An analysis of the representation of organizational practices in a TV drama of Korea: Implications of public pedagogy for critical human resource development

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Abstract

This study analyzes a Korean TV drama and reveals that the drama conveys ideologies that privilege management over employees and normalize female workers to work harder than male workers.

Key words: Critical HRD, Public pedagogy, Popular culture, Informal learning

As the term "human resource development" implies, HRD is a discipline that values the learning of people who work collectively within organizations, whether its ultimate goal is improving performance or enhancing learning capacity (Watkins & Marsick, 2014). In this sense, it can be argued that the humanistic approach to human resource development is able to provide scholars and practitioners with sound insights and visions. It is believed that prioritizing the development of human resources is more important for individuals to reach their full potential, rather than solely focusing on unleashing expertise that is important for the organization. It suggests that the scope of HRD theory and practice should extend to "a concern for the health and humanness of our organizations, society, and the world as a whole" (Chalofsky, 2014: xlvi). However, the current mainstream of HRD emphasizes organizational effectiveness and productivity by linking learning with performance rather than with individual growth (Swanson, 2022). Bierema and Callahan (2014) contend that HRD's roots are based on humanistic philosophy. However, contemporary HRD has drifted from humanistic values and has been eroded by management discourse centered on performativity, productivity, and profitability. As the principles of humanistic philosophy are revived, HRD practices should be called upon to pay attention to individuals within organizations by acknowledging their diverse backgrounds and concerns. In a similar vein, critical human resource development (CHRD) is an alternative perspective that criticizes existing conditions and practices that serve management rather than individuals. It introduces and promotes the transformative potential of HRD interventions that seek democratic and just organizations (Bierema, 2010; Sambrook, 2014).

HRD is a practice for the people, by the people, and of the people. This nature of HRD indicates that it is necessarily value-laden because most people engaging in the practice have norms, beliefs, and desires. For example, management-biased practices can be regarded as evidence of the values and norms held by dominant organizational members. Then, we may ask a question: "Why can the voice of management wield dominant power?" Regarding this question, we might assume that it is because of the pervasive ideology that management's power is taken for granted in various organizational practices. If this is the case, it is imperative to understand how most organizational members acquired the management-focused ideology and consented to it without any attempt to contest.

Due to such ideology internalized by organizational members, the management's dominance throughout the organization becomes hegemony. As Brookfield (2005: 43) addresses, hegemony plays a role in "manufacturing consent," and it can be facilitated by education. In this manner, we may insist that the hegemony which legitimates the power of management within organizations is an outcome that results from various formal and informal learning opportunities, not only in the workplace but also from family, schools, communities, and even the media.
Hence, both employers and employees accept the asymmetrical relationships of most organizations as the status quo.

In this regard, among various opportunities for learning, this paper aims to explore the influence of popular culture, particularly a TV drama on constructing and shaping knowledge, values, norms, and expectations regarding organizational practices. For this purpose, this study analyzes a Korean TV drama that covers the organizational lives of workers in Korea. By doing so, this study attempts to show how a variety of organizational practices are depicted in popular media and how they can shape the public's understanding of these practices. This can consequently reproduce hegemonic relations within organizations. In that it is premised on the discourse of public pedagogy, which claims the pedagogical function of popular culture (Giroux, 2000), this paper suggests implications for the connection between public pedagogy and critical HRD.

**Critical HRD and Public Pedagogy**

In this section, Critical HRD that seeks more humanistic, ethical organizations, and public pedagogy that claims the pedagogical functions of popular culture are briefly presented as two theoretical assumptions for this study.

**Defining Critical HRD**

Most scholars acknowledge that the majority of HRD theory and practice have highly aligned with managerial interests and focused on organizational effectiveness at the expense of workers' interests, organizational equity, and justice (Bierema & Callahan, 2014; Valentin, 2006). However, it is imperative to see the pervasive HRD practices as contested terrain and examine which values are privileged in practices, while marginalizing other values. Otherwise, HRD practices could falsely legitimize hegemonic relationships between management and workers. A critical perspective on HRD, which is the core of critical HRD, pays attention to the ideological distortion of HRD practice and attempts to restore ethical, democratic, and humanistic organizations instead of performativity and effectiveness. However, it should be noted that critical HRD does not simply deny performativity itself. Rather, critical HRD urges caution not to over-rely on economic models and performance-enhancing interventions (Bierema, 2010).

It is a vital, critical HRD project that aims to examine the process of people's acquisition of unjust culture and systems. In this manner, Fenwick (2005) urges a critical analysis of how HRD reproduces power relations in organizations, asking questions about "who benefits" from HRD, and advocating for strategies that address gender and equity issues. In essence, critical HRD challenges the "hegemony of capitalism by opening spaces to question taken for granted assumptions and consider more carefully why and how learning is encouraged and facilitated in work organizations" (Sambrook, 2014: 150).

**Public Pedagogy**

Such influences of learning resulting from experiences with popular culture on organizational practice suggest the possibility of a relationship between CHRD and public pedagogy. The notion of public pedagogy is deemed to weave two threads together. The first thread is that it indicates educational practices that take place beyond schooling. Public pedagogy refers to "various forms, processes, and sites of education and learning that occur beyond the realm of formal educational institutions" (Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011: 4). It can be grasped as an attempt to understand learning potentials outside of formal educational contexts.
The second thread is that public pedagogy is a discourse that emphasizes the learning potential of everyday lives for challenging to schooling, which is an institutionalized educational practice dominated by ideologies. Public pedagogy is apparent in the places "where people actually live their lives and where meaning is produced, assumed, and contested in the unequal relations of power that construct the mundane acts of everyday relations" (Giroux, 2000: 355). By acknowledging the pedagogical capability of places and activities in everyday lives, the discourse of public pedagogy seeks to defend education that can secure the function of development of public good, civil rights, and social justice from the invasion of the ideology of the corporate world (Giroux, 2020). In this regard, public pedagogy is viewed as a discourse that pays attention to the educational potential of popular culture. In summary, public pedagogy can be conceptualized not only as a practice outside of schooling, but also as a discourse for critical and counter-hegemonic possibilities of learning experiences in everyday lives.

**Research Method**

The Korean TV drama being analyzed is "Mi-Saeng," which was produced based on an original webtoon (a digital comic) in 2015. It is the story of employees in a fictional trading company. It consists of a total of 20 episodes. The meaning of the title "Mi-Saeng" is the status for which survival is still not guaranteed. As the title indicates, it highlights the nature of the lives of most employees who have to constantly work for their own survival.

In order to reveal how the drama represents recurring organizational practices, I have analyzed it through the following procedure. First, I watched it just according to the developing flow of the drama, without any criticism or analysis. I was immersed in the ongoing plot and enjoyed the drama. By doing so, I was able to grasp the entire story of the drama. Secondly, I attempted to analyze the drama, paying attention to some significant parts of the drama. Since I already knew the story's overall plot, I didn't have to focus on the question of "what's happening here and what will happen next?" Instead, I watched it, asking, "What norms or assumptions are implicit in the story of the drama?"

While watching the drama, I took notes about my reflections and feelings regarding significant episodes. As qualitative writing itself is a means of analysis, I wrote some short journals about each finding (Polkinghorne, 1995). The short journals are a storied form of analysis. In order for the analysis to be valid, I tried to find the related episodes in the drama and connect them with my reflections and feelings. Furthermore, in terms of reliable analysis, I shared the journals with my Korean colleagues to confirm whether my analysis was in line with their experience of watching dramas.

**Findings**

The drama portrays two common ideological assumptions regarding organizational practices: the existence of an unequal relationship between management and employees, and the challenges that women face in organizational settings. Moreover, the drama provides an opportunity to contemplate the dichotomy between office work and manual labor.

**Reproducing Ideologies within Organizational Practice**

**Management – Employee relationship.** The beginning part of the drama is a scene of the presentation of interns. The interns, who have presented their ideas on the subject matter through a combination of practical experience, guidance from their superiors, and independent research. The significance of the presentation lies in the fact that it can serve as a determining
factor for the official hiring of the candidates by the company. The exercise of managerial power over employees is underscored by the fact that each presentation is assessed from the viewpoint of the organization’s management. While certain assertions made by interns may appear valid, their merit is contingent upon the approval of the management in order to receive credit. In the drama, some interns demonstrated their ideas creatively, however, the management dismissed their presentation as a ridiculous performance. Consequently, they were deemed unemployable. While watching this particular scene, it is common for viewers to overlook the asymmetrical structural dynamic between the management, who engage in critical commentary, and the interns, who are compelled to remain silent. The focus of the viewers is on the main characters who act as presenters and their ability to elicit favorable reactions from management towards their presentations.

**Different expectations for women in the workplace.** The employees in the trading company depicted in the drama is predominantly male, with only two female characters appearing throughout the entire drama. A woman whose name is "Yeong-i" is the only woman among the interns. She is described as an intern whose performance is much more outstanding than her male colleagues in areas such as knowledge, logical reasoning, presentation skills, and proficiency in foreign languages. The presence of a female deputy department head in middle management is a noteworthy occurrence, given the rarity of women in such positions. She is portrayed as a survivor in the masculine culture of the company. In the drama, she manages not only her own work in the company effectively but also the housework as a mother and wife. The drama highlights the challenges faced by women in balancing their responsibilities. It underscores the importance of effectively managing both domains to succeed in organizational settings. The image of these two women is internalized by viewers as a representation of the challenges encountered by working women in Korea. The drama conveys the idea that female employees need to exceed the performance of their male counterparts in order to thrive within an organization. Moreover, female employees, particularly those who are married, are burdened with household chores in addition to their professional duties, which is not the case for their male colleagues.

**Overcoming the False Dichotomy of Office Workers and Labor Workers**

In contemporary society, white-collar work, which refers to work in an administrative or office setting, is largely preferred over blue-collar work, which is typically associated with manual labor. Nowadays in Korea, a growing number of young people seek to be white-collar professions as opposed to blue-collar occupations. Within the context of the drama, the character "Sukyul" stands out as a distinctive figure due to his exclusive emphasis on the significance of blue-collar work. He cynically views white-collar work as a profession that is disconnected from the practical realities of the field. He argues that blue-collar work is experiencing marginalization, despite its importance. Nevertheless, the main character "Geurae" argues that the administrative environment in which white-collar work takes place is also another type of fields. Within a professional setting, individuals engage in knowledge-based tasks, including but not limited to planning, documentation, presentation, and negotiation. He stresses that both blue-collar and white-collar workers in the growth and success of an organization. It is imperative that these two groups of employees demonstrate mutual respect and supplement each other in order to improve overall organizational performance. This particular episode provides viewers with an opportunity to enhance their comprehension of blue-collar and white-collar occupations.

**Conclusion**
While it is possible to simultaneously enhance organizational performance and the well-being of individual employees, many common HRD practices within organizational contexts prioritize learning interventions as a means of improving organizational effectiveness. However, it is important to consider the potential impact of these interventions on the individuals within the organization. Critical HRD scholars advocate for the examination and critique of organizational practices that perpetuate inequality, discrimination, and exploitation. They emphasize the importance of raising awareness of these issues in order to promote more equitable and just workplaces. Public pedagogy emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the impact of popular culture in shaping individuals' perceptions and expectations regarding various aspects of work, such as the nature of work itself, the objectives of organizations, and the dynamics of employer-employee relationships. Given that critical HRD scholars challenge the prevailing cultural narratives surrounding organizations, it is pertinent to conduct an analysis and critique of the depictions of work and organizations in popular culture. Popular culture serves to legitimize the pervasive ideology surrounding organizational practices within capitalist societies. As Wright (2013) asserts, employees often incorporate their knowledge and experiences from popular culture into their work within organizations. Upon entering the workplace, employees are not blank slates, but rather individuals with pre-existing norms, ideas, and expectations that have been shaped by their exposure to popular culture.

According to the findings of this study, viewers tend to maintain the assumptions inherent in various organizational practices while watching TV dramas. The article presents prevalent notions regarding the unequal relationship between employees and management, as well as the distinct role expectations placed upon male and female workers. Furthermore, the drama offers viewers the chance to recognize the fallacious dichotomy between white-collar employees and blue-collar workers. By means of viewing and deriving pleasure from television dramas, individuals who are presently employed as well as those who aspire to be employed can develop knowledge, attitudes, and thoughts regarding the appropriate, moral, and ethical conduct expected of workers.

In this paper, I would argue that while popular culture and critical HRD are two distinct areas of inquiry, they are not mutually exclusive. Given that human resource development practices within an organization are multifaceted and inherently socio-cultural, achieving the vision of CHRD could be attained by critiquing and understanding of learning experiences that occur outside of organizational contexts. The examination of these learning experiences can offer HRD practitioners a valuable opportunity for critical reflection on the nature of organizational practices.

References