A postemotional analysis of *Brave New World*: HRD as unwitting collaborator or critical agent?

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Aldous Huxley wrote *Brave New World* in 1932 as a cautionary tale of the implications of totalitarianism, technology, capitalism, and mass media. The hallmarks of the futuristic society in *Brave New World* can be seen in Mestrovic’s critical theory of postemotionalism. Mestrovic argues that our society has slipped into a state in which emotions have been manipulated to such an extent that we now face a “bland, mechanical, mass produced yet oppressive ethic of niceness” (Mestrovic, 1997). If what Mestrovic argues is true, then we may have indeed become the brave new world. But what role does HRD play in the creation or maintenance of such a society? I break the silence for HRD professionals by challenging us to confront our role either as unwitting collaborators in the construction of this brave new world or as critical agents that help engage others in resisting the postemotional brave new world.

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The greatest triumphs of propaganda have been accomplished, not by doing something, but by refraining from doing. Great is truth, but still greater, from a practical point of view, is silence about truth.  
(*Brave New World*, p. xix)

Aldous Huxley wrote *Brave New World* in 1932 as a cautionary tale of the implications of totalitarianism, technology, capitalism, and mass media. He describes a future state in which society is genetically engineered to be pre-disposed for contentment and happiness, regardless of the meaninglessness of their work lives; in which citizens are controlled by the only class of people who have been genetically engineered to think critically; in which citizens are numbed by subliminal propaganda messages so that they engage in rampant impulse gratification and drug themselves to happy bliss when gratification is not immediately available; and in which consumption is the main goal of all human activity.

These hallmarks of the futuristic society in *Brave New World* can be seen in Mestrovic’s critical theory of postemotionalism. Mestrovic wrote *The Postemotional Society* in 1997 after reflecting upon the horrors occurring in his homeland of Croatia and the other countries of the former Yugoslavia. He concluded that our society has slipped into a state of ‘postemotionalism’ in which emotions have been manipulated to such an extent that we now face a “bland, mechanical, mass produced yet oppressive ethic of niceness” (Mestrovic, 1997). If what Mestrovic argues is true, then we may have indeed become the brave new world.
But what role does HRD play in the creation or maintenance of such a society? Professionals in HRD engage in activities of training & development, career development, and organization development. Each of these types activities can be seen in some form in *Brave New World* and each can be interpreted through the lens of postemotionalism. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to use the concept of postemotionalism to critically analyze the role of HRD in the contemporary society—perhaps as ours exists today—postulated by Aldous Huxley in the *Brave New World*.

I break the silence for HRD professionals by challenging us to confront our role either as unwitting collaborators in the construction of this brave new world or as critical agents that help engage others in resisting the postemotional brave new world. In this paper, I first provide an overview of the novel. Then, I explore the nature of postemotionalism within the context of critical HRD and highlight the postemotional manifestations within the novel as they coincide with key activities of HRD practice. I conclude by discussing the implications of these postemotional HRD practices for the field.

**Summary of Brave New World**

The term ‘brave new world’ is often bandied about as a positive herald of a new time; however, the essence of Huxley’s novel is not to praise the new society but to warn of the consequences of many of changes such as technology, medicine, and popular culture. In this brave new world, totalitarianism keeps the world free from disease, hunger, poverty, war and hatred. To maintain this utopian state, a small group of Controllers eliminate most individual freedoms and redefine traditional Western values. For example, marriage is taboo, free sex is required, and pregnancy is forbidden. Human beings are part of the production process, in which individuals are genetically engineered in Petri dishes to happily fulfill tasks in society in one of five caste levels. These five castes range from the intelligent Alphas, who perform the leadership roles in the society, to the mentally-challenged Epsilons, who perform the most menial of tasks. Children are raised in collectives under strict conditioning, both while awake and while asleep, to ensure that they never question their role in society. As adults, individuals unquestioningly assume their appointed roles, operate with efficiency in those roles, participate as expected in mindless leisure activities, and consume a drug called ‘soma’ to ensure that they are always happy. The core values of society are consumption, standardization, and progress.

When Bernard, an Alpha from London who appears to be the ‘victim’ of faulty programming, begins to question the values of his society, he is branded an outcast and threatened with banishment to Iceland. However, during a trip to the savage reservation (a portion of the world untouched by modern technological progress), he discovers Linda and John. Linda is a Beta who had traveled to the reservation twenty years earlier with Bernard’s supervisor, she became lost in the reservation and discovered that she was pregnant while she was lost. She was never rescued and raised her son, John, amongst the savages. Bernard decided to return to London with Linda and John in a bid to regain his stature in society. Linda is unable to cope with her assimilation back into society. Having been ravaged by age and alcohol while on the reservation, she longs for the days when she was pretty and happy and content with her life. Seeking comfort, she gradually overdoses with soma and eventually dies. John, whose education has been based on reading a book of Shakespeare’s works, is baffled and horrified by the supposedly civilized society. He also is unable to cope with assimilation into society; he
rejects the lack of individuality, compassion, and challenge. Forced to choose between conformity or death, John chooses to hang himself rather than lose his individuality and personal values.

Critical HRD and postemotionalism

What differentiates critical HRD from traditional understandings of HRD is the focus of inquiry and action; critical HRD is concerned with structures of power and control and seeks to challenge assumptions that guide HRD research and practice (Trehan, Rigg, & Stewart, 2006). As a field of practice, in particular in the U.S., HRD “pays significant attention to the U.S. corporate context, skews loyalties toward management, and lauds performance improvement above other results” (Bierema, 2002, p. 245). This bias in action has led to a number of critiques of the field. Fenwick (2004) notes that HRD has been challenged for commodifying human development and subjugating human interests to exploitive organizational interests and for engaging various technologies to observe and regulate worker behavior, to classify and normalize worker tasks, and to engineer cultural diversity within the organization.

In general, critical theorists seek to empower the oppressed in order to redress the inequalities and injustices of social systems (McLaren, 1994). One of the distinctions of critical theory is that it focuses heavily on reason as a means to distance itself from accusations of irrationality (Brookfield, 2001) as it challenges the dominant discourse. Despite this emphasis on reason in critical theorizing, I have argued that critical theory is inherently emotional (Callahan, 2004); emotions infuse the systems and structures that inform our daily lives. To counter this rationality, Mestrovic (1997) proposed exploring representations of emotion from a critical perspective as a more effective means of understanding social phenomena today. This alternative perspective is postemotionalism.

Postemotionalism has three primary components—other directedness, mechanization of emotion, and voyeuristic inaction (Mestrovic, 1997). First, Mestrovic suggests that Western society externalizes emotion in such a way that emotions are no longer private spaces of reflection moving one towards action. Instead, emotions are directed outward as vehicles to communicate a perceived ‘correct’ expression of positive emotions; negative emotions of hate, sorrow, suffering, and the like are not part of the other-directed culture of postemotionalism.

Second, Western society suffers from a mechanization of emotion (Mestrovic, 1997) in which emotions pass through a cognitive filter in order for individuals to achieve instrumental gains. This mechanization of emotion is, in part, the result of the overuse of emotionally-laden language used to ‘sell’ concepts and goods. This inundation of emotional messages has numbed the masses to genuine emotion.

Finally, this other-directedness and mechanization of emotion has created a culture of voyeuristic inaction. Because our other-directed culture of niceness disavows negative emotions, the culture media transmits images such as pain, suffering, tragedy, and anger to create an outlet for these emotions. Witnessing this suffering through simulations (i.e. television and movies) has numbed society to genuine suffering that exists all around us.
Postemotional Manifestations in *Brave New World*

The novel contains many postemotional elements and the practice of HRD can be linked to these elements. In this section I provide examples of how postemotionalism appears within the text of *Brave New World*. I connect these examples to traditional practices in HRD by linking each to elements of training & development, career development, or organization development.

**Other-directedness**

Other-directedness can be seen in the repeated references to the ultimate pursuit of happiness programmed into citizens of the brave new world. Controllers of this society seek to maintain a state of stable positivity, “…that is the secret of happiness and virtue—liking what you’ve got to do. All conditioning aims at that: making people like their unescapable social destiny” (Huxley, 1932, p. 10). Further, the cultivation of impulse gratification begins at an early age because “impulse arrested spills over, and the flood is feeling, the flood is passion, the flood is even madness: it depends on the strength of the barrier. The unchecked stream flows smoothly down its appointed channels into a calm well-being” (p. 32). Therefore, everyone is programmed to gratify all impulses.

For HRD professionals, the ubiquitous smile sheets as evaluation mechanisms for training are other-directed symptoms. Kirkpatrick’s level one evaluation is the most common form of evaluation of training events; this level is often referred to as a smile sheet because it really does nothing more than ensure the participant was happy with the training experience (Holton, 1996).

**Mechanization of Emotion**

The mechanization of emotion occurs first through biogenetic engineering of embryos, “We also predestine and condition. We decant our babies as socialized human beings, … as future sewage workers or future … World controllers” (Huxley, 1932, p. 9). Then through hypnotic messages delivered while children are sleeping, “Till at last the child’s mind is these suggestions” (p. 20). This programming is continued by cultural messages regarding leisure activities and work roles. And, finally, when threats to the programming occur, citizens indulge in a happiness inducing drug called ‘soma’.

Professionals in HRD engage in career development and training activities, both of which can be compared to the mechanization process above. Socialization programs are designed to assimilate individuals into the culture of the organization (Reio, DATE). Further, HRD professionals consistently search for the next best way to make training more effective and less expensive (Callahan, Whitener, Mathis, & Carden, 2006); sleep training would certainly fit that requirement!

**Voyeuristic Inaction**

Voyeuristic inaction can be seen in the programming to blandly accept emotional events, such as death, and also in the rampant self-interest manifested in most citizens. For example, children are programmed to accept death and expressions of grief associated with death are unconscionable. When one character sobs uncontrollably at the death of his mother in front of future workers in the hospital, the head nurse struggles, “Should she … try to bring him back to a sense of decency? Remind him … of what fatal mischief he might do to these poor innocents? Undoing
all their wholesome death-conditioning with this disgusting outcry—as though death were something terrible…” (Huxley, 1932, p. 158).

For HRD professionals, organization development issues arise with this postemotional element. The culture change interventions that HRD professionals employ can be seen as postemotional manipulations. As Turnbull (2002) points out, the manipulation of emotion is a fundamental component of organizational change programs.

**Implications for HRD**

While postemotionalism offers an explanation of our current society and shows how the brave new world is manifested in our society, the brave new world also offers glimpses of how such a society is created. In this creation, we see how a cadre of citizens is engaged to train others for their roles in society; we can relate this to the role that HRD professionals take within organizations to train employees.

There are several lessons HRD professionals might take from the realization that we may be operating within a brave new world. First, we should not blindly accept the word of management; we should always question the status quo and the logic behind any training program we are asked to design, deliver, or implement. HRD professionals should also cultivate self-awareness to reveal our own motives for choosing to either act or not to act; coupled with self-awareness is the awareness of the injustices and suffering experienced by others. Perhaps most importantly, HRD professionals should resist efforts that result in deskilling (Kincheleoe, 1999) workers within organizations. To do this, our training and development efforts must cultivate holistic understanding through broadening interventions such as cross-training. We must refuse to create narrowly focused experts who no longer have the skills to be marketable and are, therefore, dependent upon the ‘controllers’ of the organization.

Do we live in a brave new world? Perhaps, perhaps not; we certainly have many manifestations of the brave new world in our society today. But what HRD professionals must bear in mind is that we must take action to break the silence that may unconsciously propel them toward being unwitting collaborators in the creation, or maintenance, of the brave new world.

**References**


