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Theorizing cultural HRD: an emancipatory structures approach

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ABSTRACT

The HRD field, in its current situation as it approaches the second quarter of the twenty-first century, is at a crossroads. Although theories of HRD that have been developed in Western Europe and North America have served the field well, they represent the voices and experiences of less than 25% of the world's population. This paper questions the enduring dominance of Western-cultural HRD, and argues for transformation of the discipline to be inclusive and equitable but also reflective of the global mosaic of human knowledge, wisdom, and practice. We critically consider literature arguing for a generalised theorisation of HRD and, grounded in our own different positional perspectives, we propose and discuss a new term Cultural HRD, which is distinct from National HRD (NHRD) and Indigenous HRD, as a way forward for HRD theorising. We illustrate our proposed concept through describing what we term Islamic-cultural HRD and contrasting this with Western-cultural HRD. Prompted by our concerns relating to the under-representation of cultural HRD theorisation, we further argue for a new emancipatory structures approach to theorising, to pivot HRD towards a more equitable and context-sensitive discipline that can both explain and foster human and organisational development across diverse global contexts.

This paper contributes to debate and dialogue concerning the relevance of traditional HRD assumptions, practices, theoretical foundations, and methodological approaches across global contexts. As the field of HRD has become established it has attracted and benefited from research carried out by scholars from many regions of the world (Cseh & Crocco, 2020). However, most HRD scholarship and practice is dominated by Western-oriented and neo-liberal assumptions that are culturally located in Western Europe and North America. Current HRD theories and assumptions represent the voices and experiences of fewer than 25% of the world's population. This issue was highlighted in 2004 by Cho and McLean (2004), who advocated for HRD to be global in its perspective, integrating non-Western theories and practices to enrich the field. Other scholars have also called for a paradigm shift towards an HRD that interrogates the power dynamics at

play in the dissemination of HRD knowledge and practices (Fenwick, 2004; Stewart et al., 2007; Wang & Doty, 2022). More recent calls for indigenous perspectives within HRD further indicate the importance of more inclusive methods to include voices presenting alternative contexts, narratives, and HRD conceptualisation (Ghosh et al., 2023).

The problem we address in this paper is that HRD scholarship and practice are located and enacted in rich, diverse, contextualised settings while HRD theory is dominated by a Western-centric cultural approach to HRD. Our aim is to reimagine HRD theorisation so that it appropriately honours the cultural diversity of its participants and the richness of their contributions in a way that is inclusive and equitable, but also reflects the global mosaic of human knowledge, wisdom, and practice. In taking forward this aim, we first discuss the literature base relating to what we refer to as a Western-cultural basis for generalised HRD theory and practice. We then offer Western-positional reflections on HRD of two members of the author team and a different cultural framing contributed by a third member of the author team. These reflections prompt our proposal of a new term *Cultural HRD*, which we argue is distinct from the more commonly used terms National HRD (NHRD) and Indigenous HRD. We discuss how a Cultural HRD approach might provide a framing for HRD theorisation that is more equitable and context-sensitive and can both explain and enable human and organisational development across diverse global contexts. This provides the groundwork for the second part of the paper where we propose an interactive, intentional, and synchronistic framework for HRD theorisation. We first set out analytical principles for HRD theorisation that draw on the Cultural HRD framing we have developed. We then set out the *emancipatory structures* approach to HRD theorising that we have developed. We use the term *emancipatory* to connote the potential for agency and co-creation of change. We use the term *structures* to connote the organisation of features of HRD but, importantly, the term structures is not used to imply features that are static and permanently enduring. We discuss the applicability of this approach using a case illustration of Islamic-cultural HRD. We further identify important implications for HRD practice, scholarship, and research relating to the role of the HRD field in change agency and human development at individual, group/workplace, organisational, and societal levels.

Our paper is provocative in its problematisation of generalised HRD theories and its critique of the dominance of Western-cultural assumptions in HRD theorisation. It is provocative in its proposal of analytical principles and an emancipatory structures framework for HRD theorisation that are grounded in the Cultural HRD concept that we identify. We regard the argument we develop and advance in this paper as more than an academic exercise. We see this as a necessary step towards transforming HRD into a field that is both globally relevant and responsive to the pluralistic nature of human development.

Generalized approaches to theorizing HRD

Generalised approaches to theorising and investigating HRD aim to capture the core phenomenon of HRD as it appears across all conceivable contexts. Similar labels to name such approaches include universal(istic) theories and generic models. They are characterised by formalised modes of knowledge construction, whereby theory is defined as 'a framework that can be used to explain or predict a phenomenon within a set of boundary

conditions and can be tested by empirical research' (Seo et al., 2019; p. 414). Moreover, at least four elements must be included in a robust generalised theory: 'factors (variables, constructs, and concepts), the relationships between factors, underlying assumptions to justify choosing factors and relationships, and a set of boundary conditions' (Seo et al., 2019, p. 415). By empirically testing the explanations and predictions built from the theory, it can gain increased support, or it can be (partly) falsified with a view to further refinement.

Although a classic sociology paper from the 1960s already commented that it is impossible to devise any general theory (of behaviour in this case; Ferdinand, 1969), generalised HRD theories and models have characterised the HRD literature from the field's inception. Most of this HRD theorising emanated from Western parts of the world, especially the United States (USA) and the United Kingdom (UK). Examples include the definitional work of Hamlin et al. (2011) as well as the development of the Learning Transfer System Inventory (Holton et al., 2000) and the Dimensions of the Learning Organization Questionnaire (Marsick & Watkins, 2003). As Kuchinke (2003, p. 295) asserted, 'most HRD theories and models are generic and universal rather than specific and differentiated'. Almost 20 years later, Kuchinke et al. (2022) pointed again to a need to for Indigenous HRD approaches.

Theorising HRD has also been studied as a research topic in its own right. Lynham (2000) was one of the first authors to examine studies in this area. While she emphasised 'the importance of embracing multiparadigm research perspectives' (p. 159), all viewpoints put forward are Western-centric and HRD research is characterised as highly positivistic. Storberg-Walker (2006) highlights 'the five universal theory-building phases' (p. 252) in Lynham's model (conceptual development, operationalisation, confirmation, application, and continuous refinement and development). Although her focus, too, is on generalised theorisation of HRD, she does point out that the model allows for both realist, critical realist, and social construction approaches to HRD theorising. Likewise, Torraco (2004) points to 'advancements in naturalistic methodologies for theory building' (p. 178), by which he means phenomenology, ethnography, case study research, and grounded theory. Nevertheless, there is no problematisation of the Western-centric nature of such theorising in these foundational contributions to the HRD field.

What is distinctive about generalised HRD theorising is that it aims to explain HRD without much sensitivity to specific contextual situations. Ontologically, generalised HRD theorising addresses externalised and measurement focused topics such as 'effectiveness' and 'strategic fit' (Garavan, 1991). Axiologically, it is performance-focused, valuing the development of human resources insofar as it allows them to become more productive and efficient (Swanson, 1995). Epistemologically, generalised HRD theorising strives to develop knowledge that is 'objectively' true regardless of the particular context in which it is applied. Human resources (i.e. people) are sources of data that can be used to support or falsify the theory being developed, which can then be used to manage and develop the same human resources based on stronger evidence (Swanson & Chermack, 2013). In these approaches, HRD theorists fulfil the role of 'experts' who devise theories and models by which people and organisations can be developed and managed optimally.

Benefits of generalised approaches to theorising and such third-person investigation into HRD include their aim to explain a wide variety of phenomena within our domain. A generalised HRD theory promises a unifying framework to understand different

practices and guide further investigation. Generalised HRD theory can also help the evaluation and comparison of alternate practices across different contexts. As Wang and Doty (2022, p. 432) claimed, 'it is beneficial to apply a coherent theoretical structure across all levels in all contexts and for all geographical domains to create more meaningful and generalizable HRD knowledge'.

However, problems associated with generalised approaches to theorising and investigating HRD have been noted, not least the problems of establishing their practical utility and application in contextual work-based settings as changes in cultural, organisational, and management approaches occur. This means that practice can 'run ahead' of research that relies on generalised theories. As Kuchinke (2003, p. 29) stated, 'organizations appear to continuously adapt, modify, and alter HRD; this modification is all too often not captured in HRD research'. The pervasive dominance of Western-oriented assumptions within generalised HRD theorising has also been critiqued. Fenwick (2004), for example, emphasises the incongruence of Western HRD practices with the cultural and socio-economic diversity across global contexts, suggesting that a one-size-fits-all approach is insufficient. The imposition of Western models fails to recognise the unique developmental needs and values of non-Western societies, which can lead to ineffective HRD strategies that are often misaligned with local realities. This dominance reflects an epistemological bias that privileges Western ways of knowing and doing, and which marginalises indigenous knowledge systems and practices.

Third, Stewart et al. (2007) critique the neo-liberal underpinnings of HRD which prioritise economic performance and competitiveness over more holistic human development goals. This focus on efficiency and market-driven strategies can exacerbate inequalities within organisations and societies, sidelining considerations of social justice and equity. The neo-liberal agenda, with its emphasis on individualism and competition, overlooks the collective and communal aspects of learning and development valued in many cultures.

In summary, whilst generalised theories of HRD are attractive, the universal application of Western models has been recognised as insufficient and incongruent with the varied socio-economic and cultural landscapes that characterise our global society. As critics argue, not only do generalised theories marginalise non-Western perspectives but they also perpetuate a one-dimensional neo-liberal understanding of human and organisational development focused on economic performance, competitiveness, and individualism. This calls into question the epistemological bias that privileges Western ways of knowing and doing, which downplays localised knowledge systems, ethical considerations, and practices that are pivotal to the communities representing more than 75% of the world's population.

Cultural, national and indigenous HRD

In this section, drawing on personal reflections of the author team, we discuss our varying cultural contexts in relation to our understanding of HRD. One of us was born, raised, and still lives in the UK and another in the Netherlands. These are two different societal settings and yet our HRD socialisation has occurred within a Western-cultural context. Another member of the author team is from Malaysia, a setting in which HRD practice and work settings are grounded in Islamic

cultural values that, whilst shared across other societies (for example, the Gulf countries), are manifested in distinctive ways. These are not 'positionality statements' associated with reflexivity concerning our individual perspectives, identities, and axiological stances (Corlett & Mavin, 2018). Rather our reflections are more focused towards the basis for our identification of what we refer to as cultural approaches to HRD. We will argue that Cultural HRD is distinct from NHRD and from Indigenous HRD.

Reflection 1

For me (Valerie Anderson, growing up in the UK in the1960s) education was regarded as the route to prosperity. I flourished in the classroom but the cultural context of my school-based education meant that I almost never encountered anyone whose skin colour differed from mine. For most of my youth I grew up unaware of the limited, white, colonial mindset that framed my school curriculum. When I reached school leaving age my parents saw no reason for me (a girl) to consider any higher education, so I went to work as a trainee in the UK National Health Service (NHS). Here, for the first time, I encountered fellow workers who traced their family backgrounds to different parts of the world, mostly places that had once been part of the British Empire. My early work experience in the NHS was one of the most productive learning times in my life-course. I encountered a more meaningful (social, affective, cultural) learning experience through work-based trial and error, experience, observation, and role-modelling than I did through the pre-defined training curriculum that had been set out for me. I saw how, at workplace levels, people are curious and creative; they learn more from each other than from experts, and they are more than able to work around, or even subvert, explicit structures and hierarchies. These experiences have led me to realise how much traditional and 'systematic' approaches to HRD under-estimate the emancipatory potential of localised, work-based, action-orientated, experiential learning.

It was not all positive. Alongside constructive learning, I picked up poor habits, behaviours, and attitudes. UK policy was focused on cultural assimilation as the basis for narratives of citizenship and identity, and only later in my HRD career did I learn to question or critique this stance. During my early work career I also remained unaware of institutional and power relationships and it was not until, in more mature years, I enrolled for Higher Education study that I began to recognise inequities in workplace and social contexts. Thereafter, in all my years of HRD practice and scholarship I have noticed the effect that unequal power relationships have on people's career chances. Experience has taught me that the cultural approach to HRD in which my professional practice occurs means that those with fewest educational or socio-economic advantages receive least support for formal HRD, and will likely only encounter training for 'onboarding' or to fill short-term skills needs. However, for those who already have more educational, social, or organisational hierarchical advantage, and who might be designated as 'high potential', there will be more investment in HRD. Therefore, my experience as an HRD practitioner and scholar has led me to question the assumption that HRD is fundamentally justified by a business case.

Reflection 2

For me (Rob Poell, growing up in the Netherlands in the 1970s) HRD is mostly about learning, and I have had a fascination with learning for a long time. I come from 'an education family'; several of my uncles and aunts taught elementary school. The idea of being able to help young people develop themselves has always attracted me. Besides, I was eager to learn and could learn well in school myself. I wanted to become an elementary school teacher, but my father did not think that was good enough for a son of his. Only in the last year of high school did I realise that I would like to understand why some people were 'good learners' and others less so. In the mid-1980s, I went to study educational science in Nijmegen, at one of the more critical and progressive universities in my country.

In the third year of my studies, I became interested in what was then called 'corporate training', although before that I had always had an intuitive dislike of the competitive world of business and big money. Two years later, I went on a nine-month internship in the European training department of Digital Equipment Corporation (later acquired by Compaq), and I found out that training practice held little real challenge for me. However, my curiosity about 'learning' was further stimulated. Following all the rules of the art at the time (*Training for Impact* by Robinson & Robinson, 1989!), I had conducted a need assessment to design and implement a new training course for 35 managers. Prior to the first day of the pilot, however, all but one had cancelled their participation, so we could not do the training at all and my effectiveness study fell through. This taught me how powerful learners actually are when it comes to their own learning. I wanted to be able to better understand that, too, and that was a major reason for starting my doctoral research.

Somewhere in the 1990s, 'corporate training' changed to 'HRD'. I had trouble from the beginning with the utilitarian term 'human resources' in this label, but I've always been pragmatic in that discussion: every strange animal needs a name. I have also always been critical of the performance perspective on HRD, without fully professing to the Critical HRD (CHRD) movement. I still feel that HRD is primarily about learning and that as many people as possible should be given as many opportunities to do so as possible. Power and emancipation play an important role in this, as my previous experiences at Digital had shown. The learning-network theory (developed with Ferd van der Krogt from the 1990s onwards) allows for a diagnosis of/by an individual in their organisational context but, more importantly, it also gives them tools to further develop themselves and their context. I must contend, however, that my approach to HRD, critical and power-conscious though it might be, has always been very much imbued with Western-cultural notions of learning as a matter of individual rather than communal experience and reliance on systematic assessment of individual learning as the basis from which to determine success or 'failure'.

Reflection 3

For me (Roziah Mohd Rasdi, growing up in Malaysia in the 1970s), my journey within HRD is deeply intertwined with my Malaysian heritage and Islamic faith, alongside the influence of Western educational standards. This blend of elements has significantly

influenced both my professional path and my approach to HRD, especially within the Malaysian context. My efforts have consistently aimed at integrating Islamic values with the predominantly Western-centric HRD narrative, striving to create a practice that is not only internationally knowledgeable but also resonates deeply with local sensibilities.

Growing up in Malaysia where Islamic teachings play a pivotal role in shaping daily life and societal norms, I learned to view education as more than a path to professional success; it became a lifelong spiritual and ethical journey for me. These formative experiences laid the foundation for my understanding of HRD as a means for comprehensive human development, encompassing professional aptitude and ethical character development. However, advancing through my educational journey, especially in higher education, I often found mainstream HRD discourses heavily disconnected from the cultural and religious subtleties that were integral to my background. Malaysia's colonial legacy, which continues to impact its education system, further complicated my engagement with HRD. The government's 'Divide and Rule' policy resulted in an education system fraught with cultural fragmentation, serving as a constant reminder of the clash between local identities and global influences. This historical backdrop was instrumental in shaping my HRD approach, underlining the need for cultural sensitivity and the integration of Western practices with local realities.

Throughout my career as an academic, researcher, and consultant in HRD, I have embarked on a journey of exploration and reconciliation. I faced the challenge of aligning HRD practices with Islamic principles that prioritise community welfare, ethical conduct, and the fusion of spirituality with professional life. This process involved critically evaluating Western HRD norms, seeking synergies, and adapting these practices to align more closely with local values and necessities. I am deeply grateful for the invitation to contribute my non-Western perspective to this discourse on HRD, emphasising the importance of inclusivity and the conscious effort to minimise bias in our discussions. This opportunity not only allows for a broader dialogue but also reminds me to continuously scrutinise my own viewpoints.

These personal reflections show how different understandings of HRD practice and scholarship cannot be fully accounted for by *native* institutional and societal systems. In writing these reflections, we have noticed that our HRD perspectives are in part societally conditioned but that we have also been differently influenced by interaction and experiences that have challenged our assumptions of what is *normal* and prompted change and development in our HRD understanding and outlooks. Our perspectives cannot be fully accounted for by our indigenous, localised contexts, nor can they be fully accounted for by socialisation through our National contexts. This prompts us to identify the importance of what we refer to as Cultural HRD, which we argue is distinctive from National HRD (NHRD) and emerging ideas about Indigenous HRD.

Cultural HRD

We propose that the concept of Cultural HRD better describes how our HRD 'selves' have developed through infusion of both cross-national socio-cultural heritages and more localised perspectives. We argue that it provides a conceptual and practical 'bridge' between socio-cultural approaches to HRD theorisation and local distinctive contexts. This provides space for inclusive and culturally sensitive HRD enriched with diverse

views and practices. thereby creating a more representative and comprehensive basis for theory and practice. For example, Valerie's and Rob's reflections are both grounded in a Western-cultural approach to HRD in which secular, individualist, and competitive values are dominant. However, their HRD experiences vary according to their different localised social, political, and religious contexts. None-the-less the broad Western-cultural approach of their HRD practice and scholarship remains evident. Roziah's reflections indicate the limitations of the Western-cultural framing for HRD. In Roziah's context, the term Islamic-cultural HRD connotes how HRD practitioners in other (say, Gulf) countries, with different NHRD and indigenous contexts, would none-the-less recognise Islamic religious influences which have provided the basis for her HRD practice (Akdere et al., 2006; Booth, 2016).

Therefore, we propose that the concept of Cultural HRD has potential to integrate global insights with local nuances. It provides a promising basis for HRD theorisation that moves beyond exclusive reliance on the Western-cultural approach. In the following sections, we review scholarship relating to alternative concepts (NHRD and Indigenous HRD) and we argue that the concept of Cultural HRD, whilst related, is distinctive from these other terms.

National HRD

Since the foundational work of Cho and McLean (2004), NHRD has provided a conceptual frame from which national-level, institutional and regional training, education, and employment systems, policies, and interventions have been described and compared (Garavan et al., 2018). Scholarship in NHRD is important for understanding national-level, institutional policies directed at human capital development, national competitiveness, and economic sustainability (Lee & Jacobs, 2021). Drawing on Human Capital Theory (Nafukho et al., 2004), NHRD examines the HRD contribution of institutional and regional systems of training, education, and employment within the wider generalised context of economic, cultural, societal, and global development (Garavan et al., 2018). From different disciplinary perspectives, including HRD (Alagaraja & Githens, 2016), Vocational Education and Training (Fjellström, 2017) and labour market economics (Fitzenberger & Völter, 2007), NHRD systems have been examined to explain differential patterns of social and economic development at national and regional levels. However, the analysis and critique of systems of power relations at workplace and local levels and critical evaluation of the legacy of colonisation in context-sensitive and context-specific local HRD practices, are outside the scope of NHRD. We argue that these are important components of HRD practices and perspectives (see also Kuchinke et al., 2022).

Indigenous HRD

In contrast to NHRD, indigenous research, highlights the effect of global migration, both voluntary and involuntary, over many centuries and generations and the consequences of this for education, culture and, in our field, for HRD at local levels (Buergelt et al., 2022; Kuchinke et al., 2022; McGuire & Nachmias, 2023; Salmon et al., 2023; Stahl et al., 2023). Indigenous approaches critique the way that socio-cultural networks and histories are

unrepresented in Western approaches to theory, foregrounding the effect of colonisation on knowledge, practice, and worldviews in different communities. With particular relevance to HRD theorising, indigenous researchers 'call out' the ways in which colonial legacies in different regions of the world privilege theoretical frameworks, models, mindsets, and ways of conceptualising developed in the West, something that is sustained and reinforced when dominant scholars come from, or were educated in, Western Europe or the USA (Cseh & Crocco, 2020).

In the HRD field, indigenous perspectives on learning in the workplace were introduced within the HRD literature by foundational and inclusive work led by McLean (2006). McLean and others highlighted how religious, ethical, and spiritual traditions are weaved into localised understandings of HRD that are infused with concerns about harmony, communalism, and respect for tradition and ancestry. Indigenous approaches to HRD provide a basis for challenge of the differential value that Western dominated epistemological framings ascribe to localised communities' knowledge, culture, or practices (Datta, 2018). As Roziah has commented in her reflection, with the specific context of Malaysia in mind, HRD practices in Islamic contexts are deeply linked with ethical and spiritual foundations, such that personal development and ethics are intertwined with professional development, with implications for fundamental questions about the purpose and values of organisations and of HRD.

Although some features of the indigenous framing resonate with our personal reflections, we also recognise that our life experiences have been affected by historical processes of socio-cultural mixing over many generations. These make it difficult to theorise how colonialism has affected our different HRD practices in localised settings (Kuchinke et al., 2022). For example, Roziah spent 6 years of her career in the UK and her education in Malaysia was infused with Western-cultural colonial heritage, so is she now a 'valid' indigenous 'voice'? (McCartan et al., 2022). We further reflect that deeply localised diversity in indigenous contexts and traditions may result in confusingly pluralist narratives that inhibit curious, questioning, and sceptical theorisation of the more generalised structural and cross-territorial consequences of colonisation and structural forms of inequality (Gone, 2019). As a result, Indigenous HRD, like NHRD, may not be sufficient to explain and examine the power relationships, assumptions and structural patterns of advantage and disadvantage that we have described in our personal reflections.

Cultural HRD as distinctive from NHRD and Indigenous HRD approaches

Our argument in this paper is that both NHRD and emerging Indigenous HRD approaches are limited in their ability to explain the diverse and complex nature of HRD practices worldwide. NHRD often focuses on institutional and policy levels, which may overlook the localised cultural and social dynamics that influence HRD. On the other hand, Indigenous HRD, while valuable in its emphasis on local traditions and knowledge, can assume that a return to a former way of life and social organisation is prioritised over tackling contemporary socio-economic challenges effectively (Chilisa, 2019; Willow, 2023).

The novel Cultural HRD concept we propose integrates features of both global and local contexts. It bridges the gap between generalised theories and localised practices. It

recognises the importance of cultural, religious, and spiritual traditions while also addressing power dynamics and structural inequalities. The Cultural HRD concept we propose indicates that effective HRD practices are context sensitive but also reflect wider structural socio-economic settings. The Cultural HRD concept acknowledges and integrates the diverse localised religious, spiritual, and cultural heritages that shape HRD practices around the world with recognition of the effect of wider structures and socio-economic forces such that HRD can be understood and explained as an outcome of locally relevant and globally informed practices and assumptions.

We argue that a Cultural HRD framing is distinctive from NHRD and Indigenous HRD with regard to power dynamics. Cultural HRD, as we have defined it, provides space for explicit analysis of power relations, providing scope to examine how historical legacies of colonisation and ongoing socio-political inequalities impact HRD practices and policies. By addressing these power dynamics, Cultural HRD provides a basis from which it is possible to foster more equitable and just development outcomes. In addition, a Cultural HRD framing can emphasise contemporary applicability of traditional localised HRD practices whilst integrating them with innovative solutions that address current challenges with relevance to emergent socio-economic contexts as a basis for agency, change, and transformation. Therefore, the Cultural HRD concept provides the basis for synthesis of global knowledge with local nuances, recognising and valuing the diverse cultural, religious, and spiritual traditions that shape HRD practices worldwide. It also opens HRD theorisation to the rich and diverse non-Western religious, spiritual, and cultural heritages that inform HRD practices and socio-economic structures in various global regions (Ghosh et al., 2023).

Case illustration: Islamic-cultural HRD

In this section, to illustrate the Cultural HRD framing we propose, we describe an Islamic-cultural perspective of HRD. This shows how moral, ethical, and value-based foundations of HRD purpose and practice, which are excluded from Western-cultural approaches to theorisation, are central to HRD understanding and explanation in contexts representing about 25% of the global population who identify as Muslim (Statista, 2024). We also acknowledge that these issues, albeit differently expressed, feature in other non-Western worldviews such as Buddhist, Confucian, Hindu, Ubuntu and Maori (McLean, 2006). However, mindful of the positionality of the author team, we focus here on describing Islamic-cultural HRD.

Islamic-cultural HRD is embedded in ethical and spiritual foundations where the development of individuals is viewed as more than an issue of professional development but represents the development of individuals as moral beings (Akdere et al., 2006). Unlike assumptions in Western-cultural HRD, work is understood as integrated with spirituality. Professional activities are positioned within a broader ethical and societal context, viewing work as an act of worship that should be in harmony with Islamic principles. Such a perspective challenges Western-cultural HRD focus on individualist and organisational competitive performance, highlighting instead ethical considerations reflecting spiritual and ethical interconnectedness (Tantray & Khan, 2021). Islamic-cultural HRD is grounded in an holistic worldview that incorporates natural, social, and moral phenomena as a feature of harmonious social relationships and the integration

of individuals into these social relationships. This contrasts with Western-cultural HRD's focus on individualism and competitiveness. These more holistic features are also present in other Cultural HRD systems and practices including, for example, Confucian and Chinese Buddhist traditions (Zhao et al., 2023), indicating the importance and relevance of the concept of Cultural HRD to take account of different beliefs and values, codes of ethics and approaches to professional growth directed towards fostering work environments that are both spiritually enriching and ethically grounded (Armitage, 2018; Ghozali et al., 2019; Walusimbi, 2023).

A further important characteristic of the Islamic-cultural HRD perspective is an emphasis on community welfare and collective well-being. Islamic-cultural HRD prioritises the greater good of society, advocating for initiatives that benefit the wider community, reflecting an holistic understanding of development that transcends the individual gains that are central in Western-cultural HRD (Pudjihastuti & Astuti, 2019; Walusimbi, 2023). Other Cultural HRD contexts, for example, African-Ubuntu, Hindu and Confucianism also value this communal focus, prioritising the needs and long-term development of the community as a whole (Rosborough & Rorick, 2017). This emphasis on communalism that is part of Islamic-cultural HRD contrasts with Western-cultural HRD theorising which has little to say about concepts such as societal welfare, interconnectedness, harmony, and balance.

This case illustration highlights how Islamic-cultural HRD is distinct from Western-Cultural HRD. First, Islamic-cultural HRD specifically integrates religious principles into HRD frameworks. This integration shapes HRD practices towards contextual sensitivity that is spiritually as well as morally aligned. Islamic-cultural HRD views professional activities as acts of worship and emphasises that work should be conducted in harmony with Islamic ethical standards derived from Islamic teachings applied in professional development practices (Akdere et al., 2006). Islamic HRD, integrated as it is with religious doctrine, provides a structured framework and holistic approach to development that encompasses professional, ethical, and spiritual growth. This comprehensive view of development is rooted in the belief that human development encompasses all aspects of life, including moral and spiritual dimensions (Ahmad, 2009; Rizk & Debeljak, 2008).

Although Islamic-cultural HRD is rooted in traditional practices, it seeks to balance tradition with modernity to provide practicalrelevance. In this way, Islamic-cultural HRD provides a focus for justice and equity in professional and community development that should extend beyond cultural preservation and provide for social transformation (Ali & Al-Owaihan, 2008; Metcalfe, 2007). Therefore, an Islamic-cultural HRD framing can provide a basis for critique of power dynamics and structural inequalities, especially those arising from historical legacies. Workplace inequalities are also incompatible with the values of just and equitable development outcomes that feature in Islamic-cultural HRD framings (Tlaiss, 2015). To summarise the argument of this part of the paper, the holistic integration of work and spirituality that characterises Islamic-cultural HRD has potential to align HRD systems, practices and professional purpose with spiritual and moral values (Husain, 2019).

This brief description of the Islamic-cultural HRD framing, illustrates the importance of taking cultural, social, and environmental contexts of localised communities into HRD theorisation in a way that can be integrative, context-sensitive, and

emancipatory. We do not argue that Islamic-cultural HRD is better than Western-cultural HRD. Both framings can be critiqued. However, we do argue that the assumptions of secularism, individualism, competition and short-term economic outcomes that infuse Western-cultural HRD are challenged by Islamic-cultural HRD.

An emancipatory structures approach for HRD theorizing

The argument of our paper to this point has been to problematise generalised theorisation of HRD and the domination of Western-cultural and neo-liberal assumptions in HRD theorisation. We have further argued that both NHRD and emergent indigenous HRD approaches have limited utility for analysis and critique of power relationships and structural, cross-territorial patterns of inequality. We have used the example of Islamic-cultural HRD to illustrate that generalised theorisation of HRD, infused by Western-cultural assumptions, fails to accommodate the diverse spiritual and cultural identities of individuals within workplaces in different parts of the world.

The provocation to ourselves, which we address in this section is to develop an approach to theorisation that recognises and honours differences between local settings, cultures, and belief structures but that also includes analysis of power relations and conflicts of interest. We have argued that HRD theorisation that is fit for purpose must integrate contextual differences, cultures and belief structures and also explain HRD experiences and perspectives that transfer across cultural and societal boundaries. The argument we have developed indicates that this requires a balance in theorisation between 'top down' macro (socio-cultural/NHRD) level description, explanation and comparison; recognition and interpretation of micro level localised (indigenous) life experiences; and intervention potential and change agency in work organisational 'meso' HRD settings.
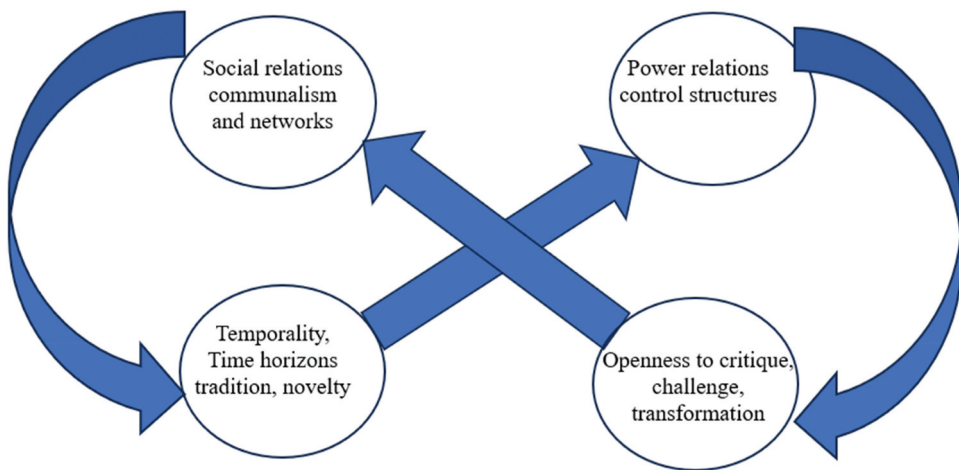

Figure 1. Interrelations among analytical principles for HRD theorization.

Analytical principles for HRD theorization

Figure 1 illustrates the HRD theorising principles that arise from our Cultural HRD framing. These principles are not an elaboration of the Cultural HRD concept we have proposed. They are drawn from, prior analytical approaches in the HRD field, specifically learning-network theory (Poell & van der Krogt, 2017), cross-cultural theory (Osman-Gani, 2014) and critical action research (Trehan & Rigg, 2015). This synthesis of these prior analytical approaches with the Cultural HRD concept we propose, provides a theory building opportunity that can describe and explain HRD systems and processes wherever these are enacted. We argue that each analytical principle is equally important for HRD theorisation as it is only in combination that they provide a basis from which to examine and explain HRD practices and change, or lack of change, in HRD within and between national, organisational, and local cultural settings.

The first analytical principle derived from the concept of Cultural HRD is a focus on social relations, networks, and communalism. This helps us see how different beliefs, cultures, or religious or civil society groups affect people's inter-actions at work and within their community. For example, traditions and pro-cesses of social relations, the basis for networks, and the stance towards communalism are distinctively different between Western-cultural HRD and Islamic-cultural HRD. The second analytical principle arising from the concept of Cultural HRD relates to localised approaches to tradition and timeframes (temporality), and attitudes towards novelty and innovation (risk aversion). This principle is necessary to understand why and how change is inhibited or encour-aged at national, organisational, and local levels. For example, religious traditions and longer-term time horizons are more important for Islamic-cultural HRD and there are different stances and motivations towards innovation and change in Western-cultural HRD settings. The third analytical principle is to examine and critique power relations and control structures wherever they impact on HRD. The concept of Cultural HRD that we propose encompasses such an approach to assess the extent to which top-down decisions are imposed (nationally or organi-sationally) and the ways in which discourse and intangible structures within different cultural and local settings promote or delimit worker participation, challenge, and agency. The fourth analytical principle is to assess how debate, critique, challenge, and transformation are regarded, both tacitly and explicitly, in different Cultural HRD settings. This is necessary to understand how cultural features such as social dynamics, power distribution, and the ways in which questioning of workplace practices is possible at national, organisational, or work-group levels affect HRD practices and systems.

These four principles provide the basis from which to examine structure and agency whilst taking account of factors such as cultural and religious heritage, business sector-specific expectations, and localised or indigenous agency. It is these analytical principles that confer emancipatory potential to the framework we propose. We contend that they provide a robust basis for theorisation of why and how HRD systems in different cultural contexts and in different spaces and places are sustained or changed over time.

HRD theorizing using an emancipatory structures approach

In this section, again informed by our Cultural HRD concept, we propose an emancipatory structures approach as a basis for theorising HRD to analyse and explain change at regional, national, organisational, and individual levels. We use the term emancipatory as we argue that the framework we are advocating has potential to recognise and foster agency and co-creation of change at all of these levels. We use the term structures to connote the organisation of, and relationships between, the features of HRD at different levels in varying cultural settings. The term structures, as used here, does not imply that these features are static or permanently enduring.

Instead, drawing on learning-network theory (Poell & van der Krogt, 2017) our emancipatory structures approach proposes that individuals in any context (for example, in institutional policy settings, in operational workplace settings, or in other informal or communal learning settings) have some agency and choice over how they may take
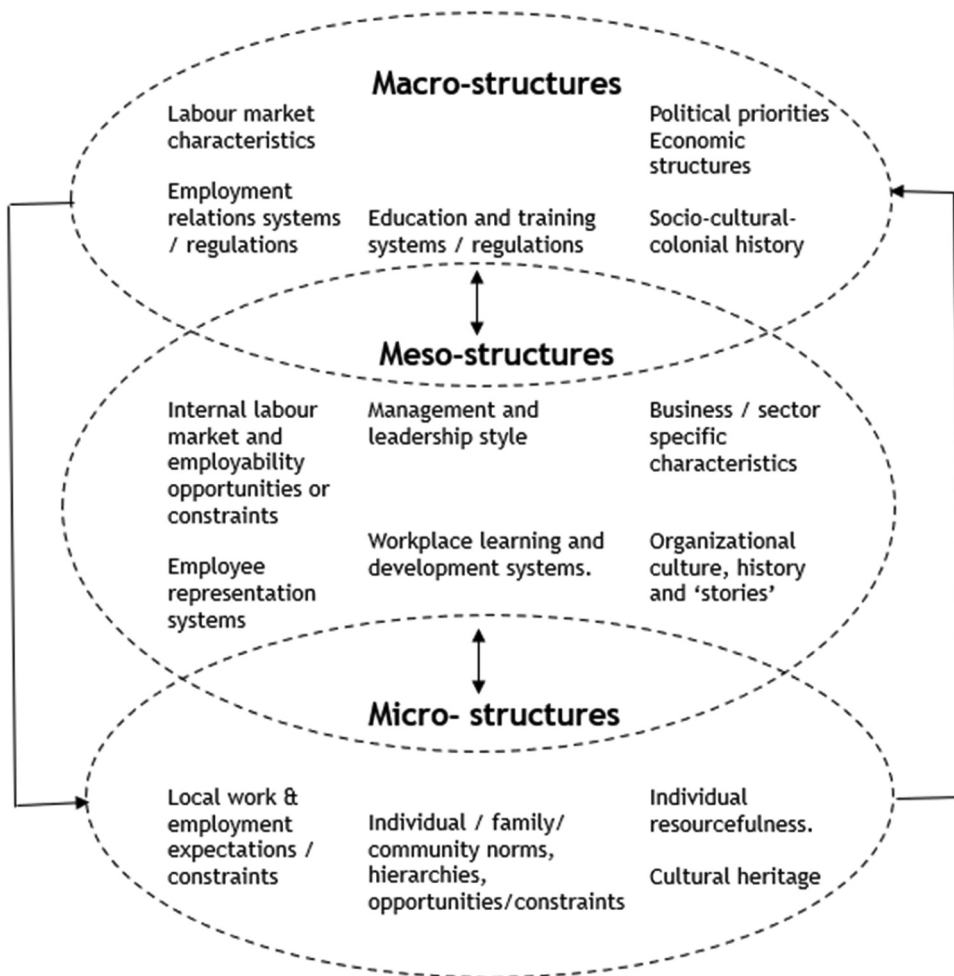

Figure 2. A framework for emancipatory HRD theorizing: navigating macro, meso, and micro structures.

forward their interests in their own HRD contexts, thereby potentially impacting the very structures they operate in. We conceptualise three levels of emancipatory structures (Figure 2), all of which include both tangible and intangible features. Our framework incorporates what we refer to as macro structures, a level that tends to be prominent in NHRD descriptions (Garavan et al., 2018, 2023). It also features meso structures, which feature prominently in strategic HRD theory and practice (Garavan et al., 2016; Torraco & Lundgren, 2020). In addition, it features micro structures, which are more prominent in indigenous and localised action-oriented research. Power relations and structures of control infuse all these levels, both explicitly and implicitly. However, their emancipatory characteristics arise from interaction and agency by actors involved within and between these different and interconnected levels.

The three oval shapes in Figure 2, depicted with dotted lines, signify the dynamic and permeable nature of the emancipatory structures framework. These dotted lines illustrate the fluid boundaries between macro, meso, and micro levels, emphasising interaction and agency across these levels. The analytical principles we have summarised in Figure 1 provide the basis from which this interaction and agency may be examined and explained. Our argument is that HRD theorisation grounded in Cultural HRD must take account of continuous, multi-directional influences and interconnections. Such permeability is essential for understanding the complexity and context-sensitivity of Cultural HRD practices (Garavan et al., 2018; Poell & van der Krogt, 2017). It provides the basis from which adaptive and contextually relevant HRD strategies, policies, and practices may be conceived and enacted.

Macro, Meso, and micro structures

We use the terms *macro, meso*, and *micro* in Figure 2 in a way that is distinctive of their use in other parts of the HRD literature. We define macro structures as those HRD systems, institutions, and hierarchies that have emerged, evolved, or been constructed and conceived for the long term. Macro structures organise and frame social under-standing, interaction, and agency. Although they are generally resistant to change in the short term, change is none-the-less evident when a long-term historical lens is applied. Macro structures vary in different cultural and regional settings. Tangible examples of macro structures include NHRD systems of training and education, prominent social and governance institutions, scholarly associations such as AHRD and professional bodies such as Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) in the USA, the UK Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) or the Malaysian Institute of Human Resource Management (MIHRM). Examples of intangible macro structures include societal cultural assumptions and stereotypes, social and political governance processes, for example, systems of authority and decision making.

We define meso structures as operational systems and hierarchies that operate in work-place and employment settings. Macro structures also vary depending on the cultural context in which they are situated. However, these are more subject to change and adjustment in response to challenges and opportunities that arise in workplace settings. Tangible examples of meso structures are firm-specific organisational systems for learning, training, and devel-opment. Processes, hierarchies, and policies for operational level workplace decision making and communication are further tangible examples of meso structures. Examples of intangible meso structures include workplace culture, interactional processes carried out with other

external stakeholders, such as with customers and suppliers, as well as local systems of employment relations and communication enacted between managers and employee representative bodies.

We define micro structures as those tacit and contextualised social and interactional processes that occur at localised, community, and individual levels. Micro structures can be enabling and facilitative, but they can also be constraining. Micro structures are features of Cultural HRD theorising as they include those physical spaces and locations where work interactions occur; the places of meeting, of conference, of story-sharing, of work-breaks and so on. Intangible micro structures are the localised norms and expectations underpinning interpersonal interaction and communication that may vary from one localised context to another. In the HRD field, for example, these include the way discussions are managed and decisions are presented, as well as local conversational expectations.

In combination, our conceptualisation of different structural levels of HRD and our development of Cultural HRD analytical principles, provide for a framework that is emancipatory as it recognises and includes agency and interaction at any level over time as important for explaining change, or lack of change, in HRD systems. We argue that a focus on any one of these levels, to the exclusion of others, can result in a failure to notice inequities and opportunities in relation to HRD as experienced by different individuals, groups, or communities in specific contexts. Garavan et al. (2018) conclude from their review of the NHRD literature, that we know relatively little about the linkages between macro, meso, and micro level factors. The analytical principles we describe in Figure 1 provide the opportunity for this gap to be addressed. We further argue that this provides scope for examination of the HRD outcomes of agency, intervention, emancipation, and change over time. Our framework also provides the opportunity to examine historical legacies of colonisation and other features of labour migration in theorisation of HRD.

Application and implications: Islamic-cultural HRD

To consider the implications of the emancipatory structures framework and analytical principles for HRD theorisation that we have proposed, in this section we discuss their applicability in relation to the Islamic-cultural HRD case illustration presented earlier in this paper.

Macro level: societal and institutional structures

At the macro level, Islamic-cultural HRD influences and interacts with societal and institutional structures including national HRD systems, educational frameworks, and policy-making processes. Islamic-cultural HRD is rooted in the ethical and moral teachings of Islam, which influence education, training, and other system-wide and institutional policies and practices. For instance, in countries like Malaysia and Saudi Arabia, Islamic principles are integrated into national HRD policies, shaping the development of educational programmes and organisational practices (Ali & Al-Owaihan, 2008). With regard to the first analytical principle described in Figure 1, these macro structures, both implicitly and explicitly, incorporate communal values that are distinctive from the value assumptions of Western-cultural HRD. Ethical standards are also derived from Islamic teachings that further emphasise the relevance of the analytical principle of social

relations and communalism. This alignment with communalism provides the basis for HRD practices that are expected to support the broader goals of community welfare and social justice as set out in Islamic teaching and sacred writings.

Meso Level: organizational systems and practices

At the meso level, which focuses on organisational systems and workplace practices, Islamic HRD demonstrates how localised approaches to temporality, novelty, and innovation are operationalised. Organizations in Islamic contexts often set out to blend traditional Islamic values with recently conceived HRD practices, which are intended to justify a work environment that attempts to balance contemporary global trends with conflict minimalization (e.g. Afiouni, 2014; Baidoun & Anderson, 2023; Tlaiss, 2014). For example, the concept of *Taqwa* (God-consciousness) influences leadership styles and organisational behaviour, with the expectations that leaders will promote integrity, accountability, and ethical decision making (Rizk & Debeljak, 2008). These features illustrate that Islamic-cultural HRD attempts to balance tradition and modernity, adapting time-honoured values to contemporary organisational needs and opportunities. This approach aligns with the second analytical principle of localised temporality and innovation, showcasing how cultural and religious values can both drive organisational change and innovation but may also inhibit the speed at which change and innovation occur.

Micro level: individual and community interactions

At the micro level, Islamic-cultural factors influence both individual and work group interactions that shape daily work practices and personal development. Figure 1 proposes an analytical principle focused on examination and critique of power relations and control structures. At the micro level, as well as at other levels, implicitly accepted power relations and control structures, which are distinct from the experience of individual and community interactivity in Western-cultural HRD, are consequential. Islamic-cultural HRD practices emphasise the development of individuals as moral beings, integrating spiritual growth with professional development. To different extents in different contexts, the concept of *Wasta* informs interactional processes that advance mutual advantage through social and network connections. Although these practices can optimise social bonds and encourage ethical conduct, community service, and personal integrity (Akdere et al., 2006), the third analytical principle we propose provides a basis from which to analyse power dynamics played out through community-wide social expectations about decision making.

Furthermore, the Islamic-cultural HRD framing we propose explains how temporal dynamics and agency within and across macro, meso and micro levels affect how change is enacted over time and the extent to which processes of adaptation, innovation, and change occur, as described in both the second and fourth principles. For instance, the implementation of *Shura* (consultation) in decision-making processes highlights the endeavour towards a dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, promoting participatory governance and inclusive decision making (Tlaiss, 2015). This process, whilst providing participation opportunities, also has temporal consequences such as

cultural values and traditions influencing consultation and hierarchy, and inhibition of debate, critique and challenge, that may lead to slower rates of innovation in some instances.

In summary, the illustration of Islamic-cultural HRD within the emancipatory structures framework demonstrates the practical application of multi-level structures and analytical principles. It does not claim that Islamic-cultural HRD is better than other Cultural HRD framings. However, this illustration of the ways in which social relations, communalism, temporality, power relations, and agency interact explains features of the macro, meso and micro levels of Islamic-cultural HRD practices, thus providing a basis for more inclusive and dynamic HRD theorisation.

Theorizing HRD, change, and agency

In its provocative intent, this paper departs from the traditional structural norms of academic writing in the HRD (and social sciences) literature base. The purpose of the paper is to problematise generalised approaches to HRD theory and their reliance on Western-cultural assumptions. Our provocation to ourselves, in response to this problematisation, is to propose an alternative approach to HRD theorisation. As such the inclusion of a *discussion* section to interpret and explain *findings*, connected to a formal research question, is inappropriate. However, in this section we consider the implications of the emancipatory structures approach and the analytical principles we have proposed as a basis for HRD theorisation. Specifically, we contend that the HRD theorisation approach we propose has important implications for the HRD field and its contribution to advocate, enable, and facilitate change at individual, group, organisation and workplace, and societal levels. In line with the theorisation focus of this paper we address the ontological, axiological, and epistemological implications.

Ontologically, the emancipatory structures approach suggests an important role for HRD scholars and practitioners to critique and address issues of power relations and dominant social, cultural, and economic influences on context-sensitive and context-specific local HRD practices (Kuchinke et al., 2022). Axiologically, the emancipatory structures approach we propose supports intervention and interaction-focused HRD scholarship and practice, with an emphasis on opportunity for agency and change through individual involvement in work settings to resolve HRD issues. Epistemologically, the emancipatory structures approach and the analytical principles we have set out, require HRD scholars and practitioners to value localised voices and to identify and explore previously unencountered (note – not undiscovered) HRD topics, populations, and sites of learning in a way that is culturally authentic and reflexive. The approach we have advocated here is provocative. It represents a challenge to the differential value that Western-cultural HRD dominated assumptions ascribe to workplace or localised communities' knowledge, culture, or practices. We contend that the theorisation process we have proposed is essential for understanding the complexities and multifaceted nature of HRD in different cultural contexts, where historical processes have shaped, and continue to influence, the dynamics of labour, culture, and learning within organisations and societies. We hope that our proposed emancipatory structures framework and analytical principles provide a comprehensive lens through which HRD, wherever it is practiced, can be re-examined and re-envisioned.

This re-examination prompts fundamental implications for research. First, research to foster a deeper understanding of HRD practices in different regional and cultural contexts (Crocco & Tkachenko, 2022) is necessary. Research is necessary to rectify the deficiency in the HRD knowledge base, of colonial and other cultural legacy remnants like biased education, gender inequality, and cultural insensitivity (Mpofu & Mdlovu-Gatsheni, 2022). Second, research focusing on diversity and inclusion is necessary to better describe and understand the diverse knowledge and skills of all those who work on behalf of organisations (migrants and indigenous) as a basis for HRD practice developments that are inclusive and culturally attuned. Third, the emancipatory structures approach to theorising that we advocate should prompt research and practice innovations that recognise the historical basis and influence of colonialism as a feature of workplace HRD experiences and outcomes and which is prepared to confront and mitigate inequalities, wherever they may be found.

Conclusion

We acknowledge the limitations of the cultural diversity of our author team of three, although our personal reflections nonetheless echo a common theme, a recognition of difference as well as similarity in HRD perspectives that arise from different geographical, cultural, and spiritual boundaries. Our problematisation of the dominance of Western-cultural HRD as the basis for theorisation is not merely an academic exercise. We regard it as a necessary step towards transforming HRD into a field that is both globally relevant and responsive to the pluralistic nature of human development.

In the development of the new concept of Cultural HRD, and in our proposed analytical principles and emancipatory structures approach to HRD theorisation, we have aspired to shift the HRD field in a manner that reflects the multiplicity of human experiences and cultural narratives. We argue that generalised approaches to HRD theorisation that reflect the current dominance of Western-cultural HRD assumptions not only undermine the potential for genuine development across different cultures but also perpetuate structural inequalities and patterns of marginalisation. Addressing this is imperative for the development of HRD into a field that values diversity, embraces pluralism, and is committed to fostering equitable and just development outcomes across the globe. The Cultural HRD concept we propose provides our field with the opportunity to recognise and value non-Western HRD knowledge systems and practices. The emancipatory structures framework and analytical principles we have developed further provide the HRD field with the opportunity to challenge power structures at macro, meso, and micro levels, thus providing opportunity to prioritise equity and social justice in HRD scholarship and practice. We have developed this framework as a basis for transformational development of our field through an approach to theorising that is pluralist, orientated towards individual and social change, and includes globally diverse perspectives, lived experiences, expertise, and knowledge systems. We regard this as a first step from which our field can better fulfill its potential as a catalyst for human and organisational development.

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