Psychodynamic and Critical Perspectives on Leadership Development

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The problem and the solution. Increasing attention is focusing on the value of critical approaches to enhancing human resource development (HRD). This article examines how critical HRD and psychoanalytic processes can be harnessed to produce valuable learning through reflection. Psychodynamic perspectives not only explore underlying power and control issues but actively engage in an examination of political and cultural processes affecting the development process. Such perspectives enable one to move beyond purely instrumentalist approaches toward embracing the complexity of leadership development.

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During the past decade, there has been an increasing concern for the introduction of a more critical interpretation of practice in adult and higher education (see e.g., Barnett, 1977; Welton, 1995). The same concern is evident in our own field of human resource development (HRD) as a response to the considerable influence that managers as a professional group exercise over the lives of employees, the wider community, and the environment (Alvesson & Willmott, 1998). In recognition of this, HRD teachers have been urged to “analyze HRD in terms of its social, moral and political significances and . . . to challenge management practice rather than seek to sustain it” (Grey & Mitev, 1995, p. 74). The challenges vary, from critical theory, liberationist (Freirian) theology, feminist, and poststructuralist scholarship to Marxism and labor process analysis. Although differences between these schools of thought are too significant to be overlooked, together they comprise a critical perspective that provides a basis for rethinking adult and professional education.

Whichever critical perspective is applied, its characteristics are likely to include:
• questioning assumptions and taken-for-granteds, asking questions that are not meant to be asked;
• foregrounding processes of power and noting how inequalities of power intersect with social factors such as race, gender, or age;
• identifying competing discourses and the sectional interests reflected in them; and ultimately,
• developing a workplace and social milieu characterized more by justice than by inequality or exploitation.

What might critical HRD look like in practice? Reynolds (1997), drawing from ideas of Giroux (1981), introduced the concept of content-radical and method- or process-radical pedagogies. Content radicals disseminate radical material in the sense of critical theories and concepts, alternatives to technocratic management education. Typically there is no challenge to the contradictions in power relationships between lecturers/institutions and students and no focus on the power dynamics within the students’ collectives. Process radicals attempt to address power asymmetries of the traditional teacher/learner relationship, for example using experiential learning, negotiated syllabi, peer appraisal, or action learning sets. Reynolds argued that an approach that could be both content and process radical would have characteristics of questioning assumptions, analyzing power relations, and a collective focus, in the “sense of acting in concert with others” (p. 316).

Thus, critical HRD studies engage managers in a process of drawing from critical perspectives to make connections between their learning and work experience to understand and change interpersonal and organization behavior. Learning from experience is also central to psychodynamic and systemic traditions with their focus on development, insight, and understanding, but what separates psychodynamics from other approaches is learning from the unconscious phenomena. Trying to think about and apply such phenomena to leadership development is a complex and multidimensional task. Although insights and theoretical contributions (Armstrong, 1997; French & Vince, 1999; Gould, Stapley, & Stein, 2004) have enabled us to explore leadership development, the question I wish to address is what does this mean in practice? How can the interplay between critical HRD studies and psychoanalytic thought be expedited in leadership development, what outcomes can critical HRD studies and psychoanalytic thought have for leadership development, and can the interplay between critical HRD and psychoanalytic processes be fulfilled in practice in the current climate, which is often preoccupied by outcomes, business improvement, performance management, and where the processes of learning becomes a subsidiary activity? The intended contribution of this article is to explore and identify ways in which the interplay between critical HRD and psychoanalytic processes can be recognized and valued as a source of learning rather than overlooked. In exploring the interplay between critical HRD and psychoanalytic thought, I am proposing an approach to learning that illuminates the complexities, contradictions, and tensions in leadership development.
Exploring Leadership

Leadership has been studied from many viewpoints. These have produced a diverse analysis of development needs, and these have in turn been associated with varied HRD policies and practices. Furthermore, the patterns that have formed in this knowledge system during the later part of the 20th century are now seen to be in dynamic change as a result of the interplay of social, political, economic, and technological factors influencing business behavior today. The modern networked organization is very different in structure, function, and culture from the classic bureaucratic form (Castelis, 2000). It is a rapidly evolving hybrid, capable of being viewed simultaneously in a variety of ways (Boje, 1995).

Leadership has been seen in the past by social and organizational psychologists as a group of organizational phenomenon, as a set of role behaviors performed by an individual, to influence others toward a goal (Conger & Kanungo, 1998). Leadership is seen as a relational and attributional phenomenon in that it depends on the perceptions, decisions, behavior, and attributions of a number of followers (Beckhard, 1969). Leadership is studied in terms of its content, namely, the behavior and attributes of leaders and followers and the situation they are in at the time, and process, namely, the use of different types of power and social influence. Finally, leader effectiveness can be evaluated by reference to follower attitudes, behavior, satisfaction, and followers’ acceptance of the leader.

Several thousand empirical studies have been conducted on leadership development and effectiveness (Grint, 1997), but according to critics, most of the results are contradictory and inconclusive (Yuki as cited in Alvesson & Deetz, 2001a). Part of the problem is dealing with leadership as an abstract concept capable of practical simplification—rather than as part of a complex social process. Fundamental to these issues are questions that explore what is meant by leadership and how it might be developed both in theory and practice. During the 20th century in America, leadership studies changed from being concerned with the biographies of great people, often male military leaders, to the psychological/behavioral orientation typical of research in the United States of America from the 1930s onward. Trainers advocated that leaders should have a high concern for both task and people. These models were rationalistic in that they proposed a choice of style in the pursuit of goals based on evidence and tended to be perceived as universalistic in that they were taken to apply equally across cultures, sectors, and individuals. They often focused on one or two main variables and began to seem simplistic and mechanistic in the way they were often applied after training courses. Gradually, these models were modified to include a contingent element.

Later versions, the situational and contingency approaches to leadership development, recognized that situations might vary and so require specific modifications in leadership approach. Groups mature over time and become more capable of working effectively without the close supervision and structuring that leaders of new groups often feel compelled to provide (see Bion, 1968). Task
simplicity or complexity, leader power over subordinates, leader-follower liking, situational requirements (e.g., for a quality decision or a quick decision) were shown to be related to certain styles. So if the task were straightforward and the followers supported the leader, perhaps an autocratic style might work for a time; but in more ambiguous circumstances or where the leader’s power was weaker, then a more involving style might be advised.

From the 1980s, when the speed of institutional change appeared to increase, a new school of thinking emerged called “new leadership” (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2003). It advocated visionary and inspirational, charismatic, and transformational roles for the leader and offered empowerment for the worker/follower. Transactional styles, in which rewards were exchanged for performances, were regarded as insufficient in that they lacked the power to enthuse and inspire possessed by transformational leaders.

By the 1990s, some popular attention turned to the more charismatic transformational leader, who has been defined as someone who transforms the outlook and behavior of followers so that they move beyond their self-interests for the good of the group or society (Bass, 1997; House & Shamir, 1993).

Talk and writing about leadership might be considered to be problematic in itself, for example as revealing an ideological or theoretical stance. A first step in organizational leadership is to classify what all the talk is trying to achieve. A local culture tacitly defines what is on the leadership agenda and may negatively exclude certain topics from conversation. The silent, or unsaid, or unsayable may be as powerful in defining leadership-followership realities as that which is explicitly promoted.

The public has become skilled at deconstructing leadership speeches (see Fairclough, 2003) and at noticing how words are used with care to create rhetorical impressions. We are aware how words do things, create effects, have consequences, often unintended, when quoted out of context. Words are not the transparent glass through which we see the real world. Leadership itself is a discourse; it is a patterned form of communication with particular genres of speech and typical concerns. The key is to remain open to different readings of the leadership text rather than to unwarranted optimism about their unproblematic substance. Leadership texts are often written in a popular style but employ subtle techniques to persuade their readers of the truth of their arguments, such as selective quotation of positive cases.

These arguments suggest that although theories may seem technically sound, on analysis they can be shown to contain contradictions that to some extent can undermine their claims. This approach is informed by critical theorists. Critical theory seeks to highlight, nurture, and promote the potential of human consciousness to reflect critically on oppressive practices and to facilitate the extension of domains of autonomy and responsibility (Alvesson & Willmott, 1998).

Brookfield (as cited in Alvesson & Deetz, 2001b) defined the critical view as challenging assumptions of ordinary perceiving, conceiving, and acting;
recognizing influences on beliefs and actions; exploring alternatives that disrupt routines; and being appropriately skeptical about truth claims. Alvesson and Deetz (2001b) went on to provide several critical views on leadership theory. They noted the skepticism of reviewers such as Yuki about the conceptual and empirical weaknesses in much of leadership theory. They pointed out how limited references to style can seem when applied uniformly to the very different social roles in which leadership might be enacted. They noted that the positivist approach tended to suppress variation in leadership concepts and practice in favor of an artificial universalism. Leadership is not in this view a stable entity but a complex and variable process, either not referring to the same material reality from one case to the next or perhaps being better thought of as manner of speaking and writing about a social phenomenon at a certain time and place (i.e., a discourse). The critical view can be taken as a warning to avoid simplistic application of ideas to social situations and to maintain a critical perspective.

**Developing Leadership**

How then does this affect how we see leadership development? If leadership can be reduced to uniform definitions and formulaic presentations such as those about successful styles, then it is reasonable to suppose that it can be transmitted through culturally accepted processes to each successive generation of leaders in similarly reliable and valid ways. But if there are many definitions of leadership and if each organization or social context has its unique character, then exploring the variations may be more important for HR developers to encourage than the one right way approach.

It has become almost routine to assert the importance of leadership development. Rigg and Richards (2005) argued there has been a recent upsurge in enthusiasm for and investment in leadership development. They argued that an exploration of the kinds of leadership capabilities organizations might require, whether or not they are distinctive, and what approaches to leadership development might be most appropriate has followed belatedly.

When we come from a critical perspective to the question of leadership development for HRD, then we are faced with a number of options; first, we can expand the theoretical range by including or adopting nonconventional views; second, we can relate methods of development to our theories of the leadership phenomenon. It is tempting to analyze this discussion and to formulate proposals for a technology of development to fit every theoretical position. This invites a repeat of the criticisms made by Alvesson and Deetz (2001b) indicated earlier. Instead I will take the position that leadership and management development approaches can be questioned along the following lines.

How is the idea of development being used by the various groups in the debate, for example by HR specialists, senior line executives, and the main body of managerial, professional, technical, and administrative leaders? What
are their tacit assumptions about growth and the desired outcomes of investment in it? In whose interest is the development that is proposed? How does the adopted development process work as a social process? For example, what outcomes does it create and for whom? Are any of these undesirable for a stakeholder? For example, some groups, such as nongraduates, might be regarded by a company executive as qualified to be part of the fast track graduate recruitment scheme that is “producing tomorrow’s leaders.” How are implicit conflicts between the purported aims of the sponsors and the actors in the system played out in events that take place, such as workshops? What happens when someone questions the approach being taken to be development?

The emerging nature of theory and practice in this area is leading to much reflection as to what constitutes critical leadership development. Vince (2000) proposed the notion that if it is to flourish, HRD may have to get more complicated and start focusing on supporting the impact managers/leaders can have on organizing rather than on people development. Vince further argued the political struggle in organizations in terms of practice is often represented in “the reluctance managers have towards enacting their leadership openly and in public” (p. 139). Thus, it is crucial to the development process to examine the ways in which critical leadership development is able to unveil power relations and the emotional context within which they operate rather than to avoid them.

Psychodynamics and Critical HRD

The interplay between psychodynamic approaches and critical HRD provides an opportunity to explore leadership development at an individual, group, and organizational level as conscious and unconscious processes. Psychodynamic perspectives illuminate approaches that differentiate between behaviors and activities geared toward rational task performance and those geared to emotional needs and anxieties. The application of this approach emphasizes the importance of understanding human relationships through the idea of connectedness and relatedness. In doing so, the emphasis is placed on “learning from the conscious and unconscious levels of connection that exist between and shape selves and others, people and systems” (French & Vince, 1999, p. 7). To develop our understanding of leadership development, we need to find ways of exploring the nature of authority, the exercise of authority and power, the relationship of organizations to their social, political, and economic environment. We also need to examine how emotions (e.g., humor, fear, envy, joy) reverberate on the relational nature of leadership and impact on organizational life.

Applying psychodynamic ideas to leadership development means not just exploring assumptions of power and control but actively engaging in an examination of political and cultural processes affecting the development process. Willmott (1997) argued the challenge is “to envision and advance the development of discourses and practices that can facilitate the development of
‘management’ from a divisive technology of control into a collective means of emancipation” (p. 175).

Another critical aspect of psychodynamic theory to the study of leadership development is the interrelation between emotions, organizational dynamics, and leadership development. Emotions and the study of the emotional organization is central to psychodynamic theory because first, it places leadership at the very center of the organization, and second, it reveals emotions as the prime medium through which people act and interact. All organizations are emotional arenas where feeling shapes events and events shape feeling. Vince (2000) highlighted emotions as an important element in developing our understanding of learning in relation to how learning occurs and how it is prevented. Within leadership development, knowing more about the nature of anxiety enables better structures and systems of work to be created. Also, it illuminates how different types of learning affect behavior. Psychodynamics argues for a possible distinction between learning that is restricted to the cognitive level and learning that involves the whole experience.

In addition, this implies leadership involves an emotional connection to the anxiety arising from the nature of organizational life. This is based on the premise that social and organizational behavior can be constructed as defenses against anxiety. Thus, a psychodynamic approach to leadership development would facilitate an exploration of the impact that emotions have on leadership development at both conscious and unconscious levels.

To show the importance of power, emotions, and psychodynamic perspectives to the study of leadership, it is necessary to examine the inseparability of power between academic disciplines and leadership practitioners. By conducting research, using the techniques of deconstruction, into the dominant and subjugated discourses in their organizations, leadership developers could gain far greater insight into the invisible workings of managing and organizing than is provided by other analyses of organizational workings. This could provide us with a powerful tool for understanding influencing future “reauthoring” in the workplace.

Another consideration to reviewing the role of a leadership developer is the way in which they and their role can be inscribed and objectified by others in the organization. Lyotard (1979) provided the concept of “the differend” to explain the difficulties in gaining acceptance for new ideas that fall outside of the accepted discourse. The differend is the name Lyotard used to describe the shutting out of one player from a “language game.” The concept of a language game is derived from Wittgenstein. Thus, shutting out phenomena occur where there are no agreed rules for the introduction of something new to the game. This could be a new rule, a new idea, principle, or grievance. The differend is the impossibility of giving expression to an injustice as it is rendered invisible. This has implications for leadership practitioners trying to introduce new concepts and values to an organization.
Similarly, Reynolds (1999) argued the function of management development should not be to help managers fit unquestioningly into the roles traditionally expected of them but to assist them in engaging with the social and moral issues inherent within existing management practice and to become more conscious of the ideological forces that constrain their actions.

The issues and dilemmas that have been highlighted are those that teachers and practitioners might identify for discussion even if they cannot be neatly or easily resolved. Equally, there is a role for tutors in supporting discussions of these issues when they are initiated by students. Where critical leadership in some form is practiced, there is value in an open examination of what it entails. Within this context, the importance of being a critically reflective practitioner becomes clear. As Burgoyne and Reynolds (1997) argued, the critically reflective practitioners play an important role as “they are aware that with every practical action they take they are fixing (temporally) their belief and acting their current best working theory, but they realize that this may also be open to challenge and improvement” (p. 2).

The implications of the aforementioned for leadership development is that it reveals the tensions, contradictions, emotions, and power dynamics that inevitably exist in understanding leaders’ lives. Critical leadership development as a pedagogical approach emerges when those dynamics are treated centrally as a site of learning about leadership.

What this analysis begins to indicate is that when we are thinking about critical leadership development we need to recognize that power operates in areas that may be obscured by traditional theories and approaches. It is easy to see how individuals wishing to embark on leadership programs might be forgiven for thinking that they only need to follow the formula set out for them and they would succeed, were it not for the fact that organizations might be changing more rapidly and in more complex ways than the aligned model could adapt. Leadership is, after all, a myriad set of constructs, and attempts to regularize it in a single organizational formula may be self-defeating.

Conclusions

In the debates previously presented I have reviewed and discussed various perspectives on leadership development and the challenges it presents in relation to the interplay between psychodynamic and critical HRD. A number of conclusions can be distilled from the discussion.

First, in the field of HRD, education and critiques of the values, purpose, and approaches to HRD have become well developed in recent years. At the same time, leadership has continued to be an area of academic debate and practitioner focus. Yet, although there are many potential areas of overlap between critical HRD and psychodynamics, they have been evolving as parallel discourses, with little attention accorded to exploiting their interconnections.
Second, although critical and psychodynamic approaches to leadership development may be appealing in theory, they are also fraught with difficulties and problematic consequences. Leaders and HR developers may resist engagement in critical processes because to do so would be to question the organizational context in which they operate and challenge traditional norms.

Third, leadership development from a psychodynamic perspective may find it countercultural to the pressure to conform to organizational ideologies. However, in arguing for a critical psychodynamic approach to leadership development I would concur with Reed and Anthony (1992), who called teachers to account, insisting on their responsibility to “recover their institutional and pedagogical nerve” (p. 610), in supporting managers in critical learning within their working environment, not withstanding the complexities and conflicts of interests that may surface.

Finally, the theoretical debates presented have sought to emphasize the distinctive nature of psychodynamic leadership and to argue for its place in the professional activity of HR practice. Leadership development, whether in educational institution or in organizations, can support people in an examination of the social, emotional, and political processes within the workplace. Leadership practice is about moral issues and requires ethical consideration because, as Reed and Anthony (1992) argued, these are fundamentals on which any organizational reality rests. It is also important for education and organizational practice to counter current preoccupations with instrumentalism and introduce methodologies that focus their attention to the moral, political, emotional, and cultural aspects of leadership.

Thus, the interplay between critical and psychodynamic approaches to HRD could offer innovative and challenging perspectives, which unveil functionalist and performative approaches that fail to address the wider social, political, emotional, and psychodynamic context in which HRD is organized.

References


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