a strategic resource in talent management. First, competence: talent is for use. That is, talent is comprised of unique knowledge, skills, abilities, insights and experience which, when applied, effect outcomes, which may in aggregate be recognised as organisational capability. This is consistent with the view of talent as human capital and the individual's competence as individual human capital resources. Second, context: talent is conceived of within context. That is, as the sundial in the sun, talent is expected to be functional when it fits meaningfully with the purposeful context within which it is embedded. Third, communication: talent is expected to be visible, not hidden. That is consistent with the reciprocal signalling by both the employee of their intended contribution today and further development of potential in future, and of the organisation which seeks, identifies, recognises and fosters its talent for differential management, deployment, development and retention. Finally, contribution: talent is strategic, creates

value, and is consequential. That is, talent is resourceful and intended to have impact or generate notable consequence. At its broadest and most diverse interpretation then, for any purpose, such as the sundial's purpose, a form of purposeful talent can be defined. This is consistent with the literature which challenges us to consider talent in terms of "for what purpose", enabling diverse perspectives on how talent may be defined for its greatest contribution and impact to organisational outcomes, aligned to business strategic intent, and even to aspirational societal outcomes, such as improved quality of living through competitive economic development.

The aim of this thesis was to investigate the employee psychological response to talent management and the consequences for the employee psychological contract and individual outcomes. In doing so, this thesis has aimed to invite the "voice of talent" into the literature, repositioning the talent within talent management, which had reflected a primarily managerial perspective. Drawing primarily on psychological contract and social exchange theories, the employee experience of talent management was conceptualised at an individual-level. Extending human resource attributions theory to introduce employee talent management attributions, specifically of commitment and of control, this thesis examined the influence of employee attributions of the meaning of talent management on the employee psychological contract and individual outcomes.

The employee experience of talent management was shown to be complex and the consequences for the employee-organisation relationship wide ranging. The novel introduction of employee talent management attributions has shown that the meaning attributed by employees to organisational use of talent management is significant in the explanation of variance in the outcomes of this strategic human capital practice. The empirical work has further demonstrated that discrete attributions of commitment and of control differentially influence employee outcomes and that the psychological contract is centrally involved as a mediating mechanism through which the organisationally-preferred outcomes of talent management function. Given the pivotal position of the employee as a central actor within the individual-level path to organisational-level talent-advantage, as the scholarly body of work in talent management continues to develop and advance, its continued consideration of the employee as a centrally informing perspective is imperative.

Effective talent management is expected to be a source of competitive and inimitable advantage through the employee's contribution. Yet the ambiguity of purpose and meaning in talent management may currently constrain the fullest participation of its central actor – the talent themselves. Extending the social exchange-based foundations of the employee-organisation relationship, business signalling of strategy-contingent talent priorities through communication of the purpose and meaning of talent management in the organisation, has been shown to contribute to outcomes of value to both the organisation and the employee. However employee interpretations of management intent and priorities in adopting strategic talent management are centrally involved in the employee's participation in talent management, and thereby its competitive outcomes.

Consideration of the employee experience of talent management has been shown to facilitate and invite the reciprocal response of the employee to engage with the purposes of talent management in the organisation. Doing so, supports organisations to invite the fullest contribution of employees and the wider workforce to contribute their diverse talent on the collective journey to talent-advantage. The empirical work within this dissertation has shed light on the complexities of elite status as talent and the influence of talent management on the psychological contract which underlies the employment relationship, of relevance to all employees. Centrally considering the employee at the heart of talent management, presents a broad and compelling landscape of future research for further development of the emerging talent management literature.

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**Appendix 1 Review of the Literature: Empirical studies which consider the employee within talent management**

(Literature review, Chapter 2, presented in alphabetical order, n=24)

| Author(s), year, title | Research focus, methods | Focal variable(s) | Findings | Future research |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bethke-Langenegger, Mahler & Staffelbach (2012) Effectiveness of talent management strategies. | Web based survey of talent management strategies of respondents from HR associations in Switzerland and included executives and managers (n=138 companies). Quantitative organisation level and individual study. | Organisationally-reported talent status Employee perceived talent status | Organisationally confirmed talent status and outcomes:<br>- Positively related with turnover intention<br>- Negatively related with work engagement<br>- Non significant relationship with job satisfaction<br>Employee perceived talent status was not found to be significantly related with any of job satisfaction, turnover intention, work engagement | Research on perceptions of talent management at the workforce level. |
| Björkman, Ehrnrooth, Mäkelä, Smale & Sumelius (2013) Talent or not? Employee reactions to talent identification | The relationship between employee perceptions of talent status and specific attitudinal outcomes. Quantitative survey of employees in 9 Nordic MNC's (n=769). | Talent status perception | Employees who perceive they are identified as talent by their organisation differ from those who do not know.<br>Perceived talent status and outcomes:<br>- Positively related with: acceptance of increased performance demands, commitment to build competence, support of strategic priorities | To examine organisationally-reported talent pool inclusion and to examine possible reverse causality. |

| Author(s), year, title | Research focus, methods | Focal variable(s) | Findings | Future research |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | - Negatively related with turnover intention (compared with those who perceived non talent status)<br>- No significant relationship was found between perceived talent status and identification with unit, identification with MNC enterprise | |
| Clarke & Tracy (2017)<br>The role of the psychological contract in shaping graduate experiences: a study of public sector talent management programmes in the UK and Australia | Participant experiences (n=68) of 2 fast tracks graduate development programs (UK public sector organisation, Australian public sector organisation). Semi-structured interviews. | Fast track program participation | The fast track graduate recruitment process builds expectations in the new graduate for career paths.<br>- Graduates seek opportunities to demonstrate skills<br>- Graduates seek opportunities for training and development when accepting a graduate programme offer<br>- Line manager support is a factor influencing graduate evaluation of programs<br>- Career opportunities contributed to the formation of the psychological contract and its evaluation | Consider the impact of line managers in talent management. |
| Daubner-Siva, Ybema, Vinkenburg & Beech (2018)<br>The talent paradox: talent management as a mixed blessing | Auto ethnographic study of author's experience of talent management (n=1). Company HQ in the Netherlands. | Organisationally-assigned talent status | - Paradoxically, being identified as talent can be positive and negative simultaneously.<br>The employee reported outcomes of:<br>- opportunities and risks<br>- sense of power and of powerlessness | Research on the effects of TM. |

| Author(s), year, title | Research focus, methods | Focal variable(s) | Findings | Future research |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dries & De Gieter (2014) Information asymmetry in high potential programs | Implicit beliefs held by high potentials and HR Directors with regard to the exchange between high potentials and their organisation. Qualitative interview study (n=20 high potentials, 11 HR managers, in 9 organisations). | Official talent status (as reported by organisation). | - Information asymmetry (when the organisation and the employee hold inconsistent views of the employee's status as talent or not) presents a risk for psychological contract breach.<br>- Organisations use strategic ambiguity regarding their talent practices but may create perceived promises and requires careful consideration.<br>- Expectations of employees with official talent status include: customised career support, training and development opportunities.<br>- Expectations of the organisation include: career self-management by talent identified employees<br>- Official talent status was associated with insecurity and confusion regarding signals of talent management by the organisation | Further research on the psychological effects of talent identification and of the differing employee and employer psychological contract terms. |
| Dries, Forrier, De Vos & Pepermans (2014) Self-perceived employability, organization-rated potential, and the psychological contract. | Relationship between self-perceived employability resources and perceived psychological contract obligations. Whether organisational high potential ratings are | Organisationally reported talent / non-talent status | Compared to non-talent identified employees, high potential employees did not indicate any significantly different self-perceived obligations to demonstrate longer-term relationship loyalty to reciprocate organisational differentiated investments they have received. | Longitudinal studies and multi-level designs. Consider culture on the relationship between perceived employability and psychological contract. |

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| Author(s), year, title | Research focus, methods | Focal variable(s) | Findings | Future research |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | associated with more relational psychological contracts of employees. Survey study of 5 large Belgian not-for-profit organisations. N=103 of which 49 were high potentials. Case control design. | | Organisational assistance to employees to enhance employability resources should not be withheld.<br><br>Between group comparisons:<br><br>- No significant relationship between self-perceived employability resources and perceived psychological contract obligations nor intention to stay.<br>- High potential identification is unrelated to attachment to the organisation and unrelated to the employee's perceived ability to perform.<br><br>- Positive relationship between self-perceived employability resources and perceived employee obligations for performance. | Research required on the psychological implications of being identified as high potential. |
| Dries & Pepermans (2007)<br>Using emotional intelligence to identify high potential: a meta competency perspective. | To demonstrate the utility of emotional intelligence (EI) in the identification of high potential managers. Matched samples of 51 high potential and | Emotional intelligence (EI) | - Manager differences (between high potential and regular samples) in total EQ-I were not significant.<br>- Some of the 15 EQ-I sub-scales were shown to have significance.<br>  - Assertiveness, independence, optimism, flexibility and social responsibility are significantly | Further empirical studies of high potential individuals. Further testing of the relationship between emotional intelligence and high potential. |

| Author(s), year, title | Research focus, methods | Focal variable(s) | Findings | Future research |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | "regular" managers, from 3 organisations. | | different for HP and non-high potential groups. | |
| Dries & Pepermans (2007) "Real" high-potential careers: An empirical study into the perspectives of organisations and high potentials. | High potential careers. Qualitative, cross-organisation. N=34. Interviews of high potential employees and HR managers, employed in 6 MNCs in Belgium. Comparison across samples of high potentials and organisational representatives. | Official talent status (as reported by organisation). | High potentials have traditional careers which include features of low inter-organisational mobility and career self-management.<br>Retention is a primary goal of high potential programs.<br>Talent-identified employees:<br>- expect regular career progression to higher levels in organisation<br>- reported fears of and stress related to not achieving organisational expectations<br>- resentment towards the organisational monitoring of their performance with regard to failure | Comparison of high potential and non high potential career progression. Research on the psychological implications of high potential identification (or not). |
| Dries, Van Acker & Verbruggen (2012) How boundaryless are the careers of high potentials, key experts and average performers? | Survey based study (n=941). Nine participating for-profit organisations. Case-control design where cases (employees identified as with exceptional leadership potential, or key experts) | Supervisor-rated performance and career orientation as predictors. Talent status (organisationally-assigned talent category) as mediator. | - Traditional career inducements and attitudes are more significant in employees identified as talent and, to a lesser extent, those identified as key experts.<br>- Employer inducements associated with traditional careers (organisational support, promotions, and organisational | Relationship between Boundaryless careers and subjective evaluations of career. Longitudinal studies of employee careers, talent management and career climate. |

| Author(s), year, title | Research focus, methods | Focal variable(s) | Findings | Future research |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | and control groups (matched sub samples of average performers) were identified. Survey sub-sections administered at three points in time. | | commitment) are positive predictors of career satisfaction.<br>- Supervisor ratings of employee performance is the most important predictor of talent status categorisation by the organisation. | Wider scope of empirical investigation of talent management (beyond simple assignment to talent categories). |
| Dries, Vantilborgh; Pepermans (2012)<br>The role of learning agility and career variety in the identification and development of high potential employees | Whether learning agility is predictive of high potential or not. Matched sample of high potentials (n=32) and non high potentials (n=31) from seven best practices organisations in talent management. | Learning agility as an antecedent of potential | - Learning agility, mediated by on the job learning, is a predictor of being identified as talent and is a stronger predictor of talent identification than job performance.<br>- Career variety is associated with learning agility. | Further longitudinal studies are required. Causal analysis is required. |
| Ehrnrooth, Björkman, Mäkelä, Smale, Sumelius & Taimitarha (2018)<br>Talent responses to talent status awareness—Not a question of simple reciprocation | Psychological reaction of employees identified as talent by their organisation. A quantitative survey study (n=321 employees identified as talent). | Talent identification. | - Employee awareness of their status as talent moderates the relationship between employee offers to talent (including psychological contract fulfilment, performance management and leadership development) and the obligations which talent identified employees form. | Further research on status and employee outcomes. |

| Author(s), year, title | Research focus, methods | Focal variable(s) | Findings | Future research |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gelens, Dries, Hofmans & Pepermans (2015) Affective commitment of employees designated as talent: signalling perceived organisational support | The role of perceived organisational support in the relationship between talent identification and affective commitment. Two survey based studies in different organisations in Belgium. Study No.1 n=203. Study No.2 n = 195. | Organisationally identified talent / non-talent | - Employees who are identified as talent are more likely to perceive organisational support (POS)<br>- For the dependent variable of affective commitment, results of the 2 studies were opposite. Positive relationship in one study.<br>- POS mediated the relationship between identification as talent and affective commitment. | Multi-level studies. Cross-cultural studies. Studies of talent identified employee perceptions and reactions nested in organisations. |
| Gelens, Hofmans, Dries & Pepermans (2014) Talent management and organisational justice: employee reactions to high potential identification | The influence of perceived organisational justice (distributive and procedural) on the relationship between high potential identification and job satisfaction and work effort. A survey in one organisation (n=203). | Organisationally identified high potential employees<br>- Junior<br>- Senior<br>- Non-talent | - Job satisfaction – no difference between junior and senior high potentials. Job satisfaction was significantly higher for both than for non-talent<br>- Work effort was significantly higher for senior high potentials than for junior high potentials and non talent. No difference between junior and non-talent.<br>- Perceived distributive justice was significantly higher for high potential identified employees<br>- Perceived distributive justice fully mediates the relationship between high potential identification and job satisfaction. | Examining causality of the findings. The influence of organisational culture. The influence of communication of high potential identification. Multi-level analysis. |

| Author(s), year, title | Research focus, methods | Focal variable(s) | Findings | Future research |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | - Perceived procedural justice moderated the relationship between perceived distributive justice and work effort. | |
| Höglund (2012) Quid pro quo? Examining talent management through the lens of psychological contracts | The relationship between skill-enhancing HRM practices and employee perceptions of employer talent inducements and human capital outcomes. Talent inducements are employer commitments to provide career and promotion opportunities. Alumni of Finnish business school (n=126). | Employee perceived talent inducements by their employer | - Psychological contract obligations to build skills partially mediate the relationship between talent inducements (employer commitments to provide career and promotion opportunities) and human capital. | Compare reactions of employees who are considered talent and non-talent. |
| Khoreva, Kostanek & Zalk (2015) Managing High-potential Employees in MNCs: The Mediating Role of Socialization Mechanisms | The influence of talent identification and of organisational identification on attitudes of high potential employees. Quantitative survey sample within eleven Nordic MNCs. (n=439) | Self-reported talent identification / Organisational talent identification | - Talent identification<br>  - Talent identification predicts positive employee attitudes or commitment to build competence and acceptance of increased demands.<br>  - Talent identification predicts acceptance of increasing demands via corporate socialisation<br>  - Talent identification does not predict commitment to build competence via corporate socialisation.<br>- Organisational identification | Not reported. |

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| Author(s), year, title | Research focus, methods | Focal variable(s) | Findings | Future research |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | - Organisational identification is positively associated with commitment to build competence and with acceptance of increased demands.<br>- organisational identification does predict acceptance of increasing demands via corporate socialisation<br>- organisational identification does not predict commitment to builds competences via corporate socialisation<br><br>- Informing high-potential employees of their status is worthwhile<br>- Organisational socialisation mechanisms support high potential attitudes to adopt increasing performance demands | |
| Khoreva & Vaiman (2015)<br>Intent vs. action: talented employees and leadership development | The influence of talent identification on leadership development activities. Survey based study of eight MNCs (n=330) | Talent status awareness (self-aware and non aware talent) | - Perceived effectiveness of leadership development activities is positively related to employee willingness to undertake the leadership development activities<br>- No significant relationship between identification as talent and willingness to participate in leadership development activities | Longitudinal research to examine causality. |

| Author(s), year, title | Research focus, methods | Focal variable(s) | Findings | Future research |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | - No significant relationship between willingness to participate in leadership development and actual participation in leadership development activities<br>- Leadership development activities included international assignments, job rotation, receiving feedback, training<br>- Willingness to participate in change management was significantly associated with actual participation in change management.<br>- Formal identification as talent does not encourage leadership development behaviours, counter to previous studies such as Bjorkman et al 2013. | |
| Khoreva, Vaiman & Zalk (2017)<br>Talent management practice effectiveness: investigating employee perspective | The influence of TM practices effectiveness on high potential commitment leadership competence development.<br>Quantitative survey using a sample of 439 high potential employees in eleven Finnish companies. | Perceptions of TM practice effectiveness by high potential identified employees. | - Perception of TM practice effectiveness is positively related with employee commitment to leadership competence development and this is mediated by psychological contract fulfilment.<br>- The relationship between perceived TM practice effectiveness and commitment to build leadership competence was statistically higher for female employees. | Longitudinal research and research which examines causality and direction of the effect. |

| Author(s), year, title | Research focus, methods | Focal variable(s) | Findings | Future research |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Kontoghiorghes (2015) Linking high performance organizational culture and talent management: satisfaction/motivation and organizational commitment as mediators | High performance organisation and effective talent management and the influence on employee attitudes. Using a paper and pencil survey of automotive supply chain employees (n=556) in the US followed by a survey of a Cypriot telecommunications company (n=600). | High performance organisation | - Talent attraction and retention were predicted by a high performance culture.<br>- Employee attitudes of job satisfaction, motivation and organisational commitment mediated the relationship. | Further study of organisational culture and ethical work values in SHRM research. |
| Petriglieri & Petriglieri (2017) THE TALENT CURSE: INTERACTION | How talented employees struggle with talent identification by their organisations. | Talent identification. | - Idealisation and identification are moderators which can be destructive for talent identified individuals.<br>- Being placed in a high potential pool can be associated with 3 negative behavioural consequences for the employee:<br>  - a focus on proving talent status and a performance orientation rather than a learning orientation<br>  - a focus on image which may not be consistent with the real self in which authenticity may suffer<br>  - a delay to meaningful work | How organisations may be reinforcing this reaction of talent and what they could do instead. |

| Author(s), year, title | Research focus, methods | Focal variable(s) | Findings | Future research |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Smale, Ehrnrooth, Björkman, Mäkelä, Sumelius & Taimitarha (2015) Letting the Chosen Ones Know: The Psychological Effects of Talent Status Self-Awareness | The influence of talent status self-awareness on the social exchange relationship between the employer and the talent. Quantitative survey of talent-identified individuals (n=313) in six Finnish MNCs. | Mediator - Talent Status recognition (yes, no, do not know) | - Psychological contract fulfilment is associated with talent obligations and moderated by talent status recognition.<br>- Performance appraisals linked to rewards and talent obligations are associated, however no support was found for this relationship being moderated by talent status recognition.<br>- The relationship between performance appraisal target setting and feedback and talent obligations was weaker for recognised talent (those who are aware of their talent status) than others.<br>- Awareness of talent status results in<br>  - Increased demands to achieve psychological contract fulfilment<br>  - Reduced effectiveness in performance appraisal as a management tool | None presented. |
| Sonnenberg, van Zijderveld & Brinks (2014) The role of talent-perception incongruence in effective talent management | The effect of talent management practices and of incongruence in talent status perceptions on psychological contract fulfilment. Qualitative study of respondents in twenty one organisations (n=2660). | Number of talent practices used | - Volume of TM practices used is positively associated with psychological-contract fulfilment.<br>- This relationship is negatively moderated by incongruence in talent status perception. | Improved quality of measures to examine weightings of differing TM practices. The effects of intended TM practices to examine financial and behavioural differences. Examine |

| Author(s), year, title | Research focus, methods | Focal variable(s) | Findings | Future research |
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| | | | | whether psychological contract fulfilment is an intermediate variable between TM and performance variables (such as commitment). Consider employee fulfilment of obligations. Further examination of gender and education as characteristics of talent pools. |
| Swailes & Blackburn (2016) Employee reactions to talent pool membership | Matched samples of employees in a public sector (chemicals) organisation identified as included in the talent pool and not included. Talent pools specified were emerging talent, scientist, future senior leader, non-talent. Qualitative interview based study (n=17+17). | | - Employees identified as being included in a talent pool are more likely to report<br> - positive regard for their future employee outlook in the current organisation<br> - perceive organisational and supervisor support<br> - satisfaction with development activities<br> - Employees who are not included in the talent pool are more likely to:<br> - Report perceptions of lower support by the organisation and perceptions of unfairness. | Further matched sample studies of talent and non-talent. Longitudinal case studies to consider career expectations and career capabilities. Further research comparing insiders and outsiders. |

| Author(s), year, title | Research focus, methods | Focal variable(s) | Findings | Future research |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | - Future senior leaders (compared with scientist and non-talent) were more likely to expect the organisation to create career opportunities | |
| Tansley & Tietze (2013)<br>Rites of passage through talent management progression stages: an identity work perspective | The role of identity work in talent transitional processes in talent program progressions. Qualitative study comprised of six interviews with organisational representatives and two focus groups with staff identified as talent. | Talent identification. | - Successful transitions through phases of talent programs are required for advancement.<br>- Identity work is required to be successful in talent advancement.<br>- Tension is involved in organisational and self-identities.<br>- Appropriate identities consistent with organisational norms are required.<br>- Ambitious and fluid relationships and contexts need to be overcome to be successful.<br>- Talent status involved both costs and benefits | The interface between talent identities, decision making, the role of self-doubt and critical reflection through progression stages. Investigate strategic exchange and individual identity. Consideration of ethical issues and individual agency and how talent management contributes to societal and moral development. Investigation of the |

| Author(s), year, title | Research focus, methods | Focal variable(s) | Findings | Future research |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | link between macro, meso and micro level. |
| Thunnissen (2016) Talent management: For what, how and how well? An empirical exploration of talent management in practice | Investigation of talent management in multi-level study of five Dutch universities. Qualitative interviews with employees in tenure track positions and departed "talent". | | - Talent perceive TM practices as intended to support professional development.<br>- Talented employees are generally not satisfied with<br>  - the organisation's inducements to them<br>  - with uncertainty of career options<br>  - lack of clarity of promotion criteria<br>  - continuing insecurity of their employment positions due to fixed-term contracts<br>  - Lack of consistency in TM practice implementation by supervising professors.<br>- However high levels of continued employment were found, inconsistent with turnover which would be predicted by psychological contract (breach) theory<br>  - Talent-organisation relationship is found to be an unbalanced relationship | Research on the influence of TM on psychological contract. Research on the effectiveness of TM. Multi-level designed studies. Research on the implementation of TM and its challenges. |

## Appendix 2 Qualitative Study Semi-Structured Interview Guide

(Study 1, Chapter 5)

**Perceived talent status and organisational signals of status.**

What meaning does talent management hold for the employee? What interpretations do employee make about why talent management is used as a strategic HRM practice in their organisation? How does an employee's views of their self now and in future, including their perceived talent status, influence employee views of their exchange-based relationship with their organisation?

**Psychological contract.**

In what ways does the experience of talent management shape the employee's psychological contract and its content (i.e. employee formed commitments)? What specific commitments do employee form when they perceive they are seen by their organisation as talent or high potential?

**Employee relationship with organisation.**

How does an employee view the exchange within their relationship? How do employees identified as talent describe their expectations of exchange and reward and risk in the relationship?

**Employee experience of support as "talent" in the organisation.**

How does an employee's experience of exchange-based events within their organisation influence their perceived commitments to their organisation? Which events may be notable as "anchor events" and why? What support do employees perceive they receive in the context of talent management and how does the supervisor influence (contribute or undermine) the employee experience?

**Job attitudes, behaviours and outcomes of talent-identified employees.**

In what ways does talent management influence an employee's individual job attitudes, behaviours and outcomes? Which employee job attitudes and behaviours are of most relevance to the employee's experience of talent management? How does the employee perceive performance relative to talent identification or perceived talent status?

## Appendix 3  Quantitative Study Employee Questionnaire Items

(Study 2, Chapters 6, 7)

**Employee Attributions of Talent Management**

Talent management practices used in this question set are:

1)      Employee performance

2)      Employee career development

3)      Talent identification

(Company) manages (TM practice 1, 2, or 3) the way it does in order to:

a)      Promote employee well-being by feeling valued by their company. (Commitment)

b)      Support employee competence and career development. (Commitment)

c)      Support employee delivery of quality service to customers. (Commitment)

d)      Try to keep costs down. (Control)

e)      Promote company reputation. (Control)

f)      Get the most work from employees. (Control)

**Affective Organisational Commitment**

I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization.

I really feel as if this organization's problems are my own.

I do not feel a strong sense of belonging to my organization. (Reverse)

I do not feel emotionally attached to this organization. (Reverse)

I do not feel like part of the family at my organization. (Reverse)

This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me.

**Organisational Citizenship Behaviours**

I provide constructive suggestions about how my department can improve its effectiveness.

For issues that may have serious consequences, I express my opinions honestly even when others may disagree.

I "touch-base" with my co-workers before initiating actions that might affect them.

I encourage others to try new and effective ways of doing their job.

I help others who have large amounts of work.

I willingly share my expertise with my co-workers.


**Intention to Remain with Organisation**

I would turn down a job with more pay in order to stay with this organization.

I plan to spend my career at this organization.

I intend to stay at (Company) for at least the next twelve months.

I do not plan to look for a job outside of this company in the next six months.


**Psychological Contract Fulfilment**

Please indicate the extent to which you think your employer has fulfilled its commitments to you.

All the promises made by my employer during recruitment have been kept so far.

I feel that my employer has fulfilled the promises communicated to me.

So far my employer has done an excellent job of fulfilling its promises to me.