

HRD theory, real or imagined?

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This is a response to the *HRDI* editorial written by Gary N. McLean (1998) entitled 'HRD: a three-legged stool, an octopus, or a centipede?'

Gary's university office is about fifteen long strides from mine. We have worked together for the advancement of HRD for the past twenty years. We are good partners. And, we have had fun with our agreements and disagreements over the years. In his editorial he challenged my work on the theoretical foundations of the discipline of HRD. He concludes his piece with a plea for 'continued conceptualization of HRD'. I totally agree with his conclusion.

My goal in writing this reaction is just that – a continuation of the theory dialogue and development. This is not a righteous defence of my work or an attack on McLean. It is an opportunity to further explain and explore. McLean's editorial is very useful in highlighting a number of important points in the realm of HRD theory. I have selected only a few to spur the dialogue.

Theory deficit

'A theory simply explains what a phenomenon is and how it works' (Torraco 1997: 115), while 'a discipline is a body of knowledge with its own organizing concepts, codified knowledge, epistemological approach, under-girding theories, particular methodologies, and technical jargon' (Passmore 1997: 201). The idea that HRD is a discipline that draws upon many theories is widely held. My thesis is that this overly generous idea has served as fool's gold to the profession. In the attempt to be inclusive of so many theories – staking its claim so broadly – it has come up with no theory.

The three-legged stool does not equal HRD

My three-legged stool is a visual portrayal of the components of the *theoretical foundation* of HRD (see Swanson 1992; Ruona and Swanson 1998). I contend that the discipline of HRD is based on psychological, economic and systems theories and their unique integration in the HRD context. My HRD 'theory stool' is not a picture or conceptualization of HRD as implied in the editorial. When someone asks me what HRD is, I respond by presenting a *HRD definition* and noting the core *HRD process*.

Definition HRD is 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.

Process The process of HRD is made up of five core phases including: analyse, propose, create, implement and assess.

By itself, the three-legged stool has little value. It is only an icon of the foundational theories of HRD.

Unifying vs. rival theories

I was misquoted in the editorial when McLean indicated that I was interested in a unifying theory of HRD. Others have at times called for a unifying theory (see Jacobs 1989); I never have. What I have called for are fully developed rival theories that can inform and challenge the profession.

Two central theory issues facing HRD scholars

McLean's editorial provides an entrée to what I believe to be the two central issues facing the HRD profession as it relates to theory. They are: (1) the unacceptability of ill-defined HRD theory and (2) the role of core vs. supporting HRD theories

The unacceptability of ill-defined HRD theory

I find the following logic unacceptable: 'We do not know for sure what the HRD theory is, or should be, and therefore we accept nothing until some later time.' To me this is a powerless and impotent position. Surely the HRD theory-building journey will continue as long as the profession exists and it will always be a 'work in progress'. This fact does not absolve responsible scholars from going on the journey and from taking definite stands along the way. I have no qualms about reporting and standing by my best response to the theory question – the three-legged stool resting on that ethics rug – and I will have no qualms about revising it based on continuing theory-building research.

For those holding back out of a concern about the linkage between theory and practice, most theory-building research methods require the theory to stand up to the test of practice (see Cohen 1991; Dubin 1983). Those familiar with theory-building research methods know that the worst response is to avoid putting a 'theory stake' in the ground and not following through with the work of purposeful theory building. Not knowing should be a call to action, not inaction.

The role of core vs. supporting HRD theories

I find the following logic unacceptable: 'HRD is a complex field of practice that draws upon any theory as needed to help in doing its work.'

Well-structured HRD theory is powerful and practical in doing the primary work of the profession. Those that espouse 'centipede' or 'smorgasbord' HRD theory invariably discover they have no HRD theory.

I have run up and down the mental tracks of a number of the outlying smorgasbord theories in my journey before embracing psychological, economic and systems theories and their unique integration in the HRD context. At this point in time I have determined that HRD's unique integration of these core theories constitutes the theoretical foundation of the discipline of HRD.

In my theory-building journey I have also come to realize that HRD is as much a discipline as many of the disciplines we often defer to. For example, communication theory is its own blend of psychological and systems theories. Sociology, like HRD, could be seen as a unique blend of psychological, economic and systems theories for a unique purpose quite different from HRD's purpose. If HRD is a process for developing and/or unleashing human expertise through organization development and personnel training, and development for the purpose of improving performance at the organization, work process and individual/group levels, it will call upon and integrate those theories in ways unfamiliar to sociologists. Would I ever look to sociology for guidance and insight? Sure I would. I would also recommend to sociology that they look to HRD for similar guidance and insight.

Thus, I am perfectly willing to call upon any supporting theories that prove helpful for a particular situation or a specific thread of work. This generosity is no different than people from the medical schools calling upon adult learning theory for particular situations (while never thinking that adult learning theory is a core theory of medicine). Calling upon supporting theories is not the same as having a 'theory centipede' or a 'theory smorgasbord'. Having a well-defined the core theory of HRD – such as the three-legged stool or other well-developed alternatives – is practical and powerful.

Next steps

It is important to continue the theory-building discussions and the actual theory-building research in the HRD profession. We are on the precipice of deep understandings. While the theory-building research needs to go forward, this essay must end. Pursuit of the theory-building journey is not a win-lose situation. The HRD profession loses only if debate and serious inquiry do not continue and if the HRD profession only comes up with one fully developed theory.

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