Exploring the Operationalization Phase of Theory Building from Three Different Perspectives

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In applied theory building research, a central mission is to conduct research that both advances an academic discipline and enlightens practice in a professional domain (Van de Ven, 2007). Therefore, a goal of theory building research in HRD is to advance the knowledge of HRD and contribute to the practice of HRD (Storberg-Walker, 2003). Recent increased effort in HRD theory building methodology research reinforces and typifies HRD as a discipline moving toward this direction (Lynham, 2002; Storberg-Walker, 2003, 2007; Torraco, 2002; Wang & Swanson, 2008).

A number of studies have proposed theory building research methods in social sciences and organizational settings (Dubin, 1978, 1983; Lynham, 2002; Van de Ven, 2007; Weick, 1995). In general, all theory building methods follow three key phases of theory development. They are (1) conceptual development, (2) operationalization, and (3) application or testing. A number of recent studies have discussed the first phase, conceptual development (Storberg-Walker, 2007).

However, very little literature was found addressing the operationalization and application phases of theory development. This research round table is an initial effort to fill that gap.

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The dearth of literature on the operationalization and application of theory may not only impede HRD theory development research, but also reduce the utility of theory for practice. The literature on theory building has demonstrated that all “good” theory in applied areas must eventually operationalize and apply or test the conceptual framework of a theory, although different theory building models have different preferences to naming the phases. For instance, Dubin (1983) termed it as deriving empirical indicators and testable hypotheses, Lynham (2002) named it “operationalization,” whereas Van de Ven (2007) called it “hypotheses at an operational level of concreteness,” and Weick (1995) included it as part of his notion of “thought trials.” Van de Ven further explained that operationalization includes “developing specific hypotheses and empirical observation procedures (based on the theoretical model) that predict what data should be obtained if the model provides a good fit to the real world” (2007, p. 21).

The primary research question addressed by this Research Roundtable is two-fold: How can researchers operationalize and apply or test theory in HRD? Secondary questions ask: What procedures help operationalize theoretical propositions into applicable or testable hypotheses? And what are different perspectives on theory operationalization and application or testing?

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study is more methodological informed by different perspectives (functionalist, interpretivist, and critical theorist [cf. Goia & Pitre, 1990]). This study considers the differences in operationalization, application, and testing from the functionalist, interpretive, and critical perspectives. Briefly, it is expected that the process and outcomes of the operationalization, application, and testing phases will proceed differently and produce different
outcomes depending on the perspective of the researcher. For example, the functionalist perspective is closest to the traditional scientific method and has codified rather specific procedures and standards for operationalizing and testing theory. The goal of this approach is to deduce empirical and measurable variables from universal laws and concepts. This approach assumes an objective reality governed by universal laws and propositions that can be operationalized somewhat rationally. However, in a study of the literature in the management sciences, Bartunek (2007) found a huge gap in the implications of theory for practice.

The interpretive perspective takes a grounded theory or constructivist approach to operationalizing and testing—inducing more general propositions and patterns from empirical data. In essence, this approach begins with operationalized variables and builds the theory from there.

The critical perspective takes an evaluative and action-oriented approach by directing operationalization toward specified goals of creating a new awareness of conditions as a means for change (Goia & Pitre, 1990). These approaches address three important goals of theory in an applied field such as HRD—general propositions, empirical data, and change.

**Contributions to Human Resource Development**

While conceptual development is critical for theory development, testing and application make theory useful in the field. Thus, operationalizing a theory is the link between concepts and action (Lynham, 2002), as well as between action and concepts. Rigorously linking actions to conceptual development increases the strength of the knowledge base and raises the professionalization of the field (Chalofsky, 1996).
Recently, Van de Ven (2007) defined operationalization as creating a model to “make operational some specific predictions of a theory, which can be subjected to empirical inspection” (p. 21). Operationalization and application mean to derive testable and actionable hypotheses based on theory by reasoning or inquiry. Operationalization and application also serve as ways to evaluate, assess, and refine theories building the intellectual foundation of a field. Overall, this roundtable session will contribute to HRD by examining the process of operationalization that translates theoretical concepts into observable and actionable elements. The outcomes of this session will begin to identify and clarify the links between theory as conceptual construct and theory as action guiding the practice of professionals in the field.

References


