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Theory and other irrelevant matters

Richard A. Swanson
University of Minnesota

The first title of this essay was 'The theory and theory-building challenge in HRD'. Not thinking you would read it, I changed it to include *theory* and *irrelevant* in order to get you to this point.

The conclusion to this essay is that the HRD profession is in need of building and articulating its core theories (not just one); that the HRD profession needs to engage in theory-building research (this scholarly process is not the same as soap-box oratory); and that HRDI can grasp the leadership opportunity of becoming the theory-building journal of the HRD profession.

The HRD profession is at a crucial point in its development, and *HRDI* is at a crucial point in its development. The HRD profession is in need of high-level scholarship and dialogue as to its essence. It is my belief that a journal primarily dedicated to this HRD leadership challenge is needed *now* and that such a journal could truly help the profession mature in ways that traditional research journals cannot.

HRDI is still defining itself and could capture the moment by taking on this theory-advancement role. My assessment is that (1) no existing HRD journal sees its mission as one of theory building or is fully comfortable with HRD theory scholarship, and (2) that an HRD theory-building journal is needed. There is mounting scholarship and mounting demand for a first-rate outlet for the HRD research and dialogue around theory building. I shall not run down the names of all the HRD and HRD-related journals to convince you that such a forum does not exist (I can do this off-line with any of you interested in this discussion). While we have a reasonable number of high-quality scholarly publications in HRD, only *HRDI* is positioned to take on this theory-advancement role. The reason for this has to do with the original inception of *HRDI*, its international perspective that encourages greater tolerance for exchange and for unearthing meaning, and with the fact that *HRDI* is presently the most agile HRD journal. *HRDI* could pull off this leadership challenge and become the scholarly theory forum for the profession. In doing so *HRDI* would distinguish both itself and the profession.

Is HRD theory such a big deal?

Here are a few organizing thoughts about theory and *HRDI*'s potential role in advancing the theory of the HRD discipline. These basic ideas are important to highlight because there are those in HRD that do not believe the theory-building struggle is essential to the HRD profession. I speculate that their view is that HRD needs to have an ethical intent and then needs to draw upon as many theories as required in pursuit of its good work.

Importance of theory building

Theory is relatively more important to a discipline that is emerging and growing. Sound theory is not pontificating or forcefully marketing ideas. Rather, theory in an applied field is required to be both thoughtful and reflective as well as practical and successful in application. Rhetoric that negates theory, or the idea that theory is disconnected from practice, is an artefact of non-theoretical thinking. At this point in the history of the HRD profession I believe that theory building is the single most significant means of advancing the discipline and profession.

Definition of theory

The following two definitions of theory from HRD scholars capture the essence of theory and the theory challenge facing our profession:

- '*A theory simply explains what a phenomenon is and how it works*' (Torraco 1997: 115). Torraco's definition poses a challenge to answer the following question: what is HRD and how does it work?
- '*Theory building is the process or recurring cycle by which coherent descriptions, explanations, and representations of observed or experienced phenomena are generated, verified, and refined*' (Lynham 2000). Lynham's definition poses a challenge to answer the following question: what commitments must individuals, the HRD profession, and its infrastructure make in order to establish and sustain theory-building research in the HRD profession?

Theory-building research

The arena of theory-building research can be thought of as a never-ending journey for any discipline. Yet, it is reasonable to assume that there are points in the maturation of a field of study that cause it to press theory-building research to the front, middle, or back of the line. I contend that the demand for HRD theory is moving up in the queue and that our present available theory has taken

us about as far as we can go. What we do and purport to do is too important for us to wallow in atheoretical explanations.

Recognizing the theory-building journey as scholarship

When a scholar takes a serious look at the theory-building research journey, it is quite sobering. Fortunately, we HRD scholars will take this journey, and its overview is captured in 'Theory building in the HRD profession' (Lynham 2000a) and in theory-practice struggles such as *Systems Theory Applied to Human Resource Development* (Gradous 1989). The serious methodology, as articulated by Reynolds (1971), Dubin (1978), and Cohen (1991), is daunting. Even the comparatively simple theory-building tools and methods put forward represent a challenge (e.g. Patterson 1986; Strauss and Corbin 1998). HRD needs a journal that allows, respects, and encourages a full continuum of theory engagement. For example, seemingly elementary investigations into definitions and documenting the range of thought within a realm are fundamentally important theory-building stepping-stones. HRD examples include 'Operational definitions of expertise and competence' (Herling 2000) and 'Commonly held theories of human resource development' (Weinberger 1998). An example on the philosophical side of theory building is 'Core beliefs underlying the profession of human resource development' (Ruona 1999), a study that investigates the thought and value systems that permeate the discipline of HRD. Other writings, such as 'Theoretical assumptions underlying the performance paradigm of human resource development' (Holton in press), push to articulate the underlying assumptions related to one of the major schools of thought in HRD.

Some recent examples of straightforward theory-building efforts on the part of HRD scholars include 'A theory of intellectual capital' (Harris 2000), 'A theory of knowledge management' (Torraco 2000), and 'A theory of responsible leadership for performance' (Lynham 2000b). Each one of these cited pieces deserves to be celebrated, published in a forum where there is opportunity for additional reflection in an effort to advance the profession. The reality is that most theory-building research has received rough treatment from journals and reviewers and an uncomfortable journey in getting published. This is primarily because of the lack of commitment from any existing journal to take on the challenges of theory-building research. Theory building is not a small task and should not be a sideline or periodic feature issue of a journal. Theory-building research is big enough and important enough to be at the *centre* of the mission of a HRD journal!

Conclusion

The conclusion to this essay is that the HRD profession is in need of building and articulating its core theories (not just one); that the HRD profession needs to engage in theory-building research (this scholarly process is not the same as soap-box oratory); and that *HRDI* can grasp the leadership opportunity of becoming the theory-building journal of the HRD profession.

Address for correspondence

Richard A. Swanson
Professor of Human Resource Development
University of Minnesota
USA

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