# Problematizing HRD in SMEs: A "Critical" Exploration of Context, Informality, and Empirical Realities

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*Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) represent the backbone of the global economy and therefore are an integral part of the HRD research agenda. The HRD literature has predominantly focused on both large firms and formal practices, and as a consequence HRD in SMEs is considered deficient. In this article, we question these assumptions by invoking Mingers' (2000) "four aspects of being critical" framework. We argue that the current knowledge base is flawed as research has not moved beyond the deficiency model to explore, accommodate, and explain HRD in the SME setting. The role of SME context and informality is insufficiently conceptualized in the literature. We make theoretical and methodological recommendations to advance HRD research.*

*Key Words: context, critical human resource development, HRD, informality, SMEs*

## Introduction

In the contemporary era of discontinuous and transformational change, the quality of human capital is central to competitive advantage (Bhattacharya, Doty, & Garavan, 2014). Within this context, human resource development (HRD) is critical to enhancing human capital (Scheel, Rigotti, & Mohr, 2014). HRD researchers have not sufficiently focused on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), their unique context, and the characteristics of HRD in these organizations. The limited evidence is fragmented, disjointed, and methodologically deficient (Nolan & Garavan, 2016). Researchers continue

to look for the existence of a formal HRD architecture within SMEs, and these firms invariably come up short when compared to such an architecture (Bishop, 2015). A focus on size as a key determinant of HRD, coupled with an emphasis on formal HRD practices as the exclusive conduit for human capital development, has led to conclusions that HRD in SMEs is unsophisticated, deficient, and inferior (Kitching, 2008), if not empirically elusive (Rigg & Trehan, 2004).

These deficiencies are increasingly difficult to justify given the role of SMEs in influencing competitiveness worldwide (Kitching, 2015; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2009). HRD in SMEs is of strategic importance given the labor-intensive nature of these firms and where the employee contribution is more readily visible and impactful on firm performance (De Clerq & Belausteguigoitia, 2007; Uçanok & Karabatı, 2013).

The focus of this article is to critically evaluate HRD in terms of its meaning and operationalization within SMEs (cf. Keenoy, 2009). We specifically consider the ways in which the dominant discourse of HRD has misconstrued knowledge and skills development processes in SMEs. We utilized a framework derived from the field of critical management to challenge the assumption that SMEs do not "do" HRD. We argue that the marginalization of SMEs within mainstream HRD research is symptomatic of deeper problems rooted in the very identity of HRD.

We question these assumptions by invoking Mingers' (2000) "four aspects of being critical" framework to problematize knowledge about HRD in SMEs. Our central argument is that the literature draws upon frameworks, discourses, and vocabularies that have produced particular versions of HRD that repress and exclude the unique realities and context of SMEs. This renders research on HRD deficient in terms of explaining what actually happens and why particular patterns of HRD emerge in SMEs. Specifically, context is insufficiently understood and accounted for in existing research. There are critical gaps in understanding with respect to explaining the omnipresence of HRD informality in SMEs. There are also gaps concerning the dimensions of context that facilitate both the emergence and persistence of informal HRD practices, their relationship to formal practices, and the fit of different degrees of formality and informality (Nolan & Garavan, 2016).

We structure the article as follows. First, we briefly consider the origins of HRD scholarship, traditional modes of theorizing, and methodological approaches and their implications for HRD research. Next, we explain the theoretical framework and the review method utilized to review the literature. We then present our key findings using a critical theory lens (Mingers, 2000) to evaluate the literature. Finally, we propose future research avenues and outline implications for HRD practice in SMEs.

## The "Problem" With Dominant HRD Scholarship:
## The Legacy of Theory and Method

Research on HRD in SMEs is shaped by the theoretical and methodological legacy of the broader field of HRD. This broader field of research is characterized by a multitude of contradictions, confusions, and controversies concerning the HRD's theoretical and conceptual identity (Hamlin & Stewart, 2011), which have impacted research on HRD in SMEs. Debates about the nature of HRD have traditionally focused on (a) whether its purpose should be to enhance performance or learning; (b) the underpinning theories that explain the role and contribution of HRD; and (c) how HRD should be operationalised for research purposes (Ghosh, Kim, Kim, & Callahan, 2014; Lee, 2015).

These contradictions, confusions, and controversies present challenges when investigating HRD in SMEs. First, the majority of research on HRD in SMEs is highly functionalist in nature (Githens, 2015). Second, it is significantly performative and does not sufficiently differentiate between formal and informal HRD (Holton & Yamkovenko, 2008; Mankin, 2009). Third, the focus on learning is frequently deemphasised (Poell, 2014), and the social nature of HRD is given insufficient attention (Froehlich, Segers, & Van den Bossche, 2014). These challenges have led scholars to suggest critical approaches (Bierema & Callahan, 2014) as a way of achieving a more nuanced understanding of HRD in SMEs.

Critical approaches have value in problematizing mainstream, conventional thinking about HRD in SMEs (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Delbridge & Keenoy, 2010). Essential components of a critical approach concern the labeling of existing contributions as deficient in some way (Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997) and the opening up of opportunities to include actor voices that have been excluded in the existing body of research (Delbridge, 2014). Specifically, in the context of this article, critical approaches help to (a) consider conceptualizations of HRD that move beyond a preoccupation with performance; (b) consider the role of structures of power in conceptualizations of HRD in SMEs; and (c) provide the opportunity to situate HRD in its social, political, and economic contexts. The SME context is a particularly apt one in which to consider these issues. Scholars have observed that the proliferation of SMEs will result in a significant amount of HRD practice located in this context (Hill, 2002). The increased significance of SMEs as a location for HRD practice requires notions of HRD that include the perspectives of employees, consider informal HRD practices as something less than deficient and consider conceptualizations of HRD that are less performance and productivity driven.

To help reposition and broaden the HRD research agenda in SMEs we utilized Mingers' (2000) framework. This framework is particularly useful in this context for a number of reasons. First, it seeks to bring coherence to the many interpretations of what it means to "being critical." Second, the

framework proposes four critiques that represent different dimensions of questioning HRD in SMEs. Third, the framework helps to capture the messiness, complexities, and irrationality of organizational HRD practices (cf. Sambrook, 2004). Specifically, the critique of rhetoric examines the logical strength of arguments made about HRD in SMEs. The critique of tradition questions taken for granted assumptions in HRD in SMEs research. The critique of authority highlights the need to adopt multiple perspectives of HRD in SMEs. Finally, the critique of objectivity brings into view the role of power structures and interests in shaping conceptualizations of HRD.

## Method

We utilized an integrative literature review which is "a form of research that reviews, critiques, and synthesizes representative literature on a topic in an integrated way such that new frameworks and perspectives on the topic are generated" (Torraco, 2005a, p.356). Following the guidelines of Callahan (2010) and Torraco (2005a), we describe the review process, specifying (a) where the articles were found, (b) when the search was conducted, (c) who undertook the search, (d) how the articles were found, (e) the total number of articles that resulted from the search and the final count selected for inclusion, and (f) why the articles were finally selected.

Both SMEs and HRD are contested concepts. SMEs are variously defined and HRD conceptually lacks cohesiveness. This is echoed in Nolan and Garavan's (2016) recent analysis of the literature, where they observed limited use of the term HRD in the SMEs literature. To address these challenges, we focused on the traditional arena of HRD—the workplace—as this remains a substantive context for HRD scholarship (Torraco, 2005b). Hamlin and Stewart (2011, pp. 207, 213) suggested that HRD is primarily a workplace process of "planned, activities, processes and/or interventions" designed to "facilitate individual and group learning relating primarily to employee jobs, work and … careers." Moreover, we focused on the management of training and development (T&D) as a key dimension of practice within HRD (Swanson & Holton, 2009). To facilitate different international conceptualizations of the term *SME,* we focused on nonsubsidiary organizations employing fewer than 500 employees (OECD, 2015).

We utilized the following databases to identify relevant literature: ABI, ProQuest, Emerald, Wiley Online Library, Sage Full Text Collections, Business Source Premier, and Science Direct (Elsevier). We chose the time frame of January 1995 to December 2015 because of sporadic and patchy evidence of relevant articles prior to 1995 (Nolan & Garavan, 2016). Moreover, a number of HRD journals, such as *Human Resource Development International*, were not in existence prior to 1995. We concentrated our analysis on peer-reviewed academic journal articles and the business and management subject areas rather than extending analyses to the fields of psychology, education, and sociology.

We searched the databases using the following search term combinations: "HRD (or human resource development) and SME," "training and SME," "development and SME," and "learning and SME." We included secondary key words such as "training," "workplace," and "HRD" in conjunction with the main search terms. We modified the search parameters to incorporate the terms "small firm," "small enterprise," "small business," and "small organization."

Our initial search generated 2,897 articles. Application of our inclusion and exclusion criteria reduced the total to 132 articles in 34 publications. We independently reviewed the initial article count utilizing our conceptual boundaries. We then coded the articles using the dimensions of the Mingers framework.

## Applying Mingers' (2000) Framework to Review HRD in SMEs

We now present our analysis sieving the selected articles through Mingers' framework. The underpinning principles of the four rhetorics are outlined in Table 1. This also includes indicative examples from the literature, as well as key implications for the study of HRD in SMEs.

### Critique 1: The Critique of Rhetoric

Mingers' framework first considers the critique of rhetoric. This provides the foundation to the three critiques that follow. We focus on two dimensions of rhetoric found in the literature: the deficit HRD model in SMEs and the role of size determinism.

*The Deficit HRD Model in SMEs.*  The literature adopts a deficit view and focuses on the barriers that prevent SMEs from engaging in formal HRD. This contrasts with examining and explaining the activity that *actually* takes place and why it assumes a particular form. Resource deficits including time, finance, expertise, and scale pose significant challenges to HRD in SMEs and figure prominently in the literature (Admiraal & Lockhorst, 2009; Harris, 2009; Susomrith and Coetzer, 2015; Westhead & Storey, 1996). Examples of barriers include the high opportunity cost, which is one of the greatest barriers to the occurrence of formal HRD in SMEs (e.g., Castany, 2010; Greenidge, Alleyne, Parris, & Grant, 2012; Kock & Ellström, 2011; Pajo, Coetzer, & Guenole, 2010). The release of staff for training and the provision of cover can be problematic and SMEs are unable to realize economies of scale advantages (Hoque & Bacon, 2008; Loan-Clarke, Boocock, Smith, & Whittaker, 1999). SMEs may be reluctant to invest in HRD, particularly as business benefits take time to accrue (Marshall, Alderman, Wong, & Thwaites, 1995). However, when SMEs invest in HRD they have strong awareness of the activities offering best value for money (Barrett, 2015; Gray, 2004; Hill & Stewart, 2000; McPherson & Wang, 2014; Susomrith & Coetzer, 2015). SME owners

**Table 1. Application of Mingers's (2000) 'Four Aspects of Being Critical' Framework to the Study of HRD in SMEs**

| Critique | Underpinning principles | Indicative Examples from the HRD in SMEs literature | Implications for the study of HRD in SMEs | Indicative citations |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Critique of rhetoric | • Questions validity, soundness and logic of the argument | • SMEs do not engage in formal methods of HRD due to a combination of significant resource constraints<br>• Informality is a consequence of resource constraints | Deficit perspective that does not adequately explain informal HRD activities and approaches | Admiraal & Lockhorst (2009); Castany (2010); Greenidge et al. (2012); Harris (2009); Hoque & Bacon (2006); Massey (2004); Pajo et al. (2010); Saru (2007); Susomrith & Coetzer (2015); Westhead & Storey (1996) |
| | • Questions the premises upon which conclusions are based | • Size acts as a significant barrier to engagement in formal HRD<br>• Size used as a control variable<br>• Comparisons between SMEs and large firms<br>• Informality is a direct function of size | Overlooks unique, dynamic contextual factors and distinguishing features of managerial processes in SMEs | Ahmad & Allen (2015); Choi et al. (2015); Geordiadis & Pitelis (2014); Guerrazzi (2014); McKevitt & Marshall (2015) |
| | • Questions the language used to analyse the phenomenon of interest | • Discourse of large firms privileged<br>• Pejorative overtones associated with informality<br>• Promotion of a universalist HRD stance | Inadequate explanations for informality of HRD in SMEs<br><br>Decontextualised research | Bryan (2006); Curado & Teixeira (2014); Fazzari & Mosca (2009); Rauch et al. (2005); Thassanabanjong et al., 2009) |
| Critique of tradition | • Questions taken-for-granted assumptions within a discipline | • Preoccupation with analysing the impact of HRD on dimensions of organizational performance (performance paradigm)<br>• Studies positioned within learning paradigm remain focused on how learning can be leveraged to maximise performance, productivity & profitability | Downplays issues of politics and dynamic power relations in the HRD process | Collins & Smith (2004); Huang (2001); Jayawarna et al. (2007); Macpherson & Jaywarna (2007); Miller et al. (2015); Newkirk-Moore & Bracker (1998); Roffe (2007); Savery & Luks (2004); Westhead (1998) |

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| Critique | Underpinning principles | Indicative Examples from the HRD in SMEs literature | Implications for the study of HRD in SMEs | Indicative citations |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | • Treats conventional wisdom and customs with scepticism | • Reliance on traditional theoretical perspectives rooted in economics, strategic management and organizational theory literatures | Lack of creativity in extension of existing theories or adoption of new theories to explore HRD in the SME context | de Kok (2002); Gray & Mabey (2005); Greenidge et al. (2012); Johnston & Loader (2003); Solomon et al. (2013) |
| | • Questions the use of conventional research designs | • Research designs rooted in positivist paradigm with emphasis on measurable, quantifiable dimensions of HRD and tightly defined variables that are amenable to statistical analysis | Sustains a narrow focus on the performance paradigm and overlooks social and conversational aspects of learning | Aragón-Sánchez et al. (2003); Beaver & Hutchings (2005); Bryan (2006); Devins et al. (2004); Gray (2004); Hoque & Bacon (2008); Choi et al. (2015); Keogh et al. (2005); McCole et al. (2001); Morgan et al. (2008); Webster et al. (2005) |
| | | | Restricted focus on formal indicators of HRD activity | |
| | | | Fails to differentiate between formal and informal HRD | |
| Critique of authority | • Questions dominant views about a phenomenon | • Research designs focused in the main on SME owner-manager perspectives | HRD mainly viewed as a reflection of managerial objectives and aspirations | Johnston & Loader (2003); Loan-Clarke et al (2000); Raffo et al. (2000); Skinner et al (2003); Solomon et al. (2013); Walker & Webster (2006) |
| | • Questions the hegemony of a singular perspective | • Managerialist orientation of the HRD process and activities: choices and decisions typically lies in the hands of the owner-manager | Lack of attention to employee voice | Barrett (2015); Castany (2010); Deakins et al. (2012); Perry et al. (2010)' Smith & Barrett (2014) |

| Critique | Underpinning principles | Indicative Examples from the HRD in SMEs literature | Implications for the study of HRD in SMEs | Indicative citations |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Critique of objectivity | • Emphasises multiple perspectives on a phenomenon | • Lack of attention to diverse stakeholder perspectives | Lack of attention to perspectives of external stakeholders | Clarke et al. (2006); Devins et al. (2004); Jayawarna et al. (2007); Stokes (2001) |
| | • Emphasises that knowledge can never be value-free and objective | • Formulaic research that rarely challenges the status quo | Focus on testing theories derived from studies in large firms | Hoque & Bacon (2006, 2008); Saru (2007); Loan-Clarke et al. (1999); McCole et al. (2001); Webster et al. (2005); Wong et al. (1997) |
| | • Emphasises that structures of power and interest shape choices about the generation of knowledge | • SMEs seen as unconventional sites for management research | HRD in SMEs as terra incognita | Nolan & Garavan (2015) |

*Adapted from Ardley (2011); Gold et al. (2002); Hughes et al. (2014) and Mingers (2000)*

consider investing in HRD to be a risky endeavor. Scale makes it difficult to justify the employment of specialist training/human resource (HR) personnel (Hoque & Bacon, 2006; Garavan, Watson, Carbery, & O'Brien, 2015). Small-ness is therefore a liability, particularly when it comes to the development of human resources. Storey and Westhead (1997) offer two additional explanations for limited evidence of formal HRD in SMEs: a lack of awareness among SMEs owners of the benefits of HRD (the ignorance argument) and a lack of incentives to engage with training opportunities in the market place (the market failure argument). External training providers neglect the specific needs of SMEs, preferring instead to offer off-the-shelf solutions (e.g., Deakins, Battisti, Coetzer, & Roxas, 2012). This translates to a perception of irrelevance of external HRD opportunities among SMEs, and owner-managers view external providers with skepticism and question their credibility (Bishop, 2011).

The literature highlights the importance, prevalence of and preference for informal and idiosyncratic HRD in SMEs, where practices are embedded within the context of normal, daily operations and routines (e.g., Barrett, 2015; Beaver & Hutchings, 2005; Coetzer, Redmond, & Sharafizad, 2012; Kitching, 2007; Susomrith & Coetzer, 2015). SMEs adopt ad-hoc and reactive approaches to day-to-day operations and HRD is driven by operational needs and priorities (Hirschsohn, 2008). The focus of HRD is on addressing pragmatic concerns such as performance deficits, managing skills shortages, and creating a mobile and flexible workforce (Kotey & Folker, 2007; Morgan, Raidén, & Naylor, 2008). Thus, HRD is often built around the resolution of pressing work-related problems rather than as a long-term people development strategy (Smith, Boocock, Loan-Clarke, & Whittaker, 2002; Walker, Redmond, Webster, & Le Clus, 2007). Studies have investigated both formal and informal HRD approaches in SMEs; however, informality is considered an inevitable consequence of a lack of formality and a direct function of scale, rather than a legitimate approach in its own right. The ubiquity of informality has resulted in the emergence of an SME HRD deficiency model (Patton, 2005) conceptualized in terms of the notion that "not much (HRD) is done" (Rigg & Trehan, 2002, p. 390). Informality is considered a function of a lack of managerial resources and expertise to identity skill deficiencies (e.g., Hoque & Bacon, 2006; Matlay, 2002; Saru, 2007). Hence, it is assumed that HRD in SMEs is inferior and unorganized, if not nonexistent (Massey, 2004).

The literature is characterized by pejorative overtones with respect to informal HRD approaches in SMEs. Informality is viewed as a manifestation of backwardness, whereas formal approaches represent progress, advancement, and sophistication. The literature focuses on criticizing the SME's approach to HRD, with researchers extolling (either implicitly or explicitly) the virtues of formal approaches (e.g., Bryan, 2006; Curado & Teixiera, 2014; Rauch, Frese, & Utsch, 2005). So-called "best practice" HRD frameworks such as Investors in People (IIP)[1] focus on documented formal procedures, standards, and systems (Hoque & Bacon, 2008). Moreover, strategic HRD (SHRD)

models (e.g., McCracken & Wallace, 2000), emphasize indicators that have little resonance in SMEs. A notable exception is Garavan's (2007) *Contextual and Dynamic Framework for SHRD*, which moves away from prescription to afford greater recognition to multiple levels of context and the wide variety of stakeholders that exert an influence on HRD. It emphasizes the need to be sensitive to and capture emergent HRD processes, as well as planned, formal approaches. Evidence supports the flexible, intuitive, and emergent nature of strategy in SMEs more generally (e.g., Herbane, 2010; Mintzberg, 2003), however, such theorizing is rarely found in HRD in SMEs research.

*The Role of Size Determinism.* SME research frequently makes the misguided assumption that SMEs are simply smaller versions of large firms. This is particularly evident in the direct comparisons between firms of varying sizes (e.g., Choi, Lee & Jacobs, 2015; Guerrazzi, 2014; McKevitt & Marshall, 2015) and the associated polarization of formality and informality with large and small enterprises, respectively. A related assumption concerns the notion that large firm prescriptions can and should be readily transposed to SMEs. The positioning of large firms as the benchmark against which SMEs are analyzed obscures many differences (Curran & Blackburn, 2001) and reinforces the primacy of formal HRD (Blackburn, 2005). Another implicit assumption is that SMEs should emulate their larger counterparts with respect to the proactive adoption of formal approaches to HRD (e.g., Bryan, 2006; Fazzari & Mosca, 2009; Thassanabanjong, Miller, & Marchant, 2009). This narrow perspective fosters size determinism in that it considers the difference between SMEs and large firms as merely one of scale. This assumption can also be seen in researcher decisions to relegate size to the status of a control variable (e.g., Ahmad & Allen, 2015; Georgiadis & Pitelis, 2014), thereby downplaying the distinctive contextual characteristics of SMEs. Such approaches reinforce the notion of homogeneity among the SME population.

While size is undoubtedly an important contextual influence, it is not a sufficient explanatory variable (Behrends, 2007). There is a need to pay attention to the relationship between a wide range of internal and external contextual dynamics that combine to shape and explain how SMEs manage HRD. Gray and Mabey's (2005) study of management development practice in European SMEs found that although size effects were significant, the key differences between SMEs and large firms were more strongly connected to the specific features of SMEs. These included resource constraints, the need for managers to be multifunctional, and cultural preferences for informal HRD approaches. Martin, Warren-Smith, Schofield, and Millman (2013) also emphasized the importance of differentiated support and training solutions that take the particularities of local contexts into account. These studies point to the importance of not only recognizing the differences between SMEs and large firms, but also considering the substantial diversity that SMEs exhibit. Kuchinke (2003, p. 295) has argued that the reasons for variation in HRD

practices between large firms and SMEs are "theoretically underdeveloped and empirically underresearched."

By continuing to compare large and small organizations, the discourse and language systems of large firms have been privileged at the expense of SMEs. In privileging a language system, there is an additional tendency to universalize (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). This in turn creates further problems. Kuchinke (2003) observes that the majority of HRD models, definitions, and theories are implicitly or explicitly universal and normative in nature, rather than differentiated and empirical. Thus, dominant HRD theorizing and discourse is preoccupied with arguing about what HRD should be and pays scant attention to empirical grounding in what HRD is (Kuchinke, 2000). Universalism has attracted widespread critique within the HRM domain in particular, with researchers pointing to a variety of logical and methodological problems (see Boxall & Purcell, 2015; Legge, 2001). Scholars have been less effective in capturing the complex and dynamic nature of work in SMEs and for ignoring key contextual factors in terms of their influence on the enactment of practice (Gilman, Raby, & Pyman, 2015; Wu, Bacon, & Hoque, 2014). Of particular relevance is Kaufman's (2010, p. 633) argument that "most existing HRM theories are partial, incomplete and biased towards larger firms with formal HR departments." Fundamentally, when context is ignored, any sense of meaning in the data is missed (Taylor, 2008). There is major variation in the application of HRD (Kuchinke, 2003), leading to strong deviations from the suggested normative order. Hence, the shortage of studies on what is actually happening more broadly in HRD practice and accounts of what are the experiences and views of those concerned (stakeholders in the HRD process) is particularly concerning. Harney (2009) argues that normative approaches, in the main, do not sit easily with the realities of organizations in general and particularly within the context of smaller firms. They "exclude messy real world details" (p. 51). Similar criticisms can also undoubtedly be leveled at the body of HRD in SMEs research.

Garavan, McGuire, and Lee (2015) call for holistic notions of development; however, mainstream HRD models fail to account for the context-dependent nature of HRD and variations in strategies and processes (Kuchinke, 2003). Examples of empirical elusiveness are more pronounced in SMEs because of the common practice of using ideological or normative prescriptive models as the basis to investigate SME/HRD practices. Normative HRD models, drawn from large firms, do not correspond well with what is known about the prevailing informal management model within SMEs. However, the long-standing polarization of formality and informality with regard to firm size is misleading because it takes researchers away from understanding the contextual factors and managerial processes unique to SMEs (Marlow, Taylor, & Thompson, 2010). As Kitching and Marlow (2013) observed, the employment relationship must be managed by SMEs, irrespective of the form

that it assumes. Following Kaufman (2010), it is possible to conclude that HRD may be done, with no formal, tangible, or measurable practice. While the enduring focus on formal systems is understandable from both a theoretical and methodological perspective, it leaves a significant gap in knowledge of how HRD actually operates within SMEs.

## Critique 2: The Critique of Tradition

We consider three dimensions of the critique of tradition: the strong performance orientation, the reliance on mainstream modes of theorizing and the deployment of conventional positivist research designs.

*Theoretical Traditions: The Performance Orientation of the Literature.* A long-standing debate concerns whether HRD should promote learning or enhance organizational performance. While the performative perspective is dominant, the learning perspective has gained increased attention. The majority of studies are positioned within the performance paradigm. They explicitly investigate the impact of HRD activities on organizational performance outcomes such as innovation, quality, and sales growth (e.g., Ahmad & Allan, 2015; Bryan, 2006; Georgiadis & Pitelis, 2014; Jayawarna, Macpherson, & Wilson, 2007; Macpherson & Jayawarna, 2007; Miller, Xu, & Mehrotra, 2015; Newkirk-Moore & Bracker, 1998; Savery & Luks, 2004). Other studies utilize individual-level measures of impact such as enhanced job-related competence, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and worker motivation (Huang, 2001; Pajo et al., 2010; Roffe, 2007; Rowden, 2002). Moreover, the majority of studies make implicit reference to the need for all HRD activities to positively impact on some aspect of organizational functioning such as through enhanced learning agility, reduced skills gaps, or other operational enhancements (e.g., Collins & Smith, 2004; Panagiotakopoulos, 2015; Walker, Redmond, Webster, & Le Clus, 2007; Westhead, 1998).

   We found studies that utilized learning theory to offer explanations regarding the pervasiveness of informal HRD approaches (e.g., Birdthistle, 2006; Coetzer, 2007; Coetzer & Perry, 2008; Saunders, Gray, & Goregaokar, 2014). However, upon closer examination, these studies refer (either explicitly or implicitly) to competitive advantage. These studies sit comfortably within the performative paradigm where employees are viewed in instrumental terms of their knowledge and skills, measures of performance, productivity, and profitability. A notable exception is Higgins, Mirza, and Drozynska (2013), who investigated the role played by power and politics in learning processes in SMEs. They argued that many scholars overlook the complexity of the learning process in SMEs and draw attention to the mediated nature of collective learning. In adopting a critical theory approach, Higgins et al. (2013) emphasize the dynamic nature of power relations, conflict, and politics between managers and employees in the social context of the SME and how this can facilitate or inhibit new modes of working.

Few studies draw upon alternative theoretical perspectives, and rely on traditional perspectives from the economics, strategic management, and organizational theory literatures. In particular, theoretical perspectives such as human capital theory and the resource-based view figure prominently (e.g. Bishop, 2008; de Kok, 2002; Gray & Mabey, 2005; Greenidge et al., 2012; Miller et al., 2015). Training design theory is also used to understand the various dimensions of the systematic training model including needs analysis and evaluation (e.g., Curado & Teixeira, 2014; Johnston & Loader, 2003; Sadler-Smith, Down, & Field, 1999; Solomon, Frese, Friedrich, & Glaub, 2013). Ultimately, the literature overrelies on a restricted number of mainstream theoretical perspectives with limited evidence of creativity in the extension of existing theories or the adoption of new theories. There are, of course, exceptions. By way of illustration, Garavan et al. (2015) used a combination of perspectives to explain the mediating influence of SME owner-manager attitudes to leadership development. They drew upon the attention-based view (Ocasio, 1997), upper-echelons theory (Hambrick, 2007), resource-based view of the firm (RBV), and the complex RBV (Colbert, 2004) to explain why SMEs adopt leadership development practices as a subset of HRD practices that align with strategic goals. In particular, they utilized complex RBV to provide a more robust explanation of the value of informal practices, highlighting their synchronicity with an SME operating context that values flexibility and responsiveness to competitive circumstances.

***Definitions of HRD in the Literature.*** Despite the "conceptual quagmire" (cf. Legge, 2005) that surrounds HRD, it is predominantly conceptualized as a systematic, formally planned, and structured activity (Nolan & Garavan, 2016). Hamlin and Stewart (2011) revealed sparse recognition of informal interventions embedded within conceptualizations of HRD. HRD in SMEs is characterized by a lack of consensus and cohesiveness as a field of study. Few studies explicitly define HRD. Beaver and Hutchings (2005) and Kerr and McDougall (1999) highlighted the strategic dimension and the importance of linking formal training and development to business objectives and changes in the external environment. HRD activities such as training needs analysis and performance evaluation were also emphasized by the latter. On the other hand, Hill and Stewart (2000) stressed the importance of capturing both formal and informal training and development activity that develops skills, knowledge, and behavior. Researchers make use of terms such as *training, development,* and *learning.* The situation is further complicated by the failure of many authors to define their chosen terminology.

***Research Designs and Dominant Methodological Approaches.*** With positivistic empirical designs and an overreliance on questionnaires, researchers have created a situation where the amorphous, distinctly ambiguous and cultural artefacts of HRD have been "refined and desiccated until they submit

to a reconstitution and agree to be extruded as malleable statistical epiphenomena" (Keenoy, 2009, p. 464). While narrowing the HRD construct may be a matter of practical necessity, it may lead to misspecification (cf. Kaufman, 2010). Such an approach "filters out all the living breathing human interventions required to enact social phenomena and eliminates all possible individual and collective experiences which give them their various and contested situated meanings" (Kaufman, 2010, p. 464). Johnson and Devins (2008, p. 2) warn of the dangers of an uncritical reading of statistical evidence, maintaining that "existing survey-based measures of training activity do not take sufficient account of the informal, flexible nature of much workforce development" that takes place in SMEs. The ubiquity of informality complicates the assessment of HRD in SMEs (Devins & Johnson, 2002). However, Patton and Marlow (2002, p.261) have argued that such forms of knowledge and skill generation should not be ignored because they lie "outside the measurable template of formality," while Rigg and Trehan (2002) highlighted that a focus on formal HRD activity alone does not capture the complexity of HRD in SMEs and presents a highly distorted picture. Much SME HRD therefore often goes unnoticed and not researched, with the ensuing outcome being an underestimation of activity (Smith et al., 2002). Johnson and Devins (2008) thus concluded that "statistical evidence obscures as much as it reveals" (p. 7).

The questions deployed by researchers do not map on to or readily connect with the HRD modus operandi in SMEs (Clarke, Thorpe, Anderson, & Gold, 2006). The pillars of conventional HRD, often depicted in models of SHRD, manifest themselves in formal, written training policies and plans, a dedicated training budget, explicit linkages with business strategy, and the presence of a dedicated specialist. Such characteristics and the associated terminology may not sit comfortably in SMEs, and the language is likely to be alien to owner-managers, who may be less able to answer questions on topics that are anathema or alien to their daily work. This resonates with Blackburn, Edwards, Storey, Saridakis, & Sen Gupta's (2007) criticism of the Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS) framework for its overuse of large firm "measuring rods" and norms that underlie the questions on employment relations matters.

Our review revealed that studies predominantly focused on measures of the degree of proliferation of intensive formal practices, normally associated with activities undertaken by well-staffed, sophisticated HR departments in large firms (e.g., Aragón-Sánchez, Barba-Aragón & Sanz-Valle, 2003; Castany, 2010; Choi et al., 2015; Hoque & Bacon, 2008; Massey, 2004; Webster, Walker, & Brown, 2005). Some studies argue that SMEs lack a robust HRD infrastructure, which includes the existence of a dedicated training budget, specialist expertise, and a systematic approach to needs identification and evaluation (e.g., Hoque & Bacon, 2006; Matlay, 1999). Conventional indicators of strategic HRD activity, incorporating activities such as a systematic approach to analysis of learning and training needs, the development of

written plans and a rigorous evaluation of activity, are found lacking in SMEs (Keogh, Mulvie, & Cooper, 2005).

In researching HRD, methodologically it is not that researchers have not "found" HRD-type initiatives, but rather they did not find what they went looking for. The empirical elusiveness of HRD raises questions about the fundamental validity of the construct, that is, how close is what is being measured empirically to what is intended to be measured? Specifically, in relation to SMEs, underdeveloped research and empirical elusiveness are a function of limited theorizing in HRD (Rigg & Trehan, 2002). This has resulted in the creation of a dominant HRD discourse that has singular relevance to a small elite (Weick, 1999). Thus, it is questionable whether the HRD concept can be used to explore developmental interventions, processes, and arrangements within SMEs. The methodological road taken by many has led researchers down blind alleys because studies have focused on the sought, rather than the seen or experienced (Keenoy, 1999).

Critics have argued that a major shortcoming of the dominant positivist approach to researching HRD in SMEs is the removal of meaning from contexts in the pursuit of quantifying complex social phenomena (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Studies acknowledge that the distinctive contextual features of SMEs exert a significant influence on their HRD orientation (e.g., Anderson & Boocock, 2002; Kerr & McDougall, 1999; Storey, 2004); however, this recognition should mark the beginning rather than the end of analyses in the SME setting. Rigg and Trehan (2002) emphasized the importance of moving away from traditional representationalist readings of HRD in SMEs that are essentially reductionist in their singular focus on formal measures of activity. Such work is characterized by narrow definitions of HRD and by quantitative research methods that focus on the easily measurable dimensions of activity, for example, training expenditure, training days, and qualifications earned. Instead, they advocate a discursive perspective, which frames HRD through a learning lens. This, they argue, allows SMEs the discursive space to articulate how HRD is actually done within the firm, how it is talked about, and how HRD occurs in the course of talking and working. Their approach also has the benefit of being able to capture how HRD permeates both traditional formal means and everyday activities in the workplace. Using a social constructionist lens, Gold and Thorpe (2008) investigated how traditionally antagonistic SME owner-managers can be engaged to implement external HRD initiatives. They highlighted the importance of the interaction process between policy makers and SMEs, emphasizing the need to be attuned to the needs, desires, and interests of individual SMEs and their owner-managers. They also suggested that while the specific characteristics of SMEs may feed the absence of a formal HRD culture, this should not be taken to indicate a failure to train and develop employees in SMEs. From a methodological perspective, the work of Rigg and Trehan (2002) and Gold and Thorpe (2008) suggests the need to get closer to participants through ethnographic, action learning research approaches that

utilize qualitative methods of inquiry. Such approaches enable researchers to capture how HRD in SMEs is shaped by the context and power relations of the research setting (Trehan & Rigg, 2015). While we found that researchers, either in their own right or in part of a mixed-methods study, actively pursue qualitative studies, we found insufficient attention devoted to exploring the nuances of both the institutional and organizational context. This suggests a static approach to the study of HRD in SMEs (Nolan & Garavan, 2016).

Ultimately, these empirical developments reflect a growing acceptance of the need to study SME practice on its own terms, rather than in comparison to normative prescriptions (Gilman & Edwards, 2008). They also stem directly from the recognition that the differences between large firms and SMEs are more than that of scale and that resultant theorizing must be built on actual SME experience (Taylor, 2006; Westhead & Storey, 1996). SMEs have unique people development requirements and differing motivations to engage in HRD in comparison to their large counterparts (Kerr & McDougall, 1999; Patton, 2005). As Marlow (2006, p. 474) has argued with respect to HRM, "What diverges from normative applications should not automatically be considered subversive" without due consideration to the circumstances of the SME. A deeper analysis of organizational reality is needed to explore the reasons why some mixes of policies and practices appear rational and coherent courses of action for SMEs (Bacon, 1999). There is also a need to recognize that informality is not the sole preserve of SMEs (Edwards & Ram, 2009) and coexists with formality in all firms (Marlow, 2005). More specifically, others have argued that firm size in itself does not influence the presence/absence of informality but rather its degree and the manner of its operation (Marlow et al., 2010; Ram, Edwards, Gilman, & Arrowsmith, 2001). This suggests that the nature and form of HRD needs to be set against the broader dynamics of management processes in SMEs (Beaver & Jennings, 2005). Accordingly, the polarization of formality and informality with regard to firm size is misleading because it draws attention away from the importance of understanding the range of dynamic contextual factors and unique distinguishing features of managerial processes in SMEs.

## Critique 3: The Critique of Authority

The third dimension of being critical in Mingers' framework concerns authority. The critique of authority embodies close linkages to the critique of tradition (Ardley, 2011) and questions the dominant HRD discourse in terms of theory and method and the legitimacy of the knowledge this dominance has created about HRD in SMEs. From a methodological standpoint, this critique raises skepticism of one dominant perspective concerning what takes actually place within SMEs. Thus, it recognizes that the SME owner-manager may provide us with only one of many different, yet valid, perspectives.

At its heart, a critical perspective seeks to challenges the unitarist assumptions of management practices (Delbridge, 2014). Unitarism presupposes that

employees identify unreservedly with organizational goals and depicts a culture of harmony, mutuality, and partnership between employees and management (Cullinane & Dundon, 2014). The unitarist perspective also reflects a management-dominated form of workforce governance and legitimates management as a single source of authority (Kaufman, 2008). Francis (2007) has criticized models of SHRD for being "classically unitarist" and draws attention to how power inequalities and associated tensions within organizations are consequently downplayed or ignored. While owner-managers are undoubtedly powerful stakeholders in SMEs in respect of HRD, this dominant unitarist and managerialist discourse treats employees as passive recipients or "objects" to be developed, rather than "active organizational agents" seeking to exercise their own subjective power and interests (Grant & Shields, 2002). The dominant discourse is therefore somewhat blinkered by its managerial and organizational focus.

The majority of studies of HRD in SMEs emphasize the perspective of the owner-manager. Choices and decisions about what and how training and development takes place in SMEs is typically in the hands of the owner-manager (e.g., Castany, 2010; Deakins et al., 2012; Perry, Badger, Lean, & Leybourne, 2010; Smith & Barrett, 2014). A key attribute of critical HRD is its effort to emancipate those who are marginalized or repressed (Sambrook, 2004). While we have argued that SMEs themselves are marginalized with the HRD discourse, the reactions, perceptions, and responses of SME employees have not yet been sufficiently integrated into analyses of HRD. The central role that employees occupy in SMEs raises the question of whether and to what extent they might be well placed to exercise influence over how they are managed and consequently the shape and form that HRD assumes. For example, recent work in the employment relations literature by Behrends (2007) and Mallett and Wapshott (2014) demonstrates that the relative bargaining power of employees may be accentuated with the specific context of small professional service firms (PSFs). They attribute this to the high level of dependence within small PSFs on the skills, engagement, motivation, and commitment of the workforce.

The literature includes some evidence of efforts to incorporate employee perspectives into research designs. For example, research by Kitching (2007) revealed that a lack of employee motivation or interest acts as a key limiting factor to HRD in the SME setting. Other studies revealed negative perceptions of managerial support for HRD among SME employees (Coetzer, 2007; Coetzer & Perry, 2008) coupled with limited opportunities to participate in the determination of training needs (Wang, Tolson, Chiang, & Huang, 2010). Thus, the subjective orientations of employees (Bishop, 2008; Coetzer et al., 2012; Panagiotakopoulos, 2015) may be significant in influencing the operation of HRD within the SME setting. The critique of authority also raises specific questions about how HRD needs are identified and met in the SME setting. For example, to what extent are employees permitted/denied an

opportunity to engage in dialogue about their learning? To what extent do expectations for HRD meet both organizational and employee needs? Do SMEs champion the learner and empower employees in HRD process (cf. Callahan, 2007)? Finally, Sambrook (2004, p. 616) raises the issue of considering how we know and understand HRD and whether this should be a more democratic process "involving our partners in co-constructing new knowledge." From a methodological standpoint, this suggests that future research should integrate both employer and employee perspectives to present a more holistic picture of SME HRD.

### Critique 4: The Critique of Objectivity

The final dimension of Mingers' framework emphasizes the subjective and contextualized nature of knowledge (Gold, Holman, & Thorpe, 2002). Similar to the other critiques, it underlines the importance of being skeptical of what is known about HRD and the manner in which this knowledge has been generated. Mingers (2000) maintains that this is shaped by power structures and interest within a situation. Thus, in an HRD context, power shapes what is/is not studied, what is/is not recorded in the field and how important factors are measured. The earlier discussion regarding the positivist and performative orientation of the literature, which focuses predominantly on the measurable dimensions of HRD, is pertinent here. However, the pressure to produce formulaic research is also relevant whereby researchers make judicious decisions to overlook unconventional sites in fear of the ramifications for publishing output.

Much traditional theorizing and research in HRD can be characterized as what Alvesson and Gabriel (2013, p. 245) refer to as "formulaic." Hence, the need to produce "more of the same, within the same conventions" (Alvesson & Gabriel, 2013, p. 252) takes place at the expense of research that is meaningful or socially useful. This resonates with Curran's (2006) critique of dominant models of HRM and HRD on the basis that they do not represent the business population of most economies. In their recent analysis of the identity of the HRD field through an analysis of emerging and waning themes, Ghosh et al. (2014) observed the notable absence of studies that challenge the status quo. They suggested that the field may be stymied due to the tendency of HRD researchers to reproduce previous popular studies, follow conventional methodologies, and pursue research convenience.

The relative neglect of SMEs in the HRD literature can perhaps be explained by acknowledgments in the HRD and wider management literature that studies outside of the traditional, multinational corporate setting are regarded as unconventional contexts for management research and are hence often excluded (Bamberger & Pratt, 2010). In this regard, Alvesson and Gabriel (2013) lament the lack of out-of-the-box thinking in the field of organization and management studies whereby taken-for-granted assumptions are

routinely reproduced rather than challenged. They highlighted the isomorphic pressures facing the academic profession and the need to comply with strict research templates to achieve publication. Similarly, Corbett, Cornelissen, Delios, and Harley (2014) observed the institutional pressures that perpetuate a homogenization effect whereby attention to unconventional research sites is limited.

This has created a situation where SMEs have not yet been able to understand the dominant vocabulary of HRD, nor have they been able to articulate their interests in the dominant language and, being unheard, they have withheld their voice (Kornberger, Clegg, & Carter, 2006). Consequently, scholars need to find ways for SMEs to take part in conversations about HRD.

## Moving Forward: Challenges and Next Steps for Research

The four critiques suggest that alternative ways of understanding and researching HRD in SMEs are needed. While theoretical and empirical critiques of HRD are helpful, even more important is providing an improved alternative (Kaufman, 2010). One of the key criticisms leveled at critical management studies (CMS) is its overly critical tone, notably the rejection of mainstream, positivist work, without offering a viable alternative (Paauwe, 2009). We therefore make a number of suggestions for future theorizing and research endeavors on HRD in SME. Our suggestions mirror those of Alvesson and Gabriel (2013) in their discussion of polymorphic research. They encourage a diversity of research approaches, the cross-fertilization of ideas and theories, and creative work that seeks to challenge taken-for-granted ideas and assumptions. Of particular importance to the study of SMEs are perspectives that give significant affordance to capturing the complexity of informality and context.

Our first suggestion concerns a variant on the resource-based view of the firm (RBV) specifically Mueller's (1996) "evolutionary resource-based approach", which has become one of the most dominant theories within the field of HRD to explain how development of the human capital pool can contribute to sustainable competitive advantage (Garavan & Mackenzie, 2014). However, this theory has not yet been utilized to explain the underlying reasons for the emergence and persistence of informality in SMEs and the relationship between formality and informality. In examining HRD from a resource-based perspective, of particular importance are skill formation activities that are embedded in ongoing daily operational routines, such as informal learning through social interactions with others, learning by doing, learning from mistakes, and learning as a by-product of another activity (Mueller, 1996). A further critical condition for sustainable competitive advantage is the existence of resource mobility barriers (RMBs), as they limit attempts at imitation (Caves & Porter, 1977). Mueller (1996) argued that

formalized approaches to the management of human resources are unlikely to be an effective RMB. Rather, what is vital is the firm's informal systems and social architecture, including tacit organizational knowledge, cooperation, and unplanned informal learning that emerges over time and is linked to the unique history and culture of the firm (Truss, 2001). Under Mueller's (1996) "approach resource-based approach," informal HRD practices may represent critical strategic assets. He suggests that although such assets "may largely be an unintended result of many patterns of informal and unofficial behaviour," they are frequently goal-directed (p. 774).

The work of Behrends (2007), Ram (1999), and Harney (2013) reveals that SMEs often deploy functionally equivalent HR practices to achieve particular HR outcomes. Applied to HRD, the equivalence model recognizes that there may be a wide range of alternative options for handling HRD issues and the suitability of an organization's particular approach should be assessed only against the backdrop of its unique context and action requirements (Behrends, 2007). As Muller (1996, p. 774) states, "deviancy with regard to means does imply deviancy with regard to underlying goals." This model therefore recognizes the *different* ways in which SMEs respond to HRD challenges vis-à-vis large firms. It may also represent an important means of explaining the diverse approaches they adopt, beyond the labeling of such approaches as deficient due to the potential absence of formalized structures (Marlow, 2006). Such work undoubtedly holds promise for the field of HRD.

Second, there is a need to research multistakeholder perspectives of HRD. Our knowledge about HRD in SMEs mainly reflects a managerialist portrayal of reality. This is not surprising given that owner-managers are the primary stakeholder that shape the HRD agenda in SMEs. However, the dominant discourse has silenced other critical actors that comprise the "dominant coalition" (Cyert & March, 1963) in SMEs, which also includes employees, clients, suppliers, professional networks, and government bodies, to name but a few. We emphasized the lack of attention to employee perspectives; however, insight into the influences exerted by other members of the dominant coalition are also lacking. A potentially fruitful avenue for future research may lie with investigating the impact of the informal social networks cultivated by owner-managers and employees in SMEs. For example, drawing on social capital theory, Bishop (2011) reported that advice derived from trusted sources was an important trigger for HRD, both in terms of engagement with external training providers and owner-manager receptiveness to formal HRD interventions.

Stakeholder theory lends itself to analyses of the relative power exercised by internal and external groups to influence the operation of a firm (Freeman, 1984). Baek and Kim (2014) recently proposed a stakeholder-based HRD model. This perspective recognizes the dynamic, multidimensional, and multilevel nature of the HRD process (Freeman & McVea, 2001). It would help to overcome the limitations of common source and common method

variance (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003) and is proposed by Verreynne, Parker, and Wilson (2013) in their study of employment relationships in SMEs. It can also help researchers to achieve greater integration of political perspectives into analyses of HRD. Kim and Cervero (2007) observed that while research on the political nature of HRD has gained momentum, there remains a paucity of empirical research in this area. The operation of the employment relationship is inherently political (Boxall & Purcell, 2015). Organizational decision making is not a sterile process but reflects the dynamics of power relations and politics in the firm context (Pettigrew, 2014). Within the SME context, it is arguable that a greater degree of interdependence between members of the dominant coalition increases the potential for conflict about issues such as HRD (Thompson, 2003). In particular, we have limited knowledge about the extent to which employee perspectives on HRD are deemed to be legitimate within the SME setting. We also know little about the gap between employee and managerial perceptions and attitudes toward particular types of HRD practices and how this influences subsequent employee behavior, either positively or negatively toward HRD. These represent important issues for future research. The perceived quality of HR practices exerts a powerful influence on employee behavior (e.g., Alfes, Shantz, Truss & Soane, 2013; Edgar & Geare, 2014). The importance of positive perceptions for reciprocity in terms of positive work attitudes and behaviors has also been observed (Gould-Williams & Davies, 2005). Such work holds promise for future research endeavors on HRD in SMEs. While all stakeholders exercise a degree of influence, stakeholder power will vary by organization, the decision, the outcome, and a range of other environmental factors (Way & Johnson, 2005). Context is therefore at the foreground rather than as a backdrop to the phenomenon under investigation. Contextualized research emphasizes the importance of drawing understanding from complex data and privileges explanation in its recognition that the diverse views, perspectives, and interests of multiple actors must be captured and accommodated (Brewster, 1999). The importance of context-sensitive research to explore the operation of HRD in SMEs cannot be overstated. Mendelow (1991) has proposed a model, the power/interest matrix, which may prove to be a useful means of assessing the power, dynamism, and predictability of various stakeholder groups. This model has already been applied to the study of SHRD (Garavan, 1995) and could be extended to the SME context.

Third, the integrative review suggests a more prominent role for learning theory in analyses of HRD in SMEs. Specifically, we propose the need for more studies that incorporate a focus on informal and incidental learning (Marsick & Watkins, 2015). Evidence from the broader HRD literature points to the complementary and integrated nature of formal and informal learning in the development of employee competencies (Choi & Jacobs, 2011). Rowden's (2002) study supports the dynamic interaction of formal and informal learning in SMEs, yet this topic remains comparatively underresearched. Significant

questions remain, including: What are the conditions that facilitate the emergence and persistence of informal learning? How can informal learning be leveraged to enhance operational performance and employee satisfaction? Are there particular sectoral influences that shape organizational choices regarding the degree of in(formality) adopted?

Fourth, we have argued that the nature and form of HRD is not only shaped by internal dynamics but also by a range of external forces within the specific SME setting (Edwards, Sen Gupta, & Tsai, 2010). This suggests an important role for institutional theory, which argues that organizations sharing similar social, economic and political contexts are subject to a number of isomorphic pressures and therefore come to resemble each other over time as they pursue increased legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). However, Oliver (1997) also considered firms being influenced by powerful forces for difference. These frequently relate to path dependency and include history, culture and issues of power and politics, which invariably create a degree of idiosyncrasy between firms. Drawing on institutional theory, the work of Edwards, Ram, Sen Gupta and Tsai (2006) demonstrated that firms are embedded in a range of networks, and thus social institutions shape their employment practices. These include product and labor markets, as well as regulatory influences. This framework is important in that it moves beyond a deterministic account of structural influences to accommodate managerial agency and choice. This combination of embeddedness and choice leads to differing responses to broadly similar conditions. In respect of HRD in SMEs, we can deduce that while informality is a common feature of SMEs, such firms are said to exhibit substantial variation in their HR practices (cf. Doherty & Norton, 2014). There is therefore a need for theoretical perspectives to capture a more holistic, situated view of HRD and the lens of institutional theory can be effectively used to analyze and discuss the complex, evolving, and multidimensional phenomenon of HRD. We maintain that it may provide a useful lens through which to explain the adoption of particular HRD practice in SMEs. For example, it may help us to answer questions regarding the different degrees of formality and informality adopted by SMEs in contrasting industrial sectors. The application of this perspective to HRD is still in its infancy (Alagaraja & Li, 2015); however, we maintain that it holds promise for the study of SMEs in particular.

Finally, application of Mingers' framework reveals that HRD in SMEs is identified as a long-standing and intractable problem, and the manner in which the dominant organizational coalition perceive and understand it is central to its enactment. This requires us to come at the problem from a different perspective to conventional methodologies. We therefore advocate an actor-centric approach by attending closely to accounts of the dominant coalition in the SME setting. In moving forward to incorporate SMEs into discussions of HRD, issues of nomenclature, particularly the language used to investigate the phenomenon, also become critical. Elsewhere (Nolan &

Garavan, 2016) we have advocated approaching the exploration of HRD in SMEs using the framework of social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In line with the ethos of CMS, social constructionist approaches encourage researchers to challenge prevailing discourses rather than taking them at face value (Irwin, 2001) and apply new insights towards a redefinition of existing theoretical frameworks (Torraco, 2004). Social constructionist approaches seek to understand to how people make sense of the social world (Turnbull, 2002) and emphasize the subjective interpretation and meaning that social actors give to HRD in the organizational context (Gill & Johnson, 2010). The philosophical proclivity of social constructionism influences the methodological strategy adopted (Thomas & Linstead, 2002). We suggest the need for a methodological approach that will enable SME research participants to easily identify and articulate what is important to them (see also Wilson & Homan, 2004). Social constructionism is useful in this context because it concerns itself with the processes by which people come to describe, explain, and account for the world (including themselves) in which they live (Gergen, 1985). In this way, it can yield in-depth knowledge of particular situations and in doing so also serves practitioners' needs more directly (Evered & Louis, 1981). Moreover, the approach acknowledges that managers and employees in SMEs do not talk about HRD *per se* (Gold, Holden, Iles, Stewart, & Beardwell, 2013; Hill, 2004). The realities of SME HRD are therefore acknowledged to be grounded in talk/accounts of training, development, and learning from those immersed within the SME environment (Lonner, 1999). Following Skålén, Quist, Edvardsson, and Enquist (2005), we argue that it is sometimes difficult for SME managers and employees to understand and make sense of the somewhat general ideas that HRD stands for. A translation process therefore becomes necessary to adapt to local conditions, as this difficulty in understanding can create difficulties for enactment. Managers, therefore, tend to be more persuaded by research written in a transparent language (Kelemen & Bansal, 2002) and will assess its value on the extent to which it reflects, captures, or resonates with their own identity (Weick, 1995).

Methodologically this approach requires more situated studies of HRD practice (cf. Watson, 2004) to capture the subtleties and textures of HRD in SMEs through an exploration of the context in which it takes place. The researcher's immersion in the situated detail, producing "narratives of the actual" that incorporate "thick descriptions and interpretations of practices in companies through which daily life and its ongoing process of dealing with personnel" are the key issues (Steyaert & Janssens, 1999, p. 193). Close observational or participative research central to ethnographic endeavours may be particularly helpful in uncovering "how HRD works" (Watson, 2011) through accessing "insider stories" (Bacon, 1999). Such an approach has recently been usefully applied to the study of SME HRD (Gold & Thorpe, 2008), but additional studies rooted in this perspective are undoubtedly important.

## Implications for HRD Practice

The use of Mingers' framework as a lens through which to review the literature on HRD in SMEs suggests a number of implications for HRD practice. We have raised questions concerning how and why HRD is encouraged and facilitated in SMEs, whether HRD should solely benefit the bottom line, the role played by HRD in the political systems of organizing in the SME, and how and why HRD provides a mechanism for the control and manipulation of learners (Fenwick, 2004; Sambrook, 2014). Our analyses suggest that owner-managers should reflect on how HRD is currently undertaken within their firms. Specifically, we emphasized the important and powerful role played by employees in the SME setting, in terms of their perceptions and subsequent reactions and behaviors toward HRD practices. We suggest that owner-managers should ensure that employee perspectives are incorporated into the HRD system and that practices should be customized to reflect the unique contextual environment within which SMEs operate. SMEs may benefit from more active monitoring and evaluation of changes in their external environment and consideration of how such changes may impact on HRD. This in turn can facilitate the more effective management of structural influences and provide SMEs with greater confidence that managerial actions and choice are judiciously adopted.

Our analyses suggest that owner-managers should take the time to reflect on their HRD practices in terms of their signaling effect (cf. Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015). In particular, there is a need to ensure consistency and minimize ambiguity in the signals that particular practices send to employees in terms of managerial values and expectations. The following issues require managerial attention: Do employee have clear understandings regarding managerial expectations and motivations for HRD? Is proactive employee HRD behavior rewarded? What are employee perceptions about current and potential HRD practices? Do employees perceive practices to be relevant to their personal goals and the satisfaction of personal needs or merely for the benefit of the organization? Reflection on these key questions can enable owner-managers to cultivate more positive behavioral reactions to HRD practices. Concomitantly, it may help to identify areas requiring remedial action as a results of inconsistent or conflicting messages.

Our analyses also have important implications for government policy. The importance of defining HRD problems and priorities from the viewpoint of the SME have been highlighted. Understanding their emic worldview may facilitate problem solving that preserves their cultural sets of meaning of HRD. Building relationships with SMEs and their representative bodies/lobbying groups and families is therefore a prerequisite to forming respectful and trusting partnerships that will enhance the understanding and promotion of HRD from multiple perspectives, including the individual SME. Such approaches

may facilitate the encouragement of SME engagement with policy initiatives directed at encouraging such firms to engage in HRD.

## Conclusions

In this article, we utilized Mingers' framework to conduct an integrative review of the literature on HRD in SMEs to argue the need to break away from the study of the more well-trodden ground of larger firms and focus greater attention on the *terra incognita* of SMEs. First, in terms of the critique of rhetoric, research on HRD in SMEs is based on poorly reasoned arguments about the nature of HRD in that context, an overreliance on a deficit model perspective, and too much emphasis on the role of size determinism. There is little reference to the unique context of SMEs. Second, the critique of tradition demonstrates that researchers have used a dominant discourse in a fashion that propagates a focus on performance and quantitative, positivist approaches to research. Third, the critique of authority illustrates that the dominant discourse is unitarist, focusing on the perspective of the owner-manager and ignoring alternative actor perspectives. Finally, the critique of objectivity reveals that HRD in SMEs is conventional, with researchers producing formulaic research that follows well-tried and low-risk methodologies. While our analytical approach is critical, it is primarily aimed at "productive provocation" (Alvesson & Gabriel, 2013). We suggest that the credibility of the field of HRD in SMEs will be strengthened by extending theories currently used and employing a more diverse range of theoretical lenses to enhance the research base.

In considering the particular context of SMEs, the ongoing linguistic ambiguity surrounding HRD should be regarded as an opportunity—"a conversation worth having" (Ruona & Lynham, 2004). Undoubtedly, the term *HRD* is capable of multiple interpretations and does, therefore, provide a rich source of debate. HRD in SMEs is likely to exhibit a distinctive and diverse texture (Gold & Thorpe, 2008; Hoque & Bacon, 2006). In this regard, there is need for researchers to attend more closely to the polyvocal landscape of HRD in SMEs and the multiple perspectives of key actors in order to capture its complexity and heterogeneity and produce context-sensitive accounts (Newton, Deetz, & Reed, 2011).

We acknowledge as a limitation our lack of attention to studies using gender, race, or ethnicity as a category of analysis (Bierema & Cseh, 2003). A critical review of such work represents an important opportunity going forward, as there are significant gaps in our understanding of such dynamics more generally and in SMEs in particular.

HRD is in need of a change and/or broadening of discourse if the extent of its contribution within the SME context is to be enhanced. This requires

that academics change the way they talk about HRD and the way they understand how HRD is experienced and enacted (Harley & Hardy, 2004) within SMEs. We hope that our analysis encourages the use of both the wide-angle lens and the microscope to encourage more context-sensitive research.

## Note

1. Investors in People (IiP) is the United Kingdom's national quality standard for people management. Launched in 1991, the standard aims to improve business performance by promoting best practice in managing and developing people. The latest figures indicated that over a third of the United Kingdom's workforce is employed by IiP recognized employers or organizations working toward achieving recognition status. Further information is available from www.investorsinpeople.co.uk.

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