Critical HRD: a concept analysis

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The emerging concept of ‘critical HRD’ is complex, ambiguous and lacks clarity. To address this problem, the technique of concept analysis (Walker & Avant 1988, Rodgers 1989) is employed to help clarify our understanding of CHRD. Concept analysis presents theoretical definitions and defining characteristics of CHRD, which can help provide clearer operational definitions, to assist practitioners and researchers enact and evaluate critical approaches to HRD. Benefits and limitations of the technique are also explored.

Keywords: Critical HRD, concept analysis, methodology

In attempting to further promote learning, performance and integrity, the concept of ‘critical HRD’ (CHRD) has emerged to challenge current notions of HRD. Yet, we are not entirely sure what CHRD (nor HRD) might mean. The concept is evolving, ambiguous and appears to lack clarity or consistency. This creates major problems for HRD research and practice in epistemological, methodological and pragmatic ways (Bierema & Cseh 2003, Elliott & Turnbull 2002, Fenwick 2005). To help address these problems, ‘critical HRD’ is explored employing the technique of concept analysis (Walker & Avant 1988, Rodgers 1989). A concept analysis is usually conducted from a review of relevant literature, focusing on the concept itself and associated concepts, but also attempts to relate the characteristics and attributes to empirical evidence. Concept analysis presents theoretical definitions and defining characteristics of a concept to enhance our understanding of the phenomenon, and perhaps help construct shared meaning. This addresses the epistemological problem by drawing on diverse processes of knowledge creation, rather than relying on traditional, positivist approaches. Concept analysis can also help provide clearer operational definitions, to assist practitioners and researchers enact and evaluate the concept of critical HRD. This addresses the methodological problem by clearly identifying critical issues for researchers’ enquiry and for opening up possibilities for innovative research methods focusing on otherwise neglected areas of practice. New knowledge through new research can address and inform pragmatic problems associated with practitioners’ attempts to reform workplace organizations and development practices (Fenwick 2005:228). The three aims of this paper are: to briefly explain the process of concept analysis; to apply concept analysis to ‘critical human resource development;’ to consider how such a concept analysis might enlighten the practicing, teaching and researching of CHRD.

Research question & methodology: how can we develop a concept analysis of critical HRD?

The use of concepts is important in theory development. Chinn & Kramer (1995) suggest concepts can be located on a continuum from the more directly experienced (empirical) to the more mentally constructed (abstract). The more directly experienced are easier to ‘measure’ than the more abstract. How might CHRD be conceptualized? Is it an abstract concept, or
could we attempt to capture its effects in practice? Kitson (1993:29) argues, ‘concept analysis is essentially an imaginative process, seen as more of an art than a science.’ Yet, there are various approaches to this, and some more scientific. Walker and Avant (1988:36) argue that concept analysis is useful to clarify overused, vague terms and ‘to produce precise operational definition.’ Walker and Avant’s linear method may be associated with a more scientific and positivist approach, and can be criticized for being reductionist and static. In light of the theoretical stance associated with a ‘critical’ approach, with its epistemological and revelatory challenges, is it either possible or useful to seek precise operational definitions? Rather than use direct empirical indicators to ‘measure’ CHRD, perhaps a more holistic and interpretive approach may be more appropriate. Rodgers (1989) has developed a cyclical approach to concept analysis. She argues that concepts are abstractions that may be expressed in a discursive or non-discursive way, and that ‘through socialization and repeated public interaction, a concept becomes associated with a particular set of attributes that constitute the definition of a concept,’ (Rodgers 1989:332). This suggests a more social constructionist and discursive approach, more fitting with a pluralist and ‘becoming’ ontology of CHRD. Rodgers’ approach is used here.

The aim of this analysis is to attempt to clarify critical HRD to assist our understanding of the concept and to raise awareness of what HRD professionals are undertaking when they become involved in CHRD. Justification for this is provided by Short, Bing and Kehrhahn (2003) who urge the multiple stakeholders in HRD to engage in its analysis, synthesis and discussion to ensure HRD’s survival, a call also relevant to the emerging concept of CHRD.

Concept analysis involves identifying attributes, antecedents, related concepts, consequences, model cases, contrary cases and borderline cases, in differing orders, depending on the method. Attributes are those factors without which the concept would not exist. Antecedents include personal and organizational factors that influence how the concept is enacted. For CHRD, related concepts include training and development, employee development, organizational learning, and critical management studies (CMS). This analysis identifies key aspects of each and highlights what constitutes CHRD - and what does not. Consequences are the outcomes of enacting the concept. Finally, model and contrary cases serve to illustrate – whether empirically or theoretically – what CHRD might look like in practice. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide such cases. Interestingly, concept analysis might also include an examination of the discursive practices associated with the concept.

**Theoretical framework: the concept of ‘critical human resource development’**

This theoretical framework draws upon research focusing on three interrelated areas. These include the issue of defining concepts such as HRD and CHRD, the role of discourse analysis in thinking and talking about (defining) these concepts, and the historical background to critical approaches in organization studies, including HRD. Given the difficulty in defining HRD (see, for example Blake 1995, Lee 2001 and McLean 1998, amongst others), it becomes even more problematic to attempt to define critical HRD. Although it has existed in the American vocabulary for more than 30 years, HRD is still an emerging concept with a history of around only 10 to 15 years in the United Kingdom. The concept of HRD involves three individual words, alone all with varying meanings and interpretations, (Elliott 1998). When combined into two or three, this creates further ambiguity and multiple interpretations (eg human development, resource development, human resourcing). When ‘critical’ is added, this
compounds the issue. It is possible to suggest that ‘HRD’ has been created (by academics) to
differentiate strategic and business-oriented learning and development activities from old-
style training and development (T&D) – a contrary case. However, ‘HRD’ itself is becoming
a contested concept (Walton 2002, Ruona 2000, 2002). With the emergence of critical HRD,
this further clouds the issue of what it is we do in the name of HRD/CHRD and how shall we
call this thing (Walton 2003). This draws our attention to the importance of discourse – how
we frame and talk about our activities (Sambrook 2000, 2001). HRD has been conceptualized
HRD as a social and discursive construction, to connect ways of thinking, talking about and
practising HRD (Sambrook 2000, 2001). By conceptualizing HRD in this way, the focus is on
developing methods of researching and understanding how HRD can be talked about and
accomplished through selecting particular discursive resources to construct personal realities
of this occupational activity. Early discourses focused on performance (Swanson 1995) and
learning, with tensions between the two. As the concept of HRD matures, researchers now
detect other discourses, including the public relations (PR) role of HRD in promoting
corporate social responsibility and its more humanistic and emancipatory role (Rigg 2005,
Turnbull & Elliott 2005) in both helping individuals achieve their own aspirations and
transform socio-political structures in which they exist. The ‘critical’ discourse has entered
the HRD arena, suggesting new and different ways of talking about and accomplishing our
professional practices.

The concept of critical HRD has emerged for several reasons. First, research into the
concept of HRD has been characterized by both ontological uncertainty and methodological
hegemony. We cannot agree on what HRD is, or should be (Lee 2001, McLean 1998,
Swanson 1999, Walton 2002). Thus we must accept the partial and situated nature (Elliott
1998) of how we conceive and construct our knowledge of HRD. Also, much ‘credible’
research aims to treat this complex occupational practice as any other ‘natural’ phenomenon
by conducting positivist research to measure, count, explain, propose causal relations and
predict future outcomes. This approach can be useful in answering some of our questions, but
not all. Instead, there are now calls for other ways of ‘seeing’ and researching HRD, drawing
upon more interpretive philosophies and innovative methods (Valentin 2006). The concept of
‘critical HRD’ makes a contribution to developing such new approaches.

So, what is critical HRD? Billing notes, ‘The term ‘critical’ is itself an interesting one. As
language analysts, we should not shy away from examining (critically examining) the terms
that we use to describe our own work and, indeed, our own identity,’ (2000:291). As HRD
professionals, we need to examine both the terms ‘HRD’ and ‘critical’ that we use to describe
our own work and identity. In terms of our identity as HRD workers, there is debate whether
this label is appropriate to capture the diverse and dynamic features of work-related learning
and development. But, would ‘critical HRD’ be any better? Billig (ibid) argues that,
‘Basically, when academics apply ‘critical’ to their own paradigm, discipline or theory, the
label tends to signal two related messages: (a) the new paradigm/discipline/theory includes
social analyses, particularly the analysis of social inequality; (b) the ‘critical'
paradigm/discipline/theory is opposing existing paradigms/disciplines/theories, which among
other failings, fail to address social inequalities. As such, the critical paradigm signals its
‘other’ – the mainstream, apparently uncritical paradigm.’ We can apply his argument to
HRD and its emerging criticality. With the increasing interest in critical HRD, are we
becoming critical to address inequalities, for example, in access to learning and development
opportunities? Do we wish to distinguish ourselves from those ‘others’ who do not, or who
perhaps focus exclusively on a performance orientation? However, adopting a critical
orientation does not necessarily mean replacing existing conceptions of HRD, rather offering
another one, among multiple paradigms or discourses co-existing in a pluralistic field (Fenwick 2005).

We can turn to organization and management studies to find an established history of thinking ‘critically’ (Thompson and McHugh 1995, Alvesson and Deetz 1999, Alvesson and Willmott 1996). Burrell (2001) reviews this work and notes that Critical Theory is associated with challenging ‘rational’ organization practices and replacing them with more democratic and emancipatory practices. It is also concerned with: identifying weaknesses and limitations of orthodoxy, the need for self-reflexivity, the empowerment of a wider range of participants to effect change and explanations of social phenomena that are multi-dimensional, recognising the tensions in and contradictions of managing and organising. Looking closer to home, we find evidence of critical thinking in human resource management (Legge 1995). However, Elliott and Turnbull note (2005:1), ‘despite the influence of the critical turn in management studies on HRD in the UK, HRD has nevertheless neither been subject to the same degree of critical scrutiny as management and organization studies, nor has it gathered together a significant mass of followers that might constitute it as a ‘movement’ in its own right.’ Yet, we can observe the critical perspective now beginning to emerge in human resource development (McGoldrick et al 2002, Elliott & Turnbull 2002, 2005, Trehan et al 2002, 2005). The 2002 AHRD conference hosted its first ‘critical’ session. The session convenors explained the rationale behind their innovative session: ‘We are concerned that the methodological traditions that guide the majority of HRD research do not allow researchers to engage in studies that challenge the predominantly performative and learning-outcome focus of the HRD field… We seek to unpick the assumptions behind the performative orientation that dominates much HRD research … We therefore perceived the need to open up HRD theory to a broader range of methodological and theoretical perspectives,’ (Elliott and Turnbull 2002:971). Similarly, in the UK, a discreet ‘critical HRD’ stream was convened at the 2003 CMS conference (Trehan 2002). Having briefly outlined the context and background, we now turn to the concept analysis.

Methodology & results: A concept analysis of CHRD

Although approaches differ, concept analysis involves identifying the following elements: attributes, antecedents, consequences, and empirical referents. Table 1 summarizes these as they relate to the concept of CHRD.

Attributes and Antecedents
The attributes are those factors without which the concept would not exist. The key defining attributes of critical HRD include: challenging contemporary practices, exposing assumptions, revealing illusions, questioning tradition and facilitating emancipation. Being critical means recognising the messiness, complexities and irrationality - rather than the sanitized reason and rationality - of organizational practices. Burrell (2001:16) identifies six interrelated strands to a critical approach, which are: political, iconoclastic, epistemological, investigative, revelatory and emancipatory (2001:14-17), which provide a further classification of the potential attributes of CHRD.

For the concept to be transferred effectively into practice, a clear understanding of the concept is needed and a recognition of the influencing factors or antecedents. Antecedents include personal and organizational factors such as: individual awareness of the attributes of CHRD; understanding and acceptance of one’s role; recognition of the boundaries of one’s
profession; political awareness; excellent communication skills; respect; trust; organizational values of participation, democracy, learning and personal development.

A key attribute of critical HRD is challenging the search for ‘the’ truth about HRD, given the disagreements about what it ‘is,’ the reluctance to define ‘it’ (Lee 2001) and then accept/reject this term. Antecedents include the attempts to identify how HRD is talked about (some might describe this as the ideology or rhetoric) and how it is accomplished through talk - but is this any more ‘real’? Is it possible, or even desirable, to attempt to reveal a single truth about HRD? Other antecedents require the acceptance (or tolerance) of multiple and often-contradictory constructions and discourses of HRD, which offer partial, ambiguous and dynamic meanings and understandings of those activities and actions currently talked of as HRD.

Table 1: A concept analysis of Critical HRD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Antecedents</th>
<th>Consequences</th>
<th>Empirical referents</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multiple truths</td>
<td>Motivation to change practice</td>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>Use of ‘we’ rather than ‘them &amp; us’</td>
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<td>Epistemological</td>
<td>Political awareness</td>
<td>Equity</td>
<td>Dialogue</td>
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<td>diversity/different</td>
<td>Understanding &amp; acceptance of one’s role</td>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>Negotiate learning</td>
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<td>forms of knowledge</td>
<td>Willingness to allow learners control</td>
<td>Improved relationships</td>
<td>needs and solutions</td>
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<td>construction</td>
<td>Effective communication skills</td>
<td>Improved creativity &amp; productivity</td>
<td>Voice of the learner is heard</td>
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<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>Trust &amp; respect</td>
<td>Enhanced transfer of learning</td>
<td>Tolerance of diverse views</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emancipation</td>
<td>Rejection of positivism as dominant research philosophy</td>
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<td>More qualitative and innovative research studies</td>
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<td>Ability to challenge</td>
<td>Challenge cherished beliefs</td>
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<td>More CHRD in practice</td>
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<td>Investigation</td>
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<td>Iconoclasm</td>
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<td>Complexity</td>
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<td>Personnel factors:</td>
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<td>Organizational</td>
<td>Structure &amp; job design</td>
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<td>factors</td>
<td>Open, blame-free culture</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Appropriate reward system, rewarding learning, risk, change as well as</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Adequate resources eg time, money to provide space for critique</td>
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Related to this, another key attribute is epistemological diversity, with new and different ways of identifying what constitutes knowledge, and new methodologies for constructing how we ‘know’ HRD. Antecedents here include a willingness to ask how does HRD exist (ontology) beyond the performative conception, and how can we learn about it beyond scientific experiments (methodology). Elliott and Turnbull (2002) identify the difficulties associated with developing "newer” perspectives as alternatives to the dominant positivist
philosophies and accompanying quantitative methodological approaches. Also, as researchers and ‘thinking performers,’ we need to develop a critical lens through which to explore and develop interpretative approaches. Antecedents include problematizing the concept of HRD, an acceptance of methodological plurality and the use of qualitative methods, examining the role of ‘the researcher’ and their relationships with ‘subjects,’ and exploring values, morality and ethics in HRD and HRD research, (Hatcher & Lee 2003). CHRD challenges dominant approaches and seeks to contribute to a deeper, different understanding of HRD. As well as adopting a critical reflection on the work and methodologies of others, a further antecedent involves self-reflection and a consideration of the extent to which our work is reflexive. We might also challenge the extent to which ‘critical’ knowledge actually pervades into organizational practices. Trehan (2004:23) notes that ‘while examples of critical pedagogies are accumulating, they seldom exhibit corresponding changes in HRD practice.’ Other antecedents include co-operative research endeavour, and an evaluation of the utility (and ethics) of critical HRD from stakeholders’ perspectives.

Another key attribute of critical HRD is the awareness of power relations and the need to shift power from oppressor to the oppressed to give them voice and freedom, whether in HRD research or practice. In practice, the oppressor could be manager or HRD practitioner, failing to listen to, invite the views of or involve the oppressed trainee or learner in decisions relating to their learning. In teaching and research, the oppressor could be HRD academic enforcing or restricting the options of the oppressed research assistant or student. Focusing on the political dimension, to understand the concept of CHRD, we need to ask questions such as who are the stakeholders involved in HRD, who influences HRD, in what ways and for what gains? In the academic arena, HRD specialists might struggle for their own academic space and freedom. Sambrook (2001, 2002) has argued that HRD has been talked into being to serve the needs of academic career development, by creating valuable resources with which to trade in the organizational political arena such as new job titles and new products such as postgraduate programs and textbooks. In the practitioner arena, Vince (2005:27) argues that we need to ask, ‘what function HRD has within the political systems of organizing, how and why HRD provides mechanism for the control and manipulation of organizational members and what role fear (or other such powerful emotion) plays in defining how HRD is and is not done.’ The associated antecedents include sharing of power, co-operation, shared planning and decision making and non-hierarchical learning and working relationships. Other personnel factors include political awareness, understanding and acceptance of one’s role, motivation to change practice, willingness to allow learners control, effective communication skills, trust and respect. Organizational antecedents include: re-structuring and job re-design to enable power sharing and autonomy, an open, blame-free culture, an appropriate reward system that rewards learning, risk-taking, and change as well as performance, and adequate resources eg time, money to provide space for the (critical, challenging) activities associated with CHRD.

Another, but no less important, attribute of critical HRD is emancipation. An antecedent of CHRD is awareness (and acceptance) of the struggle concerning whether HRD is - or should be – emancipatory. There is an inherent tension between reconciling the needs of individuals and those of employing organizations, so how could HRD emancipate? This relates to the political dimension (Vince 2005). Should HRD interventions serve the purpose of freeing humans – perhaps from capitalist exploitation and employment degradation (O’Donnell et al 2006)? Or should it focus exclusively on organizational performance? What is HRD about, and whose needs do academics and practitioners serve? Some might ask whether HRD might be emancipated from HRM, or even its own performance cage?
But what are we trying to break free from? The attribute of iconoclasm is concerned with breaking down the ‘dominant imagery and icons’ of HRD. Symbols such as *Personal Development Plans* or *Individual Learning Accounts* might suggest a *humanistic* orientation, but is their underlying purpose pure *performance*? Iconoclasm involves attempting to uncover and unpick signifiers and symbols used in organizational life, including the ‘right phrases’ associated with a particular HRD discourse. Here, discourse analysis is useful in examining what discursive resources are being used, by whom and to construct which dominant image. So, despite the rhetoric of a humanistic orientation, HRD could be exposed for its exclusively performative objective and disregard for personal development. Iconoclasm is used to debunk conventional myths (Burrell 2001:15), in this case, of HRD. The associated antecedent involves a willingness of HRD professionals (and learners, and managers) to seek and challenge ‘cherished beliefs.’

Perhaps a less glamorous, although associated, attribute is investigation, through attempts to uncover what others take for granted and deal with issues of human concern that are often neglected because they are suppressed and excluded from the agenda (Burrell 2001:15). Antecedents include asking what do we actually ‘mean’ by HRD rather than taking this for granted, perhaps by questioning those who (powerfully) decide what HRD should mean, and then exploring what this in turn might mean for those exposed to HRD. For example, questioning the label HRD suggests an investigative critical dimension. The 2002 AHRD conference Town Forum enabled such an investigation of the appropriateness of HRD label. Walton (2002) believes that one term – HRD – cannot be used to mean many things to many people, whether it be ‘theories’ or organizational activities. He argues that ‘the label we use to designate our domain is a major factor contributing to the creation of such a barrier,’ (ibid p 1). Yet, Ruona (2002:2) argues for retaining the label whilst we attempt to gain increased clarity of HRD. She argues that ‘a major barrier for HRD professionals is that our work and what we stand for are not yet well understood by others. Some would argue that we do not yet well understand ourselves either. As a profession, we have not done a very good job working to identify who we are, what we stand for, and what we can do for those we serve.’ Concept analysis makes a small contribution in trying to examine these issues.

**Consequences**

Having described the key attributes and antecedents of critical HRD, a further element of concept analysis involves identifying consequences of the concept, whether in teaching, researching and/or practising CHRD. Although little empirical work has been conducted to evaluate the impact of CHRD in work organizations, Brookfield (2001:20) suggests that a critical pragmatism offers a ‘flexible pursuit of beautiful consequences’. In the practice arena, these consequences might include: more democratic work production, improved (working/learning) relationships; more effective and relevant learning; enhanced transfer of learning; improved creativity and productivity; and an acceptance of alternative approaches to knowing. These should also apply in the academic arena, where there would be more democratic relationships between teachers and learners, researchers and participants. As teachers of CHRD, we should be teaching both the *content* of CHRD (eg critical theory, emancipation, politics, etc) and role modelling the *process*. This involves examining our own power relations with students and identifying whether we are demonstrating the antecedents required for a critical approach within our own professional roles. This shift is not unproblematic – neither for teachers nor students. Expectations and understandings need to be carefully negotiated and managed. Teachers need to feel secure in ‘letting go’ of their power and being questioned and challenged in a more vigorous and rigorous manner. Students
need to feel secure that their questioning and challenging of our practice is a developmental opportunity in a relatively safe environment, before attempting to adopt such a critical approach within their work organisations. However, we are reminded of Trehan’s (2004:23) concern that ‘while examples of critical pedagogies are accumulating, they seldom exhibit corresponding changes in HRD practice.’ Does this suggest that it is ‘easier’ to teach CHRD than practise in a performance driven organization? Furthermore, is it ethical to expose students to critical thinking when the consequences of such an approach might be opposed in their own work organizations? Also, we must beware attempts to establish a new orthodoxy nor neglect our own reflexivity (Brookfield 2001:19).

Methodological conclusions and limitations

This paper presents an initial concept analysis of the emerging concept of critical HRD. This is not without difficulty given the complexity and ambiguity associated with the concept, and the use of this method itself makes a new contribution to the study of HRD. It has been beyond the scope of this paper to present model and contrary cases of CHRD, but that is an area for further research. This concept analysis provides other researchers, teachers and practitioners insight into what CHRD might be, through the identification of its attributes, what antecedents and actions it requires, and the possible positive consequences it might realise, thus contributing to new knowledge.

However, there are possible limitations with this endeavour. First, theoretically, given the difficulties in defining HRD, no definition of CHRD is provided. This is justified, in line with Lee’s (2001) work, in that attempting to find one, single definition or truth of CHRD defies a critical perspective. Lee (2001) argues that HRD resists being known as a static ontology, as it is, instead, in a constant state of ‘becoming.’ CHRD may also mean different things to different people in different contexts/practice settings. Thus, the concept analysis is left a little fuzzy around the edges, to acknowledge the contested boundaries and continuing evolution of what we have come to know (or label) as critical HRD. Second, empirically, it has not yet been possible to provide model and contrary cases of CHRD. It would be easy to construct these conceptually, or hypothetically, but little empirical research has been conducted to explore what CHRD might look like in ‘reality’ in work organizations. Yet, Rigg (2005) cautiously notes that critical management learning can develop critical managers. And Fenwick (2005) notes some critically-oriented development work in organisations, suggesting that sites of critical HRD may already exist in practice if not in name, however peripherally. Within the method of concept analysis, it is useful to identify or construct ‘borderline’ (or partial, perhaps peripheral) cases to highlight the ongoing tensions and developments in struggling to achieve a critical approach. Again, further research is needed in this area. Finally, the paper has not addressed the potential negative consequences of practising CHRD. There may be both personal and organizational barriers to such an approach, caused by dogma, fear, misunderstanding, and perceived threat of loss – of power, particularly. These may be experienced by all HRD stakeholders – teachers, researchers, learners, managers, business partners etc. Once we have identified organizations where CHRD is practised, we might then be able to explore empirically the antecedents and supporting factors as well as the barriers, and find examples of coping strategies to help overcome these. However, we must beware and acknowledge the complexity of organizational life to ensure critical HRD cannot be accused of idealism, an elitist disregard for practitioners’ experiences and bodies of knowledge, and the mere offering of trite or unrealistic solutions.
A concept analysis involves a review of relevant literature, focusing on the concept itself and associated concepts, but also attempts to relate the characteristics and attributes to empirical evidence. This analysis has attempted to clarify the concept of ‘critical HRD,’ which is arguably complex, ambiguous, evolving, and lacking consistency. It works towards exploring what we might mean by CHRD (and how this differs from HRD) by presenting theoretical definitions and defining characteristics of the concept to enhance our understanding of the phenomenon, and perhaps help construct shared meaning. It is also hoped that by helping provide clearer (but not static) operational definitions, this concept analysis will assist practitioners and academics enact, research and evaluate critical HRD, and develop the concept.

References


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