Chapter 1 Introduction

HRD - in search of identity

HRD can be seen as fundamentally a practice and process of becoming (Lee, 2016), that is, an activity that is all ‘about’ identity. While the importance of identity is typically now acknowledged in contemporary HRD scholarship, such scholarship has yet to systematically engage with identity theorising. This book responds to this lacuna through addressing two related aims.

Firstly, the book aims to enhance the underlying theorisation of HRD and thereby to expand and redefine the academic space for HRD. By introducing theorisations of identity that have thus far been developed largely outside of HRD it is hoped to enable new, deeper and more interesting understandings of the underpinnings of HRD and of key HRD themes. HRD is predicated on understanding learning (Callahan & De Dávila, 2004) and with the gradual shift in emphasis in HRD from delivering training to enabling learning (Cureton & Stewart, 2016) so the quest to more fully understand learning has become both important and urgent. It is proposed that identity offers a particularly strong, but yet to be fully realised, understanding of learning of relevance to HRD. Moreover, while wishing to avoid theoretical closure, it is proposed that identity offers a resource for disturbing hegemonic orthodoxies, contributes to the emerging critical turn in HRD (Gedro, Collins & Rocca, 2014) and thereby facilitates new forms of nuanced but powerful professional practice.

Secondly, the book aims to respond to observations such as Ruona’s (2016, p. 552) that “HRD has long been characterised as a field in search of itself” and to Callahan and DeDavila’s (2004, p. 79) still not fully answered call for “reflection on who we are”. It will
be seen that as a relatively new profession the sense of “who we are” has been marred by insecurity with challenges both to the legitimacy of the HRD profession and to the credibility of HRD as an academic discipline (Hatcher, 2006). The possession of an exclusive knowledge base is a hallmark of professional identity. Advances in knowledge are, therefore, important in building and maintaining professional credibility (Valentin, 2006). As will be seen, it has been argued that the theoretical bases of HRD have historically been weak. However, theoretical discourses constitute ways of knowing and, thereby, ways of being. Therefore, advances in knowledge and theorisation, as developed in this book, have the potential to strengthen the professional identity of HRD. A deeper theoretical understanding of HRD phenomenon builds professional autonomy and has potential to offer “refuge” from supplication to the pervasive forces of managerialism and the “ubiquitous power of the corporation” (Hatcher, 2006, pp. 72-73). Moreover, identity theorising provides practitioners with understandings to engage in a more reflexive examination of their own professional identities and to question who they are aiming to become and to be, why and how they might become more than they imagined.

This introductory chapter provides a conceptual overview of how HRD is enhanced when viewed through an identity lens. Thereby a context is provided for the chapters that follow which collectively demonstrate the range and depth of the identity contribution to this field. To provide this context, the chapter addresses the following questions: what is the nature of contemporary HRD?; what are the theoretical foundations of HRD?; in what ways can identity theorising contribute to HRD research and practice? The latter is the key question addressed.
The Meaning of HRD

To appreciate the potential of identity theorising to HRD and to understand the context of the chapters that follow, requires an initial examination of the nature of HRD. What is meant by HRD has been asked since its inception and has been the subject of journal special editions and numerous review articles. However, despite the maturity of HRD, which is reflected in the term featuring in the titles of well established specialist journals, of “upwards of five hundred” textbooks (Cureton & Stewart, 2016, p. 3) and of specialist degree programmes, the question of meaning remains unresolved. It has been noted that the nature of HRD has been ambiguous, ill-determined (Gold & Rodgers, 2003; Garavan, O’Donnell, McGuire & Watson, 2007) with the activity lacking a clear identity (McClean, 2007). Hamlin and Stewart (2011) thus noted that HRD was beset by “contradictions, confusions and controversies” (p. 199) with definitions being subject to challenge and with “well over twenty definitions of HRD” being offered (p. 202).

While it can be argued, as will be seen, that defining a field constrains it, providing some delineation avoids a “state of rudderless, random activity” (Swanson, 2001, p. 307) and much research has been done to delineate and ascertain a universal definition of HRD (Wang & Sun, 2009). In calling for papers for a special edition of the International Journal of Training and Development, McGoldrick, Stewart and Watson (2002, p. 396) succinctly defined HRD as being concerned with “supporting and facilitating the learning of individuals, groups and organisations”. Refining this definition through the thematic analysis of definitions of HRD, Hamlin and Stewart (2011) found commonality among 24 distinct definitions of HRD that were reviewed. It was suggested that these definitions could be grouped into four “distinct categories” reflecting “four core purposes” (p. 210). HRD was thus defined as “planned activities” to: improve individual or group learning and, in turn, job or work effectiveness,
productivity and performance; improve organisational effectiveness; develop knowledge; enhance human potential.

That the themes of productivity, performance and organisational effectiveness feature strongly in definitions of HRD can be understood in terms of HRD having evolved as an organisational function before emerging as an academic field (Callahan & De Dávila, 2004). However, while it might be expected that the academic field of HRD would adopt a circumspect approach, even within the domain of this field a performative emphasis is evident. At the turn of the century Russ-Eft (2000) noted the conflict at the heart of HRD between developing the human resources of an organisation and developing the resources of the human and Callahan and De Dávila (2004, p. 77) reported on a “decade of divisive dichotomisation”. However, more recently, Callahan, Stewart, Rigg, Sambrook and Trehan (2015, p. 3) noted that HRD remained conflicted in “serving two masters” – the organisation and the employees – and McInnes Corlett, Coupland, Hallier and Summers (this volume) note a continued distinction between definitions of HRD implicitly emphasising ‘resource’ and those emphasising ‘human’. In essence, whereas the ultimate purpose of HRD is seen by some as a process of “shaping”, for others it is seen as a “voyage” (Lee, 2001).

The field is thus bedevilled by a dialectic tension between the values and ultimate purposes of development with managerialist and performative organisational values tending to inhibit the emergence of educative, enabling and emancipatory professional values (Fenwick, 2014). The weakness in professional values has resulted in an unwitting, or even willing, collusion with managerial values. It is thus noted that HRD scholars sustain a “disturbing interest” in the neo-liberal narratives of resource maximisation, productivity and performance with a “surge” of such articles being observed (Ghosh, Kim, Kim & Callahan, 2014, p. 312).
Learning is sidelined and mainstream HRD research is dominated by narrow instrumental work aimed at providing practitioners with normative prescriptions for productivity enhancement (O'Donnell, McGuire & Cross, 2006). This dominance is reinforced as, within academia, HRD is less likely to be found in schools of education and more likely to be found in schools of business and management.

However, HRD is undoubtedly becoming more open and Lee’s (2001) persuasive argument against defining HRD so as to avoid constraining the field has gained considerable traction. Lee (2016, p. 27) noted that HRD is constantly evolving and emerging, dynamic and developing whereby its “being is constituted by its becoming”. The benefits of a becoming view, that is inclusive and accepts pluralism, multiple perspectives and porous, expanding boundaries, are that HRD will avoid stagnation, flourish and grow. HRD might thus best be considered an “illusory entity” that is an “emergent co-creation” (Lee, 2016, p. 28), drawing from multiple disciplines and comprising a “negotiated reality of shared meanings” (O'Donnell et al., 2006, p. 7). There is a need to “reduce dichotomy” and “increase dialogue” (Callahan & De Dávila, 2004, p. 78) and accept a diversity of approaches.

The meaning space of HRD has indeed been both moving, as themes wax and wane over time, and expanding (Ghosh et al., 2014). Analysing themes in AHRD sponsored journals over time enabled Ghosh et al. (2014) to ascertain the expanding scope of HRD. Learning and training were the dominant themes in the early days of HRD being a distinct entity with coaching and mentoring subsequently coming to prominence. However, the “ten dominant themes” had expanded to include culture, work-attitudes, careers, diversity, knowledge management and leadership (Ghosh et al., 2014, p. 309).
To bring order to this expansive and expanding meaning space, models and typologies have been proposed. Concerned to understand the seemingly disjointed activities of HRD, Callahan and De Dávila (2004, p. 87) focussed on the internal and external environments of HRD to model four “categories of action” based on two dimensions. Firstly certain HRD actions “orientate the organisational system to its internal environment” and are associated with “identity” or “integration”. Secondly certain actions orientate the system to its external environment, using HRD actions to accomplish goals through “adaptation” or “achievement”. An alternative typology, proposed by Garavan, McGuire and Lee (2015, p. 364), aims to “differentiate the various uses of the development concept” and maps uses against two “primary dimensions” of structure and process yielding “four fundamental development types”. Development can be seen, on the structural dimension, as “independent” or “interdependent” and, on the process dimension, as “planned” or “emergent”, with the four associated types being “acquisitive”, “autonomous”, “dialogic” and “networked”.

**Theorising HRD**

As each HRD theme has distinct theoretical underpinnings so the evolving and expanding meaning space of HRD suggests that broadening and deepening theoretical bases are necessary for understanding at the new frontier of HRD. However, McGoldrick, Stewart and Watson (2001, p. 349) noted the “theoretical vacuity” of “discourses within the HRD domain” and more recently Werner (2014, p. 131) concluded that HRD was still characterised by a “relative lack of theory” with the domain needing to find its theoretical feet. The weak theoretical underpinnings are attributed to the proximity of HRD to the pragmatics of practice. Whereas pragmatics are particular, theorising provides generalisation. Although Lynham (2000, p. 165) noted “there are as many definitions of theory as there are authors”, the essence of theorising is a coherent, integrated system of concepts designed to provide
generally applicable description, understanding and explanation of observed or experienced phenomena with a view to predicting events. In the absence of stronger theoretical foundations, research and practice within HRD are likely to be restricted and to lack credibility and professional status. Moreover, in the absence of stronger theoretical foundations and the critical discourse that such foundations enable, HRD “will remain subsumed under the utilitarianism of business” and “subservient to … managerialism” (Hatcher, 2006, pp. 72-73).

Although the theoretical basis of HRD might be in need of enhancement, HRD has historically drawn, albeit selectively, upon theoretical streams from certain well established academic disciplines (Weinberger, 1998). While there is debate over the “foundational” theories of HRD (McClean, 2007, p. 459) certain core theories or root disciplines can be discerned (Gold & Rodgers, 2003) with particular theories coming to prominence or being eclipsed mirroring the HRD themes being researched at any one time (Ghosh et al., 2014). These core theories drew predominantly from the disciplines of psychology and economics and included adult learning theory, human capital theory, systems theory and various sociologically-orientated branches of organisational theorising.

While it has been argued that “no dominant paradigm of HRD” research can be discerned (McGoldrick et al., 2001, p. 346) typically HRD theorising aligning with the scientific, neo-positivist paradigm has dominated (Hamlin & Stewart, 2011) and the associated normative and performative hegemony has remained largely unchallenged. However, with a broadening of the themes researched within the ambit of HRD, such as leadership, culture and diversity, so the dominant paradigm has been questioned and post-positivist, constructionist or interpretivist perspectives have started to emerge (Garavan, et al., 2015; Gedro et al., 2014).
Consequently, the theoretical bases of HRD are finally widening. Nonetheless, the axiology of regulation prevails and the status quo is maintained. Theorising grounded in more critical, radical or humanist perspectives, examining the power and control lurking below the benign surface of dominant managerialist discourses, is flourishing in the wider field of organisation and management studies (Fenwick, 2014). Such perspectives have yet to gain much traction in HRD inquiry. However, as will be seen in certain of the chapters in this text, theorisation located within critical, radical perspectives will enable hegemonic HRD orthodoxies to be challenged, pose new and deeper questions capable of unmasking assumptions, allow new truths to emerge and advance creative solutions aligning with dynamic contemporary contexts.

We suggest that certain significant strands of identity theorising particularly support such critical research agendas. However, the relevance of identity theorising to HRD is, as is shown, considerably broader. As noted, HRD is predicated on understanding learning. The emphasis in HRD has, though, migrated. Until recently the emphasis has been on understanding learning occurring in discrete and purposeful episodes as a result of formal interventions such as training or coaching and resulting in knowledge acquisition or skill development. More recently, the emphasis has shifted with recognition of the pervasive incidental and informal learning that occurs across the life-course. Such learning, which is embedded within work processes and organisational structures (Cureton & Stewart, 2016) particularly engenders transformations in individual and organisational subjectivities, to ways of being in the world (Lee, 2016). As will be seen, identity theorising has particular traction in examining these latter manifestations of learning. Moreover, particular forms of identity theorising enable bridging of persistently problematic gaps. Gaps amenable to understanding through identity lenses include the interplay of learning on the individual and organisational
planes and thus the interplay between HRD and OD, and also between replicative and expansive generative learning.

Theorising Identity

While a subsequent chapter of this text examines in detail the social constructionist conceptualisations of identity that have most to offer HRD scholarship and practice (McInnes et al., in this volume), a brief analysis here of the richly diverse theoretical field of identity provides a platform for our outline analysis of the contribution and potential of identity theorising for HRD that follows. Identity theorising has become a “critical cornerstone” in contemporary organisation and management studies literature (Brown, 2015, p. 20). Identity is, though, a “slippery notion” that can “easily involve everything and nothing” (Alvesson, 2010, p. 194) and, like HRD itself, identity is contested and conceptualised from contrasting and incompatible paradigmatic perspectives. Theories of identity have been modelled and mapped against several dimensions of difference and the positioning of identity theorising on the fundamental, ontological, dimension of essentialist-subjectivist is particularly significant for HRD. At the essentialist end of the continuum, social identity theorising and the associated self-categorisation theory postulate that individuals strive to adopt the subjectivity attributes to a favoured group, construing themselves in terms of these attributes. However, our review reveals that social constructionist identity theorising locating at the subjectivist end of the continuum offers the greatest potential for explicating HRD. From this perspective Giddens (1991, p. 53) noted that “identity is not a distinct trait or even collection of traits possessed by an individual. It is the self as reflexively understood by the person” and involves the individual answering the question ‘who am I?’ (Alvesson, 2010). Identities are not stable, fixed and secure but are, rather, adaptive, malleable, fluid and incessantly crafted. Such reflexive crafting does not, though, occur in a vacuum. Identities are mutually
constituted, developed and sustained through social interaction and are also subject to challenge, denial or neglect (Sims, 2003). Identities are thus seen less as ascribed and more as constituted through dialogue and involving narratives drawing upon available discourses. Subjectivity is thus discourse driven and McInnes et al. (in this volume) differentiate ‘d’/’D’-discourse. The former is the more usual meaning of discourse and refers to what is said whereas the latter meaning of discourse refers to typically-unquestioned dominant discourses. Focussing on the latter serves to reveal how taken for granted hegemonic organisational discourses, often perpetuated by HRD, typically serve to limit available subject positions.

The positioning of identity theorising on a further differentiating dimension is, as will be shown, also of significance. Whereas structuralist theorists assert that powers outside of the individual, not least the deterministic nature of dominant discourses, constrain and define the individual, ascribing an identity, humanistic theorists assert that the individual has a degree of agency and control in becoming the sort of person they wish to be. For most, a sense-of-self might be the outcome of the tension between domination and resistance (Brown, 2015), a process not so much of ‘being’ but of ‘becoming’, a project not an achievement (Collinson, 2003).

A key construct used in more agentic conceptualisations of identity is thus the notion of identity-work. Identity-work refers to the activities individuals engage in to create, present and sustain coherent, authentic and preferred personal identities. Identity-work can be either invoked or enabled by learning experiences associated with HRD. However, more structuralist conceptualisations of identity consider that the plasticity of humans is somewhat exaggerated with individuals not so much doing identity but having it done to them (Alvesson, 2010). From this more critical perspective, HRD is understood as inherently political with
HRD activities serving to regulate and prescribe. HRD can thus be seen as a culprit in manipulating, distorting or at least limiting individuals’ subjectivities. Pervasive and unquestioned discourses within organisations such as those of productivity and performance act as powerful forces colonising or regulating subjectivities. HRD activities, either purposefully or inadvertently, might perpetuate such discourses acting as a “technology of control” (Fenwick, 2014, p.119). Weighing the balance of arguments and evidence for identity being considered as fixed or emergent and the result of structure or agency remains a key debate in identity theorising.

**Analysing Identity Theorising**

To provide the context for the chapters within this text the established identity literature was analysed with sources selected for review on the basis of the following criteria. Sources were assessed for their potential relevance to the current and emerging concerns of HRD inquiry as discussed below. Sources were then appraised on the basis of meeting either or both the criteria of developing identity theorising and applying identity theorising in empirical study. The review focused upon specific HRD, training and management education and development journals listed in the UK ABS *Academic Journals* Guide, 2015. However, in attempting to extend the boundaries of HRD, we moved beyond the work of self-identifying HRD scholars. Therefore, leading adult education, careers and workplace learning journals were also surveyed as were those organisation and management studies journals where identity theorising has featured prominently and been developed most strongly. These latter journals were selected for survey based on the higher than average incidence of search terms such as “identity” appearing in article titles and within abstracts. Following the guidance of Ghosh et al. (2014, p. 306) we largely “used abstracts as proxies for the full articles” on the
understanding that, following APA guidelines, abstracts are “intended to be an accurate and brief, comprehensive summary of the contents of the article”.

Over one hundred papers across over twenty journals met the reviewing criteria and have been analysed using a content analysis approach. The initial analytical themes were derived from established works that used identity to explicitly address HRD themes such as those in the chapters in this text. Further analytical themes were induced from within more generic identity sources. A constant comparative method was adopted whereby new themes were compared with existing themes to identify similarity and difference and sources that had been analysed earlier in the reviewing process were reappraised in the light of the refined and emergent themes. The resulting framework is detailed in the section that follows.

Applications of Identity Theorising to HRD

Our analysis has confirmed the diverse and developing nature of identity theorising, but that identity theorising has yet to feature significantly in the HRD specific literature. However, the extent and diversity of identity theorising of relevance to HRD pose the challenge of how the field can be meaningfully mapped to advance HRD specific thinking and research. In Table 1 we delineate the identity workspace. In the first column, established and emergent themes in HRD and OD scholarship or practice informed by systematic reviews such as Ghosh et al. (2014) are noted. The second column notes the identity lens or lenses that we consider have greatest potential for understanding each of these HRD themes. As can be seen, most, and possibly all, HRD themes have the potential to be understood through different identity lenses and until HRD scholarship engages more with identity the utility of these lenses cannot be prioritised. We refer here to identity ‘lenses’ rather than ‘theories’ to encompass both distinct theories with clear boundaries and broader approaches that have yet
to be reified. The third column shows selected conceptual tools associated with each theoretical lens. These concepts are selected on the basis of their potential for HRD scholarship. Detailing each lens and its associated concepts is beyond the scope of this short chapter. However, the seminal study/ies developing each conceptual tool are noted to support further research. The final column categorises the chapters that follow in terms of the prevailing identity approach adopted.

**[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]**

*Table 1: Selective identity theories and associated concepts: relevance for understanding HRD*

These identity lenses and the most widely used conceptual tools are then depicted within a typology (Figure 1). It has been noted that typology development, the organisation of complex ideas, is itself a form of theorising (Garavan et al., 2015) and our typology is designed to explicate how identity lenses position in relation to two key dimensions of concern in HRD scholarship. Influenced by Gold et al.’s (2013) influential HRD typology, we map the lenses according to their traction for understanding learning on an individual HRD – collective OD dimension and, reflecting our earlier discussion, on a performative – educational / emancipatory dimension. The typology thereby enables HRD researchers to ascertain the identity lens or lenses that are likely to have most traction for the particular learning or development issue being investigated. Thus for example, if the research focus is to understand the development of individuals in a truly emancipatory manner then the theoretical lenses of psychoanalytical theorising or identity-work will provide invaluable insights and particularly enable a critical examination of HRD policies and practice.
Figure 1: Typology of identity conceptual tools with potential for understanding HRD

Conclusion

We have shown in this chapter that various strands of identity theorising provide additional and strong theoretical resources for understanding a diverse range of HRD themes and activities and thereby enable “richer ways of envisioning HRD realities” (Garavan et al., 2007, p. 4). Identity enlarges both the academic space and the depth of HRD. As the chapters that now follow reveal, identity lenses give fresh insights into the motivations for learning, the purposes of learning and the indirect, and perhaps unintended, outcomes of learning. HRD can thus be seen as predicated on identity.

In particular, HRD can foster the emergence of identity through providing resources for identity-work. However, identity theorising within the critical tradition reveals how subjectivities are shaped and potentially regulated or distorted, by dominant managerialist discourses, a subtle but effective “technology of control” (Fenwick, 2014). Thus limiting discourses are often perpetuated, intentionally or unintentionally, by HRD interventions. Identity theorising thus contributes strongly to moving HRD into the as-yet-neglected critical territory needed for conventional assumptions to be constructively challenged and for creative contributions to practice to be crafted. Identity is thus a crucial resource for the emerging critical HRD agenda (Callahan, Stewart, Sambrook, Rigg & Trehan, 2015) and for thereby countering the prevailing deficit, fitting-in, view of HRD with an expansive, emancipatory view.
The bolstered theorisation of HRD offered by identity also provides a resource for strengthening the identity of the professional field and function. Callahan and DeDavila (2004, p. 91) called for HRD professionals to “identify the nature of our identity” and while it has been noted that HRD has “moved well beyond the identity forming stage of its development” (O'Donnell et al., 2006, p. 9), the profession continues to suffer a conflicted identity. The theoretical discourses of HRD to date have largely served to constitute the activity and the subjectivities of its practitioners as agents of organisational performance. Thus, just as limited theorisation has constrained the field so too have practitioners been constrained from becoming what they are capable of becoming. Identity theorising offers, as the chapters will show, just the sort of “tangible narrative” that Gedro et al. (2014, p. 532) argued can be used as “a tool for developing professional identity”. Moreover, engaging with identity theoretically prompts practitioners to reflexively examine identities personally and to make a critically-informed judgement of just what sort of professional to be and to become. For instance, should the practitioner be a cipher of managerial orthodoxies working to maximise productivity and performance or strive to become an autonomous professional engaged in engendering transformational change for individuals and organisations in ethically just and socially equitable ways? The chapters in this text provide the resources for answering such a question.

Throughout this introduction it has been asserted that identity has significant potential for understanding HRD practices and practitioners but that that potential has yet to be realised. Through the chapters that now follow this potentiality is realised and identity is proven to be an invaluable foundation for HRD.
References


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