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Decolonising Management. Reflections of a Human Resource Practitioner from the Global South

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Abstract

This article takes a slight detour from this edition's theme – decolonising systemic practice – by suggesting that systemic practices can be used to decolonise dominant discourses, such as Western-centric management and its associated form of knowledge production. My views are voiced from an insider–outsider, intersectional positionality – a person from the Global South now working as a Human Resource Practitioner in the United Kingdom.

The article posits management and human resource management as Western in their cultural roots and neoliberal in their economic worldview and proposes that underlying assumptions embedded in these discourses have resulted in epistemic othering and subjugation on an international scale. It suggests that decolonising management could begin with making the paradigm shift from a diagnostic to a dialogical understanding of organising human systems. It holds up this epiphany as an example of embracing indigenous knowledge and practices. The article also suggests, through a case story, the use of a systemic practice known as Social GRACEs (Burnham, 1992), that systemic reflexivity and the re-constitution of language games are paramount for making such a paradigmatic shift to decolonised practice.

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Introduction

A few years ago, I wrote a paper for the *Voluntary Sector Review* entitled "Systemic Practice as an Alternative to Managerialism" (Goh, 2017), which proposed systemic practice as an alternative to the Human Resource Management approach to organising. In summary, I opined that Human Resource Management is based on a unitarist and neoliberal worldview (ibid, 2017) based on the hegemony of Anglo-Saxon knowledge production (Gantman, Yousfi and Alcadipani, 2015). I also posited managerialism, with its notion of leaders and followers, as a hierarchical ideology (Klikauer, 2013) and Human Resource Management as a unitarist discourse that creates a 'subjugated, less empowered follower class as the norm' (Wilson,

2014, p. 2). For most, this polarised leader-follower paradigm is our lived reality. Managerial discourse is so pervasive that even in democratically run countries, employees seemingly side aside their democratic ideals when going to work. With globalisation, this is now a worldwide phenomenon. A social consequence of the leader-follower paradigm is "epistemic othering" (Keet, 2014, p. 23), a phenomenon intrinsic to colonisation.

With the benefit of hindsight, my 2017 article was a call to decolonise Western notions of management through systemic thinking and practice. I was intrigued, therefore, to learn of this themed issue of *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice* that invites reflections about decolonising systemic practice. Given the foregoing, I have, unsurprisingly, chosen to be irreverent to the theme by suggesting that systemic practice can and should be seen as a means for decolonising dominant discourses, such as managerialism, that normalise and perpetuate forms of subjugation through its rules, conventions, assumptions and language games (Wittgenstein et al., 2009).

Intersectional positioning

I have been a global Human Resources practitioner for over 35 years. This experience has afforded me personal insights into this profession. As these are borne from my lived experiences, I know my views may be biased, but I would argue that knowledge is 'always mediated through the self' (DeLuca and Maddox, 2016, p. 286). In this spirit, my reflections, learnings, observations and epiphanies (Ellis et al., 2010) are offered not as truth claims but as a 'discursive resource' (McNamee and Hosking, 2012, p. xiii) for sense-making, in the hope of catalysing further reflections about decolonising managerial practice.

Various insider-outsider perspectives characterise my life experiences. I was born and grew up in Singapore, a former British colony. When Singapore gained independence from British rule on August 9, 1965, I became a citizen in this Southern country, which most commentators agree is an authoritarian regime (Rajah, 2012; Rodan, 2004), before emigrating to the United Kingdom in the early 1990s and making Human Resource Management a career here. In this light, I offer the narrative that I am speaking with the voice of someone who has lived in colonised cultures (including organisational culture, vis-à-vis Human Resource Management) historically predicated on unitarist forms of leadership and governance, which, despite recent rhetoric about diversity and inclusion, do not fully integrate diverse voices and perspectives. This observation speaks to the importance of mindfulness about positioning, particularly the importance of being alert to the culturally socialised/internalised notions of 'commonsense' that we receive to conform to and perpetuate structural oppression.

In discussing positioning theory Rom Harré (2012) says that "…not everyone involved in a social episode has equal access to rights and duties to perform particular kinds of meaningful actions at that moment and with those people" (Harré et al., 2012, p. 193). In their seminal work on the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM), Pearce and Cronen (1980) remind us that what we speak into and out of are unequal, co-constructed conditions based on multiple levels of context and meaning-making, subjected to both implicative and logical forces and creating multiple feedback loops. In this sense, language is representative and constitutive and is the social or 'creative' force through which we create relationships, rituals, social bonds and social rules. Though we manage and coordinate meaning through language, we are not equal players in the language game. For example, in an

organisational context, a blue-collar worker will have a different lunch break experience than a senior executive. What they eat, where they have access to, what they can afford, how long they have to eat and digest their food, etc., is different. Their experiences of the associated policies and rights (marketed as unifying and equitable) will also be markedly different. As such, the stories the managers and the workers tell about themselves about this experience will differ. This links to critical theorists' view that organisational systems are based on the centricity of leaders, and, by their logic, create a subjugated, disempowered follower class (Wilson, 2014, p. 2). Organisational scholar Barry Oshry describes human systems as populated by 'tops, middles and bottoms' wherein the identities of bottoms or followers tend to be constructed and often limited by the 'dominants' (Oshry, 2007, pp,199–204). As mentioned earlier, for Wittgenstein, social worlds are maintained through language games where rules, conventions, assumptions, and meanings are fixed to promote and perpetuate social realities and relationships (Wittgenstein et al., 2009). This said, pluralistic organising does not necessarily mean an inversion of hierarchy. Rather, it is a call to develop aesthetic and practical skills in managing power and an ethical commitment not to cross the line between authority and authoritarianism in any human system (Klikauer, 2015, p. 45).

Modelling Decolonising Practice in this Article

First, a caveat. Many ideas in this article are based on my unpublished doctorate research on the social consequences of non-profits becoming business-like (Goh, 2023). While my research is limited to managerialism in non-profits, it has insights for anyone wishing to explore organising from a prosocial perspective.

From the onset, I want to clarify that this article is not about people. There is a difference between managers and managerialism. The former are human beings, and the latter is an ideological approach to organising, with its epistemological assumptions and language game. As such, none of what follows is intended to pathologise, judge or totalise people in management roles. Instead, this is an attempt to point to, and critique an ideology that has been normalised in organisations and internalised by people (Clarke and Newman, 1997; Deem and Brehony, 2005; Doran, 2016; Enteman, 1993; Hvenmark, 2016; Klikauer, 2013). To avoid pejorative othering, I have used the technique of externalising from Narrative Therapy to separate ideological assumptions associated with managerialism from managers (Wallis, et al., 2011; White, 2007, White, 1989) in such a way as to avoid subject-object dualism and to make it possible to discuss the effects of neoliberal managerialism without blaming.

Neoliberalism

Human Resource Management is a neoliberal discourse in that it is associated with "market-driven capitalism" (Locke and Spender, 2011, pp. 14-17) that emerged in the 1970s as governments tried to deal with slow economic growth, high unemployment and inflation using neo-classical economic ideas. These ideas replaced "managerial capitalism", where there was a tacit acknowledgement of the role of government as a Keynesian stabiliser of the economy and a means of ameliorating some of the harsher results of the market economy (Doran 2016, p. 82-84). In Europe and America, this development resulted in a power struggle between the State and unions wherein the latter's power

was curtailed, welfare policies rescinded, financial markets deregulated, and privatisation of public services pushed through. While neoliberalism and managerialism are distinct phenomena, they are closely related in that managerialism is predicated on organising competitively along market lines, i.e., focussing on outputs and outcomes, measurement, quantification of outputs and performance management (Shepherd, 2018, p. 1670).

Some see this as an extension and intensification of neoliberalist thinking (Hanlon 2018) and argue that neo-managerialism is the organising arm of neoliberalism, involving governance through the enacting of technical methods imbued with market values (Lynch, 2014). Put another way, managerial capitalism has combined consumer capitalism in such a way that it has institutionalised market principles in the governance of organisations (Clarke et al., 2000).

While management was confined to the commercial sector, "what makes neo-managerialism new" is the "deployment of neoliberal beliefs to govern all organisations, governments and society as a whole" (Lynch, 2014, pp. 144-145). Peter Drucker pointed to this permeation of thoughts and beliefs when he said that 'the 20th century signalled a major transformation of society into a pluralist society of institutions wherein a managerial class took over from the family for accomplishing social tasks' (Drucker, 1974, p. 8). This was accomplished through justifying narratives, which became accepted as common sense. When repeated enough, this became accepted as the norm through what Michel Foucault (1982, p. 27) called 'the great anonymous murmur'. This concept is linked to hypernormalisation, a term introduced by filmmaker Adam Curtis in his documentary of the same name released in 2016. In this film, Curtis describes the process by which political leaders and institutions created simplified and artificial versions of realities to manage and control societies. This phenomenon is now further complicated by recent developments where some politicians present their worldviews as real and delegitimise others, using the slogan 'fake news' (Rajah, 2012).

Through such a normalising process, neoliberal ideology has become so pervasive, 'like a second skin that we no longer notice' (Wannenwetsch, 2008, p. 27). This makes it almost impossible to discuss the consequences of for-profit-driven managerialism without doing so through managerialism's rational logic. Gareth Morgan (2006, p. 211) refers to this as a 'psychic prison' – a social phenomenon where people unconsciously accept a particular worldview as reality, leaving little or no room for other perspectives or possibilities. Morgan (2006) uses this metaphor to explain how organisations socially construct and maintain specific values and beliefs (over others) through legitimising discourse. To transcend such a psychological 'prison', the systemic notion of reflexivity can help us consider how our taken-for-granted, socialised, internalised assumptions and language can perpetuate subjugation. Self and invitational reflexivity can also be a means for co-creating more inclusive and ethical social worlds.

Systemic Practice

Since writing the 2017 article, I have had several organisational roles that included responsibility for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) where I have used systemic thinking as a practical means of identifying how institutional norms and legacy practice have inadvertently created subjugated others. While critical scholarship has exposed and challenged self-evident and unproblematic ways of organising to reveal hidden power relations that marginalise some interests in support of others (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000) systemic practice complements such critical insights by proposing

dialogical and relationally responsive means for re-constituting meanings in a way that co-creates reflexive, ethical and inclusive practice (Krippendorff, 2008). It has a decolonising effect in that it invites us to 'see the world in terms of the connections amongst its many parts' by focusing 'on the interconnected, interdependent, and relational nature of human systems'. In this way, it eschews the imposition of a dominant (colonial) worldview by re-framing human systems as a collection of many realities — a "multiverse", rather than a "universe" (Campbell et al., 1994, p. 19). It is an ethics-based, relational way of looking at human systems that opens up "spontaneous, emergent, and collaborative responses to power and decision-making in research practices" (Simon and Chard, 2014, p. 4). Systemic practice is not confined to one method. Instead, it embraces forms of relating/organising that fall under the broad umbrella of social constructionism, therefore decolonising practice in the sense that it rejects singular truth claims in favour of collective sensibilities.

The Scientific Debate

A particular inspiration for my 2017 article was John Shotter's book *Conversational Realities,* where he posits that managers should reframe the hierarchical notion of managing by becoming "practical authors", working within their organisations to coordinate conversations that will lead to collaboration and productivity (Shotter, 1993). This dialogical approach is in contrast to the science-informed notion of management based on data collection, analysis, and diagnosis.

The European Enlightenment Movement has contributed to the contemporary view that humans are homo sapiens, capable of mastering their world through rational thought and scientific reasoning. These assumptions persist today and have led to the normalisation of an unequal world under the illusion that humans are homo sapiens- meaning wise or knowing. Arguably, this idea has created an individualist rather than communal notion of humanity. On the other hand, the majority world's conception of humans as homo narrans is more likely to co-construct humans are communal, storytelling beings. The phrase "homo narrans" comes from the Latin words "homo", meaning "human", and "narrans" meaning storytelling. Walter Fisher and Jerome Bruner proposed this concept. They argue that humans make sense through communal forms of narrative and storytelling, and that stories are an essential part of human communication, culture, and identity (Bruner, 1991; Fisher, 2021). The term highlights the central role of storytelling in human experience and emphasises the importance of understanding and reflecting on narratives that shape our beliefs, values, and behaviours.

Storytelling

Applied to organisational studies, this would mean treating workplaces as multi-voiced, story-telling, relational communities rather than objectively defined entities such as workforce or human resources. Indigenous scholars (for example, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, 2004; Jo-Ann Archibald, 2008; Nerrida Blair, 2008) have long emphasised the power of storytelling as a performance of decoloniality in qualitative research. Such a paradigm shift involves moving away from the idea that organisations are scientifically diagnosable entities to organisations as dialogical communities (Bushe and Marshak, 2014; Bushe and Marshak, 2009).

In his critique of scientific management, Boje (1995) used a theatrical production called Tamara to illustrate how human systems are complex, context-dependent, story-telling and dialogical.

According to Boje, Tamara is a play that originated in Los Angeles. It takes place in a huge set. Instead of remaining stationary, viewing a single stage, the audience breaks up into small groups that chase characters from one room to the next, from one floor to the next, even going into bedrooms, kitchens, and other chambers to watch multiple storylines as they unfolded. Because there are a dozen stages and a dozen storytellers, the number of storylines an audience could trace as they followed the actors

of Tamara is 12 factorial (479,001,600)! A polyphonic approach to organising moves us to consider that human communities are more like the Tamara play than a modern movie seen and told from a singular perspective. This approach challenges the idea that there is a singular, unified, coherent story that links organisational members together. Instead, organisations are more like the audience and actors of Tamara, wandering about, chasing different stories, exploring different plots to make sense of their unfolding experience, socially creating their realities and preoccupations. It illustrates how naturally fragmented, complex, and multivoiced human systems are. In this context, learning to live with ambiguity and the ability to co-author conversations is privileged over diagnostic forms of managing leadership (McNamee and Gergen, 1998).

Reflexivity

As previously mentioned, systemic reflexivity is a key concept for decolonising inherited language games. The term reflexivity is in vogue. However, definitions vary. It is worth, therefore, describing what I mean by the term. Reflexivity begins with acknowledging that presumptions and assumptions invariably shape and influence our thoughts and actions. In this context, it refers to making our system of knowledge (based on race, class, gender, nationality, age, etc.) transparent in any observation, interpretation, and decisions we make. Reflexivity is both a concept and a practice. It involves a commitment to cultivate awareness of, and to question our position, experience, values, beliefs and cultural background in our interaction with others in ways that do not push other voices to the margins (Trahar, 2009). This, as I have been arguing, can be considered a form of decolonising practice. When we practice reflexivity, we make ethical choices about how we think and act and hold ourselves accountable for the social realities our interactions create. Wanda Pillow (2010) argues, with reference to the field of qualitative research, that we need to expand our uses of reflexivity into the realms of uncomfortable reflexivity, problematising ideas of reflexivity as truth.

The following is a personal account of how good intentions about decolonising practice can be inadvertently counterproductive. The account is anonymised for ethical reasons.

> Just before the 2020s, many international NGOs were persuaded by the arguments for decolonising how international aid was carried out. Many iNGOs embarked on an exercise of decentralising their work. For some, this meant moving work done in Western Headquarters (resources, finance and decision-making) to regional hubs where aid was being delivered. As part of this exercise, one iNGO made the decision to replace Western Country Directors with local staff. The repatriation and local recruitment process took nearly a year to complete. However, not even eight months into the new Country Directors tenure, performance appraisals began to show that the local directors were

> underperforming. In practice, several Headquarters-based Directors were coming to me with complaints about the 'lack of competence' and 'underperformance' of their regional directors. A significant area of concern was the local directors not understanding or being able to perform fundraising activities such as writing compelling proposals, making 'good' presentations, and meeting the reporting requirements of Western institutional donors.

In my view, this is an example of why Western aid practitioners need to develop reflexive skills that foreground the effects of power, privilege and culture. It is also a lament about power and privilege associated with unitarist forms of leadership and managership. I once suggested using drama as part of a development project, only to be told that we were in the serious business of saving lives and that we didn't have time to play games.

Coming back to the account, most of the newly recruited local staff were subsequently dismissed and replaced by Western-trained international aid workers,

International NGOs, with good intentions, are continuing with efforts to decolonise their practice. However, I notice that this is being done at a practical level, without critically engaging with epistemological and ontological assumptions. This usually results in producing input, output, outcome, and impact dashboards that go into evaluation and monitoring reports to secure further funding. In my experience, these disembodied practices do not deal with the affective consequences on beneficiaries.

Off-the-shelf methods offered by well-meaning campaigners do not alter the power imbalance embedded in institutional practice and discourse. Systemic change comes from making space for reflexive thinking and practice and encouraging meaningful, in-the-moment, relationally responsive interactions. As mentioned earlier, reflexivity is an integral part of decolonising practice that is often missing. Apart from indifference from practitioners, different interpretations and approaches to reflexivity make finding examples of its practice unsurprising. For some, this is exacerbated because it is an under-defined and hollow concept (Townsend and Cushion, 2020, p. 3).

Fortunately, this is not so in systemic practice, where reflexivity has been pondered and written about widely. It is seen as an essential 'skill' for developing 'critical consciousness' and as a language for understanding and working within the complexity of relationships, which helps us understand why and what social worlds are created (Oliver et al., 2003, p. 2), and for noticing subjugating and oppressive practice. This systemic perspective sees reflexivity as the inquiry into relational reflexes – and the noticing of 'the effects that our behaviour with others is having, and might have" (Ibid, p. 2). When we practice reflexivity, we make ethical choices about how we think and act, and we hold ourselves accountable for the social realities these interactions create. Self-reflexivity is about cultivating a discerning awareness of how our own positioning within each conversation has consequences for ourselves and others. Invitational reflexivity is about inviting conversations in a way that facilitates making ourselves and others mindful of the purposes and consequences of our actions.

In the spirit of 'talking back' from a marginalised perspective (hooks, 2014), I would like to 'call out' the use of an organising method called Logical Framework in international aid and development as an instrument for propagating and maintaining imperialist practice. This is a ubiquitous management tool made popular by USAID, the United States Agency for International Development, in the 1970s. Amazingly, this management framework has remained the dominant form of organising international aid and development work despite criticisms from Global South practitioners that it is a Western-

centric, scientific approach to measuring success based on the imposition of standardised measures of performance that do not take account of local culture, judgement and experience; and where development actors are subject to neoliberal performance measures upon which they are rewarded or penalised (Muller, 2019, p. 4). This, it is argued, is a modern form of colonialism or imperialism. Scholars from the Global South have cynically called this approach "logic-less frame", "lack-frame", and "lock-frame" (Fushimi, 2018, pp. 3-8). Yet, it still remains the dominant discourse. This may have something, perhaps everything, to do with the power and privilege of Western donors. Critical theorists argue that by embracing neoliberal management, iNGOs have become the means for propagating and reinforming market discourse in developing countries (Knafo, Dutta, Lane, and Wyn-Jones, 2019).

Social GRACES

Many systemic practitioners find Burnham's 1992 work on the Social GRRAACCEESS (Gender, Gender identity, Geography, Race, Religion, Age, Ability, Appearance, Class, Culture, Caste, Education, Ethnicity, Economics, Spirituality, Sexuality, Sexual orientation) a useful starting point for deconstructing power relationships in therapy. This concept can also be usefully applied to the decolonising normalised hierarchical forms of organising. Mindfully naming and accepting aspects of difference allows people to explore more fully the influence of assumptions that may be invisible, unnoticed, or unconscious but with a view of co-creating human systems that genuinely incorporate difference. Burnham's list (which is meant to be added to) predicates human systems as multi-voiced and is a reminder to notice power and privilege at work in any form of relational practice.

In systemic practice, an emphasis on multiple voices replaces the managerial notion of individual rationality and leadership with "communal negotiation, the importance of social processes … the social practical function of language, and the significance of pluralistic cultural investments in the conception of the true and good" (Gergen and Thatchenkery, 2004, p. 238). This approach contrasts with managerial practice, where uniformity is often preferred to dealing with diverse viewpoints. One example of this is the convention where the leader or group of executives craft what they think should be the organisation's mission statement and values, and, having done so, attempt to impose it as a requirement for belonging. Employees are judged on how aligned they are with these statements. It is common practice to include adherence to these unitarily crafted statements as part of performance appraisals. Anecdotal evidence suggests that alignment vocabulary continues to be prevalent despite studies showing that treating difference and diversity as problematic rather than a social resource for success stifles rather than engenders inclusion (Milbourne, 2013).

Decolonising practice

It is argued that a systemic approach is inherently decolonising in its epistemological and ontological understanding of organisations as multivoiced, interconnected, dialogical, meaning-making and meaning-producing systems. This paradigm sees success as a communal dialogical, relational achievement, and change management as a dialogical process wherein new stories, images and common aspirations are socially constructed and reconstructed with the whole system. Proponents posit that dialogical practice is the "conscious intent to engage the whole system in dialogue and

synergistic relationships in such a way that: mental models are surfaced; new knowledge, structures, processes, practices, and stories are collaboratively created and shared; and diverse stakeholder voices and perspectives are heard" (Amodeo and Cox, quoted in Bushe et al., 2009, p. 361).

Drawing on the work of Foucault (Foucault, 1971, 1982, 1995, 2012), critical theorists have characterised managerialisation as market ideology colonising all aspects of humanity. It has become a container from which market values have gone viral – into private lives and societies at large (Deeks,1997). Notice also how neoliberal discourse has even appropriated the notion of subjectivity, for example, by using a person's desire for self-actualisation as a psychological form of control. "This marks a subtle twist in the cultural dynamic of managerial control: encouraging autonomous people to use their alleged independence to express their resourcefulness as well as to submit themselves to continuous self-scrutiny and audit in the name of accountability" (Costea et al., 2007).

The question for those interested in decolonising the professions, particularly management, is, 'How does decolonising dominant discourse happen?' As with all relational activity, change happens "one conversation at a time" (Scott, 2011). In such a heuristic approach, truth or truth testing is eschewed. Instead, dialogical, relational activities are communally performative, i.e., they involve creating space for organisation members to co-author (Shotter, 1993) life-giving conversations that lead to the co-creation of shared futures (Gergen, 2015). These conversations should be diversity-honouring in that they should be based on whole systems thinking, participation and the curation of systemic intelligence.

Decolonising managerialism

A helpful starting point for decolonising management can be found in the book, "Doing Critical Management Research" by Alvesson and Deetz (2000) where the authors offer a framework for understanding management approaches based on their worldviews. It shows why organising should be seen in the context of their underlying assumptions and discourse and their consequences on the social construction of workplace realities. Indeed, different ontological and epistemological assumptions beget different ideas about the nature of organisations and the role of leadership, managership and followership. In the following table, their notion of normative, interpretive, critical, and dialogic discourse has been adapted to highlight the consequences of different discourses; and how these can be reconstituted through pluralist vocabularies and language games.

Discourse	**Axiom**	**Purpose of Organising or Governance**	**Desired culture**	**Interventions**
Modern: Command and Control	Get people <u>to do</u> what leaders think is right	Close the gap between the individual and the required behaviour	Individuals reproduce 'correct' behaviour	Top-down goal setting Right-wrong

				measures and feedback Corrective reward and punishment processes
Late modern: Winning hearts and minds	Get people to <u>want to do</u> what leaders think is right	Align purpose with individual purpose through material or psychological incentives	Individuals reproduce 'correct' behaviour because they were motivated to 'feel good' about it	Regulate behaviour through engagement or incentives Focus on communications, i.e., 'sell' the plan to achieve 'buy-in' Get alignment through regulation Develop leaders to acknowledge others' human needs – emotional intelligence People who are seen as not aligned are deemed dysfunctional
(Post-modern) Systemic constructionism Collaborative engagement	Practical valuing of collegiality by encouraging pluralist forms of organising	Facilitate communities/networks for action for the greater good. Emphasis on	Joint and several purposes achieved (differences and diversity seen as an asset)	Appreciatively inquire into each other's purpose, motivations Leaders as co-

		relationships that foster connectedness, interdependence		author of conversations; and good at generating sense-making in the context of diversity and complexity. Create means for mutual accountability Broker conditions for collaborative activity Deal with and change negative relational patterns Rely on distributed leadership

Adapted from (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000)

The skills associated with decolonising managerialism include the ability to:

- Engender safe spaces for sense-making in the context of animated 'both/and' conversations that are often complex, ambiguous, and morally dilemmatic.
- Generate curiosity and inquiry about the effects of the taken-for-granted.
- Create a safe, no-blame culture.
- Co-create contextual decision-making in the face of competing shared values.
- Notice deficit conversations and co-author life-giving ones.
- Notice unhelpful vicious-circle patterns of behaviour/interactions and to co-create virtuous-spiral patterns of behaviour/interactions in its place.
- Co-create trusting relationships.

Henry Ford, who founded the automobile company that bears his name, was reputed to have said, "If you do things the way you've always done them, you'll get what you've always got". This could explain

the sticky nature of legacy in thinking and practice.

Decolonising systemic practice

There is a growing movement to decolonise management and organisational knowledge in favour of indigenous knowledge and practices. Proponents include 'decolonial feminists' who are calling for the transformation of 'heteropatriarchal, colonial, racist, epistemic, affective, cognitive and economic structures of organisation and power' (Jammulamadaka et al., 2021, p. 718). Unfortunately, this movement is, to date, on the periphery and a long way from displacing managerialism as the dominant discourse (ibid, 2021).

It is noted that systemic thinking, influenced by social constructionism, should not be exempt from decolonial critique, given its Western origins, privilege, power and biases. Creating sensitivity to colonising practice requires us to constantly question underlying assumptions that are historically, culturally specific, and contextually bound. A mitigating narrative, perhaps, is that social constructionism is epistemically and ontologically pluralist, with practitioners who are strongly committed to co-creating systemic intelligence (Allen, 2016). Nevertheless, this orientation may be experienced as the imposition of post-modern thinking on modernist cultures from the Global South. In this context, reflexivity acknowledges that power dynamics are inherent in any interaction, even when mutuality is sought (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). Power can manifest as a "physical shove, gentle persuasion" (Hosking et al, 1995, p. 60) or as psychological peril. Whilst it is impossible to eliminate power dynamics, an appreciative orientation can create space for mutual agency in ways that conversational partners can unconditionally "present their life situations in their own words and stories" (Kvale, 2006, p. 481). This can come with making a relational connection that comes from listening "with and into" each other's stories (Weingarten, 2015, p. 196), where epistemological and ontological views are treated as "discursive resources" for meaning-making rather than as infallible instruments for imposing objective truths (McNamee and Hosking, 2012, p. xiii).

Conclusion

The topic for this special issue is decolonising systemic practice. However, as a systemic practitioner from a former British colony, working under a unitarist model of management, I have made a case that systemic practice, with its philosophical commitment to ethical practice, its ecological perspective on human systems, and its emphasis on reflexivity, is a useful discursive resource for decolonising legacy assumptions embedded contemporary practice.

In the 1980s, neoliberal multinational corporations from America rebranded the Personnel function turning it into Human Resource Management. As the name suggests, it is based on market values – a discourse this article argues strips employees of what it means to be fully human in the workplace. Increasingly, leaders believe that people at work are not merely economic resources or assets, yet their organisations continue to have HR departments. In the spirit of reflexivity, this is an invitation to take the first step towards decolonising management by reconstituting the Human Resources Department as the People Team and for the term 'workforce' to be reframed as workplace community.

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