

WARNING CONCERNING COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproduction of copyrighted material.

Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research. If electronic transmission of reserve material is used for purposes in excess of what constitutes "fair use", that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

This PDF file was provided by the instructor, with this information page inserted.

Challenges and Choices for Theoretical Research in Human Resource Development

Richard J. Torraco

Theoretical research in HRD has established itself and is now at a point where many avenues exist for further contributions to the field. But what kinds of theoretical research appear to be needed at this stage in the development of HRD? This paper identifies areas in which further research in theory and theory building might be conducted. Possible areas for future research include new HRD theory, theory-building research methods, HRD's theoretical foundation, and published work that includes both the theory-building research process and the theory itself. The paper argues that as more theory is being developed, the justification of the need for theory becomes more important. Considering the merits of alternative theoretical contributions, HRD professionals are asked to make judicious choices about the direction of future theoretical research. The implications of this study for further research and professional practice are provided.

The importance of theory to the development of professional disciplines such as human resource development (HRD) is one of the most frequently discussed topics in the field (Holton, 2002; Kuchinke, 2000; Lynham, 2000; McLean, 1998; Swanson, 1997, 1999, 2001; Torraco, 1997; Weinberger, 1998). The goal of just a few years ago for developing more theory-related scholarship in HRD is now becoming a reality (Holton, 1999; Swanson, 2000). HRD scholars have contributed to the increasing number of theory and conceptual articles disseminated in a broad range of outlets, including journals, books, research monographs, conference proceedings, and preconference forums on theory and theory-building research. A greater variety of theoretical research in HRD is available—new and enhanced theories, concepts, theory-building research methods, conceptual articles, research on the foundations and philosophy of HRD, and integrative literature reviews for theoretical purposes now appear in the literature.

Future Challenges for Theoretical Research in HRD

The pace and productivity of recent work in HRD theory and theory building is impressive. HRD researchers have developed new theories and conceptual frameworks that address a broad range of phenomena of interest to the HRD profession. The theories and bodies of knowledge that should rightfully constitute HRD's theoretical foundation have been debated in an effort to establish a sound theoretical foundation upon which to ground research and practice. The theory-building research methodologies used in applied disciplines such as HRD have been described and compared (Lynham, 2002). A new journal, *Human Resource Development Review*, was launched in 2002 and serves as a forum for theoretical work in HRD and related disciplines. Theoretical research in HRD has established itself and is now at a point where many avenues exist for further contributions to the field. Further advancements in research and professional practice will depend, in part, on continued attention to strengthening the theory base for HRD researchers and practitioners.

But what types of theoretical research appear to be needed at this stage in the development of HRD? What directions for theoretical research might be most beneficial for the discipline? Many theories and conceptual frameworks recently have been published, implying a need for these contributions to HRD research. Is more theory needed in HRD? Scholarly discussions continue about the composition of HRD's theoretical foundation. Does HRD need a broader and stronger theoretical foundation? Has HRD research developed to the point where it has now reached beyond its theory base? Recently there has been much creative activity in the realm of theory building. Is there a need for more theory building to support the further development of HRD research and practice?

Advancements in theory and theory-building research methods have occurred in management, psychology, sociology, and other fields in which the topics and methods of theoretical research overlap with those of HRD. Scholars have accomplished a great deal to date to broaden and strengthen the theoretical foundation of the relatively young academic field of HRD. Nonetheless, there is little doubt that more theoretical research is needed to advance our understanding of the human and organizational phenomena of interest to HRD.

Problem Statement. While acknowledging the progress made in HRD theoretical research in the past few years, we are asked to look beyond the issue of simply doing more theoretical research to the more difficult question of what kinds of theoretical research appear to be needed at this time. Theoretical research in HRD takes many forms, including new theories and conceptual models, extensions or enhancement of existing theories, research on theory-building methods, HRD's theoretical foundation, and other work that brings fresh ideas to the field. Given the current state of theoretical research in HRD and the present state of development of the HRD profession as a whole, what directions should theoretical scholarship take to best serve HRD research and practice? What *needs* exist for theoretical research in HRD? This discussion is

grounded in the assumption that generating more and better HRD theory will support more effectively the work of researchers and practitioners and ultimately will advance the development of the HRD profession. Specifically, this article argues that as more theory is being developed, the issue of the need for theory becomes more important. The notion of need requires elaboration. *Need* is defined here as a condition or situation in which something is required or wanted. When applied to a piece of theoretical research, the notion of need is not synonymous with the purpose of the work, although researchers are obliged to attend to this issue because an index of the value of a research contribution is the relationship between its stated purpose and the need to be addressed. Thus, the notion of need retains a key element that is, a priori, external to the interests and purposes of the individual researcher. This conception of need arises from the value that a theoretical study contributes to the HRD profession. As a way of expanding the breadth and impact of its research and practice, there is no doubt that HRD embraces a variety of theoretical research that reflects the rich diversity of interests, questions, problems, and opportunities inherent in the many realms of HRD. Nonetheless, this seems to be a crucial time for substantive discussions among scholars about the kinds of theoretical research needed. This article critically examines areas in which further theoretical work in HRD might be conducted.

First, the roles and purposes that theory serves for HRD and related disciplines are reviewed to set the stage for discussing alternative areas for future research. Then, several areas for research are discussed as possible directions for further theoretical work in HRD. These areas of theoretical research include developing new theory for HRD, giving more attention to the theoretical foundation of HRD, conducting research on theory-building methods and their uses in HRD, and generating published works that describe both the theory-building research process and the theory itself. It is hoped that thoughtful discussion among scholars about the roles that theory should serve at this stage of HRD's development will provide a basis for judicious choices about future research in this area.

The Roles of Theory in HRD. Theory and theory building serve several different purposes in HRD and related disciplines. Strauss and Corbin (1998) go beyond theory building as simply a research method or set of procedures in their reference to grounded theory as "offering a way of thinking about and of viewing the world that can enrich the research of those who choose [grounded theory] methodology" (p. 4). In a similar vein, theory and theory building for the social constructionist are not used to uncover theoretical truth or reality but to model an understanding of the sense that people make of the social world in their everyday lives (Berger & Luckman, 1966) and to offer insights into how social experience is created and given meaning (Turnbull, 2002a). Theory can also provide rich descriptions of complex, organizational phenomena through integration and synthesis of different sources and types of data (Mintzberg, 1979; Eisenhardt, 1995). Addressing the roles of theory in

industrial-organizational psychology, Campbell (1990) discussed the ways in which theory is important for the generation of further knowledge. Torraco (1997) noted the following roles of theory as they apply to HRD: (1) to interpret old data in new ways, (2) to interpret new research findings, (3) to define applied problems, (4) to evaluate solutions to problems, (5) to determine research priorities, (6) to identify new research directions, and (7) to respond to new problems that have no previously identified solutions. The research implications of these roles of theory can be stated in concrete terms. Theory allows us to avoid recreating the wheel in our research (Roles 1, 2, and 4); it means we do not have to approach new research opportunities blindly (Roles 3 and 7); and theory can open up new intellectual perspectives to catalyze research (Roles 5 and 6).

How important are these roles of theory to our own research? How important are the roles of theory for the HRD profession as a whole? Would the HRD research enterprise benefit from greater emphasis on one or more of these roles of theory? HRD researchers use many theories in their work. Some of these are HRD's "own" theories, while others are from disciplines related to HRD. HRD's "own" theories are theories developed by HRD researchers about HRD-related phenomena. Examples of theoretical work in HRD include theories of learning (Marsick & Watkins, 1990, 1993), models of managerial work (Watson, 1994, 1997), philosophies and foundations of HRD (Lee, 2001; Ruona & Roth, 2000; Short, 2000), major constructs (Holton, Bates, & Ruona, 2000), theory-building methodologies (Turnbull, 2002b), and new conceptual models (McGoldrick, Stewart, & Watson, 2001; Sambrook, 2000; Sikora, Beaty, & Forward, 2004; Wognum, 2000). Theoretical research in HRD is now at a stage where many avenues exist for further contributions to the field. This article addresses the following areas in which further research might be conducted:

- HRD theory
- Theoretical foundation of HRD
- Theory-building processes
- Published work that includes both the theory-building process and the theory itself

Is More HRD Theory Needed?

As scholarship in HRD matures, there have been calls for discussion about whether more theory and conceptual work is needed to support the development of HRD research and practice (Azevedo & McLean, 2002; Ruona & Roth, 2000). HRD researchers use theories from fields such as organization behavior, psychology, sociology, communication, education, and other social and behavioral sciences. As we might expect, there are relatively fewer HRD theories than theories addressing behavioral and organizational phenomena from disciplines

whose interests overlap those of HRD. Of course, there is nothing wrong with using theory from related fields to support work in HRD. In fact, using theory from other fields is laudable, since it broadens the conceptual basis for framing HRD research questions, and it helps to cast a wider net for collecting and analyzing data to answer these questions.

Should HRD be generating and using more theory that is “our own,” that is, theory developed by HRD researchers about HRD-related phenomena? Does the continued development of HRD research and practice imply the need for the development of more HRD theory? This question is asked implicitly each time an HRD researcher contemplates a theoretical framework for a research study. When framing the scope of the study and grounding it in a theoretical framework, the researcher selects one or more theories as the theoretical basis of the study. While these may be HRD theories, more commonly they are theories from psychology, management, education, and other domains related to the topic of research. Does the HRD researcher have to rely on theories from related disciplines due to the absence of an HRD theory that addresses the phenomenon of interest to the researcher? Are there phenomena worthy of study for which we feel HRD theories should be developed, but have not? A rich, diverse body of theory from across the organizational and behavioral sciences is available to support the work of HRD researchers and practitioners. Considering the existing body of theory, do HRD researchers feel that theoretical knowledge about issues of central interest to the HRD field are unavailable to them? In other words, does HRD need more of its own theory?

Research that proposes a new or better theory is obliged to show how the theory contributes to new knowledge. We expect the proposed theory to be grounded in a justification of the problem or need, which addresses conceptual deficiencies, omissions, or other concerns with existing theory. Research that meets this test holds the promise of contributing valuable theoretical knowledge to the field. The issue of establishing the need for a new HRD theory would seem to have important implications for HRD researchers involved in theoretical research and theory building, since their work is based in large part on the premise that there is a need for more and better theory for the field.

An important consideration related to the role of theory in HRD is the difference between basic research and applied research. HRD is an applied discipline that conducts a great deal of applied research. The distinction between basic research and applied research is related to the roles and purposes that theory serves for HRD. Although basic and applied research are not dichotomous choices, the nature of basic research is quite different from that of applied research. However, it appears that the nature of applied research is not well understood (Holton, 1999).

The goal of *basic research* is the discovery of knowledge; the production of new knowledge itself is the primary purpose of basic research. Thus, the outcome of basic research is new knowledge that has value in itself, yet can exist

apart from practice and may not yet be in a form that can be applied directly to a problem.

The goal of *applied research* is the discovery of new relationships in the knowledge within the domain to which the research will be applied. Applied research concerns itself with (1) elaborating on new knowledge from basic research in anticipation of future application, (2) better understanding of the area to which the new knowledge will be applied (in HRD this is usually considered to be some area within the general domain of education for and about work), and (3) research of the application itself (for example, a preliminary empirical study of the application of a new cross-cultural model). Thus, the scope of applied research in HRD goes beyond just the research of applications and includes knowledge about the relationship between new knowledge and the domain in HRD to which it is applied. Basic and applied research are not polar choices, but rather different points along a spectrum of research that represents the *basic–applied research continuum*. Researchers strive for constant interplay between basic and applied research, since basic research findings often lead to applied research, and the outcomes of applied research have implications for basic research. Both forms of research should be responsive to the actual needs and wants of practice (Swanson, 1997).

The applied nature of HRD research in no way diminishes our reliance on theory. On the contrary, since applied research in HRD must sometimes cover large territories of knowledge to encompass new knowledge from basic research, the domain to which this new knowledge is applied, and research of the application itself, a vast body of theory is needed to support the various elements of applied research. A great deal of theory is needed, although of different kinds and for different reasons, by both basic and applied researchers.

Of interest to HRD researchers who work in applied areas is that relevant and robust theory is available and is used appropriately to support their research, wherever it lies along the basic–applied research continuum. HRD research studies may be located at different points along this continuum. Moreover, some studies may reach across a wider span of the basic–applied research continuum than others. For example, a preliminary study of the application of a new cross-cultural model might focus on the empirical verification of the model and thus be localized at a point on the applied end of the continuum, whereas theoretical research on a new learning model based on recent, basic research in the areas of neurophysiology and cognitive psychology might extend across a wider span of the basic–applied research continuum. Researchers in applied fields rely on theory to provide linkages between their research and prior knowledge from basic research and to provide theoretical support for extensions and applications of this knowledge. Thus, theory serves just as important a role in applied research as it does in basic research. Indeed, an important role for HRD theory is to bridge gaps in knowledge that exist along the basic–applied research continuum.

The Theoretical Foundation of HRD

Discussions about the role of theory in HRD have generated questions about the theoretical foundation of HRD. Is more attention needed to the theoretical foundation of HRD? The theories and bodies of knowledge that should rightfully constitute HRD's theoretical foundation have been debated in an effort to establish a sound theoretical foundation upon which to ground HRD research and practice. HRD's *theoretical foundation* is constituted by those theories and bodies of knowledge considered to be essential for explaining the distinctive purpose and defining characteristics of the discipline of HRD. Formal discussion in the literature about the theoretical foundations of HRD began in 1987, with the theory-to-practice monograph series produced by the University of Minnesota Human Resource Development Research Center and the American Society for Training and Development (Swanson & Gradous, 1987). Since then, discussions of the theoretical foundations of HRD have grown in scope, depth, and frequency (Gradous, 1989; Holton, 2002; Jacobs, 1989; McLean, 1998, 1999; Passmore, 1987; Swanson, 1997, 1999, 2000, 2001; Weinberger, 1998).

Although we have passed the fifteenth anniversary of the start of these discussions, HRD's theoretical foundation continues to receive much attention from HRD scholars. What do we seek from current scholarly discussions on this topic? Is further discussion expected to enable us to choose among the alternative theoretical foundations proposed in the literature? Do we seek insights into substantive changes in existing formulations of HRD's theoretical foundation? Do we hope that these discussions will foster greater reliance on HRD's theoretical foundation by researchers? Asking the appropriate questions about HRD's theoretical foundation might help us gain a better understanding of its composition and purpose.

An issue relevant to this discussion is the distinction between the theoretical framework used by an HRD researcher to support a particular study and the theoretical foundation of the HRD discipline as a whole. This distinction helps to clarify the roles and purposes that theory is *servicing*, versus *should be servicing*, for HRD. How are the theories we use to support a specific research study related to the theoretical foundation of HRD? Of course, the relationship of a study's theoretical framework to the theoretical foundation of the discipline as a whole depends on the nature and topic of a particular piece of research. Certainly researchers should go beyond the theories that constitute HRD's theoretical foundation when conducting research on topics that cross disciplinary boundaries. This is particularly true of studies in the areas of learning, change, development, and other topics that can overlap the boundaries of related behavioral and social science disciplines. Should the conceptual roots of new HRD theory arise exclusively from HRD's theoretical foundation? Would it not be desirable for HRD researchers to develop theoretical understandings and propositions to explain new phenomena that reach *beyond* HRD's theoretical foundation? These would seem to be important questions for further

discussion about areas in which theory and theory building might be used to better serve the HRD profession.

Theory can be distinguished from the process of theory-building research. A *theory* explains what a phenomenon is and how it works (Torraco, 1997). The characteristics of good theory have been described in several ways. Patterson (1986) offered eight criteria for evaluating theory. Bacharach (1989) discussed the importance of two aspects of the quality of a theory—its falsifiability and its utility. Whetten (1989) identified key questions about a phenomenon that theory should answer (what, how, why, who, where, and when) and offered seven criteria for manuscripts submitted for publication as theoretical work. Campbell (1990) synthesized the roles of theory in industrial-organizational psychology and discussed the importance of theory to the generation of new knowledge. Sutton and Staw (1995) discussed five elements of research that authors sometimes include in their theoretical formulations but that, in themselves, should generally not be considered as theory. In short, many guidelines exist for determining what constitutes a good theory. Since a contention of this article is that little published work includes both the theory-building process and the theory, it is important to clearly distinguish the process of theory-building research from the theory itself.

The Process of Theory-Building Research. Theory building can be considered as a research *process* for creating theory. Theory-building research has also been referred to as *theory construction*, *theory development*, and *theorizing*. Several methodologies exist for building theory. Theory-building methodologies vary in the paradigms or worldviews they represent (Torraco, 2002). Older methodologies for building theory developed in the 1960s and 1970s have typically taken more traditional, positivist approaches to knowledge creation. Seminal sources for this approach to building theory include Blalock (1969), Dubin (1978), Freese (1980), Kaplan (1964), Kerlinger (1973), Reynolds (1971), and Stinchcombe (1968). However, many scholars report that these approaches to theory building are too standardized and formalized to reflect their theory-building experiences (Van de Ven, 1989; Weick, 1989). Van de Ven (1989) observed more than a decade ago that advancements in the process of theory building were needed to address the gap between researchers' espoused theory-building methods and the methods they actually used and to provide more valid and practical ways to build good theory. Subsequently, new approaches to theory building have been developed that build upon older, more traditional approaches. These include research by Cohen (1989a), Eisenhardt (1989), Gioia and Pitre (1990), Klimoski (1991), Lynham (2002), Weick (1989), and Yang (2002). Reviewed next, this more recent body of work has increased the number and variety of theory-building methods available to researchers.

Naturalistic Approaches to Theory Building. As refinements in positivistic theory-building methodologies continued, advancements in naturalistic methodologies for theory building also occurred, including work in phenomenology, ethnography, case study research, and grounded theory. Naturalistic

approaches to theory building typically emphasize the need to make explicit the theoretical logic and conceptual reasoning used by researchers to build theory. Researchers using naturalistic approaches to theory building often provide verbatim data and explicitly describe their methodologies for content analysis to make the conceptual strategies used to develop theory transparent to the reader. Weick (1989) used the term “thought trials” to refer to the mental experimentation theorists use to create theory; naturalistic theorists attempt to make these thought trials explicit.

Corbin and Strauss (1990) argued that researchers using grounded theory should report the procedures and canons used for building theory. These include criteria for evaluating the grounded theory research process (for example, stating the categories of events, incidents, and actions that serve as the basis of theoretical sampling) and criteria for evaluating the empirical grounding of findings (for example, have conceptual linkages between key concepts of the theory been made explicit?). Moustakas (1994) offered guidelines for using phenomenology as the basis for theory building. Phenomenological and grounded theory-building methodologies identify specific indicators for theorists to assess the quality of the theory emerging from their research. This helps theorists assess their progress in building theory against some of the methodological milestones for theory construction.

Combining traditional theory-building methodologies with recent work in this area, the literature now contains a variety of descriptions of the process of theory building from positivistic, naturalistic, and multiparadigm perspectives. Table 1 lists more than twenty substantive descriptions of the process of theory-building research. These diverse approaches to theory-building research show the different ways in which a theory can be developed. Each theory-building approach is based on different values and assumptions, strengths, limitations, and indications for use.

It is arguable whether or not all of the descriptions of the process of theory-building research listed in Table 1 should be considered as formal theory-building methodologies. Some of these works are more prescriptive than others about the procedures and techniques to be used in theory-building research. Our purpose is not to rate or classify these works by their usefulness to theorists or by the degree of guidance they provide. Each of these works takes a different approach to developing theory using different methods and techniques. Since each of these approaches provides a substantive description of the process of theory building, we refer to them here as *descriptions of the process of theory-building research*.

Theory-Building Processes in HRD

Is more attention needed to theory-building processes in HRD? Weick (1995) discussed the difficulty of recognizing good theory by examining the product alone. “Products of the theorizing process seldom emerge as full-blown

Table 1. Process of Theory-Building Research

<i>Positivistic Theory Building</i>	
1964 to 1980	
Kaplan (1964) Stinchcombe (1968) Blalock (1969) Reynolds (1971) Kerlinger (1973) Dubin (1978) Freese (1980)	These positivistic approaches to theory building are reviewed and summarized in Chamber (1988), Van de Ven (1989), and Whetten (1989).
Since 1980	
Cohen (1989a, 1989b)	Cohen (1989) offered a methodology for developing social science knowledge through theory building.
Klimoski (1991)	Klimoski (1991) discussed theory construction and the presentation of knowledge frameworks for human resource management.
Yang (2002)	Yang (2002) discussed the use of meta-analysis for theory building.
<i>Multiparadigm Theory Building</i>	
Eisenhardt (1989)	Eisenhardt (1989) synthesized a process of theory building from case study research from the works of Glaser and Strauss (1967), Mintzberg (1979), Jick (1979), Yin (1984), Miles and Huberman (1984), and Van Maanen (1988).
Weick (1989)	Weick (1989) discussed theory building as a process of disciplined imagination.
Gioia and Pitre (1990)	Gioia and Pitre (1990) argued for a multiparadigm perspective on theory building.
Langley (1999)	Langley (1999) discussed alternative strategies for theorizing from process data.
Pentland (1999)	Pentland (1999) discussed building process theories from narratives.
Lewis and Grimes (1999)	Lewis and Grimes (1999) argued an approach to theory building from multiple paradigms through metatriangulation.
Lynham (2002)	Lynham (2002) presented a general method for theory building.
<i>Naturalistic Theory Building</i>	
Glaser and Strauss (1967)	Glaser and Strauss (1967) first proposed a grounded theory approach for creating social science knowledge.
Corbin and Strauss (1990)	Corbin and Strauss (1990) argued that grounded theorists should report the procedures and canons used for building theory. They included criteria for evaluating the grounded theory research process and criteria for evaluating the empirical grounding of research findings.
Moustakas (1994)	Moustakas (1994) offered guidelines for using phenomenology as the basis for theory building.
Strauss and Corbin (1998)	Strauss and Corbin (1998) provided an in-depth presentation of techniques, procedures, and examples of developing grounded theory.
Turnbull (2002a)	Turnbull (2002a) argued for the use of social construction research for theory building in HRD.

theories, which means that most of what passes for theory in organizational studies consists of approximations. These may represent interim struggles in which people intentionally inch toward stronger theories” (p. 385). Weick concluded, “What one needs to know, instead, is more about the context in which the product lives. This is the process of theorizing” (p. 387). Although theory can be developed using any one of the processes for theory-building research shown in Table 1, much theoretical work in HRD seems to rely primarily on two approaches to theory building research—grounded theory and Dubin’s theory-building methodology (1978). Naturalistic theory building is frequently done using the grounded theory methodology. Theories developed from the positivistic paradigm frequently rely on Dubin’s theory-building methodology. Theorists seem to rely heavily on these two approaches because each approach provides explicit methodological guidance for working through the phases and procedures for building theory. Explicit methodological guidance is particularly useful to scholars who are new to theory-building research. Moreover, since these approaches are commonly used, the literature offers many examples of their use in theory-building research, which further perpetuates their use by theorists.

Is more research needed that examines the process of theory building in HRD? Would giving attention to more explicit descriptions of the process of theory building advance the development of theory, research, and practice in HRD? Scholars attending the theory preconference of the 2003 Academy of Human Resource Development annual research conference addressed the questions of whether *criteria* and *standards* are needed for the process of theory building. They asked, “What indicators do we have that sound theory is being developed? What are the milestones that should be followed along the way to developing good theory?” While ultimately concerned with the quality of the theory produced, these questions address the relationship of a theory to the research methods used for its development. The next section examines what is offered by published work that describes both the theory and the research process used to develop it.

Published Work That Includes the Theory-Building Process and the Theory

Publishing peer-reviewed accounts of the researcher’s experiences in developing a theory may represent an important contribution to new knowledge in HRD. These accounts would offer insights into the process of how the researcher developed a theory, as well as offering descriptions of the elements and structure of the theory itself. Research that presents insights into both the theory-building process and the theory itself would provide a holistic view of theory-building research. Such research provides a means for tracing the author’s theory-building strategies as these take shape, and ultimately give rise to a theoretical product. It would allow the reader to appreciate the conceptual

challenges the theorist encounters during the development of the theory, and then to see how the challenges are resolved and reflected in the theory itself. On the other hand, presenting a theory or model without a description of the origin of its component constructs, their interrelationships, and the conceptual reasoning used to build the theory or model is akin to presenting the results and conclusions of an empirical study without discussing data collection and analysis. As with other types of research, readers of new theory expect to see how the logic and conceptual reasoning of the research process was used to develop the proposed theory.

Grounded theory, a method committed to allowing theory to emerge from the data, lends itself especially well to showing the relationship between the theory-building research process and the theory produced through this process. For example, a grounded theory developed in public school settings was constructed to better understand the process of structuring a community-based curriculum for rural schools (Jones, 1999). This work allows the reader to follow the development of the theory with clear descriptions of how foundational concepts, empirical data, and theoretical logic were used to develop and refine the emergent theory. Myers (2000) used phenomenology to develop a model of management consultation used by employee assistance program (EAP) professionals that showed how these professionals serve their organizations. Both of these new theories were developed as doctoral dissertations, which are expected to present explicitly the process through which research problems and theory-building research methods are used to create new theoretical knowledge. Such research is necessarily an elaborate and lengthy endeavor.

Nonetheless, the relationship between the theory-building research process and product can be described clearly in article-length research. Margolis and Hansen (2002) provided a full account of their process of using a qualitative case study to develop a theory of organizational identity. These researchers provided clear descriptions of their theory-building process—how data were collected and analyzed from multiple sources and then used, along with foundational concepts and existing theory, to develop the theory. Throughout the study the researchers stated explicitly the theoretical logic they used to systematically develop the theory. This allows the reader to follow the connection between the research problem (sustaining organizational identity during traumatic change) and the theoretical outcome (a model of organizational identity). Other works also present explicit accounts of the relationship between the theory building research process and its product. For example, see Dubin's (1976) discussion of how Herzberg's two-factor theory of work motivation (1966) follows Dubin's methodology for theory building.

Beyond the works cited, however, few publications address both the theory-building research process and the theory itself. Most publication outlets for theory and conceptual work publish new theories or substantive conceptual frameworks for new theories. Research that addresses theory-building

research methods are usually published as stand-alone articles. For example, Turnbull (2002b) proposed bricolage as an alternative approach to theory building in HRD and illustrated the potential richness of this approach through her experiences with qualitative theory building. The appearance of new theory and theory-building research methods in separate publications may occur because of the length of an article that presents both the theory-building research process and the theory. Nonetheless, the works mentioned are evidence of the existence of article-length research of high quality that includes both the theory-building research process and the theory.

Should journals and other publication outlets for theory in HRD offer more research that includes both the theory building research process and the theory? It would seem that the availability of peer-reviewed accounts of how theory-building strategies are used to develop new and better theories would be beneficial to the HRD research community. Despite the apparent benefits of this type of theoretical research, publication outlets in HRD offer little in this area. Journal editors, readers, and researchers themselves are encouraged to consider the value of producing and disseminating such work.

Implications for Further Research

Several areas of theoretical research for further study have been discussed: new HRD theory, theory-building research methods, HRD's theoretical foundation, and published work that includes both the theory-building research process and the theory. While there may be little doubt that more theoretical research is needed to advance our understanding of the human and organizational phenomena of interest to HRD, an examination of the kinds of theoretical work that are needed in HRD seems important at this stage of the profession's development. For example, future research might examine the degree to which more study is needed in each of the areas of theoretical research discussed in this article. This research should examine specifically the theory-related needs of HRD professionals. In addition, research might explore the perceptions of HRD professionals about the roles that theory should serve for the field.

This study also has implications for scholars devoted to theoretical research. Researchers who develop new theories assume the challenges of fully examining the existing body of theory relevant to their topics, of determining the extent to which theoretical knowledge about their topics has already been developed, and of proposing theories that are well grounded in justifications of the need for the new theories that are proposed. Researchers of theory-building methods face similar challenges as they work to enhance the meaning and utility to HRD of the different processes for developing theory that currently exist (see Table 1). Given the numerous calls that have been issued for the development of more theory to support the advancement of HRD, it would seem that more in-depth study of selected theory-building methods and their uses in HRD would be beneficial to the field. However, with few exceptions, little research has

examined theory-building methods and their uses in HRD (Holton, 2003). HRD theorists favor the use of a limited number of theory-building methods despite the variety of approaches to theory development listed in Table 1. Researchers interested in theory-building methods are challenged to address issues such as these that seem beneficial to the continued development of the HRD profession.

Implications for Professional Practice

Substantive discussions about the kinds of theoretical work that are needed in HRD also have important implications for professional practice in HRD. Despite the assumption made here about the value of theory, theory and related research are often dismissed by practitioners as irrelevant because theory is associated with the term “theoretical,” which connotes “impractical.” However, researchers and practitioners share responsibility for developing good theory that eventually serves to guide professional practice. Reflecting the challenges and opportunities inherent in the theory-to-practice phenomenon, we are reminded of Kurt Lewin’s (1945) dictum that “nothing is quite so practical as a good theory.” This important message is frequently repeated in the literature of management scholars (Van de Ven, 1989) and practitioners (Christensen & Raynor, 2003), and in the literatures of human resource development (Holton, 2002), psychology (Jensen, 1999), sociology (Cohen, 1989a), and in cross-disciplinary metatheory (Wilson, 1998). Given the apparent desirability of theory, few issues seem more significant to professional practice in HRD than examining areas of practice in need of greater understanding through theoretical research.

A brief illustration highlights the importance of theory to effective HRD practice. Few phenomena have had as profound an influence on all organizations and industries as quality improvement. Even though few workplaces today remain untouched by the quality movement, voluminous case histories and research since the 1980s reflect the many false starts and projects that have been abandoned by organizations that embarked on the quality journey without guidance from theory. Quality improvement theory explains and integrates the dimensions of this phenomenon that are crucial to an organization’s successful transformation to its philosophy and methods. Like the quality movement, recent efforts to initiate and sustain organizational learning are also necessarily guided by theory that integrates the organizational structures, processes, and methods that enable individuals, groups, and the organization to learn and share knowledge.

Examining areas of practice that are in need of greater understanding is vital to the continued effectiveness of HRD research and practice. Given rapid changes in the work that today’s employees are expected to perform, in the technology and methods they are expected to use, and given the continuous restructuring of organizations and of employer–employee relationships, there is no shortage of topics or practice areas in HRD for which new and better

theory is needed. Should theoretical research be devoted to developing more HRD theories, to theory-building methods, or to work in other areas? Researchers and practitioners alike have a vested interest in making judicious choices about the direction of future theoretical research. Thoughtful discussion of these issues is expected to contribute to meeting the needs for theory of the HRD profession as a whole.

References

- Azevedo, R. E., & McLean, G. N. (2002). HRD: A perspective on the search for a paradigm in a time of crisis. In T. M. Egan & S. A. Lynham (Eds.), *Academy of Human Resource Development Conference Proceedings* (pp. 750–757). Bowling Green, OH: Academy of Human Resource Development.
- Bacharach, S. B. (1989). Organizational theories: Some criteria for evaluation. *Academy of Management Review*, 14 (4), 496–515.
- Berger, P., & Luckman, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality*. London: Penguin.
- Blalock, H. M. (1969). *Theory construction*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Campbell, J. P. (1990). The role of theory in industrial and organizational psychology. In M. D. Dunnette & L. M. Hough (Eds.), *Handbook of industrial-organizational psychology: Vol. 2* (pp. 39–73). Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.
- Chamber, A. T. (1988). *Theory in the social sciences*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Christensen, C. M., & Raynor, M. E. (2003). Why hard-nosed executives should care about management theory. *Harvard Business Review*, 81 (9), 66–74.
- Cohen, B. P. (1989a). From simple knowledge structures to theories. In B. P. Cohen (Ed.), *Developing sociological knowledge: Theory and method* (2nd ed., pp. 177–197). Chicago: Nelson-Hall.
- Cohen, B. P. (1989b). A theory and its analysis. In B. P. Cohen (Ed.), *Developing sociological knowledge: Theory and method* (2nd ed., pp. 199–225). Chicago: Nelson-Hall.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology*, 13 (1), 3–20.
- Dubin, R. (1976). Theory building in applied areas. In M. D. Dunnette (Ed.), *Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology* (pp. 17–39). Skokie, IL: Rand McNally.
- Dubin, R. (1978). *Theory building* (rev. ed.). New York: Free Press.
- Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Building theory from case study research. *Academy of Management Review*, 14 (4), 532–550.
- Eisenhardt, K. M. (1995). Building theories from case study research. In G. P. Huber & A. H. Van de Ven (Eds.), *Longitudinal field research methods: Studying processes of organizational change* (pp. 65–90). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Freese, L. (1980). Formal theorizing. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 6, 187–212.
- Gioia, D. A., & Pitre, E. (1990). Multiparadigm perspective on theory building. *Academy of Management Review*, 15 (4), 584–602.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *Discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Gradous, D. B. (Ed.). (1989). *Systems theory applied to human resource development: Theory-to-practice monograph*. Alexandria, VA: American Society for Training and Development.
- Herzberg, F. (1966). *Work and the nature of man*. Cleveland: World Publishing.
- Holton, E. F. (1999). What does applied field really mean? *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 10 (4), 301–304.
- Holton, E. F. (2002). The mandate for theory in human resource development. *Human Resource Development Review*, 1 (1), 3–8.
- Holton, E. F. (2003). Where are the theory building research method articles? *Human Resource Development Review*, 2 (3), 227–228.

- Holton, E. F., Bates, R. A., & Ruona, W.E.A. (2000). Development of a generalized learning transfer system inventory. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 11 (4), 333–360.
- Jacobs, R. J. (1989). Systems theory applied to human resource development. In D. B. Gradous (Ed.), *Systems theory applied to human resource development: Theory-to-practice monograph*. Alexandria, VA: American Society for Training and Development.
- Jensen, P. S. (1999). Links among theory, research, and practice: Cornerstones of clinical scientific progress. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, 28 (4), 553–557.
- Jick, T. (1979). Triangulation in qualitative research. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 24, 590–599.
- Jones, J. E. (1999). *The process of structuring a community-based curriculum in a rural school setting: A grounded theory study*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.
- Kaplan, A. (1964). *The conduct of inquiry*. San Francisco: Chandler.
- Kerlinger, F. N. (1973). *Foundations of behavioral research* (2nd ed.). New York: Holt.
- Klimoski, R. (1991). Theory presentation in human resource management. *Human Resource Management Review*, 1 (4), 253–271.
- Kuchinke, K. P. (2000). Debates over the nature of HRD: An institutional theory perspective. *Human Resource Development International*, 3 (3), 279–283.
- Langley, A. (1999). Strategies for theorizing from process data. *Academy of Management Review*, 24 (4), 126–135.
- Lee, M. (2001). A refusal to define HRD. *Human Resource Development International*, 4 (3), 327–341.
- Lewin, K. (1945). The research center for group dynamics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. *Sociometry*, 8, 126–135.
- Lewis, M. W., & Grimes, A. J. (1999). Metatriangulation: Building theory from multiple paradigms. *Academy of Management Review*, 24 (4), 672–690.
- Lynham, S. A. (2000). Theory building in the human resource development profession. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 11 (2), 159–178.
- Lynham, S. A. (Ed.). (2002). *Theory building in applied disciplines. Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 4 (3), 221–241.
- Margolis, S. L., & Hansen, C. D. (2002). A model for organizational identity: Exploring the path to sustainability during change. *Human Resource Development Review*, 1 (3), 277–303.
- Marsick, V. J., & Watkins, K. (1990). *Informal and incidental learning*. London: Routledge.
- Marsick, V. J., & Watkins, K. (1993). *Sculpting the learning organization: Lessons in the art and science of systemic change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- McGoldrick, J., Stewart, J., & Watson, S. (2001). Theorizing human resource development. *Human Resource Development International*, 4 (3), 343–356.
- McLean, G. N. (1998). HRD: A three-legged stool, an octopus, or a centipede? *Human Resource Development International*, 1 (4), 375–377.
- McLean, G. N. (1999). Get out the drill, glue, and more legs. *Human Resource Development International*, 2 (1), 9–16.
- Miles, M., & Huberman, A. M. (1984). *Qualitative data analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mintzberg, H. (1979). An emerging strategy of “direct” research. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 24, 580–589.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Myers, N. F. (2000). *The experience of providing management consultation to supervisors and administrators for employee assistance program directors in higher education*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.
- Passmore, D. L. (1987). Adapting human resources to organizational change. In R. A. Swanson & D. B. Gradous (Eds.), *Human resources and organizational change: Theory-to-practice monograph* (pp. 11–34). Alexandria, VA: ASTD Press.
- Patterson, C. H. (1986). Preface. *Theories of counseling and psychotherapy* (4th ed., pp. xiii–xxvii). New York: HarperCollins.

- Pentland, B. T. (1999). Building process theory with narrative: From description to explanation. *Academy of Management Review*, 24 (4), 711–724.
- Reynolds, P. D. (1971). *A primer in theory construction*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.
- Ruona, W.E.A., & Roth, G. (Eds.). (2000). *Philosophical foundations of human resource development practice*. San Francisco: Berrett-Kohler.
- Sambrook, S. (2000). Talking of HRD. *Human Resource Development International*, 3 (2), 159–178.
- Short, D. C. (2000). Analyzing metaphor in human resource development. *Human Resource Development International*, 3 (3), 323–341.
- Sikora, P. B., Beaty, E. D., & Forward, J. (2004). Updating theory on organizational stress: The asynchronous multiple overlapping change model of workplace stress. *Human Resource Development Review*, 3 (1), 3–35.
- Stinchcombe, A. (1968). *Constructing social theories*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1994). Grounded theory methodology: An overview. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 273–285). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sutton, R. I., & Staw, B. M. (1995). What theory is not. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 40 (3), 371–384.
- Swanson, R. A. (1997). TADD Short (theory application deficit disorder). *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 8 (3), 193–195.
- Swanson, R. A. (1999). HRD theory, real or imagined? *Human Resource Development International*, 2 (1), 2–5.
- Swanson, R. A. (2000). Theory and other irrelevant matters. *Human Resource Development International*, 3 (3), 273–277.
- Swanson, R. A. (2001). Human resource development and its underlying theory. *Human Resource Development International*, 4 (3), 299–312.
- Swanson, R. A., & Gradous, D. B. (Eds.). (1987). *Human resources and organizational change: Theory-to-practice monograph*. Alexandria, VA: ASTD Press.
- Torraco, R. J. (1997). Theory building research methods. In R. A. Swanson & E. F. Holton (Eds.), *Human resource development research handbook* (pp. 114–137). San Francisco: Berrett-Kohler.
- Torraco, R. J. (2002). Research methods for theory building in applied disciplines: A comparative analysis. In S. A. Lynham (Ed.), *Theory Building in Applied Disciplines. Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 4 (3), 355–376.
- Turnbull, S. (2002a). Social construction research and theory building. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 4 (3), 317–334.
- Turnbull, S. (2002b). Bricolage as an alternative approach to human resource development theory building. *Human Resource Development Review*, 1 (1), 111–128.
- Van de Ven, A. H. (1989). Nothing is quite so practical as a good theory. *Academy of Management Review*, 14 (4), 486–489.
- Van Maanen, J. (1988). *Tales of the field: On writing ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Watson, T. J. (1994). *In search of management*. London: Routledge.
- Watson, T. J. (1997). Theorizing managerial work: A pragmatic pluralist approach to interdisciplinary research. *British Journal of Management*, 8, 3–8.
- Weick, K. E. (1989). Theory construction as disciplined imagination. *Academy of Management Review*, 14 (4), 516–531.
- Weick, K. E. (1995). What theory is not, theorizing is. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 40 (3), 385–390.
- Weinberger, L. (1998). Commonly held theories of human resource development. *Human Resource Development International*, 1 (1), 75–93.
- Whetten, D. A. (1989). What constitutes a theoretical contribution? *Academy of Management Review*, 14 (4), 490–495.

- Wilson, E. O. (1998). *Consilience: The unity of knowledge*. New York: Knopf.
- Wognum, I.A.M. (2000). Vertical integration of HRD within companies. In K. P. Kuchinke (Ed.), *Academy of Human Resource Development Conference Proceedings* (pp. 1083–1090). Baton Rouge, LA: AHRD.
- Yang, B. (2002). Meta-analysis research and theory building. In S. A. Lynham (Ed.), *Theory building in applied disciplines. Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 4 (3), 296–316.
- Yin, R. (1984). *Case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Richard J. Torraco is associate professor and coordinator of the Graduate Program in Human Resource Development, Department of Educational Administration, University of Nebraska.

