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**Paper title:** *The Strange Case of HRD: Dr Jekyll or Mr Hyde?*

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# ***The Strange Case of HRD: Dr Jekyll or Mr Hyde?***

# **Purpose and Research Question**

The aim of the paper is to examine the extent to which identity theorising can both enhance understanding of HRD as a field and provide a resource for extending the reach of HRD inquiry and practice. Two key contributions are made. Firstly, the contrasting identities of HRD are examined and it is shown that that an understanding of identity itself offers a theoretical basis for critical reflexivity into the nature of HRD inquiry and professional practice. Secondly, identity theorising is shown to further understanding of established and emerging HRD issues and to extend the academic space of HRD. It is proposed that identity should become core disciplinary HRD knowledge capable of contributing specifically to the emerging Critical HRD agenda and thereby to the transformation of the field.

# **Setting**

As our title suggests, HRD is a “strange” and ambiguous field of inquiry and practice. HRD is not a “unitary concept” (Lee, 2016: 24) and remains “a field in search of itself” (Ruona, 2016: 2). This search for self is complicated by the fractured and fundamentally conflicted identity of HRD (McClean, 2007). This conflicted identity can be attributed to the multiple activities and purposes embraced within HRD (Hamlin and Stewart, 2011) and to HRD serving different interests (Fenwick, 2014).

While more than twenty different definitions of HRD were discerned by Hamlin and Stewart (2011), there is consensus that HRD is fundamentally concerned with facilitating learning within organisational contexts for individuals, groups and for organisations themselves so as to change behaviour and enhance competence, capability and performance (McGoldrick, Stewart and Watson, 2001). However, Lee (2016: 331) discerned four “fundamentally different” types of definition and the contrast between viewing HRD as a process of “shaping” or as a “voyage” is notable. The field is thus beset by an “ideological contradiction” between managerialist, “shaping”, aims of enhancing individuals “exchange value” and radical, professional and educative, “voyaging”, aims to “liberate humans” (Fenwick, 2014: 118). HRD can thus be seen as having “two masters” (Callahan *et al*., 2015: 3). Cureton and Stewart (2016) question whether HRD is simply a servant of senior management concerned with ensuring compliance with accepted norms and thereby enhancing productivity and performance or is a true profession serving the nobler goal of emancipation through enabling individuals to achieve their potential and experience well-being and growth. Meta-analyses of studies defining HRD point to the increasing dominance of the former, neo-liberal, mangerialist and performative, narrative (Fenwick, 2014).

HRD’s fractured identity is also attributable to theoretical foundations that are diverse but lacking depth. The “on going debate” regarding the theoretical foundations of HRD that was noted by McGoldrick, Stewart and Watson in 2001 (343) continues to this day with the field being regarded as multi-disciplinary (Werner, 2014). The paper analyses these foundations examining the contrasting paradigmatic lenses through which HRD has been viewed (Garavan, O’Donnell, McGuire and Watson, 2007). The paper then reviews meta-analyses and modelling of the theoretical foundations of HRD such as McClean’s work (2007) showing the dominance of psychological theorising, particularly adult learning theory, economics, particularly labour-market economics, and systems theorising.

Although HRD is thus underpinned by diverse theories, the theories largely locate within the positivist paradigm (Lee, 2016) a fact that is attributed to the roots of the activity as a managerial practice within organisations (Cureton and Stewart, 2016). A “poverty of HRD theory” (McGoldrick *et al*., 2001: 348) and the need to move beyond the theoretical closure arising from the dominance of the positivist paradigm have been noted for some time (Garavan *et al*., 2007). More critical perspectives are advocated (Sambrook, 2008; Fenwick, 2014; Callahan *et al*., 2015) and the paper argues that strands of identity theorising further this critical agenda.

# **Methodology**

The paper reviews research published during the ten years since the seminal special issue of the journal *Organization* in 2006 on the theme of “managing identities in complex organizations”. The review focused on papers within specific HRD, training and management education and development journals listed in the UK ABS *Academic Journals* Guide, 2015. Research was also reviewed within selected adult education, careers and workplace learning journals and also within selected organisation and management studies journals where identity theorising features most prominently and has been developed strongly. The review does not claim to be comprehensive but is, rather, representative of the diversity of understandings of identity of judged to have relevance to HRD. Over 100 papers across 22 journals were selected and have been analysed.

# **Theoretical Background**

While identity theorising has become a “critical cornerstone” in contemporary organisation and management studies literature (Brown, 2015: 20), its potential has yet to be fully realised in HRD. However, identity theorising has, as will be shown, particular potential given the changing emphasis in HRD from classroom based training to workplace based learning interventions and the recognised need to shift the focus from individual learning to enabling, collective and expansive learning across organisations (Cureton and Stewart, 2016). Moreover, it is increasingly recognised that understanding learning needs to extend beyond understanding the acquisition of knowledge or the development of competence and to embrace “who we desire to become” (Brown, 2015: 20).

Identity is, though, a “slippery notion” that can “easily involve everything and nothing” (Alvesson, 2010: 194) and, like HRD itself, identity is conceptualised from contrasting paradigmatic perspectives. Theories of identity have been 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. The paper will show how social constructionist identity theorising locating at the subjectivist end of the continuum has the greatest potential for explicating HRD. From this perspective Giddens (1991: 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: 203). 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.

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 and preferred personal identities. Identity work can, as the paper shows, 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 perspective, identities are regulated and prescribed and HRD can be seen as a culprit in manipulating, distorting or at least limiting individuals’ subjectivities. Pervasive, unquestioned, discourses within organisations such as that of productivity and performance act as powerful forces regulating identities and HRD activities can readily perpetuate such discourses acting as a “technology of control” (Fenwick, 2014: np). The paper concludes in this area by weighing the balance of arguments and evidence for identity being considered as fixed or emergent and the result of structure or agency.

# **Results, Implications and Limitations**

The results critically analyse and map the selected identity sources to show the relevance or potential of identity to HRD. Firstly it is shown that a deeper, reflexive understanding of HRD researchers and practitioners and of who they are attempting to become is obtained through the application identity understandings (see for example, Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012) and can further enhance the status for the field. It is then shown how identity enriches HRD through providing an incisive and critical lens in examining established and emerging issues such as the implicit but significant outcomes of HRD interventions, inequality and diversity, cross-cultural development, the interplay and tensions between individual and organisational development, engagement with development, and the tension between professional and managerial orientations towards development. These results show how identity opens up critical and creative directions for understanding HRD.

The paper considers three overall implications for HRD arising from the review of identity theorising. Firstly, identity theorising prompts a critical consideration of the identity of HRD as a field of inquiry and as an activity. Where might contemporary HRD lie on a continuum extending from regulating to enabling, from controlling to emancipating? Secondly, identity theorising suggests that learning interventions can often be understood as working in quite different ways to those explained by traditional psychological and economic theories. Such traditional theorising understands HRD activities in terms of the acquisition of knowledge and development of skills or the appreciation of human capital. By contrast, identity theorising draws attention to how HRD influences subjectivities and how subjectivities, in turn, influence HRD. Identity theorising suggests that the field might require a reconsideration of the toolkit of development methods to continue the transition from the delivery of formal, off-the-job learning interventions that provide knowledge and develop skills towards enabling informal, on-the-job learning to facilitate processes of becoming. Finally, the paper suggests fruitful new directions for critical empirical inquiry informed by identity theorising as a basis for providing stronger evidential foundations for HRD policy and practice.

The results show that while a body of research and theorising has emerged that has relevance to understanding HRD in terms of identity. However, a limitation of the research reviewed is that the potential of identity for HRD, for seeing learning not as ‘doing’ but as ‘becoming’, has yet to be proven through empirical findings. Moreover, concrete implications for HRD policy and practice have yet to be articulated. Nonetheless, the paper concludes by asserting that the more critical examination of HRD and its practices that the identity lens enables, provides a basis of for understanding the strange case of HRD and ensuring that its professional and generative Dr Jekyll identity is cultivated and its managerial Mr Hyde identity is contained if not condemned.

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