


Chapter 10

Strangers No More: A Collaborative Autoethnography on Early Career Professional Identities in Academia

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ABSTRACT

In this collaborative autoethnography (CAE), we, two early-career academics in human resource development (HRD), explored the development of our professional identities in HRD academia. We began by reviewing the literature on the struggle of definitions and identities in HRD academia and argued for using autoethnography as a valid approach to explore professional identities in relation to HRD academia. Based on our experiences as graduate students in HRD Ph.D. programs and later as junior faculty members in research universities, we traced three important trajectories in the development of our professional identities – making sense of Ph.D. program renaming, situating dissertations in the dual pandemics, and first year on the tenure track. We discussed how this CAE project became a valuable process for us to engage in deep learning about ourselves as HRD academics and cultivate a sense of professionalism aligned with the field and our aspirations. This article highlighted the value of CAE as a tool to facilitate dialogue, empowerment, and collective transformation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Human Resource Development (HRD) as a field is emerging, dynamic, and always in the process of becoming (Lee, 2001; Sambrook, 2004). As Warhurst et al. (2018) argued, HRD practice is “all about identity” (p. 1). Professional identity is “the interaction between who you are, where you are, and what profession you choose” (van Oeffelt et al., 2018, p. 239). The ever-becoming nature of HRD means that professional identities in HRD are multiple, complex, and sometimes ambiguous. Thus, identity could become a crucial resource for enlarging the academic space of HRD as well as enabling a deeper under-

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standing of HRD practice (Warhurst et al., 2018). The present study was inspired by one of the questions raised by Dr. Ronald Jacobs in his Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD) Hall of Fame induction speech: What does it mean to be a scholar of human resource development (Jacobs, 2023)? In the process of career transition, early-career academics often face the challenge of identity negotiation and reconstruction (Hemmings, 2012). Shifts and development in professional identities could lead professionals to redefine their roles and strive to transform and push the boundaries of the profession (Fraser-Arnott, 2019). As early-career academics in HRD, we want to contribute to the transformation of HRD by offering a first-hand account of our professional identity negotiation and development in HRD academia.

The purpose of this collaborative autoethnography (CAE) was to dialogue and reflect upon our development of professional identities in HRD academia. We, two graduates from the same Ph.D. HRD program and now faculty members at two research-intensive universities in the US ground our professional identities in HRD academia. We take caution in using *academia* in the HRD context because, as Kuchinke (2001) noted, HRD is not an academic discipline due to its multidisciplinary foundations. We do not wish to perpetuate the research-practice divide in HRD or marginalize the voices of practitioners and scholar-practitioners in the community. We consider HRD academia to be the context of our identity development because higher education is the primary avenue for us to create and disseminate HRD knowledge. This aligns with our current roles since we are not actively involved in the industry, as recommended by Ruona (1999). We began our CAE journey by situating our identity negotiation within the field's struggle and resistance to define itself. Then, we detailed our collaborative process. The research question guiding our collaborative process was: How do we, two early-career academics, make sense of our evolving professional identity in HRD academia? We centered our discussion of findings on the evolution of our professional identities in HRD academia over time. Finally, we discussed this study's theoretical and methodological contributions, practical implications, and limitations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Definitions and Identities of HRD Academia

HRD is usually considered a multidisciplinary field (Kahnweiler, 2009). Without a clear consensus on the disciplines that contribute to HRD practice, there is a wide variety of perspectives on the precise components of HRD (McGuire & Cseh, 2006). Hamlin and Stewart (2011) reviewed literature related to definitions and conceptualizations of HRD. They found four core purposes of HRD: "improving individual or group effectiveness and performance, improving organizational effectiveness and performance, developing knowledge, skills, and competencies, and enhancing human potential and personal growth" (p. 210). Ruona (2000) interviewed ten scholarly leaders in HRD and found two strong belief sets about the profession: HRD as a helping profession to facilitate change and improvement and learning as a foundational concept for HRD. While acknowledging that clarifying and articulating a professional identity is an important task for HRD, Ruona (2000) argued that this pursuit is "a process of questioning" (p. 25). Pursuing a single, universal definition of HRD might be impossible and even dangerous (Lee, 2001,

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