

Defining human resource development: an integrative literature review

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Abstract

Purpose – Human resource development (HRD) poses complex challenges for scholars and practitioners due to its elusive nature in definition, scope, and boundaries. Driven by lived experiences, this integrative literature review aims to explore the complexities of HRD, focusing on its conceptualizations, boundaries, and trajectories from 1990 to 2023.

Design/methodology/approach – Using Callahan's (2014) Six Ws, Page *et al.* (2020) Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses search process, and Lester *et al.* (2020) thematic analysis, 26 peer-reviewed articles from leading HRD journals and databases were analyzed.

Findings – This literature review's findings enhance our understanding of HRD's trajectory by illuminating its tumultuous beginnings, precarious present, and uncertain future – potentially even its demise. The author urges prominent HRD scholars to take decisive action to secure the discipline's future before it is too late.

Research limitations/implications – One limitation is the reliance on specific articles for data analysis. The propensity to emphasize only the prevailing viewpoint is a constraint inherent in literature reviews (Dickson *et al.*, 2011). Another limitation is this study's reliance on articles exclusively from English-speaking literature. By focusing solely on publications in English, this study overlooked HRD literature published in other languages, potentially excluding valuable insights and perspectives from non-English-speaking regions and cultures.

Originality/value – Over the years, the debates regarding the definition of HRD have been fraught with ambiguity and contradictions. The boundaries of HRD remain similarly nebulous, with scholars debating its scope and applicability across contexts. This literature review adds to this debate from a unique perspective.

Keywords Trajectory, Human resource development, Boundary, Definition, Meaning, Conceptualization

Paper type Literature review

Human resource development (HRD) lacks an agreed definition, scope, and boundaries (see, e.g. Hamlin and Stewart, 2011; Harbison and Myers, 1964; Li and Nimon, 2008; McLean and



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McLean, 2001; Swanson, 2001, 2022; Swanson and Holton, 2009; Wang *et al.*, 2017). This absence of consensus on the definition and boundaries of HRD may be steering our discipline toward an existential abyss. It has presented many difficulties for the HRD community, especially for doctoral students and emerging scholars, leaving them uncertain about the compatibility of their research within the HRD framework. This quagmire resonated with my experience. When I embarked on my doctoral journey in HRD, my mentors asserted that my research topic, the advanced statistics requirement for HRD doctoral students, did not fit within the HRD definition and boundary. It is important to note that numerous HRD scholars have researched divergent issues such as HRD programs and curricula (e.g. Gaudet *et al.*, 2017; Kuchinke, 2015; Lim *et al.*, 2013; Lim and Rager, 2015), as well as the phenomenon of statistics anxiety among students (e.g. Onwuegbuzie and Wilson, 2003; Onwuegbuzie, 2004). In addition, studies by scholars in other fields, such as Amirian and Abbasi-Sosfadi (2021), Kaiser (1992), and Satinsky *et al.* (2021), have also explored these areas. Therefore, when my doctoral advisors told me that my research topic was not in tandem with the concept of HRD, I decided to conduct this study to dissect the nuanced contours of HRD and decipher its evolving landscape.

I will provide further background to support the rationale for this literature review. As an emerging scholar, I focused my research topic on HRD doctoral education, specifically advanced statistics training (AST). This research focus was in tandem with Lim *et al.* (2013) assertion that numerous HRD scholars have dedicated significant attention to the domain of HRD curriculum development, acknowledging its emergence as a research topic warranting exploration. Lim and Rager (2015, p. 15) also emphasized that “research on the HRD curriculum has been a hot issue among researchers.” Thus, I was profoundly interested in examining AST within HRD curricula and proposing a bifurcated approach to statistics pedagogy to alleviate statistics anxiety and attrition among HRD doctoral students (Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Kaiser, 1992; Satinsky *et al.*, 2021). This interest stemmed from the acute distress I experienced as a qualitative research methodologist compelled to undergo AST. Indeed, an increasing number of HRD doctoral students are expressing concerns about the perceived futility and misallocation of academic resources toward AST, which they believe may be superfluous and irrelevant to their specific research and career needs. Therefore, when my mentors told me that my research topic did not fit within the boundary of HRD, I decided to conduct a literature review on HRD's definitions and boundaries because of the pivotal questions I had:

- Q1. Who delineates the adjudication of a research topic viability within the domain of HRD?
- Q2. Does this prerogative exclusively rest within the purview of academic advisors?

Suppose professors are the decision-makers, and they penalize students for selecting topics contrary to their preferences, how can aspirant doctoral students ascertain the congruence of their research topics with HRD or the requisites of their professors before enrolling in their programs?

These unresolved quandaries regarding the adjudication of research topic viability within the HRD field persist, casting a shadow over HRD research and practice and prompting me to delve into its definition, scope, and boundaries. I surmised that an undefined discipline where research topics are accepted or rejected based on individual scholars' idiosyncrasies may yield disjointed and chaotic outcomes. Thus, this integrative literature review seeks to address this issue by critically examining the existing body of knowledge to ascertain the prevailing perspectives of HRD scholars on this matter. Wang and Sun (2009) emphasized

that defining a discipline is essential for delineating its identity, distinguishing it from related fields, guiding scholars' research focus, and aiding in policy and practice development by establishing clear areas of inquiry. Kuchinke (2015, p. 268) agreed and stated that the absence of established boundaries and a unifying definition has led to "boundary squabbles over what belongs and does not belong in an HRD course, curriculum, master's or doctoral thesis." Sambrook and Stewart (2005, p. 69) added, "Some seek to clearly define HRD. Some find this task difficult. Others flatly refuse. Obviously, some degree of consensus must be achieved to facilitate researching HRD, whatever 'it' is." Indeed, an academic discipline requires clarity regarding its definition, research focus and curriculum, or it will fade into obscurity (Krishnan, 2009).

Garavan *et al.* (1999) noted that the perpetual quest for a singular definition has long vexed HRD scholars, prompting McLean and McLean (2001, p. 313) to provocatively ask: "If we cannot define HRD in one country, how can we define it in an international context?" Defining HRD is imperative to help it "emerge from its amorphous form towards a better-defined and definable field of research and practice" (Kuchinke, 2001, p. 293). However, given that HRD has "theoretical ambiguities, permeable boundaries, and practice dilemmas" (Garavan and Morley, 2006, p. 3), scholars consequently apply varied definitions and delineate different scopes and boundaries of HRD to fill the definitional void (Hamlin and Stewart, 2011; McLean, 2004; Swanson, 1995; Watkins, 1991; Wang *et al.*, 2017). For example, Watkins (1991) proposed a singular definition for HRD, emphasizing learning, while Swanson (1995) emphasized performance. McLean (2004) contends that HRD is national in scope, emphasizing the influence of cultural and contextual factors on its practices. In contrast, Wang (2008) argues that HRD is organizationally focused, highlighting its implementation within specific organizational contexts. In the absence of a universally accepted definition and boundary for HRD, consensus on crucial issues requiring attention has been fraught with challenges and obstacles (Weinberger, 1998), particularly for doctoral students and emerging scholars who continue to bear the consequences.

I concur that the lack of an agreed definition of HRD hinders the development of innovative solutions to complex HRD challenges and impedes the field's ability to address its evolving needs (Chalofsky, 1992; Nadler, 1992). As Chalofsky (1992, p. 181) articulated, HRD needs a "unifying definition to provide direction for continued growth and vitality." Nadler (1992, p. 104) concurred with this sentiment and queried why "there is still no universally accepted definition of HRD." Years later, in 2000, the editor-in-chief of the *Human Resource Development Quarterly* (HRDQ) proclaimed that the boundarilessness of the HRD discipline had been a paramount imperative throughout the journal's existence (Jacobs, 2000). Yet, to this day, HRD scholars continue to engage in dissensions over the definitions, boundaries, theories, and practices of HRD [see public disagreements between Bowman (2007) and Kuchinke (2007), Jabarkhail (2023) and Wang and Doty (2022), and McLean *et al.* (2008) and Wang and Swanson (2008), to name a few].

Given that HRD scholars cannot "agree on what HRD is, or should be" (Sambrook, 2004, p. 613), and given that resolving the contradictions and contentious debates inherent in the HRD literature could yield substantial benefits for the HRD community (Mabey, 2003), the purpose of this study was to review the literature on HRD definitions and boundaries and provide implications for HRD research and practice. According to Torracco (2016), an integrative literature review is a distinctive form of research that leverages existing literature to generate novel insights, significantly advancing our comprehension of HRD and its related domains.

In summary, this study concludes that the lack of a unifying definition and clear boundary for HRD likely arises from the tendency of individual prominent scholars to propose their

own definitions and delineate distinct boundaries, often conflicting with those posited by their equally esteemed counterparts. This fragmentation underscores the pressing need for a concerted effort among leading scholars to establish a cohesive definition and clear boundaries for HRD, ensuring the survival of our discipline. While it is inevitable that not all scholars will align with the majority consensus on any established definition and boundary, dissenting voices will ultimately have to acquiesce. Such unification would not only elevate the prestige and respect of HRD, bringing it in line with other well-defined disciplines, but it will also ensure its continued survival.

Following this introduction is the methods section, which incorporates Callahan's (2014) six Ws framework, Page *et al.* (2020) Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) search process, and Lester *et al.* (2020) thematic analysis. Upon analyzing the selected articles, three major themes emerged: conceptualizations, boundaries, and trajectories of HRD. I subsequently discussed these themes and delineated their implications for HRD research and practice.

Method

The research question guiding this inquiry was:

RQ1. How has the evolution of HRD definitions and nebulous boundaries over the past three decades impacted the viability of HRD discipline?

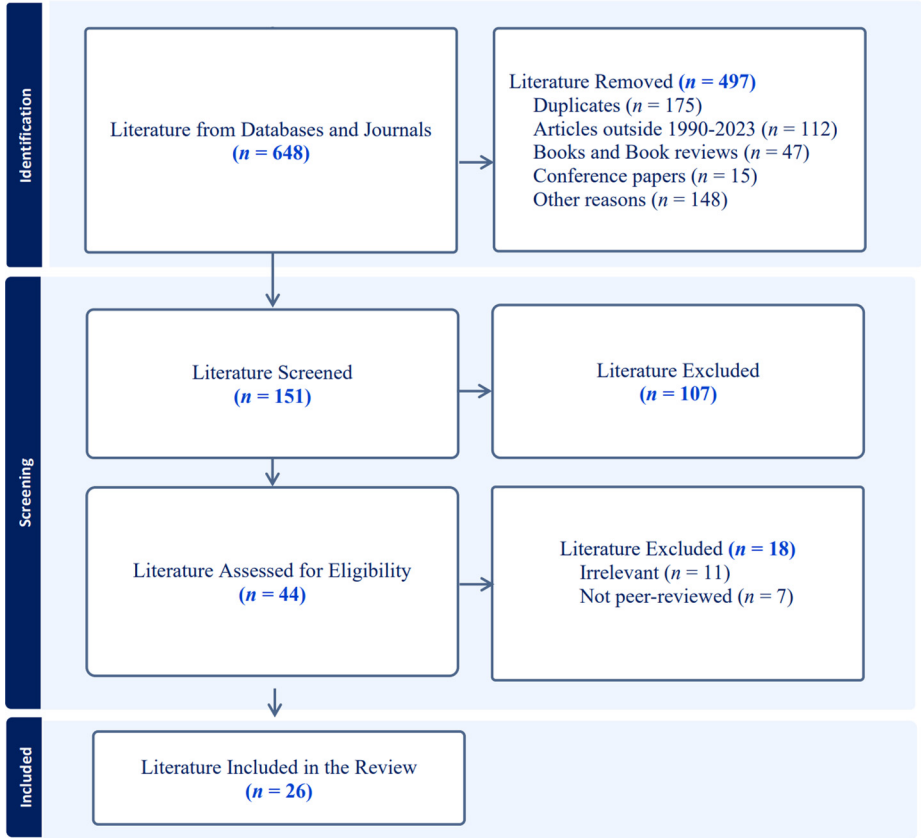
I used an integrative literature review in this study as it integrates sources from multiple streams to understand a topic and enhance the depth and breadth of the analysis, facilitating new insights and interpretations (Torraco, 2016). In addition, to systematically search the literature, I used Callahan's (2014) Six Ws addressing who (the person who searched), when (the time of search), where (search databases), how (the keywords and descriptors used), what (the total number of articles searched) and why (the selection criteria for the number of articles identified).

Search process

Commencing in March 2024 and ending in April 2024, I conducted a literature search across three databases: Google Scholar, Business Source Complete and PsycINFO. I accessed five leading HRD journals: *Advances in Developing Human Resources (ADHR)*, *European Journal of Training and Development (EJTD)*, *Human Resource Development International (HRDI)*, *Human Resource Development Quarterly (HRDQ)*, and *Human Resource Development Review (HRDR)*. I also accessed other sister journals: *Adult Education Quarterly (AEQ)*, *Personnel Review (PR)*, and *Training and Development (TD)*. I typed the following keywords in the search engines: "HRD definitions," "HRD boundaries," "HRD trajectories," "HRD conceptualizations," "HRD meaning," "HRD scope," and "Human Resource Development." I selected these keywords to identify articles that explored the definitions, boundaries, directions, and discussions surrounding the meaning and concept of HRD. The initial search yielded 648 articles. Following the screening process to determine their relevance to the present study and ensure they align with the selection criteria outlined in the subsequent section, 26 articles remained. Figure 1 presents the search process, adhering to the 2020 PRISMA guidelines (Page *et al.*, 2020).

Selection criteria

The selection criteria in this study comprised:



Source: Figure by authors

Figure 1. The search process (PRISMA 2020)

- peer-reviewed journal articles because articles that have undergone the peer review process are typically more rigorous;
- published between 1990 and 2023 because I wanted to capture the period when debates regarding HRD definitions intensified, particularly during the 1990s and 2000s; and
- published in English because I wanted to avoid excessively expanding the literature review to encompass numerous other languages and cultures.

After eliminating publications falling outside the selection criteria, such as conference papers, books and book reviews, duplicate articles, and outdated papers exceeding 33 years, 44 remained. There are several reasons why I excluded books and book reviews from this study. First, integrative review studies often emphasize peer-reviewed journal articles for their rigor and academic credibility, whereas books may not undergo the same rigorous review process. Second, books are usually less accessible through academic databases, while

journal articles are more readily available online in digital libraries or databases. Finally, to maintain focus and brevity, excluding books was necessary to keep the literature review manageable and within the journal word count and page limitation. After completing the selection process, I scrutinized the literary works found in the databases and periodicals by conducting a staged review (e.g. reading the abstracts followed by the main content of each article) to gauge their eligibility for inclusion. I ended up with 26 articles, as shown in [Table 1](#).

Analysis

Using [Lester et al. \(2020\)](#) thematic analysis, I reviewed 26 articles, creating an organized spreadsheet. I systematically grouped each article according to distinct categories, including the author's name, authorization year, journal name, database, and any pertinent additional notes or information. This meticulous organization facilitated a structured approach to data management and analysis. I then used an iterative coding process, establishing a robust foundation for the subsequent analysis. The iterative coding process involved a cyclical approach to analyzing various literature sources. Initially, I assigned preliminary codes to relevant texts, focusing on key concepts and recurring themes. As the review advanced, I continuously revisited and refined these codes through multiple analyses and iterations, identifying three major themes. To minimize potential analytical bias, I established explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, used multiple databases, conducted a systematic search of the literature, applied PRISMA guidelines to ensure systematic and unbiased data collection and reporting, incorporated diverse perspectives from HRD scholars, included contradictory evidence, and acknowledged the inherent limitations of the study. In addition, by employing triangulation across different journals and meticulously documenting the search strategy, data extraction process, and analytical framework, this study ensures both replication and scrutiny, thereby valorizing its verisimilitude and credibility.

Findings

After analyzing the 26 articles, I identified three main themes: conceptualizations, boundaries, and trajectories of HRD, as shown in [Table 1](#). Examining these themes indicates that HRD encompasses a variety of interpretations, has no agreed scope or boundary, and exhibits diverse developmental paths. I delve into the three themes in greater detail below.

Conceptualizations of human resource development

The conceptualization of HRD refers to forming a comprehensive understanding or framework of HRD ([Garavan et al., 2015](#)). It involves identifying and defining key concepts, principles, and components that constitute HRD as a field of study and practice and understanding its goals, objectives, and functions within organizations and society ([Kuchinke, 2000, 2015](#); [Lee, 2001](#); [Marsick and Watkins, 1994](#); [McLean, 2004](#); [McLean and McLean, 2001](#)). In other words, conceptualization provides a foundation for research, teaching, and applying HRD principles in various contexts ([Garavan et al., 2015](#)). [Garavan et al. \(2015, p. 359\)](#) noted the “considerable complexity, confusion, and ambiguity” surrounding the conceptualization of *development* in HRD. I identified 18 articles that addressed the concepts of HRD to varying extents (see [Table 1](#)), although unanimous agreement remains elusive.

Due to the divergent interpretations and the quest to address HRD's conceptual ambiguity, some scholars offer distinct meanings while others critique existing definitions and proffer their own (see [Abdullah, 2009](#); [Chalofsky, 1992](#); [Cho, 2021](#); [Dilworth, 2003](#); [Garavan et al., 1999](#); [Hamlin and Stewart, 2011](#); [Paprock, 2006](#); [Reio, 2023](#); [Swanson, 1999, 2001](#); [Wang et al., 2017](#); [Watkins, 1991](#)). For example, [Wang et al. \(2017\)](#) assert that HRD lacks robust

Table 1. Themes and articles reviewed

Themes	Articles reviewed	Journal	Author(s) (pub. Year)
Conceptualizations of HRD	1. Definitions of HRD: Key concepts from a national and international context	<i>EJTD</i>	Abdullah (2009)
	2. Memories of HRD	<i>TD</i>	Blake (1995)
• Incoherent meanings	3. A unifying definition for the human resource development profession	<i>HRDQ</i>	Chalofsky (1992)
	4. Searching for the future of HRD	<i>ADHR</i>	Dilworth (2003)
• Disjointed theories	5. Reclaiming the “D” in HRD: A typology of development conceptualizations, antecedents, and outcomes	<i>HRDR</i>	Garavan <i>et al.</i> (2015)
	6. What is HRD? A definitional review and synthesis of the HRD domain	<i>EJTD</i>	Hamlin and Stewart (2011)
Boundaries of HRD	7. Why HRD is not an academic discipline	<i>HRDI</i>	Kuchinke (2001)
	8. A refusal to define HRD	<i>HRDI</i>	Lee (2001)
	9. If we can't define HRD in one country, how can we define it in an international context?	<i>HRDI</i>	McLean and McLean (2001)
	10. National human resource development: What in the world is it?	<i>ADHR</i>	McLean (2004)
	11. Human resource development and its underlying theory	<i>HRDI</i>	Swanson (2001)
	12. Means vs. ends: theorizing a definition of human resource development	<i>PR</i>	Wang <i>et al.</i> (2017)
	13. Essay review: Many voices: Defining human resource development from different disciplines	<i>AEQ</i>	Watkins (1991)
	14. Human resource development literature: current issues, priorities, and dilemmas	<i>EJTD</i>	Garavan <i>et al.</i> (1999)
	15. Performance is the key	<i>HRDQ</i>	Swanson (1995)
	16. HRD theory, real or imagined?	<i>HRDI</i>	Swanson (1999)
• Permeable boundaries	17. The human resource development scholar as a disciplined rebel	<i>HRDQ</i>	Wang (2011)
	18. Debates over the nature of HRD: An institutional theory perspective	<i>HRDI</i>	Kuchinke (2000)
• Trajectories of HRD	19. HRD educators' views on teaching and learning: An international perspective.	<i>ADHR</i>	Cho and Zachmeier (2015)
	20. Determining the boundaries of HRDQ and HRD	<i>HRDQ</i>	McLean (2000)
• Haphazard directions	21. HRD as a profession: Current status and future directions	<i>HRDQ</i>	Kahnweiler (2009)
	22. The Many Faces of HRD academic programs: Directions for growth and development	<i>ADHR</i>	Kuchinke (2015)
• Multiple trajectories	23. Reframing human resource development	<i>HRDR</i>	Jacobs (2003)
	24. The learning organization: an integrative vision for HRD	<i>HRDQ</i>	Marsick and Watkins (1994)
	25. National human resource development in transitioning societies in the developing world: Introductory overview	<i>ADHR</i>	Paprock (2006)
	26. An Editor's learning journey: Lessons for moving the field forward	<i>HRDR</i>	Reio (2023)

Notes: ADHR = *Advances in Developing Human Resources*; AEQ = *Adult Education Quarterly*; EJTD = *European Journal of Training and Development*; HRDI = *Human Resource Development International*; HRDQ = *Human Resource Development Quarterly*; HRDR = *Human Resource Development Review*; PR = *Personnel Review*; TD = *Training and Development*
Source: Table by author

theoretical underpinnings and primarily focuses on Western settings, leading the authors to characterize HRD as a tool to advance the goals outlined by the host system rather than as an independent objective. They emphasize host-system dependence as the defining attribute, highlighting shaping and skilling mechanisms as critical components. [Wang et al. \(2017\)](#) goal was to address gaps and enhance the conceptualization of HRD beyond its Western-centric origins. Despite the abundance of HRD research, divergent interpretations persist, complicating the delineation of the essence of HRD. [Table 2](#) presents a brief overview of the evolution of HRD definitions over the years, commencing with Harbison and Myers, the first known scholars to define HRD formally.

Boundaries of human resource development

The boundaries of HRD refer to the limits or distinctions that define the scope and extent of HRD as a field of study and practice ([Garavan and Morley, 2006](#)). These boundaries delineate the areas of focus, concerns, and activities within HRD, establishing what falls within and outside its purview. I identified 13 articles that addressed the boundaries of HRD (see [Table 1](#)), although there is no agreement on what those boundaries should be. Many HRD scholars (e.g. [Swanson, 1995](#); [Wang et al., 2017](#); [Watkins, 1991](#)) have delineated diverse scopes and boundaries for HRD. [Swanson \(1995\)](#) argued that the boundary of HRD is performance, contrasting with [Watkins's \(1991\)](#) assertion that it is learning. However, other scholars have contended that HRD transcends conventional definitions, rendering attempts to confine it within prescribed boundaries or scopes futile (e.g. [Blake, 1995](#); [McLean and McLean, 2001](#); [Sambrook and Stewart, 2005](#); [Walton, 1999](#)). For instance, [McLean and McLean \(2001\)](#) argued that formulating a universal definition for HRD proves impractical, given the diverse practices shaped by national values and the developmental stage of the field. Others advocated against rigidly circumscribing HRD altogether (e.g. [Dilworth, 2003](#); [Lee, 2001](#); [Mankin, 2001](#); [Paprock, 2006](#); [Vince, 2005](#)). For instance, [Lee \(2001\)](#) suggested that seeking to delineate HRD may depict it as a static entity rather than the dynamic, evolving discipline it truly is. As Lee (2001, p. 337) phrases it, HRD researchers should develop “their own emergent view of HRD, rather than adopting the one propounded by teacher, which they would end up wearing like an old, ill-fitting raincoat.” However, [Wang \(2008\)](#) argued that HRD necessitates boundaries and limitations to curtail its unfettered expansion, as an absence of constraints would compromise rigor and precision in research pursuits.

Trajectories of human resource development

The trajectories of HRD refer to the developmental path or direction that the field of HRD follows over time ([Hamlin and Stewart, 2011](#)). It encompasses the evolution, trends, and future directions of HRD as a field, both in terms of research and practice. I identified five articles that addressed the trajectory of HRD (see [Table 1](#)). Several HRD scholars, such as [Chalofsky \(1992\)](#) and [Nadler \(1992\)](#), argued that HRD is diverging into disparate trajectories, emphasizing the necessity of a definitive definition to guide its study and practice. Others acknowledge the lack of a cohesive trajectory in HRD, asserting that it draws heavily from other disciplines for its knowledge base ([Kahnweiler, 2009](#); [Swanson, 1999](#)). Indeed, due to the applied nature of our field, the HRD community has pursued varied paths and integrated concepts and theories from related disciplines ([Kuchinke, 2015](#)). Consequently, as [Swanson \(1999, p. 2\)](#) aptly observed, “In the attempt to be inclusive of so many theories – staking its claim so broadly – [HRD] has come up with no theory.” [Cho and Zachmeier \(2015\)](#) stated that even 50 years after HRD’s inaugural mention in print, the HRD field grapples with a lack of definitive meaning and direction.

Table 2. Evolution of HRD definitions

HRD scholars and pub. year	HRD definitions
Harbison and Myers (1964) Jones (1981) Chalofsky and Lincoln (1983) Swanson (1987)	Increasing all people's knowledge, skills and capacity in a society An organized enhancement of individuals' job-related skills to achieve organizational objectives and personal aspirations The examination of how individuals and groups within organizational settings evolve through learning Enhancing organizational performance through activities involving workforce capabilities, such as work design, skills, expertise and motivation
Smith (1988)	Programs and activities, whether direct or indirect, instructional or individual, contribute positively to individual development, organizational productivity and profitability
Smith (1990)	The systematic enhancement of an organization's human resources by improving employee performance and productivity is achieved through training, education, development and leadership initiatives to fulfill organizational and personal objectives
Chalofsky (1992)	The study and practice of enhancing the learning capabilities of individuals, groups, collectives and organizations through creating and utilizing learning-focused interventions to optimize human and organizational growth and efficacy
Marsick and Watkins (1994)	A theoretical integration through a blend of training, career development and organizational development sets the stage for conceptualizing a learning organization contingent upon strategic deployment
McLean and McLean (2001)	Any process or activity, whether immediate or cumulative, aimed at enhancing adults' work-related knowledge, skills, productivity and satisfaction, benefiting individuals, groups, organizations, communities, nations or humanity
Paprock (2006) Li and Nimon (2008)	Synergistic, reinforcing and interdependent, contingent on the context and purpose for which HRD is studied and practiced
Swanson and Holton (2009)	A process geared toward enhancing all individuals' knowledge, skills and capacities within a society
Wang <i>et al.</i> (2017) Swanson (2022)	A process aimed at cultivating and maximizing expertise to enhance organizational systems, work processes, team dynamics and individual performance A means to support the objectives defined by the corresponding host system rather than being an end A process aimed at cultivating and harnessing expertise to enhance the performance of individuals, teams, work processes and organizational systems

Source: Table by author

Discussion

This integrative literature review investigated how the evolution of HRD definitions and nebulous boundaries over the past three decades impacts the viability of the HRD discipline. Given that the past serves as a prologue, it holds paramount significance for the HRD community to comprehend our historical trajectory to navigate our future course effectively. As [Cho \(2021, p. 132\)](#) succinctly expressed, we must understand how “HRD has evolved by looking back to look forward.” Considering the complexity introduced by divergent interpretations of HRD, the findings of this study underscore the need for urgent action to save our discipline. How innumerable scholars have conflictingly defined HRD, and the field’s nebulous boundaries has led to confusion about what HRD truly encompasses. This lack of clarity risks weakening the discipline, as it becomes increasingly difficult to establish consensus on its core purpose, areas of focus, and which research topics fall within or outside its scope. It is not far-fetched to suggest that HRD’s relevance could diminish if this ambiguity persists, potentially jeopardizing its survival as a distinct academic and professional discipline.

Many HRD scholars have frustratingly abandoned the pursuit of a universally accepted definition of the field. For instance, [Abdullah \(2009, p. 493\)](#) argued that “a single definition of HRD is neither practical nor feasible.” Similarly, [Hamlin and Stewart \(2011, p. 199\)](#) found that HRD’s identity is riddled with “many contradictions, confusions, and controversies,” suggesting that there may no longer be hope due to the field’s inherent complexity and ambiguity. [Mankin \(2001, p. 80\)](#) asserted that we must “embrace HRD as an ambiguous concept, as it is this ambiguity that provides HRD with its distinctiveness.” However, the discord surrounding HRD definitions impedes the advancement of the field, undermining key elements such as accreditation, curriculum frameworks, and other foundational pillars necessary for our discipline to earn respect and maintain its viability ([Kuchinke, 2015](#)). As [Gaudet et al. \(2017\)](#) observed, the lack of consensus and a clear definition among HRD scholars and thought leaders poses formidable obstacles for institutions in crafting and delivering relevant academic programs. Indeed, definitional coherence significantly enhances students’ understanding of a discipline, whereas fragmented or contradictory knowledge complicates learning and negatively affects students’ attitudes and educational success ([Krishnan, 2009](#)). The insights gleaned from this study have significant implications, emphasizing the need for clarity, consensus, and adaptation in HRD scholarship.

Significance of the study

Over two decades ago, [Kuchinke \(2001\)](#) argued that:

Definitions matter in life, and they matter in emergent professional fields like HRD where much recent scholarly writing has called for greater definition, clarity, and transparency of the field itself, its theoretical foundations, and its contributing areas of knowledge. (p. 291)

Today, in 2024, the HRD discipline faces a significant risk of decline due to its current disjointed and chaotic trajectory. A discipline requires a clear definition and a well-articulated research agenda to be viable ([Krishnan, 2009](#)). Disconcertingly, however, examining the three themes from this study reveals the diverse interpretations, conceptual ambiguities, and precarious state of HRD within the scholarly discourse. The analysis shows that an agreed definition and boundary of HRD remains elusive. Scholars provide distinct meanings or critique existing definitions, contributing to divergent interpretations.

Furthermore, this study underscores HRD’s divergence into disparate trajectories and the absence of a cohesive direction. Decades ago, [Chalofsky \(1992, p. 175\)](#) asseverated the “need for a unifying definition that would not only provide a focus for the development of the

profession but would also set limits on the boundaries of the field.” While some scholars stress the necessity of a definitive definition and direction to guide HRD research and practice (Chalofsky, 1992; Kuchinke, 2001), others acknowledge the eclectic and interdisciplinary nature of HRD, drawing from various disciplines and theories (Kahnweiler, 2009; Swanson, 1999). The subjective nature of HRD definitions underscores the imperative for HRD scholars to engage more critically to promote a more precise and unambiguous understanding of HRD. A coherent definition is crucial because a discipline’s eclipsing and eventual decline occurs when it expands its scope to significantly overlap with other fields, diluting its distinct identity (Grieb, 1974). Krishnan (2009) agreed, stating that a discipline that fails to cultivate a stable identity will ultimately stagnate and end up nowhere. In sum, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexity and chaotic evolution of HRD, illuminating the dangers of HRD’s potential demise and underscoring the urgent need for coherence and strategic direction to prevent the field’s further fragmentation and deterioration. Without a unified understanding of HRD, researchers and practitioners may remain confined to silos, resulting in disjointed efforts and stunted progress. Indeed, the absence of consensus can fragment research endeavors, produce conflicting theoretical frameworks, and create inconsistent practices within the field. In addition, the lack of cohesion may impede interdisciplinary collaboration and curtail the field’s capacity to tackle complex organizational and societal challenges effectively. Below are more implications for HRD research and practice.

Implications for human resource development research

An undefined discipline with nebulous boundaries has profound implications for both curricula and research, potentially leading to ambiguity in academic focus and research objectives (Krishnan, 2009). By elucidating the complexities and contradictions surrounding the conceptualizations, boundaries, and trajectories of HRD, this study offers a foundation for future research to deepen our understanding of critical principles and phenomena within HRD. This study further illuminates the fragmented nature of the existing literature, elucidates its implications for research topics and outputs, and highlights the potential risks it poses to the integrity and viability of our HRD discipline. Furthermore, the nebulous boundaries of HRD may inadvertently limit scholarly progress by discouraging emerging scholars from exploring novel research areas.

Implications for human resource development practice

Chalofsky (1992, p. 179) stated that “a definition is needed that provides direction for both the field of study and the field of practice.” The present study offers valuable insights that can inform strategic decision-making and program development within organizational settings. By gaining a deeper understanding of the conceptual underpinnings and boundary considerations of HRD, practitioners can tailor their interventions to better align with organizational goals and address specific challenges and opportunities within their contexts (Torraco and Lundgren, 2020). Educators in the HRD field could also adapt to the evolving discourse on HRD definitions and boundaries because HRD education plays a critical role in preparing future HRD practitioners to navigate the complexities of the field (Cho and Zachmeier, 2015), particularly considering ongoing debates surrounding the definitions and boundaries of HRD. By incorporating diverse perspectives and fostering critical thinking, HRD education programs can cultivate a new generation of HRD professionals equipped to address the multifaceted challenges facing organizations and individuals in today’s dynamic workplace (Prajogo and Oke, 2016).

Limitations

This study has limitations. One limitation is relying on specific articles for data analysis. The propensity to emphasize only the prevailing viewpoint is a constraint inherent in literature reviews (Dickson *et al.*, 2011). Hence, forthcoming research endeavors should incorporate insights from academics, industry luminaries, and practitioners to provide a comprehensive and balanced portrayal of HRD in its research and practical applications. While the 26 articles analyzed offer valuable insights into the conceptualizations, boundaries, and trajectories of HRD, they may not fully represent the breadth and diversity of perspectives within the field. Another limitation is relying exclusively on English-speaking literature. By focusing solely on publications in English, this study overlooked HRD studies published in other languages, potentially excluding valuable insights and perspectives from non-English-speaking regions and cultures. Future research efforts should overcome this limitation by incorporating literature from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, fostering a more inclusive understanding of HRD across global contexts.

Recommendation for future research

Given the paucity of studies in this area, empirical inquiry is imperative to ascertain the ramifications of varying conceptualizations of HRD on organizational practices, research trajectories of doctoral students, and the overarching comprehension of HRD among insiders and outsiders of the field. Empirical investigation into the practical implications of differing conceptualizations of HRD is needed to examine how different meanings and interpretations of HRD impact organizational practices (Sambrook, 2008), employee development initiatives (Antonacopoulou, 2000) and overall employee performance and organizational effectiveness (Kareem and Hussein, 2019). Future research could focus on conducting qualitative studies to investigate how various stakeholders, including HR professionals, organizational leaders, employees, and external consultants perceive the definitions and boundaries of HRD. By capturing diverse perspectives, researchers can gain insights into the nuances and complexities surrounding HRD conceptualizations within different organizational contexts. In addition, future research could validate and refine the HRD framework through empirical studies conducted across various industries and organizational settings, contributing to a more precise delineation of HRD boundaries and core principles. Curricula research on HRD postgraduate programs may also be necessary to aid emerging scholars and practitioners adapt to the dynamic discourse surrounding HRD definitions and boundaries. By integrating a multitude of perspectives, nurturing critical thinking, and fostering discourse on the diverse definitions and boundaries of HRD, future HRD scholars and practitioners will be equipped with the requisite knowledge and understanding to navigate the intricate landscape of the field and effectively confront contemporary challenges in HRD.

Conclusion

Over the past three decades, the field of HRD has witnessed significant evolution in its definitions and boundaries, leading to complex debates surrounding the relevance of some research topics within the discipline. Many prominent ancient and modern HRD scholars have divergently defined HRD, as evidenced in this literature review, leading to an increasingly fluid and inconsistent discipline. This confusion has made it challenging to delineate which research topics genuinely belong within HRD. With no universally accepted parameters for HRD, academic mentors, school faculties, editors, and reviewers often rely on personal interpretations of HRD when assessing the relevance of a doctoral student's research topic or a manuscript submitted to a journal for review. Consequently, some

research topics that align with innovative or interdisciplinary approaches may be deemed irrelevant by those adhering to more traditional HRD frameworks and vice versa. Indeed, the lack of consensus on HRD's scope allows for idiosyncratic judgments, causing confusion and frustration among HRD doctoral students or emerging scholars navigating a constantly shifting landscape. Those scholars may even be penalized by the rejection of their research topics or submitted manuscripts if they do not align with the narrow or subjective interpretations of HRD gatekeepers. Indeed, the evolution of HRD's definitions and boundaries has had profound implications on the adjudication of research topic relevance, affecting the academic trajectories of emerging scholars. There are also practical implications of differing definitions and inconsistent conceptualizations of HRD, precipitating confusion in curriculum design, misalignment between academic training and industry needs, and challenges in establishing coherent research agendas across the field.

Given these great challenges, the onus of change lies with prominent HRD scholars to establish clear boundaries and direction for the HRD field, much like the well-defined parameters in many other disciplines. Chalofsky (1992, p. 179) cautioned that the HRD discipline must act to "prevent crises from developing." Cho and Zachmeier (2015, p. 156) also warned about the "uncertain future of HRD." Mabey (2003) stated that the HRD discipline could significantly benefit from addressing and resolving the contradictions within the field. Indeed, HRD scholars must take decisive action to establish our discipline's internal consistency and external validity, ensuring its coherence and long-term viability. Swanson (2022) noted that the myriad definitions and roles attributed to HRD confound both disciplinary insiders and outsiders. Therefore, a concrete definition and clear boundary could bolster HRD's credibility and legitimacy as a distinct discipline and strengthen its position within the academic and professional community. It is incontrovertible that the HRD discipline is struggling with its identity (McLean and McLean, 2001; Zachmeier *et al.*, 2014), and we must do something about it. Cho and Zachmeier (2015) empirically found that some HRD scholars are worried about our discipline fading away. It is a fact that many disciplines have faded into obscurity (Krishnan, 2009), and it is pivotal that the HRD field takes proactive steps to avoid the same fate. As Krishnan (2009) observed, "Many established disciplines, especially in the social sciences, are afraid of failing," adding that "Academic disciplines can get into trouble once the political and historical context changes and they no longer appear to be very useful." Krishnan concluded, "Sometimes the difficulties a discipline faces are self-inflicted" (p. 33). Indeed, HRD as a discipline may well be approaching its final chapter.

Note

1. Asterisk * indicates the articles reviewed.

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