



# Recognizing the human: A psychoanalytic engagement with HRM and its discontents

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## Introduction

‘It is joy to be hidden but disaster not to be found’

Donald Winnicott, *Communicating and Not Communicating*

To many critics and readers of this journal, the ‘human’ in HRM is hardly human. The images of Marx’s alienated proletariat, Weber’s disenchanting bureaucrat, or Foucault’s biopolitical subject are now so etched in the mind to render a practical engagement with HRM impossible. Best to abandon the enterprise altogether.

Except that we can’t. ‘The professor is, after all, an employee’, writes C. Wright Mills as early as 1951 (151). The irony, of course, is that we remain engaged. If we aren’t beholden to teaching HRM in the classroom, we are subjected to its machinations in the performance review. We are divided against ourselves.

In a useful parallel, the ‘human’ Freud discovers in psychoanalysis is also hardly human. To be precise, it is a human conflicted with excess desire, traumatized, and subordinated; a human at once both excessively ‘managed’ and ‘mismanaged’ by the dual forces of superego and id. But above all, what Freud discovers in psychoanalysis, borrowing a line from Joel Kovel, is ‘the truth that there [is] something inhuman about us after all’:

not ‘animal’, for that would be an insult to other species, or ‘aggressive’, for that would be to put a lid on activity and outrage, but ‘unspeakable’, ‘abominable’, ‘unfathomable’, ‘ineffable’, and ‘wondrous’, all those words that, lacking theoretical rigor, were somehow truer and deeper than the rigmarole of psychoanalytic theory. (1983: 20)

Already we sense the cautionary tale offered by the analyst to the critic of HRM: by attributing the cause of inhumanity to external forces you proceed too hastily; you ignore the dynamic psychic causes; you fail to look within. But the critic, by now steeped in the critique of bourgeois psychoanalysis, offers the familiar retort to the analyst: by looking within you not only risk ignoring the broader world, but recapitulating that very world by naturalizing it within the psyche.

And so the exchange abruptly ends.

This essay attempts to rekindle the conversation, guided by the (perhaps wishful) thinking that we can afford to be more reflective *and* more radical. For what we can also sense in Kovel's quote above is a cautionary tale offered by psychoanalysis to itself, namely: by attributing the cause of inhumanity to *internal* forces you also proceed too hastily; you ignore the 'unspeakable', 'abominable', and 'unfathomable'. But more so, you ignore that which is 'truer and deeper' to what it means to be human, prior to its codification (indeed, ossification) by the theoretical edifice of psychoanalysis (Kovel, 1983: 20).

And so this essay begins with the rhetorical question, how can we possibly 'develop a constructive and engaged critique of HRM – one that can both theorize the human and take practice into account' (Bevort et al., 2014: 2) – without fully recognizing the human, and thus, without a critical engagement with psychoanalysis?

At its worst, psychoanalysis finds what it assumes must be there (e.g., repressed sexual desires, narcissism, the phallus, etc.). It discovers what it already knows. By the same token, Marxist, or Weberian, or Foucauldian positions find what they wish to find: the exercise of discourse and power, or the exploitation of the human as a 'resource'. In each, the human is nothing more than what we need it to be.

At its best, however, psychoanalysis draws our attention back to experience. And it is precisely this emphasis on experience that makes psychoanalysis unique among the critical approaches to HRM.

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One of the redeeming qualities of psychoanalysis is its ability to talk about the use of the human as a 'resource' without immediate critical disdain, on the one hand, or blind acceptance, on the other. In object relations theory, for instance, we find a view of the human that relies upon a whole cast of human resources. These resources form a constellation around the individual, acting as a crucible through which the individual must pass to ensure its psychic survival. From a developmental perspective, the child can only come to recognize the human as

‘whole’ (and not merely as an all-good or all-bad part-object) through its use. Use preserves the human as a separate human being. Out of such use comes concern (Klein, 1937; Winnicott, 1963a, 1969).

But use of the human also poses great risk for the budding child. Specifically, by seeking to make use of a withdrawn parent, or alternatively, an intrusive and overbearing one, the child forges a sense of self that is determined by the other’s needs. The constructed (or ‘false’) self that emerges is at once both inflated (what others want) and diminished (lacking in spontaneity), but never fully whole. Use devolves into abuse; concern into compliance (Winnicott, 1960).

Everything hinges, of course, upon the quality of the ‘human resource’. For first- and second-generation critical theorists steeped in Freudian theory (Adorno et al., 1950; Lasch, 1977, 1979), such resources were vastly depleted. The father, deskilled at work by the ‘managerial apparatus’, directed what little was left of his diminished vitality into protecting the very autonomy in the child robbed from him by the corporation. As a result, he failed to model to his child a healthy engagement with reality. Meanwhile the mother, deskilled at home by social services that stigmatized her ‘maternal instinct’, directed what little was left of her diminished vitality into ‘attempts to become an ideal parent...smothering [the child] with solicitude’ and arranging ‘each detail of his life with a punctilious zeal that undermines his initiative and destroys the capacity for self-help’ (Lasch, 1979: 173).

By recognizing (and subsequently internalizing) these ‘bad objects’ the child took on undue responsibility for a failed relationship and indeed a failed society. Put differently, the resources whom the self was modeled after were hardly human at all.

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The above developmental narrative can, and should, have direct bearing on the current debate over ‘recognition politics’ (Honneth, 1996; Habermas, 2001; Baudrillard, 2007; Jones, 2012; Fleming, 2013, 2016; Ross, 2014) – a debate that carries striking resemblance to the debate over HRM that inspires this special issue of *ephemera*.

For proponents of ‘post-recognition’ politics, the act of being seen or included (i.e., recognized) through, for instance, democratic representation or visible displays of resistance proves deeply problematic. As Fleming (2013) notes, ‘Recognition is just another way of being sucked back into a one-sided arrangement, crippling compromises and pointless commitments’ (Fleming, 2013: 629). The equation

‘recognition = exposure’ is the guiding logic here; if we are recognized we are exposed, and thus vulnerable to compliance and abuse. Better to refuse.

And yet, from a psychoanalytic perspective, refusing recognition carries great risk. The budding child who refuses recognition may do so out of an inability to tolerate *use* of the other as more than just a mirror to reflect back a fantasized self. Instead of using the other to calibrate and eventually outgrow one’s outsized fantasies (something admittedly only possible with the help of a full human resource), the child simply inverts the mirror: the all-giving, all-loving other quickly turns into an all-taking, all-devouring other who must be refused.

In such instances, refusing to be recognized, far from removing oneself from an impoverished reality, deprives oneself of reality.

Given these developmental risks, proponents of post-recognition might do better to distinguish between a developmentally appropriate form of recognition (one that is indeed vital for the human) and what we might call *surplus recognition*, the latter of which, like Marcuse’s infamous ‘surplus repression’, forces the human to labor beyond its developmental needs (and indeed exploits those very needs).<sup>1</sup> From this vantage, refusing recognition means refusing that form of recognition ‘over and above’ what is ‘indispensable’ for becoming a full human resource; recognition that, ironically, turns the self into a depleted resource (Marcuse, 1955: 37-38).

Still, what we don’t yet find in the discourse on post-recognition politics – and the same can be said of the critical discourse on HRM – is a viable alternative. ‘Overall, the point is to develop emancipatory projects for their own sake’, advocates Fleming (2016: 3), without providing much (if any) outline as to how to proceed.<sup>2</sup> In psychoanalysis, we might gain more traction. Specifically, in psychoanalysis we

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<sup>1</sup> It’s worth mentioning in this regard that in advocating for a ‘non-surplus repressive’ civilization, Marcuse was not arguing for the abolishment of repression on the whole (a common misconception of Marcuse’s critics), but instead of the ‘additional controls over and above those indispensable for civilized human association’ (1955: 37-38). For Marcuse, frustration and renunciation were imposed excessively and severely (i.e., in an arbitrarily ‘surplus’ manner) on the individual. As a result, the individual experiences a generalized restriction on pleasure, including pleasurable work. With this said, Marcuse concedes that even within a non-surplus repressive civilization, ‘The realm of necessity persists; struggle with nature and even among men continues’ (1938: 193).

<sup>2</sup> At least not psychologically. Fleming (2013, 2016) does give a number of helpful sociological examples of current resistance movements that would fall under the banner of ‘post-recognition’ (e.g., The French Invisible Committee, Canadian antiwork movements, Italian autonomists, etc).

find a sense of self that manifests without the reassurance of recognition. In short, it is a self that requires not recognition but expression.

David Levine attributes this need for self-expression to creativity: 'If creativity is the exercise of the capacity to see things differently, it begins with the ability to see ourselves differently and therefore risk losing the basis for connection with others provided by a common way of seeing' (2016: 2).

Psychoanalytically, the capacity to see things differently and, through this, 'risk losing the basis' of 'a common way of seeing' is a capacity the 'good enough' mother (or 'good enough' society) imparts to her child (Winnicott, 1960). The capacity to be alone in the presence of the other means being unrecognized and thereby un-formed by the other. And it is in this unrecognized space that the self can be formed (or make contact with itself).

To be sure, much is at stake in this unrecognized space. As Levine himself (2016) notes, 'What we fear is that, were we to succeed in our struggle for creativity, we would find ourselves alone' (2). Finding ourselves alone, like the act of creativity itself, is a kind of rupture with the ordinary human universe, and in its extreme, risks madness (the other side of reason). But what we gain in this unrecognized space is the ability to discern the contours of the self in a way unavailable within the confines of recognition. This newfound self-recognition mirrors the acceptance of the whole parent who is both loving and stern, present and absent, and above all *fallible* like the self; a parent who was perhaps never fully 'there', lost to the intergenerational trauma of surplus recognition, but now usable as a full resource within the self.

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As it stands, the 'human' in HRM is hardly a full resource. HRM does not use the human so as to establish a relationship of concern that in turn preserves the human's separateness. Instead, HRM consumes the human precisely because it can't use it.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, consuming the object serves as protection against its loss. This is the common mechanism that underlies greed. By consuming (and thereby devouring and destroying) the object, the subject gains exclusive access to the object, and in the process, deprives others from having it (Klein, 1957).

HRM is, in this sense, an echo chamber of greed and destruction. By rapidly hoarding and discarding employees, HRM defends against loss, but in doing so, it also recapitulates a familiar intergenerational trauma. The human in HRM is

forced to relive this trauma indefinitely. Leaders are attached to, or rejected and refused, by way of unconscious transference to early parental objects, and not by a reasoned assessment of their competence. More generally, the rivalries, intrigues, and power-plays so endemic to working life are reenactments and repetition compulsions, enforced and reinforced by hardly a 'good enough' other.

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No wonder, then, so many of us find HRM ill-suited for the human. Like those who refuse recognition, those who refuse to engage with HRM find no tenable solution to the management of the human as a 'resource'. Only by giving up do we gain the possibility of being human once again – of feeling alive. Indeed, if we don't give up, if we continue to seek out recognition or try to engage, we risk being exposed, abused, and ultimately devoured.

What psychoanalysis allows for, instead of giving up, is a giving in – and specifically, giving in to the self-creating act itself. This process of becoming a subject is synonymous with becoming an object. It is a statement that 'I am here' (Winnicott, 1971). While this self-creating act may require refusal as well as recognition, above all, it will require the work of the human as full resource.

As it stands, both HRM and its critics seem threatened by this form of self-expression. The becoming self must be repressed and restricted, theorized and isolated, or altogether refused. We would do better to make space for it.

The work of a new and engaged critique of HRM must, in part, be premised upon this fuller recognition of the human.

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