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Article information:
To cite this document:
Permanent link to this document: https://doi.org/10.1108/PR-11-2015-0306
Downloaded on: 31 August 2017, At: 09:33 (PT)
References: this document contains references to 88 other documents.
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Means vs ends: theorizing a definition of human resource development

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to analyze the extant human resource development (HRD) definition research literature and theorizes a new definition of HRD.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors adopted keyword and content analyses to examine selected 32 HRD definitions in relation to different organizational and sociopolitical contexts base on theory development criteria and methodology for definition research.

Findings – From a theoretical perspective, the extant definitions were mostly empirical descriptions of HRD practice with conceptualization being absent. From a context perspective, the definitions were based on HRD phenomena indigenous to the western world, especially the USA and Western Europe. They can hardly explain HRD phenomena in a non-western context. The glaring gaps lead to theorizing a new definition by focusing on the hard core of HRD in defining and criterial attributes. The defining attribute of HRD is its host-system-dependence, and the criterial attributes are its shaping and skilling mechanisms.

Research limitations/implications – This study unveils that HRD is a means to support the ends defined by the corresponding host system, and not an end in itself. This definition is applicable to different sociopolitical, cultural, and organizational contexts. It provides clear criteria and boundaries to gauge the relevance of HRD research and shows the unique identity of HRD, thus offering new directions to expand the landscape of HRD research.

Practical implications – The new definition can help human resources practitioners better understand the role and mechanism of HRD that the worldwide practitioners can resonate in various sociocultural and political contexts. Communicating the definition and goals of HRD will enhance internal clients’ understanding and appreciation of the value of HRD.

Originality/value – This study fills important research gaps in HRD definition research. It is the first HRD definition derived through a rigorous theory development process. The new definition connects the HRD research niche to the general human resource literature and lead to new HRD research.

Keywords Qualitative, Theory building, Critical, Defining and criterial attributes, Host system, HRD definition, Sociopolitical context

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Human resource development (HRD) as a subfield of the human resources discipline has long been challenged to define itself (e.g. Lee, 2001, 2014; Pace, 2000; Russ-Eft, 2000; Wang and Swanson, 2008; Werner, 2014). Although HRD definitional research may appear to be a niche in the overall human resources literature, it has increasing importance in organizations and societies, particularly in the globalization process. With increased global integration embracing and engaging in diverse sociopolitical systems, existing western-centric HRD definitions have failed to establish required boundary conditions to
adequately address why and how different systems develop their essential assets, human resources (Ruona, 2000, 2002). Ruona (2016) recently depicted the HRD literature as in "definitional disorder" (p. 2). This disorder has resulted in HRD research violating golden criteria in relevance and rigor (Wang, 2010). The HRD literature has witnessed a significant amount of such studies. For example, a recent article moved HRD into human trafficking without defining the host system and the unit of analysis (Mace et al., 2012), leaving doubts on why and how HRD is relevant to an issue of law enforcement. Clearly, HRD's definition and the way in which it is presented, shapes the identity of the discipline and constitutes an essential part of HRD knowledge that affects future knowledge production.

HRD definitions have been entertained in the literature for more than four decades (Ruona, 2002; Walton, 2002). Extant literature seems to be on a continuum, from a "refusal to define" (Lee, 2001, 2014) to a broad definition claiming HRD "benefit [...] the whole of humanity" (McLean and McLean, 2001, p. 322), with numerous definitions in between that are similar to one another. Collectively, these definitions may illustrate certain aspects of HRD's functional role, yet when taken alone, they hardly offer a holistic view of HRD (Wang, 2008; Wang and Swanson, 2008). The assertion by Ruona (2000) still appears to be valid: "A major barrier for HRD professionals is that our work and what we stand for are not well understood by others. Some would also argue that we do not yet well understand ourselves either" (p. 2).

A glaring gap in the literature is that the definitional research has largely been following an atheoretical path, resulting in definitions hardly complying with the standards of robustness required. It is well-accepted that definitions are "subject to revision as a result of future theorizing, either because the initial formulation was wrong or because the concept itself has changed in the meantime" (Brown, 1998, p. 116). To contribute to the on-going discourse in HRD definitional research and extend the research to the overall human resources literature, we adopt a theory development approach to theorizing a new definition of HRD.

As a point of departure, we clarify that what we are defining for HRD is variously presented in the literature as a profession (Ruona, 2000), a process (Smith, 1990), or a practice (Watkins, 1989). We focus on HRD as a profession and a field of research because these are umbrella terms referring to HRD as a social and organizational phenomenon, a process, practice, or a mechanism. First, HRD as a social and organizational phenomenon is concerned with individual or group conscious behaviors under the influence of some internal or external forces "sufficiently alive to respond to one another" (Markey, 1925/1926, p. 733). Particular aspects of the phenomenon are often observable, verifiable, and measurable. Second, HRD as a profession views HRD as a mechanism. "A mechanism for a phenomenon consists of entities and activities organized in such a way that they are responsible for the phenomenon" (Illari and Williamson, 2012, p. 120). Third, HRD as a functional process and practice is often used as synonymy, for a process is a collection of practices (Jacobson et al., 2007). HRD processes and practices represent the HRD mechanisms and are responsible for observed HRD phenomenon. Therefore, to define HRD is to define the mechanisms responsible for the phenomena that are observable and verifiable in organizational or social settings.

In what follows, we first present the method used for the study. We then report the findings derived from keywords and content analyses of selected definitions, including analyzing an argument of "refusal to define HRD." Based on the findings, we examine the gap and inadequacy of existing definitions and theorize a new HRD definition. Finally, we highlight the implications of the new definition for future research.

**Method**

*Data and procedure*

Because HRD definitional research is mainly published in the English language and often emphasizes US perspectives (McLean and McLean, 2001; Weinberger, 1998) or a "western-centric" focus (Lee and Stead, 1998), our literature search was mainly focused on
English databases including Academic Search Complete, EBSCO, ProQuest, and PsycInfo. Keywords used included “HRD definition,” “theory building,” “definition research,” “mechanism,” and their various combinations. We adopted two criteria to screen the search results: first, they must be relevant to definitional research and second, they must contribute to new understandings of HRD mechanisms that are absent in existing definitions.

Our search resulted in three areas of literature: publications that proposed an HRD definition; articles that did not offer a definition, but either analyzed or critiqued definitions (e.g. Cascon-Pereira and Valverde, 2006; Lee, 2001, 2014; Wang and Sun, 2009) or provided methodologies in deriving a definition (e.g. Brown, 1998; Lakatos, 1976; Wacker, 2004); and literature that identified HRD mechanisms in different organizational and sociopolitical contexts, yet were overlooked by existing definitional research (e.g. Schein, 2002, 2006, 2010; Schein et al., 1961; Wang, Lamond, Worm, Gao, and Yang, 2014; Wang, Lamond, Zhang, and Ke, 2014). Overall, we collected 32 HRD definitions in the first area, each of which had at least 24 citations according to Google Scholar, 28 articles in the second area, and 24 in the third area.

Analytical process
We analyzed the data in three steps. First, two authors coded the definitions based on keyword frequency for their commonality and differences. We then coded the content of the definitions by categories such as purpose, function, beneficiary, and values. We coded the content independently and resolved disagreements by carefully reviewing the source texts and contexts. Our inter-rater reliability was 0.91 according to Perreault and Leigh’s (1989) index. The results were verified and confirmed by all authors in the final step. Second, we compared the literature in the second area to identify patterns and trends, and applied the literature recommended criteria for theory development and definitional methodology to interpret the findings. Third, we comparatively integrated and analyzed HRD phenomena and mechanisms documented in the third area of the literature against the definitions. Whenever available in the source texts, we also examined the reported methods and procedures from which a definition was derived. To address and resolve inconsistencies surrounding the literature in the three areas, we established a theoretical foundation to question the assumptions embedded in the extant definitions and to derive a new definition.

Extant definitions: review and analysis
McGoldrick, Stewart, and Watson (2001) noted that “the process of defining HRD by academics, researchers and practitioners is proving to be frustrating, elusive and confusing” (p. 343). Thus, it is logical for new research to start with a thorough analysis of previous definitions. To clarify, a definition constitutes two critical components: first, the definiendum, the term to be defined, and second, the definien, which explains the definiendum (Brown, 1998; Wacker, 2004). Major rules for a definition include: “a concept must be defined using primitive and derived terms” that must be different from those in the definiendum to avoid being circling and repetitive (Wacker, 2004, p. 638), and it is to conceptualize the definien with qualities and properties that capture the key attributes of the definiendum (Brown, 1998; Lakatos, 1976; also see Wacker, 2004 for more detailed rules).

Keywords analysis
The frequency of keywords in the definiens, our coding, and the associated defining techniques in all 32 selected definitions were reported in Table I. A commonality of existing definitions was that they captured many empirical HRD activities and functions. For example, one of the most frequently used keywords in all definiens was learning, which appeared 23 times in the 32 definitions. A noticeable pattern in all the definitions was that they mostly focused on observable HRD functions, activities, or interventions with minimum conceptualization. Some also included instructional techniques.
Clearly, it is difficult to define HRD through an exhaustive list of activities, functions, processes, or techniques. For example, performance improvement should include learning and unlearning given the rapid pace of technological development (Yang et al., 2014). However, none of the definitions mentioned unlearning. Consequently, even from a functional perspective, existing definitions may be viewed as incomplete.

From a theory building perspective, a more critical pattern was that most definitions used the same word, “develop(ment),” to define the definiendum of “human resource development.” “Develop(ment)” appeared 24 times in the 32 definitions as a definien term, presenting the definitions in a circling, repetitive, and unacceptable way: “HRD is to develop human resources for […]” is a clear violation of conceptual definition rule noted by
Wacker (2004) above. Several others used synonyms, such as enhance, increase, unleash, or release as definiens for “development” (see Table I).

Furthermore, the activity/function/process-oriented definitions appeared to follow a clear trend. Definitions proposed in more recent years tended to be longer in length than those in earlier years (Hamlin and Stewart, 2011). For example, the length of the definitions increased from Nadler’s (1970) 18 words to 65 words by Yorks (2005). Apparently, later definitions attempted to add all major emerging HRD activities, functions, purposes, and beneficiaries on top of the previous ones. This indicates that defining HRD through its empirical functions and activities is inadequate and atheoretical per se.

**Content analysis**

Definitions were placed into their source texts and contexts through detailed content analysis and combined with our keyword analysis. They were divided into three major categories: (1) functional and component based, (2) value based, and (3) a mix of (1) and (2).

**Functional and component-based definitions.** This category emphasized HRD functions, components, job-related learning, performance, or change outcomes at individual and organizational levels. We revealed the following attributes in this category. First, limited conceptualization was observed, perhaps due to the perceived applied nature and practice-driven phenomenon of HRD. Many definitions were treated as if they were accepted knowledge without theorizing effort (e.g. Craig, 1976, p. ix; Nadler, 1970, p. 3; Nadler and Nadler, 1989, p. 6). Second, most definitions appeared to be empirical observations of HRD roles, functions, activities, or ideal outcomes based on the authors’ experiences (Table I). Frequently used keywords in the definiens included behavior change (Chalofsky and Lincoln, 1983; Nadler, 1970), work-based knowledge/abilities/capacities (Chalofsky, 1992; Jones, 1981; McLean and McLean, 2001), work-based learning or learning-based interventions (Chalofsky, 1992; Craig, 1976; Smith, 1988; Watkins, 1989), human potentials/expertise (Nadler and Wiggs, 1986; Swanson and Holton, 2009), performance improvement (Jacobs, 1988; Nadler and Nadler, 1989, Smith, 1990), personal growth and change related skill, ability, behavior, competency, training, productivity, planning, and facilitation (Jones, 1981; Nadler and Nadler, 1989; Smith, 1988; Watkins, 1989).

This category can be further divided into function-based and component-based definiens. The former emphasized HRD functions in learning, performance improvement and planning, among others. Of the 32 definitions, 28 (or 85 percent) belonged to this subgroup (e.g. Chalofsky and Lincoln, 1983; Hamlin and Stewart, 2011; Jones, 1981; Nadler and Nadler, 1989, Smith, 1990). An advantage of this is that they define HRD according to how it is actually practiced in reality, thus offering an intuitive understanding of HRD in action. Yet this advantage becomes a flaw in conceptualization. First, it is unlikely for a definition to exhaust all HRD functions or activities, not even for a short list. Second, HRD functions and practices are evolving over time. It is unlikely to come up with an enduring and comprehensive list to embrace future unforeseen activities. This flaw perhaps explains why there has not been a single consensual definition reached thus far.

The second subgroup in this category defined HRD by a combination of functional components. For example, McLagan (1989) proposed HRD as combined processes of training and development (T&D), career development (CD), and organization development (OD; see also Watkins, 1989). While seemingly straightforward, the component-based definitions faced two challenges. First, the components needed to be further defined, which made the definitions unnecessarily lengthy as they explained “development”. Second, both CD and OD were established fields of practice long before HRD’s inception (e.g. Cummings and Worley, 2015; Holland, 1959; Schein, 1975). It may be difficult to convince professionals in those fields to identify themselves under HRD without a compelling reason expressed in
the definition. A common problem of all in this larger category is that they are organization-centric, and can hardly be generalized beyond the organizational level for HRD as a social phenomenon, not to mention embracing increased globalization.

Value-based definitions. This category includes one definition by Harbison and Myers (1964), who proposed that “[…] human resource development prepares all people in a society in political processes, particularly as citizens in a democracy” (p. 2, emphasis added). The definition surfaced within their economic study to support the development of human capital theory (HCT). Although considered irrelevant to the discipline of HRD (Wang and Swanson, 2008), some insisted on a “rediscovery” of this definition (McLean, 2006, p. 9) and considered it the origin of HRD definitions (McGuire, 2011).

Harbison and Myers (1964) were economists who had little interest to define HRD as a field. “As economists, we are first of all interested in economic growth […] we are […] peripatetic observers of many societies” (p. 2). Economists are known for rigor in theorizing and conceptualizing economic phenomena, as documented in the remainder of their study (1964). This “definition,” however, was stated without a conceptualization attempt, confirming that it was to “create an expression, human resource development, consistent with the study’s focus on measuring development status by the number of medical doctors, number of engineers, and average years of education, among other things, in relation to the countries’ total population,” with a purpose to derive a Composite Index of Economic Development presented later in their study (Wang and Swanson, 2008, p. 90).

This early definition, although groundbreaking, prevented generalizing HRD to non-democratic contexts given its value orientation. Therefore, its applicability is limited to only a subset of HRD settings in western countries. Forcing this definition into HRD research without considering the context of the original study misled the direction of HRD definition research. At best, it confused research for a general HRD definition with western indigenous HRD.

A mix of functional and value-based definitions. This type of definition combined the previous two, with similar assumptions to the value-based definition due to its focus on individuals to the whole of humanity (McLean and McLean, 2001; Wang and McLean, 2007). McLean and McLean (2001) conducted a qualitative study through an e-mail survey to a group of purposefully sampled international HRD professionals in 12 countries and an unreported number of individuals in international organizations. The survey asked participants about their personal definitions of HRD, definitions most widely used in their countries, and the references supporting their definitions. Recognizing the purposeful sampling and limited sample size, the authors cautioned that “no attempts have been made at generalization” of the findings (p. 315). However, the authors offered the following definition as a result:

HRD “is any process or activity that, either initially or over the long term, has the potential to **develop** adult work-based knowledge, expertise, productivity and satisfaction, whether for personal or group/team gain, or for the benefit of an organization, community, nation, or, ultimately, the whole of humanity” (p. 322, emphasis added).

This definition extends earlier western-centric and organization-based definitions to national and international levels and emphasizes that HRD’s functional activities are related to “work-based knowledge, expertise, productivity and satisfaction” with values orientation to “benefit […] the whole of humanity.” Although a worthwhile attempt, the method of this study as reported had notable limitations. First, the survey questions did not specify the operational level of HRD, leaving the questions up to the respondents’ interpretations. The vague questions led to a **post hoc** finding that indicated the respondents were indeed misled to answering the question of “Who are the intended audience and beneficiaries of HRD” (p. 314). Second, although the study repeatedly emphasized the differences in national contexts and criticized the US perspective of other definitions, it did not explore nor analyze
contextual differences between countries (e.g. China vs Canada). The study further imposed the values of democracy or universalism to generalize that HRD was for “personal or group/team gain, or (to) benefit […] the whole of humanity” in spite of earlier caution concerning the limited sample size. While some noted that this definition “put to rest” the definitional discourse (Kuchinke, 2014, p. 121), it indeed highlighted the typical western perspective rooted in previous definitions. A more fundamental and critical problem in the methodology of the definien was that it defined HRD with the same word, “develop (development),” as in the definiendum, which resulted in a circling definition (Brown, 1998, Wacker, 2004) and left the key concept of “development” in HRD undefined.

Overall, we unveiled two commonalities in all included definitions. First, perhaps influenced by the inspirational aspect of HRD in the western context, the majority of definitions focus on “what should be,” not on “what is” for HRD, hence promoting an “ideal state” or normative HRD, instead of the HRD in practice. Second, all definitions perceive HRD as single dimensional toward positive, effective, and enjoyable practice, and assume that HRD benefits all involved, from individuals to the whole of humanity, thus overlooking the fact that HRD may also create painful and traumatic outcomes in non-western contexts, or even in many western organizations (Schein, 2002, 2006, 2010).

**Refusal or embracing conceptualization of the HRD definition?**

Perhaps disappointed by the extant research, Lee (2001, 2014) argued in favor of a “refusal” to define HRD. Her arguments were from three grounds: philosophical, theoretical, and practical.

Philosophically, Lee argued that a definition tended to represent HRD as a thing-of-being instead of a process-of-becoming, which might have misrepresented the evolving reality of what HRD actually was or was becoming. In total, 15 years after her initial writing, failing to define HRD as a thing-of-being has resulted in serious misrepresentations of HRD (e.g. Wang and Swanson, 2008), suggesting that defining the thing-of-being is more critical than defining a process-of-becoming. With a defined boundary, the potential process-of-becoming is likely to unveil itself eventually. Consider the evolution of psychology. When the field was defined over a century ago as a thing-of-being, one would have hardly anticipated that the process-of-becoming entailed multiple subdisciplines. To date, psychology has evolved into more than 40 subdisciplines, demonstrating its dynamics in the process-of-becoming. In contrast, the definition of psychology has largely remained over time (www.apa.org/about).

On theoretical grounds, Lee showed the difficulties of defining the term of “development” as maturation, shaping, voyage, or emergent. Theorizing is to conceptually unveil the nature and property of the phenomenon under study (Bacharach, 1989). Maturation essentially is not and should not be a concern of HRD. It is rather an internal process of human nature that belongs to an area in psychology (Ellis et al., 1999; Gesell, 1933). Similarly, the rhetoric of “voyage” and “emergent” is metaphoric per se, often used to represent the process or outcome of maturation (Kestenbaum, 1983; O’Rand and Krecker, 1990).

As a practical matter, Lee (2001) maintained that defining HRD seemed to be a “process of standardization” under a significant “degree of variation in practice across the globe,” which made a definitional attempt “particularly unrealistic” (p. 335). Indeed, the purpose of definitional research is not to standardize the variation of HRD practices, but to establish a boundary and a base to capture the variation of HRD, and to show a conceptual understanding of what HRD is and is not for research and practice (Brown, 1998; Wacker, 2004). It is the beauty of scientific research with its core focus on variance and differences (Weick, 1989).

Despite Lee’s (2001) arguments, at least seven more definitions emerged (Hamlin and Stewart, 2011). To date, the definitional research has reached a point in which frame-breaking analysis to bridge the gap and develop formal conceptualization is required. Recent literature has made such research possible (e.g. Cascón-Pereira and
Theorizing the attributes of HRD

The definition of a field such as HRD is a mini-theory (Cascón-Pereira and Valverde, 2006). “Theory cannot be improved until we improve the theorizing process” (Weick, 1989, p. 516). It is useful to gauge the existing definitions against the criteria for evaluating theories. “A theory is a statement of relations among concepts within a set of boundary assumptions and constraints” (Bacharach, 1989, p. 496). Yet categorization of raw data is not theory (Bacharach, 1989). Our analysis showed that existing HRD definitions were no more than empirical observations and categories of raw data in HRD practice. They fell short of the criterion for theory development (Bacharach, 1989; Weick, 1989). Consequently, “‘good’ formal conceptual definitions cause […] ‘good’ theory-building […], ‘bad’ formal conceptual definitions cause logically inconsistent properties and subsequently lead to ‘bad’ theory-building” (Wacker, 2004, p. 633). A “good” definition is to conceptualize the definiendum with its qualities and properties and capture the key attributes contained in the definiendum (cf. Brown, 1998; Lakatos, 1976).

Our findings lead to the following requirements and criteria for a sound definition. First, it must be able to demonstrate HRD’s unique identity as a discipline and a field of practice (Wacker, 2004). Second, it must be able to embrace all HRD functional activities with flexibility to capture future unforeseeable practices. Third, it must accommodate multilevel HRD phenomena, yet not be stretched to irrelevant boundaries (Wang and Swanson, 2008). And fourth, it must be multi-dimensional and applicable to all organizational and sociopolitical contexts.

“All scientific research programmes may be characterized by their ‘hard core’” (Lakatos, 1976, p. 48), which includes the “defining and criterial attributes” of a field (Brunner et al., 2009, p. 30). Defining attributes refer to the external institutional or official mandates of a class under institutional rules or scientific convention, whereas criterial attributes are associated with activities or behaviors complying with the requirements of the defining attributes (Brunner et al., 2009). Therefore, defining HRD is to conceptualize its “hard core.” Our analysis shows that the “hard core” of HRD is absent in existing definitions. Functional activities, processes and components are not hard cores, neither can beneficiaries be a “hard core” because HRD serves the same beneficiary as its host system, the institutional entity. To identify HRD’s hard core, we begin with a systems analysis.

Host system: the defining attribute of HRD

Although the literature has accepted the systems view as a foundation of HRD (Jacobs, 2014; Swanson and Holton, 2009) not all research consistently maintained systems thinking (Kuchinke, 2013). It is well-known that HRD operates within complex, dynamic, and chaotic organizational and social systems (Banathy, 2013; Yawson, 2013). These systems consist of multiple interconnected subsystems with properties representing the immediate host system, whose attributes may differ from those of their individual constituents (Banathy, 2013). The host system in which HRD functions is the very reason for HRD’s existence. Therefore, regardless of complexity, the primary responsibility of HRD is for the corresponding host system.

HRD functions and the different levels of their host systems in a complex system may have inconsistent or conflicting goals. However, this inconsistency does not change the nature of HRD in host-system-dependence. In this system, the goals, mission, and values of HRD are dictated by the host system; any HRD activities that are inconsistent with the host systems’ defined goals will not be tolerated (Jacobs, 2014). Consider a host system at a national level. In the western sense, the ideal outputs of a nation are satisfied citizens,
quality education and health care, and economic and technological advancement. Particularly, a democracy desires to advance the overall freedom, well-being, and dignity of individuals. However, not all nations have embraced the western model. For example, although recent HRD literature has paid increasing attention to HRD in China, a critical missing point was the neglect of its unique sociopolitical and ideological context.

China is under the sole governance of the Communist Party of China (CPC). The Constitution of CPC states that “the party’s highest and ultimate goal is to realize Communism” (p. 1). The Constitution of China further defines the nation as a “people’s democratic dictatorship led by the working class and based on the alliance of workers and peasants” (Constitution of the People’s Republic of China, 2014, p. 2); “essentially, it is the dictatorship of the proletariat” (p. 1). Under this host system, recent economic reform has created transformational changes throughout the nation, including increasingly embracing western HRD practice (Wang et al., 2009). However, the market economy in China is fundamentally different from those in the West and cannot be considered as equivalent (Holz, 2007). Within this host system, a critical HRD subsystem, the Party school, has long been in operation (Wang, 2012).

Consider HRD functions at a foreign-invested enterprise (FIE) in China. It is unlikely that the FIE, as a subsystem of China’s overall host system, will embrace communist ideology in its HRD function. Hence, a training program at the FIE may be inconsistent with HRD goals at a Party school. On the surface, both HRD functions involve T&D and are under the same national system, but their goals are defined by their corresponding host systems at lower levels in different organizational contexts. Therefore, an HRD practice beneficial to the FIE system may not be necessarily beneficial to the CPC system, and vice versa. HRD is only responsible for the immediate host system and cannot cut across levels or contexts to satisfy the goals for a different host system. This demonstrates that HRD as a subsystem has no separate goals apart from its host system. Attempting to extend HRD’s boundary or glorifying the role of HRD beyond the defining host system will create confusion and misrepresent HRD.

To summarize, a first hard core, the defining attribute of HRD is its host-system-dependence. For the host system, HRD is a tool or mechanism for achieving its desired outcomes. Thus, HRD will not be a panacea to cure all organizational or social problems in areas irrelevant to its host system. After all, “tools are specific to purpose and intent, just as theories are specific to central questions and puzzles” (Suddaby, 2010, p. 14).

The criterial attributes: conceptualizing the “development” in HRD
To conceptualize “development” in HRD, it may help to examine what “development” entails in an extreme case, which can be easily extended to western organizations. Schein et al. (1961) offered a classic case in which “development” created traumatic impact on individuals. Schein and his colleagues were assigned the psychotherapy of released US prisoners of war (POW) after the Korean War. Via interviews, Schein studied how the POWs had been brainwashed by their communist captors and their cognitive, behavioral, and social dynamics in the POW camps that changed their attitudes, beliefs, and values. Schein’s study became the theory of coercive persuasion, which explained how individuals’ values and beliefs were reshaped according to the host system’s values (2002). Applying the theory to organizational research, Schein (2006, 2010) launched the field of organizational psychology for organizational culture change and leadership development.

The implications of Schein’s study for HRD are profound. Essentially, Schein’s (2002) study “dismisses the popular notion that learning is fun; he focuses instead on the guilt and anxiety associated with radical relearning and draws some disturbing parallels between organizational learning and brainwashing” (p. 100). Coercive persuasion as development happens “when people are in situations from which they cannot physically escape and are
Schein (2002) further extends the notion of development to corporate cultural change initiatives: These programs require a shared commitment to new values – as well as punishment for those who depart from them – they constitute coercive persuasion. Consider GE, Jack Welch made his goals for GE nonnegotiable: If you wanted to stay at the company, you had to learn what he wanted you to learn. So this replacement process involves force if the learning has been imposed by the employer rather than chosen by the employee (p. 102).

For this reason, Schein described GE’s Crotonville Leadership Development Institute as a “GE Indoctrination Center” (p. 101). Comparing all learning to pain and coercion, Schein continues, “I believe that all learning is fundamentally coercive because you either have no choice […] or it is painful to replace something that is already there with some new learning” (p. 103). Schein (2010) concluded that “Culture is a ‘here and now’ dynamic phenomenon and a coercive background structure that influences us in multiple ways” (p. 3). Indeed, Schein’s study has repeatedly confirmed by the ups and downs in corporate mergers and acquisitions (M&As) in which one firm’s culture ultimately dominated another. Recent failures in M&As between Daimler and Chrysler and AOL and Time Warner were largely attributed to their failures in reshaping corporate culture associated values when both parties had no deficiencies in performance-related technical skills before the M&As (Risberg, 2006; Want, 2003).

Informed by Schein (2002) and corporate experiences, we conceptualize the first HRD criterial attribute as shaping. “Depending on the content of the messages, you called it brainwashing and deplored it – or you called it learning and approved of it” (p. 102). The hard core here is that brainwashing or mind-shaping must meet the criteria defined by the host system. In other words, development is to shape or reshape individuals’ values, believes, behaviors, and ideology according to the host system’s requirements.

The shaping mechanism can be further divided into constructing and controlling, both of which depend on the openness of the host system. Constructing allows individuals’ active autonomy in building and unleashing human expertise for creativity, while controlling is to frame individuals within defined values and beliefs. Different emphasis of the two determines the quality of given human resources. In a dictatorship system (e.g. North Korea), controlling is dominating with a restrictive constructing mechanism (Sun and Wang, 2015). Individuals’ creativity is suppressed and confined in a predetermined ideological manner, resulting in limited or no innovative activities, or distorted innovations (Wang et al., 2013). In a democratic context, constructing may dominate with less control, thus innovative capacity may be unleashed (Yang et al., 2014).

The second criterial attribute of HRD is skilling, that is, to prepare and equip individuals with necessary behavior, competency, and capacity to perform required tasks according to expectations. Skilling is a process of learning/unlearning and tooling/retooling conditioned by the shaping mechanism. Here, knowledge acquisition may or may not be relevant, depending on the host system’s requirement. Whether skilling is perceived to be beneficial or detrimental to individuals is determined by the outcome of shaping, or if they share the same values and identify themselves with the host system. HRD activities irrelevant or beyond these two criterial attributes are unlikely to be allowed by the host system.

Of the two attributes, “shaping” is more critical in change management, creation of buy-ins for motivation to learn, and for the skilling process (Cummings and Worley, 2015). The shaping process may be voluntary or under coercion, while the skilling process may be imposed externally or self-directed, depending on the shaping outcomes. The two criterial attributes of HRD are determined by the host system’s goals. Because no value can cut across all host systems in contemporary organizations and societies, it is unlikely for HRD to adopt a universal value. In many cases, a host system will directly interfere in shaping to
impose physical or virtual boundaries for HRD if it perceives that HRD is ineffective in shaping. For example, China’s government has implemented a Great Firewall for internet censorship and surveillance to prevent domestic netizens from visiting unwanted international websites (Romano, 2010), which established a virtual boundary for its HRD subsystems.

**A new definition of HRD**

We have conceptualized two hard cores of HRD. We formally define HRD as follows:

Human resource development is a **mechanism** in **shaping** individual and group values and beliefs and **skilling** through learning-related activities to support the desired performance of the **host system**.

This definition integrates the “hard cores” of shaping and skilling for the host system, and reveals the uniqueness of HRD. It is the mechanism of HRD, not necessarily an HRD function, that makes a difference for the host system. Although shaping and skilling are embedded in the same HRD process, it is possible to conceptually distinguish the two as distinctive and separate mechanisms similar to Becker’s (1964) conceptualization of general and specific skills in the HCT. Shaping processes may be enjoyable or painful, depending on the congruence of one’s values and beliefs with those of the host system. For those from a western context, democratic values have been taken for granted, hence maintaining the shaped values may be perceived as enjoyable, while those from different contexts may find it painful. Skilling may be imposed by the host system or actively pursued through self-directed learning, depending on how motivated the individual might be as a result of shaping. Needless to say, both shaping and skilling involve learning, relearning, and unlearning.

This definition offers advantages to understanding HRD. First, it is value-neutral, multidimensional, and applicable to all host systems without presumed sociopolitical, ideological, historical, cultural, or organizational contexts. It embraces any unit of analysis for different institutional entities as host systems. Second, shaping and skilling conceptualize all HRD mechanisms, functions, and practices, whether formal or informal, self-directed or externally-imposed with flexibility for research to explore different dimensions, forms, or perspectives of HRD phenomena. Third, this definition is based on a complex and open systems view, highlighting that HRD activities and outcomes cannot supersede the host system’s goals. Finally, it suggests that HRD functions inconsistent with the host system’s goals will be removed from the system. As has been succinctly summarized by Jack Welch (as cited in Serrat, 2010): “My main job was developing talent. I was a gardener providing water and other nourishment to our top 750 people. Of course, I had to pull out some weeds, too.”

**Discussion and conclusion**

**Theoretical adequacy and contributions**

From a theory development perspective, this definition of HRD is subject to the falsifiability rules (Weick, 1989). A specific rule for a definition is its logic and empirical adequacy (Bacharach, 1989). We followed a logical reasoning process, from a review and analysis of existing definitions to system analysis, and showed empirical bases at the individual, organizational, and national levels. Second, the conceptualized HRD hard cores, shaping and skilling, are not constructs or variables, but properties or attributes. Thus, they are not subject to measurement issues (Bacharach, 1989), and allow researchers the flexibility to explore and identify specific constructs and variables on different aspects of shaping and skilling for scholarly inquiries. Third, on the surface, some HRD perspectives, such as inspirational and strategic HRD, seem not to be explicitly expressed in this definition. This was because we focused on the “hard core” of HRD to avoid unnecessary distractions from peripherals. More important, being strategic or inspirational is framed by the host system, not by HRD. If the host system identifies strategy and inspiration as critical for the
system’s sustainability, it will require HRD to integrate them. Hence, these perspectives are embedded in the definition.

We contribute to HRD theory building literature in several ways. First, we advance the literature by revealing that extant definitions are focused on HRD empirical descriptions indigenous to western organizations and societies, especially those in North America and Western Europe. Consequently, they are not suited to address HRD in non-western contexts. The new definition, by focusing on the hard cores of HRD, is able to extend multilevel HRD phenomena to all sociopolitical, cultural, and organizational contexts, showing greater potential for research to explore HRD phenomena under globalization. Second, the new definition can encompass all major HRD components. For example, OD is about change in values, assumptions, and beliefs (Cummings and Worley, 2015). CD is about progressively matching individuals and the host organization’s values/beliefs, skills, and knowledge in pursuit of growth (Baruch, 2006), additional to learning, relearning, and unlearning as key elements in T&D (Watkins, 1989). Finally, shaping and skilling as hard cores of HRD establish a clear and unique boundary and identity for HRD, which can unite scholars and practitioners involved in OD and CD under the umbrella of HRD.

Limitations, implications, and future research directions
A limitation of the study lies in the fact that we included only HRD definitions that received a minimum of 24 citations. Additionally, we did not include definitions published in languages other than English. Nonetheless, this study offers important implications for HRD research. First, it suggests that HRD is a means to support the ends desired by the host system, and is not an end in itself, hence establishing a unique identity of HRD with criteria to gauge research relevance. Regardless of dominating systems in politics, ideology, or cultural context, the definition allows scholars to explore different indigenous HRD practices, incorporating contextual factors in “shaping” and “skilling” under different research paradigms. With accumulated context-specific studies and comparative analyses, future research may generate novel HRD theories (Wang, 2012). With clear boundaries defined, other related HRD subjects, such as strategic HRD, gender and diversity issues, or HRD ethics, can be logically situated in research agendas for relevant theory development.

More important, this definition may lead to new research avenues that challenge currently asserted theoretical foundations of HRD. Economics has been considered a theoretical foundation of HRD in the western context (Swanson and Holton, 2009). It states that HRD practices follow principles in cost effectiveness and productivity. However, in some contexts, the priority of HRD is typically of political expediency, not economic returns of human capital investment (Wang et al., 2014). For example, since 1949, Chinese firms, particularly state-owned enterprises are both production units and political entities. Parallel to the management structure is a standard CPC political leadership structure at all levels that assume key leadership roles (Wang et al., 2014). As such, the once popular principle of “rather maintaining socialist weeds than growing capitalist sprouts” is still by and large practiced. A recent example occurred in Hangzhou, China, for the G20 Summit 2016. To improve air quality for the meeting, all firms in industries of constructions, dyeing, logistics, power generation, polyester, petrochemical, pharmaceuticals, printing, textile, air cargo, and steel manufacturing within a 300 km radius from Hangzhou were ordered to close partially or completely for two weeks (Sun, 2016). In Shanghai alone, at least 255 industrial facilities were required to shut down with no subsidies from the government (Meng and Chen, 2016). Employees and residents were required to take a week-long vacation (Long and Mulie, 2016). Under this context, following western economic principles of productivity and cost effectiveness was clearly unrealistic and perhaps detrimental for HRD and organizations survival. Similar cases have also been reported in other non-western contexts (e.g. Sun and Wang, 2015; Wang et al., 2014). In short, our definition provides a
logical and relevant way to study HRD phenomena for organizations in different sociopolitical and cultural contexts. Research in this direction is likely to build new knowledge and enrich HRD theories in light of globalization pressures.

Implications for HRD practice
This definition can help human resource practitioners better understand the nature of HRD practices, namely, to identify and implement effective approaches to shaping employees’ values and beliefs according to organizational culture and performance goals, and to skilling necessary competencies and supporting the host system. HRD practitioners may enhance the perceived value of HRD within their organizations by sharing this new definition with their partner-clients of varying levels. Communicating the definition and goals of HRD will enhance internal clients’ understanding and appreciation of the value of HRD.

Acknowledgments
The authors appreciate the participants in a FOCUS Session at the 2015 Conference of Academy of Human Resource Development in St Louis, MO, particularly the thought provoking discussions with, and critiques and feedback from Andrea Ellinger, Bob Hamlin, Rob Poell, Tonette Rocco, and Gene Roth. The authors are especially indebted to written comments by Bob Hamlin, Peter Kuchinke, Monica Lee, Gene Roth, and Jessica Li for their critiques and feedback, as well as subsequent e-mail discussions on an earlier version of this manuscript. The study also benefitted from classroom discussions with 2012 and 2013 doctoral cohorts in the class of HRD6350 Contemporary Issues in HRD at the University of Texas at Tyler. Thanks also go to three anonymous reviewers and Associate Editor Dr Robert Wapshott who offered helpful comments. Madison Bolton, a student assistant helped compile the HRD definitions used in the study. Due to restrictions on manuscript length, a complete list of HRD definitions and corresponding codes was not included. Interested readers may e-mail a request to the first author for a copy.

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Further reading


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