Realising Critical Human Resource Development in the Face of Racism and Xenophobia

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Anticipated number of submissions: 20+ (based on previous conferences)


Our proposal for CMS 2017 seeks to build on this experience to explore the contribution of and challenges for (C)HRD in the face of the social upheaval the world is currently experiencing. In particular our concern is to invite papers that explore how (C)HRD can (and is) make a contribution to addressing current and future problems of hate based xenophobia by facilitating and helping to achieve desired awareness and behavioural change among employees and citizens.

“Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me.”

As a field, human resource development (HRD) is often accused of colluding with managerialist organisations (Bierema 2009, Callahan 2007, Hill, 2014). By promising to enhance performance in the workplace, HRD has been accused of subsidizing “the wealth of corporate elites” (Hill 2014: 409) at the expense of human interests. Indeed, Rigg, Stewart, Trehan (2007) argued that HRD has typically been seen as “technocratic development of effective practitioners” (3) whereby the economic desires of the organisation take precedence over the needs of the people who work in them. Critical HRD scholars have begun to challenge the perspective that the value of the field lies in its ability to deliver increased performance for organisational gain (e.g.Trehan and Rigg, 2011; Callahan et al, 2015). Others (e.g. Perriton 2009) have suggested that the desire to appeal to dominant organisational interests results in reproduction of inequalities instead of desired social changes. Rigg, Stewart, and Trehan (2007) contend that a critical HRD orientation is necessary to challenge assumptions of power in organisations and learning contexts, and to enact social change.
HRD as a professional discipline and field of study emerged from the field of training and development, where in the 1980’s and early 1990’s much work was done in racism and sexism awareness training, and using racism awareness as a focus for examining attitudes and actions in classes with students on professional HR courses, as well as within organisations. Since the turn of the century this has become incorporated into diversity training, with gender and disability becoming more major concepts relative to race.

Many pressing questions are raised for (C)HRD, as we find ourselves in a world in which many countries are experiencing a rise in explicit and visible xenophobia, where momentous political decisions (such as Brexit in the UK, election results in Austria and Australia) and presidential elections (e.g. US) are being heavily influenced by narrow nationalist agendas and appeals to racist prejudice, where institutional racism appears alive and well, and in which social media makes visible multiple incidents where employee and citizen actions appear to be visibly framed by racist assumptions and fears. Shaping the notion of 21st century CHRD are super diversity, globalization and ideas of mobility, and in no field is their impact felt more strongly than in business. Understanding mobility requires attention to the scale and dynamics of self-employment as an economic activity for migrants. In this stream we ask what we mean by ‘mobility’ in migrant self-employment, with reference to movement of geographical and historical locations and the implications for CHRD of super diversity.

We see a stream on Critical HRD as exploring (though not restricted to) these kinds of questions:

- What kind of society and workplaces do we want?
- What role can CHRD play in mitigating against racism and xenophobia?
- How can HRD take account of interplay between racism, xenophobia and masculinity?
- How can HRD take account of interplay between racism, xenophobia and mental health?
- What are the implications of Brexit for a role for CHRD in supporting employees?
- What can HRD offer public servants or private sector employees in the face of wider political uncertainties?
- What are the challenges confronting public servants working in a political context fuelled by a politics of hate?
- What can HRD offer the capability and sustainability of the public sector workforce in coping with the scale and rate of upheaval currently being experienced?
- What impact can we make and do we want to make as Critical HRD scholars and practitioners?
- What kinds of conversations should we be having, with whom and in what language?
- In what ways might xenophobia and racism be embedded in our dominant epistemologies and the way in which expertise frames the way we know the world, and our actions within it?
- What are the implications for CHRD in the context of super diversity and migrant ‘mobility’?