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## **Constructing a Manuscript: Distinguishing Integrative Literature Reviews and Conceptual and Theory Articles**

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# Constructing a Manuscript: Distinguishing Integrative Literature Reviews and Conceptual and Theory Articles

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A reviewer for *HRDR* once asked the editors, “How do I know whether this is an integrative literature review or a conceptual paper?” When we explored the submissions we were receiving at *HRDR*, we realized that the majority of the manuscripts were really conceptual papers, but the authors often presented their work as an integrative literature review. Torracco (2005) wrote a most useful article that described how to write an integrative literature review. After that, many authors began framing every article submitted to *HRDR* in that format, even if they were not writing an integrative literature review. However, *HRDR* publishes several types of articles and, as Torracco (2005) noted, the editors “continue to seek well-written review [and other types of] articles that yield provocative, new perspectives on key issues in the field” (p. 356).

The aims and scope of the journal (<http://www.sagepub.com/journalsProdAims.nav?prodId=Journal201506>) call for “submissions that provide new theoretical insights to advance our understanding of human resource development. Such papers may include syntheses of existing bodies of theory, new substantive theories, exploratory conceptual models, taxonomies and typology developed as foundations for theory, treatises in formal theory construction, papers on the history of theory, critique of theory that includes alternative research propositions, metatheory, and integrative literature reviews with strong theoretical implications. Papers addressing foundations of HRD might address philosophies of HRD, historical foundations, definitions of the field, conceptual organization of the field, and ethical foundations.” Of these, the two most common types submitted are conceptual/theoretical manuscripts and integrative literature reviews. This article will describe these two categories of manuscripts and will conclude with a call to prospective authors to consider other types of manuscripts, such as historical and methodological works, in their future submissions as well.

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## Integrative Literature Review

Torraco (2005) provides a comprehensive description of what an integrative literature review is and how to conceptualize and construct such a manuscript. In short, an “integrative literature review is a form of research that reviews, critiques, and synthesizes representative literature on a topic in an integrated way such that new frameworks and perspectives on the topic are generated” (Torraco, 2005, p. 356). From the current editors’ perspective, what characterizes an integrative literature review is the concentrated focus on a topical area and the presence of a methodology.

Although some integrative literature reviews may encompass more than one body of literature, more frequently they are truly exploring the depth of a major topic within the field. Perhaps another way to think of an integrative literature review is to consider them as seminal works audits or systematic literature reviews. In other words, integrative literature reviews are distinctive because they systematically trace much (or maybe even all) of the literature on a selected topic back to its roots. As Torraco (2005) notes, sometimes the topic is relatively new and the literature selected can truly span the life of the topic while sometimes the topic is long-standing, in which case the literature selected is more often limited in chronological or conceptual scope as identified by the reviewer. For example, Burke and Hutchins (2007) narrowed the scope of their integrative literature review of transfer of training by identifying the key theoretical factors that served as a guide for their analysis of the interdisciplinary literature.

Perhaps the most important distinction of an integrative literature review is that it can be considered, in and of itself, a form of research that can stand alone (Yorks, 2008). Although not empirical per se, an integrative literature review does a systematic and replicable study of the literature. As such, it has a methodology section. Egan, Upton, and Lynham’s (2006) article in *HRDR* provides an outstanding example of a methodology that is clear, detailed, and—to the extent possible given rapidly changing online databases—replicable.

It is not sufficient to say that certain databases were used and certain keywords were used; it is unlikely that another researcher would be able to find largely the same results. A hallmark of a good integrative literature review is that it has a methodology that clearly outlines (a) *where* the literature was found (databases and search engines), (b) *when* the search was conducted (database contents change frequently), (c) *who* conducted the search, (d) *how* the literature was found (keyword combinations), (e) *what* number of articles appeared from each combination of keywords and the final count of included articles (data set), and (f) *why* some articles were chosen for inclusion over others (selection criteria). We rarely see such level of detail in original manuscripts submitted to the journal, yet it is this level of detail that makes the method meaningful enough for inclusion in the article.

As a means to keep track of the data, Torraco (2005) also suggested that authors consider using some type of table or appendix to list the sources of literature that were included in the review. Even if such an organizing device is not incorporated into the manuscript, guidelines for preparing literature reviews often suggest using such tools in the analysis of the literature (e.g., Pan, 2004).

## Conceptual and Theory Manuscripts

Under the umbrella of conceptual and theory manuscripts, we find a broad array of article types (e.g., taxonomy development, exploratory conceptual modeling, critique of theory). As a superset of these manuscripts, I include theory building. Much of the conceptual and theoretical work done in this genre of manuscripts is part of the broader process of building theory. Storberg-Walker (2003) describes an approach to theory building in which conceptual models are the result of engaging in problem formulation and theory building, whereas theory is the outcome of engaging in theory building and designing and conducting research. Thus, conceptual models are linked to theory building and theory building leads to new theories tested through research. As such, these types of manuscripts serve an important function within the broader theory-building and research process.

Rocco and Plakhotnik (2009) discuss conceptual and theoretical frameworks as they support empirical studies, but the essence of each still applies to conceptual and theoretical manuscripts. Thus, these types of articles generally have similar characteristics in terms of structure. Conceptual frameworks make connections between multiple bodies of literature and knowledge bases to make claims toward a particular argument. Theoretical frameworks do the same thing, but they are more focused on particular theories (rather than concepts) that are connected to make a claim toward investigating or developing a theory. In other words, the authors of these manuscripts are very selective about choosing literature that supports the argument being presented.

Other manuscripts that fit within the conceptual and theory genre of *HRDR* journal articles are those that conceptually explore the foundations of the field or critique theory. For example, Callahan and Dunne de Dávila (2004) explore the underpinnings of the field of HRD and offer an alternative heuristic for developing theory within and for the field. Bierema (2009) critiques the dominant masculine rationality that serves as the foundation for much of the work conducted in the field of HRD. These types of manuscripts use, and sometimes challenge, theory to offer alternative ways to consider implications confronting the field. As with conceptual and theoretical framework articles, the authors of these manuscripts do not claim to conduct a thorough and detailed search of the literature to provide a data set; instead, they present carefully selected literature consistent with the premise of the manuscript.

This, then, highlights what is perhaps the most significant characteristic that distinguishes manuscripts in the conceptual and theory section from integrative literature reviews. In general, conceptual and theoretical manuscripts do not have methodology sections. There is no argument being made that the broad scope of a body of literature has been explored and new findings are emerging from an analysis. Instead, authors are selectively choosing key pieces of literature that support a particular perspective that they are putting forth for consideration. For example, Jacobs and Park (2009) argue that current depictions of workplace learning are composed of incompatible levels of discourse, and they propose an alternative conceptual framework of workplace learning from which to explore the construct more meaningfully. Although there is, appropriately, no methods section, the authors clearly use concepts and theories in targeted ways to construct their argument.

## What Do They All Have in Common?

Although some of the manuscripts in *HRDR* have methods and some do not, all of the articles submitted to *HRDR* are, in essence, some type of review of the literature. As such, they should have some commonalities. First, they should offer something new, whether reframing an existing idea or constructing a new one; the innovativeness and importance of said idea should be used to capture the attention and interest of the reader. Second, they should describe the purpose and key concepts of the manuscript clearly and early in the paper. Third, they should critically analyze existing literature. Fourth, they should synthesize the presentation of the literature; a paragraph-by-paragraph tour of one article after another is mind-numbing to read and not particularly insightful. And, finally, they should provide motivation for others to act on the work presented in the manuscript, whether through research or practice, by providing implications for HRD.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to share some of the similarities and distinctions between integrative literature reviews and conceptual and theory articles that are commonly published in *HRDR*. We want to see more well-constructed integrative literature reviews and we continue to seek and publish conceptual and theory manuscripts. Within the realm of conceptual and theory manuscripts, there are a whole host of manuscripts that could be submitted but that we do not often see. I discuss two such types of manuscripts here, historical and methodological; in the editorial for this issue of *HRDR*, the Editor provides more detail of another type of manuscript desired by the editorial team—theory building.

Historical works are rarely submitted to *HRDR* for publication consideration, and yet they are so important for the field to have. Although we are a relatively new field, there have been substantive changes to the way we approach the study and application of our trade. What is our history with respect to, for example, training, leadership development, career planning, or gender? How have different sectors of society historically engaged in work that informs HRD practices today? Who are the early (i.e., pre-1980) HRD scholars (or even earlier scholars from other fields) that informed the development of our field; how did their influence shape the field and does it continue to do so?

Another genre of work that we infrequently see is theoretical treatments of research methodologies. As Van Maanen, Sorenson, and Mitchell (2007) note, “methods without theoretical substance can be sterile, representing technical sophistication in isolation” (p. 1146). What are the theoretical and epistemological implications of adopting different methodological designs and tools within HRD research? What are the theoretical underpinnings of innovative, new methods that might inform HRD research and practice?

There are many more potential types of articles that would be welcomed in a theoretical and conceptual journal such as *HRDR*. Be creative and bold in the selection of topics and structures for manuscripts you are considering sending to *HRDR*, and

always feel free to contact the editors to see if your innovative paper idea might be welcomed for review. Hopefully these suggestions and examples offered here will result in the continued submission of interesting and well-developed ideas that can serve to further the theoretical rigor in the field of HRD.

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## Bio

**Jamie L. Callahan** is an Associate Professor in the Educational Human Resource Development Program at Texas A&M University. She has held multiple positions in the Academy of Human Resource Development, including being a member of the Board of Directors. Her primary research interests focus on emotion management and its relationship to a variety of organizational phenomena. Her work has appeared in journals such as *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, *Human Resource Development International*, *Human Relations*, and *Organization Studies*; she has also co-edited a book entitled *Critical Issues in HRD: A New Agenda for the Twenty-First Century*.