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A Feminist Critique of Human Resource Development Research

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Abstract. This paper shares the results of a critique of human resource development (HRD) research, according to a feminist research framework. The paper offers a brief description of feminist research and challenges HRD researchers to be more critical of their practice.

Introduction

Human Resource Development (HRD) is an emerging discipline in the process of creating and validating knowledge. Like most other social institutions, the process of knowledge creation and dissemination has historically been the province of white men. Women's experience and knowledge has been traditionally excluded or overlooked in social science research. During the last two decades, feminist social scientists have critiqued the research process. Acker, Barry, and Esseveld recognize that traditional social science has relegated women to the periphery and misrepresented their lives. They consequently suggest that "a radical rebeginning is needed in feminist research" (1983, p. 424). This paper suggests a new beginning through critical assessment of published HRD research. This paper defines feminist research, presents a feminist critique of HRD research, and challenges HRD researchers.

Theoretical Framework

Entertaining the many types of feminism is beyond the scope of this paper. A feminist--at the most simplistic level--is a person who seeks economic, social and political equality between the sexes. Feminists participate in and/or support organized activity to advance women's rights and interests. Acker, Barry, and Esseveld (1983) define feminists as engaged in: acknowledging the exploitation, devaluation and often oppression of women; making a commitment to changing the condition of women; and adopting a critical perspective toward dominant intellectual traditions that have ignored and /or justified women's oppression.

Is there a particular feminist research method? No. There is, however, a feminist *approach* to research. Feminist researchers use methods similar to other researchers (Harding, 1987; Peplau & Conrad, 1989). What makes feminist research unique is "defining women's experiences as suitable problems and sources of answers; designing research *for* women; and locating both researcher and researched on the same critical plane" (Coyner, 1988-1989, p. 291). "The feminist goal is to do research that is *for* women rather than *about* women" (Allen & Barber, 1992, p. 9). Bologh asserts that feminist researchers "question and challenge the implicit male perspective of the dominant paradigms, ethnological strictures, and theoretical assumptions of the various disciplines" (1984, p. 388). Finally, feminist research is concerned with social justice, not only for women, but also for other oppressed groups in society.

Research questions have traditionally been conceptualized without consideration of women (Fine, 1985; Lykes & Stewart, 1986; Unger, 1983) and HRD is no exception. A quick reading of HRD research reveals an agenda driven by management interests focused primarily on learning and performance. Leimbach and Baldwin (1997) identify the characteristics of effective HRD research as being customer driven, linked to value creation, short in duration, and rigorous. While Leimbach and Baldwin's characteristics are important in HRD research, there are several omissions. For instance, there is no reference to addressing issues related to women and minorities, diversity, power relationships, social context or social and political change. Employees are not even mentioned in the characteristics. Although organization power holders control the demand for HRD services and impact the HRD system, they are not the sole members. Organizations affect employees, communities and the environment.

Methodology

This study focused on reviewing the HRD research published in 1997 from three sources. During 1997, two books on HRD research were published (Russ-Eft, Preskill & Sleezer, 1997; Swanson & Holton, 1997). The other source was the proceedings of the 1997 Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD) Conference (Torraco, 1997). All sources were evaluated according to Worell's six themes of feminist research:

1. Challenges traditional scientific inquiry.
2. Focuses on the experiences and lives of women.
3. Considers asymmetrical power arrangements.
4. Recognizes gender as an essential category of analysis.
5. Attends to language and the power to "name."
6. Promotes social activism and societal change. (1996, p. 476)

The two books were critiqued. 121 papers were evaluated from the AHRD conference proceedings against Worell's framework. These findings are preliminary, as analyses of AHRD conferences from 1994-1996 and 1998 are underway, as well as an analysis of research published in *Human Resource Development Quarterly*.

Findings

The findings will be reported following two strains. The first will be a critique of the research highlighted in the two 1997 HRD research books. The second will be an analysis of the 1997 AHRD conference proceedings.

A brief critique of HRD research books. McLean and Russ-Eft identified nine "examples of excellent HRD research" in the 1997 *HRD Research Handbook*. These studies were published between 1992-1995. McLean and Russ-Eft established that the studies selected were not "perfect," and emphasized that they represented a wide array of topics and methodologies. These "excellent" studies addressed issues including: continuous quality improvement, cross-cultural human resource development, performance feedback, organization learning, behavioral modeling, interpersonal-skills training, computer-based interventions, transfer of training, performance prediction, team building, learning, design, performance and development. Two of the nine studies sampled business students. The sample populations for the others included managers, team members and training participants. By analyzing this small selection of studies against Worell's (1996) six points framing feminist research we can establish that: (1) Some of the studies challenged traditional scientific inquiry (Brooks, 1994; DiBella, 1993; and Rowe, 1995). (2) None of the studies focused on the experiences and lives of women. (3) Asymmetrical power arrangements were considered by one study (Brooks, 1994). (4) Gender was not recognized as an essential category of analysis in any of the studies, not even those with a significant population of women. (5) Worell and Etaugh (1994) identify "attending to language and the power to name" as the willingness to address undiscussables such as sexual harassment, discrimination, or violence against women. None of the studies ventured into this area. (6) Finally, none of the studies promoted social activism or societal change.

Russ-Eft, Preskill and Sleezer co-authored the 1997 book *Human Resource Development Review: Research and Implications*. The studies highlighted in this book were published between 1990 and 1995. They overlap significantly with McLean and Russ-Eft's selection of "excellent" studies. Russ-Eft, Preskill and Sleezer selected studies based on the following:

- A well-grounded theoretical framework
- A well-grounded analysis and interpretation
- Αν απροπριατε μοδε οφ ινθυιρψ
- Αν οριγιναλ χοντριβυτιον το τηε φιελδ
- Α σψστεματιχ αππροαχη το ρεσεαρχη
- Α χλεαρ ανδ ωελλ-οργανιζεδ ωριττεν πρεσεντατιον

• Α ωελλ–εξεχυτεδ μετηοδολογη

• Αν αππεαλ το α λαργε αυδιενχε

This collection of studies is organized according to learning and performance on individual, team and organizational levels. This structure situates the research inquiry solidly in the realm of corporate settings with a focus on organizational performance and learning. There are no studies related to women in this collection. Two of the fifteen studies in this book address power in organizations. There are also articles related to cross-cultural issues. A striking characteristic of this collection is the diversity of qualitative research designs.

Analyzing 1997 Academy of HRD Proceedings. 121 papers were reviewed for this arm of the study. They were coded according to Worell’s six points. The first point was "Challenges traditional scientific inquiry." The papers were sorted into four methodological categories: 1) traditional/experimental, 2) non-traditional, 3) theoretical/framework and 4) literature review. Refer to Table 1 for results. The split between traditional and non-traditional approaches was about even. Excluding the literature reviews and theoretical papers, the traditional and non-traditional approaches represented 47% and 53% of the research, respectively. 38% of the total papers applied a non-traditional method of inquiry such as case study, interviewing, content analysis, observation, participative inquiry, critical incident technique or narrative analysis. The findings on the other five points are grimmer as depicted in Table 2.

Table 1: 1997 AHRD Conference Proceedings Methodology

Methodology	#	%
Traditional/Experimental	41	33.88
Non-traditional	46	38.02
Theoretical/Framework	24	19.83
Review of literature	10	8.26

The next table shows the breakdown of studies according to Worell’s six points, including methodology. On Worell’s second point, "Focus on women’s experiences and lives," five studies, or 4% met this criterion (Cordak, 1997; Cseh, 1997; Jackson & Wiswell, 1997; McDonald, & Hite, 1997; Pegg, 1997). Six studies considered asymmetrical power arrangements, or nearly 5% (Attwell, 1997; Callender & Wiswell, 1997; Daley, 1997; Dilworth, 1997; Dirx, 1997; Smith & Lewis, 1997). Ten studies, or 8%, recognized gender as a category of analysis (Cordak, 1997; Dilworth & Willis, 1997; Jackson & Wiswell, 1997; Kwakman, K. H. E., 1997; Leitsch, & Lentz, 1997; McDonald & Hite, 1997; Pegg, 1997; Raines, 1997; Redmann, Stitt-Gohdes, & Lambrecht, 1997; Wentling, 1997).

Six of the studies, or 5%, attended to "Language and the power to name." Bradfield, Aquino, and Stanwyck (1997) looked at the effects of blame attributions and justice violations on revenge and forgiveness in the workplace. Cordack (1997) addressed diversity management in non-profit women’s health care settings and analyzed their experience according to race, class and gender. Dirx (1997) examined the meaning of learning in HRD. Jackson and Wiswell (1997) investigated the role of HRD in the welfare revolution. Pegg (1997) did an interpretive study on women of color and their experience in corporate America. Wentling (1997) analyzed diversity training in business and industry.

Table 2: 1997 AHRD Conference Proceedings according to Worell’s Feminist Research Framework

Feminist Framework	#	%
Challenges traditional scientific inquiry	46	38.02
Focuses on women's experiences and lives	5	4.13

Considers asymmetrical power arrangements	6	4.96
Recognizes gender as category of analysis	10	8.26
Attends to language and the power to name.	6	4.96
Advocates social activism and change	14	11.57

The final category of analysis, "advocacy of social activism and change," was the second most frequent feminist criterion after challenging traditional paradigms of scientific inquiry. Fourteen studies or 11% of the proceedings fell into this category (Attwell, 1997; Bierema, 1997; Cseh, 1997; Dilworth, 1997; Dirkx, 1997; Jackson & Wiswell, 1997; Lynham & Swanson, 1997; Pegg, 1997; Rowden, 1997; Smith & Lewis, 1997; Vind, 1997; Wentling, 1997; wright, 1997). Four of the studies or 3% receive "honorable" mention for meeting four or more of the criteria. Note again that none of the studies met the criteria on all six counts. The 1997 honorable mentions are: Cordak, Jackson & Wiswell, Pegg and Wentling. These studies focused on diversity and women of color.

The Challenge of Feminist HRD Research

Admittedly, this brief critique does not capture all HRD research, but serves to summarize the most comprehensive, current HRD research. Both the direction and omissions are startling. Indeed, the books provide useful models of research and fill a previously vacant niche in HRD literature. However, the research books stop short of truly challenging the assumptions HRD researchers bring to their studies. They fail to include many HRD contexts beyond industrial, corporate organizations. Diverse voices are not heard.

The AHRD proceedings also paint a disheartening picture of where the HRD field is headed. Other than promoting alternative research designs, and to a lesser degree advocating social change, there is little focus on issues of social justice in the workplace or larger social context. Women's experience is ignored, as are asymmetrical power arrangements. Gender is not used as a category of analysis—even when data are collected by gender. Organizational "undiscussables" such as sexism, racism, patriarchy, or violence receive little attention in the literature, yet have the most impact on organizational dynamics. Finally, HRD research has only weakly advocated change. These findings are cause for alarm. Is HRD research reproducing existing power relationships in organizations? Is HRD research in the service of corporate executives and shareholders? What are responsible HRD researchers to do?

Just as there are many feminisms, so too are there many types of feminist research. The purpose of this paper was not to argue for one feminist methodology, but rather to challenge HRD researchers to approach the knowledge creation process more

critically. DeVault noted that, "the dilemma for the feminist scholar, always, is to find ways of working within some disciplinary tradition while aiming at an intellectual revolution that will transform the tradition" (in Burke, 1978, p. 855). HRD researchers need to challenge their traditions in both research and practice. The feminist research framework offers a critical platform to begin this work. HRD researchers can benefit by stepping back and assessing how or if HRD research contributes to social and political change, versus reinforcing the status quo.

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