Workplace Democracy: A Review of Literature and Implications for Human Resource Development

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A review of workplace democracy revealed that both practice and research need updating. The results are discussed in terms of history, theory, research and practice. Implications for human resource development research and practice are also included.

Keywords: Workplace Democracy, Worker Participation, Workplace Freedom

Recent political, social and economic shifts have significantly changed the way work is carried out and in turn the democratization of organizations has suffered (Deetz, 1992). Technology, globalization, flatter organizational structures, improved skills and competencies and the need to manage knowledge *prima facie* offer workers opportunities to participate in decision-making and fully experience workplace democracy. It is axiomatic that as work becomes more technological and workers have more access to information that democracy would emerge. However, worker freedoms have shown little sign of increasing and with globalization of the workplace the hope of democratic workplaces for many is an unrealized dream.

The idea that workers have democratic rights and privileges in their workplaces evolved from the nineteenth century workplace of "exploitation…in laws and court rulings limiting the right to quit jobs, in vagrancy laws and coercive uses of the police and military, in stringent and punitive forms of private poor relief, in an urban real estate market that made most workers into powerless tenants in squalid neighborhoods, and in a national political system that mobilized working-class voters without responding to the needs of working people" (Montgomery, 1993, p. 114). Historically, workplace democracy has followed the labor movement (unions) both in the UK and the US. But with the decline in organized labor, especially in the US and in US controlled global firms, workers have fewer opportunities to experience workplace democracy. Unions have supported worker's rights to tenets of democracy such as freedom of expression in the workplace. Swidorski (2000) pointed out that "from the end of the Civil War to the passage of the Wagner Act in 1935 the most significant institutional actor in the struggle for freedom of expression was the labour movement" (p. 319). But worker freedom is under attack. A recent ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court declared that speech by public employees in the course of their jobs is not protected by the First Amendment from disciplinary action (Trotter, 2006). "Democracy clearly stops at the workplace door. That's bad enough. What's worse is how bad that fact is for the health of our democracy at large (Sweeney, 2004, p. 102).

In terms of scholarship, the 1970s, 1980s and into the early 1990's workplace democracy was a oft-cited and relatively important topic for industrial relations, management, labor, and social studies scholars. But, since the early 1990s it has had little cache especially among business and human resources scholars and even less importance among scholar-practitioners. The discussion of workplace democracy "is but a faint whisper among contemporary scholars in the social and management science….and no longer relevant to our technologically advanced globally networked organizations" (Diamond & Allcorn, 2006, p. 56). And even in contemporary workplaces where workers have increased skills and competence, are self-monitoring and self-directed; embrace knowledge and responsibility, and in turn have become more empowered and self-motivated. Still, "most employees are subject to managers they did not elect and to rules in which they had little or no say' (Mayer, 2001, p. 221). They are being spied on, drug tested, subjected to searches, and e-monitored. These and other management actions reduce workplace democracy.

The contradictory and inconsistent nature of the workplace democracy literature suggests that all is not doom and gloom. For example, Melman (2001, 2003) has recently suggested that especially in high technology workplaces, worker participatory decision making is standard practice and is even on the rise.

If the goal of HRD is to improve social responsibility and to provide for humane workplaces then it is necessary to align itself with research and practice that will afford democracy in the workplace. To date, the evidence of HRD having a vested interest in workplace democracy is limited, yet globally influenced workplaces show signs of fewer worker rights and more alienation. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the definitional, historical, conceptual and practical characteristics of workplace democracy through a review of literature and then highlight those that are related to HRD.

Method

The method used in the present study was a literature review of selected works of workplace democracy and many associated terms. Several searches were carried out using electronic databases including ERIC, ProQuest, Business Source Premier, psycINFO, and Sociological Abstracts. Results included scholarly and practitioner journal publications as well as several books and textbooks. Articles and books were used to locate through a thematic analysis terms, concepts, research and practices of workplace democracy. Included in this search was a review of the intersection of workplace democracy and tenets of HRD research practice and theoretical issues.

Definitions

Definitions of workplace democracy and related terms are varied due primarily to contextual issues such as unionization; yet, the large majority of definitions identified by the present study contained common themes and concepts. Related terms such as industrial democracy, organizational democracy, economic democracy, participatory democracy, worker participation, co-determination, works councils, and worker control are terms either more narrow, less focused or broader than workplace democracy which has been considered by some scholars as a "catch-all phrase" (Collom, 2001a, p. 71-72). Common definitions of workplace democracy contain characteristics of equality, decision-making, and participation. Miller (1999) as cited in Holtzhausen (2002) added that its "more than participation, "it involves the realization in the workplace of our standards for a democratic society" (p.188). Broadly, Harrison and Freeman (2004) added that "any action, structure, or process that increases the power of a broader group of people to influence the decisions and activities of an organization can be considered a move [the workplace] toward democracy" (p.49).

Workplace Democracy from Multiple Perspectives

To fully grasp the variance of perspectives of workplace democracy requires an understanding of the historical evolution of the concepts that enabled its practice. The history of workplace democracy is closely aligned with the evolution of its theoretical foundations. While a thorough historical analysis is not a part of this study, a brief glimpse into the intersection between the history of workplace democracy and the theories that support it illustrate the ideas behind democratic practice in the workplace. For example, workplace democracy has a tradition in Germany dating back to the Weimar Republic (1919-1933). The thinking behind workplace democracy at this time in Germany was influenced primarily by liberal democracy.

Between 1799 and 1850 in the UK and later in the US (1825-1934) the most influential workplace democracy experiments were being carried out by Robert Owen, a Scottish industrialist and 'father of socialism and the cooperative movements' (Donnachie, 2000).). The influence of Robert Owen's New Lanark, Scotland (1799-late 1850's) and New Harmony, Indiana (1825-1934) factory settlements reflected the socio-political environment of the times and the impact that the reformation and Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism had on Owen as a workplace and social reformer (Donnachie, 2000). From these ideas and workplace experiments he developed communitarianism and the cooperative movement; notions of work and society that are still valid and practiced today.

Foundations and Theories

To better understand workplace democracy as a construct considering its relationship with the meaning of work is critical. Participatory democracy is not achievable without meaningful work as a foundation. The present study cannot give justice to the many and varied publications on meaning of work and meaningful work. However, an examination of several of the more significant historical and conceptual views will help place workplace democracy into perspective.

The importance of work to workers has been historically divided into extrinsic and intrinsic values (Mason, 1982). With a few exceptions such as F.W. Taylor's (1911) Scientific Management theory until the late Renaissance (late 16th century) and early Reformation (16th c.) work was a curse and necessary evil that brought workers only extrinsic rewards. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "work as an intrinsic value was one of the central concerns of European social thought" (Mason, 1982, p. 116). One of the primary conceptual shifts towards more meaning in work was a direct result of the thoughts and writings of Marx (1818-1883). As a polemic against capitalism, a system that alienated and barred workers from finding meaning, Marx insisted that this estrangement of humans from meaningful work manifested itself as isolation from 'life activity, and from his species life…and alienated from other men' (Marx, 1976). As Marxism spread throughout Europe, the work of socialists Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825) in France and Charles Fourier (1772-1837) in France and America, and Robert Owen in the UK and the US for the first time institutionalized utopian, socialist and communitarian ideas. More

contemporary, 20th century ideas of the meaning of work are based on industrial-organizational psychology during the late industrial revolution and the ideas of Herzberg, McGregor, and Maslow (Mason, 1982). Chalofsky (2003) found that participatory workplaces were integral to meaningful work.

Workplace democracy is a multi-dimensional international concept with foundations in economics, politics and sociology, psychology, and labor history. Generally, theorists suggested that enhancing democracy in the workplace also enhances civic engagement and political democracy and how workers view their work. For clarification Table 1 summarizes the major workplace development theories, their application and related concepts as a result of the review of literature. The major theories that are further discussed below are identified in the table with an asterisk.

Table 1. *Major Workplace Development Theories, Applications and Related Concepts*

Theory	Application(s)	Related concept(s)
Management	Worker satisfaction for productivity and economic efficiency	Control over means of production Property rights*
Psychoanalytic (psychology)*	Individual and collective psychological dilemmas such as stress and anxiety serve to pervert democracy	Self-object and actual self-other relational theories (Diamond & Allcorn, 2006)
Power relations	Control of identity, self-perception and 'governmentality' *a la* Foucault	Domination and sociological structuralism, i.e., "dialectic view of human engagement with social reality", (Diamond & Allcorn, 2006, p. 60).
Humanist*	Individual values, voice and development	Ethical, rights-based (non-liberal), morality* Consequentialism
Democratic*	Participation as process towards freedom of choice and decision making "Restore democratic legitimacy to the political process" (Grady, 1990, p. 146) and 'transfer' democratic learning from the workplace to society	Social and political equality Restore political and civil participation. Generalizability Developmental democracy (Bachrach, 1967; Pateman, 1970) Autonomy*
Left (participatory)* Intellectual tradition (Greenberg, 1986)	Participation to overcome worker alienation and control; participatory democracy is required in all social institutions; replace capitalism with democratic control	Justice* Revolutionary Overthrow of capitalism
Feminist (Rothschild, 1992)	Collectivist-democracy has same values and organizational practices as feminism.	Ethic of care Socialist (Ferguson, 1984) Anti-hierarchical Response to female subordination at work*
Liberalism (classical) RE: John Locke; the free individual experiences morals even in Nature; social contracts (Mason, 1982).	'Possessive individualism' (Macpherson, 1977), especially in the US	Political efficacy (Pateman, 1970) based on individual experience Inalienable rights (Locke, 1632-1704)
Utopianism *a la* Mannheim's four "images": chiliasm (anarchism), liberal-humanitarian ideal (liberalism), conservatism, and socialism-communism (radicalism) (cited in Luhman, 2006)	Oppressive environments cause revolution; immediacy of fulfilling the human potential; spontaneous activities toward freedom unites people (Luhman, 2006). Radicalism seeks to free people from their unconsciousness of oppression and create a new social order *a la* critical theory (Frankfurt School) and Marxism	Labor is commodified and alienated from the control of production Emancipation of self

Workplace democracy has been theorized by Dahl (1970, 1985) as a *moral right*. "The right to self-government through the democratic process is itself one of the most fundamental rights that a person can possess" (Dahl, 1985, p. 25). If owners and their managers have the right to impose binding decisions on workers and if they have the capacity shouldn't employees have the right to participate in decision making? "If we agree that they have a moral right to participate in governing a state, don't they have a comparable moral right to participate in governing a firm?" (Dahl, 2001, p.250-251).

The morality of worker participation and democratic power within organizations is predicated on several related concepts, namely that workers are autonomous and that being treated equally is an issue of justice. The autonomy claim is that freedom to make decisions is a continuation of the right to autonomy that all individuals possess (Dahl, 1985 as cited in Mayer, 2001). The justice claim includes the tenet that 'equals should be treated equally' (Cohen in Mayer, 2001, p. 225). This implies that members of an organization are equal and distributive justice defined as an "equal share of power in an organization is an entitlement of all who are subject to its rules" (Mayer, 2001, p. 225) is practiced. According to Dahl (as cited in Mayer, 2001) workers are "entitled to democratic voice in the firm as a matter of right, as a kind of compensation for subjection to the rules" (p. 222). Archer (1994) called the ability of people to have control over the processes that influence them and others the "all-affected principle" (p. 14).

Workplace democracy as moral responsibility has met with criticism however. Mayer (2001) insisted that moral responsibility cannot be advocated in firms because "polities and firms are qualitatively different types of associations in which the entitlements of subjects are distinct. Subjection to power is acquired in different ways in the two kinds of associations, and this difference deprives employees – but not residents – of a moral claim to democratic voice" (p. 223). Additionally, moral responsibility violates the rights of owners and their designees to manage the company (property) as they see fit. Dahl's notion that employees are equal to citizens/residents requires one to accept that workers are not compelled to obey managerial decisions; "their decision to do so is voluntary" (Mayer, 2001, p. 227).

Race, class and gender are the major bases of social inequality in the workplace. Researchers have found gender effects in attitudes toward workplace democracy and that middle class women in particular support democratic processes, that women support worker participation, and that feminism influences work-based decision making (Collom, 2000, 2001a&b; Markowitz, 1996).

There is a dearth of theory-building research within the context of workplace democracy. A good example of current theory building research is found in labor-managed firms where Luhman (2000; 2006) developed a theoretical framework for workplace democracy. An extensive literature review and subsequent thematic analysis resulted in 23 key concepts of organizational democracy; many of whom were located in the literature and included in the present study. In addition to those listed in Table 2, examples include accountable hierarchical controls, specialized and collective management roles, and consciousness of participation and the greater good (Luhman, 2006). Without transforming theories and concepts into practical application they remain abstract and hard to validate. The next section discusses literature on research and the practice of workplace democracy.

Research & Practice of Workplace Democracy

Workplace democracy has a long history of implementation. The principal example and majority of empirical research on workplace democracy has been that of *worker participation*. Again, a thorough history of worker participation programs would benefit understanding of its evolution as a practice. Due to space constraints this is not possible. However, key examples of the historical application of workplace democracy include: Owen's social experiments at New Lanark mills and New Harmony workplaces, Fourier's (1808) The Social Destiny of Man , phalanaxes, based on "grand hotels," or Phalanstère, communes that offered its members maximum self-fulfillment and participation. The German Weimar Republic (1919-1933) that included the Stinnes-Legien Agreement (Balderston, 2002) that called for collective labor contracts, workplace reforms and an 8 hour work day. More recent examples of workplace democracy in action include the Spanish Mondragon Corporacion Cooperativa (MCC) and Israeli Kibbutzim. MCC is a cooperative with some 150 individual companies, 70,000 workers/owners and sales in access of 11 billion euros. Successful for a half century, Mondragon exhibits workplace democracy through a shared means production, excellent working conditions and inclusive decision making (Hatcher, 2002). With a unique form of workplace and community democracy kibbutzim have 100,000 people with over 300 industrial plants.

Some research has shown that cooperative work cultures are as competitive and efficient as other traditional structures (Altman, 2002). However, several researchers note that US participatory programs failed to grant significant and power over decisions (Dachler & Wilpert, 1978), and lacked both depth and breadth (Collom, 2000).

Research based on psychoanalytic understandings discovered unconscious and collusive forms of perverting democratic organizational processes (Diamond & Allcorn, 2006). Unfortunately, generalizability is limited since there are very few empirical, psychologically-base studies available.

The overall literature on the practice of workplace democracy displays specific characteristics and outcomes (Deutsch, 1981; Rothschild, 1992; Butcher & Clark, 2002) that have potential to transform people within organizations by making them more democratic, politically aware and active, social, public spirited, cooperative and concerned for the general good (Dahl, 1985). Characteristics of worker participation include political understanding, solidarity, and perceived and real power (Haque, 2000). See Table 2, Characteristics and Outcomes of the Practice of Workplace Democracy for additional literature-based applications.

Conversely, case study research on several democratic firms by Viggiani (1997) revealed a constellation of hierarchical dilemmas that negatively impacted on workplace democracy including accountability, authority and ownership. The literature also supported the hypothesis that management may resist democratic workplaces on the grounds that it must surrender power and prestige.

The literature supports Zwerdling's (1984) workplace democracy practice typology of (1) humanitarian reforms, (2) Quality of Work Life (QWL), (3) employee-owned firms, and (4) worker owned and controlled (self-managed) workplaces (cited in Grady, 1990) or what Luhman (2006) called Labor-managed firms (LMF). And, Turner (1997) suggested that workplace democracy in the US is organized around unilateral management control through human resources, labor-management cooperatives involving HR, and rank and file organizing efforts.

Table 2. *Characteristics and Outcomes of the Practice of Workplace Democracy*

Open communication internally and externally	Fuller participation of women and underrepresented groups
Open governance	Devolved power and responsibility for decisions
Individual freedom of expression and choice	Power is related to relationships versus structure
Meaningful work	Workplace democracy is not possible without "unalienated and meaningful work" (Mason, 1982, p. 102).
Gender and ethnic equity	Tolerance, respect, inclusion of women and underrepresented groups
Less managerialism	Psychological ownership of activities depends on worker contributions, knowledge and competence.
More worker control over the functions that impact them	"Reduce alienation, create a solidarity community based on work, strengthen attachments to the general good of the community, weaken the pull of self-interest…[and], stimulate citizenship in the government of the state itself (Dahl, 1985, p. 95). Individuals have control over their work tasks (Luhman, 2006)
Improved trust and less fear	Legitimacy for workers to question control (Markowitz, 1996)
Enhanced flow of information	Increase in organizational commitment, personal responsibility, ability to change (Harrison & Freeman, 2004)
Worker voice in job design, work requirements and quality	Because worker groups may not be privy to organizational strategies or have the required skills and knowledge they may make incorrect or less than advantageous decisions. Worker group decisions may take an inordinate amount of time and may disrupt normal operations (Harrison & Freeman, 2004).
Flatter, team-based organization structures Non-hierarchical controls (Luhman, 2006)	Educate through participation thus inculcating democratic values in the citizens of the workplace (Grady, 1990)

Human resources delivered programs known as Employee Stock Ownership Plans (ESOP) as a form of worker participation has had less than stellar success. Archer (1995) suggested that workplace democracy is not an issue of ownership, but rather one of control. ESOPs do not exhibit unencumbered worker participation and have not significantly changed management structures from conventional to participatory (Logue & Yates, 1999).

Tenets of the quality movement and TQM such as quality circles enhanced worker participation although there is little evidence of true employee empowerment as a result (Harrison, 1991). These and other 'human relations' based initiatives were somewhat successful but were developed in an attempt to improve productivity more than provide for worker democracy.

One of the most visible yet waning examples is union sponsored worker participation programs that have declined in line with overall union density. In the U.S. the percentage of union membership of the workforce fell to 12.5% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005), and one estimate is that union density could fall to 5% in the early part of the 21st century (Towers, 1997). Surviving a decade of falling densities in the UK, the BBC (British Broadcasting Company, 2005) reported union membership in 2005 at 29% and on the increase, especially for women employees.

Historically and practically unions have been the bedrock of workplace democracy. Potter & Ngan (1996) found that union sponsored Worker participation programs can yield up to 20 percent productivity gains. Turner (1991) suggested that with the decline of unions in developed countries and the increase in the need for organized labor in developing countries that workplace democracy has a better chance of emerging in developing nations.

Formal workplace democracy plans in the US that stemmed from the need to allow a voice for workers in unorganized (non-union) workplaces included John D. Rockefeller's 'Colorado Industrial Plan'. This plan provided mechanisms for airing of grievances without fear of reprisals or retribution, joint labor-management committees and rights to appeal. These plans are interesting because they attempt to provide democracy in non-union workplaces.

Some widely discussed and researched international examples of the practice of workplace democracy include Mondragon, the Kibbutzim and Owen's social experiments in Scotland. In S. Africa a combination of government regulations such as the Basic Conditions of Employment Act coupled with worker participation programs have been credited with increases in efficiency (de Villers & Kooy, 2004).

Opposing the above examples of praxis, Bowles & Gintis (1986) suggested that because worker autonomy and empowerment is "already secured by the competitive structure of labour markets and the liberal democratic structure of the state" (p. 64), workplace democracy is redundant. They also point out the freedom afforded individuals in the open labor market gives them freedom to exit (quit) a job and take another. Again, there are contradictions to this assumption in the literature. In times of outsourcing, off-shoring and lay-offs and firings, especially in the manufacturing sectors workers have fewer choices to leave or stay with an employer (Rifkin, 1996).

Implications of Workplace Democracy for HRD

As mentioned in the introduction, to date HRD has not emphasized workplace democracy in its practice nor has the theoretical enrichment or application of workplace democracy been an objective of HRD-related research or conceptual examinations. However, based on this review of literature several themes of a possible link between workplace democracy and HRD emerged. For example, the information that lack of participation decreases chances for innovation and organizational change has tremendous implications for HRD research and practice intended to address innovation and change.

Much of the more current research on workplace democracy has implications for HRD. The new "class" of workers which is structurally different from 'conventional' workers of the past few decades is a focus of much HRD research. Rothschild-Whitt and Whitt (1986, p. 297) made the case that "this new class position has implications for job satisfaction, expectations, meaning", and therefore implications for workplace democracy. And, Collom's (2001b) research on social inequality and production found race and gender effects on attitudes toward economic democracy.

International HRD is playing a more important role in developing nations as in the example of South Africa. Workplace transitions there since the demise of apartheid include an increase in unionization. A recent study found the roles of management and labour to be similar to a typical industrial country but with potential to decrease racism and introduce political democratic ideas for an increase in workplace democracy (Maller, 1994).

Hi-tech and highly skilled workers and knowledge workers demand autonomy and the opportunity to make decisions and solve problems with little or no managerial control. Yet, there is little evidence of real democratic freedom amongst workers (D'Art, 2002; Fantasia, Clawson & Graham, 1988). Since HRD has a long history with employee empowerment, ethics and value structures it makes sense for the profession to begin to identify interventions that might assist these new workers to achieve a high degree of workplace democracy.

And with increase in minorities and women in the workplace a potential exists to enhance workplace democracy. Researchers have suggested that democratic work may be more relevant for women (Collom, 2000; xxx) and as a concept workplace democracy is suggestive of feminist theory (Rothschild, 1992).

As a common task, HRD should take note of workplace democracy within leadership development. Goldman-Sachs and Sony are examples of corporations with new roles for leaders that include building individual autonomy, supporting choice and variety, widening the latitude of discretion, building shared purpose and encouraging risk taking by garnering trust through participation (Gratton, 2003).

Finally, the general 'educational case' for workplace democracy suggests that it would give workers a more creative and responsible role in making decisions, thus breeding increased capacities, competencies and more positive attitudes required for societal and political citizenship (Hatcher, 2002).

Conclusions

From a scholarly standpoint contemporary research on workplace democracy is sorely lacking. Echoing the fact that "workplace democracy is but a faint whisper among contemporary social science and management scholars" (Diamond & Allcorn, 2006, p.56), more research is needed on workplace democracy and especially the roles that HRD plays in its success or failure. As private and public organizations continue to focus on global economic growth and performativity, workers continue to be off-shored, out-sourced, fired, marginalized and continually lose ground. "It is vital that workers go beyond bargaining for wages and working conditions to demand overall social and economic justice" (Haque, 2000, p. 240).

Democratic processes within organizations are rife with risks and pitfalls, while economic results are uncertain at best (Harrison & Freeman, 2004). HRD should consider workplace democracy only if it can be defended on the basis of creating or adding value to individuals, the organization and to democratic societies.

Whatever hopes and standards we have for political democracy in our society, we seek in our workplaces We can have participation/democracy that is employer-controlled, "pseudo-participation that gives employees little in the way of empowerment or enduring voice in the workplace" (Turner, 1997, p. 309), or a true democratic workplace where participation and voice are negotiated, entitled and supported by internal and external management and owners, workers, and organized labor. "If we have democracy in political life but not in economic life and if the weight of economic power grows relative to political power, then citizens might have reason to question how democratic society 'really' is and whether political democracy is 'really' of much relevance" (Rengen, 2004, p. 19).

Are we to believe that trickle down economic globalization is responsible for a trickle down democracy? No, democracy is not so laissez-faire. It demands constant vigilance and renewal. There is no reason to believe that democracy in our workplaces should require any less attention.

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