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Human Resource Development should aim to make closed contexts more open

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Human Resource Development Should Aim to Make Closed Contexts More Open: A Meta Reaction to Wang and Doty, Russ-Eft, and Yoon

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Abstract

In this meta reaction paper, I reflect on the initial paper by Wang and Doty (2022a), the two responses (Russ-Eft, 2022; Yoon, 2022), and the final response-to-respondents (Wang & Doty, 2022b). I focus on two observations that stood out for me, encompassing: (1) how HRD is defined; (2) what HRD should contribute to and to what extent the initial authors' theorizing of HRD is actually "emancipatory." First, I conclude that Wang and Doty's systems perspective leaves little room for the individual agency and legitimate interests that various stakeholders have around the ways in which employee learning is organized. Connected with this, their treatment of "the mainstream HRD literature" is not convincing, which limits the rationale for and contribution of their own theorizing efforts. Second, I conclude that Wang and Doty's work violates the ethical core of HRD and, moreover, falls short of being about "emancipatory theorizing" as they claim.

Keywords

theory building, hrd contexts, agency

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I'd like to thank the editorial team of *Human Resource Development Review* for inviting me to write this meta reaction paper. My compliments go out to the authors of the initial paper (Wang & Doty, 2022a) as well as to the two respondents (Russ-Eft, 2022; Yoon, 2022), for showing us how human resource development (HRD) theory building works in practice. I'm happy to use the opportunity to contribute to this crucial process in our field.

Let me start by making explicit, just as the respondents and authors have done in their reactions, who I am and where I come from in this debate. I was born and raised in the Netherlands, a Western European country that has been long known for its open and tolerant society (even though these values have come under much pressure in recent decades). I lived and worked in Sheffield, England for 6 months, after finishing my PhD in HRD. My research has focused on how individual employees organize their own workplace learning paths in different organizational and professional contexts (networks), and how HRD practitioners, managers and other stakeholders in those diverse contexts attempt to impact this employee learning (Poell, 2017, 2022; Poell et al., 2000; Poell et al., 2009; Poell et al., 2018; Poell & van der Krogt, 2014, 2017). Although I have travelled abroad extensively and presented my research at academic conferences on all five continents, it would be fair to say that I have no first-hand experience living or working in closed contexts (unless one would view becoming a full professor at a research university in that light).

In my meta reaction I will refrain from summarizing the key points made in the initial paper (Wang & Doty, 2022a) and the two responses (Russ-Eft, 2022; Yoon, 2022). All three are well written, clearly articulated and to the point. The respondents mention the key contributions of the initial paper and I agree with them. The initial authors in their final response-to-respondents (Wang & Doty, 2022b) deal mainly with the criticisms raised and, as far as I can discern, do their best to provide a thorough rebuttal. There are however a few things that stood out for me in the aforementioned papers that may not have received the attention I'd deem warranted for an important topic like the current one. I've organized my thoughts around these matters in the following dual way: 1) how HRD is defined; 2) what HRD should contribute to and to what extent the initial authors' theorizing of HRD is actually "emancipatory."

How is HRD defined?

Wang & Doty, 2022a provide the following definition of HRD: "mechanisms of shaping individual and group values and beliefs and skilling through learning-related activities to support the desired performance of the host institutional system" (HIS) (p. 4). Despite the claim that this definition "encompasses all mainstream HRD definitions with a clear causal chain wherein HRD serves the purpose of its HIS" (p. 4), its wording suggests a systems perspective on HRD. This is however only one (albeit important) perspective on HRD and, more pertinently, one that leaves little room for the individual agency that is so crucial when it comes to organizing learning (as both Russ-Eft and Yoon point out in their reactions).

I have emphasized repeatedly (e.g., [Poell, 2017, 2022](#)) that individual employees are key stakeholders in HRD, because they are the only ones who can decide what and how they want to learn; no one else can force them to learn something that is not meaningful to them. Moreover, the actor perspective on HRD (which I prefer over the systems perspective, cf. [Poell et al., 2000](#); [Poell & van der Krogt, 2017](#)) assumes that within a given context (or HIS), employees, managers, HRD practitioners and other stakeholders will have different interests around “learning” that they try to prioritize in their mutual interactions, negotiations, collaborations, and power plays. Finally, while the existing power dynamics in a given network (or HIS) will inform the outcomes of such stakeholder interactions, those dynamics are highly context dependent, amenable to change and, certainly when it comes to learning, in favor of individual employees – who after all cannot be forced to learn by other stakeholders ([Poell et al., 2000](#); [Poell & van der Krogt, 2017](#)).

Wang and Doty might argue that this actor perspective does not belong to “the mainstream” HRD literature; however, it does emanate from a Western European context and deals with the outcomes of HRD “systems” in the context of an open HIS (which is how they define mainstream HRD). In any case, “the mainstream” HRD literature mentioned at the outset of their paper is already such a diverse set of very different theoretical approaches, that it is no wonder that “they often posit inconsistent relationships between HRD and its host institutional system (HIS) when describing and explaining HRD practices” ([Wang & Doty, 2022a](#), p. 2). A theorizing paper aiming “for coherent HRD theory, research, and practices” (p. 3) will probably have an even harder time integrating an actor perspective in its key tenets, with all the power dynamics and diverging stakeholder interests it emphasizes.

There are other concerns around the authors’ treatment of “the mainstream” HRD literature. Table 2 talks about how it apparently assumes “HRD theories and conceptions are predefined toward mainstream values and ideology, HRD outcomes are one-way positive and beneficial to all involved, HRD typically improves learning, skills, and performance, and HRD processes and experiences are typically inspiring and enjoyable” ([Wang & Doty, 2022a](#), p. 5). There are however many “mainstream” (as defined by Wang and Doty) perspectives that do not assume this. Just to mention a few examples, Stephen Billett has shown in many papers (e.g., [Billett, 2002](#)) that people also learn wrong things in the workplace, Rob Poell has provided ample evidence (e.g., [Poell et al., 2000](#); [Poell & van der Krogt, 2017](#)) that various HRD stakeholders have different interests and pursue different outcomes from HRD efforts, Etienne Wenger has made a convincing case that communities of practice instigated by management were less successful than those self-initiated by professionals ([Wenger & Snyder, 2000](#)), and several studies by Russ Korte have yielded many insights into the dysfunctional side of organizational socialization (e.g., [Korte, 2009](#)); not to mention the enormous training transfer literature since the 1980s showing the failure of many training efforts to have a positive impact in the workplace (e.g., [Cheng & Hampson, 2008](#)).

A final concern about the definition of “mainstream HRD” is the authors’ claim that “mainstream HRD views were derived from the 27% of countries steeped in the western context. The resulting views and causal logic were then extended to the 73% of countries that experience non-mainstream HRD contexts” (Wang & Doty, 2022a, p. 3). However, no studies from “non-mainstream HRD contexts” are mentioned to substantiate this claim nor are there any studies provided postulating that “mainstream HRD” is universally applicable. It seems more likely to me that scholars from “countries that experience non-mainstream HRD contexts” borrowed insights from “countries steeped in the western context” for lack of indigenous HRD theories, only to find out that “mainstream” HRD theories and models more often than not are largely useless to them. From my perspective, this would plea for more indigenous HRD theories however, not necessarily for one set of “coherent HRD theory, research, and practices” (Wang & Doty, 2022a, p 3).

In summary, my first major issue with Wang and Doty’s work is concerned with the systems perspective that they apply, leaving little room for the individual agency and legitimate interests that various stakeholders have around the ways in which employee learning is organized. Connected with this, their treatment of “the mainstream HRD literature” is not convincing, which limits the rationale for and contribution of their own theorizing efforts.

What should HRD contribute to and how emancipatory is this theorizing of HRD?

My second major issue pertains to the outcomes of HRD and is probably the most important one. Let me emphasize that Wang and Doty are to be commended for their position that “HRD processes and outcomes are value laden, context-dependent, and context-sensitive” (2022a, p. 25). I’m not so sure however that the “common vocabulary” that their paper aims to develop can (or even should) actually “protect scholarly endeavors from the sematic confusion [sic] that can occur when researchers define HRD differently at different levels of analysis or in different national or organizational contexts” (p. 23). In my experience, HRD is not hard science. It is about people who learn and who create the contexts in which they and others can learn. HRD will probably always be defined “differently at different levels of analysis or in different national or organizational contexts,” because the world is a very diverse place and people have options and choice (even in so-called closed contexts). Theorizing HRD is a crucial effort but aiming to explain all HRD in this world using just “skilling, shaping and the relationship with the HIS” seems to do more harm than good to what HRD as a discipline should strive for.

Wang and Doty seem to argue that HRD works out differently in closed HIS contexts compared to the open contexts from which its original insights emerged. But are we still talking about HRD “when the individual is the actor, target, and carrier, either as a beneficiary *or as a victim*, of the HRD activities in the HIS context” (2022a, p. 9, italics added)? Another example occurs when the authors state that “(i)n the closed HIS

context, shaping is implemented through censored communications and coercive persuasion-based enforcing mechanism to maintain its closedness” (p. 10); what does this have to do with HRD? Yet another instance is the authors’ assertion that “developing skills in critical and independent thinking is skilling in open HRD contexts, but may be considered deskilling in closed HRD systems because it may cause the incumbent to question the legitimacy of the closed HIS and thus jeopardize its foundation” (p. 13); so HRD should help keep people locked up in the dark? That would seem to be the case also from the following quote: “Closed shaping is sometimes referred to as brainwashing (...) or indoctrination (...) (M)uch of the mainstream literature seems to take open shaping for granted without considering that it may be a minority case across the population of available HRD shaping contexts.” (p. 13)

Granted that I am a prime example of the world of HRD as it appears in open contexts, I’d rather not subsume brainwashing and indoctrination under the moniker of HRD. That would go against everything the profession and discipline of HRD have stood for in the past 50 years. It certainly goes against my ethics, which see HRD as an emancipatory project aiming to provide more and better opportunities for employees to organize their own learning in the workplace in accordance with their self-defined needs and interests. If there are contexts that prevent people from doing so, and of course there are many such HISs in all parts of the world, HRD should try to change those contexts with the same aim of individual emancipation. I don’t want to imply that this is an easy task, it will in some cases be virtually impossible, but if these efforts are to be called “HRD” then that is what they should aim for.

The irony associated with this key point is that Wang and Doty refer to their efforts as “emancipatory theorizing” (2022a, p. 3) under reference to [Cornelissen et al. \(2021\)](#). I’m not sure, however, if this is the correct term, even though I understand that Wang and Doty aim to challenge our existing system of beliefs around HRD by extending it to closed contexts. Nevertheless, [Cornelissen et al. \(2021\)](#) also mention that “emancipatory theorizing (...) has (...) a more overt political role (...) to subvert such systems towards emancipation and potential reform” (p. 11). “It shows this concern by revealing the structures of domination and human constraints (...), and by trying to make a real, practical difference through identifying the potentialities and possibilities for emancipation and reform” (p. 12). Yet, subverting the system with a view to emancipation and reform is not what Wang and Doty are after, judging from the quotes in the paragraph before the previous one.

I believe that HRD should aim to make closed contexts more open so that people get options and opportunities to live their (working and learning) lives in the best ways they deem possible and desirable. Maybe this is just a “mainstream” Western way of viewing the world, but I do believe that no-one wants to be subjected to brainwashing and indoctrination even if the powers that be have decided that it is for their own good (cf. the Xinjiang case that Wang and Doty refer to). Abuse of power is abuse of power and HRD should not engage itself with any of it. HRD will be better served if it takes to heart what Sally [Sambrook \(2009\)](#) offered in defining critical

HRD: “challenging contemporary practices, exposing assumptions, revealing illusions, questioning tradition and facilitating emancipation. Being critical means recognising the messiness, complexities and irrationality – rather than the sanitized reason and rationality – of organizational practices” (p. 66).

To summarize, my second major concern with Wang and Doty’s work lies in their view of the outcomes that HRD can or should generate in closed contexts. HRD has an ethical core that makes very clear what outcomes are positive and which are negative. To say that brainwashing and indoctrination can also be viewed as positive in closed contexts is a severe violation of those ethics and can therefore not be subsumed under the moniker of HRD. In connection with this point, I believe that for the same reason Wang and Doty’s work falls short of being about “emancipatory theorizing.”

Conclusion

Despite my critical remarks above, I commend Wang and Doty as well as Russ-Eft and Yoon, for their efforts to bring theorizing HRD further along. My comments are intended to spark further debate about the crucial questions of what HRD is and how it works out in various contexts. And I certainly agree with Wang and Doty that “rigorous empirical theory testing is the best protection against the challenges associated with generalizing from Small Ns in the theorizing process” (2022b, p. 4). Let us look forward as a field and discipline to the empirical studies that will shed more light on the value of their theorizing!

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