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Exploring the Social Foundations of Human Resource Development: A Theoretical Framework for Research and Practice

Russell Korte[1]

Abstract

An important area of continuing development in human resource development (HRD) concerns the foundational theories that underpin research and practice in the field. This article explores some of the philosophical and theoretical foundations of the social realm related to HRD. As such, it provides a perspective for framing HRD research and practice from the view that social forces arbitrate the thoughts and behaviors of people. This perspective begins with philosophical questions on the nature of social science and continues with an overview of key concepts and theories drawn from sociology and social psychology. For some, social science is qualitatively different from natural science and therefore requires different methods for study, as well as different theoretical frames. The intent here is to offer a framework for approaching HRD from the perspective of the social realm.

Within human resource development (HRD), scholars continue to grapple with the definition and theoretical foundations of the field. At the extremes, one side argues for a pluralistic and multidisciplinary view that strains the limits of definition (Lee, 2001; McLean & McLean, 2001). The proponents of breadth draw from a broad range of

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social science disciplines, such as anthropology, sociology, economics, psychology, and political science (Callahan & de Davila, 2004; Garavan, O'Donnell, McGuire, & Watson, 2007; Kuchinke, 2007; Lee, 2001, 2007; McLean & McLean, 2001; Yorks, 2005). Another view argues for a more focused perspective based on systems theory, economics, or psychology as the core theoretical foundations of the field (Swanson, 2001, 2009; Wang & Swanson, 2008). Taken together, the arguments for and against various definitions and foundational theories have created multiple views of HRD.

A few years back, Torraco (2004) identified the theoretical foundations of HRD as an area still in need of further development. Of particular concern was the need for continued work on HRD theory that contributed to filling in some of the conceptual deficiencies in existing theoretical frames. In similar arguments, others have proposed that HRD was in need of more complex and holistic theories aimed at advancing our understanding of phenomena in the field—from the deeply held beliefs of individuals to the cultures and politics at the global level (Garavan, McGuire, & O'Donnell, 2004; Lee, 2007; McLean & McLean, 2001).

Although several of the authors mentioned above refer to disciplines and theories from the vast domain of social science as useful for increasing our understanding of HRD, there appear to have been few efforts to integrate these various theories and concepts in a systematic way for HRD scholars and practitioners. McGuire, Garavan, O'Donnell, and Watson (2007) briefly described the community/social realm as one of four metaperspectives in HRD, primarily emphasizing the economic benefits of social exchange and interdependence.

This article proposes a framework of key concepts pertaining to the social world that are relevant to HRD (see Figure 1). The proposal is based on the view that individuals live and work entangled in groups, teams, networks, organizations, and societies. Although much of the theoretical work in HRD is focused on the individual as an agent in organizational settings (Garavan et al., 2004), this argument concentrates on the complex, social, and relational world as the arbiter of individual agency.

The theoretical frame proposed in this article begins with a review of philosophical questions regarding the general nature of social science. Next, the discussion moves in for a closer look at some of the key concepts and theories—particularly drawn from sociology and social psychology that have significant meaning for HRD. Finally, the potential contribution of this framework is discussed in relation to the work of HRD researchers and practitioners.

An Important Philosophical Question in Social Science

A major philosophical issue relevant to HRD is the relationship between social science and natural science. The debate over this relationship has deep philosophical and historical roots that focus on our beliefs and understanding of the world (Solomon & Higgins, 1996). The definitions of natural and social science used in this article are as follows: *Natural science* focuses on generating knowledge of the natural or physical world. It deals with the relationships and transformations of matter and energy.
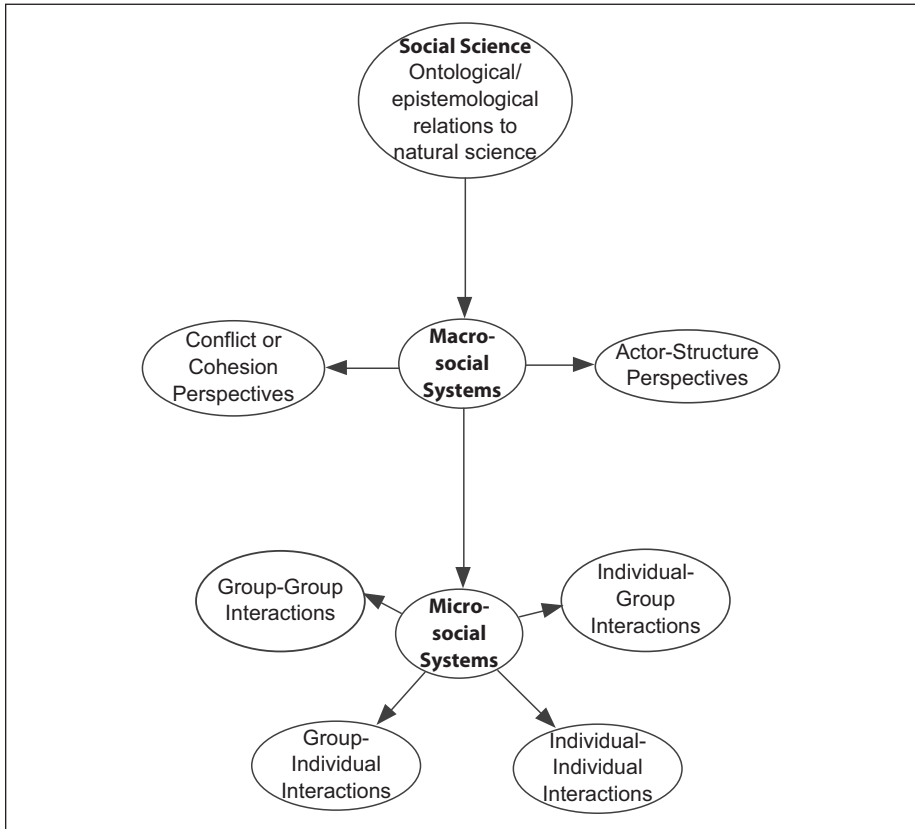
Figure 1. Conceptual map of the social realm relevant to HRD research and practice

Examples of disciplines in natural science are biology, physics, geology, and chemistry (Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, n.d.-a; Oxford English Dictionary's online dictionary, n.d.-a). *Social science* focuses on the study of human societies and the interpersonal relationships of people in society. Examples of disciplines in social science are anthropology, sociology, psychology, economics, and political science (Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, n.d.-b; Oxford English Dictionary's online dictionary, n.d.-b).

The primary issue rests on one's beliefs about the purpose of the scientific enterprise—summarized neatly by Winch (1990) as the quest for causal explanation (primarily the natural scientific perspective) or interpretive understanding (primarily a social science perspective). A subsequent issue is the commensurability of natural and social sciences. Some see the difference between the natural and social sciences as a "difference in degree." These scholars perceive a close relationship between the social and natural

sciences (i.e., they are commensurable). Any problems with the relatedness between the two stem from the belief that social science is simply more complex and less developed than natural science, and we will eventually understand social science to the degree we understand natural science (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

Others see the difference as a "difference in kind." Bishop (2007) claimed that there was strong evidence that social science was not closely related to natural science (i.e., they are incommensurable). Therefore, employing natural science methods in social science was problematic. The philosophical basis for this debate about commensurability reflects upon the goals of natural science, the subjects of analysis, and the power of the scientific method.

Researchers investigating natural science phenomena work toward the goals of causation and explanation—looking for universal laws and generalizations (Bishop, 2007; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Rosenberg, 2008). Winch (1990) stated that there is a significant difference between causal explanation and interpretive understanding—and even though the purpose of explanation was to further our understanding it did not follow that explanation was the only path toward understanding. Understanding could also be the result of interpretation. Further distinguishing social science from natural science, Winch (1990) elaborated on the differences between causes and rules, whereby he stated that social interaction was better perceived as interactions governed by a fragile and contingent system of rules rather than the universal laws pursued by researchers in natural science.

There is no common agreement that the goals of social science are to find universal laws or causes. Furthermore, there is no universal agreement that these ought to be goals or that these goals are even attainable in social science. Commonly stated goals of social science are to achieve greater intelligibility and understanding of meaning. In addition, although social science and natural science claim explanation and understanding as ultimate goals, the subjects and phenomena of analysis differ significantly enough to cause researchers and theorists to debate the commensurability of the two sciences (Bishop, 2007; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Rosenberg, 2008; Winch, 1990).

The subjects of analysis in social science differ substantially from the objects of analysis in natural science. Elster (1983) categorized these differences as foundational qualities affecting the nature of phenomena at different levels (physical objects, life forms, and human intentionality). For example: the interactions of natural, inanimate objects can be explained as causal formulations. At the next level, the interactions of organic life forms can be explained as functional formulations. At the human level, interactions must contend with intentional characteristics that cannot be adequately explained by causal or functional interactions alone. Polkinghorne (1988) also described these levels as significantly different from one another. He described three realms as the physical, organic, and mental realms, in which explanations did not transfer adequately from one realm to another.

The primary point of discussion in these debates is grounded in ontological and epistemological assumptions about the nature of the objects or subjects of analysis and our ability to understand them. The nature of objects studied in natural science is more

amenable to the pursuit of universal laws and generalizations across multiple contexts. In fact, the quest for grand theories and universal laws, by definition, must remove the context as a meaningful variable. This seems to work reasonably well for natural objects, and some forms of life; however, for human participants the context becomes a critical piece of the puzzle that confounds efforts to generalize, explain, and predict the thoughts and behavior of people.

Along with the confounding effects of context, there is the additional confounding characteristic that people often reflect upon and interpret situations in unpredictable ways (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Miller & Tsang, 2010), including the situation in which human subjects participating in a study can interact with the researcher and act in ways that are difficult to generalize beyond the particular research situation. The recurring surprise, unpredictability, and contradictory results found in matters related to human thought and behavior indicates at least some support for the notion that the human mind and social world are qualitatively different from the nonhuman objects of analysis in natural science.

Flyvbjerg (2001) claimed that social science has generally failed in its attempt to undergo scientific analysis in the manner of natural science. The objects of analysis in social science are not so much objects as they are contingent interpretations by the actors immersed in the situation. He also stated that social theories generally failed because of the requirement that theory is decontextualized. His recommendation is to return to Aristotle's concept of social knowledge as "phronesis," which involves "judgments and decisions made in the manner of a virtuoso social and political actor" (p. 2). In his view, social science is about the judgments and decisions made, not the supposedly stable traits or motivations of actors in causal models. His is a hermeneutic argument, not a rationalist argument, for the power of social science.

In a related argument, Weick (1999) supported Thorngate's (1975) conclusion stating that it is unlikely that human affairs are organized much beyond the local level. This view would affect the nature of research, theory, and practice in the field by moving away from grand theorizing to local level or contingent theorizing as well as a move away from a single disciplinary perspective to more complex multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives.

The depth of these arguments is complex and challenges commonly held paradigms, beliefs, and values of scholars and practitioners alike. A comprehensive review of these arguments is well beyond the scope of this article, however, the major point of this debate is that there are serious questions about the commensurability of social science and natural science (Bishop, 2007; Flyvbjerg, 2001, Rosenberg, 2008, Winch, 1990). This questionable relationship is important for HRD scholars and practitioners. The objects of interest in natural science and the subjects of interest in social science differ not only in complexity, but also in quality. It warrants serious consideration from researchers to address the potential pitfalls of designing, conducting, and evaluating research in the social realm based on the standards and methods of natural science. This is not to say natural science methods are never appropriate in social science. It does mean that assuming the taken-for-granted scientific method is the "gold standard" of all science research is overreaching.

With this debate unresolved, and perhaps irresolvable, a proper course of action for researchers and practitioners in the social sciences might be based on a greater awareness and appreciation of the limits of the scientific method in social science and the attention to complementary methodologies in the quest for greater understanding of social phenomena. From this position, the following sections review the primary concepts and theories proposed to explain the social world as conceptualized by social theorists, sociologists, and social psychologists. These concepts and theories of the social world contribute to a socially based theoretical framework for the field of HRD.

Conceptualizing the Dynamics of the Macrosocial World

As the focus on the social world shifts from the philosophical debate on the nature of social science toward conceptualizing human social systems, another set of questions and arguments come to the foreground. Glaeser (2005) aptly described the emergence of the social nature of people by stating that organic human bodies become recognized as people because of their interactions with others (cf. to Polkinghorne's, 1988 life forms). From a similar view, Turner and Oakes (1997) described the social constitution of people by claiming that even though the human mind is the property of the individual, it is formed and conditioned by society. Thus, as the focus of HRD is on the thoughts and behaviors of people in organizations (social formations), the foundations of HRD are, by definition, grounded in the social realm.

Social formations emerge from chains of collective interactions among people (action–reaction chains) aligned with different categories of people, relationships, cultural forms, and the material environment. These social formations link the past to the present to the future and create expectations among people of stability and durability in a self-fulfilling manner (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Glaeser, 2005). Over time, these self-organized patterns become objectified and reified as institutions—becoming both our creations and creators (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Glaeser, 2005). The mutual constitution of social structure and human activity is a key perspective of structuration theory (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Giddens, 1987) with important implications for HRD research and practice.

Institutional and structuration theories explain the relationships between social formations (structures) and human agency. People can follow or deviate from the patterns of thought and behavior prescribed by the social structures within which they live and work. In doing so, they enact these "scripts" by either reinforcing the status quo or choosing to alter the scripts creating tension or conflict in the structure (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Callahan & de Davila, 2004; Giddens, 1987; Glaeser, 2005; Harre, 2002; Stryker, 1997). There exists an ongoing tension between cohesion and conflict in social structures that affects conditions of stability and change.

The tensions between cohesion and conflict create dynamic social ecologies portrayed as complex, self-organizing systems comprised of numerous interdependent

relationships among individuals (organisms), materials (environments, artifacts, and tools), as well as the meanings (semiosis) ascribed to the elements of the system (Lemke, 1997). Organizations and communities are forms of social ecologies having complex interdependencies among the different elements of the system, as well as across systems. Thus, it is important to consider that many of the environments within which HRD operates are, by nature, social formations in various states of fluctuating conflict or cohesion. One's assumptions about social structures, human agency, conflict, and cohesion are important influences on one's agenda for research and practice.

Joseph (2003) categorized social theories into three views based on whether the consequences of human interaction led to cohesion, conflict, or consensus. For example, a social theory of norms and values promoted an underlying consensual view of societies in which the roles of norms and values were to achieve and maintain stability and equilibrium. Closely related to this perspective is the functionalist view of social organization that sees stability as the goal of organization—sometimes even tolerating inequality as the price of stability.

The concept of social cohesion, based on goals of stability, is defined in different ways potentially suffering from overuse and overextension. At the social level of analysis, cohesion generally refers to strong, primary networks among people and a high level of communal integration. Social cohesion is valued for its perceived positive relationship to performance and well-being (Joseph, 2003). Even macrosocial-economic institutions, such as the World Bank have stated that higher levels of social cohesion allow institutions greater maneuverability in the quest for better economic performance (Chan, To, & Chan, 2006).

At the microsocial level, cohesion generally refers to perceptions of individual status in the group, including perceptions of inclusion, belongingness, or membership (Chan et al., 2006). Cohesion is a way groups maintain and reproduce their unity either through consensus or compliance to dominant norms, practices, and power structures. Proponents of this view see conflict as a failure of the system (Joseph, 2003).

Conflict theorists do not see conflict as a failure of some idealistic scheme. They perceive the world as fractious, contradictory, and divisive based on competing interests among people and groups. Current views of the macrosocial order have broadened the focus of conflict from earlier notions of class conflict to more modern notions of increased risk and uncertainty in the world (Joseph, 2003). At a more microsocial level, some promote a state of conflicting ideas as a generator of creativity and innovation, as well as intellectual development (Doise, 1997). Thus the most realistic formation of the social realm might be a dialectical structure fostering a tension between conflict and cohesion.

Conflict, consensus, and cohesiveness are fundamental views of the social world—each having different sets of values influencing the research process having both an individualistic component in the notion of self-identification and agency with a group and a social component focused on the structures of relationships constraining or enabling individuals in the group (Moody & White, 2003). This dialectic view accommodates the

dynamics of individual interaction with others and the social system's structural influence on its members. Both mutually constitute the nature of individuals, groups, and the larger social context (Beyer, Hannah, & Milton, 2000). Several theories explaining social phenomena derive from the basic perceptions of the social realm having conflictual, cohesive, or consensual goals. Theories of social capital, social cognition, social exchange, and social identity are four examples of widely used theories explaining the social bases of resources, learning, interaction, and affiliation.

Essentially, sociologists view the social realm from two perspectives: (a) a macrosocial perspective focusing on the large-scale structures and institutions that influence individual thought and behavior or (b) a microsocial perspective focusing on creative and unpredictable individual thought and behavior within larger social contexts (Wallace & Wolf, 1995). The merging of both views leads to the structurationist view of reciprocity between individual agency and structural influence. In addition, adopting a dialectic view of the interactions between conflict and cohesion lead to a more comprehensive view of social systems.

Moving from the macro to the micro level brings one in contact with the work of social psychologists. This work provides a valuable source of understanding at the interface of macrosocial phenomena and micropsychological phenomena.

Social Psychology: Bridging the Individual and Social Worlds

Social psychology tends toward either a macro- or microperspective of the social realm. A more macrosocial view links closely to sociology and investigates the effects of social groups on the individual. Another view is predominantly psychological focusing on the individual and his or her relationship with the social structures of the world (House, 1977).

Representing a more macro (sociological) perspective of social psychology, Stryker (1997) emphasized the primacy of society as the organizing experience for the individual. While not losing sight of the individual, Stryker recognizes the complexity and pluralistic nature of contemporary society and draws from the earlier work of George Herbert Mead (and symbolic interactionism) who believed that the development of the individual's mind and self was an ongoing process dependent on others for constructing solutions to problems. Individuals today hold multiple roles in multiple facets of a society (James, 1890/1952) that is structured, not so much as a system than as congeries—an agglomeration of individuals, groups, institutions, networks, and relationships that are variously cooperative, conflicting, overlapping, or isolated (Stryker, 1997). It is hard to overstate the influence of the social realm on individual thought and behavior.

Social psychological concepts can be organized into four categories depending on the relative emphasis placed either on the individual or the group (see Table 1). The group–group domain emphasizes the perceptions and interactions among groups as well as the influence groups have on each other. The group–individual domain

Table 1. Four Domains of Microsocial Concepts in Organizations

	Group	Individual
Group	Group–group • Conflict • Interdependence • Social identity (group)	Group–individual • Social norms • Socialization • Social capital
Individual	Individual–group • Self-categorization • Social identity (individual) • Impression management	Individual–individual • Interpersonal • Intersubjectivity • Attribution

emphasizes the influence of the group on individual thoughts and behaviors. The individual–group domain emphasizes the influence of the individual on the group. And the individual–individual domain emphasizes the influence individuals have on each other's thoughts and behaviors. The emphasis on the individual considers social thoughts and behaviors primarily for the purpose of self-regulation. The emphasis on the group concerns collective thoughts and behaviors primarily for the purpose of cultural or organizational regulation (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). The following sections briefly describe a sampling of theories and concepts for each domain. It is important to note that the boundaries between categories are very fuzzy and some concepts overlap multiple domains.

The Group–Group Domain

The group–group domain (Table 1) is a more sociological perspective on social psychology and includes theoretical explanations of some of the characteristic interactions of formal and informal groups. Formal groups are more recognizable in the structure of teams, departments, functions, or professional groups and are relatively more stable and predictable (Weick, 2001). Informal groups often appear as cliques, coalitions, and affinity groups with shifting configurations of individuals based on fluctuating conditions, needs, stimuli, and preferences. Generally, structures, boundaries, and roles in informal groups seem to be ill formed and ambiguous compared with formal groups (Weick, 2001).

At the group level of analysis there are social structures that function as boundaries more or less defining group identities and norms as well as enabling or constraining the interactions between groups (Haslam, 2004; Stryker, 1997). The social structures that define a group also influence what individuals in the group perceive, learn, and do. Aligned with the view of social science as less predictable than natural science, Stryker (1997) pointed out that these structures are probable influences—not deterministic influences. Within the group level of analysis there are a few important

theories applicable to intergroup phenomena such as conflict, interdependence, and social identity.

Conflict. Conflict is one of the important consequences of group dynamics in organizational settings. The very nature of charging different groups to work together in the pursuit of larger organizational goals is problematic. The dynamics of working through differences in identities, power, and resources increases the tensions among groups. While group members generally accentuate similarities and cohesiveness within the group, they tend to accentuate differences and distinctiveness from other groups (Hogg, 2006). Recognizing the strong social basis of groups expands the concept of an organization to include the characteristics of a loosely coupled collection of groups having fluctuating levels of conflict, cooperation, and competition.

Interdependency. In addition to conflict, the open-systems nature of organizations (and groups) creates an environment of dependence in which any one group is not in full control of the means and resources to achieve its desired outcomes and is dependent on others to succeed (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). The nature of these interdependencies depends on the relative costs and benefits of interacting, as well as the relative status of the groups involved (Rusbult & Arriaga, 2000). Focusing on the necessary interdependencies among groups in organizations is one means to overcome the tendencies for groups to segregate themselves from other groups. Interdependency is also a multifaceted concept based on perceptual differences among groups of rewards, outcomes, power, and control related to working together (Rusbult & Arriaga, 2000). Interdependencies that might foster cohesion might also increase conflict because of differences in perceived power, costs and benefits.

Social identity (group level). Social identity theory has two foci—the group and the individual. From the group perspective, social identity theory provides an explanation of intergroup conflict and cohesion. The desire for certainty and positive self-evaluation among group members are primary motivations for the tendency of a group to exaggerate the similarities among members of the in-group and their differences from other out-groups (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Hogg & Grieve, 1999). Members of low-status groups may see opportunities to advance into high-status groups, or if advancement is not possible or desirable, they may focus internally and amplify differences that distinguish their group from the dominant group in an effort to enhance self-esteem. Social identity theory describes the permeability of a group's boundary. Some groups readily allow new members to enter, whereas other groups resist outsiders.

Discrimination may be reciprocal, with high-status groups also amplifying their differences from low-status groups. In contests of power, low-status groups tend to push for change whereas high-status groups tend to maintain the status quo (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987). Stereotyping, prejudice, and conflict are important consequences of social identity that influence levels of cooperation or conflict between groups (Tajfel, 1982, Turner et al., 1987).

The categorization and specialization of organizational work into groups—more commonly called teams, departments, and functions—fosters social dynamics of conflict and cohesion. The often criticized "silo mentality" found in organizations is not

just a consequence of specialization—it is also socially based on the identities, perceptions, influence, interactions, and conflicts among groups. Furthermore, the institutionalization of groups in organizations has a strong influence on the thoughts and behaviors of people in organizations.

The Group–Individual Domain

The effects of the group on individuals have been found to be significant (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Sherif, 1936; Tajfel, 1982). Social norms, socialization, and social capital are important concepts describing and explaining group level concepts influencing the individual.

Social norms. Social norms comprise the normative structure of a group influencing behavior, values, and roles of group members (Scott, 2003). Many scholars define social norms as the shared, informal rules governing and predicting individual behavior in social groups (Ellickson, 1998; Elster, 1989; McAdams, 1997; Sherif, 1936). Elster (1989) further distinguished social norms from moral norms, individual or private norms, legal norms, habits and compulsive neuroses, tradition, and various cognitive phenomena. He defined social norms as "the propensity to feel shame and to anticipate sanctions by others at the thought of behaving in a certain, forbidden way" (p. 105). If others share this propensity, it becomes a social norm.

At the individual level, social norms may become internalized whereby the individual takes on the psychological enforcement of group norms through guilt rather than externally imposed punishment (Cooter, 2000; Ellickson, 1998; McAdams, 1997). This internalization process shapes identities, worldviews, self-images, work preferences, and goals, as well as precludes other preferences (Etzioni, 2000). Thus, internalized social norms become more effective at ensuring conformity than external social norms alone. According to Etzioni (2000), individuals, through internalization, acquire the preferences of the society (group) in an effort to conform to their society (group).

Elster (1989) described social norms primarily as emotionally charged constraints on behavior, but Katz and Kahn (1978) described the concept of social norms as a form of cognitive map for the group helping individuals function as members of the group. They also closely linked the concept of social values to social norms, with social values providing the justification for the normative activities of members inside and outside the group. This justification through values could be based on moral or pragmatic grounds.

Studies have repeatedly shown that group (social) norms often supersede individual norms because of the human need for affiliation and a supportive values structure. These needs drive individuals toward conformity and compliance with the group (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Sherif, 1936). Social norms can form around the interests of a group or the interests of a few dominant members of the group (Axelrod, 1986) and these norms tend to persist in individuals beyond the group setting. In many cases, membership in a group also assumes acceptance and perpetuation of the normative structure of the group.

Socialization. Socializing new members is a means for the group to transmit normative expectations to newcomers and for newcomers to transition from outsiders to insiders (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Recently, the view of organizational socialization has been expanding beyond the narrow perspective of newcomer learning. Studies have found that how newcomers learn is more important than what they learn (Ashforth, Sluss, & Saks, 2007). The experiences affording learning (formal and informal) for newcomers indicate how much the organization values employees as well as tempering the development of job satisfaction, identification with the organization, and intentions to quit (Ashforth et al., 2007). These outcomes of socialization develop quickly (within weeks or months) and tend to endure making it a critical experience for newcomers and groups (Cooper-Thomas & Anderson, 2006). Essentially, the newcomers and their groups settle into relationships with each other and these relationships include various perceptions of identity, roles, responsibilities, as well as trust, respect, and cooperation.

Recent meta-analyses of previous decades of research on organizational socialization identified the reciprocal nature of group–individual interactions. The tactics used by the organization and the information-seeking behavior of the newcomer were the primary interactive factors that governed the outcomes of the socialization process (Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, & Tucker, 2007; Saks, Uggerslev, & Fassina, 2007). Of the two, the social tactics (i.e., group behavior) had a stronger effect on socialization than the individual's efforts (Saks et al., 2007).

Newcomer learning is still perceived to be the primary function of socialization (Ashforth et al., 2007; Bauer et al., 2007), yet this learning is perceived to be moderated by the social systems in organizations. In related studies of workplace learning, scholars highlight the importance of the social system on individual learning. Billett (2004) described the importance of how people are invited to participate over the actual content of what they learned. McClure and Brown (2008) stressed the importance of developing a sense of belonging as a critical factor facilitating the work of teams. Contrary to the popular view of socialization that it is the responsibility of the individual to learn to fit in, there is growing evidence that the social structures of the work groups in organizations are the primary moderators of socialization for newcomers.

Social capital. One of the benefits to individuals in groups is access to group resources. Social capital theory describes the characteristics of resources or benefits made available to individuals because of their membership in a group—especially their differential level of status in the group. The resources available to any particular individual depend on the social structure of the group and the actions of the individual (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Generally, these resources are perceived to be in the form of information, solidarity, and power (Sandefur & Laumann, 1998). There is some debate about whether social capital is an individual or group concept, however most agree that social capital differs from human capital in that it is based on the social relations among members of the group (Adler & Kwon, 2002, Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001).

There are several different models of social capital in the literature with different definitions depending on whether the author emphasizes the individual or the group. Also, the "capital" is conceptualized differently as goodwill (Adler & Kwon, 2002), relationships (Coleman, 1988), and resources (Bourdieu, 1983/1997; Lin, 2001). Theories of social capital focus on the mechanisms and processes inherent in social networks that produce and distribute resources to members (Lin, 2001). These are the mechanisms and processes that influence and enable the learning, performance, and well-being of individuals in group settings.

From the perspective of this domain (Group–Individual), the group exerts strong influences on individual thought and behavior. Groups influence individuals toward conformity and compliance to group characteristics and this influence dominates much of organizational life.

The Individual–Group Domain

This domain of the social system emphasizes the individual's perceptions of and interactions with group-level phenomena. Theories of social identity, self-categorization, and impression management describe and explain some of the interactions of the individual confronting the group.

Social identity (individual level). James (1890/1952) described multiple facets of the concept of identity and claimed that individuals had as many social identities as they had others with which they interacted. The discourse around social identity generally states that an individual has a rather stable personal identity at the core and mutable social identities that serve as the interface between personal identity and social interaction (Jenkins, 2004). Presented as a continuum (from personal to social identity) individuals will identify themselves at either end or somewhere in between based on differences in perceptions and social interactions, and the salience of the group (Doise, 1997; Turner et al., 1987). The strength of identification in the personal or social varies according to the situation—the stronger the similarities within the group and the differences between groups, the more likely it is that individuals strongly identify with the group. When social identity is more salient than personal identity, people perceive themselves less as individuals and more as members (representatives) of the group—effectively stereotyping themselves toward the prototype of the group.

Tajfel (1982) described three dimensions of social identity important to the individual: cognitive (the knowledge of what it means to be a member of a group), evaluative (the positive or negative associations related to group membership), and emotional (the degree of affective commitment to a group). Social identity is the mechanism that allows group behavior to occur (Haslam, 2004). From a social psychological perspective of people in organizational settings, social identity is an underlying driver of behavior. It is not simply the individual's identification or affiliation with a group, but a force that turns individual behavior into collective behavior (Turner & Haslam, 2001). Typically, members across an organization do not affiliate with a

single identity. Multiple identities within the organization tend to represent the loosely coupled collection of groups that make up the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

The power of identification with an organization by its members is an important factor in the engagement and performance of members of the organization. The level of identification (and engagement) in an organization is a fluctuating and dynamic resource dependent on the individual's experiences with the organization (Kahn, 1990). The process by which social identity is constructed was further described by Turner et al. (1987) as self categorization theory.

Self-categorization. Self-categorization is closely related to social identity theory and describes the individual's processes of categorizing self and others (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Turner et al., 1987). People typically categorize other people, situations, and objects as a normal part of perception. However, in social groups, individual motivations contribute to the categorization process to minimize differences within a group and to maximize differences from other groups (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Studies of self-categorization have articulated important tendencies of individual thought and behavior toward different groups. For example, perceptions of others, situations, and events are affected by group affiliations, as well as self-esteem, attributions, and stereotyping (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

Enhancing self-esteem is one of the basic tenets of self-categorization theory. Research has found that the bias for one's group (favoritism) and the denigration of other groups (discrimination) is pervasive, implicit, and easily triggered (Tajfel, 1982; Turner et al., 1987). The effects of favoritism and out group discrimination are difficult to overcome—even in situations where it is disadvantageous to the individual, group, and organization (Hogg & Terry, 2000).

Impression management. Closely related to self-categorization is the desire of people to manage their self-presentation and image in social contexts. This concept clearly applies at the individual–individual level as well as the individual–group level. Impression management by definition requires the individual's attention to others. To successfully manage impressions, one must be aware of others and have the ability to understand other points of view. In organizational settings, people manage impressions by promoting oneself, matching the behaviors of important others, and conforming to situational norms (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

A common form of impression management involves efforts to appear consistent. Often, people regard inconsistency as a sign of weakness and will take great pains to justify and rationalize any inconsistencies in their beliefs and behaviors. Furthermore, individuals strive to avoid the possibility of creating poor impressions by fostering ambiguity about their abilities, motives, attributes, and other forms of self-handicapping. Also, using flattery and expressed appreciation are other behaviors for impression management.

These behaviors, when perceived by others as sincere, usually help strengthen the status of the individual in the group, however, if perceived as self-promoting the effort usually elicits contempt from others (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). The tensions between

maintaining individuality and striving for conformity provoke a variety of individual behaviors based on feedback from and the context of the social system.

The Individual–Individual Domain

Although this domain of the social realm comes close to the purely individualistic nature of many psychological theories, it does not presume that individual cognition and behavior operate in a social void (Schwarz, 1998). Researchers in social psychology (cf. Goethals, 2003; Sherif, 1936; Tetlock, Skitka, & Boettger, 1989) have shown the strong influences of others on individual thought and behavior—even in the absence of those others. The individual–individual domain refers primarily to dyadic relations including three important concepts—interpersonal, intersubjective, and attributional concepts.

Interpersonal. Interpersonal processes are a well-known feature of organizational and personal life and appear in the literature of multiple disciplines as various types of relationships (Berscheid, 1994). In interpersonal relationship theories the concept of self derives from the reactions of others and therefore the actions of the self can be traced to the social and relational structures encompassing the self. Interpersonal concepts are self-other generalizations—not generalizations about the self or others separately. Interpersonal theories are comprised of expectations of how an interaction will proceed, along with the motives, affective responses, and images of self and others in action (Baldwin, 1992; Gergen, 1994).

Interpersonal theories also have cultural bases. Ho and Wang (2009) pointed out that conceptualizations of interpersonal relations differ between Eastern and Western cultures. Their contention is that Western cultures emphasize the individual and interpersonal experiences are peripheral to the individual, whereas in Eastern cultures the focus is on the relationship, not the individuals.

Relationship scholars recognize that ongoing cognition and perception take place in the context of relationships (Berscheid, 1994; Gergen, 1994, 2010). And that relationships form and function within a structural context, such as a group or organization. Many factors related to relationship phenomena are related to the closeness (properties of interdependence) of the relationship and many personal goals are embedded or related to close personal relationships.

Evidence suggests that social information is organized around relational, as well as person categories. Evidence also suggests that one's information about self is influenced by relationships and by internal social schemas and is therefore less stable than previously thought (Baldwin, 1992). The interactions of individuals in organizational settings are highly dependent on and influenced by the assumed or actual responses from others.

Intersubjectivity. In efforts to harmonize interpersonal relations, individuals strive for intersubjectivity, which is the tendency of individuals to modify their thinking to achieve congruence with others. Intersubjectivity emerges from the exchange and mirroring of ideas between two or more individuals (Luckmann, 2008; Weick, 2001). In

this process, the individuals transform into a more harmonious partnership. Close interaction offers the social information and feedback that individuals use for guidance and self-enhancement (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Weick (2001) claimed that face-to-face interaction was necessary for optimizing coordination because many role systems in organizations do not change fast enough to keep up with changing conditions in the organization. Therefore, achieving and maintaining intersubjectivity requires immediate and constant feedback from others, and is better achieved in face-to-face contact.

Intersubjectivity also requires willingness or at least a lack of resistance to merge one's views with another. Tetlock et al. (1989) described a social contingency model of judgment demonstrating that people will tend to align with the views of their audience if their levels of commitment to a position are low. Conversely, if they have high levels of commitment to a position they become defensive and rigid in their thinking toward others. Therefore, the level of commitment of actors to a particular position influences the ease with which intersubjectivity can be achieved.

Attribution. How people attribute the reasons for and meaning of social phenomena affects the sense they make of their experiences. Studies of attributional processes indicate a strong influence of the social context (others) on individual thinking. Attribution theory describes and explains how people formulate and identify the causes of events (Ashkanasy, 2002; Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Attributions of ability, responsibility, blame, and luck among self, others, or other elements in the environment are largely contingent on interpersonal and intersubjective relations (Ashkanasy, 2002; Baldwin, 1992). The "fundamental attribution error" states that people tend to attribute the behaviors of others to the other's personal dispositions rather than situational factors, and to attribute their own behavior to situational factors rather than their personal dispositions (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

Whether attributions are focused on people or situational factors, individuals are under the influence of the social systems in organizational settings—as well as elsewhere. By necessity and by definition, individuals interact with others in various groups embedded in social structures and while there is much research about interpersonal interaction the individual also confronts group phenomena and macrosocial systems, which have powerful effects on individual thought and behavior.

Discussion and Conclusions

This overview of the social realm began with a review of the unresolved philosophical debate of the differences between social science and natural science. The next section reviewed the macrosocial views that perceived human societies as cohesive or conflictual systems comprised of interdependent social structures and human agents. The final section reviewed selected microsocial concepts and theories explaining how individuals perceive, influence, and interact with each other and their groups.

Any attempt to describe or theorize a field imposes an order that might not exist (Weick, 1979) and certainly favors one point of view at the expense of others. Obviously, the view described in this article privileges social structures over

individuals as a foundational view of HRD. An often overlooked question in research, theorizing, and practice is which view of the world one favors and what is the power and weakness of the favored view for informing research, theory, and practice. Furthermore, what could be gained by incorporating alternate or rival views?

In a manner similar to the old tale of the blind men and the elephant, different perspectives portray the complex phenomena of social and organizational life differently—for example, different perspectives assume either the primacy of universal laws or the cogency of local meaning, collections of individuals or emergent group phenomena, conflict or cohesion, economic or sociocultural processes, macro or micro emphases, structural or agentic attributions, and psychological or social theories of thought and behavior. The discourse in several disciplines shows an increasing move toward bridging these different perspectives in favor of forming more complex theories articulating dialectical perspectives in new ways (Lawrence, 2011; Mouzelis, 2008). The purpose of this article was to suggest an organizing framework to order a wide range of social theories and concepts.

Placing the social realm that makes up organizational settings in the foreground provides additional perspectives on the dynamics of life and work and can serve as the starting point for research, theorizing, and practice—not as a background (contextual) element in the analysis stage. From this perspective, concepts typically ascribed to individual agency, such as dispositions, traits, attitudes, knowledge, skills, expertise, influence, charisma, and leadership are reconceptualized as socially constituted and socially constructed in the relationships among people (Gergen, 2010). The social situatedness of thought and behavior has important effects on the work of researchers, as well as workers, managers, and leaders in organizations and society in general.

Implications for HRD

The aim of this article is simply to further the movement toward a more dialectic and pluralistic view of HRD, by proposing the social realm as a foundational framework of HRD. While not discarding the important insights of natural science or individualistic psychologies, there might be compelling value in studying and practicing HRD from a predominately social and relational perspective. The social realm of organizational life is an active and dominant realm mediating and co-constructing individual thought and behavior. Thus, an important source of meaning and fulfillment in people's lives stems from the social formulations within which they live and work.

Each of the three levels covered in this overview of the social realm (philosophical, macrosocial, and microsocial) pose important questions for the study of human resource development. At the philosophical level, questions arise that focus on the relationship between social science and natural science. The most important of which the author proposes is the commensurability between the two. There are significant arguments that claim the two cannot be reduced to a single measure or held to the same standards (Rosenberg, 2008). If this is the case (and it has not been resolved and might never be) then the question arises about the appropriateness of using methods from one realm to

study the other. The question is, "What are we really 'proving' by the use of the scientific methods that purport to find universal or generalizable propositions in a world driven by intentionality, contingency, and constructionism?" Although these methods certainly provide important insights into social phenomena, it is very likely that the knowledge created by these means alone is more limited than it is usually believed to be. Creating significant social knowledge and theories might emerge by paying more attention to the temporal and situational limitations of research findings and theorizing. Theorizing might focus more on the applicability and practicality of research at a particular time and place while increasing skepticism for generalizing much beyond the confines of the local and temporal. It might also place greater importance on the interpretations and meanings afforded by reflexive people entangled in their social congeries—interpretations and meanings that change depending on the confluence of contingent thoughts and behaviors interacting at a particular time.

At the macrosocial level, researchers and practitioners might ask, "To what extent do social structures enable and constrain individual (actor) thought and behavior?" The tendency to attribute thought and behavior to the individual underemphasizes the social and institutional sources of many of these thoughts and behaviors. Even though individuals appear to be the source of their thoughts and behaviors, a deeper analysis might trace the source of these thoughts and behaviors to the broader cultural-, social-, and group-level structures that ascribe particular scripts and expectations to the actors in these systems. Thus, actors fluctuate between the roles of creators and servants of the social realm within which they act. This tension between the creating and serving challenges an individual emphasis on learning, performance, and well-being.

At the microsocial level, the focus turns to the configuration of social perceptions, influences, and interactions (including the mechanisms linking these factors) fostering the thoughts and behaviors of people within and among groups. At all three levels it seems backwards to focus on the individual first and relegate the social context to the background.

Changing the emphasis in HRD from an individual perspective to the social perspective embeds HRD more fully in what Schon (1983) called the "swampy lowland" of professional work (p. 42). It also shifts attention from the individual to the social systems that offer greater potential for improving learning, performance, and well-being.

Perhaps, inverting the focus of research and practice to first address the social assumptions, beliefs, values, and systems in organizations as the arbiters of individual agency would change the quality and substance of the research, theories, and practices that currently dominate the field. For example, what would a human resource intervention look like if it started as an attempt to better understand the larger sociocultural structures of the organization and society rather than the needs of individuals as resources in the organization? How might research into human well-being at work appear if the meaning of work was linked to sociopolitical structures and hierarchies rather than motivations for individual fulfillment and achievement within a taken-for-granted system? A benefit of viewing the work of HRD professionals as grounded in

the social realm might lead to more explicit consideration that all thoughts and behaviors in organizational settings are derived from the macro-, meso-, and microsociocultural systems that entangle individuals. Adopting this view would mean that HRD scholars and practitioners might begin a project by addressing underlying philosophical assumptions about the nature of social science and the factors that confound the traditional scientific methods used to analyze, diagnose, and manage social phenomena. How might the design of research and analysis change if the rationalist perspective is coupled with, or subsumed by a hermeneutic perspective? The reconsideration of deeply held assumptions might logically lead to a reconsideration of the beliefs of what should be the relationship between social structures and agency as well as the viability of striving for goals of a cohesive or conflictual organization. Finally this reconsideration would address the formidable effects of the social realm on individuals, and how effective it might be to focus on the social systems that seem to govern thought and behavior over the individual. Not only does the social realm influence individual thought and behavior—it is quite possibly the source individual thought and behavior.

As demonstrated over the last several decades by multiple fields, there are different views of social phenomena. Yin's (2003) notion of using rival theories for research (especially multidisciplinary theories) naturally introduces conflict as a dialectic opportunity for acquiring a greater understanding of complex phenomena. In a similar manner, Seale (1999) advocated the use of multiple paradigms or methodologies (not just multiple methods) in an attempt to achieve greater insights into complex social phenomena. The use of multiple and rival perspectives certainly increases levels of difficulty and uncertainty in the processes of conducting research, theory building, theory testing, and practice. However, this also increases the potential for greater insights and understanding of complex and ambiguous social phenomena, as well as more reasonable expectations of the power (and limits) of theory and science.

The view presented in this article is one plausible view for informing the work of HRD scholars and practitioners, and it is one that holds great potential for understanding the deeper meanings ascribed to various views of life and work in organizations. Regardless of whether one emphasizes learning or performance, community or individuals, business or education, cooperation or competition the effects of the social realm on the work of HRD professionals seem obvious and unequivocal. HRD researchers and practitioners might place greater emphasis on the fundamental social realm that entangles and controls nearly every aspect of the field. This is the value of the work of social philosophers, social theorists, sociologists, social psychologists, and social constructivists and why this article presents their views as a foundational framework for HRD.

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