Component Theories for Human Resource Development in China: A Proposition

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ABSTRACT

Chinese scholars have not yet achieved consensus on the specific theories that should be part of a Chinese HRD theory base. A review of the Chinese HRD literature has identified four theory domains frequently mentioned as a possible foundation for the discipline: management, economics, sociology, and psychology/learning. Considering Swanson and Holton’s (2009) argument that theory is important for any emergent discipline, the purpose of this paper is to help ignite the discussion on a theoretical foundation by going beyond the level of domains and proposing an initial core of theories for HRD in China. The proposed theories were chosen because of their fit with the four theory domains, with Deng Xiaoping’s guidelines for the development of the Chinese economy and its human resources, and with the Chinese cultural context.

KEYWORDS

Chinese Cultural Context, Chinese HRD, Core Theories, Deng Xiaoping, Economics, HRD, HRD Theory, Learning, Management, Psychology, Sociology, Theory Domain, Theory Foundation

INTRODUCTION

改革开放 (gaige kaifang), opening up and reform, and 中国特色社会主义 (zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi), socialism with Chinese characteristics, are terms with which every Chinese school child and most students of the Chinese language are intimately familiar. In a series of speeches from the late 1970s to the early 1980s, Deng Xiaoping, then Paramount Leader of the People’s Republic of China, laid out his vision for the development of the country and its human resources after the end of the Cultural Revolution and the death of Mao Zedong and periodically re-emphasized his message over the next decade. Modernization was to be achieved with the help of science and technology, which was supposed to spur production and foster economic growth. HRD professionals among others were admonished not only to promote science and technology but also to help train scientists and technicians in order to reach the ultimate goal, Chinese global intellectual superiority (Deng, 1984a, 1984d, 1994f, 1994g, 1994h).

Accomplishing these goals has been a formidable challenge. Even 30 years after Deng’s directive, Huang (2009) admitted that despite all current and past economic growth, Chinese HRD still had a weak foundation, and Dong (2014) deplored its ill-defined boundaries and a lack of involvement by scholars and organizations. To rectify this situation, he called for more research on and discussion of HRD theory because only if a core theoretical foundation drawn from several disciplines were in place could HRD become instrumental in solving China’s economic development challenges. Both
Dong and Huang argued that the current theory base is insufficient to place HRD activities on a firm footing, but a discussion of HRD theory will contribute to the advance and strengthening of HRD as a discipline in China.

Swanson and Holton (2009) agreed that theory is needed to provide guidance to HRD professionals in the development of “models and techniques that are effective and efficient” (p. 72) and the identification of unworkable or flawed suggestions. Theory, despite what some detractors have maintained, is not separated from practice but instead functions as the base on which sound and successful HRD practices are built. The alternative to having a theoretical base is what Swanson and Holton called “rudderless random activity” (p. 102). This viewpoint was supported by Xiao, Xie, and Zhang (2004), who argued that HRD must be systematic to be effective, and by Chao (2012), who asserted that if enterprises are expected to accord HRD a greater role, theory has to be studied and aligned with practice.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The purpose of this article is to recommend an initial set of component theories for Chinese HRD based on the theory domains and sub-domains identified by Chinese HRD scholars. The main ideas of each theory will be summarized to show how it fits into its respective domain. Theories will also be assessed in terms of their adherence to Deng Xiaoping’s thoughts and their flexibility to adapt to the Chinese cultural context.

There is presently no consensus among Chinese scholars on which specific theories should be included in an HRD theory base, but a review of Chinese HRD literature has nonetheless identified four theory domains frequently mentioned as a possible foundation for the discipline. Considering the still-emergent nature of HRD in China and Swanson and Holton’s (2009) assertion that theory is important for any discipline at such a stage, this paper hopes to help ignite the discussion on a theoretical foundation that Dong (2014) had advocated by going beyond the level of domains and proposing an initial core of theories for HRD in China. The authors do not mean to suggest that the theories proffered in this paper are the best choices nor the final choices but are simply intended as a starting point for the further discussion and development of indigenous Chinese HRD theories.

LITERATURE REVIEW

HRD as a discipline did not appear in China until the 1980s (Chao, 2012). One of the first major papers on the subject was written by Ouyang (1989), who subdivided development into personal, micro (enterprises, villages), meso (towns, cultural areas), macro (national), and global sectors; assigned it a scope that includes system and structural reform along with the development of human elements such as culture or living conditions; and asserted that HRD needs to assume an economic point of view that also considers the social environment. Ge (1992) was among the first to appeal for research into HRD theory and the formation of an HRD system with Chinese characteristics. Likewise, Li (2008) called for an acknowledgement of the Chinese cultural context. Although Western theories can serve as an initial basis for Chinese HRD because they are already well established, these theories need to be modified over time, especially to accommodate the collectivist nature of Chinese culture. Because the different cultural context can lead to problems with the applicability of theoretical models, traditional cultural structures and ethics as well as management techniques must be integrated with modern theories to make appropriate adjustments responsive to Chinese conditions. Without such adjustments, strengthening the role of HRD and personnel development in the Chinese economy will likely fail (Zhu, 2012).

Over the past decade, a number of authors (Chao, 2012; Cheng, 2006; Dong, 2014; Du, 2004; Guo, 2009; Hu, 2009; Huang, 2009; Li, 2008; Pan & Yang, 2006; Song, 2008; Xi, 2004; Xiao, Xie, & Zhang, 2004; Xin & Jin, 2005; Yang & Zhang, 2003; Zhang, 2014; Zhang & Fang, 2015; Zhang
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