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The Ongoing Quest for Theory-Building Research Methods Articles

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We cannot overemphasize the importance of the need for HRD scholars to contribute to the development of theory-building research methods in the social sciences. Without an understanding of how and why such methods support theory building and how to apply them productively, we risk stagnating as a field. In particular, we need more scholarly discourse about how to creatively apply quantitative (Wacker, 2004), qualitative (Dirkx, 2008), and mixed research (Creswell & Creswell, 2005) methods to build theory.

Lynham's (2002) monograph *The General Method of Theory-Building Research in Applied Disciplines* and Torraco's (2005a) chapter on research methods for theory development are excellent examples of work generated by HRD scholars, but they remain among the few. Lamenting over the first seven issues of *Human Resource Development Review*, Holton (2003) noted that but one article addressing methods for theory building was published during that time. Holton called for more scholarship that proposes and tests new research methodologies, adapts other existing methods from other fields to HRD (e.g., sociology), and investigates the field's research methods as possible means for generating more study in this area. Little seems to have changed, however, as we continue to see scant interest in this essential type of article at the Journal.

One useful venue for stimulating more thinking about developing these research methods may be one of the *HRDR's* features, the Instructor's Corner. The Instructor's Corner, albeit nonrefereed, may be one productive means of addressing the how-to of theory building. We would like to see articles where specific research methods are linked to theory-building efforts. For example, there is a burgeoning literature where case studies (an example of a mixed method) have been used to develop theories addressing topics ranging from group process (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) to cognitive development (Piaget, 1950). However, with few notable exceptions (e.g., Dooley, 2002; Ellinger, Watkins, & Marsick, 2005), there is little clear direction as to how to actually go about building theory from cases.

The same argument could be used to support a number of additional quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method approaches to theory building. From the quantitative realm, we would be most interested in contributions covering issues such as how exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis and other types of multivariate analytic approaches could be used to build theory and why. Again, care must be taken to justify why such an approach to theory building might be warranted over other approaches. Discussion about how issues related to quantitative research, such as effect sizes and confidence intervals, statistical versus practical significance, common method variance, and nonresponse bias, could affect theory building would be informative. In the next

issue of *HRDR*, for instance, I will write an Instructor's Corner article about the potential dangers of common method variance, its possible problems for theory building, and what to do to minimize its likelihood for the sake of better theory development.

For mixed method approaches, where both quantitative and qualitative data are collected, Q Methodology (Stephenson, 1953) has particular promise for providing a qualitative, but statistical, approach to more fully understanding the subjectivity of any situation, such as perceptions of a corporate downsizing, attitudes toward a new corporate policy, and perspectives about the meaning of life (Brown, 1996). Explaining how we might use Q Methodology for theory building, and why, could make a significant contribution to theory building in the field. Ethnographic research, content analysis, and surveys could be other mixed method examples if both types of data are collected (Creswell & Creswell, 2005).

With respect to qualitative approaches, phenomenological, grounded theory, social constructivist, biographical, and historical methods are well-known avenues to theory building (Torraco, 2005). Nevertheless, one can be hard pressed to find well-written, precise, how-to articles about ways to use these methods to build theory. We especially encourage articles examining less studied methods in the field of HRD (e.g., historical and biographical) that can lead future research and practice.

What we would like to see. For the Instructor's Corner, we would like to see the following elements of a theory-building research method article:

1. Write in accessible language for both scholars and a more general HRD audience (e.g., practitioners); we always must keep our readers in mind.
2. Describe the research method or technique in question and discuss how it is related to theory building.
3. Explain the advantages and disadvantages of using the method and justify when and *why* you recommend its use over competing methods.
4. Explain precisely and clearly the steps of *how* to use the method to build theory.
5. Provide a number of appropriate, concrete examples anchored in the field of HRD to support your discussion.
6. Conclude with a list of guiding questions or a checklist with step-by-step directions for using the method to build theory.

Theory building is vital to any field, particularly an emerging one like HRD. New theory guides the development of empirical research that tests the theory in real-life contexts like the workplace. New theory, too, can be applied to improve practice, which can, in turn, guide further theory building and empirical research. Indeed, a cycle of ongoing theoretical development is necessary to provide useful, more powerful lenses for understanding the rich complexities of human existence.

Please send either Jamie or me your ideas, and we can work to move the field forward from there.

Thomas G. Reio, Jr.
Editor

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