

**Influences on Professional Practice:
The HRD practitioner and their choice of learning style questionnaire**

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Social Sciences

by

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Richard James Waters. Influences on Professional Practice: The HRD practitioner and their choice of learning style questionnaire

Abstract

In an influential report, Coffield et al (2004) argued that the field of learning styles was dogged by increasing 'theoretical incoherence and conceptual confusion'. Sadler-Smith (1996, 2001), Curry (1999) and Rayner (2007) echoed these criticisms and Curry (1999) commented that the learning styles literature was plagued with a plethora of published papers, many of which contained methodological and experimental design flaws. With these criticisms in mind, the question as to how HRD practitioners identified and selected a learning style questionnaire (lsq) to use in their professional practice was considered relevant. This study used a triangulated research strategy to identify and explain factors that influenced these choices and had Bhaskars' Bases of Action model (1998) as an organising framework. The research demonstrated that from a wide range of lsqs available, that nearly 80% of HRD practitioners preferred to use one of only three of the most popular lsqs available. None of these fully met the quality criteria in Coffield et al (2004), namely demonstrating acceptable internal consistency, test-retest reliability, construct validity and predictive validity. Factors driving practitioner choice were identified through the research as including: lsq brand strength, experience based habits gained through using an lsq, economic and cognitive 'lock-in' associated with an lsq, practitioner's view of their own state of professional 'mastery' and their beliefs about how results are best delivered. Further insights included that the Myers Briggs Type Indicator was the most popular lsq and that there was only a limited knowledge of learning theories held by many practitioners. This research adds further to the debate about applied practitioners and their engagement with theory, research and evidence based practices. It offers a more dynamic model about practitioner decision making about, and engagement with, theory and research in support of their professional practice, than currently exists.

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1. Introduction

In broad terms this research project looked at the reasons why HRD practitioners do, or don't, draw on the body of HRD theory and research to inform their practice. For this research the use of learning styles questionnaires was used as the lens through which to view this particular issue but information on practitioner's awareness of learning theory in general was also addressed. There have been a number of commentators who have described the need for greater application of theory and research to improve professional practice. At one end of this debate was Ulrich (1997, p62) who lambasted HR practitioners for their reliance on the 'frou –frou of ...cute, popular and faddish HR trends'. A more measured view was that put forward by Gilley (2006, p 235) who argued that practitioners will avoid research until they understand the value it has in driving up both their personal and organisational performance. Finally, and at the other end of the spectrum to Ulrich are the likes of Stewart (2007, p95) who argued for greater connection between academic research into HRD and the work of practitioners with the opportunity afforded by better connected HRD research and practice being '...national, organizational and individual growth.' There have also been interesting developments in the application of evidence based practice, across a number of professions, and the call from some commentators for the HRD community to adopt a similar approach (Holton, 2004; Hamlin, 2007). The development of the 'practitioner-scholar' model that appeared to be emerging in the literature was also very relevant (Gilley, 2006, Moats and Mclean, 2009, Short and Schindell, 2009).

Torraco (2004, p183) argued for more research into the perceptions of HRD professionals about the role of theory in the development of the discipline and associated practice to help in closing the research – practice divide and one of the aims of this work was to respond to Torraco's call for greater research. The conceptual framework on which the research was based drew on the Bases of Action model (Bhaskar, 1998, p414.) A critical realist approach informed this study and so this research had the objective of identifying barriers, not previously identified in the literature, to the application of theory and research to the practice of HRD professionals. Such an approach therefore allowed a greater level of explanation about the mechanisms and causal powers that could inhibit or prevent practitioners drawing on research to inform their practice. The work will be valuable to those looking to further understand mechanisms that perpetuate the research – practice gap and in doing so identify ways and means of narrowing it, a move that Ruona and Gilley (2009, p 438) call for. It will also be of interest to those who are looking to enhance the professional skills and competence of HRD practitioners through professional educational activities.

The following 4 research questions were at the heart of this work:

1. What are the underlying mechanisms that encourage / prevent HRD practitioners habitually referring to theory and / or research evidence to inform their workplace practice?
2. Which, if any, learning style theories are being used to inform the workplace practice of HRD professionals?
3. What factors have influenced HRD professionals in their choice of a particular learning style instrument?
4. Which, if any, general theories of learning are known about and also being used to inform the workplace practice of HRD professionals?

In addressing these four research questions the thesis has been divided into 5 chapters. First, the literature review explored existing academic work on the different perspectives associated with Human Resource Development theory and practice, the general relationship between theory and practice and reasons why HRD professionals don't consistently engage with theory to underpin their practice. Bhaskar's Bases of Action Model, which has been used as an organising framework throughout the research, was also introduced and described. The chapter then looked at the literature on learning style questionnaires, which were the focus of this particular study, and concluded with a review of literature from the marketing field reviewing

topics such as brand power, brand loyalty, lock-in and skill based habits. The second chapter opened with a brief review of the ontology and epistemology that underpinned this research and then moved to a description of research methods employed, namely the semi-structured interview and the on-line survey. The Results chapter then presented the findings of this research which are explored in further detail in the Discussion chapter. Finally, the Conclusions chapter has drawn the various strands from the discussion together, presents a model that helps explain the issues arising from the research and suggests areas for further research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This research project looked at the application of theory and research evidence to the practice of HRD specialists, with a particular emphasis on the use of learning styles questionnaires. The following review of literature therefore comprised of three distinct and separate areas. The first looked at the contested field of HRD and associated theory, the nature of theory and research and how and why it influenced, or otherwise, the activities of HRD practitioners. This part of the review included a broad discussion about the literature but concentrated specifically on the literature associated with this topic from the HRD sphere. A model of action was then introduced, based on Bhaskar (1998), which provided a structure to help organise and aid understanding of the issues that had been identified previously. From this brief analysis there appeared to be a deficiency in the coverage, within the HRD literature, relating to issues preventing the greater adoption of theory to practice. This deficiency was tentatively addressed and suggestions as to its nature posited.

The second part of the literature review concentrated on the 'lens' for this research work, namely learning style questionnaires and their associated theories. The review looked in some detail at a number of the more recognised learning styles questionnaires, some of the controversy surrounding them, and their application in practice.

The third section covered a number of potential reasons and explanations for why practitioners don't fully engage with research when considering the use of learning style questionnaires. Factors such as 'lock-in', brand power and brand loyalty were introduced and their potential impact on the decision making process was further explored.

Finally, the separate sections of the review were drawn together and the overall relationship between the review and the research questions under consideration were made explicit.

2.2 Definitions

To start it was considered important to set the wider context for this work and so a short review of the literature about the meaning and practice of HRD was necessary. In a review of theoretical perspectives on HRD, McGoldrick, Stewart and Watson (2001, p344) stated that:

‘The process of defining HRD by academics, researchers and practitioners is proving to be frustrating, elusive and confusing’.

The question had to be asked as to why this was the case. McGoldrick et al (2001 p 346-347) identified a number of different philosophical and theoretical perspectives on the purpose of HRD and argued that there was no consensus as to the conceptual-theoretical identity of HRD and attributed this, partially, to the numerous 'root disciplines' that underpin HRD. They

identified these as including: adult education, instructional design, performance technology, psychology, business and economics, sociology, cultural anthropology, organization theory, communications and human relations theories. The problem of definition, without such consensus, meant that there was a number of different and competing perspectives developed as to the nature of HRD. Holton (2002, p206) provided a classification for some of these different perspectives and labelled them as: a) learning perspective – focussed on enhancing individual learning; b) learning systems perspective – focussed on both performance based learning and organisational wide learning; and finally, c) performance systems perspective – focussed on individual performance improvement and system wide performance improvement. To this mixture another perspective has been added, namely a more holistic perspective, which viewed HRD impacting, and being impacted by, factors outside of the organisational system and operating at the national and regional level (see McLean, Osman-Gani and Cho, 2004). In fact Lee (2007) went even further in this analysis, identifying factors such as global, technological, social and climatic changes that, she argued, had impacted both the nature of work and our experience of our working (and social) lives, with consequences for the meaning and practice of HRD. In a comprehensive summary of the debate McGuire, Garavan, O'Donnell and Watson (2007, p131) offered a taxonomy of research into HRD and presented a model identifying 8 different perspectives on HRD, organised into 4 meta-perspectives, namely the Psychological, Community / Societal, Systems and Language meta-perspectives.

However, the debate typically coalesced around whether HRD was about individual learning or about organisational performance (Barrie and Pace, 1998, p 40; Holton, 2002, p 199). Sambrook and Stewart (2005, p77) identified the latter perspective as the predominant model in the US, and more widely, which was characterised by the following definition of HRD from Swanson (1999):

‘... a process of developing and / or unleashing human expertise through organization development and personnel training and development for the purpose of improving performance at the organizational, process and individual / group levels.’

Swanson went on to liken HRD to a three legged stool with the legs (the underpinning disciplines) being economics, psychology and systems theory all of which resting on a ‘rug of integrity’. The thrust of Swanson’s definition, and the associated three legged stool metaphor, was a performance driven view of the purpose of HRD with a particular emphasis on organisational performance and, ultimately, economic impact defined in terms of resource allocation, process efficiency and optimal (monetary) returns (Swanson, 2008, p 765). This perspective was echoed by many workers and had at its core the work of McLagan and her work in defining the professional competencies for the American Society of Training and Development (ASTD) (see McLagan, 1989).

However, the other perspective, that HRD should be more concerned with learning than organisational performance was put forward by commentators such as Barrie and Pace, 1998. In their influential paper they critiqued the view that HRD should be primarily performance focussed and argued that organisational effectiveness, in its broadest sense, can be best enhanced by the encouragement of learning, as a form of liberal education, rather than the behavioural control mechanisms that they argued underpin the performance paradigm proposed by the likes of Swanson. This perspective offered some interesting opportunities for further examination going beyond the idea that HRD was only concerned with individual learning. For example, the argument that the performance paradigm had elements of control raised concerns about the unequal power relationship inherent in the 'labour process' and the impact of HRD practices on individual identity and conceptions of self within the workplace and more broadly (see Turnbull and Elliott, 2005). This more critical approach to the understanding of HRD, viewing it in the wider socio-political context, attracted increasing attention from scholars as demonstrated by the publication of texts on the topic such as that by Elliott and Turnbull, 2005.

It must also be asked whether it is appropriate to accept such a heavily USA centric view of the meaning of HRD? McGoldrick et al (2002, p 11) and Chalofsky (2007) alluded to a growing difference in understanding of HRD by scholars in the US when compared to those based in Europe, whilst McLean (2006) summarised a number of articles about different 'world views' that influenced the understanding and practice of adult learning in the workplace.

This diversity is a richness that is missed within the performance paradigm and which echoed criticisms of it made by Barrie and Pace (1998).

To summarise, there was no agreed definition of HRD and in actuality there were competing perspectives about what it meant ranging from an individual view, grounded in humanistic principles, through a more human capital perspective aligned with the organisational performance paradigm of HRD through to more contemporary perspectives looking critically at the socio-political aspects of HRD in practice (see McGuire et al, 2007). This study did not align itself neatly with one of the competing perspectives about the nature and practice of HRD but was most attuned to the 'evidence based perspective' as identified by McGuire et al 2007. They identified the ontological assumptions behind this approach as dualist, valuing both realist and relativist approaches, and accepting of evidence from any epistemology. This research study tended to be aligned with these principles. They went on to describe the perspective as being:

'The body of generalised knowledge or context and situation-specific findings derived from academically robust and rigorous and relevant research used to inform, shape and / or evaluate evidence based HRD practice'. (McGuire et al, 2007, p 125)

The outcome of this research ultimately described the practice of HRD practitioners and reflects, in many ways, their own perspective on HRD albeit recognising that the research was probably of more interest to those with a

'performance' orientation towards understanding HRD. With this in mind it was worth turning to what was meant by the term HRD practitioner.

HRD practitioner appeared to be a fairly straight forward title, and so defining the term should have been straight forward, but it was apparent in the literature that the meaning of the term was also still being debated. For example Grieves and Redman (1999, p 81) stated that the role of the HRD practitioner lacked precision due to the HRD discipline not being properly defined and in his paper on the research – practice gap Short (2006, p 343) identified that there were a 'medley' of terms used to describe the various HRD 'stakeholders' in this area including terms for 'practitioners', 'academics' and 'researcher-practitioners'. Short (2006) went on to state that these terms were rarely, if ever, defined but he believed they tended to suggest a degree of mutual exclusivity. However, Gilley (2006) did draw a loose distinction and suggested that there were two types – namely the traditional HRD practitioner and the HRD scholar –practitioner. He described the former as being primarily tactical and who saw training as an end in its own right and went on to suggest that the majority of these HRD 'traditionalists' did not link practice to sound theoretical principles. He argued that this meant that such practitioners were probably unable to distinguish between effective practice and the latest 'quick fix' fad in the field and he argued that, ultimately, such traditionalists would be unable to support the enhancement of organisational effectiveness (Gilley, 2006, p 236). In comparison, he suggested that the scholar-practitioner was more strategic in approach and would use research to inform and improve organisational decision making and thus enhance

effectiveness (Gilley, 2006, p 237). However, reading Gilley's text one is left with an impression that the term 'HRD traditionalist' was being used pejoratively by Gilley and, as such, his definition of HRD practitioner was not used for this research. However, the broad concept of the scholar-practitioner was interesting, and one that appeared to be gaining ground in the recent HRD literature (for example Moats and Mclean, 2009, Ruona and Gilley, 2009) and will be returned to later.

Without an appropriate definition for the term HRD practitioner it was decided to allow individual participants to define themselves as HRD practitioners, or otherwise, based on their own conceptualisation of the term and their own perception of their professional identity and their interpretation of the meaning and practice of HRD. Participants were encouraged to take a broad view as to the meaning of HRD, and of being a practitioner in the field, because as McLean and McLean (2001) argued the definition of HRD is influenced by context, organisational structure and prevailing country values and culture. With this in mind it was deemed appropriate to allow participants to identify themselves, positively or otherwise, as HRD practitioners in the widest sense and within their own contextual understanding of HRD, particularly as the participant population was international in nature. This also allowed individuals to identify themselves in terms of related specialisms, such as organisational psychologist or consultant. The intention was to provide access to the widest 'church' of HRD practitioners, whether they perceived themselves directly as such or not, whilst also providing boundaries as to who could, and should, contribute to the research.

This issue of professional identity was not one that was pursued in depth here, but it is worth briefly noting some of the relevant literature as it will be referenced again later. Sachs (2001) described the nature of professional identity of teachers during a period of significant change and argued that such identities were shaped by the prevailing discourses surrounding the profession at that particular time. She also recognised the social construction of professional identity and suggested that Wenger's (1998, p149, quoted in Sachs) five dimensions of identity were relevant when trying to understand the formation of a professional identity. Wenger (1998) listed these dimensions of identity as: 1) negotiated experience; 2) community membership; 3) learning trajectory; 4) nexus of multiple memberships; and 5) the relationship between local and global 'constellations'. These dimensions echoed earlier work by Argyris and Schön (1974 p 147) who described the characteristics of a profession as including: 1) a binding ethical code, a defined set of skills and techniques; 2) a mechanism to limit membership of the profession; and 3) a shared theory between members about how the profession fits into, and helps, the surrounding society. The importance of networking and social capital for identity and success as an HRD practitioner, which could be seen as a further extension to Wenger's model above, had also become more prominent recently (Gubbins and Garavan, 2005, Storberg-Walker and Gubbins, 2007). Stets and Walker (2000) provided an account of the similarities and differences between identity theory and social identity theory in which they recognised the differing units of analysis between these two theoretical perspectives but argued that the similarities between both theories were far greater than the differences and so proposed

a unification of these two theoretical models. Augoustinos and Walker (1995, p98) also identified the similarities and differences and defined personal identity as ‘...referring to the qualities and characteristics we see in ourselves’ whilst they also viewed social identity as ‘the part of the individual’s self-concept that derived from their knowledge of their membership of a social group together with the value and emotional significance of that membership’. What this did was to bring in the role based perspective of identity theory with the group influenced perspective of social identity theory and helped provide a clearer insight into how the complexity of a professional identity could develop.

The literature around identity was rich and a deeper review beyond the boundaries of this research but needless to say there were multiple facets to professional identity and how the individual constructed their own identity. On this basis, and as mentioned previously, it was decided to allow participants to decide for themselves whether they were HRD practitioners, or not. Whilst there was no ‘perfect answer’ to this conundrum the approach described above was considered pragmatic and practical.

2.3 The Nature of Theory, Research Evidence and Practice

To begin this section it is necessary to define key terms to ensure a consistency of understanding throughout.

Knowles, Holton and Swanson (2005, p10) defined a theory as a '...comprehensive, coherent and internally consistent system of ideas about a set of phenomena'. Wacker (1998, p 363) identified the four following components that, he argued, are generally accepted by academics as those underpinning a definition of theory: 1) that theory will include definitions of terms or variables; 2) a domain is identified where the theory is applicable; 3) relationships between variables are identified; and 4) specific predictions about variables are possible. Wacker did not provide his own definition of theory but alluded to these four components as being fundamental to such a definition.

Standard definitions of theory tend to make connections to theory and practice. This can be seen, for example, in the following definition from the on-line English Oxford dictionary (accessed 21/8/07). Theory was defined as a '... supposition or a system of ideas intended to explain something, especially one based on general principles independent of the thing to be explained', Practice was defined either as '...the actual application of a plan or method, as opposed to the theories relating to it', or '...the customary way of doing something...' whilst Evidence was defined as '...information or signs indicating whether a belief or proposition is true or valid.' By considering these three definitions it seemed reasonable to suggest that the logical sequence should be theory development, leading to evidence, which informs appropriate practice. However, whilst this seemed a reasonable assumption it will demonstrated later in this section that there were mismatches at the interface of the various stages of this simple model.

Swanson (1997, p 14) offered a model of the relationship between theory, research and practice as described below in Fig. 1. Swanson argued that this model – with its four domains – does not presume any relative value of a particular domain to the profession of HRD and he also stated that exchanges between these domains are in fact multidirectional. The model was, in itself, interesting and demonstrated the possible linkages in this ‘...vital cycle that allows ideas to be progressively refined as they evolve from concepts to practices and from practices to concepts’ (Swanson, 1997, p 13).

However, what Swanson did not do was to take the model and explain why this ‘vital cycle’ did not, in the vast majority of cases, work as fluidly as he suggested. There were suggestions in his writing, and that of many other commentators (for instance Jacobs 1997, Kuchinke, 2004, Short, 2006), that some of the root cause for this problem included a mismatch between the needs and expectations of the ‘academic’ and ‘practitioner’ communities, a lack of investment by organisations in long term research projects and the inability of ‘positivist’ research to add much insight, or meaningful data, to organisational decision makers. As stated these shortcomings, or variants on them, were often cited as reasons for the ‘vital cycle’ to be anything other than self-perpetuating. However, other sources suggested that the issue was even more complex than that alluded to above and this has been detailed further throughout this literature review.

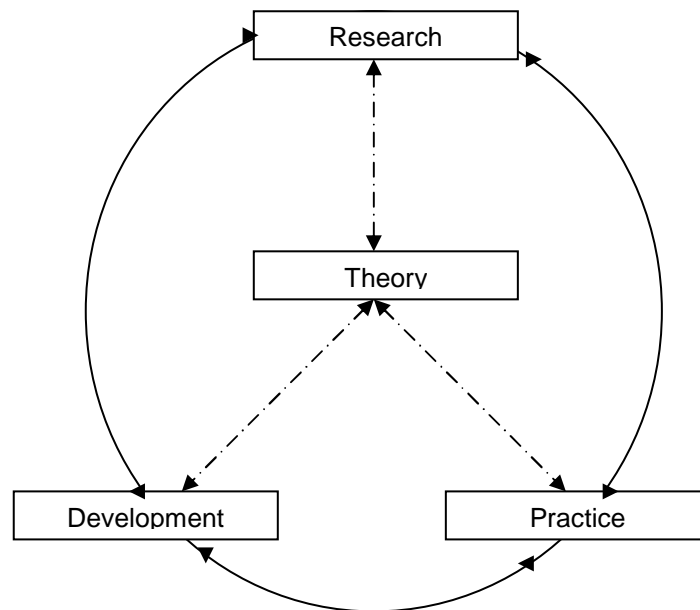


Figure 2.1 Theory-Research-Practice-Development Cycle Model, Swanson (1997)

2.4 Understanding the Academic – Practitioner Gap: A General Overview

Kurt Lewin’s famous quote, ‘... there is nothing more practical than a good theory’, is referenced in, amongst many other places, Vansteenkiste and Sheldon (2006, p 63) who described how a theoretical position on self-determination could be aligned with an applied practice of motivational interviewing by clinical psychologists to the benefit of both client and psychologist. Whilst the setting of clinical psychology was removed from this particular study the general sentiments were still valid. The following section provides a brief overview of the general literature on the issue of research utilisation and the academic / practitioner gap and sets the scene for a later, more detailed, analysis of the issues from the HRD literature.

Rynes, Bartunek and Daft (2001) reviewed the literature regarding the gap in knowledge transfer between practitioners and academics and suggested that there had been a significant debate as to why there appeared limited transfer between practitioners and academics. Within their review they identified a number of reasons why this was the case and suggested reasons, including differing frames of reference, between academics and practitioners; separate values and ideologies held by the differing communities; differing goals that the two sides had for the output of research; different timeframes in which research needed to be delivered; and finally, different perspectives on how 'variables' should be manipulated through research (Rynes et al, 2001, p341). Looking at these points it could also be argued that they demonstrate different ontological and epistemological positions held between and within these communities, the consequences of which could further 'muddy the waters' of communication between practitioners and academics. For example, Latham (2007) argued that the academic community had a particular responsibility to ensure that research was applicable to practice and that appropriate communication, by scholars, with practitioners took place. He argued that without both these in place then researchers would be ignored. He wrote '...unless researchers want to be dismissed as irrelevant by organization decision makers, they must take responsibility for specifying how the knowledge they produce and disseminate can be implemented' (Latham, 2007, p 1028). To counter this possibility Latham (2007) offered 10 recommendations for encouraging the greater transfer of knowledge between the communities. Interestingly, his first recommendation was what he labelled as 'leading with our strength' (Latham, 2007, p 1028) which he described as

‘... the key strength of our field is to conduct empirical research’. The reference to empiricism already assumed a certain epistemological position that he believed was held by ‘practitioners’. However, was this appropriate? For example, Easton (2002) argued that within the field of marketing the dominant paradigm was realism rather than empiricism / positivism and Mingers (2004) made a similar argument for research in the area of Information Systems whilst Indick (2002), Johnson and Cassell (2001) and Symon and Cassell (2006) argued that developments in psychology in general, and work psychology in particular, had been hampered through over reliance on a positivist orientated research paradigm. Looking more specifically at the area of HRM / HRD it was also worth referencing the research undertaken by organisations such as the Corporate Leadership Council (CLC) for their subscribing members. On the CLC’s website they stated that their research services were ‘... to conduct quantitative analyses benchmarking strategy effectiveness and to study the frontier practices of the world’s leading organizations’ (accessed 8/4/08). As an example of this in 2005 the CLC published two volumes of research into talent management – one of which had a strongly quantitative approach whilst the other was very much orientated towards case-study based research. This demonstrated the differing needs and expectations that practitioners have for research – in other words that empirical research is not necessarily the default that Latham (2007) seemed to suggest.

Exploring another of these issues, the competing frames of reference, in more detail helps to identify the complexity of some of these issues identified

above. Shrivastava and Mitroff (1982) were referenced in Rynes et al (2001, p 340) for their work on the assumptions held by organisational decisions makers and their impact on research utilisation. Looking at Shrivastava and Mitroff (1982, p 20) further it could be seen that they identified five different components of 'frames of reference' that were held by academic researchers and organisational decision makers. These components were listed as the: cognitive elements; cognitive operators; reality tests; cognitive maps of the domain of investigation; degrees of articulation; and finally, metaphors. Whilst a detailed description of these five components was not considered necessary here, it was worth making the point that these components framed fundamental assumptions about research. In conclusion to their paper, they argued that researchers needed to challenge their own basic assumptions about the meaning of research in order to enhance the adoption and utilisation of organisational research in the organisational setting.

Another perspective that illuminated this further was that of the internal defence mechanisms that Argyris (1995 p 20) identified with single loop learning and individual's prevailing 'model 1 theories-in-use' about action (Argyris and Schön, 1974). Argyris attributed the reasons why successful 'professionals' found difficulty in learning from past mistakes, and also the willingness to challenge their deeply held ideals, on internal cognitive defence mechanisms (Argyris, 1991, 1996). He argued that this was an attribute of single loop learning that he suggested could be remedied by the application of double loop learning, and the associated model 2 theories-in-use, within the organisational setting. Why should this be a barrier to the

transfer of theory and research into practice? Argyris (1996) identified the issue of defensive reasoning as the problem – due to professionals drawing on tacit knowledge and understanding to support their own position and thus ignoring other perspectives. This position appeared to be supported by the ‘frames of reference’ issues identified by Shrivastava and Mitroff as outlined above. In fact Argyris and Schön (1974, p 79-80) identified four key assumptions that they suggest individuals operating with a model 1 i.e. defensive mind set, hold. They were: 1) It is a win / lose World that individuals inhabit; 2) other people behave according to model 1 assumptions; 3) rational behaviour is the most effective; and 4) It is intolerably risky to publicly test assumptions. By comparing these characteristics with the components of frames of reference suggested by Shrivastava and Mitroff’s it could be argued that they inhabit similar ‘cognitive’ territory within individual researchers and practitioners.

Argyris and Schön also proposed a model 2 mind set which had core principles including that the mind set was not ‘self-sealing’, did not prevent the on-going testing of assumptions and also actively encouraged the development of personal insight and learning, all of which was underpinned by the availability and use of valid information (Argyris and Schön, 1974, p86). Whilst looking at model 2 in detail was also beyond the needs for this review it was recognised that Argyris and Schön argument for a changing organisational environment and individual behaviour to support model 2 thinking. They argued (Argyris and Schön, 1974, p 91) that individuals that operated in this way would be more open to discussion about their own

theories in use, in fact, would be more inclined to want to confront and test their own thinking in order to ensure its validity.

Rynes et al (2001, p 341) suggested that the exhortations of Shrivastava and Mitroff, Argyris and Schön and their contemporaries, had not been well heeded but they also noted that there had been recent political and economic changes that were driving a renewed look at the issue of the academic – practitioner gap. The argument they posited was that due to increased global competition, the pressure on organisations to perform had intensified and so organisational practitioners had become more responsive to any ideas – academic or otherwise – that they considered could enhance organisational performance. They also identified public policy and taxation changes that encouraged greater academic-practitioner collaboration as well as reduction in organisational cost bases, through downsizing corporate research departments, resulting in greater organisational reliance on publicly funded or supported research to meet their research needs. Rynes et al (2001 p 341-2) also argued that the pressures on academics had been transformed significantly with the need to bring greater ‘private sector’ money into Universities, to compensate for a relative decline in public funding, increased competition from private universities for students and competition from consultancies for research funds.

Mohrman, Gibson and Mohrman (2001) argued that collaborative research, with practitioner involvement and joint results analysis, via research forums, challenged the academic / practitioner divide whilst more formalised

practitioner / academic partnerships had also been promoted as a mechanism to help bring greater alignment and understanding between the practitioner / academic communities (Hamlin, 2007). However, many commentators saw negatives as well as positives in such partnership models (Rynes et al, 2001, p 341-342) and, although Mohrman et al. (2001) offered some evidence of the efficacy of their approach, there was insufficient evidence to argue whether such developments had affected a greater convergence and knowledge transfer between academic and practitioner communities.

Having introduced some of the key issues identified in the general literature on the barriers to the transfer of research to / from academics and practitioners it was appropriate to look at evidence for this from the specific HRD literature.

2.5 Theory, Research Evidence and the HRD Practitioner

The following section looks at the literature surrounding the application of theory and research evidence to the activities of HR Development practitioners. Having previously introduced some of the general literature on this topic it was now appropriate to look at specific literature of the subject in focus, namely HRD. Whilst it could have been argued that concentrating on this one group was a narrow confine it was, in fact, absolutely relevant to this study.

Whilst acknowledging Swanson (1997) and his 'vital cycle' for research and practice it was necessary to ask whether such a virtuous cycle was nothing more than an ideal state that was unlikely to be realised in practice. For instance, Ulrich (1997, p 62) criticised HR professional who adopted, what he described as '...cute, popular and faddish HR trends' and went onto argue that HR practitioners needed to understand the theory, research and application of ideas so that they could be applied in an appropriate and value enhancing way. It had been more than 10 years since Ulrich made this critique of HRD professionals so the question remains as to whether the contemporary literature demonstrated any discernable trend away from this? Whilst there was a growing literature, from across a number of fields, that described how theory and research moved from the realm of the academic to the realm of the practitioner, St Clair (2004, p 225) suggested that this was primarily dealing with normative perspectives on what the general research / practice relationship should have been rather than what the reality actually was. He went on to state that that there was, in fact, very little data in the literature on the actualities of this relationship.

When looking more specifically at the HRD profession, Berger, Kehrhahn and Summerville (2004, p403) asked the question 'Is HRD research influencing HRD practice in any meaningful ways?' and based on their review of the literature suggested an optimistic response was '...to some extent'. However, Gilley (2006, p 235) suggested there was a need to understand why there was a 'practitioner – scholar' divide whilst Torraco (2004) described the importance of theory to the on-going establishment of HRD as

an academic discipline and also suggested that both researchers and practitioners shared responsibility for developing good theory in order to guide professional practice. Torraco (2004, p 184) suggested that there was a need for researchers to understand the requirements that HRD professionals had for theory in their practice and he went on to suggest that research was needed into the perceptions of HRD professionals about the role of theory in the development of the discipline (Torraco, 2004, p 183) whilst Gilley (2006, p 235) argued that research would be 'avoided' by practitioners until they realised the importance of research for both organisational performance enhancement and also their professional credibility. Argyris and Schön (1996, p 34-35) offered an interesting perspective on the relationship between researchers and practitioners and argued that the relationship was governed by a 'Veblenian bargain' (see Schön, 1987) where practitioners brought their problems to researchers, who through their expert knowledge, advised practitioners on ways to solve such problems. However, Argyris and Schön (1996) argued that this whole approach was fraught with issues and that the tendency for researchers to ignore the practitioners capabilities in organisational inquiry was, of itself, a barrier between the two sides. In response to this issue they offered a model of collaborative action research that they argued would enhance the researcher / practitioner interaction. Berger et al. (2004, p 403) went further and argued that the application of research to practice is one of the most pressing issues across a broad number of disciplines, including HRD but they also suggested that there were barriers that kept the gap between research

and practitioner application in place. These barriers were of significance to this research and have been described in more detail below.

2.6 Barriers to the Application of Research to Practice

Berger et al (2004) argued that the following were barriers to the successful adoption of research to the work of the HRD professional: 1) that research utilisation, or the degree to which research findings could actually inform practice, was limited; 2) organisational 'attitudes' towards research based practice could be negative, due to the differing timeframes that academics and practitioners operated within, and this significantly impacted organisational decision making processes; 3) that many practitioners were unable to meaningfully translate research outputs into tangible practical application; and 4) that practitioners often had difficulties in accessing appropriate research findings. It could be asked if these were the causal mechanisms that influenced HRD practitioners in the use of theory and research in their practice and if so, whether they were an exhaustive set? Short (2006) argued that as well as the above there were other issues at play. From the 'academic' side he suggested that research tended to be: narrow in focus and typically conducted within a positivist framework; regularly lacking in relevance to the needs of HRD practitioners; and that research tended to be disseminated in ways that were not likely to influence practitioners. Lawler (2007) made similar observations in his paper on why HR practices weren't evidence based. Another dimension was the actual volume of published material in the HRD field that was considered

problematic for practitioners to navigate - what Sleezer and Sleezer (1997, p191) described as an exploding information base within HRD.

From the practitioner side he claimed that problems included: lack of time to consult scholars on issues due to the short term imperatives for action; echoing Berger et al (2004) that practitioners had negative attitudes towards research and limited appreciation of the need for evidence based practice; and significantly, a lack of competence on behalf of the HRD practitioner in the ability to understand, and use, research to support their practice. Interestingly, whilst looking at the requirements to be accredited through the Human Resource Certification Institute (the assessing body associated with the Society for Human Resource Management) Cascio (2007, p1010) described the requirement for competence in both qualitative and quantitative skills as core but that they were not being assessed in anyway throughout the accreditation system. Without such skills then the ability for practitioners to engage with research was obviously reduced. Gilley (2006, p242) offered a different perspective and argued that the HRD Academic community had developed a 'Tower of Babel' of technical language that mystified the research activity and in doing so excluded the HRD practitioner from participation, whilst Torraco (2004, p184) argued that practitioners equated the terms theory with theoretical and that the latter was perceived as 'impractical' and therefore not worthy of consideration. Short (2006) also suggested that there needed to be greater interaction between 'HRD Organisations' – meaning professional bodies, communities of practice, networks, academic communities and other research based organisations in

order to provide appropriate opportunities for practitioners to access meaningful research. Drawing on Agyris and Schön (1974) it could be argued that where there was a conflict between the professional identity of the HRD practitioner – say through their perceptions of being a member of a local ‘HRD community’ – and the willingness to engage and adopt research based evidences then defensive reasoning associated with model 1 type theories-in-use would come into play.

There were a number of potential barriers that have been identified above and in order to clarify and make sense of them, it was useful to think in terms of an organising model that helped categorise the different barriers (or enablers) to the application of theory and research HRD practice. In a compelling account, Bhaskar (1998, p 414-415) identified ‘five bases of action’ which he argued were necessary for instigating action. Bhaskar provided a model to demonstrate the relationship between these bases of action with an individual’s personal values and theories. This model (Fig. 2.2) helped in the conceptualisation and categorisation of the barriers identified above.

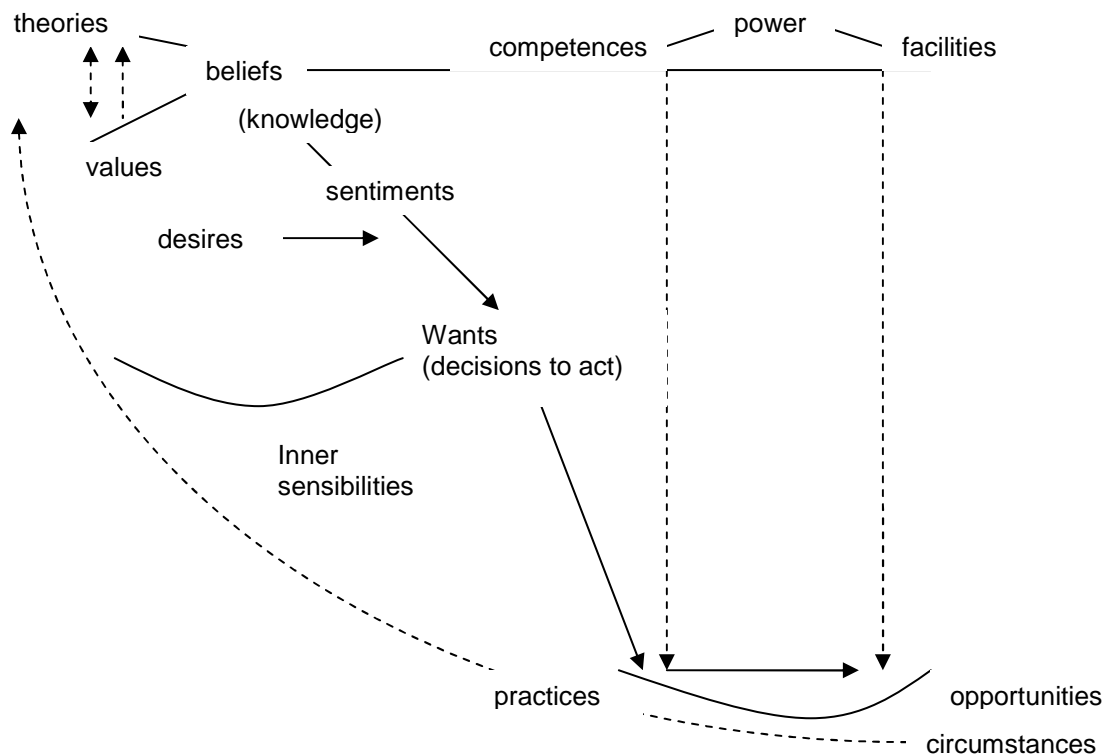


Figure 2.2 The five bases of action and practice, values and theories (Bhaskar, 1998)

Bhaskar (1998, p 413) listed these five bases of action as the: cognitive, conative, affective, dynamic (described by Bhaskar as comprising both the competences and the facilities – or resources – required for action); and the circumstantial, which Bhaskar (1998, p 414) defined as the ‘...social conditions and contingencies that comprised an agent’s context’. As mentioned, Bhaskar subdivided the dynamic base into ‘competences’ and ‘facilities’ and he went on to further define these as intrinsic and extrinsic to the individual respectively. This model highlighted the complexity of interactions that were required for an individual to take a particular course of action. When applied to the HRD practitioner and their use, or otherwise, of theory to inform practice then this model provided a valuable tool for explaining what was happening and why.

For example, if an HRD practitioner needed to make a decision about the application of a particular learning style questionnaire (lsq) to their professional practice then some of the following actions will need to be taken. At the cognitive level the practitioner needed to be aware of the existence of such lsqs, have their own theories about the use of lsqs, and believe that the use of such an lsq would add value to their practice. At the affective level the practitioner needed to have the confidence in, and enthusiasm, for a particular lsq to use it and also be engaged sufficiently with their practice to wish to use such an lsq to make an improvement. At the conative level these cognitive and affective pressures needed to be actualised into a desire, or motivation, to act – in this case to commit to purchase and / or apply the lsq into their professional practice (see Arriaga and Agnew, 2001 p 1193 for a further discussion of conation and commitment). However, this was mediated if the practitioner did not have the appropriate skills or competences to effectively implement such an lsq or did not have the opportunity, for example through lack of budgets, to purchase and apply an appropriate lsq. Finally, the contextual circumstances needed alignment– so, for instance, if the organisational context was one where there were no plans to run training / development activities then the opportunities would not be available for application and practice. Bhaskar (1998) argued that all these bases must be in place if action was to happen.

As stated earlier, Bhaskar's model of the bases of action was compelling due to its recognition that a decision to take action was not only driven by either structural or agency issues but was an amalgam of both. This differed from

some of the more conventional models of decision making that drew on a particular base of action but that didn't draw on the totality of the system. For example, the rational –economic model that underpinned the *homo economicus* model of human decisions, as described and critiqued by Zafirovski (2003), or the more intuitive approach to decision making described by Sadler-Smith and Sparrow (2007). Korte (2003) identified the impact on the quality of decision making of HRD practitioners that individual biases and assumptions have and went on to call for greater research in this area. Whilst his overview of theories of decision making was comprehensive, and his specific focus on bias and assumptions are quite detailed, it still lacked the opportunity for the greater granularity of understanding that Bhaskar's model offered.

Having described a number of barriers to the application of research to HRD practice and provided an explanatory model it is now worth mapping one to the other. Table 2.1 takes the five bases of action as identified by Bhaskar and loosely maps the various barriers to HRD theory being applied, as identified in the literature, against it. This categorisation identified where there was some consistency in view, and also the gaps in terms of explanation, about why theory and research was or wasn't more rigorously applied in practice.

Bhaskar's Bases of Action	Barrier to Theory Use as Identified in Literature	Authors
Cognitive	Internal defence mechanisms / defensive reasoning	Argyris (1995)
	Model 1 'theories-in-use' applied	Argyris and Schön (1974)
	Limited understanding of evidence based practice	Short (2006), Lawler, 2007
	Issues associated with Professional Identity	Argyris, Gilley (2006), Wenger (1998)
Conative	-	-
Affective	Negative practitioners attitude towards research	Short, Torracco (2004)
	Negative organisational attitude towards research	Berger et al (2004)
Dynamic - competence	Lack of practitioner ability to translate and understand research	Berger et al; Short, Lawler, Jacobs (1997), Cascio (2007)
	Academic language 'Tower of Babel' excluding practitioner involvement	Gilley
	Lack of skills to be able to find and use appropriate data from an 'exploding information base' of HRD research	Sleezer and Sleezer, (1997)
	Lack of practitioner understanding about how research can improve organisational performance	Gilley, Lawler
Dynamic - facilities	Academic research not utilisable for practitioners needs	Berger et al; Short, Gilley (2006), Jacobs, Lawler
	Access by practitioners to appropriate research	Berger et al; Short
	Practitioners short timeframes for action versus researchers needs for rigorous research requiring longer timeframes	Short
Circumstantial	Narrowness of academic research topics preventing application by practitioners	Short
	Research typically following a strict positivist paradigm with limited transferability to practice	Short Kuchinke (2004), Jacobs (1997)

Table 2.1: Barriers to Practitioner take up of HRD Theory mapped against Bhaskar's 5 Bases of Action.

From the categorisation in Table 2.1 there appeared to be barriers identified in the literature that were associated with the cognitive, affective, dynamic and circumstantial bases but not for the conative base. However, it must be asked what does the conative base contain? Huitt (1999) described it as '...

the personal, intentional, planful, deliberate, goal –orientated or striving component of motivation, the proactive aspect of behaviour'. For Dweck (1991) and Udran and Maeher (1995) this was better described in terms of the goals that individuals set themselves. There were three families of goals identified by Huitt (1999); 1) Mastery goals – focussing on developing competence or on the process of learning; 2) Performance goals – focussing on the outcome, winning or attainment; and 3) Social goals based on the performance of the group or the individual fitting into the group. Whilst only Performance goals could be said to reside in the conative base of action all three types of goals have been reviewed later.

However, the questions needed to be asked as to why this was the case and whether such an apparent omission within the literature offered the opportunity for further explanation, of such issues, to be developed? If the literature didn't demonstrate any barriers that could be categorised as conative did this also hold true for the converse situation – that there had been little identification of the conative bases *for* action in the application of theory and research to the practice of HRD practitioners? If this was the case then it was necessary to consider what the causal mechanisms preventing, or at times encouraging, activity at the conative base of action were. And what were the causal mechanisms for the other bases of action? As Bhaskar (1998) argued these five bases must all be present for action to take place. This research project looked at this area, for as Sayer (2000, p14) stated '...explanation depends on identifying causal mechanisms and how they work, and discovering if they have been activated and under what

conditions'. This concept will be explored in more detail later in this literature review.

In an earlier section the issue of the gap between research and practice was highlighted as was the call, from some commentators, for the closing of the research – practice gap (Marvin, Wilding, Stalker, Simmonds, Rees and Winch 2007, Short 2006, Kulchinke 2004). However, as outlined previously there were a number of mechanisms preventing this gap from being closed. But why was this issue, the gap between the applicability of theory and research to the practice of HRD practitioners, worthy of research? It was important to be able to understand what was happening in this area because of a number of factors that influenced the professional practice of HRD practitioners. The following was by no means an exhaustive list but included, 1) the widespread application of evidence based practice approaches in many fields, particularly medicine, criminal justice, healthcare, teaching and other public services (Nutley, Walter and Davies, 2003 p 126); 2) the call from some commentators for an increasing focus on evidence based management to be used as a mechanism to drive up organisational performance (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2006); 3) the perceived lack of strategic relevance of HRD in the minds of many senior managers associated with frequent low levels of credibility of HRD professionals (Hamlin, 2007, p 44); 4) the view of some commentators that much management practice is heavily influenced by 'poor quality' management research and ideology, which had adversely affected organisational performance (Ghoshal, 2003); 5) the on-going research – practice gap within the field of HRD and the damage that

this was doing to the standing of the profession (Berger et al. 2004); 6) the impact of professional associations, such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) and the model of the 'thinking performer' that sat at the heart of their professional education standards (CIPD, 2006) and which was similar to the 'reflective practitioner' model that holds a central place in the HRD body of knowledge (Kuchinke, 2004 p536).

From the above it has been demonstrated that a number of levers, both internal and external to the HRD discipline, had been applied in an effort to drive up the effectiveness of HRD practitioners within the organisational setting. Although it was recognised that there were certain contextual factors at play which lead to contradictory messages – for example management attitude towards the value of evidence based practice. However, it has been suggested in the foregoing discussion that a number of potential underlying mechanisms were identified that could support or hinder the HRD practitioner in their propensity to draw critically upon theory and research to inform their professional practice.

It is now worth briefly summarising the ground that has been covered so far. Looking back 10 years to Ulrich (1997, p62) and his denunciation of practitioners reliance on 'frou-frou' to guide their activities there appeared to be little recent evidence that there had been improvement in this situation. The literature on research, theory, evidence based practice, the nature of HRD, and the HRD practitioners role was also explored and it has been shown that there were still a number of potential barriers to the adoption of

research evidence to the practice. These barriers were categorised against Bhaskar's model of the 5 Bases of Action and through this it was identified that there appeared to be no barriers closely associated with what Bhaskar described as the 'conative' base of action. The question arose as to the nature of the underlying mechanisms underpinning these bases of action and their impact on either encouraging or hindering practitioners from becoming more research literate.

Moving on from the above the following section of the literature review will sharpen the focus of the discussion by concentrating on learning style theories and their associated instruments, as the lens through which to look at this issue in more detail. This will then lead to a final section that brings together these two disparate literatures.

2.7 The Debate Around Learning Styles

To bring focus to this discussion and moving away from a more generic review of theory / practice divide, the contested field of learning styles theories will now be focussed upon. This will provide an appropriate 'lens' with which to illuminate the research questions and is a worthy topic, in its own right, for research attention.

There was a burgeoning literature and debate on the use of learning styles theory within the educational and business management domains (see Riding and Rayner, 1998, Sadler-Smith, 2001, Coffield at al , 2004 a & b,

Rayner, 2007). Within this literature there was debate around the meaning of the term learning style, the validity and reliability of different learning style theory when applied to assessment and discussion about the application of such theory to pedagogy. Much of the literature was associated with the application and use of learning style type questionnaires in assessment of individuals and also in reviewing the psychometric properties of the instruments (Rayner, 2007). However, Sadler-Smith (2001, p293) identified the dearth of rigorous research into the effective use of learning styles in the organisational context; Berings, Poell and Simons, 2005 described the lack of research into learning styles within the on-job-training context; and Rayner (2007, p26) suggested that there was very limited research into 'evidence based practice' in the application of learning style theory in the classroom setting. Whilst research into the effective application of learning styles theories, and their associated Isqs, in the workplace appeared to be scant this did not appear to have affected their popularity with practitioners.

There have been a number of reviews published on the different learning styles theories and multiple categories of such theory have been identified (Curry, 1983, Riding and Rayner 1998, Coffield et al 2004 a & b). One early and highly influential description of the field was the Onion Model of learning styles was proposed by Curry (1983, as described by Riding and Rayner, 1998, p 82). Within this model it was suggested that there were differing layers of learning style theory with those that could be categorised as personality centred models at the core of the onion, information processing models making up the next layer whilst the outer layer comprised of models

associated with instructional preferences. However, many theorists have argued that there was much confusion and misunderstanding surrounding learning styles theories. For instance Curry (1999, p3) argued that the learning styles literature was plagued with methodological and experimental design flaws, such as over generalisation of findings from very limited studies and that this, associated with the plethora of published papers on the topic, had led to conceptual fragmentation and non-comparable results across the field. Another critic was Sadler-Smith (1996, p30) who argued that the term 'learning style' was used as a blanket term and often used to describe different constructs making meaningful comparison impossible.

In order to make sense of this confused literature and to advise decision makers at national policy level, a significant review of the field was commissioned by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA). The resultant reports by Coffield et al (2004a and b) helped to bring some clarity to the debate and provided a thorough review of many of the leading theories. The Coffield et al reports were, in many ways, critical of what was happening in the sphere of learning styles and in particular identified many of the empirical shortcomings of the research that had been carried out on various Isqs. They assessed Isqs against pre-determined quality criteria, namely having acceptable internal consistency, test-retest reliability, construct validity and predictive validity, and identified that only one Isq, the Allinson and Hayes Cognitive Style Index, actually met the required standard against all four criteria. Later comments by Coffield (2005) were increasingly

derogatory about many learning styles questionnaires for example in the Times Educational Supplement he advised teachers that:

‘...The next time an Ofsted inspector or your "line manager" mentions learning styles, I suggest you ask: "Which instrument do you recommend? What's its validity? Reliability? Any evidence of positive impact on raising attainment or improving behaviour?" If the answer is "no idea", explain that we are professionals trying to build a solid base of knowledge about teaching and learning. Practice should be informed by evidence, not by the unexamined hunches of some guru who's making a fortune from peddling poppycock.’

Coffield's comments demonstrated some of polarised attitudes that the contentious issue of learning styles generated and in Coffield et al (2004) it was rightly identified that there were vested commercial, career and academic interests associated with the field which hampered independent and rigorous reviews of many learning style models. However, Rayner (2007) critiqued Coffield et al (2004) and argued that they had been too focussed on the psychometric nature of the associated learning style instruments and, in doing, so had missed some of the insight that the learning style theories offered when applied in practice. He argued that research in this area of practice was long overdue and wrote that:

‘Meeting the challenge of applied research in education is crucial to ensuring that work with theory is worthwhile and informs practice.In the field of learning styles, this is doubly relevant, as there is a need to

further integrate the conceptual basis of diverse sets of theory in an applied context.’ (Rayner, 2007, p 29)

As mentioned previously Rayner (2007, p26) described the lack of research into evidence based practice on the use of learning styles theories in the classroom context whilst Coffield (2005), quoted above, also called for greater evidence based practice within the post-compulsory education sector. Whilst seemingly disagreeing on the use and value of learning styles theories there appeared to be a consensus between these two commentators on the need for evidence to support practice, albeit in the education setting.

2.8 Key Learning Styles Theories

This research programme was not about learning style theories per se but used the application of Isqs as a ‘lens’ to understand the perceptions of HRD practitioners about the use of theory and research applied to their professional activities. As such it is briefly worth looking at some of the more widely known Isqs and the research that has been undertaken about them.

Coffield et al (2004a p9) reviewed a broad range of such theories and offered a classification based on five different families of theories. These ranged from theories that had genetically pre-determined and fixed learning styles through to others that saw learning style as flexible and aligned with an individual’s preference and motivations. These families of learning styles ranged from those that were 1) constitutionally based; 2) based on cognitive structures;

3) based on stable personality types; 4) based on stable but flexible learning preferences; and 5) defined in terms of learning strategies and orientations. An in-depth review of such theories went beyond the scope of this work and has been published elsewhere (see Curry 1983, Riding and Rayner 1998, Coffield et al 2004 a and b). However, for illustrative purposes it is worth mentioning several of the more widely known 'families' of learning style theories and their positioning within the Coffield's typology.

1. Constitutionally based learning style theories were based on the perspective that personality and related types (such as learning styles) were genetically inherited, informed by the structuring of the individual brain or determined by preferences for specific perceptual modalities. Probably the most famous Isq within this family was the Dunn and Dunn Learning Style Questionnaire which draws on a range of environmental, sociological, nourishment / hydration and sensory modality preferences.

2. Cognitive structure based learning styles referred to those theories that had, at their core, the principle that learning was influenced by the structural, control and process properties of the individual's cognitive system and the mechanisms that individuals adopt to structure and organise information. For a review see Hayes and Allinson, 1994, 1998). A leading example was Riding's Cognitive Styles Analysis (see Riding and Rayner, 1998) that looked at two dimensions – the wholist – analyst dimension which described the individual's approach towards organising new information and the verbal-

imagery dimension relating to whether an individual preferred to mentally process in either language or images.

3. Stable personality type models, typified by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), were the learning styles family associated with the view that learning style was only one facet, or trait, of a relatively fixed and stable personality type. For instance within the MBTI there were four dichotomies that were identified within the underpinning model and every individual was assessable against one pole, or other, of each dichotomy (see Briggs-Myers and Briggs, 1995). These categorisations lead to the identification of 16 possible personality types, which were considered both stable and enduring, and that in totality described personality. Interestingly, Coffield et al (2004) placed Apter's Reversal Theory, and the associated Motivational Style Profile, within this learning style family. However, it could be argued that as Reversal Theory (Apter 1981, 2001) was a dynamic, motivational state based theory of personality then its positioning within this family was inappropriate and it was more appropriate to assign it to the next family, the stable but flexible group. Apter (2001, 302) stated that Reversal Theory is a 'structural-phenomenological' theory which was based on the premise that an individual's subjective experience was discernable through an appreciation that experience had a universal structure. As Apter (2001, 302) eloquently put it '....conscious experience has structure'. He argued (2001, 313) that as meta -motivational states had physiological structures (see Lewis and Svebak, 2001) and also roots in social discourse then Reversal Theory '... is about the universal structures within conscious experience that provide the

individual person with certain fundamental and species wide-wide ways of making sense of the World’.

4. Theories aligned with the stable but flexible family were among the more widely known and commonly used tools by practitioners. Amongst these were Kolb and his Learning Style Inventory (1999) based on his theory of experiential learning and the ubiquitous Honey and Mumford’s Learning Style Questionnaire (LSQ) (Note: the abbreviation lsq will mean learning style questionnaire throughout this document whilst LSQ will refer specifically to Honey and Mumford’s Learning Style Questionnaire). The LSQ was itself based on Kolb’s model but with the authors amending the items scales so that they had greater face validity for the ‘managerial’ learner than provided for in Kolb. Both these models, and their associated instruments, have been criticised in the literature with criticism including that the models did not differentiate sufficiently between ‘learning style’ and ‘personality’ constructs (Towler and Dipboye, 2003, Jackson and Lawty-Jones, 1996, Furnham, 1996b), the lack of acceptable validity and / or reliability for the lsqs (see Coffield et al 2004a, Towler and Dipboye, 2003) and a more fundamental criticism, aimed at many instruments like the LSQ, that they pigeon –hole individuals into one of a small number of ‘style categories’ and thus encourage some users to adopt a ‘style’ that was not wholly appropriate for them (Robotham, 2003, p 475).

5. The final family – learning strategies – covered a range of models and instruments that looked at the preference and strategies the individual

adopted for how they learn rather than the style that they inhabit when they learn. It was argued that this was a more holistic view of learning which was both more efficient and effective (Sadler-Smith, 1996, p 30). Entwistle's Approaches and Study Skills for Students inventory was one of the examples described by Coffield et al. It appeared from Coffield et al that this family of theories tended to be applied more to the educational field than the previous four families which tended to have a wider, though varying, range of applications outside education.

Having reviewed the literature on learning style theories and associated questionnaires it is now worth turning attention to some reasons why HRD practitioners made choices about which particular questionnaire to use in their professional practice.

2.9. Various Barriers Inhibiting Theory Informing Practice

The following section introduces a number of barriers that could prevent, or hamper, theory and research based evidence from informing the work of HRD practitioners. These barriers covered a number of disparate areas from the influence of brands on the decision making processes of HRD practitioners, through issues of 'lock-in' and skill based habits and onto issues associated with practitioners own image of professional identity. Bhaskar's Bases of Action model has been referred to, where appropriate, as the organising framework.

In Coffield et al (2004 a, p127) the issue of commercialisation, and the financial rewards for publishers, of successful learning style questionnaires was highlighted and this was reiterated in Swanson (2001, p 301) who identified the vulnerability that organisations had to using '....atheoretical products that have been sold on the exaggerated promises of suppliers'. In Coffield et al (2004b, p 45) the argument was put forward that some test authors were protecting more than their academic reputation when attempting to refute criticism or prevent independent review of the psychometric claims for instruments. In this respect the Dunn and Dunn model came in for particular criticism from Coffield et al.

Nixon, Gregson and Spedding (2007) drew on the findings of Coffield et al and asked the question as to why learning style instruments were still so popular and prevalent with educators when serious questions had been raised about the psychometric weakness of many of the instruments (Coffield et al, 2004). Nixon et al went on to postulate that reasons for the popularity of the instruments were due to their 'intuitive appeal' to teachers, who had need for simple tools to help them meet the demands of demonstrating cost effective 'good practice' in their work, as well as being required to provide quantitative data for the quality assurance systems. However, it could be asked whether Nixon et al had taken their analysis far enough. A question needed to be asked as to the impact that the brand of a particular learning style theory / instrument had on decisions about its adoption and use. How much of this 'intuitive appeal' was in fact the persuasiveness accompanying a

particular brand image or even whether the appeal was simply that associated with habit?

According to Murray and Haubl (2007, p79) habits were hierarchical knowledge structures with goals at the top and associated relevant behaviours at the bottom. The argument put forward was that these behaviours were automatically triggered once a habit had been engrained within the individual, through practice, and in response to goal activation. Through empirical research, using computer based simulation they demonstrated the link between skill based habits, associated behaviours and customer loyalty (Murray and Haubl, 2007). The term that was used to describe this observation was cognitive lock-in. So how does 'cognitive lock in' work? The explanation for it was based on the concept of the learning curve which Murray and Haubl (2002) explained in terms of the time taken to complete a task decreasing as a power function of the practice associated with that task, a phenomenon that Johnson, Bellman and Lohse (2003), and Murray and Haubl (2002, 2007) also referred to as the power law of practice. As a result of cognitive lock-in it was demonstrated that, as particular skill level increases, through experience, then the likelihood of an alternative course of action being chosen decreased. Murray and Haubl (2002, 2007) demonstrated the influence of skill based habits on the purchasing decisions of consumers. From an empirical study into the familiarity of interfaces for e-Commerce transactions, Murray and Haubl (2002) showed evidence to support Wernerfelt's (1985, cited in Murray and Haubl, 2002) conjecture that developing 'skills' in a brand lead to a consumer preference for that brand,

even when other competitor brands were equally useful and acquirable at a lower price. Murray and Haubl (2007, p78) argued that ‘...skill-based habits of use are acquired through a trial-and-error learning process during which the behaviours associated with using an incumbent product become increasingly automated as a function of the amount of experience with it’. What does this mean for the HRD practitioner and their choice of learning style questionnaire? If an HRD practitioner had invested time, money and effort to become trained in a particular learning style questionnaire then they will be significantly more likely to be locked-in to that particular learning style questionnaire and will reject alternatives – even if such alternatives had demonstrable economic and other benefits greater than those associated with the incumbent learning style questionnaire. In other words the cognitive cost associated with changing learning style questionnaire brand was such that they outweighed other considerations, including the rational –economic ones. Barnes, Gartland and Stack (2004, p 372) made the point that consumer utility doesn’t always depend on how good a product or service is, but rather on how many people use a product, as popularity may prove more important than usefulness, or effectiveness, in the decision making process. Barnes et al (2004) also argued that within the literature there was much written about technological lock-in, for instance once a particular technology becomes standard then it locks out competitors, but much less on lock-in due to behavioural and ‘habituation’ factors. Technological lock-in was not a focus of this work, due to the fact that there isn’t a de facto lsq standard for HRD practitioners, but the behavioural and cognitive dimensions were interesting. A piece of work in this areas was by Hopkins (2007, p351) in

which he described how differing consumer learning models could explain lock-in to a particular brand and the impact of bias, associated with consumer goodwill towards a particular brand, had on the unlikelihood of adopting an alternative brand – even when the preferred brand was inferior to alternatives. Another area of interest was the mechanisms that operated when HRD practitioners were initially introduced to Isqs and their supporting theory – for instance as part of a professional education scheme or higher education programme. Could exposure to a particular Isq early in an HRD's professional development impact on the future choice of Isq in the professional's practice? For example, looking at the text books that supported the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) professional standards it was seen that for the 'Leadership and Management' standards (which make up about 25% of the total education programme and which are compulsory if a participant wishes to gain full membership of the CIPD) there were four key fields, namely: Managing for Results, Managing Information for Competitive Advantage, Managing in a Strategic Business Context and Managing and leading People. Looking at the core text books that supported these fields there were references to learning styles / learning styles theorists in two of the texts, namely, Managing and Leading People (Rayner and Adam-Smith, 2005) and Managing for Results (Watson and Gallagher, 2005). When looking at these references in more detail it was seen that only Kolb and Honey and Mumford were identified. Could it be argued that the learning styles approaches proposed by Kolb and Honey and Mumford were being inculcated into HRD practitioners early in their career and, if so, was this a form of lock-in being perpetuated by the education

schemes of the CIPD? It was also interesting to note that the CIPD had published a fact sheet on Learning Styles (accessed 5/5/08) which drew heavily on the work of Coffield et al (2004). However, the further reading list provided at the end of the fact sheet only identified the work of Kolb and Honey and Mumford and their respective Isqs. Dijksterhuis, Smith, van Baaren and Wigboldus (2005) offered an alternative, but supporting perspective. In their review of unconscious factors that could influence consumer behaviour they identified the automatic responses and associated behaviours that environmental cues could trigger. The general conclusion that they drew was ‘...{consumer} behaviour often unfolds unconsciously as result of the mere perceptions of cues in the environment’ (Dijksterhuis et al, 2005, p198). The environmental factors that they referred to were mostly ‘physical’ but could also include trigger words, phrases and terms. If a particular Isq, say Honey and Mumford, had become synonymous with the whole Isq category then is it reasonable to assume that the term ‘learning styles’ will trigger thoughts about Honey and Mumford and vice versa? Whilst there was little in the literature to support this view it was still worth consideration.

To begin this next section it is worth asking what is meant by the term ‘brand’. A classic definition was that from Bennett (1988) who defined a brand as ‘... a name, term, design, symbol or any other features that identifies one seller’s goods or services as distinct from those of other sellers’. There was a whole body of literature on the development of brands and how they appealed to the consumer, which goes well beyond the scope

of this review. However, some of the basic concepts associated with brands have been described below to help promote understanding and explanation later. Kotler (1994, p444) suggested that a brand conveyed numerous levels of meaning to the consumer and identified the following as potential constituents of any brand: 1) attributes – such as being expensive, well made, durable or of high prestige; 2) benefits – either functional or emotional for the customer; 3) values – of the producer and that could align with the consumer's own values; 4) culture – such as that associated with the producer 5) personality – whether the brand portrays a 'personality' to the consumer; and 6) the user or consumer should be suggested by, and congruent with, the brand image. So how did this relate to Isqs? Ultimately, the buying behaviour of the HRD practitioner was impacted by a number of factors. For example, Kotler (1994, p195) suggested that all consumers develop brand beliefs, based on the above six factors, build the brand identity and influence the buying behaviour of potential consumers. These beliefs, he argued, vary on the basis of a consumers selective perception, selective distortion and selective retention of brand information. So an HRD practitioner who decided to invest in the Honey and Mumford Learning Styles Questionnaire was doing so for any number of reasons including: that it was a valid and reliable instrument (attribute), that it was easily and meaningfully applicable in the workplace (benefit), that it appeared to be professionally presented (values), that it portrayed a scientific approach (culture), that it offered a psychologist's hidden insight into the test user (personality) and that it was used by many other HRD professionals (user congruence).

Another perspective on the power of brands to influence the buying behaviour was that presented by Quester and Lin Lim (2003, p 23) who argued that the more a category of product was associated with an individual sense of personal identity then the greater commitment that individual would show to a particular brand. So, if it was reasonable to assume that an HRD professional considered that the use of an Isq was 'good practice', and hence their sense of identity as a HRD professional was reinforced, then the argument was that their psychological attachment to, and involvement with, a particular brand of Isq would be strong. As Stets and Burke (2000, p 234) argued there are differences between the concepts of individual and social identity but that these two perspectives could be combined into one overarching model which, if applied to this particular topic, could help identify some of the forces that encouraged particular brand loyalty behaviour within an individual HRD practitioner. Hoeffler and Keller (2003, p 423-426) provided further insight and described the influences that strong brands had upon 'buying' behaviour. From a significant review of the marketing literature they identified that strong brands had the following advantages over weaker or less well known brands: strong brands had a buyer memory encoding and storage advantage compared to weaker brands; they tended to have the benefits of increased selective attention, on an unconscious level, than weaker brands; they were significantly more likely to be included in the 'choice set' of options than were weaker or less well known brands; users tended to have a greater feeling of confidence in a strong brand through basic familiarity; and the possibility of 'loss' from switching from a strong, known brand, to a weaker or less well known brand was perceived as more

dangerous than 'loss' associated with sticking to a well known, but possibly sub-optimal, strong brand.

What this meant was that the power of an Isq brand could be seen as a potential barrier to an HRD professional looking at a range of options and selecting the most appropriate Isq for work they were doing. Taking this into account with the previously described 'cognitive lock-in' effect and the unconscious triggering of buyer behaviour, through skill based habits, suggested a powerful argument supporting the conjecture that once HRD practitioners had settled on a particular Isq they were then unlikely to change from it. It could also be argued that the dominant Isqs, with the strongest brands, would become the default choice for HRD practitioners. The argument could also be made then that these were some of the underlying mechanisms that discouraged HRD practitioners from regularly reviewing research evidence on Isqs. Having looked at the literature there did not appear to be any supporting evidence for this view and hence another reason for this particular research activity.

It is now appropriate to return to the application of Bhaskar's model of the Bases of Action (Table 2.1 above) that was introduced earlier. One of the key issues identified by the application of the model to the organisation of the identified barriers to use of theory, was that there appeared to be little, if any, conative explanations for why HRD practitioners did / didn't apply theory to their practice. To make sense of this it was necessary to turn to some of the literature on product marketing and branding. For example, Grimm (2005,

p 508) described the classic tri-component model, based on Rosenberg and Hovland (1960), of an individual's attitude towards products and brands and suggested that a buyer's attitude construct comprised of cognitive, affect and conative components. The cognitive component included the various attributes associated with the product, or as Keller (2003, p 596) suggested, included all the '... descriptive and evaluative brand related information in the memory of the consumer.' The affective component was described by Grimm as the attachment to a product and associated feelings with such attachment. The conative component was less easily defined, for example a typical definition was that the conative component of attitude related to the behavioural consequences of action / non-action (Aurifeille, Clerfeuille and Quester, 2001, p 301) or as Da Silva and Alwi (2006, p 294) suggested related to the behaviours associated with brand loyalty. It was interesting to overlay this tri-component model of attitude on Bhaskar's bases of action model. By doing this it was seen that the first three bases of Bhaskar's model relate directly to the three components of attitude within the tri-component model. The other bases of action include the dynamic, which could be further divided in to the competence 'to act' and the availability of resources 'to be able to act', and finally the contextual opportunities and circumstances that would allow action to take place did not align with the tri-component model of attitude.

An idea that is now worth positing is that in some circumstances that, due to issues of professional identity, brand involvement, cognitive lock-in and skill based habit, then evidence as to the efficacy of a particular Isq will be either

not sought out or, if sought could actually be disregarded by the practitioner. From an attitudinal perspective an individual practitioner's behavioural actions, associated with the conative component of their attitude, lead to the reinforcement of brand commitment and so resistance to accepting change to the brand, or challenge to that particular brand's efficacy. This, linked into the idea of the cognitive cost of change to the individual could be a part explanation for the 'intuitive appeal' of learning styles as described by Nixon et al (2007). Interestingly, Nixon et al (2007, p44) quote Waks (2006) and his argument that an 'intuitive appeal' is '...often accompanied by a positive emotion, a zestful 'feel good factor' and a heightened sense of (real or imagined) mastery' which were characteristics associated with the emotional engagement that any strong brand should be able to evoke in a potential consumer. Returning to Swanson (2001, p 307) could it be argued that HRD practitioners were in fact susceptible to '... rudderless random activity aggressively sponsored by atheoretical professional associations and greedy consultants' or whether they were simply influenced by habits, good marketing, brand activation activities and brand 'touchpoints' as any other consumer of a product or service would be? Whilst it hasn't been argued that the power of branding and cognitive lock-in were the only reasons why HRD practitioners didn't fully engage with theory and research to inform their choice of Isq it could be argued that they are 'generative mechanisms' that require further consideration. The issue of the commercial pressures and vested interests was also identified by Coffield et al (2004a, p 145) as a key problem within the field of learning style theories and associated Isqs and a causal factor in the increasing 'theoretical incoherence and conceptual

confusion' that they say dog the field. It must be asked whether the increasing brand equity of the more popular learning style theories, and their associated instruments, will drive the research literature on learning styles to become even more '...confounded, contradictory and confusing... for the majority of HRD practitioners' (Sadler-Smith, 1996, p 29).

The question now arises as to what, if anything, could be done by the HRD practitioner to ensure the standards of their own professional practice are as high as they could be. One approach which appeared to be emerging from the literature was for practitioners to adopt an evidence based approach to their practice. This has been alluded to earlier but a fuller explanation of evidence based practice for the HRD practitioner is now apposite. Within the literature there has been an increasing call for the application of evidence based practice to the field of HRD (Hamlin, 2002, 2007, Holton 2004) and so it had to be asked as to whether there were any discernable movements towards evidence based practice by HRD practitioners? Holton (2004,p 187) quoted Drake et al (2001) who defined the approach in the mental health profession as 'Evidence based practices are interventions for which there is consistent scientific evidence showing that they improve client outcomes'. Whilst McGuire, Garavan, O'Donnell and Watson (2007, p125) defined evidence based HRD as a:

'...body of generalised knowledge or context and situation specific findings derived from academically robust and rigorous and relevant

research used to inform, shape and / or evaluate evidence based HRD practices.'

Holton (2004, p187) considered the approach that was taken by the health professions as appropriate and timely for application by HRD professionals and called for a 'national movement' towards evidence based practice in the USA. Echoing this was Pfeffer and Sutton's (2006) argument for a move towards evidence based approaches more generally in the HRM arena in order to drive up human capabilities within organisations and demonstrate real value add of the profession. Hamlin (2002, 2007) also argued for evidence based practice within HRD, this time in the UK context, and as mentioned above described and proposed partnership relationships between researchers and practitioners to support the development of high quality, relevant research. Hamlin (2007, p49) described a partnership approach and argued that such partnerships would produce research that would exhibit 'high rigour and high relevance' to the HRD practitioner, however, he also recognised the problem of a lack of significant case study evidence, in this area, to support his argument. The term 'rigour and relevance' was also identified by Van de Ven and Johnson (2006, p807) but they argued that the criteria against which to assess both rigour and relevance differed between the scientific world of scholarship and the more immediate needs of the practitioner community. They argued that this difference was driven by the '...different purposes, context and processes' associated with the different demands of the scholarly and practitioner communities which is worth remembering when considering the quality of evidence required in evidence

based practice. This point shouldn't be under emphasised. In professions allied to HRD practice - such as clinical and counselling psychology – there has been a debate as to what evidence actually means for the practitioner and whether positivism, on which the scientist-practitioner model (akin to the practitioner-scholar model proposed by Gilley, 2006) was based, was adequate for the depth and breadth of the terrain (for example see Chwaslisz, 2003, Houston. 2005). Indick (2002) made an interesting point when he argued against the strictures of positivism in psychology. His point was that positivism's adherents reject alternative perspectives on the basis of a circular argument about what was acceptable in terms of scientific evidence.

He wrote:

‘To assert an empirical proof is superior to a nonempirical proof because the empirical proof is more empirical is a circular argument...’
(Indick, 2002, p24)

The point being made was that the call for evidence based practice in HRD was becoming increasingly strident yet the basis on which evidence was understood, and allowed, was still contested.

It was interesting to speculate whether a move to greater evidence based practice within HRD was a potential solution to bridging the research – practice divide that was described earlier and also a possible enabling

mechanism to encourage HRD practitioners towards a more considered use of various tools and techniques. Could it also be argued that adopting such an approach, with the maximisation of valid information at its heart, be a step towards Argyris and Schön (1974) model 2 behaviours of organisational practice? Could this be the start of another virtuous cycle? One where an evidence based practice approach was taken towards the work of practitioners within the HRD function. Finally, it was worth mentioning the recent debate in the literature about the concept of the 'practitioner-scholar' role. There appeared to be growing interest in this concept which Schein (personal correspondence quoted in Wasserman and Kram, 2009, p20) defined as 'a professional who knows how to abstract out new knowledge from experiences in organizations; someone who is dedicated to generating new knowledge that is useful to practitioners' and it was notable that the November 2009 edition of the *Advances in Human Resource Development* journal was dedicated to the topic as related to the HRD practitioner.

Ruona and Gilley (2009, p 441) proposed the following 4 tier model (figure 2.3) of how practitioners engaged with theory and practice. The model was developed because they considered that the debate on the practitioner / academic divide had almost run its course and that what was required was new insight into how the gap could be decreased. The model brings together various interrelated strands into a coherent framework but whilst it was useful for categorisation it lacked explanatory power. For instance, the presumption that 'scholar-practitioners' were results focused but that 'atheoretical practitioners' and 'practitioners' were more activity focussed seemed arbitrary

and the assertion they make that ‘...a practitioner who does not enact the theory and evidence-based best practices of the profession would be far less effective than one who does’ (p 441) lacks clarity. For instance, whilst they claimed that such approaches might have been more effective they didn’t consider the issue of efficiency (cost effectiveness) which was of comparable importance in the professional work of most, if not all, practitioners. This critique echoed that of Van de Ven and Johnson (2006) who argued that there was a difference in the criteria required to judge the ‘rigour and relevance’ of research appropriate for the practitioner in comparison to that required of the scholar. However, whilst these criticisms of the Ruona and Gilley model were relevant they did not detract from the fact that the model they presented was a useful summarising model.

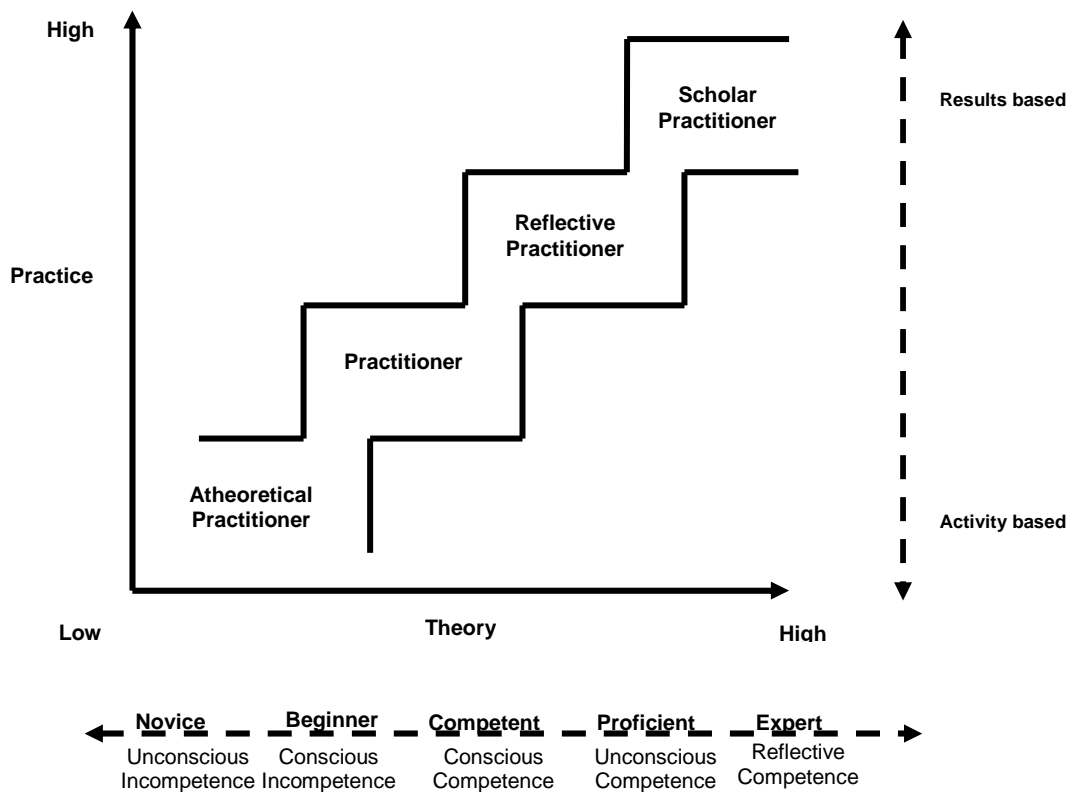


Figure 2.3 Practitioners in Applied Professions. (Ruona and Gilley, 2009)

2.10 Relating the Literature to the Research Questions

As a final part of the literature review it is now appropriate to briefly demonstrate how the various topics covered in the review relate to the research questions which sit at the heart of this research programme. This has been done question by question below.

The first research question was *'What are the underlying mechanisms that encourage / prevent HRD practitioners habitually referring to theory and / or research evidence to inform their workplace practice?'* A range of issues

about how theory and research transfers to the realm of the practitioner were summarised and those from the specific HRD literature were categorised against Bhaskar's Model of Bases of Action. This categorisation demonstrated what appeared to be a gap in the literature which, when interrogated, led the researcher to hypothesise the impact of: 1) skill based habits / cognitive and behavioural lock-in; and 2) branding and brand recognition as a potential barriers to the use of theory and research evidence within HRD professional practice.

The second question was *'Which, if any, learning style theories, and associated tools, are being used to inform the workplace practice of HRD professionals?'* To help make sense of this question it was necessary to briefly introduce the topic and describe some of the more commonly used theories and tools. This provided the researcher with sufficient background to develop an appropriate interview schedule and survey questions through which to support the gathering of data. This part of the review also described some of the recent debate about the validity and reliability of learning style instruments in general and raised the issue of 'intuitive appeal' of such instruments to practitioners.

The third research question was as follows *'What factors have influenced HRD professionals in their choice of a particular learning style instrument?'* This area was only dealt with at a generic level within the review looking at issues like professional identity and alluding to the importance of brand. However, as a result of this research project more detailed data was

gathered on the factors that influenced the decision making processes of practitioners and questions about the formative impact of professional education on the choice making process was raised.

The final question asks *'Which, if any, general theories of learning are known about and also being used to inform the workplace practice of HRD professionals?'* This question arose as a consequence of the research design and was a general question to gain a further insight into the HRD communities' knowledge about the underpinning theoretical base of the discipline.

2.11 Chapter Summary

This review showed that there was a growing body of literature looking at how theory, applied through research, moved into the sphere of the practitioner. However, within this literature there was still much debate as to the research – practitioner gap and this appeared to be particularly evident within the specific HRD literature where numerous authors had identified a number of structural, attitudinal and organisational barriers to good practice being informed by research. To help close this perceived gap there were some initial calls for the HRD discipline to take an evidence-based approach towards practice in order to demonstrate value to the organisation, drive up the professions credibility and be more closely aligned with the expectations of customers. However, there were others who challenged this basic premise. As an organising model to help understand some of these issues,

and to help identify some of the barriers to the adoption of research, Bhaskar's model of the Bases of Action was introduced and explained. The model was used to help categorise a number of the barriers identified within the literature and from this simple analysis it appeared that there had been little recognition of the 'conative' barriers to action.

As the research topic required some honing down then the 'spotlight' through which this area was illuminated was through practitioner use of learning style theories and associated instruments. There was a highly contested literature regarding the use of learning style theories and questions had been raised as to the underlying concepts and the validity and reliability of the associated instruments. This debate provided a useful background context to help develop understanding and explanation of how and why HRD practitioners choose to use, or otherwise, research to inform practice.

The next stage was for Bhaskar's model of action to be overlain with a theoretical perspective on buyer attitude and behaviour, which was taken from the marketing and branding literature. It was posited that branding was one particular 'mechanism' that could drive an HRD practitioner's decision making process on the use of learning style theory and the degree to which the practitioner identified and was involved in the brand could influence such decision making. The idea that 'brand involvement' could be linked to the concept of an HRD practitioner's role and social identity was also tentatively suggested. A second mechanism was identified in the literature which was the impact that skill based habits and / or behavioural / cognitive 'lock-in' had upon HRD practitioners and their choice of Isqs in their professional practice.

Finally, an attempt was made to relate the literature back to the research questions that underpin this research programme and the relevance of the literature review was demonstrated.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter deals with the research design employed throughout this study and starts with a brief overview of the philosophical position that has informed it. This has been followed by a description and justification for the triangulated research strategy that was used and of the two primary data collection methods – an on-line survey and semi-structured interviews. Within these descriptions is more detail about the participants, about validity and reliability issues and data analysis methods. The chapter concludes with a discussion on ethics and ethical considerations within research.

3.2 Ontology and Epistemology

Storberg-Walker (2006, p228) argued that researchers must explicitly state the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin their work so that others can understand and analyse it. This section meets this exhortation and so, briefly, outlined the views that have informed the work of the researcher.

3.2.1 Ontology

Ontology, the philosophy of existence, has been construed and applied in social research in many different ways. These could be described as ranging from an empirical ontology associated with positivism through to social constructionist (or relativist) ontology, associated with postmodernism (Fleetwood, 2005, p 198). But why is ontology of importance to the social scientist? Fleetwood (2005, p197) argued that

‘...ontology influences: what we think can be known about it (epistemology); how we think it can be investigated (methodology and research techniques); the kinds of theories we think can be constructed about it; and the political and policy stances we are prepared to take’.

In other words, for Fleetwood, ontology was a foundation on which research could be built. Underpinning this position was Bhaskar (1997, p142) who suggested that everything is contained within ontology, including both ethics and epistemology, and who stated that ‘... knowledge follows existence, in logic and in time; and any philosophical position which explicitly or implicitly denies this has things upside down’ (Bhaskar, 2008, p 39). The researcher believed this premise was sound and so accepted the primacy of ontology over epistemology, which meant the research was aligned with a realist philosophy. So what is realism? The realist position asserted the independent existence of reality apart from any of our statements and / or

beliefs about it, or perceptions of it (Potter, 2000: p245). There are variations of realism ranging from the naïve realism of the untrained philosopher / scientist (I can see, smell, taste, hear, touch it so it must be there) through to the empirical realist position, held by many researchers in the natural, and social, sciences, that state only theory-independent data, based on systematic observation of events, can be the foundation of knowledge (Reed, 2005, p 1629). However, for this study a critical realist approach was adopted to inform and underpin the research design.

Within critical realism it was considered that ontology was stratified, with three associated domains – the empirical, the actual and the real domains (Sayer, 2000, p 11). These were described as: a) Real - which was the domain of existence, regardless of whether the individual had an understanding of it or not and was also the realm of 'objects, their structures and powers' b) Actual - which referred to what happened if, and when, such powers were activated, and c) Empirical - which was the domain of experience of the real or the actual (Sayer, 2000 p 11, Bhaskar, 1998, p41). What should also be mentioned was the acceptance, by the critical realist, that the social World was an 'open system' which ruled out a positivist approach of observation, cause and effect. This was because social systems, structures and agents, both practically and ethically, do not lend themselves to being manipulated within a 'closed system' environment as required by a positivist research strategy. The key difference between the two paradigms being the critical realist emphasis on explanation compared to the positivist emphasis on observation and prediction. Relativism was also rejected but on different

grounds to positivism. It was argued by Reed (1997) that the relativist take on structure-agency was to conflate the two, leading to a flat social ontology that Reed (1997, p 24) stated ignored the explanatory power of structure and concentrated on a ‘... myopic analytical focus on situated social interaction and the local conversational routines through which it is produced’. Mutch (1997, p 328) elegantly summarised this rejection of relativism when stating that critical realists accepted that the World was known through language but that language does not define the totality of the World. Taking a realist ontological position meant that epistemology followed ontology in as much that the research design needed to reflect various epistemological traditions from empiricism through to constructivism. In order to gain the broadest possible understanding then it was appropriate to attempt to tap into these domains through a triangulated research methodology. As mentioned, this had consequences for epistemology as both quantitative and qualitative research techniques were employed in this study.

3.2.2 Epistemology

The point had previously been made that the perspective held on ontology significantly affected the epistemological position that the researcher took. As a critical realist ontology had informed this research then it was possible to argue that holding a particular epistemological position was not necessary as the ontological position allowed greater epistemological flexibility than that afforded to a positivist or relativist researcher. So keeping this point in mind the decision on epistemology was driven by the research methods employed

for the study because, as Sayer (2000, p19) suggested, a critical realist perspective was more compatible with a wide range of research methods but that choice of methods was dependent on the object of study.

3.3 Critical Realist Informed Research and a Triangulated Research Strategy

It is now worth asking the question 'what is the goal of research?' McEvoy and Richards (2006, p69) stated that, from a critical realist perspective, the ultimate goal of research wasn't to identify generalisable laws or to identify the beliefs or lived experiences of social actors, as positivist and relativist approaches attempted, but it was to develop deeper levels of understanding and explanation, and through explanation, the opportunity to understand causation. For the realist, causation was more sophisticated than simple cause and effect relationships and required the identification of underlying mechanisms and their effects on events, or understanding their potential to affect events, even if these effects were not realised. The goal of research informed by a critical realist perspective was explanation, and through explanation, to understand causation. Taking this into account a triangulated research strategy, drawing on a range of techniques, was used as this provided the greatest opportunity to generate data which, in turn, helped explanation of the phenomena under investigation.

McEvoy and Richards (2007) suggested that such a basis for research would see the nature of the research questions driving the methodology employed

and stated that in most cases a combination of both quantitative and qualitative approaches was most effective. Such a mixed method approach was supported by Downward, Finch and Ramsey (2002), Downward and Mearman (2007), Kiessling and Harvey (2005) and Scandura and Williams (2000, p 1250) who argued that the use of a mixed methods approach should improve both the robustness and generalisability of research findings. This mixed methods approach, also known as triangulation, could be argued as appealing to the methodological pragmatist who would consider either a wholly quantitative or qualitative research strategy as limited for quality analysis (McEvoy and Richards, 2006 p 68). Triangulation is the research strategy where multiple data types were collected and used to bring a greater clarity of understanding about the subject of research and also as a mechanism to enhance the validity of a piece of research (Seele, 1999). However, Olsen (2004, p 212) identified the differences between data and methodological triangulation and argued that whilst difficult, methodological triangulation was valid as it helped the researcher to take theory and apply it to practice. With the use of two different data collection strategies – one broadly qualitative and the other more quantitative – then the opportunity for methodological triangulation was presented. McEvoy and Richards (2006, p68) also recognised the difficulty associated with mixed methods research but also argued ultimately in favour of such an approach. Risjord, Moloney and Dunbar (2001, p 45) also argued that triangulation should be used for one of the following purposes; 1) to ensure completeness and richness of data that a single approach would be unable to match; 2) for confirmation of results and thus enhancing the validity of a study; and 3) abductive

inspiration where data already gathered could be used to make inferences about relationships or as McEvoy and Richards (2005, p 72) suggested '...provide a platform for making retroductive inferences about the causal mechanisms that are active in a given situation.' As Denzin (1970, quoted in Olsen 2004) argued '...methodological triangulation actually attempts to use profoundly contrasting methodologies, while keeping in mind their differing epistemological and ontological assumptions' and hence allowed for triangulation, rather than integration. Referring back to the evidence based perspective of HRD, proposed by McGuire et al (2007,) then it was seen how such a research strategy should be aligned with that particular perspective and as previously described.

For this research there were two techniques employed to collect data. The first was through semi-structured interviews, with a small number of participants, which was followed up by the second technique, the use of an extensive on-line survey. The intention of the semi-structured interviews was to gain an in-depth understanding of how HRD practitioners used theory and research, with emphasis on learning styles theories, to underpin their professional practice and to gain further insight into the mechanisms supporting, and barriers towards, the use of theory. The on-line survey also pursued similar information but due to the standardised nature of the survey, the opportunity to explore emerging themes was not possible, unlike with the semi-structured interview. However the survey provided a far larger bank of data with which to test the extent to which such supporting mechanisms and barriers influenced HRD practitioner activity, across a wider sample of

participants. As both research methods were underpinned by the same conceptual framework then it was considered that triangulation was appropriate and possible.

3.4 Research Phase 1

The initial phase of the research was designed to identify and explore some of the themes and issues that HRD professionals associated with using theory and research to support their professional practice. The research method that was identified for this phase was the semi-structured interview and the underlying conceptual framework. The semi-structured interview was seen as a tool that could be guided by the conceptual framework yet flexible enough to pursue emerging themes and so was considered a suitable research tool for work within the critical realist approach. As Sims- Schouten, Riley and Willig (2007, p 102) argued, for critical realism applied to interviewing that it:

‘... combines constructionist and realist positions to argue that while meaning is made in interaction, non-discursive elements also impact on that meaning’.

The semi-structured interview therefore allowed interaction whilst also drawing on a framework to help identify the significant non-discursive elements that had influenced the respondents.

3.4.1 Semi-Structured Depth Interview

Mason (2002, p 62) identified the following characteristics as being associated with the semi-structured interview: a) they have an inter-action and exchange basis; b) they are relatively informal in style; c) there is a theme to the interview yet a flexible structure that allows further development of themes that have emerged unexpectedly; and d) and finally, in most cases, there is an acceptance of an epistemology that knowledge is both situated and contextual in nature.

Mason (2002, p67) argued that a great deal of planning was required for any qualitative / semi-structured interview, either through the consideration and design of the interview schedule or, if this was considered an inappropriate tool, the preparation required to allow the interviewer to be able to credible, authentic and to be able to 'think on their feet' as they are conducted the interview. The interviewer needed to make on the spot decisions about the sequence and flow of their interview and to identify, in real time, how to pursue themes that emerged from the interview. Without the necessary preparation this could have been a significant challenge – even for the most experienced interviewer. Mason's advice was therefore taken and so an interview schedule was developed and used during the interviews. This schedule guided the questioning flow by the interviewer whilst also providing some degree of flexibility that allowed the interviewer to explore themes and areas that arose during the interview itself (Bryman, 2001, p314).

3.4.2 Design of the Interview Schedule

For this piece of work the interview schedule was based on the model of the five bases of action (Bhaskar, 1998) which was the conceptual framework for this research. As a reminder, Bhaskar identified 5 bases of action: the cognitive, affective, conative, dynamic – subdivided into the intrinsic competences and extrinsic facilities – and the circumstantial. Whilst these bases were not defined in detail by Bhaskar there was sufficient information, both in Bhaskar's writing and in the general literature, to attempt to operationalise these terms for the interview process. For the cognitive base it was taken that this meant the knowledge, theories and beliefs that an individual held about a particular 'action' and its resultant effects; the affect construct was considered here to include the desires, attachments and emotional sentiments held by the individual and that would be triggered by the action / no action decision; the conative construct related to individual's needs and wants that drive an actual behavioural response; the intrinsic competence construct was associated with the individual's capability and skill to actually perform the behavioural response, whilst the extrinsic facility construct related to the allocation of appropriate resources to allow the behavioural action to be taken; finally, the circumstantial construct related to the more contextual social and organisational opportunities that supported action or the barriers that hindered the action from taking place.

However, taking these brief working definitions was only partly the answer to operationalising the constructs. The next step that was taken was a short

brain storming session with three 'experts' to help the researcher make greater sense of these terms and to counter and pre-conceived ideas / biases held by the researcher. The 'experts' were, to all intents and purposes, a sample of convenience and consisted of one qualified teacher and two other HRD professionals. The brain storming activity followed the classic approach with 10 minutes ideas generation allowed for each of the six bases (the intrinsic competence and extrinsic facility sub-constructs were treated separately) with a 30 minute idea selection, deletion and categorisation review afterwards. This short activity added significant value by providing a broader set of experiences and expectations for the researcher to draw on when interpreting data on the bases of action. From this activity an initial set of groupings were identified. These groupings were: 1) Theory / Evidence group; 2) Learner Benefit group; 3) Brand Influence group; 4) Ease of Use group; 5) Cost / Benefit Group; 6) External Requirements group 7) Qualification group and 8) Professional Identity and Practice group.

Once this short activity had been completed the researcher reviewed the outputs and from these the interview schedule was developed. At this point it is worth considering Crouch and Mackenzie (2006, p 485) who argued that for the realist researcher the interview itself targeted the understanding, perceptions and feelings of the interviewee rather than concentrating solely on the prevailing social conditions surrounding such experiences. However, to analyse the information from such interviews required the researcher to understand as fully as possible the social 'frame', in other words the external

and independent context that shaped the interviewees understanding, perceptions and feelings of the subject topic under discussion. This needed to be considered and factored into the interview schedule to ensure that sufficient data was collected by the interviewer to understand and explain both the transitive and intransitive dimensions that influenced the interviewee. A copy of the interview schedule can be founded at appendix 2.

3.4.3 Participants and Sampling Approach

11 participants were invited to participate in the semi-structured interview all of whom had identified themselves as HRD professionals or with significant expertise within the field. Several of the participants were known to the researcher, either as colleagues or ex-colleagues, although some were identified as a bi-product of approaches to L&D / HRD practitioners to complete the on-line survey. A summary of the participant biographies is below in table 3.1

Participant	Job Title	Organisation Type and Size	Highest Qualification	Membership of Professional Society
1	Associate Fellow	Higher Education / Executive Education	2 Masters degrees	None
2	Director	Consultancy 5>employees	Masters	CIPD, BPS, Association of Business Psychologists
3.	Lead Consultant in Learning and Development	Professional Services circa 16,000 in UK	Masters	CIPD
4.	Owner and Director	Consultancy 5>employees	Degree	BPS
5.	Learning and Development Consultant	Consultancy – sole trader	Postgraduate certificate	CIPD

6	Senior Consultant, Organisation and Change Development	Information Technology Circa 3,000 employees	Masters	None
7	Learning and Development Manager	Manufacturing, 850 – 900 employees	Licentiate member of CIPD / Post Graduate	CIPD
8	Director	Consultancy 5> employees	MBA	CIPD
9	Director of Talent Development	Transportation / Manufacturing circa 30,000 employees	Postgraduate Certificate	None
10	Group Learning and Development Consultant	FMCG circa 80,000 employees	BA Honours degree	ASTD, American Society of HRM, Institute for Personnel and Development (South Africa)
11	Director / Development Catalyst	Consultancy 5> employees	2 post graduate certificates	INLPTA (qualified NLP trainer)

Table 3.1 Biographic details of interview participants

This could be considered to be a sample of convenience (Bryman, 2001, p97) as 7 participants were known to the researcher – either as present or past colleagues or as service providers – whilst the other 4 respondents were unknown to the researcher prior to the interviews and were identified through contacts. There have been many objections to the use of convenience samples in the literature – primarily on the grounds that they were non probability based and so findings of such research could not be generalised to a broader population with any confidence. Another key issue with such an approach was that those participants known to the researcher were likely to share at least some commonality of understanding or experience in the field under investigation. This shared ‘experience’ reduced the potential diversity of views that were surfaced as a result of the interview process meaning that some alternative perspectives or insights could have been missed by the

researcher. This was an important issue for the researcher to be aware of, and to attempt to minimise, by reference back to the literature, triangulation with data gathered through the survey and through personal critical reflexivity that the researcher has attempted to apply through this study.

The question as to the small number of participants is also an issue worthy of consideration, or as Goodwin and Horowitz (2002, p36) say, the 'small N problem'. However, as Crouch and McKenzie (2006, p 492-493) suggested this was not an issue for a qualitative researcher employing a critical realist perspective in exploratory research. They argued that because each individual respondent's case embodied and represented a meaningful structure- experience linkage, rather than a particular instance of a specific variable category, then every 'case' had to be taken into account rather than account being taken of as many cases as possible. In other words a small sample size was not problematic because the output, at this stage of the research, was the development of understanding of issues, and building an inductive analysis of such issues, rather than testing a cause and effect relationship or trying to produce generalisable explanations of behaviour to certain specific categories in the population. This position has been criticised by many who consider qualitative methods un-scientific (for instance King, Keohane and Verba, 1994 as cited in Goodwin and Horowitz, 2002) and that qualitative researchers should adopt the same methodological standards as their colleagues with a more quantitative approach however, on ontological and epistemological grounds such criticisms were rejected.

3.4.4 Conducting the Interviews

Two interviews took place face to face whilst the rest were completed via the telephone. The interview schedule (appendix 2) was used as a guide throughout all the interviews and the initial few minutes of all the interviews included a description of who the interviewer was, why the interview was taking place and a brief explanation of the ethics covering the interview including a guarantee of interviewee confidentiality and assurance that the interviewee could stop at any stage during the interview and that their input, up to that stage in the interview, would not be used in any way. There were no cases where any interviewee raised any issues or objections on ethical or other grounds. The interviews typically lasted between 30 – 45 minutes and were recorded for transcription purposes – all interviewees were informed, in advance, that a recording of the conversation would take place and that this would eventually be transcribed. There were no objections to this either.

At this stage it is worth commenting on the fact that both face to face and telephone interviews were used. There were obvious differences between these two approaches and this was recognised as an area of potential concern. Bryman (2001, p111-112) identified a number of advantages that the telephone interview offered over face to face interviews and vice versa. The benefit of telephone interviews (the approach used in the majority of cases) included reduced cost and faster speed of data collection (the interview participants were in a number of countries so it would have been prohibitively expensive for the interviewer to meet all interviewees face to

face). However, a major advantage was with the interviewer being remote from the interviewee then there was less chance for interviewer bias, towards or against the interviewee, being an issue in the conduct of the interview or associated data collection. There were also disadvantages with this which need to be borne in mind. In particular the inability of a telephone based interviewer to pick up on non-verbal cues that the interviewee could have been exhibiting was considered a problem. For instance, if the interviewee didn't fully understand a question then their facial expression could have provided the interviewer with a cue to repeat, or re-phrase, the question accordingly. On reflection it would have made more sense for all the interviews to be held by telephone and the reason why two interviews were completed face to face was simply that the researcher happened to be with the interviewees at the time the interviews were scheduled. The question is whether the data collected during these interviews had, in some ways, been 'contaminated' by this mixed method. After some consideration the researcher decided that the nature of the topic and the questions that were asked were such that it was unlikely the presence, or otherwise, of the interviewer would have biased the information collected during the different types of interview.

3.4.5 Transcriptions

'The transcript is a tool that helps qualitative researchers make sense of, and understand, interviewees' experiences and perceptions' according to McLellan, MacQueen and Neidig (2003, p 74). This brief section discusses

some of the issues that were taken into account by the researcher when planning and then conducting the transcription process. The technology used by the researcher has also be described.

McLellan et al (2003, p64) argued that there was no one universal approach to transcription that covered all the needs of the qualitative practitioner, however, they did provide guidelines for data preparation and transcription. They also highlighted the need for the researcher to 'settle on' what was to be transcribed and what was to be omitted in the transcripts (McLellan et al, 2003, p65) which was the initial stage in data reduction (McLellan et al 2003; Miles and Hubermann, 1994) and one that had ontological and epistemological implications for further analysis. Decisions needed to be made as to what was to be transcribed and whether non-verbal and other contextual cues were to be included in the transcription. What this meant was that a decision was required about the approach to transcription that was to be used – based on whether the researcher intended to make a literal, inductive or reflexive reading of the data (Mason, 2002).

McLellan et al (2003) argued that the adoption of their transcription guidelines would help the researcher be more systematic in the organisation and analysis of their data. Whilst the guidelines presented were comprehensive they went beyond the requirements for this research. For example, the recommendation to transcribe 'elisions, mispronunciations, slang, grammatical errors, nonverbal sounds (e.g., laughs, sighs), and background noises' made sense for a constructivist researcher drawing on

the conventions of Conversation Analysis for their work but add little in terms of generating meaningful data and insight for this particular research activity.

All interviews were recorded on an Olympus DS 2300 digital voice recorder and then transcribed by a commercial transcription service. Transcripts were produced in Microsoft Word for Mac and saved on a password protected Apple Mac iBook running the Mac OSX 10.3.9 operating system.

3.4.6 Analysis

The researcher had decided to analyse the data in what Mason (2002) termed as a Thematic Analysis approach. Braun and Clarke (2006, p 79) suggested that Thematic Analysis was a broadly used approach but that there was no common understanding about what the term meant and the techniques that were associated with it. In fact in their paper they presented a wide and rich description of the flexibility that Thematic Analysis brought the qualitative researcher and noted that its use was not restricted to any particular epistemological stance (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p 81).

This approach was adopted because the research questions in this study were about identifying generative mechanisms that underpin, and explained, why HRD practitioners made certain decisions about the adoption of theory to their practice and Thematic Analysis provided the flexibility to allow this analysis. The focus of the analysis was on social processes that were identified and described rather than on socially constructivist and contextually

situated techniques, such as Conversation Analysis which was recommended for HRD practitioners by workers such as Wang and Roulston (2007). As Sims-Schouten et al (2007, p107) argued there was, within the critical realist approach, a recognition that there was a material dimension to the lives of all humans which was, at the very least, partially non-discursive in make up. So whilst the researcher was not rejecting Conversation Analysis, and similar techniques per se, it was rejected for this study because the focus on the individual's own construction of reality alone detracted from the identification of external and independent social processes that the researcher considered to exist at the level of the 'real' in the stratified view of social reality (see Bhaskar, 1975, 2008).

The approach that was taken followed a more top down, theoretical and deductive approach rather than a more inductive approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p 83). This meant that the researcher was looking to code against the specific research questions and so accepted a less rich but more detailed analysis of the data. However, as this was a critical realist influenced study it also attempted to identify, what Braun and Clarke described as, latent rather than semantic themes. In this sense, Braun and Clarke (2006, p84) defined semantic analysis as being the analysis of explicit data and latent analysis aimed at '...the underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualisations ...' that a more constructivist approach would warrant. On first sight it appeared that there was a contradiction here – between the rejection of a constructivist approach, as identified in the paragraph above, and the argument for analysis that would uncover more implicit and latent

data. However, as argued above this contradiction was resolved through the application of a critical realist ontology which furnished a more liberal stance on epistemology than that which could be allowed for under a constructivist approach (McEvoy and Richards, 2004).

Braun and Clarke (2006) provided a 'step – by – step guide' on doing Thematic Analysis which was used to provide structure to this analysis. Within this guide there were six steps, namely: 1) familiarisation with data 2) generating initial codes; 3) searching for themes; 4) reviewing themes; 5) defining and naming themes; and 6) writing the report. The following section will summarise how the Braun and Clarke (2006) framework was used.

3.4.6.1 Step 1 -Familiarising your self with the data

Braun and Clark (2006, p 87) suggested that the first step in Thematic Analysis was for the researcher to familiarise themselves with the data that had been collected and, if appropriate, have any data transcribed. Transcriptions of the interviews were made and these were read in conjunction with listening to the recordings of the interviews themselves, in order to complete the 'missing' data sections within the transcriptions. This review process was completed several times during a one week period where the researcher was attempting to make intuitive sense of the data that had been collected. Braun and Clarke (2006, p 88) made the case that the work of transcription itself was, in fact, an initial part of the analysis and

suggested that it should be done by the researcher. However, for this piece of work the actual recordings were transcribed by a commercial organisation, for speed and efficiency sake, and so the researcher did not have this opportunity to begin the analysis through the process of actual transcription. However, this was not considered to be an issue. A further recommendation made by Braun and Clarke was that the researcher should start to make notes about the data during this initial exploratory stage in order to facilitate the coding process later on which was done.

3.4.6.2 Step 2 – Generating Initial Codes

The second phase of the analysis was to start generating initial codes for the data set. This was done in a way that aligned to the top down theoretical approach to Thematic Analysis as previously described (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p 89) and as recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994, p58). In particular the researcher was looking for underlying mechanisms that could explain why HRD practitioners did, or didn't, refer back to theory and / or research to support their professional practice, and in particular looking for explanations that could be loosely described as 'conative' in nature (however, this wasn't the exclusive focus of investigation). As previously described the following codes were derived from Bhaskar's Bases of Action model. These were: 1) Theory / Evidence codes; 2) Learner Benefit codes; 3) Brand Influence codes; 4) Ease of Use codes; 5) Cost / Benefit codes; 6) External Requirements codes; 7) Qualification codes and 8) Professional Identity and Practice codes. Whilst initially useful to structure the analysis it became

apparent that these codes didn't completely cover the territory under investigation and so the coding 'frame' was amended and revised through several iterations and as described later.

Coding was such a fundamental activity to the sorting, retrieving and sense making of data collected through qualitative methods that further description was considered to be appropriate here. Miles and Hubermann (1994, p 56) defined codes as '...tags or labels for assigning units of meaning or to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study'. There were differing views as to when the coding process should start with Miles and Hubermann (1994, p 65) suggesting that it was useful to begin coding, on the basis of the conceptual framework and research questions, prior to data collection, whilst others, following Glaser and Strauss's seminal text on grounded theory, would only look to code after data had been collected (see Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This approach was not taken because, as Cepada and Martin (2005, p 858) argued, it was unrealistic for a researcher to enter a field of research with no ideas or concepts about the field of interest for, if nothing else, a researcher should have consulted the literature, prior to their work, to identify gaps in the knowledge base. This researcher had therefore decided to take Miles and Hubermann's approach and so initial codes were developed on the basis of Bhaskar's (1998) framework and these have been described in section 3.1.2 above. However, as Miles and Hubermann argued this did not mean that codes emerging from the data won't be included – rather, that the pre-coding helped ensure the research remained in-line with the pre-stated research questions. It also meant that

there was sufficient flexibility to allow for inductive analysis as well. This was important in order to ensure that emerging codes were not rejected on the grounds of the researcher's pre-set ideas. This approach also protected the researcher from what Miles and Hubermann described as data overload' and provided the researcher with a tool for the selection of appropriate data for the study, the act of which, Miles and Hubermann (1994, p 55) described as 'inescapable'. Using the conceptual framework as the initial foundation for coding, and preventing data overload, also ensured the connection between data, its analysis and the research topic (Cepeda and Martin, 2005, p 859).

However, a weakness of this research process, which was recognised at this point, was that the researcher was working alone on the coding process. Ideally, there should be at least two well trained coders in a study such as this and measures of quality of coding, such as Guetzkow's U or Cohen's Kappa, should be used with other inter-coder consistency tests (see Srnka and Koeszegi, 2007). Whilst accepted as a potential flaw in the coding process the researcher was mindful of this and so the importance of the established conceptual framework for guiding coding and analysis was further demonstrated.

High level codes were initially generated by the researcher and based on Bhaskar's Bases of Action Model. These high level codes were then used to help an initial organisation of underpinning codes that the researcher developed both before the analysis and from those that emerged during the

actual data analysis process. Table 3.2 shows a summary example of the structure employed.

Higher level Code	Underpinning codes	Code Reference	Code Definition	Data Extract
Theory / Evidence	Personal Experience	TE - PE	Use of personal experience to guide tool selection	<p>Question: <i>Can I ask, are you aware of any research evidence or any other kind of evidence to support the actual Honey and Mumford learning Style Questionnaire, on its use, and that it is valid and reliable?</i></p> <p>Answer: <i>'I think that I'm not familiar with any specific research. All I've got to go on with that is just my own experience of its validity. People saying 'yeah, I recognise that' or 'yeah, that's me', that's how I like to work. So no research. It's only anecdotal experience of it.'</i></p> <p>Participant 7</p>

Table 3.2 An Extract from the Coding Process

Appendix 3 presents all the codes that were identified through this initial phase.

The main difference employed by the researcher was the generation of initial codes, based on the conceptual framework, prior to step 1) above. This was more in-line with a top down theory driven approach to analysis.

3.4.6.3 Step 3 Searching for Themes

Following Braun and Clarke (2006) the next stage in the analysis was to review the initial analysis for meaning and completeness and to identify key themes that emerged from the data. They defined a theme as capturing:

‘something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p 82).

This was done by re-reading the data, re-coding if necessary and attempting to condense the initial analysis down into a more summarised, but complete, map of the entire data set. This was achieved by reviewing codes and sorting them into ‘stacks’ of apparently similar meaning codes, using simple ‘Post-it’ notes and flip chart paper. The process of developing a map also required that a top down and bottom up approach was taken to reading the codes. In this sense, top down meant looking at the degree of coherence across the terrain and bottom up meant reading the data in detail to ensure completeness of coding and of understanding. Braun and Clarke (2006, p91) argued that this helped check the actual validity of the themes being identified at this stage of the analysis and how they reflected the actual data collected through the interviews. The end point of this stage, according to Braun and Clark, was to have developed a map that ‘works’ in helping to describe the data set whilst bearing in mind the analytical and theoretical approach that had been adopted. What was actually produced were two

thematic maps – one for ‘barriers’ and the other for ‘encouragers’ which are figures 4.1 and 4.2 in the Results chapter. In this sense ‘barriers’ were all the potential factors, both associated with the individual practitioner and also their context, that prevented the practitioner engaging with theory and research to support their practice whilst ‘encouragers’ were seen as the opposite – those factors that supported the practitioners engagement with research. Braun and Clarke (2006, p91) also stated that these maps should cohere meaningfully as an overall picture whilst being clearly discriminating between the emerging themes, in order to show differences between them.

3.4.6.4 Step 4 Reviewing Themes

Having developed the thematic maps, figures 4.1 and 4.2, it was necessary to take stock, review and if necessary rationalise themes and make the maps more compelling. As previously reported Bhaskar’s Bases of Action model was at the heart of the research, and in particular the conative component, and so this gave some direction as to the themes that the researcher was looking for. Braun and Clarke (2006, p 82) described what they believed counted as a theme but they recognised that there were issues of ‘prevalence’ – how often the instances of a theme appeared in the data – and ‘keyness’ – capturing something of importance to the research. They argued that prevalence did not equate to keyness and that researcher judgement was necessary and fundamental to identifying the themes that were important. They also argued that the researcher’s expectation of the type of analysis required also influenced the search for themes. They identified that

analysis could be either to gain a rich description of a total data set or to develop a more detailed account of a particular aspect of the data. For this research the latter approach was taken and particular themes relating to the research questions were searched for. Having gone through a review process then intermediary maps were developed of the terrain. which are figures 4.3 and 4.4 in the Results chapter.

3.4.6.5 Step 5 Theme Identification and Definition

This was a crucial stage in the analysis and one that Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested should be about 'defining and refining' the analysis but also one that took the collated data extracts, supporting each theme, and using the data to produce a coherent, consistent and ultimately compelling narrative that identified and described why these extracts were both interesting and supportive of the overall analysis. After significant re-reading of the transcript 'extracts' a final map of the terrain was developed which is figure 4.5 in the Results chapter.

3.4.6.6 Step 6 Writing the Report

The final stage in the Thematic Analysis process was the preparation of the written report and Braun and Clarke (2006) offered the following advice on the write up:

‘...it is to tell the complicated story of your data in a way which convinces the reader of the merit and validity of your analysis. It is important that the analysis provides a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story the data tell your analytic narrative needs to go beyond description of the data, and make an argument in relation to your research question.’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p 93).

The researcher attempted to adopt this guidance in this work.

3.4.7 Validity and Reliability in Qualitative Research

The criticism of qualitative research, as described by Goodwin and Horowitz (2002), had prompted many qualitative researchers to develop greater ‘methodological self-awareness’. For example, Seale (1999, p 467) identified and described a ‘...bewildering variety of new concepts...’ that had been developed by qualitative researchers with the aim of identifying and agreeing a set of quality criteria on which to judge qualitative research. He suggested that the various underpinning philosophical positions were partially to blame for this proliferation of methods. He argued that qualitative research, as a craft skill, should ‘break free’ from the obligations of a particular philosophical position, whilst still acknowledging the value that philosophical reflexivity brought to the researcher’s work (Seale, 1999, p466). However, whilst this researcher had sympathy with some of Seale’s comments about the various mechanisms to assess quality it was still believed that the critical realist

philosophical position is an appropriate one on which to guide this research and to use as a basis to assess quality. In an interesting article Healey and Perry (2000) identified and described criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative research drawing on a critical realist perspective. They identified six specific quality criteria and argued that earlier literature had either ignored this area for the realist paradigm of research or had tried to force-fit positivist or constructivist approaches towards quality assessment on realist based research. Whilst the criteria themselves can be seen elsewhere (for instance Miles and Huberman, 1994, p278 – 280), the positioning and definition within a critical realist paradigm was the differentiator. Having taken this commentary on board the researcher adopted Healey and Perry's six quality criteria for the assessment of this phase of the research. These criteria are introduced and described in more detail in Table 3.3 below.

Quality Criteria	Description of the Quality Criteria	Research techniques within the realist paradigm
Ontological Appropriateness	Research problem deals with complex social research phenomena	Selection of research problem – is it a 'how' and 'why' issue?
Contingent Validity	Open systems involving generative mechanisms rather than cause and effect	Theoretical and literal replication, in-depth questioning, emphasis on 'why' questions.
Multiple Perceptions of participants and peer Researchers	Value aware rather than value free or value laden	Multiple interviews, supporting evidence, broad questioning before probing, triangulation. Self-description, awareness and reflection on personal values.
Methodology	The research is trustworthy and is capable of being	Use of relevant quotations in report, summaries of data, descriptions of procedures,

	audited	interview templates.
Analytic Generalisation	Theory building rather than theory testing approach	Research issue identified before data collection so interview protocol will provide data that confirms / disconfirms theory generated
Construct Validity	That constructs within the theory are actually being measured and not some other artefact.	Use of prior theory, triangulation, case study material

Table 3.3: Quality Criteria to Assess Qualitative Research in the Realist Paradigm.
(Adapted from Healey and Perry, 2000, p 122)

By drawing on these six criteria and then assessing how well the semi-structured interview process met them, provided an appropriate guide to the validity and reliability of the activity, seen through the realist lens. The first criterion was whether the research activity was ontologically appropriate, or in other words looking at fairly complex social issues. Healey and Perry (2000) suggested that the focus here should have been on the 'how and why' yet the research questions for this study were dealing with 'what and which' issues. However, by going into more detail and reviewing the interview schedule it was demonstrated that the 'how' and particularly the 'why's' were being tackled in the interview. Whilst the over-arching questions did not appear to meet the definition for quality, the practical application did meet this requirement. The second criteria identified by Healey and Perry was that of Contingent Validity which implied that the research should have been orientated towards understanding and explaining rather than identifying cause and effect relationships. In this respect the interview procedure met the criteria well as the intention was to improve understanding of the

mechanisms that were at work and so helped explain how and why practitioners choose certain learning style theories and instruments for application in their work. The third criteria was described as taking multiple perspectives on the topic and this was the case as the researcher had consulted a wide literature in preparation for this work, that a number of different participants were interviewed and that a complimentary survey was running concurrently with the interviews as part of the triangulated research strategy. The methodological criteria were demonstrated through the possibility, or otherwise, of auditing the primary research data allowing a full and detailed account to be provided of the methodology adopted. The requirements to describe the research in the detail needed for the doctoral thesis also ensured that this criterion was met. The penultimate criteria was described as analytical generalisation by Healy and Perry and related to whether the research identified key issues and generated theory prior to data collection, so that the emerging theory could have been supported or rejected. The recognition in the literature review that branding could impact the selection of a learning style instrument by an HRD practitioner demonstrated this key issue. This was identified and explored using the conceptual framework, through both the interview and the survey technique, which allowed modification to initial explanations for some of the reasons why HRD practitioners did, or didn't, refer to theory to inform their practice. Finally, the criteria of construct validity was identified by Healy and Perry and in respect to this criteria the adoption of a triangulated research strategy and the on-going reference to Bhaskar's model of the Bases of Action was considered to be sufficient to meet this criteria. In summary, Healy and Perry

identified six criteria for assessing the validity and reliability of qualitative research, particularly drawing on a critical realist approach, and the preceding paragraph demonstrated how these criteria were considered and met through this study.

3.5 Research Phase 2

The original intention for the research design was that phase 1 would precede and inform phase 2. The actuality was that the two phases were run concurrently with some degree of iteration taking place within, and between, the design activities. This was for purely practical reasons to take advantage of resources that were made available to the researcher to design and build the survey in the Survey Monkey tool, resources that would not have been available again for a further six months.

The second approach towards gathering data was through the use of an on-line survey. This data collection approach was by nature more 'quantitative' than that of the semi-structured interviews described in phase 1 of the research. The intention of the survey was to collect data on the themes that emerged from the interview phase about the predilection of HRD practitioners to use theory to inform their activities, or otherwise. However, the same conceptual framework was used as a foundation.

3.5.1 On-Line Survey

To collect data in the most cost efficient and standardised way for this phase of the research an on-line survey was developed. Taking this approach also allowed for an integration of data collection methods, the survey, with the data analysis software, SPSS. The survey itself was designed using the 'Survey Monkey' tool which is widely available on the internet.

3.5.2 Survey design and structure

The survey design followed a self-completion format as described by Bryman (2001, p133). Bryman (2001, p 129 – 132) identified a number of advantages and disadvantages to using self-administered questionnaires. He argued that, in their favour, they were relatively cheap and quick to administer (although Bryman was referring to postal questionnaires and not on-line surveys which are somewhat more costly to build) and a particular advantage was that the 'interviewer effect' was removed as a possible source of bias from the research and this issue has been looked at in more detail below. Bryman (2001) also identified a series of disadvantages associated with the format – when compared to a structured interview – but as the intention was to get a significant number of respondents, internationally, to complete the survey then this format seemed to provide the most efficient and effective data collection technique. Looking at on-line surveys in particular, Granello and Wheaton (2004, p388) identified the following specific advantages of their use over the more typical paper based self-

completion questionnaires: 1) reduced response time; 2) lower cost; 3) ease of data entry; 4) increased flexibility of, and control over, format; 5) advances in technology; 6) recipient acceptance of the format; and 7) the ability to obtain additional response-set information - for instance being able to see how many people had accessed the survey but did not complete it – which was not possible with a paper based questionnaire. However, they also recognised four main disadvantages with the approach – representativeness of the sample; response rates; measurement errors and respondents technical difficulties - all of which were encountered by the researcher during this exercise. These were all important issues and have been explored later in the section on sources of bias (section 3.4.2).

The survey opened with a brief introduction by the researcher, an explanation of what the researcher was attempting to achieve and a statement of what the intended benefits of the research would be. An assurance on respondent confidentiality was also made as part of this opening statement.

The first part of the 'body' of the survey collected a range of biographical data from the respondents that allowed comparison to be made between groups as well as allowing for the investigation of the impact of various professional backgrounds on the tendency to use, or otherwise, theory to support practice. The standard CIPD membership questions were used as a basis for the biographic data but with some modifications as appropriate (for instance the researcher was not interested in salary bands unlike the CIPD who have a specific question on this). The CIPD's questions were used as they were

easily accessible, standardised and convenient yet also covered the biographic data necessary for this research. The CIPD was approached about using their membership questionnaire and it was confirmed back that this was acceptable to the CIPD and did not cause any copyright issues.

After the collection of biographic details, the survey moved on to questions regarding HRD practitioner's knowledge about, and use of, learning style questionnaires and questions. These questions were structured to allow the respondent to select appropriate items against a pre-defined list of responses. There was no attempt to evaluate preferences, rather the intention was to collect data about how wide spread the understanding about such tools was, how they were being used in practice and how HRD practitioners were introduced and became familiar with the tools. Initially, the respondents were asked to choose from a list of HRD practices that they have used a learning style theory to support in some way. The researcher initially identified a set of such practices based on personal experience. However, on reflection it was decided to use a more transparent approach and so the CIPD's subject list on their website was reviewed. From the HRD practitioners perspective there were three subject areas that looked of particular relevance, namely Performance Management, Learning, Training and Development and finally Recruitment and Talent. Under these three category titles there were subsections listed which provided the basis for the question.

The next question dealt with the actual learning style instrument that the practitioner knew and used. The question was in the form of a list, based upon the 13 major learning style theories identified by Coffield et al (2004) in their review, and respondents were asked to indicate which instruments they didn't know, which ones they knew but didn't use and finally which ones they used in their professional practice. If a practitioner used more than one then they were asked to select their preferred instrument. Respondents were then asked to state whether they were trained and / or accredited in the learning style questionnaire that they used. They were also asked whether they were able to name the underpinning theory that supported the particular learning style questionnaire. There was a free completion text box for this response.

The survey then moved onto the next stage and information about how and why practitioners used specific learning style theories / lsqs was gathered. This section was designed to gain some insight into the factors that influenced the decision making process for HRD practitioners in their choice of learning style questionnaire and took the form of 35 standard 5 point Likert Scales (Bryman, 2001, p 135, Coolican, 1992, p 98). The scales were identified as a by product of the outputs from the 'brain storming' session described in section 3.1.2 above and were later checked with one of the 'experts' for meaning and coverage. After being grouped into similar 'themes' it was seen that there was reasonable alignment between these groupings and Bhaskars (1998) Bases of Action Model. The 35 items were categorised into the following groupings: 1) Theory / Evidence group; 2) Learner Benefit group; 3) Brand Influence group; 4) Ease of Use group; 5)

Cost / Benefit Group; 6) External Requirements group 7) Qualification group and 8) Professional Identity and Practice group. When mapped to Bhaskar's model the following loose relationships can be seen.

Bhaskars Bases of Action	Grouping Label
Cognitive	Theory / Evidence
Cognitive	Cost / Benefit
Cognitive	Ease of Use
Affective	Professional ID and Practice
Affective	Brand
Conative	Brand
Intrinsic competence	Qualification
Extrinsic facilities	Cost / Benefit
Extrinsic facilities	External Requirements
Circumstantial	Ease of Use
Circumstantial	Outside Control

Table 3.4: Relationship Between the Scale Groupings and Bhaskar's Bases of Action Model

Likert Scales were used because they allowed the respondents attitudes to specific constructs to be easily assessed. Bhaskar's Bases of Action was the foundation of the survey and the actual constructs that were assessed were the groupings named above. What this provided was data on the respondents' attitudes towards each of the above which, in turn, provided insight as to the factors that influenced the practitioners in their choice of learning style questionnaire. These questions also provided data on how the practitioner became aware of their preferred Isq and provided some data to investigate the issues associated with cognitive lock-in and skill based habit formation.

The next section of questionnaire was about the respondent's personal views as to the benefits that they thought using their preferred Isq brought to themselves and to the learners they were working with. In the next section participants were asked to identify, from a list of 12 examples, learning theories that they had: a) never heard of; b) heard of but didn't use and c) used in their practice. The learning theories that were identified were listed and described in a standard text on learning theory (Pritchard, 2005).

The final section of the survey included a statement of thanks and a free text box for respondents to add any further comments about the research topic under investigation and finally, the option to leave their eMail address if they wanted to be notified of the availability of the research write up.

Having now discussed at some length the structure of the survey it is worth briefly looking at some of the design principles and guidelines that were adopted. Bryman (2001) identified the layout of a self-administered questionnaire as being important and argued that the format must not be cramped or unappealing. With data being collected on knowledge about, and use of, learning style theories and Isqs then a simple 'radio button' was used with respondents selecting their responses against a defined list. However, there was also the provision of a free text format 'other' box for respondents to add alternatives not identified by the researcher. Throughout the survey the Likert Scales were mixed so that 'positive' and 'negative' responses were not always at the same end of the scale in order to manage a possible issue of respondent 'acquiescence' (Bryman, 2001, p 136). The traditional 5 point

scale was preferred as it reduced down the amount of time and effort participants would need to give to complete the survey but without any loss of discriminative power that scales with higher number of scales (Dawes, 2008). When looking at the design of Likert Scales, Bryman argues for a 'vertical' rather than 'horizontal' arrangement of scales in order to improve respondent response rates and reduces possible completion error (Bryman, 2001, p 134) however, the restrictions of the Survey Monkey tool prevented this advice from being adopted.

The questions within the survey were almost overwhelmingly closed in nature (see Bryman (2001, p145) and predominantly were designed in line with several standard rating techniques. Standard guidelines were used for the design of the questions (see Bryman, 2001, p 150; Coolican, 1992, p 101 – 102) and efforts were made to ensure that questions were not ambiguous, complicated, drawing on overly technical language, using double negatives or simply too long. As described above there was a mixture of Likert Scales with both positive and negative statements being used to help maintain construct validity. However, it was decided not to go to the length of having two forms of the survey – one with positive scales ascending from the left side of the screen and a second with the positive scale ascending from the right hand of the screen as recommended by Nicholls, Orr, Okubu and Loftus (2006). They recommend this format to counter a perceived skew to favourable scales at the left and unfavourable scales on the right, a psychological tendency they call 'pseudo-neglect' (Nicholls et al 2006, p 1027). The reason why this recommendation was not taken on board was for

practical purposes and the difficulty of setting up two different on-line surveys and then integrating the data collected. Finally, when considering good scale design Coolican (1992, p98) advises that they should: 1) have discriminatory power; 2) be reliable; 3) be supported by test of validity and 4) be standardised if they are to be used as general measures of human characteristics. Whilst point 4 is not relevant to this particular survey the other three are and will be described in the next section.

3.5.3 Survey Data Analysis, Validity and Reliability

This research activity was influenced by critical realism and the intention was to identify causal reasons and generative mechanism for explaining how and why HRD professionals do, or don't, draw upon theory and evidence to support their professional practice. This philosophical stance meant that the researcher did not attempt to demonstrate 'positivist' orientated cause and effect relationships, or similar, as these run counter to the intention of the research. As Manicas (1998, p 334) argued, if the aim of a research programme is to identify causes and their effects then the programme is futile because '...causes are not additive and all the quantitative methods in current use must assume that they are'. Manicas (1998, p 335) clarified this position and stated that this view was relevant to the 'open system' world of social science study but not for the 'mechanical causation' associated with the natural sciences. However, it was considered that some analysis was necessary, in order to identify explanatory causes, and so descriptive statistics were primarily used, as appropriate, to describe the data. Also,

nonparametric statistics were used in order to demonstrate relationships between factors and, in particular, the Kruskal –Wallis test was chosen (see Higgins, 2004, p86). This test assessed the equality of population medians across independent groups and was used to interrogate the data to help the researcher understand and explain the causes and generative mechanisms. This was aligned with the critical realist approach as non-parametric techniques offered a loose, iterative and incremental approach that assisted in the practical assessment of the adequacy and reliability of knowledge claims coming from the research (see Finch and McMaster, 2002, p754). Non-parametrics were also considered more appropriate for the analysis of the Likert type scales, due to the ordinal nature of the data (Clason and Dormody, 1994), although it could be argued that due to the number of respondents that ‘normality’ of data could have been assumed. However, in light of the ordinal nature of the collected data and the previous argument about the use of non-parametric statistics in a study informed by critical realism, this position was not taken.

In order to analyse the data a decision had to be made about how the sample would be treated in order to show differences in the data, if any existed, to support or reject the research questions. A number of alternatives were considered based upon whether a respondent identified themselves as an HRD professional, whether they had membership of a professional body, their level of qualification and so on. However, none of these ultimately seemed satisfactory and so it was decided to take an alternative approach. Within the data collected it was evident whether respondents used one, a

small number or many learning style questionnaires as well as seeing whether they only knew of one, a small number or many learning style questionnaires. This allowed the participants to be categorised into one of 9 groups, as shown in the following 3 x 3 matrix.

L S Q s u s e d	↑	Speed dater (7)	Fashionistas (8)	Independent (9)
		Beachcomber (4)	Floating Voters (5)	Switcher (6)
		Childhood Sweethearts (1)	Loyalists (2)	Brand Advocate (3)
Low		→ High		
Awareness of a range of lsqs				

Table 3.5. 9 categories of lsq user

Each of the 9 categories was labelled for convenience and these labels have been briefly summarised below. Whilst somewhat arbitrary it was decided that 'low' meant 2 or less responses, medium was 3-5 responses and 6 responses or over was considered high. This provided the mechanism to categorise the participants into one of the nine categories.

1. **Childhood sweethearts** – used one tool to the exclusion of all else. Not interested in understanding range of tools. Monogamous relationship with test.

2. **Loyalist** – some awareness of the range of Isqs available but preferred the tried and trusted approach. Conservative user.
3. **Brand advocate** – very aware of the breadth of tests available but used a particular questionnaire to the exclusion of all others. Test publishers dream.
4. **Beachcomber** – used what he / she came across at the time. Medium usage of tools but low awareness of range. Opportunistic test user.
5. **Floating Voter** – used a number of Isqs and had some understanding of the available range. Open to persuasion.
6. **Switcher** – was aware of the breadth available and would, at times, use different tools. Serial test monogamist.
7. **Speed dater** – used a large number of Isqs but with no real awareness of the range available and depth behind them. Promiscuous test user.
8. **Fashionista** – used a large number of tools with some awareness of range. Follows trends.
9. **Independent** – used a wide range of tools and was a wide appreciation of the 'market'. 'Horse for courses' approach.

This loose categorisation allowed the data to be interrogated in a way that demonstrated a number of interesting relationships and allowed the researcher to identify themes emerging from the data. It is worth noting that there were only small numbers of some respondents in several categories and the idea of combining several related categories was considered. However, the researcher decided against this conflation in case interesting

themes were lost albeit it was recognised that some categories have very small numbers of members.

It is now necessary to turn attention towards the issues of validity and reliability associated with the survey. Validity was assessed through several different approaches. First, Content Validity (Coolican, 1992, p 112) was assessed by a colleague looking through the scales and providing feedback on the basis of their 'expert' opinion. Convergent Validity was also considered which Bryman describes as being '...gauged by comparing it to measures of the same concept developed through other methods' (Bryman, 2001, p73). Therefore, by using the outputs from the semi-structured interview then Convergent Reliability could be assessed by comparison to the survey findings. Whilst this lacked some degree of rigour it was still considered appropriate, particularly as the conceptual framework was the same for both methods.

In some ways reliability was more problematic to assess as the survey was a one off tool to collect data and was not intended for further use. However, as Davies (1996, p297) suggested, a survey can be considered reliable if it consistently discriminated amongst members of a population. Looking at the classification of Isq users that were identified through the survey then it was apparent that the survey had met this requirement.

The statistical analysis was carried out on the SPSS version 17 package running on a Dell Latitude E4300 laptop running Windows XP professional and exported to Microsoft Excel for the production of charts.

3.5.4 Bias

It was important to think about and reflect upon bias within survey based research such as described above. Bias has been described in a number of ways – from one perspective, the research design, including sample selection, could lead to biased results (see Coolican, 1992, p 25-26), or bias could come from the design of the survey, the presentation of which could encourage a ‘yes set’ approach in the minds of respondents (Coolican, 1992, p102). In terms of recognising, and where possible managing, such issues then the following steps were taken. First, it was recognised that through a ‘snow ball’ sampling approach, drawing primarily on social networking internet sites, then self-selection and also access issues could have been an issue. However, as Eaton and Struthers (2002, p307) pointed out, that whilst there will be bias simply through using the internet as a mechanism to collect data that there are really few, if any, organisational studies that have been published that use a completely random sampling technique anyway. Also, it must be remembered that the intention of this research was not to make generalisations about populations so the impact of sampling bias was much reduced. As mentioned previously a survey based design removed the interviewer bias effect from the data collection process (Bryman, 2002). In terms of ‘yes set’ responses to the various scales then care was taken to

ensure that there was a mixture of both positive and negative statements for the Likert scales which were presented in a random way.

A second view on bias was that that 'I', the researcher, brought a personal approach and interpretation of the 'knowledge' generated – as a result of held views, attitudes, past experiences, motives, values and beliefs. This was a factor that influenced both the more qualitative as well as the more quantitative phases of this research. There was no one 'correct' method or technique towards ameliorating such bias. However, a personal attempt at reflexivity, through reflection and self-critique of the researcher's role in this research process, did go some way to checking such bias. However, it must be realised that this could not and will not prevent bias, as knowledge was being socially constructed, with the researcher playing the role of architect, brick layer and site foreman - to draw on a simple construction analogy.

3.5.5 Participants and Sampling Approach

There were a growing number of professional social networks available via the internet and eMail such as LinkedIn, as well as on-line communities hosted by organisations such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). In order to reach the widest possible set of participants, in number and geography, it was decided to draw upon these social networks as a mechanism for disseminating the on-line survey as well as the researcher using a network of personal contacts. There were a

number of benefits and drawbacks with this approach, as with any other sampling mechanism, and in particular the researcher was unable to control who had access and completed the on-line survey. However, participants were asked to self-select as to whether they viewed themselves as Human Resource Development professionals, in its broadest meaning, which was one mechanism to manage this issue. Also, when potential participants were being identified through the LinkedIn networking site specific search criteria were used. Through the membership database the researcher searched for LinkedIn members who had the following characteristics: 1) they identified themselves as experts in 'learning and development', 'human resource development', 'leadership development', 'executive education' or 'training and development'; 2) that this expertise was in their 'current' job; and 3) they stated on their membership profile that, amongst other things, they would accept 'expertise inquiries' from other members. From this database 200 separate individuals, the limit of access that the professional subscription bought, were approached with a note requesting their help. From this 96 positive responses were received, 10 requests were declined whilst the rest were not responded and lapsed within 2 weeks of being sent. A response rate of 48% was considered to be very good for a survey of this type. The LinkedIn community was used because of its significant membership size and the fact that for a relatively small fee, GBP 100 / month, the researcher had access to a large pool of possible participants to approach. The survey was also posted into the CIPD's electronic discussion on 'general learning and development' but this appeared to bring only limited response to the survey and finally, personal contacts were also accessed, which was very

successful in terms of generating further survey participants. Whilst a very wide pool of potential participants was tapped it did mean that the researcher lost 'control' over who could access the survey and whilst there were benefits associated with time, costs and global access there were obvious disadvantages using such a method in terms of control over participants and the ability to access further information about them. It could be argued that there were flaws in the sampling approach that was employed. In particular the communities involved were self-selecting and were also, in the main, technology orientated. In the former instance there was only participation from those who labelled and perceived themselves as practicing in the broad area of HR Development. Such self-selection would mean that there was no representation of other views from those, who work within the area, who don't perceive themselves as being allied to the practice of HRD per se. In the latter instance this meant that there was no participation from those who, whilst meeting the rest of the selection criteria, had little or no access / usage to the internet. This again skewed the sample and required the researcher to remain mindful of the potential consequences, as discussed above in section 3.5.4, on bias. However, recognising that there was no such thing as a perfectly representative sample and that the survey response rate was high then the results were not considered to be adversely affected by these characteristics of the sample (see Eaton and Struthers (2002, p307).

The following provides detailed information on the survey participants.

221 respondents completed the on-line survey during the 8 week data collection period. As part of the design of the survey biographical detail was collected about the respondents including their job title, a description of their job role, highest educational qualification, membership of professional bodies, industry sector, size of organisation that they work for and geographic region in which they operate. A further question was asked as to whether they identified themselves as an HRD practitioner or not. For those who answered in the affirmative, they were then asked to choose from a list what their specific specialism was. For those who did not identify themselves as HRD practitioners they were asked to choose, from a different list, the specialism that they considered themselves to have. This data is reported in appendices 5-11.

The sampling approach adopted for this activity was described by Bryman (2001, p98-99) as snow ball sampling and whilst the approach did allow for a wide range of possible respondents to be contacted it did bring within it a number of problems. However, it is first worth pointing out the difference between classical snow ball sampling and what was used in this study. Typically, a snow ball sample is developed through personal contacts and social networks which, by nature would lead to questions about the nature of the sample and how representative it would be of a population in general – an issue that Bryman raises when he suggested that snowball sampling was more appropriate for qualitative rather than quantitative studies (Bryman, 2001, p 99). However, in this research the network was accessed through social networking software, such as LinkedIn as well as professional on-line

communities such as those hosted by the CIPD. Browne (2005) described the use of snow ball sampling in social research and whilst acknowledging that it wasn't a flawless approach (which is a common characteristic shared with every other sampling technique) she concluded that whilst there were:

‘..advantages and disadvantages that these are subjective and often dictated by the precepts and expectations of what is acceptable and unacceptable to the research strategy being employed’ (Browne, 2005, p 57).

In terms of other benefits Eaton and Struthers (2004) identified several – including access to a potentially very large and geographically diverse population, enhanced anonymity for respondents and ultimately the cost effectiveness and efficiency of the technique.

Having now looked at the design and analysis of the semi-structured interviews as well as the on-line survey it is now worth looking at the issue of ethics and the guidelines that the researcher adopted.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

As a guiding framework the British Psychological Society's (BPS) Code of Ethics and Conduct (2006) was drawn upon. As the BPS (2006, p6) pointed out ethics are related to the control of power and this must be considered and reflected upon throughout the research process. A fundamental ethical

principle within this 'power relationship' was that of providing Informed Consent to the participant (BPS standard 1.3 (i) & (ii), 2000 p 12). Informed Consent required the researcher to ensure that respondents were given the opportunity to understand the nature, purpose and possible consequences of research and, on this information, either engage or withdraw from participation in the research. Within this research process the initial contact made with interview respondents was crucial to gaining informed consent and this was followed up at the start of the actual interview where after the purpose of the research was explained then the rights of the interviewee to withdraw from, or not answer specific questions during, the interview was reiterated. Another fundamental principle was that of confidentiality but in this respect the BPS standard on Privacy and Confidentiality was less relevant to this particular study due to its emphasis on confidentiality in the therapeutic / clinical setting. However, confidentiality was vital for this research and all respondents were guaranteed that they would not be identifiable through the research outputs and that their interview data would be stored electronically in password protected files. Ideally, such data would be deleted after use but this would run contrary to the quality principles established above, where it is argued that data needs to be available for 'audit' purposes to ensure trustworthiness of outputs (Healey and Perry, 2000). In this circumstance the researcher undertook to keep the data for the period of the research activity and until after the research programme had been completed and published but after this the researcher undertook to destroy interview transcripts. After these commitments had been made and the rationale for them explained the participants were asked, again, for their

consent to continue. Returning to the issue of confidentiality McLellan et al (2003, p71) raised the issue of how individuals / organisations should be 'described' if identified by a respondent during an interview. The principle of maintaining anonymity and confidentiality of such data was adhered to and so pseudonyms were inserted by the researcher as necessary.

Returning to the BPS Code sections entitled '3.3 standards of protection of research participants' and '3.4 standard of de-briefing of research participants' (BPS, 2006, p 18 -19) were also of particular relevance. These two standards provided full and directive guidance on ethical behaviour and were adhered to during the research process. However, Orb, Eisenhauer and Wynaden (2000, p95) argued that such codes do not provide the 'answers' for all ethical dilemmas that might be faced by the researcher. In response to this observation Orb et al (2000) outlined three principles of ethical behaviour in qualitative research, namely autonomy, beneficence and justice that they argued informed responses to such ethical challenges. Orb et al (2000) described autonomy as the various rights that the research respondent had – namely, the rights to: being informed about the nature of the study; to freely decide whether to participate in the study or not; and the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. These rights map well to the BPS standards 3.3 (vi) and 3.3 (vii). The second principle identified is that of beneficence which was summarised as '... do good for others and preventing harm' (Orb et al 2000, p 95). In relation to the BPS standards this particular principle related primarily to confidentiality and anonymity. In their work Orb et al suggested that researchers use

pseudonyms for research participants to help to protect anonymity and this was applied to the outputs of this piece of work. Finally, the principle of justice was described by Orb et al (2000, p 95) as ensuring 'equal share, fairness ... and avoiding exploitation and abuse of participants'. Within the BPS guidelines this was covered by section 4.2 – the standards for avoiding exploitation or conflict of interests.

Finally, BPS standard 2.2 (1) and 2.2 (2) described the standards required of ethical decision making and pointed out that there will inevitably be ethical questions which must be addressed during practice. In 2.2 (2) the need to consult colleagues on ethical dilemmas was raised and, in this respect, if any ethical dilemmas had arisen during this research process then they would have been discussed with the researcher's Supervisor.

3.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter opened with a discussion about ontology and epistemology and it was also stated that the research would be influenced by the tenets of critical realism. A triangulated research strategy was described drawing upon both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and this approach was then justified.

The qualitative and quantitative research methods were then fully described as was the data analysis techniques that were used. The approach towards identifying suitable participants for both data collection approaches was also

explained and justified. Validity and reliability issues were also considered and the mechanism used to attempt to ensure the quality of the research process was described. Finally, an overview of ethical considerations was made and the researcher outlined his determination to adopt the ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society for his research work.

Chapter 4: Results

4. 1 Introduction

This chapter has been broken down into four discrete sections. First, the outcomes of the thematic analysis, based on the analysis of the interview transcripts is introduced and initial themes arising from the data has been outlined and initial conclusions drawn. The second section presents descriptive information of the participants who completed the on-line survey. Third, selected descriptive statistics have been used to describe the data collected in the survey and again, initial conclusions from this data have been drawn. Finally, this has been followed by the use of some appropriate inferential statistics to explore the relationships and themes emerging from the data collected. This provided the context for the discussion of the findings that followed in the next chapter.

4.2 Thematic Analysis of Semi-Structured Interviews

This section deals with the data 'corpus' that was collected during the semi-structured interview process and the analysis of the relevant data set from this corpus. As mentioned in the Methods chapter the work of Braun and Clarke (2006) was used for guidance on how to conduct a Thematic Analysis. Their six stage approach was described in the previous chapter but for the purpose of the Results chapter then three of these stages, and the supporting analysis, will be described more thoroughly. These three stages

are: 1) Searching for themes, 2) Reviewing themes and 3) Defining and naming themes.

4.2.1 Searching for themes

As described in section 3.16.3 a detailed process of reviewing and re-coding the data was undertaken. From this review process then the first two thematic maps of the terrain emerged and are described in detail in figures 4.1 and 4.2.

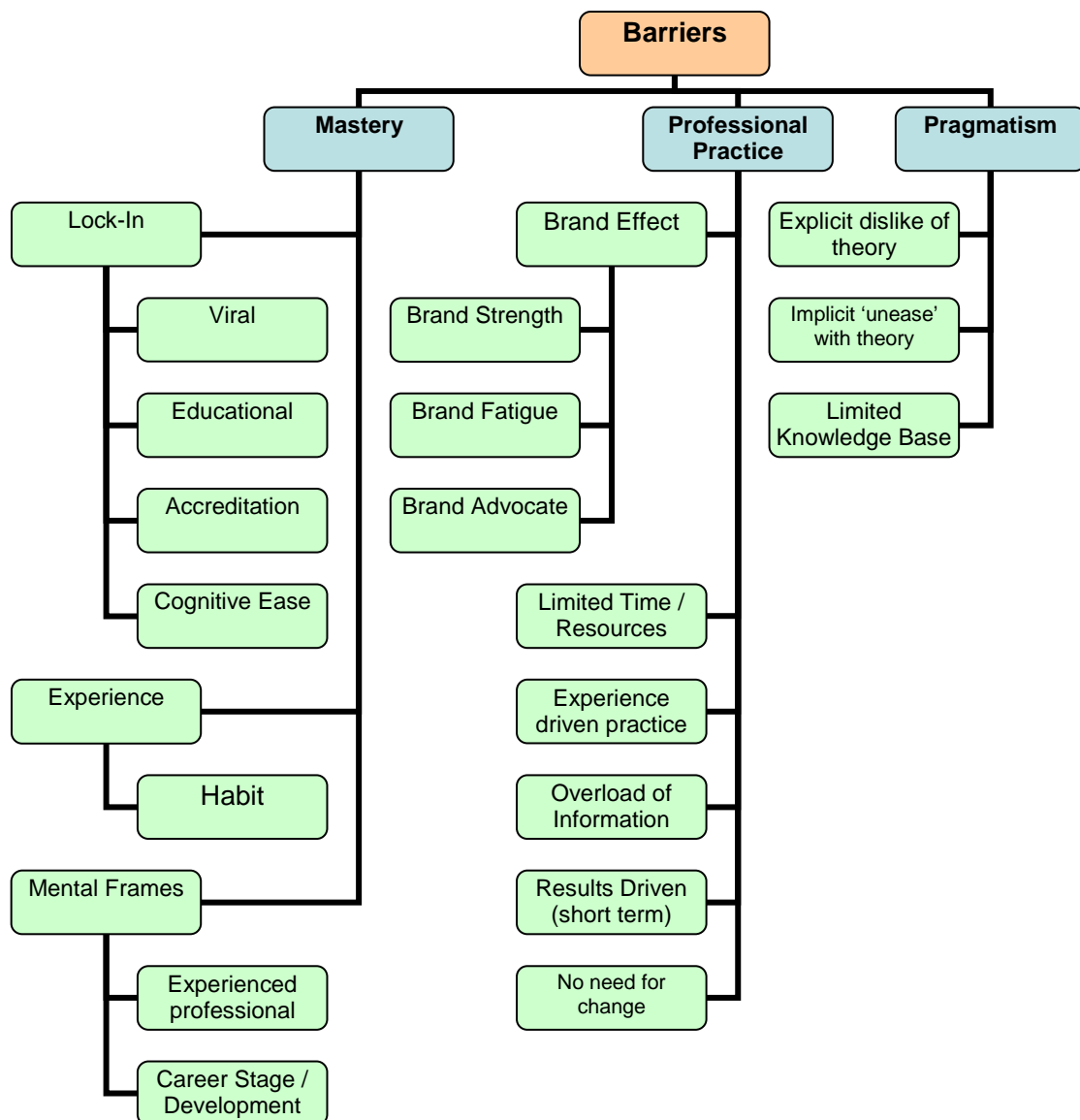


Figure 4.1 Initial thematic map of the 'Barriers' terrain

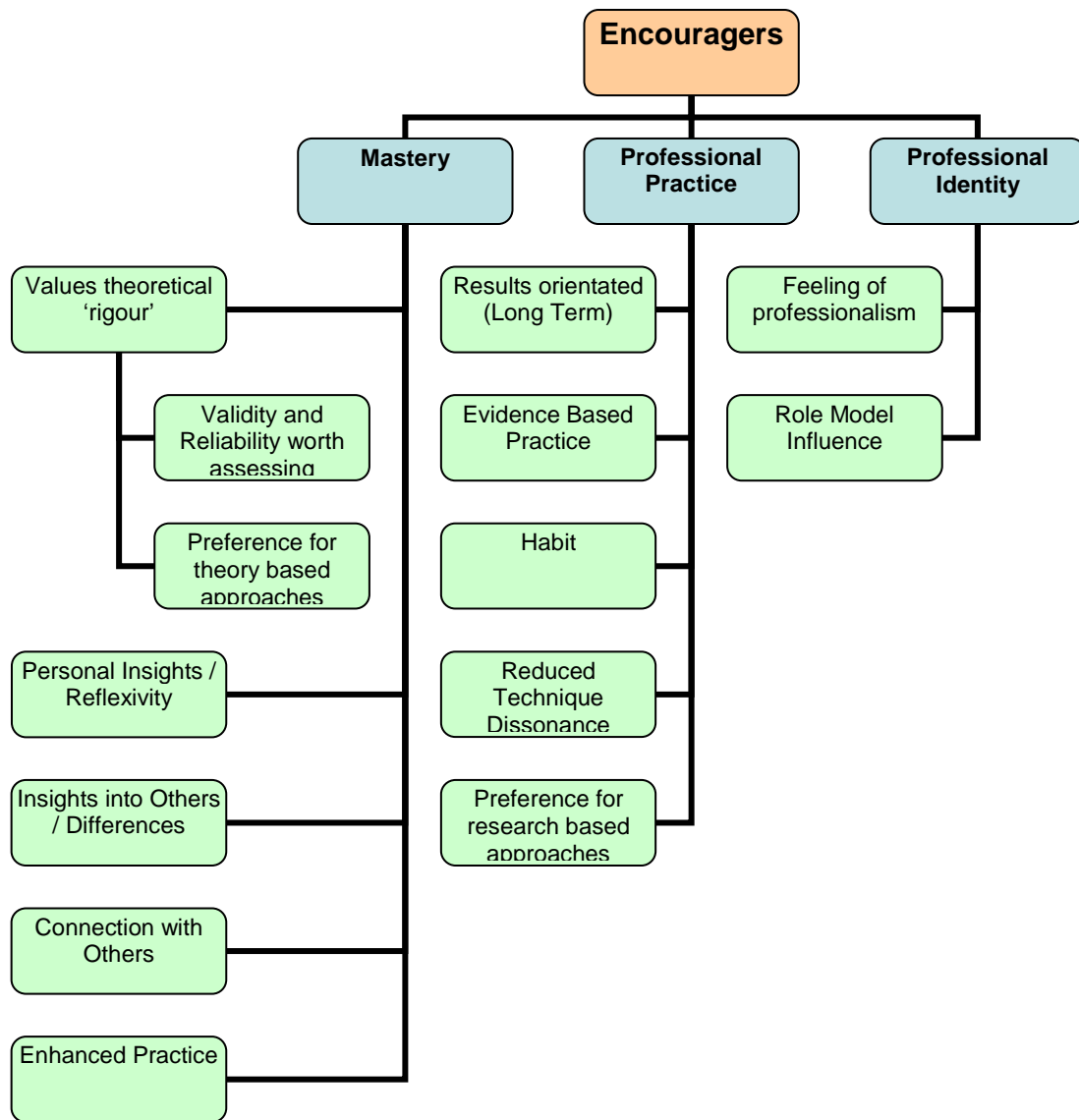


Figure 4.2 Initial thematic map of the 'Enablers' terrain

The first map described a number of 'barriers' that could prevent a practitioner engaging with theory and research in support of their professional practice whilst the second map identified some 'enablers' that encouraged engagement. In this sense both 'barriers' and 'enablers' were potential factors, both associated with the individual practitioner and also their context, that prevented or supported the practitioner engaging with theory and research. It was recognised that this dualism, whilst parsimonious in application, and pragmatic in nature was also a possible constraint to full

analysis. The imposition of the two categories, by very nature, could cut off further avenues of investigation and it could be argued that, in certain contexts, some of the enablers could be seen as barriers and vice versa. However, it was felt necessary to impose this structure whilst also be cognisant of the potential problems that it could create.

4.2.2 Reviewing Themes

The next step in the data analysis was to review the themes that had emerged and, as described in section 3.16.4, this process allowed for a clearer articulation of the thematic maps particularly in light of a review against Bhaskar's Bases of Action model. The maps that were developed from this review are shown below in figures 4.3 and 4.4.

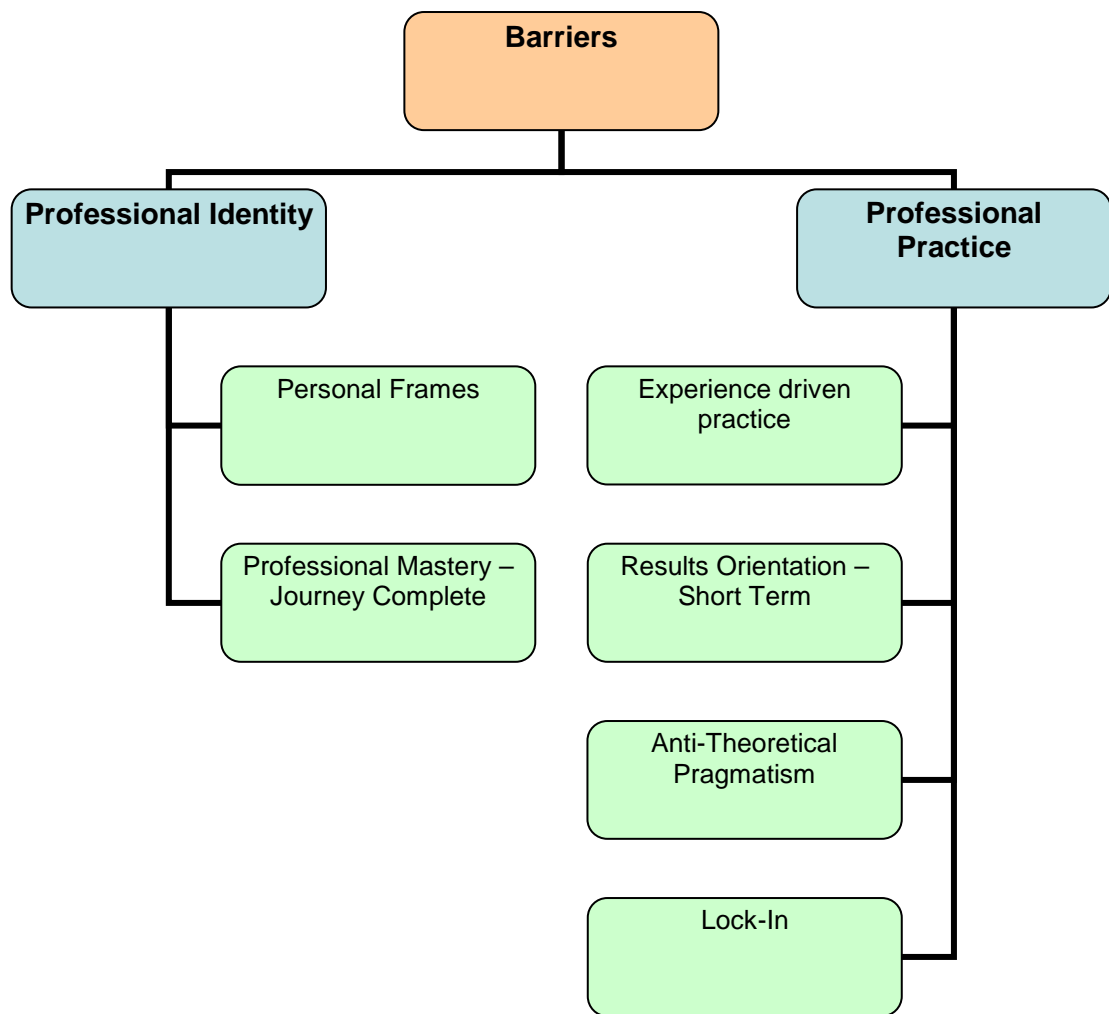


Figure 4.3 Developed thematic map for the ‘Barriers’ terrain

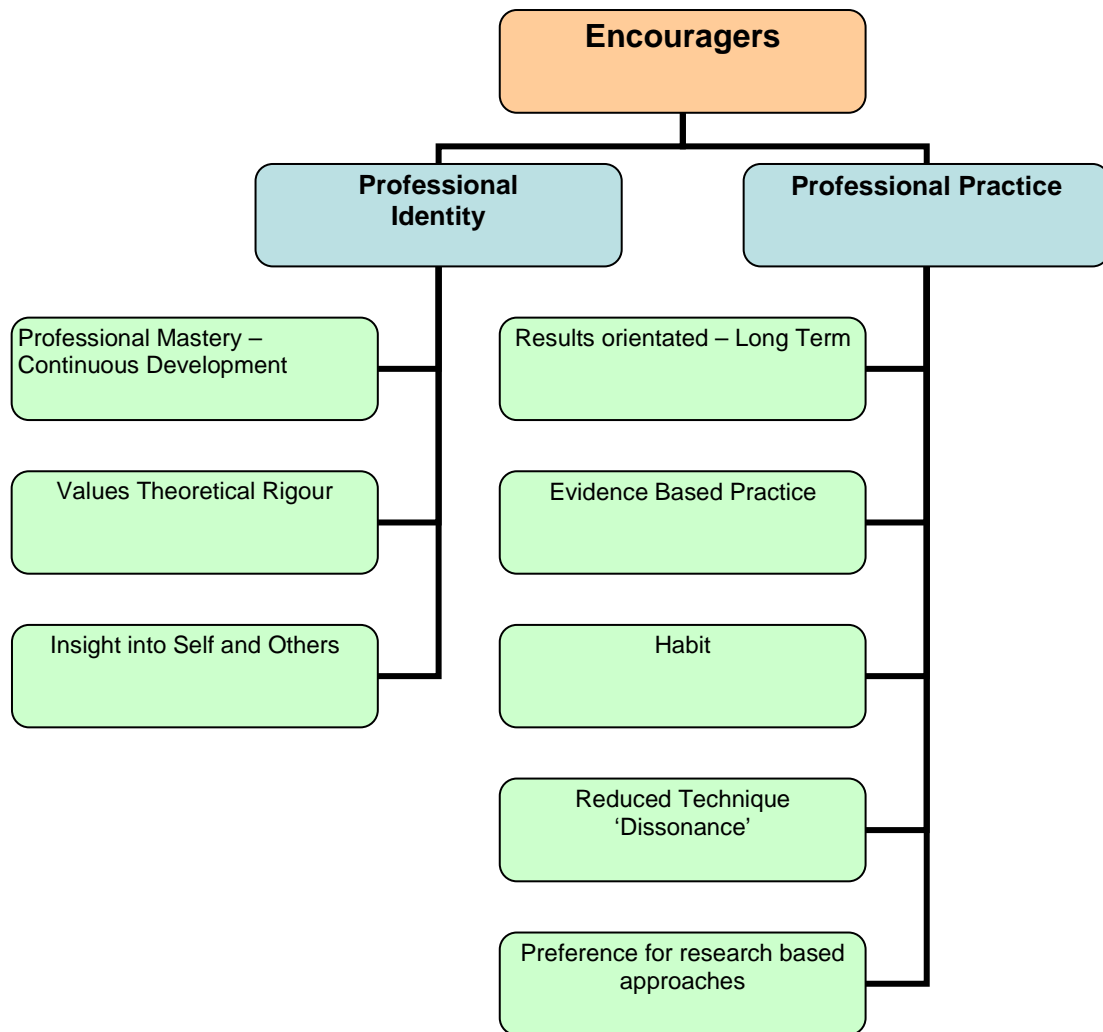


Figure 4.4 Developed thematic map for the ‘Enablers’ terrain

4.2.3 Defining and Naming Themes

This final analytical stage in the process was absolutely critical and drew together the various strands of data to create a coherent, compelling and consistent map that was used for organising the various data extracts into a whole, shown in figure 4.5. This map was then used to explain the results that emerged from the interviews.

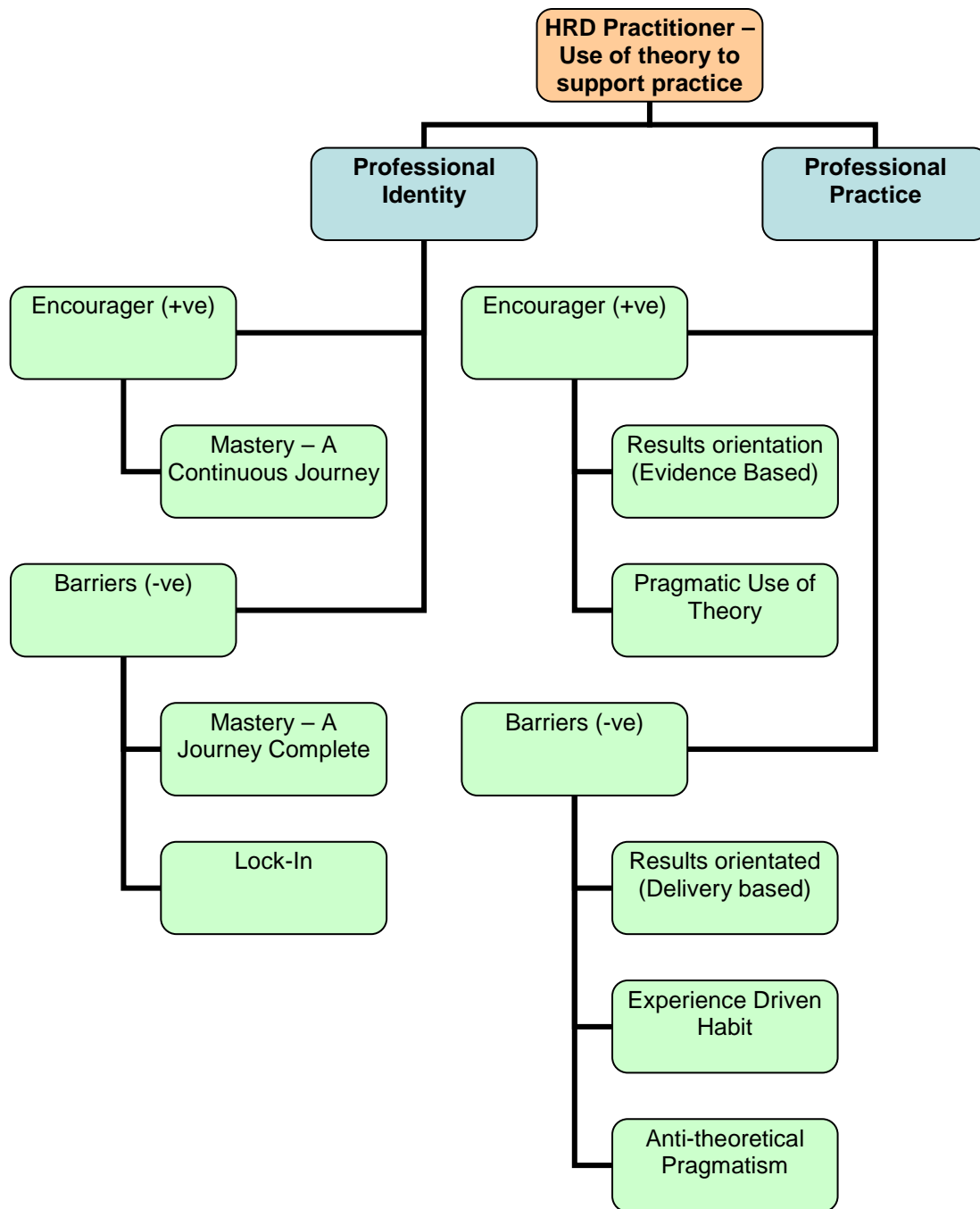


Figure 4.5 Final thematic map for the total terrain

The diagram above (figure 4.5) provided the final overall map of the research terrain and, as such, offered some explanation as to the possible conative, and other, barriers and encouragers for HRD in respect to their professional practice. Two main themes emerged, namely professional identity and professional practice, both of which with associated and aligned barriers and

enablers. In order to bring the figure to life and to draw out some of the supporting evidence then the sub-themes have been illustrated with data extracts, below, from the interviews. This has been drawn together in a summary at the end of this section.

The first sub-theme to be identified was that of 'mastery'. What this sub-theme captures was the recognition for some that their professional development in the field of HRD was on-going, almost evolutionary and this was labelled as 'Mastery – continuous journey'. Typically, these participants were looking for new 'tools for an ever expanding HRD tool bag' to use in their professional practice. This contrasted to an alternative view, held by some that they had reached 'Mastery' and so it was a 'journey completed'. This could be summarised by saying that, for these professionals, their 'HRD tool kit was complete, was effective for practice, and needed nothing else unless a revolution in practice occurred. The following interview extracts illuminate some of these points and for reference purposes each extract has been identified by the participant number and the number of the extract attributable to that participant. For instance, the following extract was from participant 4 and was the first extract attributable to them so will be labelled 'extract 4.1'.

During a discussion about learning theories Participant 4 said:

'I went through a period of reading about all this when I was working in management leadership development stuff. But I am

talking about old reading here, it's not where I am currently at. But Talbot, Kolb, that work at CCL, you know, so very much coming from Harvard in terms of creative leadership and the evidence base on managers is that they learn by doing. I've got my old psychodynamic training about relationships matter, but it's not your Mummy and your Daddy, it's about relationships you are currently in....' Extract 4.1

The Researcher then asked for further detail on the particular approaches he took. Participant 4 said:

'I think they go they're in the sort of tradition of.... I guess it goes back to Dewey as I now realise, but I have always been heavily influenced by William James, George Mead and the work of John Dewey, without realising it... because it's their approaches, when I now go back to them and go, you know, and the older I get the further I go back to read actually'. Extract 4.2

These extracts demonstrate that Participant 4, although a very experienced HRD consultant, still read and reflected back on key writing from his subject area. The idea of 'Mastery – continuous journey' seemed well supported in this particular extract. Another supporting extract came from the interview with Participant 2. During a dialogue on the use of a particular learning style questionnaire Participant 2 identified how it had helped him understand more about himself, as well as understanding the interactions he had with client

groups. This approach towards gaining more self insight and insight about others was also considered part of this wider ‘mastery – continuous journey’ theme.

‘That is one of its uses, yes. That’s not all I do, because I also design, as does [name removed to protect anonymity] when we are working together, we design activities that clearly address different learning styles within motivational states. But you are quite right... it is a self-monitoring process actually... I think it is quite useful and so is this conversation. I don’t think I’d actually thought of it in those terms, but I do now that I have a better understanding of the impact of my own behaviours or my own preferences, I do probably moderate them in recognition of what I know of the audience, more than I used to.’ Extract 2.1

However, other participants appeared to take a different approach and seemed to see Mastery as something already attained, a journey now mostly complete. The following extract comes from the conversation with Participant 11 and was during a dialogue on what would need to happen for him to consider using different tools to those that he already used.

‘... when I look at the world as a whole, this is a cliché, but I’ve only got time to get my head around a certain amount of stuff and, you know, I kind of trust the Universe, when I’m ready, to bring something that is going to grab my attention and blow me away and say I want to use this as well’. Extract 11.1

This position was supported by the following extract from the discussion with participant 3. When talking about what would encourage him to draw on theory to support his practice more he stated:

‘So for me, I think I have got enough (theory) for the moment to get me through that and I’ve got enough to be able to do what I’m required really... and I suppose really it doesn’t... to a certain extent it hasn’t been something that really interested me or hasn’t really got my goat, sort of thing’. Extract 3.1

Looking at these short extracts there appeared to be a theme emerging about different thoughts and views on professional Mastery – some of the participants appeared to hold a view that their professional development was on-going and appeared to widely read in the psychology of learning whilst other participants seemed to be suggesting that they had sufficient knowledge and skills in their professional domain and, unless some ‘revolutionary’ new approach was published, did not appear to have a particular drive to continually expand their knowledge base.

The next sub-theme concerned an orientation towards results. There appeared to be a view from some respondents that results were most valuable when they could be delivered quickly, simply and in a way that could be explained easily to the client / user. The suggestion was that rigour was less important than the speed of delivery. However, this could be contrasted

with another perspective, which was less prevalent, that the results had to make a real, and lasting, difference and so required evidence to demonstrate their effectiveness. Looking at the extracts it seemed as though there was an identifiable divergence between Practitioners on this sub-theme, orientation to results.

For example, the following extract was taken from a dialogue with Participant 7 about the use of theory to support practice:

Researcher: What prevents you looking at theory more generally?

Participant 7: 'At the moment I'd say it is time Richard... there is a pressure within my organisation to deliver outputs constantly..... and it's a case of.... It may well be familiarity breeds contempt... so there isn't a need to go out and draw on more theoretical research because what I've already got and what is in the organisation, is fit for purpose and serves what we need'

Extract 7.1

Another extract to demonstrate this was taken from the discussion with Participant 6. When talking about her approach towards practice she emphasised that she was a pragmatist and so did not need to draw on theory to support her approach in any way. She talked about research – but in terms of benchmarking studies and similar – rather than more 'academic'

research. When asked why she didn't draw on more theoretical approaches she said:

'It's a question of time and my impression of the available resources, not resources, but studies and research other people have found out..... somehow this gives me the feeling it's enough background and so it's more or less... maybe I'm just lazy... [laughs] I can't describe it.... Yeah, because yeah, it might be a wrong idea, but in my idea, I presume using surveys and making it in a very detailed way to evaluate this in a theoretical or a scientological (sic) way, might be too big effort in terms of how fast our business is going...' Extract 6.1

By way of a counterpoint the following extract was taken from the interview with Participant 4. Talking about approach he spoke about being a pragmatist but also described his approach as being influenced by philosophy and the need to provide evidence to support his practice. The impression taken from this extract was that Participant 4 was very results orientated but also that the rigour of approach was also important to him and so influenced his practice.

'I mean I've also worked in businesses where it wasn't, you know, where if it wasn't working, it wasn't bloody working on the bottom line, you know and so I am seriously interested in making a real difference in everyday life in the world of business or

people. I'm a pragmatist, I mean I'm more than I know that I suspect I'm an ingrained pragmatist and philosophy influences my thinking... so I really won't.... I mean I make a virtue of being evidence based'. Extract 4.3

Participant 10 also responded in a way that demonstrated a belief in the value of grounding his work on a theoretical basis. The following excerpt is an example of this but throughout the interview Participant 10 referenced a broad range of theorists which had influenced his work. The following was a partial response to the researcher's question on the use of learning theory in support of professional practice:

'... none the less Malcolm Knowles was one of the earlier influences.... But what appealed to me about Wiggins and also Spayde's work was the outcomes orientation, the specifying of outcomes, the design of the curricula, using outcomes, linking outcomes to the required life or business results... and it has a strong focus on drawing from Bloom's taxonomy – thinking skills, cognitive skills'. Extract 10.1

Demonstrated above is an apparent difference in how results are understood by Practitioners. One perspective was about the speed of delivery of outputs, with less emphasis on the theoretical rigour, whilst the other preference appeared to want to ground professional practice on a strong theoretical base.

Now moving on to two more sub-themes, namely, lock-in and experience driven habit it could be argued that they were, in some ways, related. However the researcher assigned them to different main themes. This is because experience driven habit was directly associated with individual practice, the more the practitioner used a particular questionnaire then the more habitual it becomes and in many ways was seen to be the internalisation and reinforcement of the barriers associated with initial lock-in. In contrast there were a range of possible external causes of lock-in including the requirements to be accredited to use a particular questionnaire and the deliberate or inadvertent 'promotion' of a particular brand/s during professional education and training activities. However, where the two were more closely linked was in the more 'internal' issue of cognitive ease which was identified in the literature as a form of lock-in yet and was probably more akin to experience driven habit. However, the decision to categorise these two sub-themes under different main themes appeared appropriate.

It is now worth looking at some of the evidence to support these themes and sub-themes in more detail.

The following quotes demonstrate how an early introduction to one particular questionnaire influenced on going practice.

Researcher: *'Can I ask where did you get introduced to or find out about the Honey and Mumford Questionnaire?'*

'Two things. One, it was the one that everybody else within the organisation that I started doing training in used, so it was just the way things were done. And also, the qualifications that I took at first stage, I did the CIPD certificate in Training practice and Honey and Mumford featured alongside David Kolb's work as the easiest entry level learning styles questionnaire assessments'.

Participant 7, Extract 7.2

Talking about the Honey and Mumford Learning Style Questionnaire:

'One of the key reasons why I use it is it's one of the first ones I was introduced to. So that makes a difference, because I have a very clear understanding of how it works'. Participant 9, Extract 9.1

Again, in conversation about the use of Honey and Mumford: ***'Oh yeah, I mean, I suppose it's just something that I was introduced to a long time ago. It seems to work. I suppose I am referring to type in terms that it works for me and so yeah, I am open to it'***

Participant 5, Extract 5.1

These comments appeared to suggest that an early exposure to a particular questionnaire, in this case Honey and Mumford's, locked a user 'in' to that particular questionnaire. With on-going usage then this became a practice based habit to the possible detriment of the consideration of other approaches and tools. The following quote took a slightly different angle on Lock-In and described the influence of an individual, who could be described

as a 'brand ambassador', for the adoption of a particular questionnaire by other practitioners. Again, the impact of the 'brand ambassador' appeared to have led to some degree of cognitive 'lock-in' to the particular questionnaire.

Researcher: Can you remember where you first encountered either Kolb or Honey and Mumford?

'... Honey and Mumford was when I was on tour, I think I was on tour to the UK doing some best practice analysis in either 1994 or 1995 and I bumped into the HR Director at HAL [company name changed to protect anonymity] at the time, a guy called [name removed to protect anonymity], that I still speak to now, a very nice guy, I think he is now retired. He gave me a lot of input and in fact I think it was [name removed to protect anonymity] that put me onto the writings of Honey and Mumford and I took it from there. And I picked up the stuff, ordered the material and started using it. So it came from that. That was the catalytic event that got me into Honey and Mumford'. Participant 10, Extract 10.2

Another component of Lock-In was what the researcher has described as 'viral' – this was where experienced HRD practitioners were responsible for the training of other practitioners / laymen in 'train the trainer' type activities. The use of learning style theories and questionnaires seemed prevalent in such programmes and the work of those who delivered the training. The following extracts demonstrated this 'viral' tendency. Initially the researcher

asked about learning style approaches and Participant 11 stated that he used Kolb, McCarthy and the work of Howard Gardner on multiple intelligences. The conversation then turned to 'train the trainer' type activities and Participant 11 stated that he would use them:

'... certainly, if I was running a trainer development programme, which as it happens I will be in two months time, then I would certainly make explicit some of these theories and models to people going through that programme because I think in the early stages of professional development, it's important to have a sense of what these models are and the similarities and the differences between them.' Extract 11.2

Whilst on a similar theme, that of the use of Learning Style theory in Train the Trainer courses participant 8 stated:

'I mean we run a lot of train the trainer stuff and train the facilitator and train the coach, it's an absolute necessity on those because people are passing on, they are then becoming educators in their own right, so it is a must on certain programmes' Extract 8.1

The extracts above demonstrated the 'viral' nature of these theories and approaches, getting passed on from the more experienced trainers to less experienced trainers and facilitators who started the cycle again. However,

an interesting comment, which went against the accreditation training that some tools require, was made by Participant 2. During a discussion on accreditation he became somewhat irate at the licensing arrangements associated with some tools and stated:

'I mean, I think people who layer on accredited training and sort of say 'you've got to do these two days on this'.... Well, I'm going to say bollocks, this is absolute nonsense... and similarly people, you know, who are charging too much.... Just a simple unit price.... No, it's not on.... Sorry' Extract 2.2

The impression the researcher was left with was that accreditation, in some ways, could lock-in people to using a specific tool but could also be viewed as a potential inhibitor to use of the tool, if the accreditation process seemed excessive – particularly for more experienced practitioners.

Lock-In appeared to be an important feature and could be established from one of a number of sources – either to early exposure during professional development, through the investment of money in gaining an accreditation for a questionnaire – which typically would have a strong brand associated with it, through the impact of a 'brand ambassador' or other influential peers or role models and finally through habit developed through on-going use and practice. These forms of lock-in were all considered to be relevant when understanding why an HRD practitioner wouldn't consider looking at the

literature, theory or research to support their choice of a learning style questionnaire.

The other sub-theme was one of experience driven habit – where the HRD practitioner relied on the tried and trusted to inform their professional practice. Whilst this wasn't necessarily poor practice, the issue arose where bias to past experience impacted the consideration of alternatives and options. The following extract was interesting in that the participant talked about intuition and this was taken, by the researcher, to mean habit.

Participant 11: 'After, I suppose, 40 years of being in the learning and development sort of business, from, you know, teaching, all the way through to the corporate stuff and so on, now I tend to trust my own intuition as much as anything else..... so I haven't, for many years, actually given out a questionnaire in advance or at the beginning of a programme to pick up on learning styles or whatever's going on for the individual. Extract 11.3

Researcher 'and why is that?'

Participant 11: 'I trust myself I suppose is the simple answer to that. I trust myself and I trust my ability to sit in awareness of what is going on in the room around me... it's not that I am not unaware of the models (of learning styles) it's just that I don't need to consciously apply them. Extract 11.4

It was interesting to reflect on the final words in this statement where there appeared to be an implicit recognition that theory drove practice but that this was an experience driven habit rather than explicit decision to engage with theory.

Another example of this was seen in an extract from participant 8. When asked how sure he was about the effectiveness of the tools he used he stated:

: ‘.... you heard right at the beginning of this interview, I think these things are..... they actually help inclusivity and they’re almost rituals and they make being on a programme and the design of a programme easy, but do they have the rigour to say this is how the brain works, this is how learning occurs.... I’d be surprised!’ Extract 8.2

This extract appeared to suggest that the participant fell back on to the tried and trusted approaches but actually harboured some concerns about the actual validity and reliability of the tools that he used. This was a good example of how habit seemed to be driving the selection of practitioner’s tools.

A final example of the importance of habit in this sense was a very short extract from participant 5 who, when asked about her style and approach towards practice, said:

‘So in some respects once you have two or three things that work for you , you tend to stick with the tried and tested’. Extract 5.2

The final set of sub-themes that arose from the data seemed to indicate whether participants viewed the use of theory as being a barrier to effective HRD practice, and so to be avoided, or alternatively, that theory had an important part to play in driving HRD practice. The term ‘Anti-Theoretical Pragmatism’ had been used to label the former perspective whilst ‘Pragmatic Use of Theory’ had been used to label the latter. (The term anti- theoretical pragmatism has been taken from the work of McKenna,1994, and his work on the socialisation of trainee accountants during early professional training).

Whilst none of the participants came out directly and stated that they were sceptical of a theoretical basis for their work this impression did emerge from some of their comments. The following extract was taken from the interview with participant 9. When asked whether he had looked into the background research evidence to support the use of his preferred learning style tool (Honey and Mumford in this case) he replied

‘No, because I never researched it.’

The researcher then asked: ***Can I ask why wouldn't you, or why haven't you, researched it?***

'Because of how I have used it, it does its job. So in much the same way as the rest of my work, frankly it does what I want it to do in the context that I use it in and therefore I am happy to keep using it'. Extract 9.2

The following extract, during a discussion about what factors that could be used to discriminate between different learning style questionnaires demonstrated this point:

'I don't tend to go that much into the theories behind them. So, if I can see a benefit to my audience of using it, then yeah, absolutely, I'd use it' Participant 7, Extract 7.3

Participant 7 then went on to talk about the Honey and Mumford tool in particular and in response to a question about its validity and reliability stated:

'I think that I'm not familiar with any specific research. All I've got to go on with that is just my own experience of its validity. People saying 'yeah, I recognise that' or 'yeah, that's me', that's how I like to work. So no research. It's only anecdotal experience of it.' Extract 7.4

This left the researcher with the opinion that the underpinning rigour of the tool was of limited concern to this participant – the key requirement was that it delivered an output that could be used. As another example the following extract was taken from the interview with Participant 9, when the researcher asked the question about what theories or models supported his professional practice. Participant 9 responded:

‘well I can’t think of any specific model that I could talk about in any meaningful sense’. Extract 9.3

In a similar vein, when asked about the learning theories that she used to support her practice, and whether she could name them, participant 5 said:

‘Good question. Now I’ve got to really think about that. It’s one of those where you think ‘I have been doing this so long, do I’?

Extract 5.3

These responses allude to the fact that these participants didn’t consider the theoretical component of their practice as relevant enough to warrant them being ‘au fait’ with such research and theory. This contrasted markedly with a number of the previous responses where a fairly detailed knowledge of the academic domain was described readily. When it comes to evidence to support the view of some practitioners, that theory could be pragmatically

applied, then the following extract from a conversation with participant 2 demonstrated this well.

'You know, so I am a bit more of a psychologist and I will probably read something more about mental health which is where my background is, than I would.... It's just where I come from, you know, it's a funny eclectic background, but it isn't in that sort of, not academic exactly, but yeah, I suppose it is theoretical... you know, but I am not a theorist'. 'I mean if somebody, if a colleague whom I trust, says 'read this it's really interesting', I can sit there and I can read it. And quite heavy stuff and even JOOP (Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology) is arguably, you know, it's real hard work... but if I see a title and I think... 'that actually looks interesting'... then I can get through that and I can understand it and sometimes I will extract either some learning from it for myself or even just some ideas or models , something that I can stick up on an overhead, you know' Extract 2.3

Participant 2 did not see himself as a 'theorist', a term that he implied had a pejorative connotation, but apparently looked to the literature quite regularly and was willing to take, and apply, content from the literature to his practice. The comment he made, above, summarised the type of 'Pragmatic Use of Theory' approach that had been seen to come from the data. Another example of this was from Participant 10 who, when asked what would

encourage him to look at alternatives to his current preferred learning style tools, stated:

'I would be influenced to a large extent by the research, the track record, more than anything else. So that you know that you are using something that is valid and not just pop psychology'.

Extract 10.3

This again suggested that a fairly rigorous approach towards tool selection would be employed and that, in this case, evidence of effectiveness would be sought from the literature. Finally, when discussing the use of theory to support practice Participant 4 demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of different levels of theory. He stated that:

'I'm deeply suspicious of grand theory, I've seen too many fall apart.... So I like middle to micro level theories , but unless they come inside the social nexus of what is going on I don't buy it too strongly' Extract 4.4

This was a fascinating insight as Participant 4's highest formal education level was a first degree yet he was able to discuss types and applications of theory that might be expected from those qualified at Master's degree level. Overall, this left the impression that this participant was widely read and grounded in the literature – but as previous quotes from this participant make clear he was also very focussed on performance and results.

To briefly summarise this section, there were two main themes, both with associated encouragers and barriers that were identified and that a further eight sub-themes were also identified and described using extracts from the interviews to support the analysis. However, to conclude this summary two extracts that seemed to demonstrate two different positions about the usefulness of theory to support HRD professional practice were chosen. The first comes from participant 5 who, when asked what was preventing her from drawing on theory to inform her professional practice stated:

'There is nothing preventing me..... I don't know, is there? Actually, why am I not doing it then is the question that I am asking myself?' Extract 5.4

This dialogue with herself, in response to my question, was fascinating as the act of questioning appeared to trigger thoughts in the participant's mind which had perhaps lain dormant. She later expressed a view that she wished she could afford herself the 'luxury' to learn something new for her professional development – a statement that neatly encapsulates the thoughts of a number of practitioners about the use of theory and research to support their professional practice.

An alternative position came from Participant 8. When asked about the benefits of drawing on learning styles research he responded by saying:

‘.. it reminds the educator, the trainer, the teacher, to not just sit in their own preferred style but to ensure their lesson plans, their training design plans, cover multiple learning styles, multiple intelligences, multiple representation systems.’ Extract 8.3

This extract was chosen as it appeared to summarise well the value that this participant placed on a considered and thought through approach to application of learning style theory to his professional practice.

4.2.4 Section Summary

The preceding section has described the process of the Thematic Analysis in detail and went onto develop some narrative about, and interpretation of, the data set collected through the semi-structured interviews. From this work two main organising themes were identified from which encouragers and barriers to the use of theory to support HRD professional practice were identified. In the discussion chapter this explanation will be taken further and in particular a focus on the conative encouragers and drivers will be made.

4.3 On-Line Survey and Descriptive Statistics

Having completed a review of the qualitative Thematic Analysis approach it is now necessary to look at the data that was collected through the use of the on-line survey and to draw any initial conclusions that might be evident within this data. However, it must be stated that the survey developed a very

significant database and so only the data appropriate to the research questions has been presented.

The first part of the survey collected biographic details on the participants and the outcomes were reported in the methodology chapter (see section 3.5.6). In the next part of the survey respondents were asked to state whether they presently, or previously, had used a learning style questionnaire as part of their professional practice. For those who answered affirmatively, they were then taken to a list of 13 learning style questionnaires, identified by Coffield et al (2004) as being the most influential, and asked to identify which they had not heard of, which they had heard of but hadn't used and finally, which ones they had used. There was also a free text box for those respondents to identify any lsqs that they had used but that were not listed. The next question was for the respondents to identify their preferred lsq and this was followed by further questions about this preferred lsq. The respondents were asked if they had been trained in the use of the lsq, whether they were aware of the lsq published having requirements for them to be trained, whether they were accredited to use it, and whether the published had requirements for them to be accredited. After this section the respondents were then into the main body of the survey which comprised a series of Likert type scales – the results of which will be described in a later section of this chapter.

Once the section on lsqs was complete then the survey asked a similar set of questions about learning theory. Each respondent was asked to identify if

they had never heard of, heard of but didn't use, or had used specific learning theories. Again a free text box was available for those who used other theories in their work and finally, there was the option for participants to state that they didn't use learning theory to support their professional practice. They were then asked to identify their preference for a particular learning theory and were taken into a similar set of Likert type scales as had been used previously in relation to the Isqs.

4.3.1 Participant's use of Learning Styles Questionnaires

The following section describes the participant's responses about their use of learning style questionnaires, their knowledge of a range of such instruments and the identification of their preferred questionnaire. Underpinning the choices were the 13 different learning style questionnaires that Coffield et al (2004 a, b) identified as the most influential in the field.

4.3.1.1 Learning Style Questionnaires

The participants were asked whether they have used, or do use, some form of learning style questionnaire to support their professional practice. 169 participants answered the question of which 144, 85.2% of them, use or have used such a tool and 25, or 14.4% stated that they hadn't. The 144 who answered in the affirmative to the question then went onto the next section of the survey. This looked at the actual tools that they had heard of, or otherwise, and had used. From this it can be seen that the Myers Briggs

Type Indicator was by far the most recognised learning style questionnaire with Kolb's Learning Style Inventory and Honey and Mumford's Learning Style Questionnaire being the next most recognised.

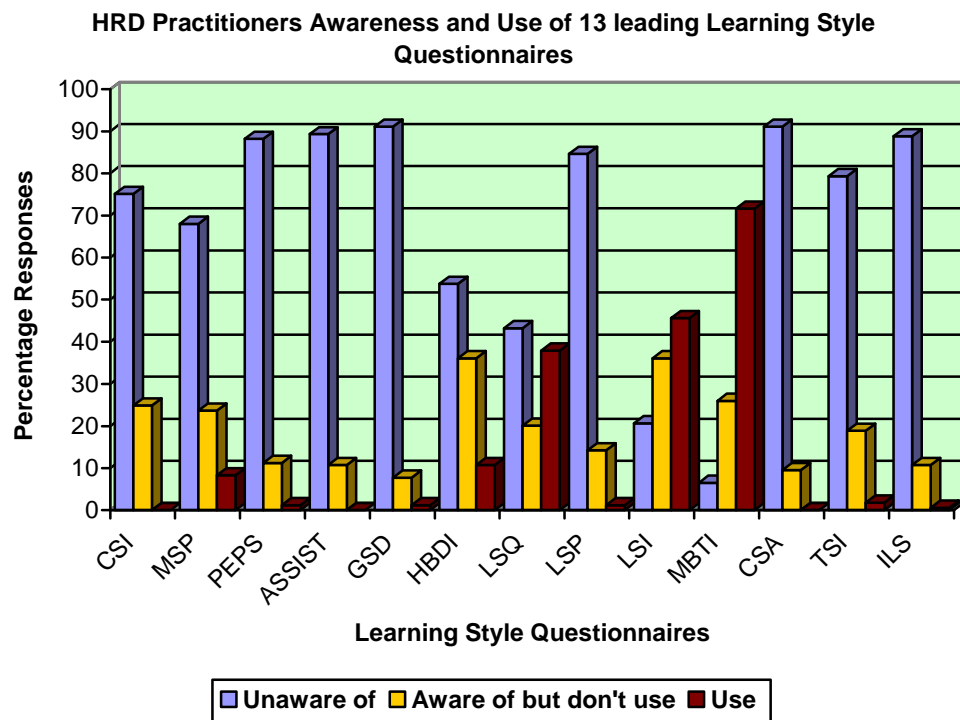


Figure 4.6 Practitioners awareness and use of differing lsqs

Analysing this data further it was possible to look at the relationship between the usage of the number of questionnaires, as a percentage of the number of questionnaires, that the participant was aware of. This data was plotted and a simple regression analysis, using Microsoft Excel, was applied (see figure 4.7). From this analysis it was clearly demonstrated that as the number of lsqs the practitioner became aware of increased, then the number of lsqs actually used, as a percentage of the total, dropped. This suggested that there was a limit to the number of lsqs a practitioner actually used

concurrently which acted as a barrier to other Isqs being considered by the practitioner.

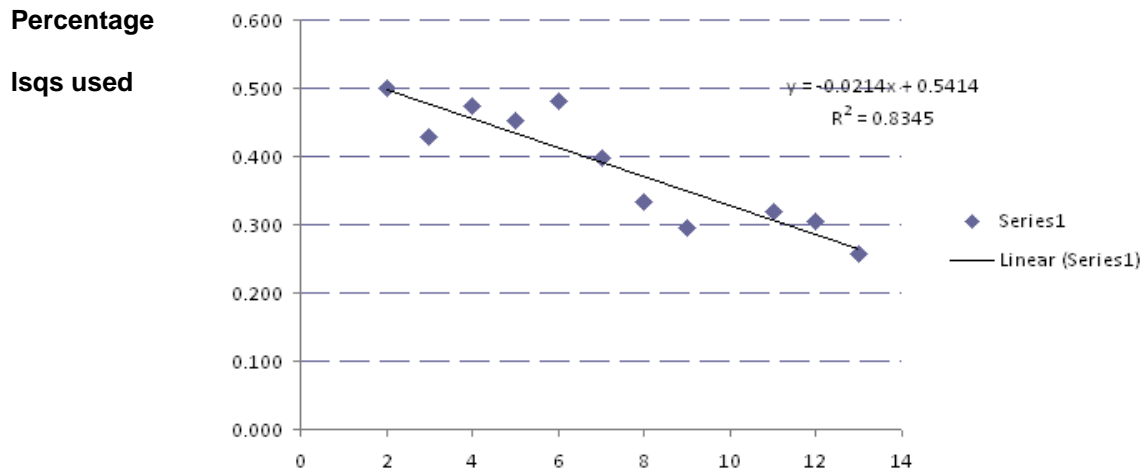


Figure 4.7 Isqs used as a percentage of Isq awareness

The next question in this section was for participants to identify their most preferred learning style questionnaire from the list of 13 popular Isqs. Participants also had the option to note an alternative Isq if their preferred choice was not listed. As figure 4.8 shows the overwhelming preference was for the MBTI, with the Honey and Mumford LSQ and Kolb's LSI also preferred by a significant number of HRD practitioners. From the 169 respondents 36, or 21%, had an Isq preference other than those listed and amongst this extra data, 4 respondents identified the DISC questionnaire and another 4 the Strength Deployment Inventory (SDI) as their preference – no other Isqs were mentioned more than once.

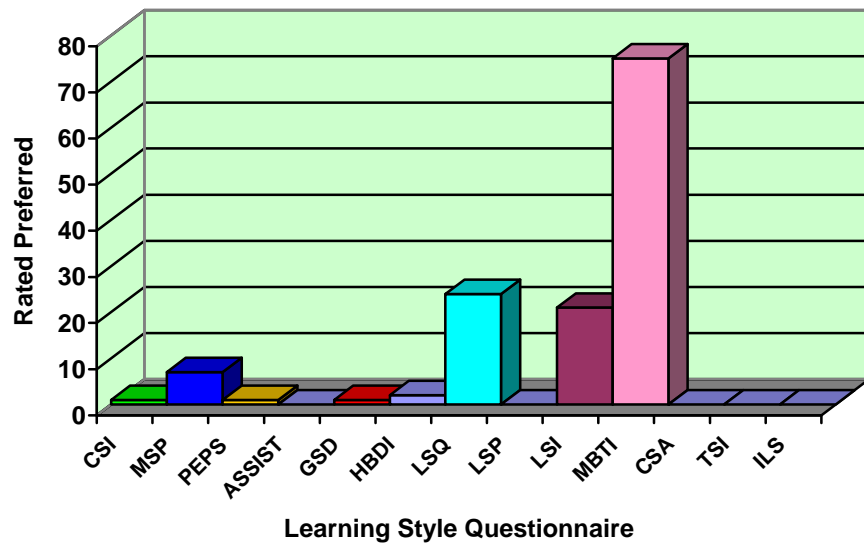


Figure 4.8 Practitioners Isq preference

Cutting this data in a different way allowed the researcher to identify whether there were any regional preferences for particular Isqs. It had been assumed that preference for the UK developed Honey and Mumford questionnaire would be stronger in the UK than in the US and that the preference for the US developed Kolb's inventory would be stronger in the US than in the UK. Figure 4.9 captured this information for the main questionnaires and regions identified in the survey. Interestingly, the only significant country / region where the MBTI was not the most preferred Isq was in the UK, where there was a preference for the Honey and Mumford questionnaire.

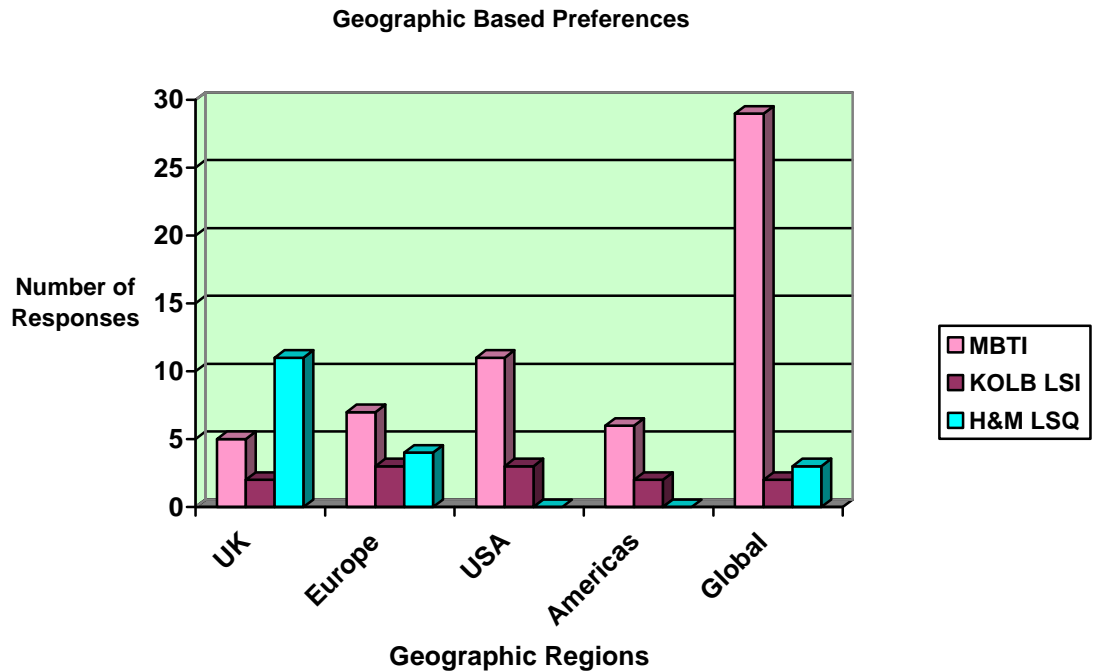


Figure 4.9 Regionalised variations in Isq preferences

4.3.1.2 Training and Accreditation in Specific Isqs

The participants were asked to state whether they were trained in their preferred Isq or not, whether they knew if there was a requirement to be trained, whether they were accredited and whether they knew if there was a requirement to be accredited. 53.3% of respondents stated that they had been formally trained in their preferred Isq whilst 46.7% stated that this wasn't the case. Interestingly, 52.7% of participants said that they believed the test publisher required them to be trained (virtually identical to the number who had actually been trained), whilst 12.4 % stated that they knew the test publisher did not require users to be trained in their Isq and 35.9% said they were unsure whether this was the case or not.

Moving on to accreditation / qualification 42.6% stated that they were formally accredited to use their preferred Isq whilst 57.4% stated that they were not accredited. 53.8% stated that they knew the test publisher had a requirement for users to be accredited, 11.8% stated that the test publisher had no requirement for accreditation whilst 34.3% were unsure as to whether the test publisher required users to be accredited.

4.3.1.3 Underpinning Learning Theory for Isq

Respondents were asked to identify which learning theory underpinned their preferred learning style questionnaire. This question was intended to offer some insight in to how much the respondents were aware of the theoretical base of their preferred questionnaire. This question got 59 responses. Of these, 30 respondents identified that Jungian psychology underpinned their preferred learning style questionnaire – which was mostly the MBTI – although one respondent did say that Jungian psychology underpinned the Honey and Mumford questionnaire. Interestingly, when cross referencing the MBTI back against the learning theories it became apparent that all those trained and accredited in MBTI, bar one, knew that Jungian psychology underpinned the tool. However, 11 respondents who stated a preference the MBTI as their learning style questionnaire were not trained / accredited and their knowledge about its theoretical foundation was much weaker – with these respondents saying that the underpinning theoretical model included: experiential learning theory, adaptive leadership theory, cognitive theory and the 'CSI'. 10 respondents identified that Kolb underpinned their preferred Isq

whilst a further 6 identified the theory of experiential learning. These two have been combined as Kolb is heavily associated with experiential learning theory (see Kolb, 1984). Figure 4.10 captures the responses to this question.

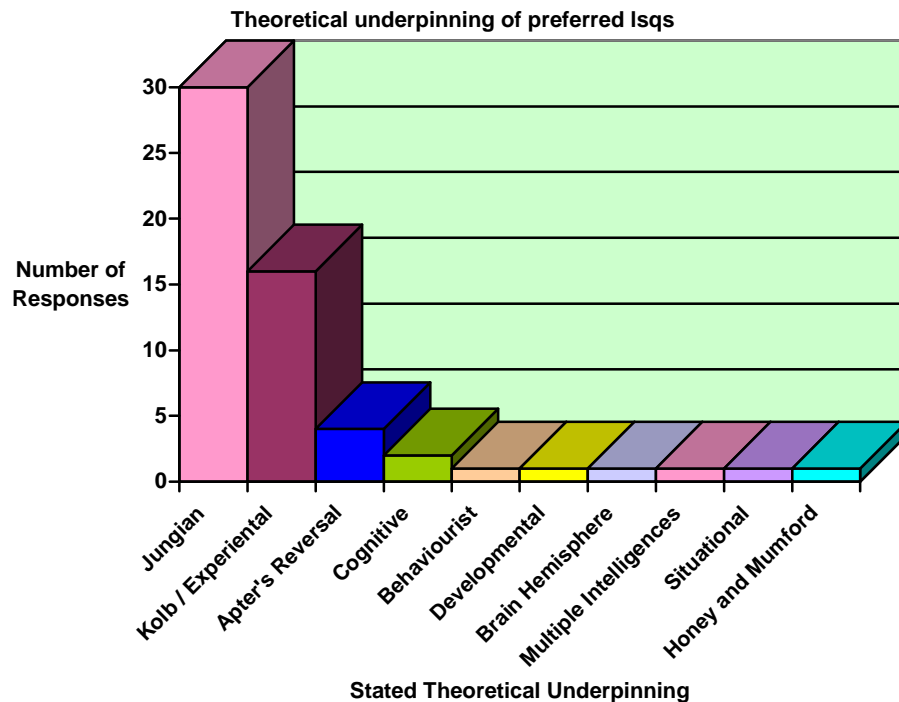


Figure 4.10 Theories identified as underpinning preferred Isqs

4.3.1.4 Reasons for preferring a particular Isq

The following table summarises the responses to the questions about why the practitioner chose their preferred Isq and the responses are a summary of all 169 survey respondents. The question that these respondents were asked was: *'The following questions are designed to help me understand your reasons for choosing your PREFERRED LSQ. Please indicate your response to each question on the scales below.'* Responses were against a 5 point Likert type scale with Strongly Disagree / Negative being rated at 1 and Strongly Agree / Positive being rated at 5.

Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Median
I chose the LSQ because I am already qualified to use it	11.2% (19)	24.3% (41)	32.5% (55)	19.5% (33)	12.4% (21)	2.98	3
Reputation of the LSQ was not a major consideration in my choice	22.5% (38)	34.9% (59)	20.1% (34)	17.8% (30)	4.7% (8)	2.47	2
The LSQ is easy to use	1.8% (3)	5.3% (9)	15.4% (26)	50.9% (86)	26.6% (45)	3.95	3
The LSQ is cheap to buy	5.3% (9)	17.8% (30)	43.8% (74)	24.3% (41)	8.9% (15)	3.14	3
This LSQ has a strong brand	2.4% (4)	5.3% (9)	23.7% (40)	43.2% (73)	25.4% (43)	3.84	4
Having a user friendly format is a key criteria for selecting an LSQ	1.2% (2)	5.9% (10)	18.9% (32)	47.9% (81)	26.0% (44)	3.92	4
It was recommended to me by some one whose judgement I trust	3.0% (5)	10.7% (18)	27.2% (46)	38.5% (65)	20.7% (35)	3.63	4
It is recommended good practice	1.2% (2)	3.6% (6)	32.5% (55)	49.7% (84)	13.0% (22)	3.70	4
It has not previously been used within my organisation	19.5% (33)	29.0% (49)	32.5% (55)	16.0% (27)	3.0% (5)	2.54	3
Value for money was not a consideration in choosing the LSQ	7.7% (13)	29.6% (50)	37.3% (63)	21.9% (37)	3.6% (6)	2.84	3
It enhances the experience of the learners I am working with	1.2% (2)	3.0% (5)	14.8% (25)	47.3% (80)	33.7% (57)	4.09	4
It is of high quality	1.2% (2)	2.4% (4)	17.8% (30)	49.7% (84)	29.0% (49)	4.03	4
I like using it in my professional work	1.2% (2)	2.4% (4)	19.5% (33)	49.1% (83)	27.8% (47)	4.00	4
It's use positively impacts on the performance of my learners	1.2% (2)	1.8% (3)	17.2% (29)	55.0% (93)	24.9% (42)	4.01	4
My boss / sponsors / clients expect me to use it	11.2% (19)	30.2% (51)	40.2% (68)	13.6% (23)	4.7% (8)	2.70	3
It enhances my feeling of professional identity	7.1% (12)	23.1% (39)	41.4% (70)	23.1% (39)	5.3% (9)	2.96	3

It is theoretically sound	1.8% (3)	4.7% (8)	20.7% (35)	51.5% (87)	21.3% (36)	3.86	4
It is the only one I know about	29.0% (49)	34.9% (59)	23.1% (39)	8.9% (15)	4.1% (7)	2.24	2
It allows me to respond to the individual needs of my learners	0.6% (1)	4.1% (7)	21.9% (37)	55.0% (93)	18.3% (31)	3.86	4
It is based on computer and automatically generates reports for me	6.5% (11)	19.5% (33)	33.7% (57)	27.2% (46)	13.0% (22)	3.21	3
It is very flexible in its use	1.2% (2)	5.9% (10)	28.4% (48)	49.7% (84)	14.8% (25)	3.71	4
It is built into pre-existing learning materials	4.7% (8)	27.8% (47)	36.1% (61)	26.0% (44)	5.3% (9)	2.99	3
I am required to use it	37.3% (63)	33.7% (57)	21.9% (37)	5.9% (10)	1.2% (2)	2.00	2
It is quick to administer	2.4% (4)	10.7% (18)	25.4% (43)	52.7% (89)	8.9% (15)	3.55	4
It makes sense to my learners (it has face validity)	0.6% (1)	1.2% (2)	14.8% (25)	62.7% (106)	20.7% (35)	4.02	4
It is a very practical tool to use	0.6% (1)	4.1% (7)	12.4% (21)	59.8% (101)	23.1% (39)	4.01	4
It is relevant to my professional practice	0.6% (1)	4.1% (7)	17.8% (30)	58.0% (98)	19.5% (33)	3.92	4
It has the best validity and reliability data of comparable products	1.8% (3)	4.1% (7)	53.3% (90)	32.0% (54)	8.9% (15)	3.42	3
It enhances my effectiveness	0.6% (1)	2.4% (4)	26.6% (45)	56.8% (96)	13.6% (23)	3.80	4
The outputs are easy for my learners to understand	0.6% (1)	1.8% (3)	13.6% (23)	58.6% (99)	25.4% (43)	4.07	4
I do not have to be accredited to use it	24.3% (41)	17.8% (30)	31.4% (53)	21.3% (36)	5.3% (9)	2.66	3
It is free for me to use	29.0% (49)	23.7% (40)	25.4% (43)	16.6% (28)	5.3% (9)	2.46	2
I have evidence about its effectiveness from prior use	3.6% (6)	5.3% (9)	17.2% (29)	51.5% (87)	22.5% (38)	3.84	4
I have been able to demonstrate its 'return	3.6% (6)	14.2% (24)	41.4% (70)	31.4% (53)	9.5% (16)	3.29	

on investment' with use							3
I am very experienced in using this LSQ	5.3% (9)	14.8% (25)	26.0% (44)	35.5% (60)	18.3% (31)	3.47	4

Table 4.1 Descriptive statistics from the survey data

The data captured in the above table was interesting, for example, almost 70% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their preferred questionnaire had a strong brand. The issue of brand strength and its influence on practitioner decision making was interesting and will be explored further in the Discussion chapter. However, the table above was also a summary of the raw data used for the inferential statistics in section 4.4 below – and this more sophisticated analysis was where a greater exploration of the data took place, looking at differences between categories, or segments, of the respondent population rather than the whole population as summarised in the table above.

4.3.2 Learning Theory

As part of the survey a general question was asked about the respondents' preferred learning theory. This went beyond questions about the underpinning theory for an lsq but was designed to look more broadly at practitioners' knowledge about the underpinning theoretical basis that supported their practice. The preferences identified have been presented in chart 4.8 below. The question, as presented in the survey, highlighted the theory but also gave an example – for instance, with the Adult Learning

option then Knowles was provided as an example of a key worker. It can be seen below that the personality based theories were the most popular for practitioners. This could be due to the fact that the example provided for this was the Myers-Briggs – which on reflection might not have been the best label as respondents could have associated the theory with the instrument which influenced their choice.

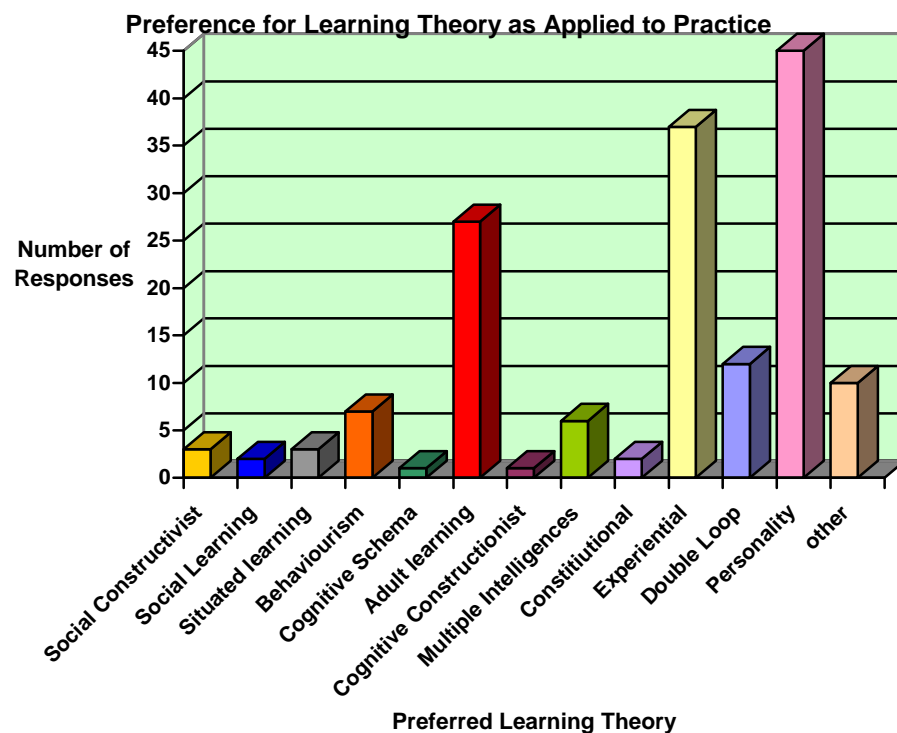


Figure 4.11 Practitioner preference for learning theory

A further question was asked of the survey respondents for them to identify which, of a series of theories and workers associated with them, they a) did not know, b) were aware of but did not use and c) used in their practice. Figure 4.12 presents the results of this question. For brevity the axis labels are identified with the name of the generic theoretical approach but in the survey an example was also provided. For example Lave and Wenger were the example given for the Situated Learning theory. It was interesting to note

the lack of awareness of a number of prevalent theories of learning. For instance, the lively debate in the academic literature about situated learning theories seemed to have had little impact on the practitioner field with over 80% of practitioners not being aware of it. Even more surprising was the lack of awareness of constitutionally based approaches considering the prevalence and on-going popularity of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP).

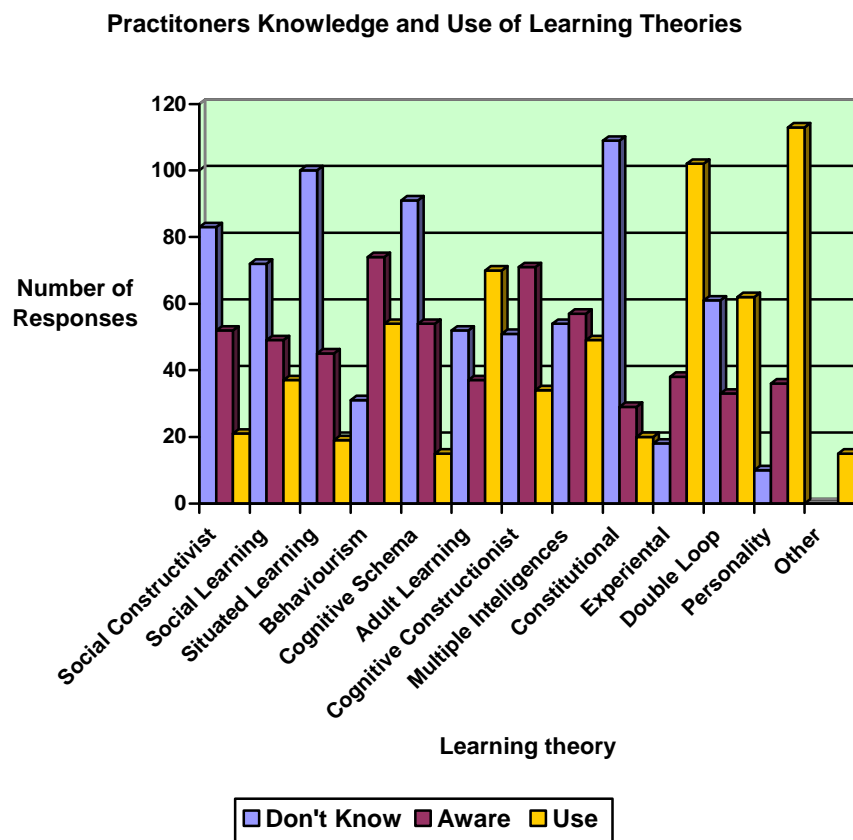


Figure 4.12 Practitioner knowledge and use of learning theories

As part of the analysis of preferred learning theory it was decided to compare how membership of the two most popular professional institutes / societies, the ASTD and the CIPD, impacted on the preference for a particular learning theory / family of theories. Figure 4.13 shows such preferences between

members of these two organisations. It is worth noting that there appeared to be a reasonable similarity in preference except for that expressed for Adult learning / Andragogy where there is a marked preference demonstrated by ASTD members compared to their CIPD qualified counterparts.

Membership of CIPD and ASTD and Preference of Learning Theories

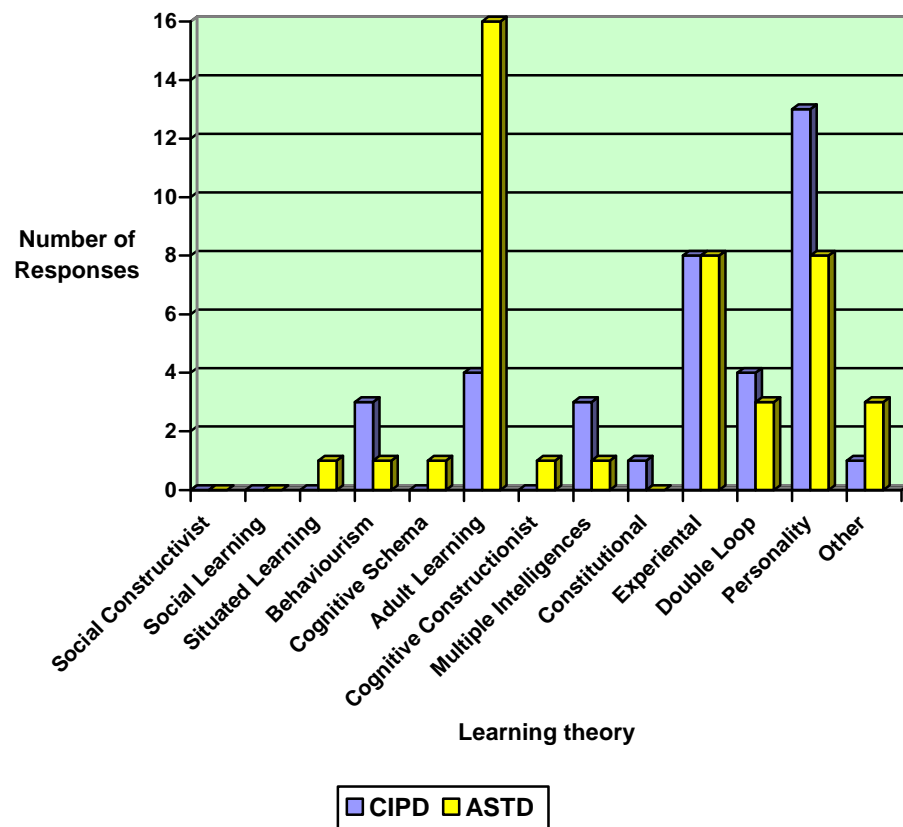


Figure 4.13 Membership of professional body and preference for learning theory

4.4 Inferential Statistics Analysis of the Survey Results

4.4.1 Categorisation of respondents

The following section provides descriptive statistics for the responses to the Likert Scales used within the survey. The total amount of data collected in the survey went beyond that needed to answer the research questions so there has been selection of those Likert Scales that were only directly relevant to the research questions. It could be argued that by being so selective the researcher could, in fact, be missing important and relevant findings beyond the immediate research question. This is an important argument and one that the researcher reflected on. However, for manageability purposes certain decisions about what is included and what is excluded from the data need to be made. Decisions about what to include were guided by the themes that emerged from the qualitative component of this triangulated study. At this point it is also worth briefly returning to the participant categorisation that was introduced in the methodology chapter. This categorisation has been referred to throughout the following section.

1. **Childhood sweethearts** – used one tool to the exclusion of all else. Not interested in understanding range of tools. Monogamous relationship with test.
2. **Loyalist** – some awareness of the range of tests available but preferred the tried and trusted approach. Conservative user.
3. **Brand advocate** – very aware of the breadth of tests available but used a particular questionnaire to the exclusion of all others. Test publishers dream.

4. **Beachcomber** – used what he / she comes across at the time. Medium usage of tools but low awareness of range. Opportunistic test user.
5. **Floating Voter** – used a number of Isqs and has some understanding of the available range. Open to persuasion.
6. **Switcher** – was aware of the breadth available and will, at times, use different tools. Serial test monogamist.
7. **Speed dater** – used a large number of Isqs but with no real awareness of the range available and depth behind them. Promiscuous test user.
8. **Fashionista** – used a large number of tools with some awareness of range. Follows trends.
9. **Independent** – used a wide range of tools and was a wide appreciation of the ‘market’. ‘Horse for courses’ approach.

For ease of reference the categorisation can be summarised in the following 3 x 3 matrix.

L S Q s u s e d	High ↑	Speed dater	Fashionistas	Independent
		Beachcomber	Floating Voters	Switcher
		Childhood Sweethearts	Loyalists	Brand Advocate
	Low →	High		
		Awareness of a range of Isqs		

Table 3.5 Categories of Isq user

In terms of numbers of respondents per category then the following distribution (figure 4.14) was seen. The distribution of participants isn't

homogeneous across the categories and this needed to be remembered when interpreting the results. In particular the results for 'Fashionistas', 'Independents', 'Switchers' and possibly the 'Speed Daters' and 'Floating Voters' required interpretation with some caution. The possibility of combining some categories, to increase numbers, was considered but was rejected because of the possible loss of 'meaning' which could arise.

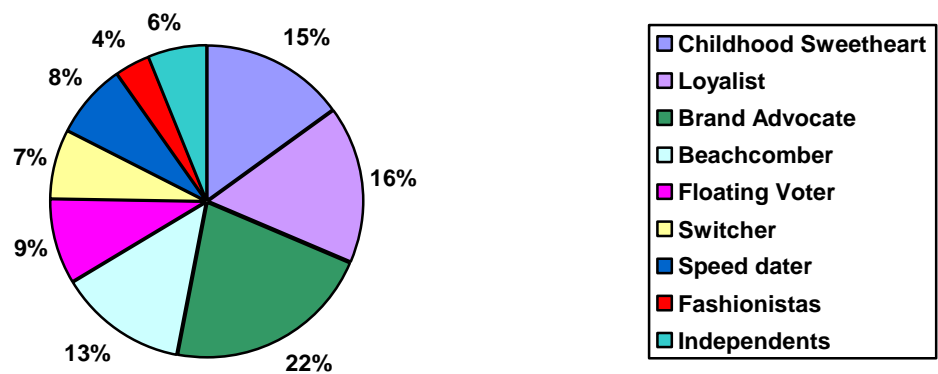


Figure 4.14 Distribution of survey participants across the 9 identified categories

Looking at the above chart it was an interesting observation that 53% of respondents were categorised as brand loyal, in other words they tended to have one preference that remained steady (Childhood Sweethearts, Loyalists and Brand Advocates) whilst only 18% of respondents drew upon a number of different questionnaires in support of their work. This suggested that once using a particular questionnaire was 'established' then the majority of practitioners were likely to stick with it rather than seeking alternatives.

4.4.2 Choice of Statistical Test

The next step in the analysis was to identify themes emerging from the data and, in particular, to identify differences between the different respondent categories, and to do this an appropriate inferential statistical test was needed. This test needed to be non-parametric to remain aligned to the critical realist underpinning of the research (Downward, Finch and Ramsey, 2002). The Kruskal-Wallis test was identified and selected which was a one-way analysis of variance, by ranks rather than by the actual data. The Kruskal - Wallis test was run on SPSS and the output summarised below, in table 4.5, where P values of 0.5 or lower (meaning that there is a 5% or less chance of the observation being due to chance) were taken as the level of 'significance'. Questions were ordered by significance and those that were considered to show a significant difference between the nine categories were highlighted in bold. Whilst there were a number of interesting relationships shown through this analysis it was decided to discuss only on those with a significant difference between the categories at the 5% level, as is standard in research. From this it was seen that there were 10 items that meet or exceeded this standard and each will be considered in more detail in the discussion.

Question Number	Chi-Square	Asymp. Sig (P value.)	Question
Ans18	38.07912605	7.2791E-06	It is the only one I know about
Ans25	25.2269793	0.00142266	It makes sense to my learners (it has face validity)
Ans27	24.59134879	0.00182267	It is relevant to my professional practice
Ans21	23.86241751	0.00241671	It is very flexible in its use
Ans30	23.70804559	0.00256475	The outputs are easy for my learners to understand
Ans29	22.65825337	0.00383187	It enhances my effectiveness
Ans17	21.70444852	0.00549383	It is theoretically sound
Ans19	21.58979954	0.00573521	It allows me to respond to the individual needs of my learners
Ans26	16.88553991	0.03132326	It is a very practical tool to use
Ans7	15.3034828	0.0535062	It was recommended to me by some one whose judgement I trust
Ans5	13.77194692	0.087906628	This LSQ has a strong brand
Ans33	13.61599471	0.09233994	I have evidence about its effectiveness from prior use
Ans35	13.14585512	0.10692876	I am very experienced in using this LSQ
Ans6	12.45885349	0.131875058	Having a user friendly format is a key criteria for selecting an LSQ
Ans2	11.97807485	0.152184813	Reputation of the LSQ was not a major consideration in my choice
Ans34	11.92873252	0.154412101	I have been able to demonstrate its 'return on investment' with use
Ans14	11.67872888	0.166124057	It's use positively impacts on the performance of my learners
Ans23	11.55011654	0.172433271	I am required to use it
Ans12	11.31271579	0.184601983	It is of high quality
Ans8	11.13249511	0.194304278	It is recommended good practice
Ans31	9.892733892	0.272635491	I do not have to be accredited to use it
Ans20	9.797922243	0.279496633	It is based on computer and automatically generates reports for me
Ans28	9.585165848	0.295356583	It has the best validity and reliability data of comparable products
Ans11	9.495418416	0.302239744	It enhances the experience of the learners I am working with
Ans15	9.206614504	0.325167288	My boss/ sponsors / clients expect me to use it
Ans10	8.769073088	0.362149763	Value for money was not a consideration in choosing the LSQ
Ans32	8.518536984	0.384522366	It is free for me to use
Ans22	7.454272776	0.488503999	It is built into pre-existing learning materials
Ans24	7.38706643	0.495503816	It is quick to administer
Ans13	6.711035985	0.568106234	I like using it in my professional work
Ans9	5.607398028	0.691114354	It has not previously been used within my organisation
Ans16	3.382264476	0.908132566	It enhances my feeling of professional identity
Ans4	2.615031597	0.956150845	The LSQ is cheap to buy
Ans3	2.446360515	0.9641853	The LSQ is easy to use
Ans1	1.781233489	0.986999733	I chose the LSQ because I am already qualified to use it

Table 4.2 Outputs from Kruskal Wallis analysis

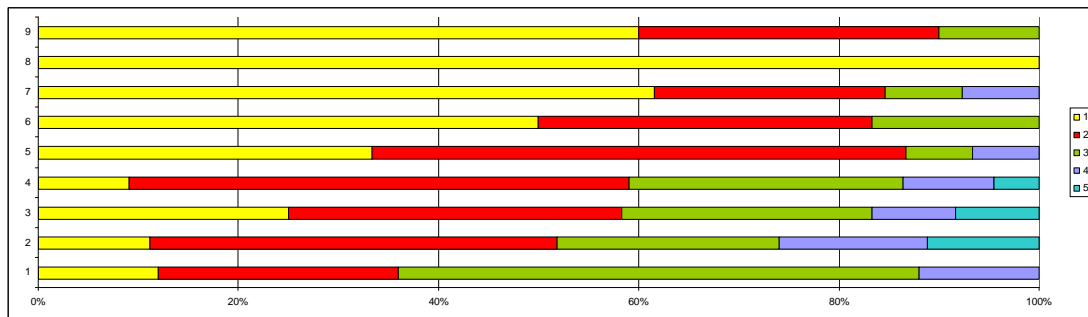
4.4.3 Further Analysis of Significant Questions

The following sections present the distribution of scores for each specific Likert scale where the difference between 9 categories of participant was demonstrated to be of significance at $P < 5\%$. The analysis was completed using the pivot table function within Microsoft Excel. Each individual chart, within each subsection, took the form of a comparison of the ratings, from the 9 groups of respondents, as identified in table 4.6 above. The 5 possible responses to the Likert Scales were also colour coded to ease interpretation with Strongly Disagree (1) being coloured yellow, Disagree (2) being red, Neither Agree or Disagree (3) being green, Agree (4) being purple and Strongly Agree (5) being blue. A brief commentary of salient points was made for each.

4.4.3.1 My preferred questionnaire is the only one I know

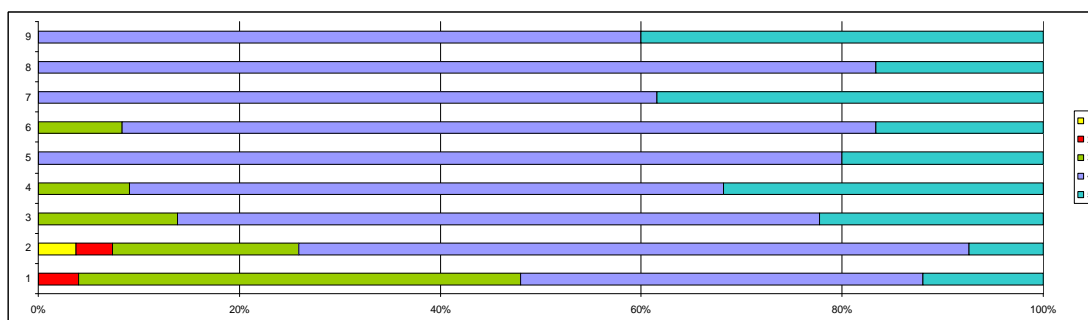
The chart below was consistent with what was expected for this question and to some extent provided confidence that the approach worked (if the result had been less consistent then this would have required further explanation). From the chart it was seen that there was a drift towards the strongly disagree / disagree end of the continua as awareness / use of lsqs increases. For example, only about 10% of the 'childhood sweethearts' strongly disagreed with the statement and about 37% strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement that their preferred questionnaire was the only one they knew about. When compared to the 'independents' where 60% strongly

disagreed with the statement and over 90% strongly disagreed or disagreed with it then the differences were clearly seen.



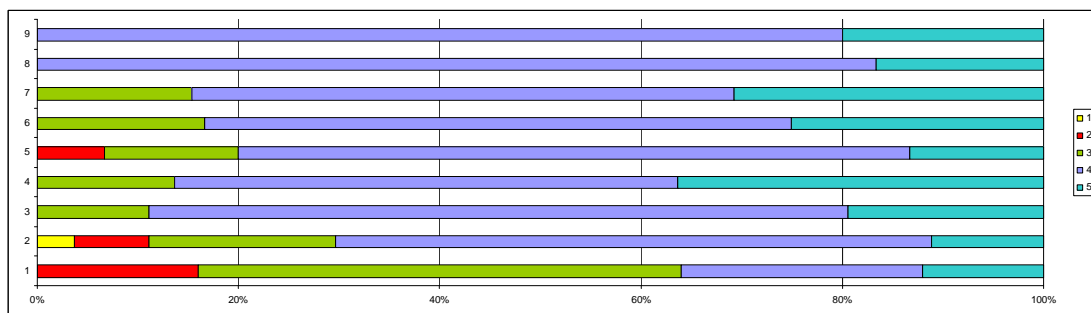
4.4.3.2 My preferred questionnaire makes sense to my learners (It has face validity)

Whilst 100% of 'Floating Voters', 'Speed Daters', 'Fashionistas' and 'Independents' strongly agreed or agreed that their preferred tool had face validity for their users almost 50% of 'Childhood Sweethearts' either strongly disagreed / disagreed with the statement or where unable to commit to either agreeing or disagreeing. The possibility was that this was a result of 'lock-in' and a recognition that although a tool might lack face validity for some users that it would still be used, by some practitioners, who have invested in it, to the exclusion of other options.



4.4.3.3 My preferred questionnaire is relevant to my professional practice

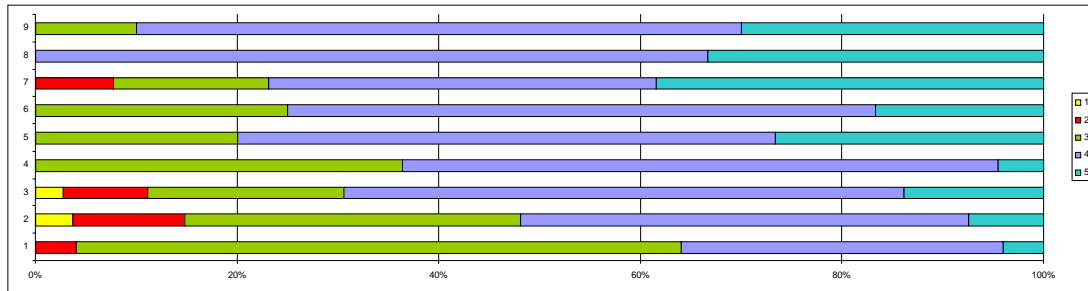
It is interesting to see that the 'Fashionistas' and 'Independents' had a 100% strongly agree / agree response to this question but that 'Childhood Sweethearts' had over 60% of responses as either non –committal or disagreeing with the statement. Again, whether this was a consequence of some form of 'lock-in' was worth considering but it was an interesting finding that such a high percentage of this category was either non-committal or disagreed with the view that the tool they preferred to use was of relevance to their professional practice.



4.4.3.4 My preferred questionnaire is very flexible in its use

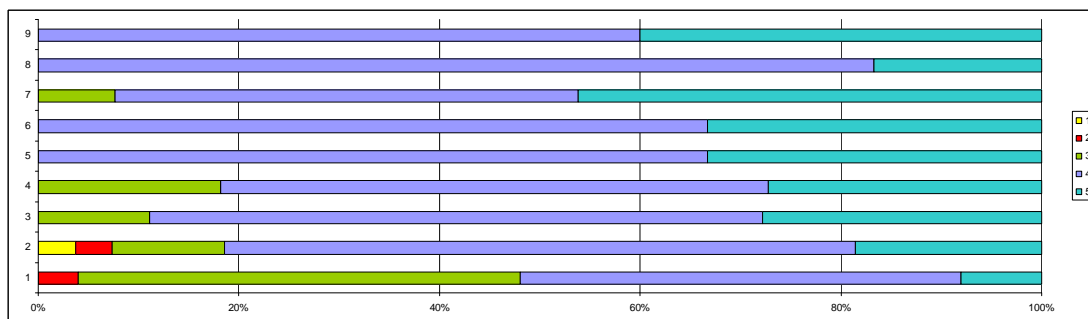
The intention for this question was to gain some understanding as to whether practitioners could look at a number of ways of using the outputs of their preferred questionnaire. Over 75% of 'Floating Voters', 'Speed daters', 'Fashionistas' and 'Independents' agreed or strongly agreed that their preferred tool was flexible but this contrasted with 'Childhood Sweethearts' where 60% of respondents were non-committal to the question and almost

50% of 'Loyalists' being either non-committal or strongly disagreeing / disagreeing with the statement. However, it was apparent that the majority of respondents in all categories except 'Childhood Sweethearts' agreed or strongly agreed with the question.



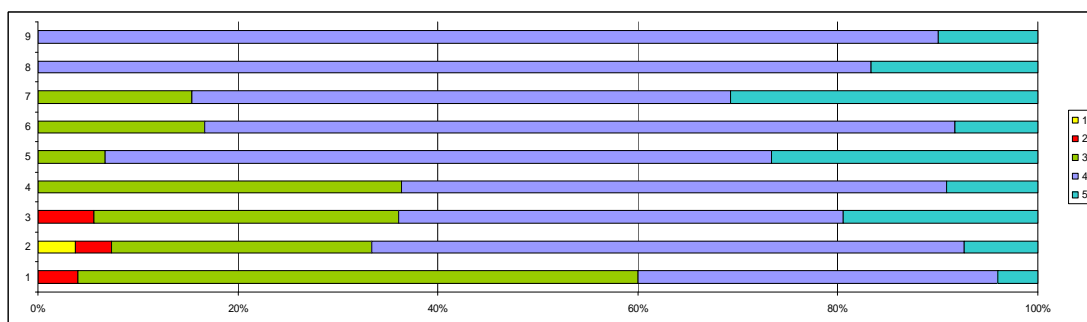
4.4.3.5 My preferred questionnaire has outputs that are easy for my learners to understand

This question had a response pattern very similar to that of the question 4.4.3.2 regarding face validity and it could be argued that the two questions 'tap' into the same construct. Again, the responses tended to show a marked non-committal response in the 'Childhood Sweethearts' in comparison to the other categories.



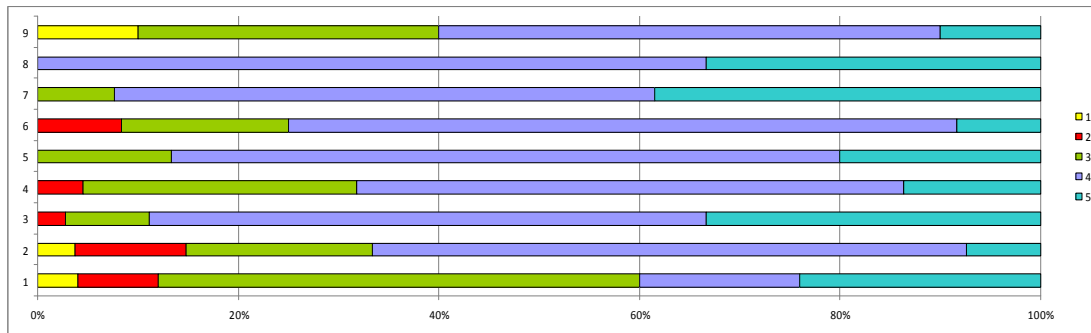
4.4.3.6 My preferred questionnaire enhances my effectiveness

The intention of this question was to identify whether the use of a preferred questionnaire was seen as something that could enhance performance and, by association, feelings of professionalism. Looking at the chart below it was obvious that there was very little disagreement with the statement across the categories of users. However, there was a marked difference in positive commitment to the question with 35% or more of 'Beachcombers', 'Brand Advocates', and 'Loyalists' being non-committal or strongly disagreeing / disagreeing with the statement and 60% of 'Childhood Sweethearts' either disagreeing with the statement or being non-committal (and it is recognised that those disagreeing were only a small minority of respondents in the category). The reasons why such a significant number of respondents in these four categories felt unable to agree that the use of their preferred questionnaire made them more effective is interesting to speculate about. Could it be that there was some recognition that, although these users were 'loyal' to a particular brand, that this loyalty was a barrier preventing them identifying the most appropriate tool? In other words, was brand loyalty driving sub-optimal decision making as suggested by Barnes, Gartland and Stack (2004, p 372)



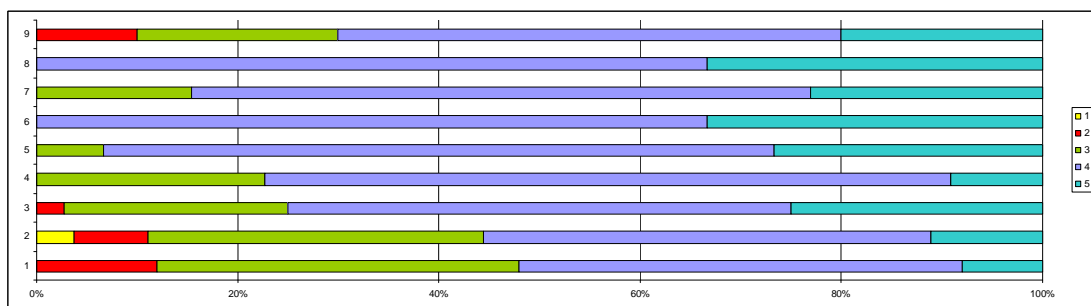
4.4.3.7 My preferred questionnaire is theoretically sound

The responses to the question about whether the practitioner's preferred questionnaire was theoretically sound show an interesting distribution. The result for the 'Independents' showed that 40% either strongly disagreed with the statement or were non-committal about it, was worth considering. This category, those that are the most aware of options and use the most questionnaires to support their professional work, showed a significant minority that appeared ambivalent, at best, about the theoretical foundation of the questionnaires they used. Another interesting observation was that 60% of the 'Childhood Sweethearts' strongly disagree / disagree or were non-committal in their response regarding the theoretical basis of their preferred questionnaire and, although less marked, a similar pattern was seen for the 'Loyalists' and 'Beachcombers', albeit only about 30% of the respondents for these two categories were non-committal or in disagreement. This was also surprising as it had been expected that those who had a strong preference for the on-going use of a particular questionnaire were likely to have been trained in it, for accreditation purposes, and in attending such training could have been exposed to any theoretical underpinning. Apparently, this isn't necessarily the case. Whether the explanation for this was through the influence of anti-theoretical pragmatism, or some other influence, was open to conjecture. It was also worth referring back to Ruona and Gilley (2009, p441) who asserted that practitioners who did not enact theory in their practice were be less effective than those who did.



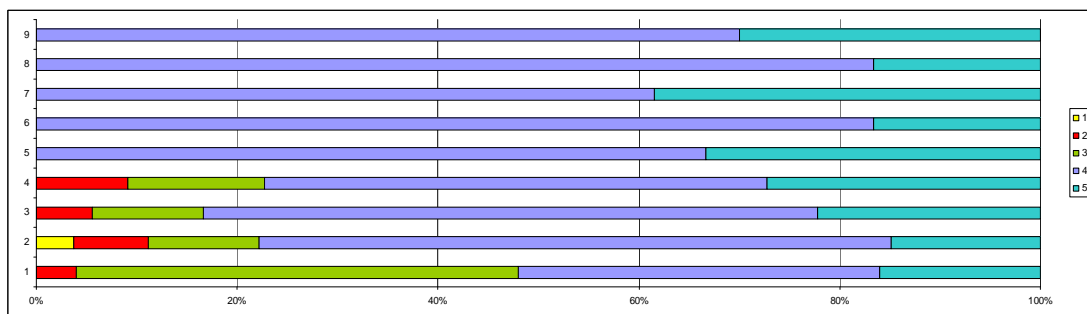
4.4.3.8 My preferred questionnaire allows me to respond to the individual needs of my learners

This question was intended to further look at the flexibility that a preferred questionnaire offered the HRD professional in their professional practice. On an initial look at the chart it seemed that there was some alignment between the participant's responses. Whilst this initially looked anomalous it should be remembered that the 'Childhood Sweethearts' and 'Loyalists' made up a significant minority of respondents and their diversity of response was sufficient for this particular question, to register as significant.



4.4.3.9 My preferred questionnaire is a very practical tool to use

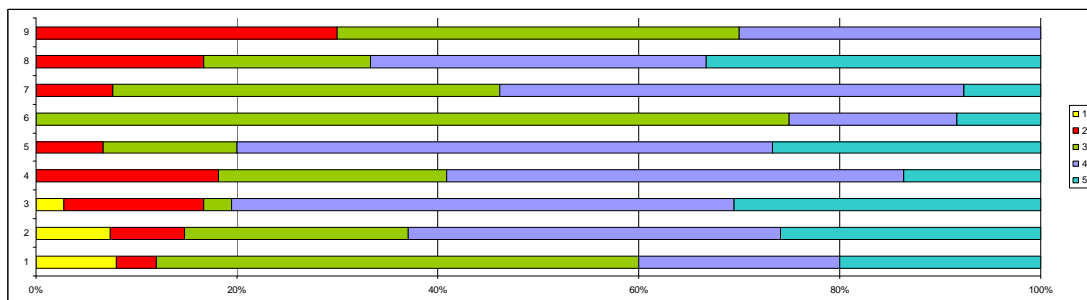
The fact that 100% of ‘Floating Voters’, ‘Switchers’, ‘Speed daters’, Fashionistas’ and Independents’ agreed or strongly agreed with this statement was interesting in its own right, yet there was sufficient divergence within the responses from the other 4 categories (who comprise 66% of the total respondents) for this question to be considered significant through the Kruskal-Wallis test. The fact that almost 50% of ‘Childhood Sweethearts’ disagree or were non-committal about this statement suggested that their decisions about the selection of particular questionnaires was driven less by pragmatic application than other factors. This has been commented on further in the discussion chapter.



4.4.3.10 My preferred questionnaire was recommended to me by someone whose judgement I trust

A possible influence on a practitioner’s choice of a particular learning style questionnaire was that exerted by a professional ‘role model’, colleague who was well respected or possibly a ‘teacher’, in the widest possible sense. It

could be argued that such influence was a form of brand ‘endorsement’ offered by a respected other. The impact of such brand ambassadors shouldn’t be underestimated. The results for this question were interesting as it appeared that the ‘Floating Voters’ and ‘Brand Advocates’ had been very influenced by someone whose judgement they trusted, with 80% or higher of respondents in these categories, either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. It was also worth noting that there was an almost equal split of ‘Independents’ across disagreement with the statement, being uncommitted either way, and being in agreement with the statement. Another interesting observation was that over 75% of the ‘Switchers’ neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement.



4.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the results from the two main research approaches, namely the qualitative interviews using the theme analysis technique and the on-line survey drawing upon both descriptive and non-parametric statistics to interrogate the data. Whilst some description of the results was required at times for contextual reasons the main discussion of the results have been carried out in the subsequent chapter. What was achieved was the development of a summarised map of the themes that emerged from the qualitative research phase. This had surfaced some of the mechanisms that could have been influencing practitioners in their choice of learning style questionnaires, which in turn aided the researcher's understanding. Data was also collected through the survey and then analysed and this provided further insights into the decision making processes of HRD practitioners. As an example there appeared to be some evidence showing that loyalty to a particular 'brand' of questionnaire had driven sub-optimal decision making within practitioners, that various forms of 'lock-in' were influential on practitioner choice and that evidence of effectiveness, for some, was less important when coming to decisions about using particular questionnaires than other factors.

The following discussion chapter knits these different strands of evidence together and has attempted to articulate an argument that identified the various mechanisms that influenced HRD practitioners in their choices of tools that they used in their professional practice.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

5.1 Chapter Introduction

It is now appropriate to look at the results that were previously presented and to attempt to make some sense of them in light of the research questions. To bring some structure to this then each research question will be re-presented, the results associated from that question will be discussed and some further questions will be raised as appropriate. Then, as a conclusion to this chapter, a more integrated discussion of the results will be entered into. This will then set the scene for the next, and final, chapter on my conclusions from this research.

This chapter is also organised into two discrete sections, the first takes the research questions individually and discusses the research findings in light of each question. However, this is perhaps an insufficient treatise of the topic so after the specific discussion there is a more general overview that attempts to understand the results with reference to Bhaskar's Bases of Action model. This gives a more integrated overview of the terrain rather than the more atomistical view provided in the former section.

To begin this chapter it is worth returning to the 'map' of the terrain that was developed as a summary of the qualitative analysis of the interview data (see Figure 4.5). This 'map' has been used to guide the discussion throughout the chapter – both in terms of the discussion around the specific research questions but in the more general discussion at the end of the chapter. Referring back to the 'map' will help guide the reader on this overall journey but it must be remembered that the map isn't the actual journey itself and so some deviation, detailed exploration and new discovery beyond the map should be anticipated.

5.2. Discussion Associated with the Research Questions

The first research question was: *‘What are the underlying mechanisms that encourage / prevent HRD practitioners habitually referring to theory and / or research evidence to inform their workplace practice?’*

There was a plethora of data that could be discussed in great detail here. However, it was necessary to keep the principle of parsimony in mind and so a selected discussion of the key mechanisms that appear to have emerged has been presented. To begin it is worth referring back to the map of the research presented above and from this the researcher concentrated on three areas, or mechanisms, namely Mastery, Lock-In and Results orientation. These have been described individually and then an attempt has been made to knit them together in to a more integrated framework.

Mastery has been seen as being either an ‘encourager’ or a ‘barrier’ to the use of theory / research to support professional practice and in this study the term had been used to categorise two quite different types of practitioners that have emerged from the data. The first category label was appropriate for those who recognised that their professional development was on-going and continuous and so they were labelled as having a perspective that Mastery was a ‘continuous journey’. The alternate perspective that appeared to be emerging was that Mastery was a ‘completed journey’ and that there was little else that they could add to their technical professionalism. In this context, looking at the use of learning style questionnaires specifically and underpinning theory more generally, then the former position on Mastery was best encapsulated by the following quote from participant 4, whose erudition appeared to support this perspective. When talking about the theoretical underpinning of his work he was able to readily quote a broad range of influential theorists from the field which can be seen in extract 4.2.

This compared quite starkly to the comments of participant 3 who was more representative of those classified as ‘mastery ... a journey complete’, who, when asked about learning theories that underpinned his professional

practice stated that he had sufficient ‘theory for the moment’. See extract 3.1.

The different perspectives on the place of theory to inform practice was apparent within these two quotes and from this, the question needed to be posited as to whether it was reasonable to assume that this interest, or otherwise, in the underpinning theoretical frameworks of practice could be extrapolated to the concepts of mastery, as either a continuous journey or a journey near completion. Taking this a little further, it could be seen in the outputs from the Kruskal-Wallis test (table 4.2) that there was significant difference, amongst the participants, about whether their preferred Isq was the only one they knew about (see also section 4.4.3.1). Unsurprisingly, those who identified a low awareness of the range of Isqs available and / or low usage of Isqs rated this statement very differently to those who had higher awareness and / or higher usage of such Isqs. Whilst it wasn’t conclusively demonstrated that there was a direct relationship between high awareness / use and the ‘continuous journey’ category and low awareness / use and the ‘journey completed’ category (the data couldn’t be interpreted to show this) the application of retroductive logic to the data supported such a suggestion. For example, it could be argued that there was some relationship because those who were seeking ongoing development in their professional ‘mastery’ had the tendency to be more critical and open when reflecting on their practice in comparison to those who, considering mastery as something already attained, would have less focus on such critical reflection. As a further example, and in support of this position it was interesting to note that in response to the question *‘my preferred questionnaire is relevant to my professional practice’* (see 4.4.3.3) there was a very strong degree of support for the statement from those participants who scored more highly on being aware about and / or using a wider number of Isqs in their professional practice, which contrasted quite markedly with the low to middle awareness / low use category where there was a marked non-committal response with some participants disagreeing with the statement. How could this difference be interpreted? It was possible to argue that the latter categories were more narrowly focussed on their preferred Isq, to the

exclusion of others, and this lack of broader awareness meant that they were less able to adopt different questionnaires that meet their actual need, rather than trying to apply a single questionnaire to all possible circumstances.

Referring back to Ruona and Gilley's (2009) model of practitioners in applied professions (figure 2.3 in the literature review) it was seen that there were some similarities between the concept of 'mastery – a journey complete' and the behaviours associated with their categories of 'atheoretical' practitioners' and 'practitioners' whilst the concept of 'mastery – a continuous journey' appears more analogous to their categories of 'reflective practitioner' and 'scholar practitioner'. This similarity appeared to be supported by both the qualitative and quantitative results of this research as described previously. At this juncture it was also worth reflecting on the work of Argyris and Schön (1974) with their type 1 and type 2 models of behaviour. It could be argued that the 'mastery – journey complete' mindset was related to a defensive and closed approach reminiscent of type 1 'theories in action' behaviour whilst those who had a 'mastery – a continuous journey' style were more likely to exhibit the willingness to test assumptions and continually learn, as typified by a type 2 theories in action approach.

The second 'mechanism' that emerged from the literature, and also from the data, was that of 'lock-in'. Murray and Haubl (2002, 2007) described cognitive 'lock-in' with a particular product as being associated with increasing skill levels, gained through experience with the product and leading to a decreased tendency to search for alternative or substitute products. If lock-in happened then it was a powerful explanation for why some practitioners took limited, if any, notice of the research and / or other evidence to support their choices of Isq for their professional practice. However, it must be asked as to how the product that becomes 'locked-in' was identified and chosen in the first place. Previously four possible mechanisms were identified: a) viral; b) education based; c) accreditation based and d) cognitive ease and these will be discussed in more detail now.

It could be argued that particular products (in this case questionnaires) were communicated and shared in a way that was similar to the spread of virus in a population – one ‘carrier’ infects others who then go out and infect others and so on. The question then is – who are the initial carriers? It has been suggested that transfer takes place during commercially available and in-house ‘train the trainer’ sessions. From personal experience of attending, observing and delivering such sessions it seemed that a discussion on learning styles, and the associated questionnaires, takes place almost as a mandatory course ritual. Extract 8.1 taken from a discussion about the use of Honey and Mumford questionnaire in train the trainer courses demonstrated this point well.

However, it wasn’t only exposure to training materials that encouraged this ‘viral’ spread – a similar route is through the syllabus and education programmes associated with colleges, universities and learned bodies. As mentioned previously, the CIPD teaching text for their Professional Qualification Scheme were reviewed and whilst the term learning style arose a number of times it was interesting to see that only Honey and Mumford’s Learning Style Questionnaire and Kolb’s Learning Style Inventory were mentioned specifically. Is it any wonder then that they are clearly the second and third most popular learning style questionnaires? This point was echoed in the comments made by participant 7 (see extract 7.2) about his experience taking the CIPD certificate in Training Practice.

It has been interesting to speculate on whether the syllabus for education schemes, preparing individuals for a career in HRD practice, were actually providing sufficient exposure to the breadth of options that were available and also the skills required to allow practitioners to critically engage with, and assess, the theoretical and research work that underpinned their professional practice. A question must also be asked as to the power and influence that such education schemes have to inadvertently promote the use of certain commercial products during the training of future practitioners.

Lock-in associated with accreditation was best described by reference to the most popular Isq, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) which had almost double the combined score for Honey and Mumford and Kolb in terms of practitioners saying it was their preferred Isq. This result was surprising and required explanation. Whilst the MBTI made reference to learning approach and associated guidance on learning strategies, it wasn't positioned as a learning style questionnaire per se. So, why was it the most popular Isq as identified in the survey? One argument was an economic one, based on the costs of accreditation in the MBTI and the associated cost / benefit of substitution with another questionnaire. The MBTI was a leading global brand in personality assessment and as such had many users but also attracted a premium for training in the questionnaire to allow a practitioner to become an accredited user. For example, as of 28th September 2009 the cost for accreditation training for the MBTI stage 1 programme, in the UK, was £2600 not including associated costs such as accommodation. With such an initial outlay then to gain a 'return' on the investment then the MBTI would need to be used in as many ways as possible. This then becomes an example of lock-in by accreditation. The economic outlay required for accredited users to gain their 'licence' in MBTI meant that it was used whenever practically possible in order to get the most return on the investment.

However, this practice meant that there was an increasing familiarity and 'cognitive ease' with the MBTI which, by itself, drove up loyalty to that brand. This was a further example of a type of lock-in described by Murray and Haubl, 2007 who demonstrated the link between skill-based habits, associated behaviours and customer loyalty. The cost of substitution, replacing the MBTI with another tool, then increased cost, not only in terms of possible financial outlay as described previously but also in terms of 'cognitive ease' – in other words the time and energy required to learn and use a new questionnaire became a deterrent to 'product' substitution. It was recognised that lock-in via cognitive ease and skill based habits of use were closely related and it might be that further work would be necessary to investigate the actual relationship between them.

The final mechanism that needed some commentary was that associated with 'Results Orientation' where a distinction had been made between those practitioners who had an 'evidence driven' approach to results in comparison to those who appeared to be more 'delivery driven' in approach. From a theoretical perspective this categorisation appeared similar to that of the activity based and results based practitioners described by Ruona and Gilley (2009). The similarity between this work and that of Ruona and Gilley (2009) was best seen where the evidence driven approach described in this study appeared to equate with Ruona and Gilley's description of a results based practitioner whilst the delivery driven practitioner described in this study equated to their activity based practitioner. There wasn't a specific item on the survey that looked at 'Results orientation' per se but the 'theme' had emerged from the qualitative data and appeared to be supported by some of the quantitative outputs

The best way to illustrate this difference was by comparing two extracts – the first from participant 4 (see extract 4.3) who appeared to have a strong preference for evidence to support his work and the second from participant 7 (extract 7.1) who had a more ambivalent attitude about the need for evidence to support practice.

There was also stark contrast between these two statements and it is now worth looking to the survey data to see if there was anything that could further support this emerging theme. One example was a question that was asked as to whether the participant's preferred Isq was 'theoretically sound' or not (see 4.4.3.7). The difference between the participant categories was statistically significant so it could be stated that there was a divergence amongst users about whether the questionnaire they prefer was sound. Did this suggest that some practitioner's would purposefully choose an 'unsound' questionnaire? This seemed unlikely but it could suggest that whilst some practitioners considered such rigour as being of importance to their work, that others were much less concerned about this and placed greater reliance on their personal experience and user feedback. Another interesting result was

the response to the question about whether the preferred Isq was a 'practical tool to use'. Again, there was a statistically significant difference amongst the participants with those expressing a preference to use one tool, to the exclusion of others, being proportionately less supportive of the statement than those who used a higher number of questionnaires. Whether this supported the argument that 'lock-in' prevented practitioners choosing the most appropriate questionnaire for their work – perhaps using MBTI for multiple purposes to ensure a 'return on investment' – was worth further consideration.

In summary, the first research question was designed to identify emerging themes and mechanisms that could help improve understanding as to why HRD participants do or don't engage with theory and research evidence to support their professional practice. Figure 4.5 summarised the terrain of this research and from it three particular 'mechanisms' were identified as of relevance, namely: Mastery, Lock-In and Results Orientation.

Mastery and Results Orientation were discussed in some detail above and it was interesting to note that they appeared to align with and support the 'Practitioners in Applied Professions' Model proposed by Ruona and Gilley (2009). However, the mechanism of 'Lock-In' was something different and its impact was not explained in the Ruona and Gilley model. Lock-In impacted HRD practitioners choice of tools to use in their professional practice. Whilst the impact of such sub-optimal decision making wasn't assessed in this study it was considered to be a significant causal mechanism. For example, the research demonstrated the prevalence of the MBTI as an Isq of choice for many practitioners. However, the MBTI was considered relatively weak when assessed against the quality criteria established in Coffield et al (2004a and b). This implied that there was significant 'sub-optimal' practice taking place, in this particular context and potentially across the discipline of HRD. The question as to the possible impact of this and its effects on learners was not covered in this study but would be an ideal area for further exploration. For example, as well as considering Lock-in, in its various forms, to be an important mechanism in the choice of Isqs, it would also be valuable to

research whether there is impact on practitioner decision making in other related areas, for instance in the choice of personality and ability testing instruments.

The second research question that was asked was: *'Which, if any, learning style theories, and associated tools, are being used to inform the workplace practice of HRD professionals?'*

When looking at the learning style theories that underpin practice it was apparent that there was only limited knowledge, and less understanding, of the theoretical basis of such tools. As might be expected, by far the most commonly referred to theory was the Jungian psychology that underpinned the MBTI. It was not surprising that there was such awareness as the training / accreditation for MBTI practitioners required an extensive understanding of the underpinning Jungian psychology. There also appeared to be some appreciation that experiential learning theory underpinned Kolb's LSI but overall, of those who identified that they used a learning style questionnaire, only 44% responded that they were aware of its theoretical underpinning. However, stripping out the MBTI trained practitioners would have reduced this percentage very significantly. If the users of Kolb's LSI, who were able to reference experiential learning theory, were also removed then this would have reduced this number to an almost negligible amount, albeit from what would have been a small rump of practitioners using other learning style questionnaires. Was this a concern? It is argued here that if practitioners were going to be able to make more informed choices about the learning style questionnaire tools they used, and to work in a way that could be described as evidence based, then a greater appreciation of the underpinning theory supporting the tools they chose to use in practice would be expected. This knowledge should not be just an appreciation of the underpinning theory but also the ability to understand and interpret the supporting research into the psychometric properties of the Isq, its validity and reliability. However, as Gilley (2006, p 235) suggested practitioners will avoid such research because they don't fully understand how it related to performance improvement and as Lawler (2007, p 1033)

argued, in this case about HR practices in general, but which was equally as applicable to specific HRD practice:

'A great deal of what passes as "best practice" in HRM most likely is not. In some cases, there is simply no evidence that validates what are thought to be best practices, while in other cases there is evidence to suggest that what are thought to be best practices are inferior practices.'

However, as well as the theoretical basis of the learning style questionnaires an awareness and understanding of the published literature on such learning style questionnaires would also be advantageous and it wasn't clear from this study that there was appetite for such engagement by many of the practitioners who participated in the study. In fact, it could be argued that there is, for many, a distinct un-willingness to make such engagement. As identified in the interviews there appeared to be pressure to simply get things done in the workplace, with speed of delivery being seen as paramount for many practitioners. This pressure on speed is likely to mitigate against a more considered review of the theoretical and research underpinning of a particular tool taking place. Briner (2007, p2) described the potential outcome of such speed pressure as the implementation of a 'quick fix' solution – often to meet political rather than organisational imperatives – where a 'quick fix' is considered to be the application of the latest 'fad or fashion' rather than a considered response. Keefer and Stone (2009, p 466) reported similar findings where they suggested that the organisational operating model, that the HRD practitioner works in, was highly influential on the approach taken by HRD practitioners. This was an interesting consideration as it could be argued that the organisational operating model related directly to the 'circumstantial' base of action in Bhaskar's Bases of Action model. If this was the case then it offered another explanation as to why practitioners might not engage with research in support of their practice. Even if there was an interest in such critical assessment, many practitioners

appeared to have a limited awareness of the underpinning knowledge base of their practice on which to make appropriate judgements and lacked the ability to understand what had been published (for example see Cascio, 2007 p 1010). This tendency wasn't shared by all – some practitioners did see the need to engage with, and understand, the theoretical underpinning of their preferred tools. This appeared to be associated with those practitioners who had a preference for evidence based practice – for example those who looked for both rigour and relevance in what they were doing – although the criteria for assessing both rigour and relevance was dependent on the individual practitioners personal context (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006, p807).

The data collected from the survey provided some interesting insights into the learning style questionnaires that HRD practitioners were using. As reported, the overwhelming preference of learning style questionnaire was the Myers Briggs Type Indicator. This surprised the researcher inasmuch that the MBTI was a personality instrument, with various possible applications – including providing insight about individual learning styles – but was not a specific Isq. However, as Coffield et al (2004a, p47) pointed out, the MBTI was the most used psychometric instrument globally, selling more than 2,000,000 copies per year at the time. Looking at the international split of preference it was apparent that the MBTI preference is not associated with any one country or geographic region. The only significant geographic group of practitioners, who demonstrated a preference for something other than MBTI, was the UK focused practitioners. For this particular group Honey and Mumford was the preferred tool by a 2:1 ratio in comparison to the MBTI. Therefore it could be argued that the simple fact of the widespread proliferation of the tool is, in part, the reason for its popularity with practitioners.

Following the MBTI in popularity were the Honey and Mumford Learning Styles Questionnaire and Kolb's Learning Style Inventory. These results were less surprising than the finding about the MBTI to the researcher. Kolb's Learning Style Inventory, and his work on the underpinning

experiential learning theory, are one of the most influential models of learning styles (Coffield et al, 2004a, p60). In fact the Honey and Mumford tool was based directly on the Kolb's experiential learning theory and was only developed as a response to criticisms from managers in the UK that Kolb's LSI lacked face validity for them. There appeared to be an understandable regional bias for the use of Kolb or Honey and Mumford but it was recognised that the underpinning learning theory for these tools was the same.

Having looked at the preferences that practitioners exhibited it is now worth turning attention back to Coffield et al (2004a, p139) and their review of the key learning style instruments, and whether they meet the 4 key assessment criteria, namely: internal consistency, test-retest reliability; construct validity and predictive validity. From their assessment of the leading lsqs they identified that only Allinson and Hayes Cognitive Style Indicator met all four assessment criteria. In this review both Honey and Mumford's LSQ and Kolb's LSI scored positively on one of the four assessment criteria, test-retest validity whilst the MBTI fared a little better, being assessed as having demonstrated both internal consistency as well as test-retest validity. However, the question has to be asked as to why the Allinson and Hayes instrument, which fared so well in terms of its supporting evidence was not used by any practitioners who responded to the survey (one slight anomaly in the data was that although no practitioners said they used this particular tool one respondent did say it was their preferred tool). It appeared that there was little 'brand awareness' for this particular instrument amongst practitioners, with over 75% of practitioners not being aware of the instrument. There were a number of other instruments that demonstrated even worse 'brand awareness' and these, in the main, also showed very little, if any, usage by practitioners. In fact, looking at the data in Figure 4.6 it appeared that before an instrument was likely to have any kind of significant usage there had to be a high level of brand awareness amongst the target group. The Honey and Mumford LSQ appeared to be an anomaly here but this was due to the UK centricity of the tool – for example almost 90% of UK based practitioners knew of the Honey and Mumford LSQ whilst more than 90% of the US based practitioners had not heard of it.

Looking beyond the top three learning style questionnaires it was seen from the data that only Apter's Motivational Style Profile (AMSP), based on Reversal Theory, and Hermann's Brain Dominance Instrument (HBDI), based on the whole brain model, had other users identifying it as their preferred tool. The AMSP, like the MBTI, was not a specific learning styles questionnaire, but a more general inventory of motivation style, that Coffield et al (2004) argued had relevance in the field of learning styles. Whether this differentiation had an impact on its user's responses is worth considering.

A final comment is that there appeared to be very little diversity in use of learning style questionnaires across the group of respondents. It could be argued that this lack of diversity lent support to the argument that lock-in and brand strength were both important factors in influencing HR development practitioners in their choice of learning style instrument. This also raised questions about whether rigorous evidence based practice was still a long way from the being a reality for such practitioners.

To summarise the discussion associated with the second research question, it appeared from the data that the MBTI, and its underpinning theoretical model, were the most influential for HRD practitioners. This was surprising as the MBTI was not a learning style questionnaire and the Jungian theory on which it was based was not a learning theory. However, the prevalence of the brand and the lock-in associated with its use was presented as explanations for this finding. Honey and Mumford's Learning Style Questionnaire and Kolb's Learning Style Inventory were also popular as was the experiential learning theory that underpinned both of these questionnaires. Interestingly, the only questionnaire that met the four quality criteria set out in Coffield et al (2004) review was the Allinson and Hayes Cognitive Style Indicator. This questionnaire was relatively unknown and was not used by the survey participants.

The third question asked was: *‘What factors have influenced HRD professionals in their choice of a particular learning style instrument?’*

From the data that was collected, in both quantitative and qualitative forms, it was apparent that there were a few well known tools that were extensively used whilst there was a long, thin tail of others that were either unknown or, if known, not used to any significant extent by practitioners. As mentioned earlier the researcher was surprised that the single most used learning style tool was reported to be the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). Why was this surprising? As an accredited user of the MBTI the researcher was trained in its use as a questionnaire for: describing personality type; as a model for understanding and explaining individual’s development through maturation: and as a tool to help understand team dynamics and interactions. However, whilst there was some reference to the underpinning model, as a mechanism to describe learning style and preference, this was described more as an adjunct to, rather than of a particular strength of, the MBTI through the accreditation training. This differed when compared to the second and third most used tools – namely, Kolb’s Learning Style Inventory and Honey and Mumford’s Learning Style Questionnaire which were marketed as learning style assessment tools in their own right. So, the question arose as to why a more generic tool, namely the MBTI, was the most preferred tool for practitioners when there were specialist alternatives available? The contention presented was that lock-in, both through practice based familiarity and prior accreditation, was a significant contributory factor in this selection process. When considering skill based practice the literature suggested that lock-in was associated with both the benefit of cognitive ease (i.e. the tried and tested) and also habit formation through familiarity and practice see Murray and Haubl, (2002, 2007). This study supported this perspective and, as an illustration, the reader should refer back to a quote made by participant 5 during the interview stage of data collection. When asked about her approach to professional practice and the selection of Isqs and similar tools she stated that she tended to stick with the tried and tested (see extract 5.2)

However, it has also been suggested that lock-in goes beyond habit based practice and that it can also be driven by other factors, and in this case, forms of accreditation, were proposed as one such factor. This was explained through the process whereby the practitioner invested significant time and money into training to become accredited, in a personality instrument such as the MBTI, that they became financially and emotionally 'locked-in' to using that questionnaire as often as possible in order to get return on the investment. But why was the MBTI selected in the first place? The MBTI was a very strong brand and as Hoeffler and Keller (2003) identified this had significant impact on buying behaviour. Also, as Barnes, Gartland and Stack (2004) suggested the popularity of a particular 'brand' of goods or services was often more important in the decision making process than the usefulness or effectiveness of the goods / services. This was echoed by Hopkins (2007) who argued the 'goodwill' associated with a strong brand often prevented consumers considering alternatives, even when those alternatives were superior to the incumbent.

So, if the influence of the 'MBTI', or other strong lsq brand, was such that it became the initial preference for practitioners to train and accredit in, then the lock-in process began. This was then reinforced by the pressure to use the tool where possible, in order to 'recoup' the costs, both financial and emotional, of accreditation, and so encouraged the practitioner to gain increasing familiarity with it, which, in turn developed into habitual use of the tool and so onto it's use becoming a skill based habit. Further reinforcing this preference was the associated increase in cognitive cost to change, which in economic parlance was a classic market barrier for a 'new' entrant. It was also worth noting Coffield et al (2004a, p 51) who argued that the MBTI had simply been accepted as 'part of the normal arsenal of measurement' with an associated lack of critical and reflective consideration of the tool. Could this be further evidence for the case of 'lock-in'?

The idea of 'viral lock-in' was introduced previously and this is also worth reflecting upon, with particular reference to the LSQ and LSI, here. This idea was described as the passing of learning styles approaches, from one group

of practitioners to the next generation, via 'train the trainer' course activity. In other words, successive generations of HRD practitioners were 'infected' by the received wisdom of the past. Whilst this idea was not looked into via the survey, there was evidence of this theme emerging though the analysis of the interview data. Several respondents mentioned the use of learning styles on the 'train the trainer' activities they delivered and, from personal experience, as trainer, trainee and observer of such programmes, the topic of learning styles appeared to have become a ritualistic component of such training. To highlight this point participant 11, in response to a question about his use of Kolb's LSI and experiential learning theory in train the trainer sessions confirmed the view that this was important for professionals in their early career (see extract 11.2)

It could also be argued that, within the UK, this was accentuated further by the underpinning professional knowledge imparted through the CIPD Professional Qualification Scheme (PQS). Having reviewed the supporting literature for the PQS there was, as mentioned previously, reference only to Honey and Mumford's LSQ and Kolb's LSI. Even within the CIPD's factsheet on Learning Styles, which summarised Coffield et al (2004), the further reading recommended were only the texts by Honey and Mumford and Kolb.

Further reflection on the strength of the MBTI brand on the choice of practitioners is now required. As had previously been described, the MBTI was a leading global brand in the field of personality assessment questionnaires and its use was multi-faceted in the organisational context. Figure 4.6 showed that more than 95% of the survey respondents knew of the MBTI, which compared favourably with the second most recognisable questionnaire, Kolb's LSI, which had almost 80% awareness and the third most recognisable, Honey and Mumford's LSQ, that had just over 50% recognition. All the other questionnaires identified in the survey had less than 25% awareness amongst practitioners, and in many cases around 10% awareness, except for the Apter MSP which had slightly over 30%. It was apparent that the strength of a particular brand impacted the choice of practitioners, which, when combined with the effect of lock-in meant that the

preferred Isq became entrenched into practice, even when there was evidence to suggest that it was sub-optimal. As mentioned earlier the MBTI was probably the most commercially successful psychometric instrument on the market. With such general brand awareness, aligned with the requirement for practitioners to gain formal accreditation in order to purchase the instrument, then the barriers to entry for competing products were high.

Honey and Mumford's LSQ and Kolb's LSI were the second and third most preferred learning style questionnaires. This was less unexpected than the overwhelming preference for the MBTI reported by the HRD practitioners. However, by referring back to the work of Barnes, Gartland and Stack (2004, 372) then this shouldn't be surprising as they made the point that decisions on a particular product or service were often made on the basis of popularity of a 'brand' rather than the quality or potential utility of a product – such as a learning style questionnaire. When looking at the data from the survey, there was some supporting evidence for this. For example, it was interesting to note in table 4.5 that 69% of practitioners agreed or strongly agreed that their preferred learning style questionnaire had a strong brand which contrasted against the 57% of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that their preferred learning style questionnaires reputation was an important consideration in their choice of learning style questionnaires. Interestingly, only 41% agreed or strongly agreed that their preferred learning style questionnaire had the best validity and reliability data compared to the other tools. The impression was that popularity was, as Barnes et al (2004) argued, of more significance in the decision making process for many professionals than 'rigour' of the tool being selected. There was some support in the survey data for this. For example, the responses to the statement about whether the preferred learning style questionnaire had face validity for users (see section 4.4.3.2) showed a statistically significant divergence of opinion amongst participants. This was interesting to note because it suggested that many practitioners had a preference for a questionnaire that they considered exhibited low levels of face validity for the questionnaire users. Why would this be the case? Why would practitioners retain such a preference even if they thought the tool they were using lacked

validity (albeit a weak form of validity) for users? Was this supporting evidence for the view of Barnes et al (2004) about 'popularity' being more important than rigour? The researcher believes that this was, in fact, the case. Lawler (2007, p1033) supported this position and made the following comment whilst writing about why HR practices, and in this case the term has been taken to include HRD practices, were not evidence based.

He wrote:

'Even where research results are known and have clear implications for practice, they may not impact practice because they run counter to what practitioners prefer to do or believe is right'

The competing perspective to this was neatly summed up in the comment from participant 10 (see extract 10.3) who described how reference back to research data would in fact drive his choice of Isq.

So, whilst it could be argued that some practitioners were predominantly influenced by the brand strength of a particular questionnaire there were other practitioners who clearly took into consideration the quality of research evidence to support their use of a particular questionnaire.

It is also worth briefly considering the impact of professional identity on the individual practitioner at this juncture. As stated in the literature review there was already a significant literature on professional identity and this research never intended to cover it in detail. However, as an example it was considered worth referring back to Argyris and Schön (1974) and their work on type 1 and type 2 theories of action. Coming from the interviews there appeared to be a distinction between those practitioners who viewed their professional journey towards mastery as a journey still being undertaken

whilst others seemed to see the journey as being almost, if not, complete. It could be argued that there was more of a willingness to look at alternatives and new developments in the field for those who saw themselves still travelling on a route to professional mastery whilst others, who could be suggested to have 'reached' their destination, would have seen their tool set as being adequate for their needs. This aligned with Argyris and Schön's views on model 2 and model 1 behaviours respectively. Whilst this impression was not tested empirically, through the survey or elsewhere, it did emerge from the reading of the qualitative interviews (for example, see extract 5.4)

Could it be argued that the need to develop the skills of professional self-reflection was something that needed further enhancement in the syllabus of practitioner training and education schemes? Ultimately, this had the potential to impact on the way that practitioners make choices about the tools and approaches they use in support of their professional practice.

This third question has looked at the factors that have influenced the choice of HRD practitioners about which tool to use in their work. It appeared that for a large number of practitioners then initial 'brand' awareness, later reinforced by the effects of 'lock-in', had been a major factor in the decision making process. However, this wasn't always the case and it was also shown that some practitioners valued the underpinning research evidence to help guide them in the decision making process. However, even those practitioners who appeared to value research evidence were not choosing the questionnaire which, from Coffield et al (2004) review of the field, met the highest quality standards. The mechanism for how such questionnaires could have been brought to the attention of the practitioner body needs further consideration. Finally, the issue of professional identity, as identified in 4.5 – the map of the research terrain – was briefly touched on. The work of Argyris and Schön (1974) on model 1 and model 2 'theories in action' and the associated defensive or open behaviours was referenced as a way to help explain the dimensions of 'Mastery' identified in the research.

The final research question asked: *'Which, if any, general theories of learning are being used to inform the workplace practice of HRD professionals?'*

Looking at the data in Figure 4.11 it was seen that personality based theory, typified by the use of the MBTI, was the most popular learning theory that practitioners used in their day to day work. In fact 29% of respondents identified this as their preferred learning theory. This was, again, a surprising result. There were two possible explanations for this. First, it could be the case that the respondents, having previously identified the MBTI as their preferred learning style questionnaire, felt that it was appropriate to respond in a similar manner when asked about their preferred learning theory. Alternatively, the 'lock-in' alluded to above was more deeply engrained than had been supposed. The reason for this statement being that in the survey the respondents were asked about their preferred learning theory and the name of the 'family' of theories was provided, but with an example of a key worker to help. For instance, social learning theory was linked with Bandura as the example. The familiarity with the brand name could have influenced the responses to this question, because, the example given for this particular family was 'Myers-Briggs' rather than, and probably more correctly, Jung.

As well as personality based approaches there was also a significant number of respondents who indicated experiential learning theories, associated with Kolb (24% of respondents) and adult learning / andragogy, associated with Knowles, (18% of respondents) as their preferred approaches. These three families of learning theory had 71% of all respondents recognise them as preferred. Again, there was a long, thin tail of other theoretical approaches that followed these 'big three' with Argyris's approach to double loop learning attracting 8% of respondents, Multiple Intelligences, associated with Gardner and Behaviourist approaches, associated with Skinner, both attracting 4% of respondents. All other families of learning theory had less than 2% of respondents identifying them as their preferred. An interesting observation was that 59% of those who identified Adult Learning theory as their preferred approach were members of the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) whereas only 6% who preferred this approach were

members of the CIPD. In fact by referring back to Chart 4.10 it was shown that there was a broad degree of similarity between members of these two professional bodies and their preferences for different learning theories except for Adult Learning / Andragogy as typified by Knowles. Whether Adult Education / Andragogy is not covered to any extent in the CIPD training materials and standards is worth asking. Another interesting observation is the lack of preference for what could be deemed more socially orientated learning theory by these practitioners, in comparison to the more individually orientated approaches. In fact the lack of any respondent's preference for the well established and validated approach of behavioural role modelling, as the application of Bandura's social learning theory to training practice, was surprising. Considering the now classic text on the topic by Goldstein and Sorcher (1974) and a wide range of supporting research (for a summary see Robertson, 1990) then it would have expected to see it rated more highly.

What was also an interesting result was the apparent lack of awareness of the situated learning theory, as exemplified in the survey by Lave and Wenger. In a comprehensive review of workplace learning Lee et al (2004, p10) suggested that the work on Lave and Wenger's approach to situated learning has '... enjoyed much currency within workplace learning theory and research' yet it is apparent that this work has yet to filter down to the HRD practitioner body. This further reinforced the impression of the gap between the academic / research community and practitioners that is oft written about and that was extensively covered in the earlier literature review of. Another surprise was that almost 70% of all respondents had not heard of constitutionally based theories – these which were labelled as the VAK (Visual, Auditory and Kinaesthetic) modalities approach, with Guildford being given as the example. The reason why this was so surprising was due to the fact that VAK modalities are a key construct within Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). The prevalence and popularity of NLP as a topic of 'accredited' training, therapy, business books, popular psychology and as a staple of many training programmes had led the researcher to expect a higher degree of recognition of this family of theories. This is an interesting

exception to Barnes et al (2004) argument about popularity and its impact on decision making.

Having looked at some specific points regarding the preferences of HRD practitioners for learning theory it is worth raising the issue as to what was being taught, in terms of a theoretical basis, to those following programmes leading to a qualification in HRD and / or membership of an appropriate professional institute or society. If, as some commentators have argued, an evidence based approach to HRD practice was the way to push the profession forward then the question as to how such an approach could be sustainably developed needed to be answered. Whilst no more than an impression it seemed to this researcher that the theoretical base of other professions, such as psychology and social work, were covered more in the professional education of these practitioners than had been the case for HRD professionals. To illustrate this point Briner (2007, p4) stated that within the field of HRM, and in this instance it is taken that this covers HRD, there was only one academic journal devoted to evidence based approaches which was in marked contrast to other professions. To support this assertion the professional standards for the CIPD were 'key word' searched and there was no reference to the terms 'evidence based' or 'evidence based practice' identified through the search which contrasted markedly with the occupational standards for psychologists. The British Psychological Society had a key standard for all psychologists to 'Apply psychological and related methods, concepts, models, theories and knowledge derived from reproducible research findings'. Whilst the term 'evidence based' doesn't appear as such, the meaning of this particular occupational standard is clear. This raised an interesting question about the extent to which HRM / HRD is, in fact, a profession? However, that is a debate that goes beyond the scope of this thesis.

However, as a final observation for this question – there were practitioners who clearly have a very firm grip on the theoretical and research evidence that supports their practice, as extracts 4.2 and 10.1 clearly demonstrate.

These extracts suggest that there were practitioners who were very familiar with the research underpinning their professional practice but it was unclear as to why they were so engaged with the underpinning professional research base when compared to their peers. However, the discussion on the research questions above have hinted at some of the possible themes that explain why some practitioners were so engaged whilst others weren't – but there is a lot further work yet to be done in this field.

To summarise the discussion about this final research question it was again surprising to see that the most popular 'family' of learning theories were the personality based approaches. What was also interesting to note was the difference between CIPD and ASTD qualified survey participants in their knowledge about Andragogy and the work of Knowles in the field of adult education. Also, the lack of awareness amongst practitioners of socially orientated learning theories was surprising considering the increased attention this approach had received in the academic literature over the last 15 years. Finally, it was speculated as to whether the education programmes that prepare practitioners for a career in HRD, and aligned professions, should have a greater emphasis on evidence based approaches and, if they should, whether this would help to drive the dissemination of good research evidence into the underpinning knowledge base of practitioners.

5.3 General Discussion

What has been presented above has been a discussion of the research findings based on the key research questions. However, it is now worth a discussion from a more integrating perspective than the research questions alone. The justification for this being that the research was not predicated on a set of simple, flat, cause and effect relationships but instead, was built on a stratified critical realist ontological foundation which led to the identification of several emerging themes. However, if an attempt is not made to integrate these themes into a more coherent 'narrative' then the research output would only be partially successful.

The following discussion has been heavily influenced by Bhaskar's Bases of Action model which, as a brief reminder, contained 5 bases which included: 1) Cognitive, 2) Conative, 3) Affective, 4) Dynamic (sub-divided into competence and resources) and 5) Circumstances. According to this model all bases were required to be 'in place' if action was to happen. Through the literature review various reasons why practitioners were not engaging with research were identified. However, it became apparent that there was little in the way of explanation that could be labelled as residing in the 'conative' base. If searching for reasons why practitioners were not drawing on theory and research to support their practice then this seemed to be an area of explanation that had been neglected. The argument that has been presented below was that the following mechanisms, which could be considered to operate at the conative level, helped in further explaining some of the barriers to the use of theory and evidence by HRD practitioners and, by extension, other professional practitioners. There was one proviso that needed to be mentioned and that was any simple model, used to explain a complex interaction, will usually be found wanting. In this case there were features of the discussion that might be classified under, say the Cognitive Base, which another researcher could justifiably label under a different Base – say the Affective base. The following discussion therefore drew upon the Model to organise thoughts and provide structure, rather than being a definitive statement about where certain features of the research outputs actually sat within the Model.

To start this section it is worth reviewing the term conation again. Conation was defined as the alignment of cognition and affectivity actualised into intentional, goal orientated behaviours that Huitt (1999) categorised as being: 1) Mastery goals – focussing on developing competence or on the process of learning; 2) Performance goals – focussing on the outcome, winning or attainment; and 3) Social goals based on the performance of the group or the individual fitting into the group. It was fair to say that Huitt's classification of what was a conative goal covered a very broad terrain and that much of what was covered could fit into other Bases. However, when considering Mastery

goals then it became apparent from the model described above that this referred, in many ways to, the 'Mastery – A Journey...' factor. What appeared to have emerged was an internal 'mechanism' that encouraged or discouraged the practitioner from entering into the goal directed activity, of seeking the most appropriate learning style questionnaire tool, on the basis of their self-perception of what 'Mastery' meant. Those who considered that their current practice was more than sufficient for their needs did not actively engage with seeking out superior tools whilst those who considered their mastery to be an on-going (and possibly never ending) process appeared to show a greater willingness to engage. Huitt (1999) identified a second family of goals – namely performance goals – which appeared to lend themselves to the 'Results Orientation...' factors identified. These suggested that for some practitioners the important driver was delivery - to deliver outputs, at pace, and with less of a consideration for the quality of the results being delivered. Whether this was an inherent personal preference, or an artefact of the organisational culture they operated in, was not apparent. However, it contrasted starkly with the alternative perspective held by some – the evidence based driver. These practitioners, whilst still 'bottom line' orientated, also appeared to have greater need for evidence to support their professional activities. Again, whether this was an artefact of their operating context was not possible to state but there appeared to be a distinct preference for them using evidence to inform practice for some. The model of the HRD traditionalist and HRD Practitioner-Scholar that Gilley (2006) proposed comes to mind and helped to explain the differences in approach between the Traditionalist practitioner, who Gilley suggested would find difficulty in determining effective practice, from 'fads', versus the evidence orientated Practitioner Scholar who used research to support their decision making. Huitt (1999) also identified social goals, associated with group performance and an individual's ability to successfully 'fit in' to the group, as the final component of the trio of conative orientated goals. Such goals also aligned with factors associated with professional identity. For example, by referring back to the description of social identity, provided by Augoustinos and Walker (1995, p98), then the concept of 'self' was considered to be derived from the meaning an individual associated with belonging to a group

and the emotional value that such membership brought. Participants in the survey were asked if they considered themselves to be HR Development professionals or not, and as reported in the results chapter, about two thirds responded positively to the question yet, on further examination, all those who responded negatively had job titles that could be described as residing within the broad 'church' of HR Development practitioners.

However, it was possible to see an even more integrated explanation of what was happening at the conative level by employing the 'lens' of Argyris and Schön Model 1 and Model 2 Theories of Action. Argyris and Schön's (1974) work on theories of action – which identified both defensive Model 1 theories and the more inquiry based Model 2 theories was interesting in context of this discussion. For Argyris and Schön a key driver of Model 1 thinking was the avoidance of embarrassment and, to do this, both individuals and organisations respond to a potential 'threat' by adopting a set of defensive behaviours, some of which were adopted consciously whilst others operated at a more unconscious level (Argyris, 1995 p21). It is proposed that some of the features associated with Model 1 behaviours were synonymous with the 'barriers' identified in the model of the 'research terrain' at the beginning of this chapter. For example, Argyris (1995, p 21) argued that a challenge towards promoting a more inquiry based approach to action was that:

'... individuals senses of competence, self-confidence, and self esteem are highly dependent on their Model I theories-in-use and organizational defensive routines' and that 'individuals' theories-in-use are so internalized that they are taken for granted.'

If the action that was being sought was that of HRD practitioners drawing more consistently on theory and research to support their professional practice then, for many practitioners, this would have been a challenge to their view of personal competence, with consequences for self-confidence, which in turn could result in the associated defensive behaviours being purposefully exhibited. Mapping this against the model of the terrain (Figure 4.5) it was possible to see the similarity between Model 1 behaviours and the

barriers that were identified and it was reasonable to argue that there were relationships with the 3 types of conative goal that Huitt (1999) identified. However, by looking at the enablers in Figure 4.5 it was seen that they had much in common with the behaviours that were required for, and associated with, Model 2 theories of action. To demonstrate this then Argyris (1995, p22) will be quoted. He wrote that:

‘The governing values of Model II are valid information, informed choice, and vigilant monitoring of the implementation of the choice in order to detect and correct error.’

The similarity was clear to see – drawing upon evidence to support practice, the willingness to pragmatically embrace theory, where appropriate, and the on-going journey towards professional Mastery all appeared to resonate and align, with the goal orientated behaviours of conative goal orientated behaviour – in terms of Mastery, Performance and Social goals.

5.4 Proposed Model of the HRD Practitioner decision making process

The following model, Figure 5.1, was proposed as an attempt to apply the research findings to Bhaskar’s Bases of Action framework so that the constituent components of the HRD professional’s decision making process could be better understood. To begin, it is important to note that each base in the equation below should be considered as being multiplied by the other – so, if any base was not present then a zero value would have been inserted into the equation. A basic principle of mathematics is that anything multiplied by zero will have a zero answer. Therefore, there must be a ‘value’ in each base. If this wasn’t the case then action would not have taken place. This was consistent with Bhaskar’s model.

It is worth mentioning that skill based habit were seen as an influencing variable on the cognitive base, brand awareness and loyalty were seen as influencing variables on the affective base and lock-in, in various forms, was

an influencing variable on the competence component of the dynamic base. The conative base was different and it has been proposed that the inter-relationship between the three categories of conative goals that Huitt (1999) proposed impacted how the individual practitioner decided to act. This was shown in Figure 5.2 and has been explained in more detail below. However, it is worth mentioning that there was likely to be interaction between the circumstantial base, regarding context, and the social category within the conative goals. It is therefore argued that the organisational cultural context influenced many individual practitioners and their desire to 'fit into' the organisation and help achieve the goals that had been set.

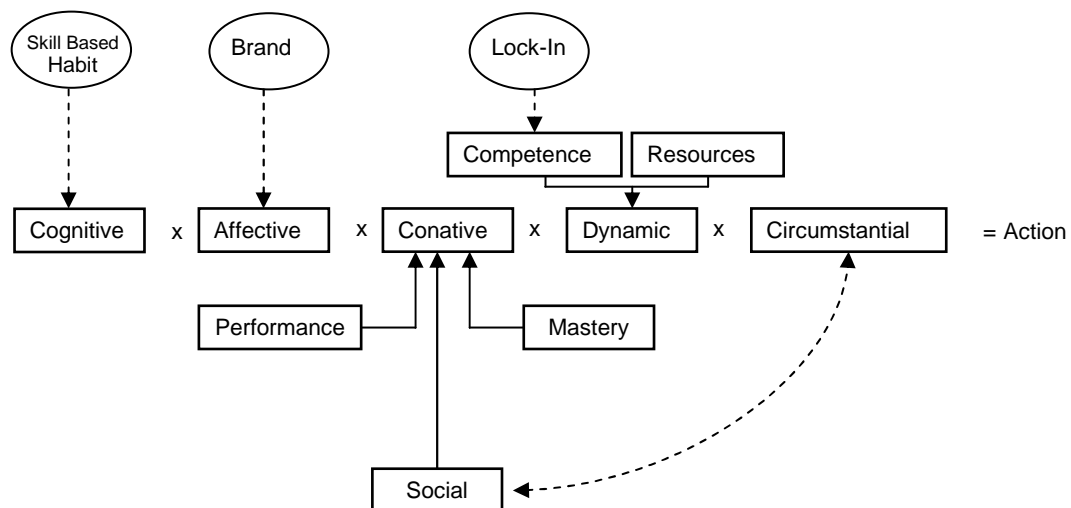


Figure 5.1 HRD practitioners and their choice of Isq: applying the research outcomes to Bhaskar's Bases of Action model

Table 2.1 maps the various barriers that prevented HRD practitioners engaging with research, as identified in the literature, against Bhaskar's bases of action model. From this it was seen that there were apparently no barriers that could be described as residing in the 'conative' base. The following model, which builds on figure 5.1, identified some possible mechanisms that were identified in the research and which related directly to the conative base and the associated categories of goals. First, there was

the 'performance' category of goals. It is proposed that the orientation a practitioner had, either to 'delivery based' or 'evidence based' results, impacted their decision making process with respect to choosing an Isq. It was considered that the former was more likely to adopt an Isq they knew about, in order to get things done, whilst the latter was more likely to consider a range of options before choosing the most appropriate for the situation. However, the practitioner's orientation towards mastery was also highly relevant in respect to the mastery category of conative goals. It could be argued that the preference the practitioner exhibited for developing competence meant that those with a '... continuous journey' orientation looked for new options and approaches whilst those who were more '... a journey complete' would not look to expand their repertoire beyond the tried and trusted, so choosing different Isqs was far less likely in the latter group. Finally, the social category of conative goals needed mention. As previously stated the interplay of the circumstantial base should not be under estimated but it could also be argued that the practitioner's view of themselves, as a professional belonging to competing communities (profession, employing organisation, offering consulting services etc) had potential impact on their decision making process.

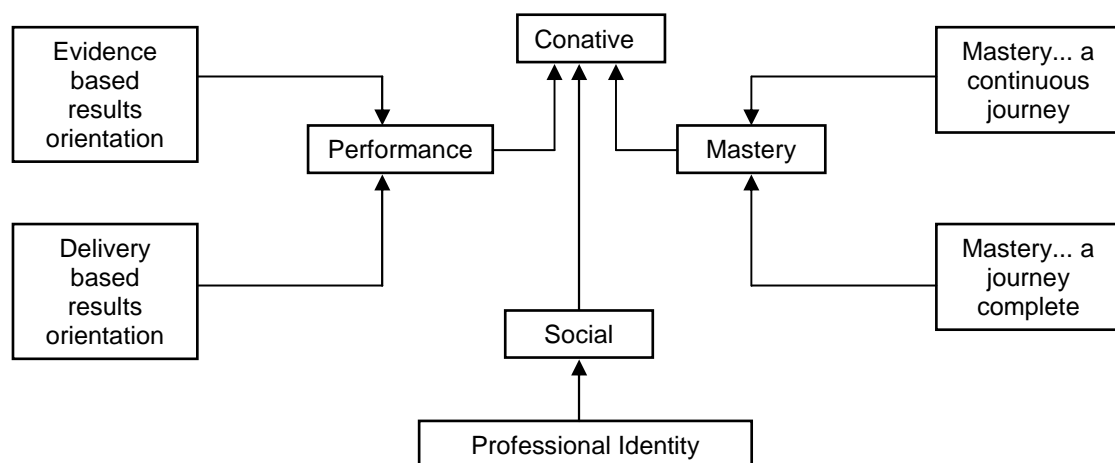


Figure 5.2 Understanding the conative base of action in more detail

The model in figure 5.1 and 5.2 was proposed as a tool to help understand why some practitioners engaged with theory and research to support their professional practice more than others. In this instance it related to the choice of a particular Isq but it was considered that the model had greater application than this limited area. It provided a more dynamic and complex picture of practitioner engagement than the model proposed by Ruona and Gilley (2009) but required further research to validate the model.

5.5 Chapter Summary

The literature contained a lively debate on the reasons why many HRD practitioners didn't engage with theory and research to underpin their professional practice (for example Short, 2006; Gilley, 2006; Berger et al., 2004; Torracco, 2004). Using Bhaskar's Model of Bases of Action as a framework to help make sense of this debate, a number of barriers described in the literature were identified. However, it was also noted that little had been written about conative barriers to action and the question was raised as to whether this was a missing part of the explanatory jigsaw puzzle. What this research attempted was to identify such barriers but also to make a more complex argument about the interaction of such bases of action and how they interplayed in the decision making process of the HRD practitioner. In particular, issues around professional mastery, lock-in (in its many guises) and results orientation were discussed in some detail as they were identified as 'themes' that emerged from the research data. A model to describe this process was proposed. However, as well as these themes this research also identified some more surprising observations, particularly around the preference for so many practitioners to use the MBTI as a learning style questionnaire, rather than specific Isqs developed for the activity. The general paucity of knowledge about various learning theories was also surprising and raised questions about the content of professional education programmes within this professional domain. In conclusion to this research the following chapter has summarised the work, drawn conclusions, made suggestions about what might be done to ameliorate the situation and finally recommend areas ripe for further research.

6. Conclusions

6.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter draws together the discussion and provides the key conclusions from this research. The chapter opens with some general conclusions about the findings from the research and the wider practitioner- academic context and then looks more closely at conclusions that have arisen directly from this research. As outlined earlier this work has been underpinned by a critical realist philosophy and so it is apt that the next section of the chapter raises suggestions for change – ultimately, to drive up the effectiveness of HRD practitioners. The chapter is completed with recommendations for further research in this area.

6.2 Conclusions from the research and the wider context

Whilst writing in a recent text on critical thinking in HRD, Vince (2005 p30-31) stated that:

Currently, the practice of HRD in the UK is rooted in standardised products and services, driven by competencies, defined by professional bodies and focussed on predictability and consistency. There are too many organisations whose approaches require staff members to learn mechanistically, and only a very small number of models of development that are used and that make any lasting impact (the top three are the training cycle, Kirkpatrick's evaluation ladder and Kolb's learning cycle).'

This opinion neatly summarised the premise on which this research was undertaken – namely, that in general HRD practitioners were not drawing on the wealth of research that supported the discipline to inform their workplace activities. From the literature review a number of such mechanisms and barriers were identified and categorised against Bhaskar's Bases of Action model (see table 2.1) and this research then identified further mechanisms – both barriers and enablers - that didn't appear in the literature.

Learning style questionnaires, and the underpinning learning theory on which they were based, was the focus for this research project. However, the findings from this research were not only relevant to this narrow focus and could be 'exploded out' to help researchers understand more about why certain tools or approaches appeared to be more 'sticky' within professional practice than others. Returning to Vince's quote above – it was interesting to note that he mentioned Kirkpatrick's evaluation ladder as one of the few models that were used. This work was initially published in the late 1950's and captured more fully in a text book published in 1975 (Kirkpatrick, 1975) but it must be asked as to why Kirkpatrick has remained so popular over the last 50 years, when many competing and arguably better models were developed (for example, the researcher finds Brinkerhoff's 6 stage evaluation approach more persuasive and practical than Kirkpatrick, see Brinkerhoff, 1987) and with criticism the approach has attracted from many commentators (for example Alliger and Janak, 1989, Newstrom, 1995, Holton, 1996 a and b, Brinkerhoff and Dressler, 2002, Islam, 2004). Why, as Vince suggested, has Kirkpatrick's approach appeared to retain its position of

pre-eminence, at least in the UK? Was this because of the strength of its 'brand', the lack of awareness of other approaches amongst many practitioners, the way it was passed, almost virus like, from one generation of practitioners to the next or simply the mental effort to replace the approach, with an alternative, was greater than the benefits that such substitution could bring to the practitioner? These were all issues that emerged from this research work and have now been thoroughly described. This section was not intended to be a criticism of Kirkpatrick but was a demonstration of how certain models, theories, tools and approaches had become dominant in the 'market' to the potential detriment of the profession, and practitioners more generally, and Vince's observations about the small number of models of development being used lend weight to this argument.

These findings were therefore relevant to the work of HRD practitioners beyond the narrow confines of learning style questionnaires.

6.3 Conclusions from the research

An important model within this research was Bhaskar's Bases of Action framework and it was identified in the literature review that whilst reasons for the lack of practitioner engagement with theory / research could be mapped against the framework there was one base, namely the conative base that appeared not to have been tapped into by researchers. This conative base refers to drivers of planned and intentional goal orientated behaviour (Dweck (1991, Udran and Maeher ,1995) and was distilled down by Huitt (1999) into

three distinct types of goals; 1) Mastery goals – focussing on developing competence or on the process of learning; 2) Performance goals – focussing on the outcome, winning or attainment; and 3) Social goals based on the performance of the group or the individual fitting into the group. From Huitt's classification of these types of goals it was seen that the research has identified mechanisms it was argued resided within each type. For example, within the thematic map of the research terrain (figure 4.5) the mastery goals was considered as referring to the concepts of 'Mastery... a journey complete' and 'Mastery... a continuous journey'. The attitude that the individual held about their level of 'mastery' impacted their willingness to engage, or otherwise, with the research literature. This was an area ripe for further investigation and it could be that the work of Argyris and Schön (1974) on model 1 and model 2 theories in action would be an ideal framework on which to base such an investigation.

A second area identified within the thematic map (figure 4.5) and aligned with Huitt's (1998) performance orientated goals, was that of results orientation – with some practitioners seeming to have a 'speed and delivery' orientation compared to others who had an 'evidence and delivery' orientation. The differences here were interesting as both types of practitioners were concerned with delivery of results – however, whilst one group could be typified by a 'just good enough' mindset to the tools they employed others were much more concerned that they were using the most appropriate tools to support their professional practice. Ruona and Gilley (2009) offered a model of different types of 'Practitioners in Applied Professions' (see figure

2.3) and, as outlined in the Discussion chapter, this research provided some supporting evidence for the model. However, if there was to become a serious movement towards evidence based HRD, as championed by commentators such as Hamlin (2002, 2007) and Holton (2004) then there will need to be more in-depth research to understand the reasons for differences in approach between these two 'categories' of practitioner going further than the model provided by Ruona and Gilley (2009). Once such a mechanism was understood then it could be the basis on which further work takes place to distil out the associated skills and behaviours which could then inform professional education and training programmes.

The third family of conative goals, as identified by Huitt (1998), were social goals – those associated with belonging to a community or the performance of a group. There was less direct overlap with this type of conative goal and what was identified in the thematic map of the terrain. However, professional identity and professional practice were the 'summarising' labels given to the two categories of enablers / barriers within the map. This focus on the profession of HRD, and practitioners' identification with it, was argued as having demonstrated the attributes of a 'group' that would fit Huitt's definition of a social goal (for example see Argyris and Schön, 1974, Wenger, 1998). However, a more contemporary look at this was the work on networking and social capital (Gubbins and Garavan, 2005, Storberg-Walker and Gubbins, 2007) and the links to professional identity and professional success of HRD practitioners.

The model described in figures 5.1 and 5.2 overlaid the research outputs onto Bhaskar's Bases of Action model and described some of the variables that influenced a practitioner in their approach towards engaging with research and theory in support of their professional practice. This model also made reference to some of the other mechanisms at play which have been described further below.

Having drawn conclusions based on the Bases of Action framework it is now appropriate to look at some other relevant areas that emerged from the research. Looking at the results it was apparent that the MBTI was the preferred learning style questionnaire for a large number of HRD practitioners and that, with Kolb's Learning Style Inventory and Honey and Mumford's Learning Style Questionnaire, particularly in the UK, these three tools dominated the marketplace. Yet as identified by Coffield et al (2004 a and b) the research that supports the assessment of validity and/ or reliability of these three questionnaires did not meet the statistical standards required for a psychometric instrument. However, the questionnaire that did meet the quality criteria set by Coffield et al, the Allinson and Hayes Cognitive Style Indicator, was unknown to the practitioner body. What this does is demonstrate the importance of brand awareness within the practitioner community and the power that 'stronger' brands had in reducing the likelihood of being substituted by 'weaker' brands even where the 'weaker' brand was a technically better or more appropriate product (Hoeffler and Keller, 2003, p 423-426, Barnes et al., 2004, p372). The power of brand awareness should not be underestimated when it comes to considering why

practitioners do, or don't, engage with research evidence that underpins decision making in their professional practice.

As well as the impact that 'brand' had on practitioner choice of tools they used there was also the various forms of 'lock-in' that have been described throughout this research. If 'brand' was about competing for practitioner awareness and winning initial 'trust' then 'lock-in' was more about how the questionnaire moved from being known about to becoming an engrained practice. A number of different forms of 'lock-in' were mentioned – ranging from the economic through to the mechanism of knowledge transition, and on to individual lock-in through development of a 'skill based habit' due to regular use of a particular questionnaire (Murray and Haubl, 2002, 2007).

The intention of the above was not to suggest that the impact of 'brand' or 'lock-in' was an insidious influence on practice – it was merely to raise attention to their role as mechanisms that might prevent HRD practitioners engaging more widely with research. Through uncovering these mechanisms, and helping to explain and understand them, then it provides practitioners the opportunity to decide whether there is a need to take action in support of driving up the standard of their professional practice. The following section is therefore based on the assumption that some actions might be appropriate and so suggestions have been generated to stimulate debate.

6. 4 Suggestions for change

In the previous section a number of conclusions were drawn from the research findings and now it is appropriate to consider some suggestions / recommendations that could be made to improve the situation.

First, the issue of 'brand awareness' concerning various tools, methods and models appeared to have an impact on many practitioners. To help make engagement with information about such tools easier for practitioners then it is suggested that professional bodies – such as the CIPD – could research and publish information on them. For example, a '*Which? Guide...*' type publication on learning style questionnaires could be highly informative and provide practitioners with an independent and unbiased review of the field. Regular guides on a range of topics would be highly beneficial to practitioners. The issue of how to disseminate research findings to practitioners has been debated in the literature (for example, Guest, 2007) but a consumer guide hasn't, as such, been identified.

Second, the promotion of evidence based management to drive up organisational performance (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2007) and more specifically evidence based HRD to enhance the credibility and performance of HRD practitioners (Hamlin, 2007) was a topic of much debate. Whilst there are many challenges to being able to operate within the evidence based framework the approach still has much to commend and, within the UK, is attuned to the political climate (see Briner, 2007 for a discussion). However,

there are still many challenges towards adopting such an approach and one of them is linked to the professional education that practitioners receive.

The third issue that needed consideration was the body of knowledge that was defined as underpinning professional practice and how that was built into the curricula of 'professional education' courses at universities and colleges. Cascio (2007) identified that, whilst the ability to conduct and understand both qualitative and quantitative research was seen by the US body, the Human Resources Certification Institute, as being part of the core knowledge required of HR practitioners, there was no attempt to assess or accredit this within the certification process. Whilst the situation in the UK was different in some respects – with the CIPD having some requirements for practitioners to demonstrate quantitative skills in their professional education - there was still the issue that particular 'brands' of theory, tools or approaches appeared to have seeped into the CIPD's collective consciousness and promulgated throughout their learning materials and resources. Whether the imminent update of the CIPD's professional standards will challenge this situation is yet to be seen but the opportunity is there for the taking!

Fourth, a mechanism towards encouraging greater practitioner engagement with research could be through a more directive requirement in continuing professional development (CPD) activity. For example, the CIPD has a very permissive approach towards the learning that counts towards CPD with the emphasis being on reflective learning and the outcomes that have arisen from such reflection. Whilst the CIPD makes the statement that there should

be a link between theory and practice there seems to be no mechanism in place to encourage this link to be made (see CIPD CPD Guide, 2007, p6). However, if a requirement was made that some evidence of CPD had to demonstrate critical engagement with the research literature then this could drive up engagement, albeit not on a voluntary basis.

6.5 Further research

This is a rich and fertile area for further research and a number of recommendations could be made. However, for the sake of parsimony then these will be kept to the critical minimum.

1. The practitioner decision making model – based on Bhaskar's Bases of Action framework and described above - requires further research. Is it a valid model? If so, is it a tool that provides greater light in determining how decisions, and actions coming from such decisions, actually occur? How fundamental is the conative base to understanding how and why action takes place?
2. What are brand attributes that popular learning style questionnaires, and similar tools, exhibit but that weaker brands don't have? How can valid and reliable questionnaires, that happen to be relatively weaker 'brands', be marketed in away that could raise their profile in the practitioner body?

3. Further research into 'lock-in' is necessary to aid greater understand of the construct, identify its different facets and bring greater clarity about its impact on practitioners.
4. There appears to be some relationship between the three 'mechanisms' identified from the research (mastery, results orientation, and lock-in), the work of Argyris and Schön into type 1 and 2 model behaviours and the model of practitioners in applied professions proposed by Ruona and Gilley (2009). It would be interesting to test these relationships further and see whether a more integrated model could be developed.
5. Further research into the apparent paucity of HRD practitioner's knowledge about the profession's research base is required and if validated then mechanisms to improve knowledge acquisition need to be identified.

In conclusion, this research has demonstrated that a large majority of HRD professionals use lsqs that are sub-optimal. There appears to be limited knowledge about the range of possible lsqs available for use, and even less awareness about the quality of research that underpins the various lsqs. There also appeared to be quite a limited understanding of the breadth of learning theories which, for those people who identify themselves as HRD professionals, is surprising. A number of mechanisms have been identified through this research to explain why this might be the case which has

provided greater understanding and clarity about the choices that HRD practitioners make.

A penultimate point was that drawing upon an 'open system, stratified ontology', by taking an approach influenced by critical realism (see Sayer, 2000, Bhasker, 1998, 2008), allowed the researcher to apply Bhaskar's Model of The Bases of Action to the issue of how and why theory does, or doesn't, inform the decision making process of practitioners. The amended models, figures 5.1 and 5.2, outlined above will provide another useful tool for researchers to help understand and describe this area.

Finally, this research was primarily concerned with HRD practitioner use of learning style questionnaires but the outputs were considered to have a wider application to the field of HRD practice, and the work of practitioners in other disciplines, as well.

Appendix 1- . Personal Refle'x'tions on the Journey

In the literature there appears to be some debate about what it means to be critically reflexive, whether this is the same as being critically reflective, what it means to be a reflective practitioner, how the activities differ and, in some cases, how they can be inter-twinned into a combined practice. For instance, one definition of critical reflexivity is that it 'embraces subjective understandings of reality as a basis for thinking more critically about the impact of our assumptions, actions and values on others (Cunliffe, 2004, p407), whilst being a reflective as a practitioner requires a more objective assessment of past activity in a way to improve future practice (see Schön, 1983). Swan (2008, p389) discusses the difference between the more objective and introspective activity of reflection and compares this against the deeper and potentially more political / power aware review associated with critical reflection. There are also examples of where these 'approaches' are simply seen as a part of the same system (for example, see Hartog, 2002). A review of this literature is not appropriate or necessary here but it is worth noting Sambrook and Stewart (2008, p 371) who suggest that within the professional doctorate model of research the concept of critical reflection needs clarification, for both students and staff alike, as well as having the activity of critical reflection embedded throughout such programmes.

Notwithstanding the debate introduced above the need for a personal review and critique of the journey undertaken is required. The following passage will be a short, personal account of this recent journey I have made as I work towards the goal of completing this thesis. It will combine both elements of reflection and reflexivity and, as such, it might not meet the tenets associated with either practice. Whilst this will mean some fairly critical self-commentary this account is not intended to be either some form of therapeutic 'confessional' (Swan, 2008, p387) or an act of academic self-flagellation. Will this benefit the researcher or the reader most? The answer, I trust, will be both. But it is worth re-emphasising that the narrative is a mixture of reflection and reflexivity, a critical account and a personal critique.

To begin this account it is worth initially exploring my personal motivation for embarking on a Doctoral programme of this nature. As an experienced HRD practitioner, professionally and academically well qualified, there appeared little need to embark on a further extended period of study. However, I personally felt dissatisfied that I could not see an obvious, rigorous and relevant next step in my professional development. When I found the DSocSci programme at Leicester I was delighted to have found a mechanism that I believed would help me satiate this dissatisfaction. However, there was also an aspect of ego and the ability to 'prove' myself worthy of the title 'Dr' was also a factor in my decision to embark on the study. What I found during the initial part of the programme was surprising and somewhat shocking for me. Although I considered myself well qualified, with a strong knowledge base and a lot of practitioner experience, the early recognition that I knew less about my discipline than I had previously supposed was a jolt to my professional self-identity. This recognition ultimately underpins much of my thesis research. Now, the question has to be asked as to whether this self-realisation has in anyway skewed my approach and interpretation of data that I have collected. It would be naïve to argue otherwise. No matter how much one attempts to be rigorous in their work the personal perceptual filters, both conscious and sub-conscious will always flavour the outcome with personal seasoning. Give two chefs a list of ingredients and they are likely to produce very different offerings to the table of Diners. However, this doesn't mean that no rigour can be applied and throughout my research I have attempted to draw upon good methodological practice. This did cause some philosophical issues and internal debates, which will be explained below.

During my initial studies I was introduced to the most considered approach towards philosophy that I have encountered so far in my education. As I thought about the philosophy, and my own take on epistemology and ontology, I became aware of a personal un-easiness with the two more dominant paradigms, namely an empiricist based approach, particularly with a positivist grounding and also the more constructivist approach, with a particular reference to the postmodernist emphasis on discourse and a

refutation of an external reality. However, the critical realist stance seemed to meet my own perspective at this time. The appreciation that there are underlying social mechanisms that are unobservable, so not measurable made sense, but that these mechanisms positively influenced an external reality that I was both a part of, but separate from, also spoke to me. Having decided upon a critical realist inspired approach I then felt that my research design should reflect this philosophical decision. This was a reason why I chose a triangulated approach in an attempt to have alternative perspectives on my research questions that could be used to support, or refute, the underlying generative mechanisms I thought were there. However, this left me with a personal paradox – how do you actually design research that is true to a critical realist stance? After all, both the positivist and constructivist philosophies had been rejected and as such shouldn't the aligned research methods, from both an experimental 'quantitative' approach as well as a constructivist qualitative approach be rejected as well? If so, then what next? To be pragmatic I decided that the mixed method triangulated design made sense – drawing on both qualitative and quantitative techniques - but I do still harbour the occasional 'philosophical' issue as to whether this can be really justified. Another positive reason for choosing a triangulated mixed method approach was to allow me to practice my research skills in both qualitative and quantitative methods and thus enhance the learning I have been able to extract from the programme. There were benefits and draw backs to this as will be described below.

Although I used a qualitative approach towards the thesis component of my Master's degree it wasn't until this piece of work that I was able to really understand the discipline required for qualitative analysis. I use the term discipline purposefully here – both in terms of the rigour required for, and the techniques that underpin, the analysis of data I collected. This was a positive learning experience for me and one that has taken me forward from my Master's level study. However, throughout the analysis I was constantly asking myself how much my own expectations of the outputs were influencing my interpretations of the emerging themes. Were my mental filters letting me see certain themes in the data but not others? As mentioned

previously, I have to say that they did. However, for my own sense of professionalism I tried to challenge myself throughout the analysis stage. In this sense I believe that my own personal values were, in one sense, a basis on which I could build rigour. However, this was also a double edged sword – knowing when the data I had was sufficient for my needs and that the analysis was sufficient for answering the questions set. At times there was a need for parsimony in my approach in order to ensure that an end product was delivered – however, this need for parsimony was also, at times, discordant with the desire for professionalism. This was an internal debate which, if honest, was never truly resolved.

The second stream of the study was by means of an on-line survey and the associated quantitative analysis that followed. This was more problematic for me as I have never considered myself to be strong in quantitative analysis and yet the opportunity to at least test myself in this way was appealing. However, during the development of my survey I was regularly hit with doubts, both methodological and philosophical. In terms of the former then I was questioning the quality of the items that I developed for the survey, the number of them and ultimately the overall rigour of the survey itself. For the latter, I was constantly concerned that a quantitative study was, in many ways, counter to the epistemology that could be stated as being aligned with a critical realist position. Through my background reading I did find a number of references to how a quantitative approach could be aligned with a critical realist perspective but that the analysis could only be sensibly made through the use of non-parametric statistics. This though was counter intuitive as a form of analysis due to the large data sets that I had collected and the associated assumption of normality of the data due to size could allow for the use of more powerful parametric statistics. So the question I had to struggle with was one plumping for philosophical ‘purity’ and consistency or a more pragmatic use of a broader range of more powerful statistical tools. Eventually, I decided on philosophical consistency but this still was only one issue resolved. I have to admit that at times I allowed myself to lose sight of the proverbial forest for the attention of a particular tree. Due to a lack of personal confidence in the use of quantitative

techniques I kept finding myself questioning what and why I was considering various analytical tools. In fact, reflecting back I became a victim of the value of professionalism that I think served me well during the qualitative analysis. I was so determined to be as 'professional' as I could that this became a barrier to progress and, if I am honest, an excuse for putting the thesis aside for a number of months whilst I did over more 'enjoyable' things. It wasn't until I sought help from my Supervisor that I was able to remove much of the barrier although some of it still remains in my mind to this day.

The final stages of writing up the thesis was a comparative joy as an end was in sight and as I became increasingly of the view that I had something important to say about my research questions (for quite a while I did think I was in danger of '*stating the bleeding obvious*' which was quite demotivating). However, the physical constraints of word count for the thesis meant that I could not explore the data I had in totality and at times the requirement to apply a literary version of Occam's Razor felt hugely constraining and, again, left me with concerns that I had not done full justice to the topic of my research.

At a higher level of abstraction there was also a philosophical issue that did, and still does, cause me some concern. Adopting a critical realist approach should mean that the research is looking at, amongst other things, power based relationships, political structures and ultimately providing the kind of challenge to the status quo that would allow for increasing human emancipation (for instance, see Bhaskar, 2008). However, to paraphrase Swan (2008, p391) 'How critical is critical'? Swan voices her concerns about how 'critical' practitioners and academics actually are in their critical reflection, in other words, how much they are calling into question power relationships and generally held social assumptions in their reflection. I must also ask myself the same question – with my critical realist stance - how 'critical' can I honestly say I have been in my analysis? Whilst many authors do talk about how critical realism is intended to identify and explain generative mechanisms, structures, stratified ontology and emerging themes

(for instance see Reed, 2005) the emphasis on the 'critical' nature of critical realism seems less well developed. I, too, feel that I am guilty of this neglect.

Ultimately, this experience has been one that has had many 'emotions' associated with it – frustration, disappointment, annoyance, irritation, ambivalence, happiness, surprise, contentment, fascination and pleasure to name but a few from across the spectrum. The real test though is whether I think that I have developed myself professionally and in doing so become a better practitioner for the investment of time and effort into this doctoral process. Ultimately, and on reflection, the answer is a wholehearted 'yes'. Many lessons have been learned and much knowledge acquired but, for me, I have to now ask myself the question.... 'is the journey complete? My answer is, still, a wholehearted 'no'.

Appendix 2 – Interview Schedule

The interview schedule was prepared in Microsoft Powerpoint and replicated below.

Introduce self, explain the purpose of the research and the process that will take place and how the data will be used.

The interview should take up to 1 hour.

Encourage the participant to talk freely – confidentiality and anonymity is assured.

Explain the 'ethics' of the interview – and particularly that they can 'step out' of the process at any time if they wish.

Thank them for their willingness to participate in the interview.

Section 1. Biographic Data:

1.1 Job Title: (please complete)

1.2 Job level: Please indicate which of the following most closely corresponds to your role within the organisation.

- a) Director: b) Senior Executive / Group Role; Top executive with overall responsibility but without board membership or equivalent
- c) Manager: Individual with responsibility for an activity within the overall function – maybe a very senior specialist or a broad generalist. Makes a significant contribution to policy formation.
- d) Senior Officer: Individual in senior position with strong professional role – may have supervisory responsibilities for departmental work and / or manage a small team.
- e) Officer: An experienced officer with first level of professional responsibility but with more than two years experience as an officer
- f) Administrator/ Assistant: A less experienced officer with under two years experience as an officer
- g) In-House Consultant
- h) Independent Consultant
- i) Teacher/ Lecturer

1.3 HRD Specialism: Do you see yourself as a specialist in HR 'Development'

1.3.1 Yes 1.3.2 No

1.4 Current Education level:

- a) Secondary School
- b) Further Education/ Vocational Certificate or Diploma
- c) Higher Education / Vocational Certificate or Diploma
- d) Degree
- e) Postgraduate Qualification
- f) Master's Degree
- g) Doctorate

1.5 Membership of relevant professional organisations:**1.6 Industry Sector:**

- | | |
|---|--|
| a) Agriculture, forestry and fishing | Finance, Insurance, Real Estate |
| b) Mining and Extraction | Consultancy Services |
| c) Manufacturing | IT Industry |
| d) Electricity, Gas and Waters Supply | Public Administration – Central government |
| e) Construction | Public Administration – Local Government |
| f) Wholesale and Retail | Defence (Navy, Army, Air Force) |
| g) Hotels and Restaurants | Education – Further and Higher (16+) |
| h) Transport, Storage and Communication | Education – Infant, primary and Secondary (under 16) |
| i) Other private Sector Services | Voluntary and Not for Profit Sector |
| | Health and Social Care |

1.7 Size of Organisation: Approximate Number of People Employed By Your Organisation

- | | | | | |
|------------------|------------------|--------------------|----------------|----------|
| a) 1-999 | b) 10 – 49 | c) 50-99 | d) 100-499 | e) 500 – |
| f) 1,000 – 4,999 | g) 5,000 – 9,999 | h) 10,000 – 19,999 | i) over 20,000 | |

1.8 Geographic Responsibility: Which area(s) are you responsible for/ have influence on HR Development

Single Country.....

Europe (excluding Central and Eastern Europe)	Central and Eastern Europe	
Middle East Africa North America	Central and South America	Asia / Pacific

Part 2. Learning Styles

Do you currently, or have you ever, used a Learning Style Questionnaire (LSQ) in your professional work?

Yes / No

If yes, which one do you use?

What specific characteristics does this LSQ have that led you to chose it?

What benefits does the use of this LSQ bring to the people you are working with? And to you personally / professionally?

What would it take to encourage you to look at using a different LSQ?

If no, have you consciously decided not to use LSQ's in your work?

If yes, then why?

If no, what would encourage you to use an LSQ to support your professional practice?

What characteristics would you look for in an LSQ in order to chose it for use?

Part 3a. Learning Theories

The following section looks specifically at your use of, and views about Learning Theory

Do you currently, or have you ever, used a particular Learning Theory, of theories, in your professional work?

Yes / No

If yes, which ones have you used?

What specific characteristics does the theory / theories have that led you to chose it?

What would encourage you to make more use of learning theory more to support your professional practice?

What barriers are there that stop you using learning theory more regularly to support your professional practice?

Thank you.

If no, go directly to next section 3b.

Part 3b. Learning Theories

The following section looks specifically at why you don't use Learning Theory in your professional practice

What specific characteristics does learning theory / theories have that discourage you from using it / them in your professional practice?

What would encourage you to make more use of learning theory to support your professional practice?

What barriers are there that stop you using learning theory more regularly to support your professional practice?

Thank you.

Appendix 3 – Codes generated through data analysis

The table below shows the codes that were identified through the initial data analysis phase and how they align against the higher level codes identified previously.

Higher Code	level	Underpinning codes	Code Definition	Code Reference
Theory Evidence	/	Scepticism	Doesn't accept on 'evidence' on face value.	TE-S
		Personal Experience	Decisions on use guided by prior personal experience.	TE - PE
		Face Validity	Face validity a key requirement for tool acceptance.	TE -FC
		Choice Informed by Research	Decisions on use guided by research / evidence.	TE-CIR
		Choice Informed by Theory	Decision on Use Guided by Theory	TE-CIT
		Dislike of theory	Anti-theoretical / science approach preferred	TE-AT
		Evidence Based Practice	Required evidence to support practice	TE-EB
Learner Benefit		Pragmatic Approach	Applicable back to workplace	LB-P
		Easy to Use	Easy for learners to use	LB-EU
		Inclusivity	Doesn't exclude or label an individual learner.	LB-I
		Connection back to Others	Provides insights about the behaviour of	LB-CO

		others	
	Understands self	Provides insights about 'self' to users	LB-US
	Learner Differences	Users have different learning styles so referencing in design and delivery is necessary	LB-D
Brand Influence	Brand Strength	The strength of the Brand has persuaded users of its value	BI-BI
	Brand Advocate	Influential 'other' has encouraged use of a particular tool	BI-BA
	Brand Fatigue	Over use leading to over familiarity / lack of differentiation in the market	BI-BF
	Accreditation	Fees to gain and maintain accreditation	BI-A
Ease of Use	Easy for Learner	Easy or simple for learners to understand and use	EU-EL
	Easy for Trainer	Easy for Trainers to administer	EU-ET
	Pragmatic	Has practical application for trainer.	EU-P
	Too scientific	Terminology / concepts in tool is a barrier for learners	EU-TSC
	Too Simplistic	Underpinning model is overly simplistic to be meaningful	EU-TSI
Cost / Benefit	No Cost	Free to use	CB-NC
	Connection back to workplace	Direct connection	CB-CBW

		back to workplace activity demonstrated	
	Worthwhile Results	Benefits, intrinsic or extrinsic, are perceived.	CB-W
	Too Cheap	Suggests low quality to clients	CB-TC
	Too Expensive	Too expensive for clients	CB-TE
	Automated Feedback	Cost Effective Computer Generated reports	CB-F
External Requirement	Customer Required	Customer requires the use of the tool	ER-CR
Professional Identity and Practice	Enhances Professional Practice	Considered important for professionalism and practice	PIP-EPP
	Used in Learning Design	Used to support the design of learning interventions	PIP - LD
	Supports Practitioner Reflexivity	Supported reflexivity in practitioner to improve their professional practice	PIP-SPR
	Tacit Awareness	Uses theories / models tacitly in support of practice	PIP-TA
	Explicit Awareness	Use of models and theories explicitly to support practice	PIP-EA
	Connectivity with Clients	Used to help analyse why initial approaches may not be working for clients / trainees	PIP-CC
	Limitation of Model /	No model /	PIP-LM

	Theory	theory covers all possibilities so can restrict a 'trainer' if overly used	
	Professional 'Mastery'	Have moved into 'Mastery' stage of practice and so beyond the use of theory / models.	PIP-PM
	Limited Background Knowledge	Uses tool without full understanding of it or it's research base.	PIP-LBK
	Aligned with Other Practice	Approaches are aligned with other L&D type activity thus supporting use and reducing 'dissonance'	PIP-AOP
Miscellaneous	Ritual / Habit	Tool used because of familiarity and experience	M-RH
	Lock-In from Education	Initial exposure to tool during professional development has detracted from alternatives being considered	M-LIEd
	Lock-In from Personal Investment	Have emotionally or financially committed to a particular tool or approach which, in effect, locks out competitors	M-PI
	Viral Lock-In	Seen as a key component of 'Train the Trainer' training	M-VL

	Lock In – from cognitive ease	Have grown to know the tool through use so would not question it's appropriateness anymore	M- LIE
	Personal Frame – Career Stage	Impact as to whether such a tool is considered appropriate / inappropriate at this time in career development.	M-PFC
	Personal Frame – perceived usefulness	Considered value adding or otherwise	M-PFV
	Overwhelmed by Quantity of Research	Don't refer to research / literature due to volume of work being published and limited personal resources	M - OQR

Appendix 4 – Screen shot of opening statement for the survey

Many thanks for agreeing to participate in this survey. The survey is designed to collect data about how Human Resource Development practitioners use theory to support their professional practice with a particular emphasis on theory about learning styles. The research is being undertaken as part requirement for the degree of Doctor in Social Science in Human Resource Development from Leicester University, where I am currently a part time student.

The information collected will be used solely for the purpose of this research study and for no other purposes. All data collected will be held confidentially and in line with the UK Data Protection legislation. Once the research programme has been completed and then all data will be securely erased.

It is my intention to publish the results of this research on the internet and you have the option of being notified, by eMail, when this has taken place. Please indicate in the box below if you would like to receive access to the final report. The survey should take between 10 – 20 minutes to complete and I'd like to thank you in advance for your help.

Richard

Appendix 5 Survey Participants role descriptions

Survey respondents were asked to describe their job role against a pre-defined list (based on the CIPD's membership survey). The breakdown of respondent's job roles is below.

Role Description	Percentage Respondents	Total Number Respondents
Director: Top executive with overall responsibility for own function with Board membership or equivalent, including MD, CEO, Chairman and DG	13.1%	29
Senior Executive / Group Role; Top executive with overall responsibility but without board membership or equivalent	26.2%	58
Manager: Individual with responsibility for an activity within the overall function – maybe a very senior specialist or a broad generalist. Makes a significant contribution to policy formation.	22.2%	49
Senior Officer: Individual in senior position with strong professional role – may have supervisory responsibilities for departmental work and / or manage a small team.	7.2%	16
Officer: An experienced officer with first level of professional responsibility but with more than two years experience as an officer	1.4%	3
Administrator/ Assistant: A less experienced officer with under two years experience as an officer	0.9%	2
In-House Consultant	3.6%	8
Independent Consultant	22.7%	48
Teacher/ Lecturer	3.6%	8

Appendix 6 – Survey participants specialism

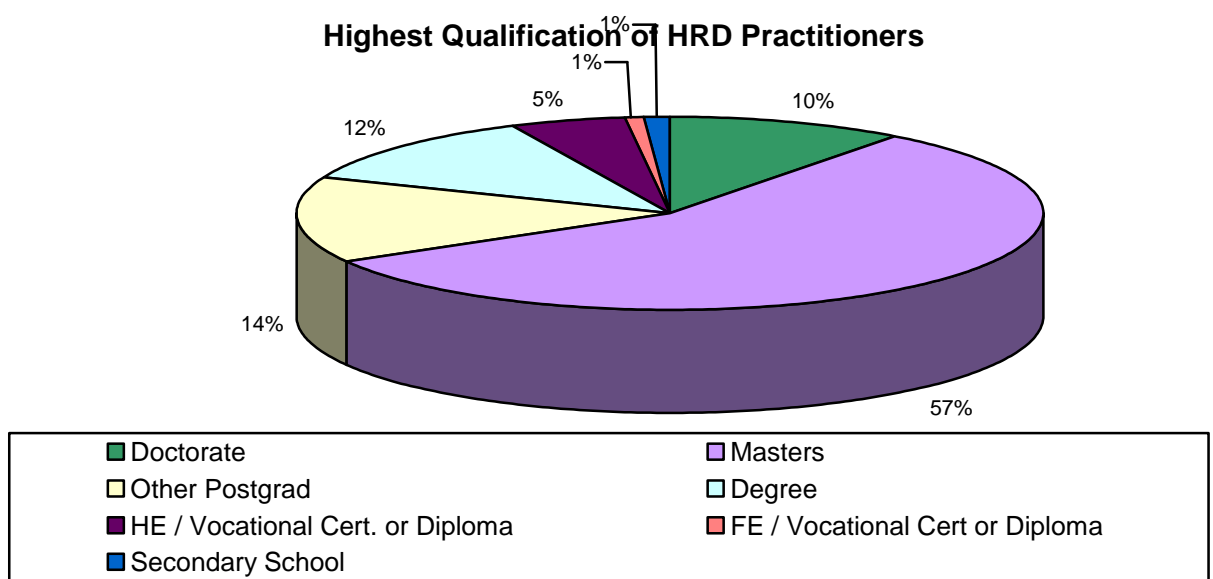
The participants were asked to identify if they considered themselves to be HRD specialists and 77% replied positively with 23% replying in the negative. Within the group who replied positively to the question 38% went on to describe themselves as organisational development specialists, 19% described themselves as Management Development specialists and 14% described themselves as learning / training designers. The rest were split across a number of L&D practices as taken from the CIPD membership survey.

Of the 23% who did not see themselves as HRD specialists the following identification of specialisation was recorded.

Specialism	Response Percent	Response Count
Organisational Development Practitioner	8.2%	4
Talent Management Practitioner	8.2%	4
Training and Development Practitioner	18.4%	9
Business / Occupational / Organisational Psychologist	2%	1
Lecturer / Teacher	12.2%	6
Human Resource Generalist	10.2%	5
Consultant	12.2%	6
Career Counsellor	2%	1
Other	26.5%	13

Appendix 7 – Highest qualification of survey participants

The survey participants were asked to identify the highest educational qualification they had achieved, and the categorisation was again based on the CIPD's membership survey. The results show that almost 60% of HRD practitioners have a Masters degree and in total 81% have some form of postgraduate level qualification.



Appendix 8 – Membership or professional associations

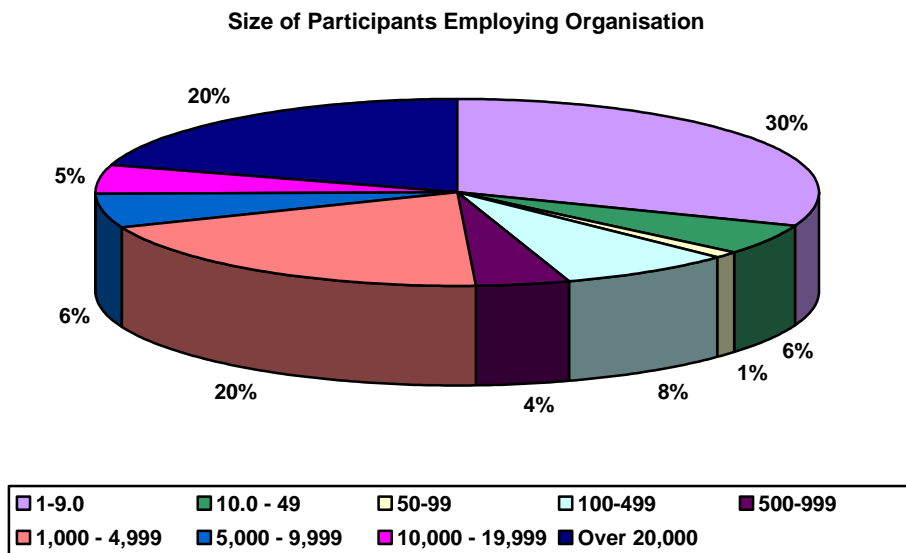
The survey asked participants to respond about membership of professional associations, institutes, societies and similar bodies. This list was based initially on the CIPD membership categorisation but was augmented by other professional associations that the researcher was aware of. Over 36% of participants belonged to the American Society of Training and Development (ASTD) whilst just in excess of 30% belonged to the CIPD and almost 20% belonged to the American Society for Human Resource Management. It is worth remembering here that participants could have multiple memberships of different professional associations.

Membership of Professional Association	Percentage Respondents	Total Number Respondents
Academy of Human Resource Development	2.4%	4
American Society for Human Resource Management	18.8%	32
American Society for Training and Development	35.3%	60
Association of Business Psychologists	1.8%	3
Australian Human Resources Institute	1.8%	3
British Psychological Society	12.9%	22
Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development	30.6%	52
Chartered Management Institute	4.7%	8
Higher Education Academy	1.8%	3
Institute of Directors	7.6%	13
Institute of People Management (South Africa)	2.9%	5
Institute of Training and Occupational Learning	3.5%	6
Other	42.9%	73

52 respondents also indicated that they did not belong to a professional association but these were removed from the above calculations.

Appendix 9 – Size of employing organisation

A question was asked about the size of the organisation that the survey participant worked in and the classification was based on the CIPD membership survey guidelines. It was interesting to note that whilst 31% of HRD professionals worked in small organisations, with less than 9 employees, over 51% worked in organisations with more than 1000 employees and 20% of the total actually worked for organisations with more than 20,000 employees.



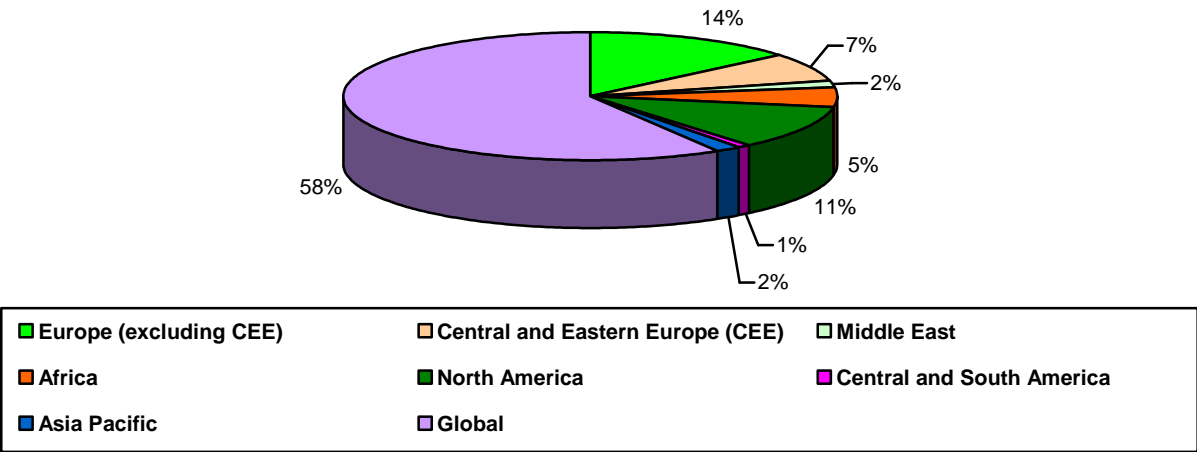
Appendix 10 Geographic responsibility for survey participants

The geographic responsibility of the survey participant within their job was inquired into. 43.9% (97 respondents) said they had responsibility / worked exclusively within a single country whilst 56.1% (124) stated that they had responsibility / worked regionally or globally. This is described below.

Country of HRD responsibility / Influence (single country only)	Percentage of Respondents	Number of Respondents
Australia	3.2%	3
Canada	1.1%	1
Colombia	2.1%	2
Czech Republic	2.1%	2
Denmark	1.0%	1
France	1.0%	1
Honduras	1.0%	1
India	3.1%	3
Ireland	3.1%	3
Italy	1.0%	1
New Zealand	1.0%	1
Romania	3.1%	3
Russia	1.1%	1
Saudi Arabia	2.1%	2
Singapore	2.1%	2
Slovakia	1.0%	1
South Africa	8.2%	8
Switzerland	1.1%	1
United Kingdom	32.0%	31
United States	28.9%	28

However, for those who identified a regional responsibility then the following regions were identified.

Regional Representation of Survey Participants



Appendix 11 – Sector that survey participants worked in

Survey participants were asked about the industry sector that they worked in and the following results were obtained. In summary, 36% of the participants worked in consultancy services, which was by far the largest sector. Other notable sectors included FMCG and Higher Education which both had about 10% of the respondents and the IT industries which had over 8% of participants employed within it.

Industry Sector	Response percent	Response Count
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	0%	0
Finance, Insurance, Real Estate	5.1%	11
Mining and Extraction	1.4%	3
Consultancy Services	35.5%	77
Fast Moving Consumer Goods	10.1%	22
IT Industry	8.3%	18
Electricity, Gas and Waters Supply	0.5%	1
Public Administration – Central Government	0.5%	1
Public Administration – Local Government	1.4%	3
Education – Further and Higher (16+)	10.6%	23
Education – Infant, Primary and Secondary (under 16)	1.4%	3
Construction	0%	0
Manufacturing	4.6%	10
Transport, Storage and Communication	0.9 %	2
Wholesale and Retail	2.8%	6
Hotels and Restaurants 0.9%	0.9%	2
Health and Social Care	3.7%	8
Other private Sector Services	7.8%	17
Defence (Navy, Army, Air Force)	1.4%	3
Voluntary and Not for Profit Sector	3.2%	7

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