

Kansas State University Libraries

New Prairie Press

Adult Education Research Conference

2006 Conference Proceedings (Minneapolis,
MN)

Another Look at a Historical Foundation of HRD: F.R. Roethlisberger's Foreman

Julia Storberg-Walker
North Carolina State University

Laura Bierema
University of Georgia

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc>



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

Storberg-Walker, Julia and Bierema, Laura (2006). "Another Look at a Historical Foundation of HRD: F.R. Roethlisberger's Foreman," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2006/papers/54>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Another Look at a Historical Foundation of HRD: F.R. Roethlisberger's Foreman

Julia Storberg-Walker, North Carolina State University
Laura Bierema, University of Georgia

Keywords: Human relations, Roethlisberger, F.R., poststructural analysis

Abstract: F.R. Roethlisberger has been recognized as the "father" of the human relations period of management. Historically, this period was seen as a move towards more humanism in the workplace. This manuscript presents a poststructural analysis of a classic management text from this period. Findings and implications for HRD are presented.

This manuscript offers preliminary findings from a poststructural analysis of a classic management text. This analysis is a part of a larger project exploring the connections between human resource development (HRD) theory and masculine epistemologies. The text analyzed in this manuscript is "The Foreman: Master and Victim of Double Talk," written by F.R. Roethlisberger, published in the *Harvard Business Review*, Spring 1945 issue. Roethlisberger himself suggested this text was "one of the most popular articles I ever wrote" (p. 35). Evidence supports his belief: thousands of reprints were sold, the text was included in several edited books, and it was re-printed in 1965 in the *HBR Classics* series, thus introducing a new generation of management scholars and practitioners to his ideas.

Our guiding research question is "how would understanding the connections between masculinities and organization theory, as represented by The Foreman, contribute to our understanding of contemporary HRD theory?" We follow the call of Denzin and Lincoln (2001) to go back to history to learn more about today. However, by selecting this text we acknowledge that we exclude others; and by focusing on the text we risk reifying both the text and an (our) interpretation of it. Thus is the conundrum of post-modern analysis, and following Calas and Smircich (1999), we view our analysis as specific and an "exercise of the theoretical imagination," (p. 654) guided by tools and techniques of post-modern inquiry and analysis. After a description of our theoretical framework and a brief introduction and discussion of the text, the remainder of the paper is organized around Bradshaw's (1996) three deconstruction categories, namely 1) creation of dichotomies and "other" categories, as well as silences; 2) maintaining harmony, rationality, and unity; and 3) hyperbole and mockery as an insider's joke.

Theoretical Framework

We examined the text from a feminist, poststructural perspective. We follow what Alvesson and Deetz (2000) describe as a partial or situational ethnography; our focus is on this text and not the "stable behavior patterns, attitudes or traits" (p. 201) that is the norm for traditional ethnographic work. We provide a "thick" description of the Foreman so that readers may "evaluate and reconsider the interpretations and conclusions" (p. 202) we reach. We attempt to provide you with the experience of reading the Foreman by mimicking Roethlisberger's style as closely as possible.

Several postmodern organization theorizing strategies exist for conducting this type of analysis (Calas & Smircich, 1999). The first, genealogical analyses, uses Foucault's genealogies

as a model to understand a “history of the present,” and show how “webs of practices, discourses and institutions ... have been adopted, imitated and transformed to the point that they become knowledge and common sense and are repeated by many without recollection of their original purpose—thus the notion of power/knowledge” (Calas & Smircich, 1999, p. 655). Constructing a genealogy helps us understand how practices of HRM, which may appear to give employees more control and autonomy, in reality are a type of panopticon in which kinder, friendlier ways of controlling employees are invented and practiced. Calas and Smircich suggest that genealogies demonstrate how accepted knowledge is fraught with power relations, yet offer opportunities for resisting these theories.

Another postmodern organization analysis strategy is Derrida’s deconstruction. This approach dissects text to discover where language deceives and contradicts itself, (Calas & Smircich, 1999), or where there are significant silences and gaps (Bradshaw, 1996). Brashaw explores how language creates dichotomies and the category of others. This is apparent in texts that use pronouns such as *we* or *them* to indicate exclusion of certain groups. The creation of the category of *other* often reflects the marginalization of women and other groups that are not white or male, and in the case of HRM texts, not management. Deconstruction examines how the author engages in marginalization through footnotes, quotation marks, metaphors, parentheses, or asides (Bradshaw, 1996), as well as what words or phrases are privileged as central to the text (Calas & Smircich, 1999). Deconstruction also seeks to “dismantle hierarchical dichotomies” (Bradshaw, 1996) where false oppositions are created such as management/non-management, change/nonchange, female/male or good/bad. The human relations movement is an excellent candidate for a poststructural feminist analysis as it has been historically applauded as a welcome movement away from Taylorist scientific management, and towards a more human and humane workplace. Our close analysis of the text suggests that the movement from scientific management to human relations theory can *also* be understood as a move from externally-controlled behavior, and towards internally or self-regulated control—guided by the panoptic gaze of the “Other” as legitimate masculine authority. Further, our analysis suggests there is a close connection between the epistemology of the masculine perspective and the difficulties encountered in human relations theory in the 1930s. These difficulties include 1) lack of analytical tools to study relations between people; 2) lack of concepts and frameworks to study individual purposive action (beyond behaviorism); and 3) lack of research methods to study organizational change. We present the implications of these difficulties in the conclusion.

Because we use a post-structural perspective, this manuscript does not lay claim to “truth;” rather, we suggest our writing is best considered an event of interpretation; it is one interpretation amongst other possible interpretations. The analysis “helps us to understand the exclusions on which writers need to rely in order to represent “positive knowledge,” (Calas and Smircich, 1999, p. 658).

What is *The Foreman: Master and Victim of Double Talk*?

A Narrative Description from Nowhere

We cannot provide one answer to this question: the text is Roethlisberger’s, both from his 1945 and 1965 vantage points; it is ours, as we read and re-read its passages in 2006; and it is every reader’s, as they opened up the issues of HBR or edited volumes and interpreted and integrated the text into their lives and work. We suggest that this text influenced the thinking of at least two generations of management scholars and practitioners. It is easier to *count* the number of citations in journals, the number of reprints, and the number of edited volumes

containing the text; however, the influence of this piece of Roethlisberger's work expands into the realms of the uncountable. *The Harvard Business Review*, as the original location of the text, is targeted towards executives engaged in practice; these people do not cite Roethlisberger's work in scholarly journals but instead take action at work, more or less influenced by reading *HBR*.

The text tells a story of the Foreman working in the modern industrial organization. Roethlisberger uses the literary technique of storytelling through the objective eyes of an invisible observer to craft a composite picture of Every Foreman. While the picture of the Foreman is presented objectively, from nowhere, it is also presented as a pathology—something wrong needing to be fixed—created by management activities guided by Weberian bureaucratic logics and ideals. Roethlisberger uses the words of medicine and sickness to describe the problems of the Foreman in modern industrial organizations—pathology, disease, diagnosis and treatment, and symptom. We try to mimic Roethlisberger's narrative technique in the following paragraphs, and, like Roethlisberger, our writer's presence completely disappears from the text. We present the following from the position of nowhere:

A Narrative Representation of The Foreman: Master and Victim of Double Talk

The Foreman has lost authority and control over his work, he is insecure and fearful, and he needs Management to fix his condition. The good old days of being the "cock of the walk" (p. 39) have passed; despite having more knowledge, he has less power. The Foreman is responsible for more things that lie outside his control, and he is faced with the "complications" of war such as women and people of color to manage. The Foreman is motivated by economic reward, status (as reflected by his closeness to the Boss), and having authority and control. All three of these motivators have eroded in the modern organization, leaving the Foreman bereft of satisfaction and happiness.

It didn't use to be so. Compared to his "old-time counterpart," the modern Foreman assumes several new roles in the organization that the previous generations of Foremen did not have to deal with. The Foreman is "bewildered by the many different roles and functions he is supposed to fill" (p. 37-38) and has to "relate himself to a wider range of people" (p. 39) during the course of his daily work. Men under him and men above him do not have to take his position into account when they decide how much to cooperate, how much to communicate, and how much to accommodate. Further, his job has gotten more complex and undefined from the old days "...far better than the old-timer of 25 years ago the modern foreman knows how much work should be done in what length of time; how much it is worth; what the best methods to be used are; what his material, labor, and burden costs should be; and what the tolerances are that his products should meet," (p. 38-39).

Despite this great expanse of knowledge, the Foreman's position is basically insecure. He is continually worried about how to remain in the good graces of Management: "In some cases this preoccupation with what the boss thinks becomes so acute that it accounts for virtually everything the foreman says or does and all his thinking about what goes on around him...hours at work and home are spent in figuring and anticipating what explanations or reasons he will need to give the boss. And the boss's most innocent and unintentional acts—failure to say 'good morning,' for instance—are taken perhaps to imply disapproval" (p. 41). This worry produces nervous breakdowns and "other forms of mental anguish," (p. 41) causing countless man hours lost of productivity, efficiency, and profit.

This modern Foreman is the natural outgrowth of modern industrial development, caused by Management's lack of understanding of the multiple social forces involved when men work

together. It is management's fault that the Foreman is unhappy at work. One consequence of this unhappiness is the emergence and growth of unionization of Foremen. This is a natural consequence of taking money, status, and power away from man while at the same time not attending to the social forces acting upon him. Like B.F. Skinner's "obsessive pigeons," (p. 34) the Foreman will continue to react to these declining conditions at work unless Management assumes responsibility for "its own social creations," (p. 36) of which the Foreman is one. Only Management can fix what Management has created, but the problem is that different skills are needed to resolve the social problems of the modern organization. Some Management leaders possess these Administrative skills, but most do not because demonstrating these skills are looked down upon: Administrators are seen as lacking ambition, valuing getting along over getting ahead, and being "not too logically articulate," (p. 51).

Poststructural Analysis

As described in the introduction, our analysis uses Bradshaw's (1996) categories to organize our findings. To repeat, we examined the text to understand how it 1) created of dichotomies, "other" categories, and silences; 2) maintained harmony, rationality, and unity; and 3) presented hyperbole and mockery as an insider's joke. We deconstructed the text from a poststructural feminist perspective in order to understand more about how a masculine epistemology may have contributed towards the problems associated with the Foreman and our contemporary conception of HRD.

Creation of Dichotomies, "Other" Categories, and Silences

Roethlisberger presented the Foreman as a pathology (dichotomy: health vs. illness) needing to be fixed (dichotomy: broken vs. repaired) by Management (dichotomy: Foremen vs. Management). Foremen must rely on experts (dichotomy: doctor vs. patient) to 'cure' him of the social ills (dichotomy: economic rationality vs. social irrationality) that were the natural spawn of modern industrial organization (dichotomy: happy past vs. tumultuous present). The 'cure,' however, requires Administrators (dichotomy: Administrators vs. Management) who possess social skills (dichotomy: valued rationality vs. devalued social skills) that are viewed as lacking ambition (dichotomy: ambition vs. social skills) and illogical (dichotomy: valuing relationships vs. valuing profit). If Management (dichotomy: Management vs. all else) does not take responsibility, then Foremen unions (dichotomy: worker's unions vs. Management) will continue to grow.

The dichotomies presented in the preceding paragraph are only the tip of the iceberg. In order to make positive statements, Roethlisberger (who himself was a product of the historical epoch) adopted the dominant masculine epistemology of his day. Masculine traits of rationality, ambition, hard work, were supported by "othering" feminine traits of relationship, collaboration, and the "soft work" involved in attracting and retaining helpful colleagues and employees.

A poststructural analysis also illuminates the silences in the text that reinforce dominant white male knowledge. For example, there is solitary mention of "women and Negroes" in the text who are described as war time "complications" to the Foreman: "One only needs to add to this picture the more recent complications of expanded war industries, the influx of new workers—some of them women, untutored and inexperienced in the ways of the factory; some of the Negroes, equally inexperienced and untutored but also apprehensive of their place in this "white man's heaven"—and we have the picture of the social environment of our modern Forman" (p. 50). The ForeMAN is a white male as are the specialists, administrators and

MANagers. Masculine pronouns are used throughout the text and marginalized groups are referred to as a management problem. Other examples of silencing and othering: the few references to unions were negative, which is not surprising as the text was published in the *Harvard Business Review*; the section describing Foreman to Foreman interaction was two paragraphs long—does this length suggest anything about how important colleagues are in the modern organization? Further, the Foreman to Foreman interactions were presented as conflicted not collegial: Foremen competed for the Boss's smile. The silence: Foremen could be viewed as a source of social support and motivation—but if this perspective were to be adopted, Management would not have sole and exclusive authority to cure the problem. The text alluded to power relations between Foremen and Management, but these references were consistently footnoted and not given space (e.g., legitimacy) in the text.

These silences and dichotomies have implications for the development of organization theory. Because the prevailing understanding of men's behavior was from the behaviorist school, Roethlisberger's framework for analyzing the situation was stimulus-response. Men had things acting upon them, and then Men responded. This research framework did not give Roethlisberger the analytical tools to examine the emergent nature of individual decision making. Further, by footnoting issues of power and classifying relational skills (perhaps what we would call emotional intelligence today) as "less than," Roethlisberger, in essence, sets a course for organization theorists and researchers to think of power and informal organization as problems, as pathologies, and not as legitimate research areas in their own right.

Maintaining Harmony, Rationality, and Unity

Poststructural analysis interrogates the "single truth" that is presented and privileged in the text. Roethlisberger offers no citations, nor does the voice of the Foreman ever emerge throughout the article. The author admits, "No examples have been given, but countless could be cited by any person... The final evidence, however, it is well to remember, exists in the minds of foremen and in their behavior, not in this article; and for those who doubt, let them go out and look and listen for themselves" (p. 50). He has arranged his thesis as the truth no intelligent person would question. He is like the *deus ex machina* of Greek tragedy; he is outside and above the world of the Foreman and Management and sees the "real" situation. Further, while he has a different positionality from Management, his interpretation of reality supports and sustains existing power arrangements that privilege the Management position.

A pervading view presented in *The Foreman* is that Management possesses the skills and knowledge to deal with the Foreman where multiple, uncontrollable forces "impinge" (pp. 39-40) on his ability to do the job, and that the Foreman's loyalty is to management first: "*Thus the foreman, like each individual in the modern industrial structure, is in effect painfully tutored to focus his attention upward to his immediate superiors and the logics of evaluation they represent, rather than downward to his subordinates and the feelings they have*" (italics in original, p. 42). Roethlisberger builds a myth where Management is the authority in a logical organization, but where the Foreman must straddle the logical world of management and the illogical world of the workers where the worker culture and its informal groups are suspect and dangerous: "It should be noted that these manifestations of formal organization are essentially logical in character. Through formal organization man expresses his logical capacities; in fact, it is one of the chief outlets for the expression of man's logical capacities. It should also be noted that in the past 25 years there has been a tremendous amount of attention given to this aspect of business organization... And yet, the foreman, unlike some higher executives, cannot stay only in this logically sheltered atmosphere" (p. 45). Roethlisberger creates and perpetuates a dualism

between logic and feelings, between formal and informal, between Employer and Employee. These dualisms contribute towards the inability of Roethlisberger and his contemporaries to develop analytical tools, concepts, and research methods that can be used to study the messy, relational, and emergent processes that occur when people work together. Further, the text ignores informal power relations and further suggests that management inflicted change is never “malicious design,” but rather “oversight” (p. 45). The power arrangements described that would serve to maintain power relations in the plant suggest that employees conform, supervisors uphold management’s wishes, technical specialists originate, and management evaluates all of these activities.

Productivity is an uncontested value suggested by the text “As a result [of this impossible, rationalized job per pp. 36-37], the foreman gives lip service in his courses to things which in the concrete shop situation he feels it would be suicidal to practice. In the shop, for the most part, he does his best to perform by hook or by crook the one function clearly left him, the one function for which there is no definite staff counterpart, the one function for which the boss is sure to hold him responsible, namely, getting the workers to turn the work out on time” (p. 38). *Presenting Hyperbole and Mockery*

Bradshaw (1996) shows how text communicates hidden meanings among the inner circle. In the case of the Foreman, Management is the inner circle and the Foreman is the subject of irony, hyperbole, mockery and exaggeration. As the following quotations demonstrate, the Foreman is a Management problem. At the beginning of the article, Foremen are described as “monsters” who require fixing by management. Roethlisberger explains the dilemma of changing the nature of the Foreman problem: “Failing to recognize the hydraheaded character of the social situation with which it is faced, management will cut off on head, only to have two new heads appear” (p. 36): The next paragraph refers to the article’s premise that “management’s chickens [Foremen] have come home to roost” (p. 36).

Foremen were described as “go-betweeners,” “forgotten men,” and “the step-children of industry” (p. 36). They were also expected to be an “example” (p. 37), “subforemen,” straw bosses,” “leadmen,” “group leaders,” and “section chiefs” (p. 39). Such mockery invites us to view the foreman as a powerless conduit between management and workers where they are expected to do an impossible job that has changed. The insider joke that the Foreman was not what he used to be is exemplified by referring to him as “the cock of the walk” (p. 38) no more. The foreman is left “holding the bag” (p. 48) where management is laughing at him for trying to do this impossible job. Now the Foreman must supervise “complicated” or marginalized workers in relationships that are often “the straw that breaks the camel’s back” (p. 44) where “. . . the modern Foreman is expected to ‘cooperate’” (p. 48), “to cut off his nose to spite his face” (p. 49). Women and minorities are not welcome in this “white man’s heaven” where their presence complicates the Foreman’s job. In dealing with these complications, the foreman has a few choices. He, “stews in his own juice,” “he eats himself for lack of something else to hew and hack,” or he may seek political solution to grind out major industrial ills “do the ‘mills of God’” (p. 51).

There are significant implications for the development of organization theory from Roethlisberger’s use of these metaphors and hyperboles. By perpetuating the “reality” of valuing typical masculine traits (ambition, rationality, pride/hubris) over traits not associated with masculinity (collaboration, relational intelligence, ethic of care), organization theorists are implicitly guided towards projects, frameworks, and perspectives that do not address the deeper connections between them. Further, the role of the Foreman in his own making is taken away;

this marginalization continues the trajectory of organization theorists to be unable to conduct inquiries into individual purposive action.

Conclusions and Implications for HRD

Our method provides HRD scholars and practitioners an example of how language is anything but objective. By providing a thick (albeit abbreviated) description mimicking Roethlisberger's style, we push out to the reader the opportunity to individually feel how language is used to communicate. This is a more democratic way to present research, (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000) because the method does not make invisible the myriad subjective decisions researchers usually make when they extrapolate and make abstract the core phenomenon. Of course we made countless decisions in writing this manuscript, but we were guided by the desire to give you the same type of experience as we did while reading the original text. Many "classic" HRD texts warrant deconstruction and we hope this work will encourage a more critical read of them.

The power of Roethlisberger's language illustrates the historical masculine perspective that has remained dominant in management research and practice. We contend that this perspective has influenced contemporary HRD theory in creating contradictions, gaps, and silenced perspectives that warrant closer HRD attention, particularly in today's volatile social and economic environment.

Roethlisberger creates and perpetuates a dualism between logic and feelings, between formal and informal, between Employer and Employee. These dualisms contribute towards the lack of analytical tools, concepts, and research methods that can be used to study emergent phenomenon—which, as represented in contemporary literature, are arguably key foci of both quantitative and qualitative social science research. On top of that, by valuing typical masculine traits (ambition, rationality, pride/hubris) over traits not associated with masculinity (collaboration, relational intelligence, ethic of care), organization theorists are implicitly guided towards projects, frameworks, and perspectives that do not address the deeper connections between them. It is time for HRD to embrace new frameworks that account for topics and groups that have been ignored, silenced and othered in both research and practice.

Finally, through presenting the Foreman as a creation of Management, organization theorists are led to understand the situation from a medical perspective: the "other" (the doctor or Management) must diagnose, treat, and take responsibility for the 'subject' (the patient or the Foreman). The role of the Foreman in his own construction is taken away; this marginalization perpetuates the trajectory of organization theorists to be unable to develop a framework to understand the subject as empowered and responsible actor within the world. Viewing Foremen as subjects contributes towards placing a value on "objectivity" in terms of research and epistemology. Alternatively, viewing Foremen and Management in relationship expands the role of subjectivity and provides alternative possibilities for future research and practice.

References

- Bradshaw, P. (1996). Woman as constituent directors: Re-reading current texts using a feminist-postmodernist approach. In Boje, D.m., Gephart, R. P., and Thatchenkery, T. J. (eds.), *Postmodern management and organization theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp., 95-124.
- Calas, M. B., and Smircich, L. (1999). Past postmodernism? Reflections and tentative directions. *Academy of management*, 24(4), 649-671.
- Roethlisberger, F.J. (1945), The foreman master and victim of a double talk. *Harvard Business Review*, 23(3).