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Realising the critical in CHRD: strategies for research and practice

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Introduction

This special edition publishes papers selected from the Critical HRD stream of the 8th Critical Management Studies Conference held at Manchester Business School in 2013. The stream was the fourth co-organised by various combinations of the authors of this guest editorial. The call for papers for CMS 8 continued a focus on the economic and financial crises that informed the papers of the previous stream held at CMS 7 in 2011. As well as that focus, the call also requested proposals using concepts such as power, identity, emotions and competing interests in work organisations. Responses to the call favored these concepts more directly than a focus on the economic crisis. However, they did also respond to the call's interest in macro and micro analyses, and in research and examination of contemporary CHRD concerns such as management education and leadership development. The call resulted in 15 papers being selected for presentation at the conference. In common with some previous CHRD streams at CMS, publication opportunities had been organised in preparation and so an edited book will be published by Cambridge Scholars Publishers in 2015 which will contain new versions of all but one of the selected papers. This special edition had also been agreed prior to the conference and so we had the difficult task of selecting a maximum of six papers from the stream to be reworked for this journal. Our thinking and rationale for our final decisions is presented in this editorial together with a brief summary of each article. We also attempt to draw some tentative conclusions based on the various and varying concerns of the contributors.

Common Themes

The CMS stream and so call for papers distributed to invite contributions was titled '*Critical HRD-The role of HRD in economic crisis: global (macro) and local (micro) perspectives on HRD as co-conspirator, disinterested profession or facilitator of*

resistance'. Recent work by MacKenzie and colleagues (MacKenzie, Garavan and Carbery, 2014) suggests that at best HRD was a disinterested profession but they also claim reasonable evidence and cause for use of the label 'co-conspirator'. Our contributors had little to say on that argument and, as indicated, few responses took a direct focus on the economic crisis.. There were though some commonalities of interest in higher education (HE) as a site of employment as well as of CHRD practice, especially as a provider of management education and professional qualifications. An additional commonality was CHRD organisational practice, especially but not exclusively that of leadership development. These commonalities provided one rationale for selecting papers here. Some papers presented at conference with these themes still had to be excluded and so those selected included share additional commonalities—most notably the role of reflection in and the purpose of CHRD.

The main commonality is a concern with the meaning, application and practical use of the notion of (critical) reflection. While not directly addressed in every selection, it is a theme running through this special edition and one which is long established in all of our previous CMS streams. Linked to critical reflection is an additional but more implicit theme of the purpose of CHRD. This theme has probably been of interest since the inception of work on CHRD (see Rigg, Stewart and Trehan, 2007) and was addressed in previous special issue journals arising from previous CMS streams (Trehan, Rigg and Stewart, 2004; 2006).

The next section provides a summary of each article to highlight some common themes. We should, and so do, acknowledge that we draw on our interpretations of the contributors' work in suggesting these themes and so we also acknowledge the possibility of disagreement on the part of individual authors.

Articles and Rationale

The first article sets the stage for the relationship between the economic environment and the different contexts in which HRD is practiced by framing HE as a site of CHRD. Linda Perriton analyses two significant developments influencing HE in the UK which have implications for critical management education (CME). These are the rise of a market driven and consumerist environment and perhaps related, or perhaps not, argued characteristics and expectations of the millennial generation, or generation Y. Perriton argues that these factors at the very least question and more likely challenge the legitimacy of critical approaches to learning, teaching and assessment in

management education at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The legitimacy of such approaches require what Perriton describes as the 'critical warrant'; a notion linked with academic autonomy and freedom to pursue and apply intellectual interests and beliefs in educating students as well as in research. Perriton's analysis suggests that space for criticality in higher education comes under scrutiny and threat because of consumerist models being applied and from generational changes in expectations and demands of higher education. The work recognises a dearth of empirical research addressing these questions and so the main conclusion of the article is strategies for CHRD research in the form of an extensive agenda to inform the required research. An implicit feature of this agenda are questions which may not have been quite so relevant without the continuing impact of the 2008 financial crisis.

This latter feature is taken up in a more direct fashion in the article by Gold and Bratton. Here, the argument is in favour of the value of the sociological imagination as envisaged by C. Wright Mills. According to Gold and Bratton's analysis, an overly narrow focus on economic performance, encouraged and facilitated by management education and development, was a major factor in the 2008 crisis. They are clear that leadership development probably colluded in factors causing the crisis. This in part was related to what they term a 'weakened profession'. The profession in question is HR in general and HRD in particular. Gold and Bratton extend Watson's call for application of sociological analyses and insights to HRM to application to HRD. Their argument is that use of the sociological imagination will enable why as well as what and how questions to be addressed in the education of HRD professionals and so enable the profession to be 'strengthened' in its influence within work organisations. They also usefully provide a suggested process for applying the sociological imagination with supporting examples of its use. Thus, they provide an approach to realise CHRD education in practice. This approach relies to some extent on use of critical reflection as a means of moving from analysis of personally felt and experienced problems to analysis of wider social and economic factors. As with Perriton, Gold and Bratton are concerned with legitimacy. In their case, the 'warrant' is that of a profession and related qualifications within organizational practice.

The theme of organizational practice is carried on through the next article. A focus on leadership development and on critical reflection forms the base of Stead's article examining use of Action Learning in a leadership development programme for managers in the SME sector. The main focus here though is on the experience of

women in mixed gender Action Learning sets. Connected to Gold and Bratton's work, it might be argued that the work of sets apply a version of Wright Mill's sociological imagination by starting from a personal problem and moving out to analysis of wider social factors in organisations and societies. This is a reasonable interpretation of Stead's project which asked women set members to reflect on their experiences and then related these to wider gender issues in leadership and leadership development. The results reinforce two assumptions and concerns of CHRD: first that leadership is recognised as a social process rather than an individual quality, and second that power asymmetries are immanent and so ever present in social relations. Stead demonstrates this in the example of gender relations in Action Learning sets and in the wider context of leadership in work organisations. This article also usefully suggests implications and recommendations for CHRD practice which have application in use of Action Learning and wider CHRD interventions.

Our fourth selection from Mills, Trehan and Stewart implicitly again applies the sociological imagination, this time to the context of universities as employers and academics as employees. The specific focus is academic employees pursuing a PhD and so having the multiple identities of academic, employee and student; this context provides a direct example of HE as a site of HRD practice. In the reported study, a sample of such individuals provide personal reflections of their experience of living these multiple identities. The resulting analysis invokes many of the factors discussed by Perriton but with particular emphasis on their effect on employment and the HE labour market. Influences associated with the post 2008 crisis are also implicit here with reduced job security being a notable example. Of more direct concern in the analysis is the power asymmetries operating in the employment relationship. This in turn leads in part to research participants experiencing 'self-management' and 'self-discipline' as a form of managerial control. The paper opens new areas of research in applying those concepts to propose and develop the notion of 'critical career development' (CCD). The contribution of this paper perhaps illustrates the potential value of Gold and Bratton's call for use of the sociological imagination. As with the work of Stead, it also directly applies reflection as a research method.

Building on the theme of reflection, the use of critical reflection in development programmes is examined in the following paper. Here Cotter examines use of critical reflection as a means of realising CHRD in organisation contexts. He does this in the context of what he argues is a potential impasse between academia and professional

practice in relation to the understanding, use and value of critical reflection. As with some of the previous articles, Cotter also makes use of the concept of power. However, he goes further in directly drawing on political theory. This forms the basis of a conceptual framework developed in the paper. This framework could be applied in use of critical reflection as a development method within CHRD organisation practice. However that works out, Cotter makes a compelling case for his framework which, conceivably, could also be incorporated into education programmes for new professionals and so contribute to the ‘strengthening’ of the profession as called for by Gold and Bratton in their paper. Put simply, the framework enables practical application of what academics value in critical reflection. In addition, the framework makes direct if unintended or anticipated connections with two other concepts examined in this issue. First is the concept of difference as represented by gender in Stead’s work. Second, and despite, or perhaps because of, the use of political theory, Cotter’s framework will enable beginning with personal problems to expand into wider analyses of societal factors and so provides an additional process for applying the sociological imagination.

In our final article and as with Cotter, Valentin examines organisation contexts and the workplace as a site of HRD practice. Her focus is the emerging concept of employee engagement. This may be characterised as the latest panacea for achieving managerial aims and a refinement of approaches examined by Mills, Trehan and Stewart which seek to exert control through self-discipline by employees. As Valentin argues, the concept has been developed and promoted by consultants more than by practitioners or academics. There may too be a connection with the post economic situation in attempting to overcome rising distrust in organisation leadership among employees associated with the crisis; the timing of the UK government report on the concept (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009) is telling in that respect. Whatever the merits of that argument, Valentin demonstrates very clearly that employee engagement is solidly in the performative school of thought within HRD. Taking a discourse perspective in her analysis, Valentin also demonstrates that employee engagement raises issues of identity for employees. This extends the use of that concept by Mills, Trehan and Stewart. Valentin also usefully examines the notion of *disengagement* and shows how this may be a form of resistance utilised by employees. It seems to us that her work also connects with that of Cotter in that employee engagement would lend itself to application of his conceptual framework.

Summary and Conclusion

Based on our summary of each article we suggest that CHRD has a more settled set of interests than when it was first proposed as a valuable area of research and writing by HRD scholars in the UK and USA. These interests remain broadly with (C) HRD as a potentially emancipatory project and with achieving that potential as a major purpose. However, this special edition shows that interest has coalesced around a number of key concepts. These seem to us to be power, identity, emotion and reflection. The latter, especially in the form of critical reflection, however understood and defined, also seems to be a preferred method of investigation. The same seems to be true of discourse analysis, again in various and varying forms. And so we would argue that the special edition represents a landmark in the development of CHRD. We might say that CHRD has come of age. If that is the case, it is perhaps fitting that this journal, jointly sponsored as it is by the UFHRD and the AHRD, is an appropriate space to mark the occasion.

While the claim of coming of age may be premature and as yet too ambitious, the collection of articles does unarguably set out clear messages on the meaning of CHRD and on directions of future research for CHRD. They also indicate implications for practice as well as some means of applying CHRD in professional practice contexts. That combination lies squarely at the heart of the philosophy and purpose of HRDI. We close therefore with expressing our pleasure in having the journal accept our selection in this special edition and our gratitude to the HRDI editorial team.

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