

Generating New HRD Knowledge: Discourse, Gender, and Theory Building

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For this manuscript, a classic management text was deconstructed using postmodern methods. The purpose was twofold: to gain an understanding of how this text connected knowledge and gender; and to provide readers with a sample of deconstruction. The value of this type of analysis for HRD will be made clear. Unsurprisingly, because the manuscript was published in 1945, findings suggested that knowledge was linked to a masculine epistemology. This analysis provides implications for contemporary HRD.

Keywords: Gender, HRD, Deconstruction

Why do we find it so congenial to speak of organizations as structures but not as clouds, systems but not songs, weak or strong but not tender or passionate? Is it because organizations physically resemble one but not the other? (Gergen, 1992, p. 207).

As Gergen suggests, we ‘speak’ of organizations in certain ways and not others. Speaking—discourse—shapes how we study, conceptualize, and theorize about phenomena that we find interesting. This study adopts this discursive perspective in order to focus on the ‘speaking’ of theory in HRD. Like speaking, theory building consists of selecting certain words and concepts over others. In a discursive perspective, theories “are neither the product of immaculate conception nor reducible to ideological conspiracies. They are rather constitutive of differing configurations of interests, symbolic resources through which a sense of commonality is recognized and constructed,” (Perry, 1992, p. 85). Perry suggests that theories do not just exist in the world waiting to be discovered through science. Theories are *social creations* of common understanding between people that shape how we see and understand the world. *Discourse* is the mechanism that enables this common understanding.

Discourse changes over time. HRD theories and theory building methods, being social creations, become knowledge when their discourse generates acceptance by a majority of scholars and/or practitioners. Over time, the discourse can change and a new common understanding or acceptance emerges. For example, near the beginning of the industrial revolution, Frederick Taylor’s (1911) notion of scientific management was the accepted theory of work. In 1914 Henry Ford applied Taylor’s theory to his Model-T assembly line and decreased the amount of time to build a Model T from 728 hours to 93 minutes (Quinn, Faerman, Thompson, & McGrath, 1996). This ‘success’ at efficiency and rationalizing the work process triggered the widespread adoption of the theory. The discourse at this time was rational; “the best symbol of this model is the dollar sign because the ultimate criteria of organization effectiveness are productivity and profit,” (Quinn, et. al., 1996, p. 4). Eventually, due to the consequences of an exclusive focus on ‘productivity and profit,’ a new theory of work emerged. New evidence was produced and published that introduced psychology as a key to understanding workplace behavior and high performance. This discourse contained different assumptions, and suggested that in addition to rationalizing the workplace, attention had to be paid to the human component of the production processes. This discourse was eventually called the ‘human relations’ phase of management, and is the focus of this study. A classic text from this period was selected in order to understand more about the use of discourse in changing or perpetuating the status quo. The text, F. Roethlisberger’s “The foreman: Master and Victim of Doubletalk,” was originally published in the Harvard Business Review (HBR) in 1945. It was re-printed in 1965 as a “classic” management text, again in HBR.

The purpose of this research presented in this manuscript is not to argue that one type of discourse is ‘better’ than another. Instead, the purpose is to provide an example of how discourse contains assumptions that can come from a variety of perspectives and values. Discourse can change how people understand work, or discourse can perpetuate the status quo. For this study, the interest was on exploring how discourse perpetuated a traditionally masculine understanding of the world. That is to say, the study wanted to understand how assumptions of the discourse equated traditional masculine traits (rationality, hierarchy, aggressiveness, objectivity) with value-free and objective knowledge. When objective knowledge is associated with masculine traits, the discourse is considered a ‘gendered’ discourse, and knowledge is ‘gendered.’ Exposing the unexamined connections between what is

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considered 'objective' and masculine traits is important for contemporary HRD for at least two reasons. First, when HRD scholars and practitioners learn that assumed neutral knowledge can be gendered, they may be more able and willing to critically look at their foundational assumptions. They may develop an understanding of how discourse may suggest preference for one gender. Ultimately their perspective may not change, but they are likely to be in a better position to make their assumptions explicit and justify their position. And second, globalization and a diverse workforce are introducing different ways to view and understand the world into the 21st century workplace. These real changes in the environment of HRD demand that scholars and practitioners understand more about their own assumptions, and how they shape interpretation, meaning, and action. Especially when constructing new HRD knowledge through building new theories, scholars need to broaden their understanding of how discourse can hide bias and perpetuate the status quo.

The general research question guiding the larger study (of which this manuscript is a part) was: "Does enduring discourse, such as the classic text selected for the study, continue to influence contemporary HRD?" The theoretical foundation guiding this inquiry is feminist theory, and the method of analysis is postmodern text deconstruction. For this manuscript, the working hypotheses were a) there is a gendered understanding of knowledge in the classic text; and b) it may be possible to uncover continuations of gendered knowledge in contemporary HRD theory building. The study purposively selected a classic text that clearly represented the (then) status quo: masculine assumptions undergirded what was assumed to be neutral, objective knowledge. The selection was made in order for readers to see the process of deconstruction of a text that most (if not all) contemporary HRD readers would agree contained masculine bias. Assumptions that guide this study include such ideas as a) there is a connection between accepted knowledge and power; b) there are diverse ways of experiencing the world, but some ways of experiencing the world are more accepted than others; and c) 'accepted' knowledge and experience have been historically masculine.. The paper is organized as follows: 1) a discussion of the connections between gender, feminist theory, and contemporary HRD discourse 2) a presentation of the Human Relations Phase and Roethlisberger's classic text; 3) a description of methods used in this study; 4) a presentation of the findings; and 5) discussion and implications for HRD.

Gender, Feminist Theory, and Contemporary HRD Theory Building

Feminist theory has a particular perspective on how gender impacts research and practice. Feminist theory suggests that gender, power, and knowledge are interconnected and consequently when creating knowledge (e.g., theory building) an analysis of gender and power must be included as an integral component of the knowledge creation process. From this perspective, integrating gender (defined as more than sex) into the theory building process is one way to contribute towards problem formulation (van de Ven, in press), conceptual development (Lynham, 2002), or paradox (Poole & van de Ven, 1989). Much like economic theory, with its inherent assumptions (or biases, depending on your perspective) we suggest that feminist theory, with its inherent assumptions (or biases) can contribute towards HRD research, practice, and theory.

'Normal' science usually does not have a reaction against differing ways to accomplish problem formulation—Lynham (2002) called it conceptual development phase in her General Method, van de Ven (in press) described it as a 'base' in his model of theory building, Weick (1989) called it disciplined imagination, and Poole and Van de Ven (1989) called it building theory through paradox. Whatever it is called, it is commonly understood as a process of identifying problems in the real world and figuring out a way to conduct research that will add to the existing stock of knowledge in a discipline. However, when researchers choose to include *gender* as an important component of mental models and creating knowledge, they can receive criticism and can be marginalized or accused of producing biased work (Swanson, 2003). This is an interesting fact in itself and is worthy of continued examination; however, it is outside the scope of this paper. Sufficient for our purpose is that we are framing our study problematizing (e.g., not accepting the status quo) about how gender matters in HRD theory building discourse.

A seminal example of how gender can shape knowledge, theory, and research findings is provided here. Carol Gilligan (1977) re-interpreted the findings of an espoused gender-neutral study of moral development by using gender as relevant demographic variable AND by hypothesizing that gender may actually influence the processes of moral development (e.g., the phenomenon of interest). Her strategy of inquiry framed the problem of moral development differently than the original researcher and she introduced gender as a relevant category of analysis. She hypothesized that gender was more than a demographic variable. Unlike the first researcher, Gilligan hypothesized that gender was deeply connected to the emergence and processes of moral development.. By framing the study in this way, her strategies of inquiry influenced how subsequent research decisions were made. How she framed the research, assessed its findings, and analyzed its results were consequences of how she framed the problem. The results of her study exposed the limitations of assuming that gender did not matter. What was once

presented as a gender-neutral theory was re-presented in Gilligan's work as gender-biased, and she "called attention to the gendered nature of standards that were supposedly neutral," (Calas and Smircich, 1992, p. 232).

Research has also shown that performance-focused words are often connotated with masculine traits. Kanter (1977), in her seminal work "*Men and Women of the Corporation*," explored how gender is manifested in organizations in seemingly invisible ways through discourse. Ross-Smith and Kornberger (2004) conducted a genealogical analysis of the word rationality, and demonstrated how it has been closely associated with male/masculine from Descartes, to Bacon, to Weber. They also found that in the 20th century, Weber's formal rationality expanded the rational/masculine connections to include effectiveness and efficiency: "The inherent association of masculinity and rationality starts to become associated with effectiveness and efficiency, and they, in turn, start to become masculine attributes. So the modern bureaucratic organization...becomes characteristically masculine." (p. 288). The work of Gilligan, Kanter, and Ross-Smith and Kronberger all provide illustrations of how knowledge claims are shaped and perpetuated through discourse, and that the discourse itself contains elements of gendered bias. Only through a feminist critique can scholars examine how discourse, knowledge claims, and theory building may be producing limited or partial understandings of important HRD and social phenomena.

Roethlisberger's Classic Text and Human Relations

"The Foreman: Master and Victim of Double Talk," written by F.R. Roethlisberger, was originally published in the *Harvard Business Review*, Spring 1945 issue. Roethlisberger himself suggested this text was "one of the most popular articles I ever wrote" (p. 35). Evidence supports his belief: thousands of reprints were sold, the text was included in several edited books, and it was re-printed in 1965 in the *HBR Classic* series, thus introducing a new generation of management scholars and practitioners to his ideas. This section introduces the text and the context – the human relations phase--within which it was written.

The human relations school or movement emerged during a time of increasing unionization, industrial development, conflict and war, and performance/production needs. Alvesson & Deetz (2000) asserted that this phase was guided by unexamined normative assumptions designed with objectivity and reason in mind. The goal of theory and research was to secure objective, neutral results. The movement can be thought of as a combination of theory and practice: the theory is widely represented by the writings of (primarily) Harvard Business School faculty, and the practice is represented by the execution of the Training Within Industry (TWI) project, most importantly the *job relations* training component of TWI. The status of Harvard, combined with the massive governmental support and wide application of TWI, created the conditions for a wide acceptance of the processes, practices, assumptions, and ideology associated with human relations theory.

The work of Elton Mayo and his protégés Fritz Roethlisberger and William Dickson, among others, were key scholarly contributors to this phase of industrial development. Mayo introduced the field of psychology to management, and the three men wrote about the Hawthorne experiments, even though they came to the studies after they were begun. Mayo "argued with passion that social and clinical psychological approaches could be incorporated into an enlightened management in such a way that the social-emotional needs of workers would be met, thus ending various kinds of irrational hostility in the factory and the 'need' for workers to unite in opposition to management (i.e., via unionization)," (Bramel and Friend, 1981, p. 868). The human relations movement was a reaction to the tenets of scientific management, and began incorporating ideas of the personal, the relational, and the human into modern industrial organizations. The overriding concern of the human relations movement was to "preserve stable labor relations...as a means of combating and deflecting union pressure," (Breen, p. 241) as well as to increase productive capacity to meet the war needs. Consequently, psychology, with its functionalist assumptions and research methods, were brought to bear on this new problem.

On the practitioner's side were members of an emerging new profession (e.g., personnel management) including Channing R. Dooley, Walter Dietz, William Conover and Michael J. Kane. These four men represent the Training Within Industry program and are known as "The Four Horsemen," (Breen, 2002). TWI was a massive, government sponsored initiative that drew from practice (the four horsemen) and theory (the Harvard contingent). TWI is closely associated with Mayo, Roethlisberger, et al through their participation, beginning in 1941, in a specific component of the overall TWI project. This component was job relations training, a "direct outgrowth of the Hawthorne experiments" (Gillespie, 1991 as cited in Breen, 2002, p. 251). The job relations training focused on the human element of TWI and was championed by Dooley and Deitz. This training was not without controversy during its design and implementation, but eventually "just under half a million certificates" (Breen, 2002, p. 262) were issued and plant supervisors *and* union representatives saw value in the program.

The enduring connections between TWI and contemporary HRD is evident: Channing Dooley was the first member inducted into the HRD Scholar Hall of Fame in March of 2000. In May, 2001, large sections of the final

TWI report were reprinted to give another generation of HRD scholars and practitioners exposure to his work, which was called foundational to HRD (Swanson, 2001; Ruona, 2001). The contemporary HRD focus on performance, outcome, and standardized process are all key attributes generated from the substantial work of TWI and Channing Dooley.

Contemporary critiques of the Human Relations Phase

Possibly due to the widespread acceptance of human relations and personnel management in the contemporary (1930s to 1960s and beyond) industrial workplace, critiques began to emerge from multiple disciplines targeting different aspects of the movement. The foci of the critiques were broad, and a small selection is presented here to illustrate the diverse perspectives and disciplines that deemed the movement relevant enough produce critique. The critiques included: a suggestion of class bias from the disciplines of psychology (Brame, and Friend, 1981; Brown, 1954) and sociology (Coser, 1956; Kerr & Fisher, 1957, as cited in Bramel & Friend, 1981); an assertion of paternalistic control methods from organization theory (Barry and Hazen, 1996); a charge of overlooking the political in managerial work from management science (Willmott, 1984); and the problem of combining science and advocacy from organization behavior (Yorks and Whitsett, 1986). The Hawthorne studies, from which Mayo and Roethlisberger drew empirical findings, have also been extensively critiqued both methodologically and analytically (Sykes, 1984; Bolton, 1994).

Additionally, there have been feminist critiques of human relations. Feminists have criticized scholarship for treating gender as an anomaly that has been consistently ignored and marginalized in the literature. This marginalization is evident by gender being featured only in “special” journal issues or relegated to “special interest groups” of professional associations (Martin, 2000; Ross-Smith and Kornberger, 2004). When a preferred or rewarded discourse displaces opposing issues and ideas to the sidelines, a strong message is sent about what is really important to the dominant group. “Separating feminist theory from other areas and treating it as a specialized field in itself means to ignore the link between organizational discourse, management practices and gendered realities” (Ross-Smith & Kornberger, 2004, p. 281). They challenged how rationality and masculinity have been dominant in the historical development of organization studies and in particular suggest that human relations movement is entrenched with masculine rationality and maximizing efficiency and effectiveness. “The point to be made here about the human relations movement is not so much that it resulted in the recognition of informal organization but that it produced a ‘highly developed ideological apparatus of normative control, of hegemony, for the management of organizations’ (Clegg and Dunkerley, 1980, p. 135, as cited in Ross-Smith & Kornberger, 2004, p. 290). They further observed that human relations served to impact change management through viewing the worker as an object of interest with the potential to be patronized and manipulated by management. This resulted in the manager being cast routinely in the role of patriarch. Throughout this change in focus in the human relations movement, the organization retained its persona as efficient, thus further entrenching the mechanical, economic driven model.

Description of Method: Feminist Deconstruction

Feminist deconstruction dissects text to discover where language deceives and contradicts itself (Calas & Smircich, 1999), or where there are significant silences and gaps (Bradshaw, 1996). The method of deconstruction involves extensive reading and re-reading of the original text. After the text is well absorbed then specific techniques are used to pull out or identify words, phrases, or assumptions that are problematic (based on the researcher’s specific theoretical foundation). This analysis uses Bradshaw’s (1996) categories to organize the findings.

In general, deconstruction looks at text to see how power is hidden and how the status quo is perpetuated. For example, Bradshaw (1996) found that certain language creates dichotomies or dualisms and the category of ‘others’ by using pronouns such as *we* or *them* to indicate exclusion of certain groups. The creation of the category of *other* often reflects the marginalization of women and other groups (in this example, Foremen) that are not in power. In addition to examining words, deconstruction also examines how the author uses footnotes, quotation marks, metaphors, parentheses, or asides (Bradshaw, 1996). These techniques signal that the information is not central or critical to the text. In contrast, words or phrases that are privileged as central to the text (Calas & Smircich, 1999) are not marginalized in that way. Deconstruction also seeks to “dismantle hierarchical dichotomies” (Bradshaw, 1996) where false oppositions are created such as management/non-management, change/nonchange, female/male or good/bad. Deconstruction challenges these dichotomies. Texts are also read for how they function to maintain harmony, rationality and unity (Bradshaw, 1996) through their projection of a solitary, homogenous, rational truth. Such textual attempts at harmony deny alternative or competing views. Deconstruction exposes and challenges purported single truths and works to privilege othered views. Bradshaw (1996) also exposes hyperbole and mockery in the text to show how they function to privilege the insider.

In this study two researchers independently reviewed the text. The researchers independently drafted notes, memos, identified themes or repetitive ideas, and attempted to understand the text in its own terms. Next, the researchers began to independently deconstruct the text following Bradshaw's (1996) methods. As the deconstruction continued, the researchers emailed ideas to each other and spoke often on the phone. Agreement and disagreement emerged from the exchange of ideas, and it was agreed that ultimately the first author 'got to decide' what would be contained in this manuscript. There was little disagreement about the Roethlisberger text itself, but there was a measure of disagreement on the implications for contemporary HRD. This diversity of thought regarding the implications for HRD quite possibly mirrors the diverse thinking of contemporary HRD scholars—depending on where one falls along the spectrum, the implications can be dire or non-existent. Needless to say, the authors generally agreed there were significant implications for contemporary HRD.

Findings

In text deconstruction, findings are generated by critically reviewing text in order to expose hidden assumptions or belief systems. Findings are one possible way to understand text, and findings are 'supported' if readers individually believe that the interpretations are one plausible way of understanding. As described above, the findings are presented in three categories: 1) dichotomies/dualisms, "other" categories, and silences; 2) maintenance of harmony, rationality, and unity; and 3) hyperbole and mockery as the 'insider's' joke.

Dichotomies, "other" categories, and silences.

Dichotomies signal how an author 'splits' the world into understandable chunks. Deconstruction assumes that the chunks are not objective; rather, they represent the dominant way of perceiving reality. Dominance implies marginalization and/or silencing of 'other' ways to understand or explain up the world. This paragraph illustrates the types of dichotomies found in the text. Roethlisberger presented the Foreman as a pathology (dichotomy: health vs. illness) needing to be fixed (dichotomy: broken vs. unbroken) by Management (dichotomy: Foremen vs. Management). Foremen must rely on experts (dichotomy: doctor vs. patient) to 'cure' him of the social ills (dichotomy: economic rationality vs. social irrationality) that were the natural spawn of modern industrial organization (dichotomy: happy past vs. tumultuous present). The 'cure,' however, requires Administrators (dichotomy: Administrators vs. Management) who possess social skills (dichotomy: valued rationality vs. devalued social skills) that are viewed as lacking ambition (dichotomy: ambition vs. social skills) and illogical (dichotomy: valuing relationships vs. valuing profit). If Management (dichotomy: Management vs. all else) does not take responsibility, then Foremen unions (dichotomy: worker's unions vs. Management) will continue to grow. Masculine traits of rationality, ambition, hard work, were supported by "othering" feminine traits of relationship, collaboration, and the "soft work" involved in attracting and retaining helpful colleagues and employees. For example, men who demonstrated care and nurtured collaboration were seen as opposite to ambitious and rational leaders.

The analysis also found silences in the text that reinforce dominant white male knowledge. For example, there was solitary mention of "women and Negroes" in the text who were presented as war time "complications" to the Foreman: "One only needs to add to this picture the more recent complications of expanded war industries, the influx of new workers—some of them women, untutored and inexperienced in the ways of the factory; some of the Negroes, equally inexperienced and untutored but also apprehensive of their place in this "white man's heaven"—and we have the picture of the social environment of our modern Forman" (p. 50). The ForeMAN is a white male as are the specialists, administrators and MANagers. Masculine pronouns are used throughout the text and the others—men of color and women—were referred to as a management problem. Other examples of silencing and othering: the few references to unions were negative, which is not surprising as the text was published in the *Harvard Business Review*. Further, the Foreman to Foreman interactions were presented as conflicted not collegial: Foremen competed for the Boss's smile. The text alluded to power relations between Foremen and Management, but these references were consistently footnoted and not given space (e.g., legitimacy) in the text.

Maintenance of harmony, rationality, and unity.

The findings suggested that a "single truth" was presented and privileged in the text. Roethlisberger's writing is presented as truth, he offers no citations, nor does he give voice to the Foreman. The author admits, "No examples have been given, but countless could be cited by any person... The final evidence, however, it is well to remember, exists in the minds of foremen and in their behavior, not in this article; and for those who doubt, let them go out and look and listen for themselves" (p. 50). He has arranged his thesis as the truth no intelligent person could possibly question.

The Foreman faced multiple, uncontrollable forces that impinged on his ability to do the job, but it was clear that the Foreman's loyalty is to management first: "Thus the foreman, like each individual in the modern industrial

structure, is in effect painfully tutored to focus his attention upward to his immediate superiors and the logics of evaluation they represent, rather than downward to his subordinates and the feelings they have" (italics in original, p. 42). Roethlisberger's publication told scholars and practitioners that Management was the authority in a logical and rational organization, and the Foreman had to straddle the logical world of management and the illogical world of the workers.

In this myth, the worker culture and its informal groups (Unions) were suspect and dangerous: "It should be noted that these manifestations of *formal* organization are essentially logical in character. Through formal organization man expresses his logical capacities; in fact, it is one of the chief outlets for the expression of man's logical capacities. It should also be noted that in the past 25 years there has been a tremendous amount of attention given to this aspect of business organization...And yet, the foreman, unlike some higher executives, cannot stay only in this logically sheltered atmosphere" (p. 45). The myth is that organizations are logical and rational, and workers and unions are the opposite.

Productivity is an uncontested value suggested by the text "As a result [of this impossible, rationalized job found on pp. 36-37], the foreman gives lip service in his courses to things which in the concrete shop situation he feels it would be suicidal to practice. In the shop, for the most part, he does his best to perform by hook or by crook the one function clearly left him, the one function for which there is no definite staff counterpart, the one function for which the boss is sure to hold him responsible, namely, getting the workers to turn the work out on time" (p. 38).

Finally, at the end of the text, Roethlisberger argued that a class-based view of conflict and power in industrial organizations "at all cost(s) must not be representative of an 'ism.'" (p. 56). Roethlisberger, Mayo, and the Harvard School in general "may have allowed pro-management or pro-capitalist commitments and ideologies to distort their understanding of the world of industrial work," (Bramel & Friend, 1981, p. 868) because they presented human relations as a technique to fight unionization. Conflict was to be suppressed, minimized by understanding executives and administrators who were skilled in gaining the cooperation of men. The ideological implications of authority and power in modern organizations are seemingly apparent to Roethlisberger in his description of the relationship between a foreman and his superior: "it is clear that any adequate analysis would go far beyond the confines of this article, since it would involve a critique of modern business organization and the individual's relation to authority and, in part, an examination of the ideologies held by the leaders and executives of business," (p. 40). However, he does not question nor examine the relations of power found within modern industrial organizations. He cited Barnard's (1938) classic "*The Functions of the Executive*," to support the above statement, and then returned to the focus on behavior and "matters of common observation" (p. 41) rather than critiquing the concept of authority or power itself.

Hyperbole and mockery as the 'Insiders' Joke

Findings suggest that the text communicates hidden meanings among the inner circle. In the case of the Foreman, Management was the inner circle and the Foreman was the subject of irony, hyperbole, mockery and exaggeration. As the following quotations demonstrate, the Foreman was a Management problem. At the beginning of the article, Foremen were described as "monsters" that require fixing by management. Roethlisberger explained the dilemma of changing the nature of the Foreman problem: "Failing to recognize the hydraheaded character of the social situation with which it is faced, management will cut off one head, only to have two new heads appear" (p. 36): The next paragraph in the text referred to the article's premise that "management's chickens [Foremen] have come home to roost" (p. 36).

Foremen were described as "go-betweeners," "forgotten men," and "the step-children of industry" (p. 36). They were also expected to be an "example" (p. 37), "subforemen," and "straw bosses," (p. 39). Such mockery invites the reader to view the foreman as a powerless conduit between management and workers where they are expected to do an impossible job. The insider joke that the Foreman was not what he used to be is exemplified by referring to him as "the cock of the walk" (p. 38) no more. The foreman is left "holding the bag" (p. 48) where management is laughing at him for trying to do this impossible job. Now the Foreman must supervise "complicated" or marginalized workers in relationships that are often "the straw that breaks the camel's back" (p. 44) where "...the modern Foreman is expected to 'cooperate'" (p. 48), "to cut off his nose to spite his face" (p. 49). Women and minorities are not welcome in this "white man's heaven" where their presence complicates the Foreman's job. In dealing with these complications, the foreman has a few choices. He, "stews in his own juice," "he eats himself for lack of something else to hew and hack," or he may seek political solution to grind out major industrial ills and "do the 'mills of God'" (p. 51).

Discussion and Implications for HRD

In this section, the findings are analyzed in terms of the research question, namely, “Does enduring discourse, such as the classic text selected for the study, continue to influence contemporary HRD?” The working hypotheses were a) there is a gendered understanding of knowledge in the classic text; and b) it may be possible to uncover continuations of gendered knowledge in contemporary HRD theory building. This study notes that the historical period examined here was before the legitimization of alternative theoretical paradigms (qualitative or interpretive). The lack of alternative theoretical assumptions available to Roethlisberger is not the issue; rather, at issue is the continuation of norms and standards of discourse that continue to impede the legitimization of alternative theoretical orientations and assumptions in contemporary HRD theory building.

First, a comparison of contemporary HRD literature with the ‘dichotomies and silences’ findings suggest that silences and dualistic thinking may be continuing to influence contemporary discourse of HRD. Contemporary dualisms include performance vs. learning, individual vs. group, strategic vs. tactical, qualitative vs. quantitative, organization vs. individual, hierarchy vs. democracy, and theory vs. practice. The findings of this study challenge contemporary HRD theorists to examine accepted knowledge (e.g., dualistic frameworks for thinking) can filter or organize meanings that may carry forward unintended or unexamined biases. For example, look at the distinction between behaviorist and humanist often made in HRD textbooks. In the classic text, Roethlisberger’s framework for analyzing the situation was objective, rational, and grounded in the behaviorist school. Men had things acting upon them, and then Men responded. It was assumed that the response behavior could be objectively studied and rationally manipulated by changing the stimulus. In other words, human actions could be controlled and manipulated.

The majority of emerging theories in HRD continue to be grounded on functionalist assumptions of objectivity and stimulus-response. The contemporary text analyzed to justify this assertion is a chapter in Swanson & Holton’s (2005) *Research in organizations: Foundations and methods of inquiry*. Readers are encouraged to review the full chapter; space limitations here require a narrow analysis of the text. The text does describe alternatives to functionalist assumptions, but the primary discourse remains functionalist. For example, in describing the range of theory building research methods, Torraco (2005) provided a comprehensive review and suggested that functionalist theory building methods provided specific structures and guidelines that are “instructive and essential” (p. 353) to newcomers to theory research. He reinforced the claim that functionalist theories have dominated the HRD literature because “theorists seem to rely heavily on theory development research methodologies that provide explicit methodological guidance for working through the phases and procedures for developing theory,” (p. 353). In closing the chapter, further discourse analysis reinforced the functionalist perspective. It is clear that the intent of functionalist work is explanation and the intent of qualitative work is understanding. Torraco (2005) suggested that good theory can offer a “potentially powerful explanation of the phenomenon,” and the work must “offer propositions, questions, or hypotheses,” (p. 371).

There are significant implications for relying almost exclusively on objective guidelines for explaining phenomenon. Functional theory building does not consider power relations an issue or relevant, and assumes that an objective reality exists to be discovered. Foundational HRD theories, as described in the three legged stool (Swanson, 1999) are all functionalist (economic, psychological, and systems theories). The addition of systems theory is the only change to Roethlisberger’s framework, despite the broad spectrum of alternative frameworks that can take into account power, meaning making, and emergent phenomena. Further, by footnoting issues of power and classifying relational skills (perhaps what we would call emotional intelligence today) as “less than,” Roethlisberger, in essence, sets a course for HRD theorists and researchers to think of power and informal organization as problems, as pathologies, and something that can be factored out of the equation.

Although what is presented here is just the tip of the iceberg, scholars recognize the dominance of the functionalist perspective in HRD. Despite approximately sixty years and the emergence of the knowledge economy, evidence suggests that management and HRD theoretical discourse continues to be dominated by dualistic thinking and functionalist assumptions. Postmodernism and poststructuralism have allowed interpretive assumptions and incorporated power into theoretical thinking; however, these perspectives continue to be contested and are often deemed ‘immature,’ ‘biased,’ or ‘unscientific.’ By examining the historical roots of HRD, this study illuminated the continued influence of discourse on contemporary HRD theory building. We suggest that by looking at theory building as discourse, hidden assumptions and values emerge and are made visible. Better, diverse, and more relevant theories will be developed when this occurs.

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