

Towards Further Development of HRD as an Academic Discipline: Comparing HRD Research Published in HRD and Mainstream Journals

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This study reviews 125 HRD-focused articles published in two major HRD journals and ten mainstream SSCI journals across a six-year timeframe (1998-2003). It compares theoretical frameworks and methodologies employed in these different outlets, also looking at differences between US and European articles. Several differences in theoretical perspectives emerged. Methodology in US and mainstream journals was deemed more rigorous than in European and HRD journals. Generally, US/European differences were more prominent than HRD/mainstream ones.

Keywords: Bibliographical Analysis, Academic Discipline of HRD, Professionalization

Over the last two decades, Human Resource Development (HRD) has managed to establish itself as an academic discipline to a considerable extent, certainly in North America and Western Europe, but increasingly in Asia as well. This is witnessed by, amongst others, the creation of a multitude of degree programs, the growth of the University Forum for HRD and the Academy of HRD, the range of international research conferences being organized, and the proliferation of, to date, four HRD journals.

Nonetheless, it has never been easy for HRD as an academic discipline at large to be regarded with equal respect as, for example, industrial and organizational psychology, industrial relations, educational sciences, or business and management studies. The fact that no HRD journal, so far, has been accredited Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) status is indicative in this respect and, moreover, it also prevents HRD from gaining higher academic standing. In part, this is because the HRD journals are relatively young (three of them are eight years old or less, only one of them sixteen years), in part it may be because other SSCI-accredited journals also publish HRD relevant articles.

Several reviews of the HRD literature, particularly with respect to its topics, publication outlets and methodologies, have been published so far (e.g., by Van Hoof & Mulder, 1997; Sleezer & Sleezer, 1998; Hixon & McClernon, 1999; Donovan & Marsick, 2000; Garavan, Gunnigle, & Morley, 2000; McGoldrick, Stewart, & Watson, 2002; Dooley, 2002). Others have offered more specific reviews, for example, on statistical methodologies employed (Williams, 2001) or on feminist research influences in HRD (Bierema & Cseh, 2003). There have been few systematic attempts, however, to compare HRD research published in the major HRD journals to HRD research published in mainstream journals with SSCI accreditation. As Dooley (2002) suggested, analyzing such differences would enable the HRD field to further develop as an academic discipline. Therefore, it seems important to provide a critical assessment of the field's research accumulation and its potential across both types of outlets. In addition, no existing reviews looked explicitly at differences between European versus US outlets, although McGoldrick, Stewart and Watson (2002) alluded to the importance of doing so. Finally, the review studies so far have paid little attention to the practical relevance of the academic work in HRD, as reflected also in terms of outlets (i.e., practice oriented and academic journals). For HRD to gain more academic status yet not become disconnected from practice (a criticism directed to more established management areas), it seems timely to assess the availability and orientation of HRD research across these different outlets as well.

The present study provides a systematic review of the two major HRD journals and HRD research in mainstream SSCI journals. It aims to provide a comparative assessment of these different outlets in terms of the theoretical frameworks employed and the methodologies in use. In doing so, the study aims to help the HRD community identify research directions that could not only bring HRD journals to the attention of non-HRD scholars but also facilitate the publication of HRD work in the mainstream literature. The following *research questions* will be investigated:

1. To what extent do HRD journals and mainstream journals use different theoretical perspectives on HRD?
2. To what extent do they use different methodological approaches in studying HRD?
3. To what extent do US and European journals differ in these respects?

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Methodology

Journal Selection and Timeframe

The two oldest and most established HRD journals on both sides of the Atlantic were selected, namely Human Resource Development Quarterly and Human Resource Development International. To represent mainstream organizational research, both macro and micro-oriented journals published in North America and Europe were identified. The American journals included in the present analysis are Administrative Science Quarterly, Academy of Management Journal, Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, Journal of Applied Psychology and Personnel Psychology. The European journals are Organization Studies, Journal of Management Studies, Journal of Organizational Behavior, Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology and Personnel Review.

The mainstream journals were chosen on the basis of impact on their intended audience. Impact was defined as scholarly impact, assessed by several criteria. The first criterion involved the inclusion of journals listed under the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI). The second criterion was inclusion in previous review studies (e.g., Wasti & Robert, 2004), which selected journals based on ranking studies that have used a variety of measures such as nominations by academics and the like (e.g., Zickar & Highhouse, 2001). However, it should be noted that these studies were typically from the U.S., and were primarily dealing with American journals. Finally, informal consultations with colleagues were undertaken to determine the subset of journals believed to adequately represent mainstream organizational research in both sides of the Atlantic.

The timeframe for the study was January 1998 through December 2003. The beginning date for this review was determined by reference to the emergence of Human Resource Development International, representing the first European journal devoted specifically to HRD.

Article Selection

The relevant issues of the journals were scanned by a keyword search of the article title and abstract using the Web of Science (SSCI) database. To identify articles dealing primarily with HRD the following keywords were employed: HRD, human resource development, human resource developer, training needs, training design, training evaluation, learning transfer, transfer of training, training effectiveness, individual development, individual learning, employee development, employee learning, organization development, organizational learning, career development, workplace learning, performance improvement. Non-refereed pieces, such as book reviews, letters to the editor, editorials were not considered for the sample. Each article's reference information (if necessary the abstract) was then reviewed by one of the authors to ensure content adequacy; during this elimination process articles in non-work settings were also excluded from the sample. Given the research question involved a geographical comparison, only articles published by North American authors (operationalized as institutional affiliation) for the U.S. journals and European authors for the European journals were included in the final analysis. In the case of multiple authors, the affiliation of the first author was taken into account. The total number of articles in mainstream journals in the present sample was 58, that in HRD journals 67, making for a total of N=125.

Establishing Coding Dimensions and Reliability

All articles were initially coded with respect to their source (journal), their date, the authors' institutional affiliation with respect to country as well as academic unit (up to first three authors). Next, articles were content analyzed with respect a number of substantive as well as methodological dimensions, which are presented in detail below.

With respect to substantive dimensions, all articles were coded for their primary topic within the field of HRD. The list of topics was derived from the categories that the Academy of HRD used in 2005 to group the papers for its annual research conference. In addition, every article was coded for whether the study was a single-country versus a comparative study involving two or more countries.

In order to evaluate the underlying perspective on HRD, first an assessment of whether the authors viewed the main goal of HRD to be learning versus performance was made (Yorks, 2005). An article was coded as a "learning" article if the focus was on individual or collective learning or development, personal or professional change, well-being, motivation or commitment. On the other hand, if the article focused on individual or collective performance, effectiveness, efficiency, productivity, or cost, the article was coded as a "performance" article. In addition, each article was coded as to whether a humanistic ("soft") or a managerial ("hard") perspective was adopted (Legge, 2004). If an article emphasized the quantitative, calculative, and business strategic aspects of developing the headcount resource in as "rational" a way as for any other economic factor, the article was coded as adopting a managerial approach. Conversely, if the article endorsed employees as valued assets, a source of competitive advantage through their commitment, adaptability and high quality, it was coded as adopting a humanistic approach. It should be noted that these views are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and therefore, every article was evaluated in terms of its adoption of both learning and performance as a main goal of HRD, as well as a hard and a soft perspective with respect to human resource development.

The extent to which an article took a critical versus a “mainstream” approach was evaluated by reference to whether or not any attention was paid to issues of diversity (e.g., women, homosexuals, handicapped, colored, marginalized (sub)cultures, poor, etc), left-wing ideology (e.g., capitalist hegemony, exploitation of low educated workers, lack of workplace democracy, etc) and/or dysfunctional organizational processes (e.g., disenfranchising, ostracizing, harassment, bullying etc.). Furthermore, in order to evaluate practice orientation, we assessed whether or not practitioners were given guidance by academics in HRD in the form of prescriptive/practical implications. If articles devoted an entire section or several paragraphs to discuss prescriptive/practical implications, they were coded as prescriptive.

The article’s approach to contextualization in the use of theory was evaluated with respect to its treatment of HRD theoretical frameworks, models, techniques or practices. On the one hand, articles could be coded as expressing no or passing mention of the context in which the study is embedded, and treating HRD theories, models, techniques or practices as universally applicable. On the other hand, articles could be coded as showing a moderate to strong concern regarding contextualization, treating HRD theories, models, techniques or practices as an indigenous matter and advocating indigenous theory and measurement, or at least approaching extant HRD theories, models, techniques or practices with a priori or post hoc cultural or institutional arguments.

In order to differentiate the methodological orientations that may be evident across journals each article was coded for its primary research strategy. This coding dimension drew on the analysis of Scandura and Williams (2000), which involved a systematic review of the methodological rigor of empirical articles published in three major American management journals over the past decades and the work of Arnold (1996), which specifically evaluated the HRD literature. This coding, broadly speaking, differentiated between non-empirical pieces and empirical pieces, and among the latter group, between qualitative versus quantitative strategies.

With respect to methodological rigor, authors’ concerns for validity and reliability were assessed. With respect to quantitative empirical work, internal validity, construct validity, statistical conclusion validity and the external validity concerns were evaluated. Drawing on the work of Scandura and Williams (2000), internal validity was assessed with reference to the research strategy (e.g., survey vs. laboratory studies) as well as the timeframe for the study (i.e., cross-sectional versus longitudinal). External validity was inferred from sampling practices, such as type of sample (e.g., random or convenience), response rate and occupation of respondents (e.g., student samples versus a variety of organizational samples). Construct validity was evaluated by reference to whether reliability and validity information provided regarding the measurement of constructs. Finally, statistical conclusion validity was assessed with reference to sample size and data analytic approaches. For qualitative studies, each article was coded for the extent of triangulation undertaken, paying special emphasis on method (combining qualitative with quantitative data), source (combining a variety of qualitative data collection techniques), analyst (using multiple interpreters) and theory (using multiple perspectives for interpretation) triangulation. The rigor of qualitative data analysis was further assessed by evaluating whether the authors acknowledged their subjectivity and explicitly dealt with throughout the research process and by further evidence of questioning interpretations, searching for rival explanations or negative cases rather than corroborating material (Patton, 2004; Sandberg, 2005). Qualitative articles were also coded for their data analytic procedures, and were classified as using a grounded theory approach, pattern matching, abductive analysis (alternating inductive and deductive analyses) or textual analysis.

Two research assistants coded the articles constituting the sample of the present study. Initially, both the authors and the coders, using the coding manual developed for the purposes of the investigation, coded eight randomly selected articles. In addition to serving as a training session for the coders, the authors were thereby able to identify patterns in the discrepancies and jointly revised the coding manual to reflect shared agreement regarding the meaning of coding categories for each dimension. Next, to assess the reliability of the coding system, 30 articles were chosen at random as a pilot sample, and each article was coded independently by both coders and at least one author. The codes for the 30 articles were then compared, and the percent agreement was calculated for each coding category as an assessment of inter-rater reliability between the two coders (Riffe, Kacy, & Fico, 1998). Although percent agreement was acceptable (> 70%) for the majority of the coding dimensions (25 out of the 29 dimensions), agreement was marginally lower on four (codings for the soft approach, practical implications, qualitative validity and data analytic approach). The authors and the coders discussed all discrepancies at length, particularly focusing on the four problematic dimensions. After finalizing the coding guidelines, the rest of the articles were randomly distributed to one of the two coders. Each article was then coded independently, and a final data file compiled by merging the two separate sets of article codings. CROSSTABS were used to analyze differences between journal outlets.

Table 1
Mainstream and HRD Journals Compared on Theoretical Aspects, for US and Europe

	Mainstream Journals		HRD Journals	
	US (%)	Europe (%)	US (%)	Europe (%)
<i>1a. Main Topic Studied (n=123)</i>				
Organizational Development / Learning	25.9	29.0	11.8	19.4
Training & Development	14.8	9.7	29.4	3.2
Learning (Team / Individual)	33.3	9.7	17.6	0.0
HRD as a Discipline	0.0	3.2	8.8	38.7
Broader HR Practices	0.0	0.0	14.7	3.2
Continuing Professional Development	3.7	6.5	5.9	3.2
Management Development / Learning	0.0	12.9	0.0	6.5
Career Development	3.7	9.7	2.9	0.0
Performance (Improvement)	7.4	3.2	0.0	3.2
Strategic HR Development	0.0	6.5	0.0	3.2
HR Technology / Instruments	3.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
E-Learning / Distance Education	0.0	3.2	0.0	0.0
Other	7.4	6.5	8.8	19.4
	100	100	100	100
<i>1b. Main Goal of HRD (n=123)</i>				
Learning	81.5	77.4	52.9	67.7
Performance	70.4	41.9	58.8	45.2
<i>1c. Main Approach to HRD (n=123)</i>				
Managerial	29.6	25.8	23.5	19.4
Humanistic	40.7	45.2	47.1	58.1
<i>1d. Use of Theory (n=122)</i>				
Universalistic	92.3	87.1	91.2	61.3
Contextualized	7.7	12.9	8.8	38.7
	100	100	100	100
<i>1e. Critical Discourse in HRD (n=123)</i>				
Attention to Diversity	7.4	16.1	14.7	0.0
Left-Wing Ideology	3.7	12.9	5.9	6.5
Dysfunctional Processes	0.0	0.0	2.9	3.2
<i>1f. Practice Orientation of HRD Studies (n=123)</i>				
Discussion of Prescriptive Implications	51.9	32.3	67.6	41.9
None or Symbolic Mentioning	48.1	67.7	32.4	58.1
	100	100	100	100

Results

The main findings for differences in *theoretical perspectives* are summarized in Table 1. As indicated under subheading 1a, the four most popular research topics across the board were organizational development and learning (especially in mainstream journals), training and development (especially in the US), individual and team learning (especially in the US) and HRD as a discipline (mostly due to HRDI).

Overall, mainstream journals emphasized learning as the main goal of HRD more than HRD journals do ($\chi^2 = 5.353$, $p < .05$) (see under subheading 1b). As far as performance as main goal is concerned, US journals emphasized it more than European journals did ($\chi^2 = 5.139$, $p < .05$). This was due to geographical differences among the mainstream journals ($\chi^2 = 4.718$, $p < .05$) rather than among the HRD journals.

No significant differences either geographically or among mainstream vs. HRD journals became apparent in terms of articles using a managerial or humanistic approach to HRD (see under subheading 1c). If anything, HRDI seemed slightly more humanistic and less managerial.

Table 2. *Mainstream and HRD Journals Compared on Methodological Aspects, for US and Europe*

	Mainstream Journals		HRD Journals	
	US (%)	Europe (%)	US (%)	Europe (%)
2a. Primary Research Strategy (n=123)				
Speculative / Library Review	3.7	6.5	5.9	6.5
Conceptual / Theoretical	0.0	25.8	2.9	22.6
Instrument Construction	0.0	0.0	11.8	3.2
Case Study / Ethnography	11.1	41.9	20.6	48.4
Field Survey / Questionnaire	44.4	22.6	41.2	16.1
Experiment (Lab / Field)	14.8	3.2	5.9	0.0
Archival Study (Secondary Data)	25.9	0.0	8.8	0.0
Other	0.0	0.0	2.9	3.2
	100	100	100	100
2b. Sampling Method (n=99)				
Unspecified / Convenience	80.8	85.7	70.0	90.9
Whole Population	11.5	4.8	10.0	0.0
Random Selection	3.8	4.8	6.7	0.0
Purposive Selection	0.0	4.8	10.0	4.5
Combination of Above Methods	3.8	0.0	3.3	4.5
	100	100	100	100
2c. Concern for Reliability and Validity in Quantitative Studies (n=58)				
No Information	9.1	25.0	13.6	33.3
Only Reliability	63.6	25.0	45.5	50.0
Also Validity	27.3	50.0	40.9	16.7
	100	100	100	100
2d. Concern for Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Studies (n=40/41)				
Method Triangulation	66.7	0.0	37.5	5.9
Source/Analyst Triangulation	100.0	92.3	75.0	87.5
Theory Triangulation	33.3	15.4	12.5	6.3
Qualitative Validity	33.3	7.7	12.5	12.5
2e. Data Analysis in Quantitative Studies (n=56)				
Not Clear	0.0	0.0	5.3	16.7
Descriptive Statistics	0.0	0.0	5.3	0.0
Univariate Statistics	78.3	75.0	68.4	50.0
Multivariate Statistics	8.7	25.0	21.1	16.7
Advanced Statistics	13.0	0.0	0.0	16.7
	100	100	100	100
2f. Data Analysis in Qualitative Studies (n=38)				
Not Clear	0.0	23.1	0.0	20.0
Grounded Theory	0.0	61.5	57.1	60.0
Pattern Matching	33.3	0.0	42.9	13.3
Abductive Analysis	33.3	7.7	0.0	0.0
Textual Analysis	33.3	7.7	0.0	6.7
	100	100	100	100

As far as contextualized use of theory is concerned, on the whole, US journals appeared to be more universalistic than European ones ($\chi^2 = 6.533$, $p < .05$) (see under subheading 1d). Also, mainstream journals seemed to be more universalistic than HRD journals ($\chi^2 = 3.357$, $p < .10$). HRDI was found to publish more contextualized articles than HRDQ ($\chi^2 = 8.159$, $p < .01$).

In terms of critical discourse going on in the field of HRD (see under subheading 1e), not much like it could be found. Overall, US journals seemed to pay a little more attention to diversity and less to left-wing ideology compared to their European counterparts. Mainstream journals seemed to publish more articles with reference to

diversity issues and to left-wing ideology, but fewer with respect to dysfunctional organizational processes. However, no chi-square tests were possible because of low numbers per cell.

The practice orientation of HRD studies was found to differ geographically. Articles in US journals discussed prescriptive implications much more than European studies did ($\chi^2 = 6.830, p < .01$).

The main findings for differences in *methodological approaches* are summarized in Table 2. In terms of the primary research strategy used, on the whole, European journals published more conceptual work as well as more qualitative studies, whereas US journals were more quantitatively oriented, with more surveys, experiments, and archival studies (see under subheading 2a). Geography rather than journal type seemed to drive the main differences, although instrument construction was restricted to HRD journals. No chi-square tests were possible because of small cell sizes. The same was true for the data about sampling methods employed, even if US journals (especially HRDQ) seemed less inclined towards using convenience samples or providing no information about sampling (see under subheading 2b).

In their concern for reliability and validity, quantitative studies in US journals seemed more likely to provide adequate reliability information (see under subheading 2c). No big differences emerged between mainstream and HRD journals although, again, no chi-squares could be calculated. Although less qualitative work came out of the US, these authors tended to pay more attention to the validity and reliability of qualitative studies, especially method triangulation, compared to their European counterparts ($\chi^2 = 11.431, p < .01$) (see under subheading 2d). Even if the difference was not statistically significant, mainstream journals seemed to pay more attention to the rigor of qualitative work, compared to HRD journals.

Comparing data analysis procedures, no chi-square tests were possible because of small cell sizes. However, mainstream journals had no quantitative articles with unclear data analysis (see under subheading 2e). US journals had no articles with unclear qualitative data analysis, whereas one fifth of the European articles were unclear in this respect (see under subheading 2f). US mainstream journals seemed to avoid grounded theory studies, whereas European journals eschewed pattern-matching approaches. However, HRDQ seemed to publish more pattern-matching studies than HRDI did.

Conclusions, Limitations, and Recommendations

This study has reviewed 125 HRD-focused articles in search of theoretical and methodological differences between HRD journals and mainstream journals across two sides of the Atlantic. In terms of the theoretical perspectives used, mainstream journals were found to emphasize learning more and US journals to focus on performance more as the main goal of HRD. Furthermore, US and mainstream journals seemed to be more universalistic and therefore less contextualized in their use of theory. US and HRD journals more often discussed prescriptive implications than European and mainstream ones. Critical discourse in HRD was found to be rather scarce. As far as the methodological approaches were concerned, European journals produced more conceptual and qualitative studies, whereas US journals offered more surveys, experiments, and archival studies. European journals used more convenience samples or provided no sampling information, whereas US journals more often presented reliability and validity information. Mainstream and US journals had no articles with unclear data analysis, whereas one fifth of qualitative articles in European journals had unclear data analysis. All in all, the major differences in methodological rigor represent geography (US/Europe) rather than journal type (HRD/mainstream).

A number of limitations have to be taken into account in valuing these conclusions. They are based on a relatively small and preliminary sample, preventing the use of more sophisticated statistical analyses. Besides sample size, a possible limitation of this study is the limited selection of journals. Although the two most established HRD journals on both sides of the Atlantic were selected, one might argue that journals such as *Management Learning* or *Adult Education Quarterly* could serve as welcome additions to the sample. As far as mainstream organizational research is concerned, journals such as *Human Resource Management* and the *International Journal of Human Resource Management* might be included in the sample as well. The reason why these journals were not selected for the present study is partly their lack of impact on the broader scientific community and partly our lack of resources. It is intended, however, to extend the sample to the four journals mentioned above for further analysis. Still, only English language journals are selected and one needs to be aware that other language literatures would probably yield different findings. A final issue lies in the operationalization of HRD for our keyword search (article sampling). Only a limited number of search terms was employed in order to prevent the sample from becoming unmanageable. The inclusion of more and/or other search terms would probably affect the findings as well. However, care was taken to use those keywords that would be accepted by the greater HRD research community.

Notwithstanding these limitations, there is a lot here for the HRD discipline to begin thinking about. Is there (and should there be) one well-defined common set of theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches that HRD researchers adhere to? The present study casts some doubt over this assumption. Especially differences

between US and European journals have become apparent. Should European scholars adapt more to the US model of scholarly research, or do the two approaches complement each other?

Differences between HRD and mainstream journals were less obvious than those between US and European journals, but still there are some areas that need further exploration. HRD journals seemed to publish more studies using contextualized theory than the more universalistic mainstream journals did. They also paid more attention to prescriptive implications of the research studies. The majority of HRD scholars will probably see as many positive elements in these respects as others may see negative points. However, it is unlikely that they will embrace the fact that paucity of information about data analysis was the most conspicuous methodological shortcoming distinguishing HRD journals from the mainstream ones. There may be scope for learning by authors in HRD journals (and their reviewers and editorial boards) here; learning about the methodological rigor demanded by mainstream journals.

Contributions to New Knowledge in HRD

Although a number of smaller bibliographical analyses of the HRD literature have been published, few systematic attempts have been made to compare HRD journals with mainstream SSCI journals, nor have there been any reviews that looked explicitly at differences between European versus US journals. The present study aimed to fill these gaps. The geographical differences (US/Europe) turned out to be most important, although a number of theoretical and methodological differences between HRD and mainstream journals emerged as well. The study urges the discipline of HRD to engage in a discussion about improving the standards of rigorous research. It indicates the areas in which such improvement needs to occur. It also helps the HRD community identify research directions that can bring HRD journals to the attention of non-HRD scholars and facilitate the publication of HRD work in the mainstream literature. This can contribute to the HRD journals receiving SSCI accreditation and, therefore, more academic standing in the broader scientific community. A final contribution lies in the opportunity provided by this study of benefiting from the geographical differences (US/Europe) that were found in terms of theoretical and methodological approaches. There is much scope for cross-fertilization in these areas, which may be achieved by conducting more collaborative work across the two sides of the Atlantic (and beyond). In other words, the study also contributes to mutual learning from differences in the broader realm of Human Resource Development.

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