

• PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLES •

## Human resource development and its underlying theory

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**Abstract:** This article asserts the importance of clearly specifying the underlying theory of HRD, and challenges those who do not see this as essential to the profession. The central argument is that HRD must continue to mature as a discipline and that the integration of selected psychological, economic and systems theories serve as the unique theoretical foundation of HRD.

**Keywords:** HRD theory, theory building, discipline of HRD

There is nothing so practical as good theory.  
(Kurt Lewin)

Kurt Lewin, the famous early organization development innovator and scholar, presented a profound explanation of theory apart from popular perceptions. He noted the practical utility of good theory. This is in contrast to commonly held thoughts of theory being 'half-baked' ideas disconnected from the 'real world'. A good theory is something that is thorough and that has been tested both intellectually and in practice. Lewin helps us not to misuse the word theory.

It is my view that the HRD profession needs to honor Lewin's vision by continuing to develop its core theories and to understand that theory building is a scholarly process, not simply soap-box oratory. There are those in HRD that do not believe that having HRD theory or clearly specifying the underlying theory of HRD is essential to the profession (McLean 1998). An interpretation of this minimal view of theory is that the profession needs to have an ethical intent and to draw situationally upon as many theories as required in pursuit of its work. Here are a few organizing thoughts about theory:

### The importance of theory building

Theory is particularly important to a discipline such as HRD that is emerging and growing. Sound theory is not pontificating or forcefully marketing the latest

fad. Rather, theory in an applied discipline such as HRD is required to be both scholarly and successful in practice, and thus can be the basis for significant advancement. Rhetoric that negates theory, or the promotion of the idea that theory is disconnected from practice, is an artifact of atheoretical thinking. The following two definitions of theory from HRD scholars capture the essence of theory and the challenge it presents to the profession:

A theory simply explains what a phenomenon is and how it works.  
(Torraco 1997: 115)

Torraco's definition poses the following challenging question that is deceptively simple: 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 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?

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 move theory-building research to the forefront. In this article I contend (1) that the demand for HRD theory is increasing, (2) that our present available theory limits how far we can go, and (3) that what we do is too important 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 intricate and rigorous. An overview of this journey contained in a recent article entitled 'Theory building in the HRD profession' (Lynham 2000a) is recommended reading for all those interested in HRD theory building. In addition, there are numerous benchmark theory-practice publications. *Workplace Learning: Debating the Five Critical Questions of Theory and Practice* edited by Rowden (1996) and *Systems Theory Applied to Human Resource Development* edited by Gradous (1989) have provided excellent contributions to the theory in HRD. Gradous' (1989) classic monograph uses systems theory as a springboard for thinking about the theory of HRD, with arguments for and against a unifying theory in HRD. The perspectives in this monograph range from a call for focusing on system outputs, that is, being results-driven versus activity-driven (Dahl 1989), to the consideration of field and intervention theory, the theory of work design, critical theory and human capital theory (Watkins 1989). The

idea of multiple theories that pay attention to people, to organizational viability, along with a systematic and systemic understanding of the context, emerged in this monograph. These ranging ideas are present in most theoretical debates about HRD.

The serious theory-building research methodologies are challenging (e.g. Reynolds 1971; Dubin 1978; Cohen 1991). Even the comparatively simple theory-assessment tools and methods represent significant effort to the theory builder (e.g. Patterson 1983; Strauss and Corbin 1998). The HRD profession must encourage and respect a full continuum of theory engagement. For example, seemingly elementary investigations into definitions and documentation of the range of ideas within a single realm of HRD are fundamental theory-building stepping-stones. Recent examples in the literature include 'Operational definitions of expertise and competence' (Herling 2000), 'Commonly held theories of human resource development' (Weinberger 1990) and *An Overview of Organization Development Definitions: Ten Dependent Variables* (Egan 2000). On the philosophical side, a recent important contribution to the theory is *An Investigation into Core Beliefs Underlying the Profession of Human Resource Development* (Ruona 1999), which explores the thought and value systems that permeate the discipline of HRD. Other writings, such as *Philosophical Foundations of HRD Practice* edited by Ruona and Roth (2000), reveal core values in the field, while 'Theoretical assumptions underlying the performance paradigm of human resource development' by Holton (in press) pushes to articulate the underlying assumptions related to one of the major schools of thought in HRD. Both pieces add to our understanding of the HRD phenomenon.

Examples of straightforward theory-building efforts on the part of HRD scholars include *Systems Theory Applied to Human Resource Development* (Jacobs 1989), *Foundations of Performance Improvement and Implications for Practice* (Swanson 1999), *A Theory of Intellectual Capital* (Harris 2000), 'A theory of knowledge management' (Torraco 2000) and 'A theory of responsible leadership for performance' (Lynham 2000). Each one of these cited pieces deserves a forum where there is an opportunity for additional reflection in an effort to advance the profession.

### **The requirements for a sound theory**

Critics of HRD have chided the large number of HRD practitioners and commercial HRD products as being atheoretical (Micklethwait and Wooldridge 1996; Holton 1996; Swanson 1996). 'Atheoretical' means there is no thorough scholarly or scientific basis for the ideas and products being promoted. Organizations seeking quick or magical solutions are vulnerable to the exaggerated promises of suppliers. In order to help, Patterson (1983) has provided criteria for assessing the theory that underpins sound practice. It has

the following eight features: importance, preciseness and clarity, parsimony and simplicity, comprehensiveness, operationality, empirical validity or verifiability, fruitfulness, and practicality. Reflective practitioners and scholars want to know about the completeness and integrity of ideas they adopt. Certainly, there are always new ideas and those ideas generally deserve to be tried and tested. The ethical problem arises when unjustified claims are made in an attempt to market these ideas before they are fully developed and assessed.

### **The theoretical constraints impacting upon HRD**

There is tension in the academic world about the distinction between disciplines and fields of study. The debates taking place on this academic 'turf' embrace a number of issues and three of them are noted. First, HRD is a relatively young academic field of study and is still maturing. The stage of maturation varies within nations and between nations. Second, most academic fields of study are applied (e.g. medicine, engineering, education, business and communication) and draw upon multiple theories in articulating their disciplinary base. Furthermore, it is common for applied disciplines to create specializations that in time come to overshadow their hosts and to break away as independent disciplines. For example, university departments of adult education and vocational education have historically supported HRD in the United States, and many HRD programs eventually became larger than their adult education and vocational education academic university hosts during the last decade of the twentieth century. The third point is that most disciplines are rooted in a set of theories that are uniquely blended for the purpose of the discipline. Often their core theories are shared by other disciplines. For example, management, information systems and HRD all draw upon system theory.

Academic turf issues also confuse the HRD theory discussion. For example, there are HRD programs hosted in colleges of the arts, engineering, business and education that draw upon some aspect of psychological theory. The question that arises is: what slice of psychological theory and on what grounds should it ultimately be selected for defining the discipline? For example, HRD is believed to be committed to learning, to helping people and organizations to improve their performance. These considerations thus suggest in choosing specific psychological theories for the purpose of defining the theory of HRD. Thoughtful identification of the core component theories for the articulation of a particular discipline is essential for advancing its academic status. Furthermore, the blending of the selected core theories for the purpose of the discipline provides the true distinguishing theoretical base of a discipline.

This struggle can be illustrated by taking two examples of theories often identified as fundamental to HRD – system and anthropological theories. While system theory is not as value-laden as anthropology, anthropologists are generally committed to not disturbing or changing the culture they study. In contrast,

system theory is almost always thinking about understanding the system and the potential of improving it. Thus, it can be paradoxical to have HRD people espouse anthropological views with the intent to change the culture. This is a simple illustration of the missing logic that can occur when theory building is bypassed. Given the nature and purpose of HRD, easy arguments can be made that system theory is at the core of HRD and anthropology is secondary. Anthropology is likely to provide situational methods and tools to be called upon as needed while never being central to the theory and practice of HRD. A second example within HRD is to look closely at HRD professionals claiming a whole systems view (of the world, the organization and the people in it) without having the system theory and tools to match those claims. Many HRD practitioners believe that all the questions, data and answers are *within* the affected people and that putting them into a guided group process is all that is required to support sound HRD practice. This position is adequate for HRD and for a sound application of systems theory. Such a limited view and technique would falsely elevate group interaction facilitation and bypass rigorous system analysis.

### **Integration of three selected theories into the discipline of HRD**

Sound HRD theory results in powerful and practical explanations, principles and models for professionals to carry out their work in organizations. The problem facing almost every organization, and those that work in them, is in meeting the constant demand for high performance. In that organizations are human-made entities, they require human expertise to perform, grow and adapt. These demands include everything from assuring sustainable financial growth of the organization to satisfying the next customer standing in the front row. Without a theoretically sound model of human resource development within an organizational system and improvement context, the practitioner is left with the task of starting from 'zero' to build strategies for each and every HRD challenge they face. Or worse yet, they simply charge ahead in a trial and error mode.

The purpose of the remainder of this section is to outline a broad and well-bounded foundational theory of HRD that articulates the theoretical underpinnings of human resource development whose purpose is to develop and unleash human expertise for the purpose of improving performance. The icon of this theory is the 'three-legged stool'. This icon may be the most widely recognized description of the theory underlying the discipline of HRD (see McLean 1999; Swanson 1994, 1999) and it is visualized within the following brief on the Foundations of HRD. The short 'Brief' posits a definition of HRD, core beliefs, and the process within the larger system.

## Definition of human resource development

HRD is a process of developing and/or unleashing human expertise through organization development (OD) and personnel training and development (T&D) for the purpose of improving performance.

- The domains of performance include the organization, work process and group/individual levels.
- OD is the process of systematically implementing organizational change for the purpose of improving performance.
- T&D is the process of systematically developing expertise in individuals for the purpose of improving performance.
- The three critical application areas of HRD include human resource management, career development and quality improvement.

## Core HRD beliefs

- 1 Organizations are human-made entities that rely on human expertise in order to establish and achieve their goals.
- 2 Human expertise is developed and maximized through HRD processes and should be done for the mutual long-term and/or short-term benefits of the sponsoring organization and the individuals involved.
- 3 HRD professionals are advocates of individual and group, work process and organizational integrity.

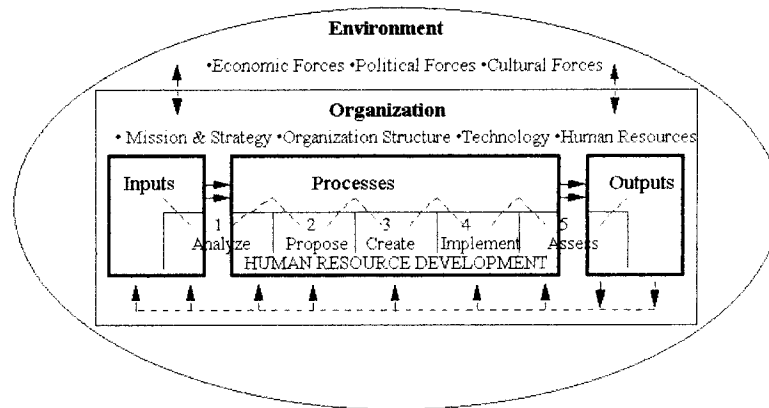
## The HRD process within the larger system

HRD is a process or system within the larger organizational and environmental system. As such, it has the potential of harmonizing, supporting and/or shaping the larger systems (see Figure 1).

## The theoretical foundation of HRD

The discipline of HRD relies on three core theories in order to understand, explain and carry out its process and roles. They include psychological theory, economic theory and systems theory.

- Psychological theory captures the core human aspects of developing human resources as well as the socio-technical interplay of humans and systems.
- Economic theory captures the core issues of the efficient and effective utilization of resources to meet productive goals in a competitive environment.



Source: Swanson (1996)

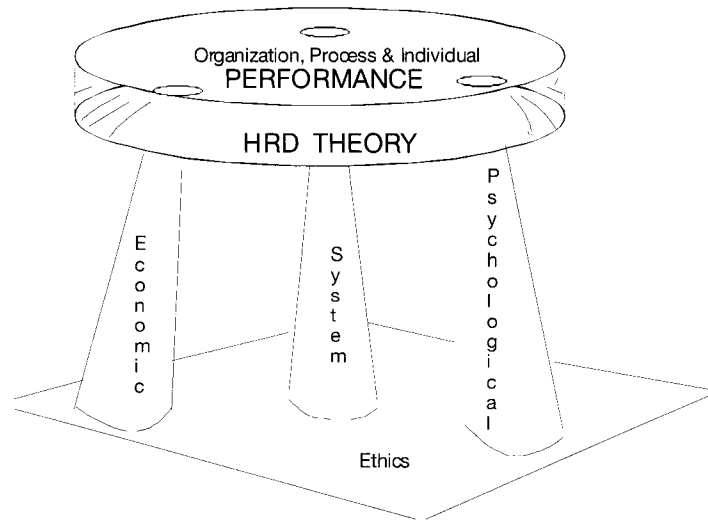
**Figure 1** System world-view model of human resource development as a process within the organization and its environment.

- Systems theory captures the complex and dynamic interactions of environments, organizations, work process and group/individual variables operating at any point in time and over time.

The three core HRD theories and their integration are visually portrayed as a 'three-legged stool'. The legs represent the component theories and the stool's platform represents the full integration of the three theories into the unique theory of HRD. While the stool rests firmly on the floor or the host organization, an 'ethical rug' serves as a filter through which the integrity of both HRD and the host organization can be maintained.

### The domain of HRD

HRD professionals believe that performance at the organization, work process, group and individual levels is mediated through human expertise and human effort (Ruona 1999). In stark contrast to this belief, the performance scorecards available to organization decision makers generally ignore the human resource side. The most obvious example is the short-term economic view of company performance as judged by daily stock market data. It is relatively easy for individuals to limit the theoretical foundation and resulting decision making to a single discipline (e.g. learning, economics, systems, psychology, etc.). Such a limited view almost always results in distortions in thinking and actions. In contrast, the absence of a specified theoretical foundation supports voids in direction, continuity and deep understanding.



**Figure 2** The theoretical foundations of human resource development

The journey of understanding improvement and performance for those who share the ‘human lens’ has not been easy. The massive United States ‘Training Within Industry’ (TWI) project that culminated with the ending of the Second World War is seen by many as the origin of contemporary human resource development for the purpose of improvement and performance (Dooley 1945; Ruona and Swanson 1998; Swanson and Torraco 1994; Swanson 2001). The performance language was simpler then, centering on whether the issue was a production problem. The TWI movement quickly outgrew its training title as it delivered results using simple and powerful tools called: job *instruction*, job *relations* and job *methods*.

After 1945, the United States had little incentive from international competition to improve performance. And, having already reaped the rewards of a century of abundant raw materials and an industrious immigrant population, United States business and industry began slowly to lose some of its competitive edge. The combination of economic, psychological and system thinking that had fueled earlier success was taken for granted, and the psychological domain began to prevail after the war among those interested in HRD (at that time primarily referred to as personnel training and development) to the detriment of the host system mission and its economic agenda.

### The theory of HRD

At present there is no universal view or agreement on the theory or multiple theories that support HRD as a discipline. Furthermore, the theoretical



alternatives being proposed in the literature and debated by the profession are limited. On the one hand, some have called for system theory to serve as a unifying theory for HRD to access all useful theories as required (Gradous 1989; Jacobs 1987, 1989) and, on the other hand, many have proposed sets of principles in the forms of comparative lists of added value, products, processes and expertise (Brethower 1995) or challenging the profession to consider the additional theories of field and intervention theory, theory of work design, critical theory and human capital theory (Watkins 1989). The alternative to having a sound theoretical and disciplinary base for the HRD profession is the present state of rudderless random activity aggressively sponsored by atheoretical professional associations and greedy consultants (Micklethwait and Wooldridge 1996; Swanson 1997). This present state celebrates short-term perceptions of success without having deep understanding or the ability to replicate results.

For this reason, a discrete and logical set of foundational theories for HRD is proposed here. It is comprised of psychological theory, economic theory and system theory (Passmore 1997; Swanson 1995, 1999). Economic theory is recognized as a primary element along with its survival metrics at the organizational level; system theory recognizes purpose, pieces and relationships that can maximize or strangle systems and sub-systems; and psychological theory acknowledges human beings as brokers of productivity along with their cultural and behavioral nuances. It is believed that these three theories, more than any others, make up the foundational theory of HRD, respond to the realities of practice, and that each is unique, robust and complementary to the others. In addition, the integration of the three theories is at the core of the discipline of HRD while ethics plays an important moderating role.

### Overarching implications for practice

Gestalt psychology and system theory inform us of the power of understanding the whole and the power of a fully functioning whole. The *whole* theory of HRD is proposed to be the integration of psychological, economic and system theories within an ethical frame. This integrative state is central to securing HRD as a reliable field of practice, not just to knowing the elements. The journey to this integrative state results in the organizing concepts, codified knowledge, underpinning theories, particular methodologies and the unique technical jargon of HRD. The *whole* of any integrated performance improvement theory will be larger than the sum of the parts and unique to HRD. On their own, psychological theory, economic theory and system theory are inadequate and produce unsustainable results. Thus, the overarching principles for HRD practice are as follows.

### The theory integration principle for practice

HRD must integrate psychological, economic and system theories into disciplined thinking and action: for example, business process re-engineering, according to Hammer and Champy (1994), focused on cost reductions through low-level system analysis. Had they considered the larger frame system and sustainable economic performance, and not ignored the psychological, the intervention and its total effects would have been very different. The premise in this article is that these three theories constitute the core foundational theory and discipline of HRD. As such, they must not only be understood individually but, more importantly, in their wholeness and integration. The implications of economic, system and psychological theories in guiding the overarching approach to HRD practice follows.

#### *The economic theory principles for practice*

The economics principles for practice revolve around managing scarce resources and the production of wealth. Most people who talk about performance can mentally convert units of performance into monetary units. HRD itself has costs and benefits that need to be understood and are not always favorable. As they are better understood in terms of theory and practice, the HRD discipline and profession will mature. Again, the principles for practice sound elementary, yet must be addressed:

*Scarce resources theory:* HRD must justify its own use of scarce resources.

*Sustainable resource theory:* HRD must add value to creating sustainable long-term economic performance.

*Human capital theory:* HRD must add short-term and long-term value from investments in the development of knowledge and expertise in individuals or groups.

#### *The psychological theory principles for practice*

The psychology principles for practice revolve around the mental processes of humans and the determinants of human behavior. Among scholars and practitioners of psychology the schisms and gimmicks reported under the psychology banner abound with little integration. As the three psychology sub-theories are interpreted in terms of the theory and practice relevant to HRD, the discipline and profession will mature. Again, the psychological principles appear to be elementary, but are regularly ignored in practice:

*Gestalt psychology:* HRD must clarify the goals of individual contributors, work process owners and/or organization leaders.

*Behavioral psychology:* HRD must develop the behaviors of individual contributors, work process owners and organization leaders.

*Cognitive psychology (purposive behaviorism)*: HRD must harmonize the goals and behaviors among individual contributors, work process owners and organization leaders.

### *Systems theory principles for practice*

The system theory principles for practice are organic. The system elements, their arrangements, the interdependencies – the complex nature of the phenomenon under study must be faced. The system theory principles for practice require serious thinking, sound theory-building research and the utilization of new tools for sound practice. A full pursuit of the following simple principles for practice would reshape the HRD purpose and toolbox:

*General system theory*: HRD must understand how it and other sub-systems connect and disconnect from the host organization.

*Chaos theory*: HRD must help its host organization retain its purpose and effectiveness given the chaos it faces.

*Futures theory*: HRD must help its host organization shape alternative futures.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this article has been to present a broad, but well-defined perspective on the discipline and theory underlying HRD. Specifically, it has framed the theoretical foundations for HRD and provided principles for HRD practice. At first glance, the idea of needing HRD theory may evoke questions of relevance and practice. It has been recognized that theory can originate from *practice*, from stressful and/or large-scale change *development* efforts or from *research* itself. In all instances, theory advancement must be a conscious effort (Swanson 1997). Research in the realm of theory requires that theories be developed through rigorous theory-building research methods (Dubin 1969; Hearn 1953; Torraco 1997) or that espoused theories be rigorously evaluated against criteria for sound theory (Patterson 1983). HRD is presently full of atheoretical models (not theories) and espoused theories that are unsubstantiated. If theory just happened as a result of practice, the HRD theory bucket would be overflowing. On average, HRD practice does not come close to what we know from sound theory. Systematically filling the performance improvement theory–practice void is fundamental to the maturation of the profession and it is the work of both practitioners and scholars. In conclusion, I contend that the demand for HRD theory is increasing, that our present available theory has taken us about as far as we can go and that what we do is too important to wallow in atheoretical explanations.

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