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CONTRIBUTION OF RESEARCH TO IMPROVEMENT OF ADULT EDUCATION QUALITY

Aleksandra Pejatović, Regina Egetenmeyer, Maria Slowey (Eds.)

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EMPIRICAL RESEARCHES IN THE HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT – QUALITY IMPROVEMENT OF THE FIELD¹

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Abstract

In this paper, we present results of content analysis of fully peer-reviewed empirical researches published in three journals, aimed to emphasize their contribution to the field of human resource development (HRD). Main research focus was on three issues: frequency and types of empirical researches in HRD, key research themes in these researches, and different methodological characteristics in these empirical researches. Our analysis encompassed 175 articles published in 2002/2003, and 2012/2013 in three journals: *Management Learning*, **Advances in Developing Human Resources** and *Human Resource Development Quarterly*. For data collection, we developed protocol for content analysis of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods researches. The findings imply the increase of number of empirical researches in HRD, and the enhancement of research interests for the themes related to andragogy. Results of analysis have been interpreted in the context of research trends in HRD, with tendency to indicate possibility of further development of researches in this domain.

Key words: human resource development, empirical researches in HRD, quantitative researches, qualitative researches, mixed methods researches

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Problem Statement

In the last decade, the field of Human Resource Development (HRD) as a constantly evolving discipline faces important changes. Trends of „embracing“ and „reformulation“ of knowledge developed in other disciplines, trials to customize “examples of good practice” in theory building of discipline, which was evident in the field of HRD during 1970’s and 1980’s are rare nowadays. The scope and intensity of ideas about mosaic, complex, “multiple theoretical perspectives” of HRD, with predominance of combination of economic theories, psychological theories, and system theory (Swanson & Holton, 2001) are decreasing.

In literature relevant for social sciences, especially for the field of HRD, concepts about integrative, synergetic influence of disciplines that form the foundation of the body of theoretical knowledge of HRD – theory of adult education and learning (andragogy), psychology, system theories (with emphasis on theories about complexity and chaos), management and leadership related theories (including organizational culture) are increasing (Chalofsky, Rocco & Morris, 2014; Sofo, 1999; Woodall, Lee & Stewart, 2004). On the one hand, conceptions about strong theoretical connections between HRD and theory of adult education and learning, especially featured by US authors in 1990’s (Lee, 2004), influence empirical researches in the field of HRD. On the other hand, pretensions of UK related authors to consider HRD a human resources management (HRM) domain, or as the field/discipline strongly intertwined with HRM are almost completely rejected (McGoldrick, Stewart & Watson, 2002; Sofo, 1999). A distinctive stimulus to these concepts are given by:

- indications of importance of theory of adult education and learning (andragogy) for the foundation of the body of theoretical knowledge of HRD (Chalofsky, Rocco & Morris, 2014; Dirks, 1996; Sofo, 1999; Swanson & Holton, 2001),
- moving focus from learning as individual to learning as social process in andragogy (Marsick & Neaman, 1996),
- growing body of theoretical knowledge about different andragogical interventions in organization (Kessels & Poell, 2004),
- learning organization concepts developed in andragogy (Watkins & Marsick, 1993),
- development of knowledge related to different types of learning in organization – organizational learning (OL), individual learning, group/collaborative learning, self-directed learning, transformative learning, workplace learning, narrative learning, action learning, problem-based learning, just-in-time learning, just-in-case learning (Brandenburg & Ellinger, 2003; Marquardt, 2011; Ovesni & Alibabić, 2013, etc.).

Moreover, while analyzing relevant literature, we found the rationale for our research in absence of analysis of empirical researches, their role in theory building and in quality improvement of the field of HRD. Trends in discussions about necessity of solid methodological foundation of HRD, instead of application of “atheoretical” approach, still is common in HRM (which emphasize singular, descriptive, methodologically ungrounded examples of practice – “cases” as a means for theory building) are very rare. Only a few studies in the field of HRD have explored similar problems. Lynham (2002) highlighted strategies commonly used in building HRD theory – research-to-theory strategy and theory-to-research strategy. Jeung et al. (2011), researched the most frequently cited (most contributive) journal articles and key research themes of the journal articles in the field of HRD and tried to identify how human resource development (HRD) research has contributed to the knowledge base across social science disciplines during the 1990’s and 2000’s. Jo, et al. (2009) performed citation network analysis among HRD publications to explore main themes and trends in HRD. Besides, Wasti and Poell (2006) analyzed 125 texts from two HRD journals – Human Resource Development Quarterly and Human Resource Development International, and compared them to articles published in ten „mainstream“ SSCI journals across a six-year timeframe. Focus of their research was to give an answer to two questions – to what extent do HRD journals and mainstream journals use different theoretical perspectives and different methodological approaches in studying HRD, and to what extent do US and European journals differ in these respects.

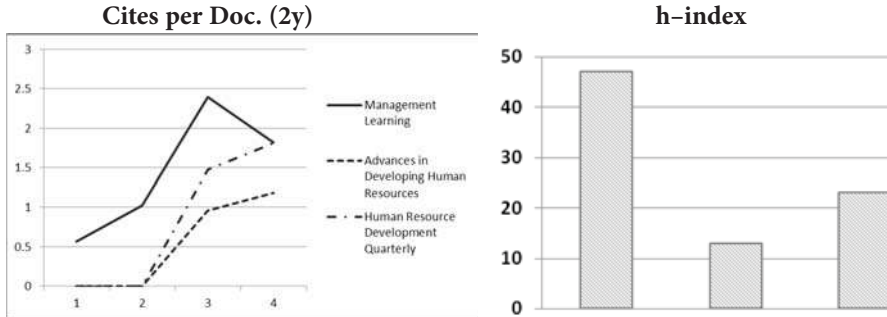
The present study provides a content analysis of empirical researches published in three leading HRD journals, undertaken to determine the sources of quality improvement in the field of HRD during the last decade. This study is aimed at answering three questions related: to frequency and types of empirical researches in the field of HRD, to key research themes in these researches, and to different methodological characteristics in empirical researches in the field of HRD.

Methodology

In this analysis we included papers published in three international journals, fully peer-reviewed, that publishes original research and review articles: *Management Learning* and *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, both published by Sage Publications Ltd. and *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, published by Jossey-Bass Inc., an imprint of Wiley Periodicals Inc., Publishers. Our decision to choose these journals has been based on few criteria:

1. *Combination of theoretical and empirical research orientation* of published articles.
2. *Numerical value of impact factor (IF) at Thomson Reuter’s list* related to the field of human resource development for 2013. These three journals have

highest rank at Thomson Reuter's list in the field of human resource development (which is included in the subject category management): Management Learning (IF: 1.245), Human Resource Development Quarterly (IF: 0.854), and Advances in Developing Human Resources (IF: 0.491)².



Based on Cites per Doc. (2y):	2002	2003	2012	2013
<i>Management Learning</i>	0.565	1.023	2.389	1.815
<i>Advances in Developing Human Resources</i>	0.000	0.000	0.959	1.186
<i>Human Resource Development Quarterly</i>	0.000	0.000	1.469	1.809
SJR indicator for:	2002	2003	2012	2013
<i>Management Learning</i>	0.352	0.433	1.115	0.913
<i>Advances in Developing Human Resources</i>	0.101	0.000	0.513	0.456
<i>Human Resource Development Quarterly</i>	0.000	0.000	0.63	0.754

Figure 1. The calculated numerical value of: SJR indicator Cites per Doc. (2y) measures and h-index for selected journals

3. The calculated numerical value of SJR indicator³ (Figure 1), a size-independent metric aimed at measuring the current “average prestige per paper” of journals for use in research evaluation processes (González-Pereira, Guerrero-Bote & Moya-Anegón, 2010: 381).
4. The calculated numerical value of Cites per Doc. (2y) measures (Figure 1), the scientific impact of an average article published in the journal is one of relevant numerical measures for computing Thomson Reuter's Journal Impact Factor⁴.

2 Data sets about numerical value of impact factor at Thomson Reuter's Journal list in the field of HRD for 2013 available from <http://ip-science.thomsonreuters.com/cgi-bin/jrnlst/jloptions.cgi?PC=SS>.

3 Data sets about numerical value of SJR indicator available from <http://www.scimagojr.com/compare.php?j1=Management+Learning&j2=Advances+in+Developing+Human+Resources&j3=Human+Resource+Development+Quarterly&j4=&un=journals&inj=0>.

4 Data sets about numerical value of Cites per Doc. (2y) measures available from <http://www.scimagojr.com/compare.php?un=journals&j1=Management%20Learning&j2=Advances%20in%20Developing%20Human%20Resources&j3=Human%20Resource%20Development%20Quarterly&j4=&inj=9>

5. *The calculated numerical value of The Hirsch "h-index"* (Figure 1), an author-level metric that attempts to measure publication (quantity) and citation (quality or visibility) scores; it is "the (unique) highest number of papers that received h or more citations" (Egghe, 2006: 8)⁵.

The analysis included findings of empirical researches published in journal articles during 2002/2003 and 2012/2013. The timeframe for the research was January 2002 through December 2003, and January 2012 through December 2013; it was determined to represent the whole decade, which formed platform to consider relation of time perspective and research questions. Our analysis included 175 published refereed HRD research articles. Most of them were published in *Human Resource Development Quarterly* (40.6%), *Management Learning* (32.0%), and *Advances in Developing Human Resources* (27.4%), respectively. During these periods similar number of HRD research articles were published: 2002/2003 (46.9%), 2012/2013 (53.1%).

For obtaining data we used content analysis. Related to common differentiation among empirical researches to quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods research – protocol for content analysis (an instrument designed for the purpose of our research) had three parts.

In accordance with research questions, we extracted a few units of analysis, i.e. for each group of researches we collected data about: types of research designs, key research themes, type of sample, methods of obtaining data, and procedures in processing data. Accordingly, as units of context in which we identified units of analysis we considered an article. Although qualitative analysis encompassed whole papers, we made special efforts to examine parts of texts related to research questions and used methodology. Overall, papers emphasized methodology in a separate chapter, but in a remarkable number of articles we had to discuss the quality of some units of analysis and to draw the indirect conclusion, while in certain papers some units of analysis were missed. For processing obtained data we also used descriptive statistics, chi-square test, and Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test.

Results

Frequencies and types of empirical researches – Frequencies of empirical researches in the field of HRD could be considered regarding different criteria, i.e. from different standpoints. In this paper we analyzed them based on relations of number of theoretical and empirical researches, and based on representation of different types of empirical researches, respectively.

5 Data sets about numerical value of h-index available from <http://www.scimagojr.com/compare.php?un=journals&j1=Management%20Learning&j2=Advances%20in%20Developing%20Human%20Resources&j3=Human%20Resource%20Development%20Quarterly&j4=&inj=11>

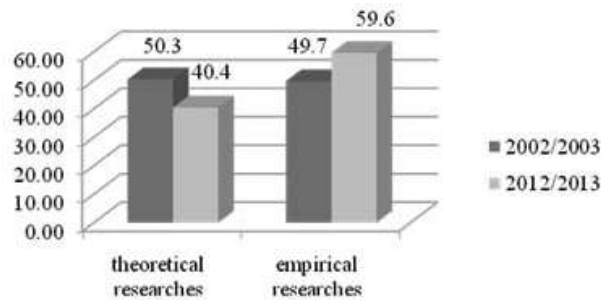


Figure 2 Frequencies of empirical and theoretical researches according to the time of publishing

Results of analysis showed that empirical researches are represented a bit more (54.5%) than theoretical researches (45.5%)⁶. Besides, during 2002/2003, the percent of represented empirical and theoretical researches was almost identical. During 2012/2013 this relation changed in favor of empirical researches (Figure 2). Nevertheless, the described differences, recorded on this sample of articles, are not statistically significant ($\chi^2=3.181$, $df=1$, $p=0.074$).

There was some evidence of dissimilarities between different types of empirical researches, in relation to result of analysis. More than half of all are qualitative researches (53.7%), while about 10% less are quantitative researches (42.9%), while mixed methods researches were very rare (3.4%). Representations of these types of researches vary according to the time of publishing (Figure 3). In the period 2002/2003 percent of represented quantitative and qualitative researches were almost the same. During 2012/2013 we found about 10% less represented quantitative researches, and about 10% more represented qualitative researches, respectively. In same period, we found more mixed methods researches. Still, no statistically significant differences emerged between frequencies of qualitative and quantitative empirical researches in chosen timeframe ($\chi^2=1.945$, $df=1$, $p=0.163$).

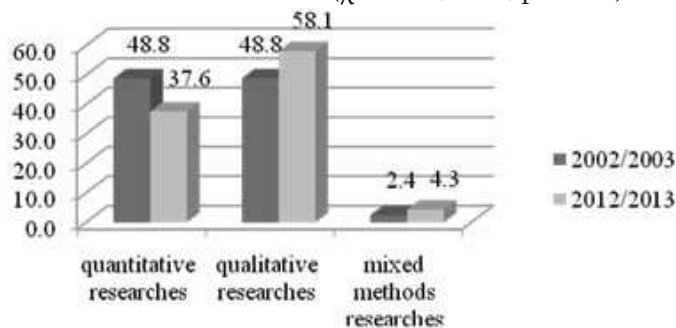


Figure 3 Frequencies of different types of empirical researches according to the time of publishing

⁶ Only for this part of our analysis sample encompassed all articles published in included journals in a chosen timeframe, i.e. 321 research paper.

In order to differentiate distinctive types of quantitative empirical researches, we added new coding dimension drawing from two criteria, in which involved two variants: (1) experimental versus nonexperimental researches, and (2) traditional paper-and-pencil versus online researches. Our analysis showed that nonexperimental researches (85.0%) dominate over experimental researches (14.7%). Percent of experimental researches in 2002/2003 (20.0%) decreased in 2012/2013, when experimental researches have been represented in 8.6% of cases, while percent of nonexperimental researches increased from 80.0% in 2002/2003 to 91.4% in 2012/2013. Even though described differences seems evident, we found that they are not statistically significant ($\chi^2=1.948$, $df=1$, $p=0.163$). According to the second criterion, traditional paper-and-pencil researches (80.0%) dominate over online researches (20.0%). Based on results of the analysis, we found statistically significant differences in frequencies of these two types of quantitative empirical researches according to the time of publishing articles ($\chi^2=12.054$, $df=1$, $p=0.001$). During 2012/2013 the number of online researches increased (37.1%), while the number of traditional paper-and-pencil researches decreased (62.9%), compared with number of online (5.0%) and traditional paper-and-pencil researches (95.0%) in period 2002/2003.

In the field of HRD, different types of qualitative researches are represented, too. In this group of empirical researches case studies dominate (61.3%). Among analyzed articles, a few models of case studies have been distinguished: qualitative singular case study, multiple qualitative case study, exploratory qualitative case study, longitudinal case study approach, comparative case study, descriptive qualitative case study. During the encompassed periods, representations of case studies in the field of HRD were almost same (51.0% in 2002/2003, 49.0% in 2012/2013). All other types of qualitative researches were represented in less than 10.0% of published papers: grounded theory research, ethnographic research, narrative research, phenomenological research, action research, qualitative content analysis, discourse analysis, qualitative feminist research, qualitative metaanalysis, etc.

Among all empirical researches in the field of HRD, mixed methods research is less common. It is not surprising that decisions to choose mixed methods are rare among researchers, for the reason that implementation of this research design started at the end of 1980's. From different models of mixed methods designs, in the group of analyzed researches, only explanatory sequential design has been used. This design is a typical model of mixed methods research. The main purpose for employment of explanatory sequential design is to provide explanation of initial quantitative results obtained in the first phase, by implementation of qualitative follow-up in the second phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Key research themes – Results of analysis showed that in encompassed empirical researches the following key research themes dominate: different HRD/andragogic practices and interventions (25.1%), psychological issues in HRD

(11.4%), diversity issues in HRD (10.3%), professionalization of the HRD field (9.7%), learning in organization and OL (8.6%), Learning Organization (LO) concept (8.0%), different HRM practices (7.4%), organizational culture (6.9%), knowledge management (5.1%), HRD theory (3.4%), HRD and social development (2.3%), Human capital theory (1.1%), and Virtual HRD (0.6%).

The difference between the two periods (Figure 4) was statistically significant using a Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test regarding following key research themes: different HRD/andragogic practices and interventions ($Z=-5.978$, $p=0.000$), psychological issues in HRD ($Z=-4.472$, $p=0.000$), diversity issues in HRD ($Z=-3.947$, $p=0.000$), professionalization of the HRD field ($Z=-3.787$, $p=0.000$), learning in organization and OL ($Z=-3.542$, $p=0.000$), different HRM practices ($Z=-3.419$, $p=0.001$), LO concept ($Z=-3.397$, $p=0.001$), organizational culture ($Z=-3.176$, $p=0.001$), knowledge management ($Z=-2.762$, $p=0.006$), HRD theory ($Z=-2.333$, $p=0.020$), and HRD and social development ($Z=-2.000$, $p=0.046$).

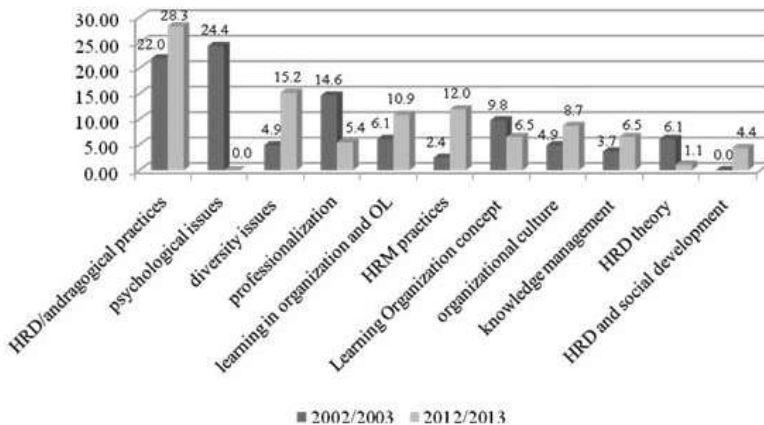


Figure 4 Frequencies of key research themes in empirical researches by the time of publishing

Methodological characteristics of empirical researches – In this paper we focused on a few issues related to methodological characteristics of empirical researches: sampling strategies, methods of data collection, and methods of data analysis.

Results of our analysis showed that only in limited scope of papers information about decisions about from whom data will be collected, who is included, how they are included, i.e. description of sampling strategies were given (27.4%). In most of empirical researches simple random sampling (20⁷), purposeful sam-

7 Because in only 48 research articles authors described sampling strategies, we provided information about frequencies, instead about percent.

pling (11), and convenience sampling (9) have been employed. In the group of analyzed researches snowball sampling (4), and stratified sampling (3), etc. have been applied. The respondents who entered samples were: managers, leaders, employees, employees in different organizations, teachers and students, participants of some programs, organizations, study programs, papers presented and published at conferences proceedings, papers published in journals, etc.

Based on results of analysis, in the field of HRD, percent of empirical researches in which one (47.6%) or two (43.5%) different methods of data collection were used, while three or more different methods of data collection were used in very limited number of researches (8.9%). The scaling (46.3%), interviewing (45.6%) and surveying (38.1%) alone or in combination with other methods of data collection were included. In a limited number of researches content analysis were employed (21.8%), while observation (8.2%) and test (1.4%) occurrence were seldom. The methods of data collection which were applied independently (as the exclusive methods of data collection in a research) were: interviewing (23.1%) and scaling (15.0%). All other methods of data collection – content analysis, surveys, observation, and tests – were employed solely in less than 5.0% of articles. The most frequently used combination of methods of data collection applied in the researches was composed of surveys and scales (26.5%). All other combinations of methods of data collection were employed in less than 10.0% of researches separately – content analysis and interviews, interviews and surveys, content analysis and scales, observation and interviews, content analysis, observation and interviews, observation, interviews and surveys, content analysis, surveys and scales, etc. In the group of the most frequently employed methods of data collection – scaling and interviewing – dominate Likert-type scales and semi structured interview protocol.

In the group of quantitative researches, the results of analysis of used methods showed that for data collection a combination of two methods is the most common (58.7%), while researches in which only one method (37.3%), or three or more methods was employed (4.0%) are seldom. In most cases alone or in combination with other methods, scaling (89.3%) and surveying (60.0%) were used. Other methods (interviewing, content analysis, testing, observing) were applied in less than 7.0% of researches. If only one method was applied in quantitative research, then in the most cases it was scaling (29.3%); if combination of methods were applied then in the most cases it was composed from surveys and scales (52.0%).

In the group of qualitative researches, researches in which only one method for data collection were applied are the most frequent (58.3%), while combinations of two (27.8%), or three and more methods (13.9%) are seldom. Used alone or in combination with other methods for data collection interviewing is the most common (86.1%), than content analysis (37.5%), surveying (15.3%) and observation (12.5%), respectively. When only one method was applied, then interviewing dominates (45.8%), while in the case of combination of two or more

methods combinations of content analysis and interviewing (16.7%), and content analysis, observation and interviewing (11.1%) dominate.

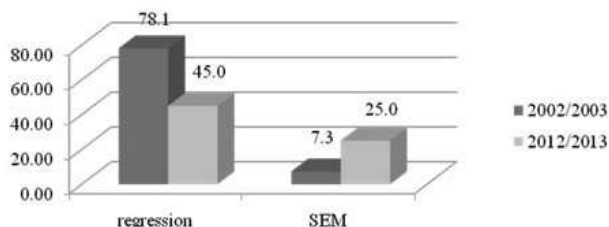


Figure 5 Frequencies of different regression models and structural equation modeling (SEM) in empirical researches according to the time of publishing

Results of analysis for methods of data analysis showed that in the group of quantitative researches the most frequent are: descriptive statistics (81.5%), different regression models – linear, general linear, multiple, nonlinear, etc. (61.7%), correlations (38.3%), different t-tests (27.2%), exploratory factor analysis (EFA) or principal component analysis (PCA) (18.5%), confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) (16.1%), and structural equation modeling (SEM) (16.1%). Application of methods of data analysis is almost the same for determined periods when observe: descriptive statistics, correlations, t-tests, CFA, EFA and PCA. However, statistically significant differences for a determined period were found regarding usage (Figure 5) of different regression models ($\chi^2=3.763$, $df=1$, $p=0.037$) and structural equation modeling (SEM) ($\chi^2=4.351$, $df=1$, $p=0.034$).

Based on results of analysis in the group of qualitative researches regarding the methods of data analysis the most frequent is “integrative approach” usually consisting of: narrative researches methods (50.5%), grounded theory related methods (34.4%), content analysis methods (34.4%), ethnomethodology methods (24.7%), phenomenological methods (23.7%), and feminist methods (5.4%).

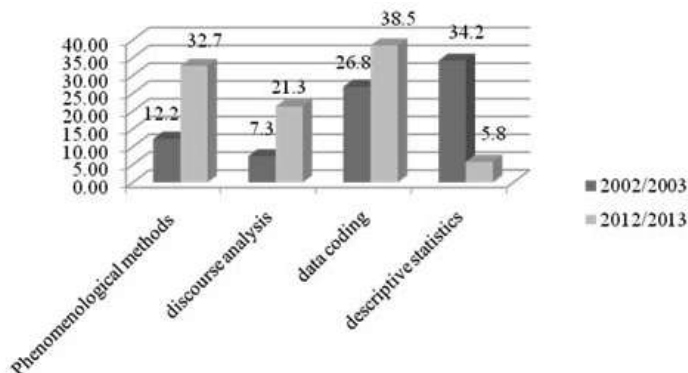


Figure 6 Frequencies of some methods of data analysis for the group of qualitative researches according to the time of publishing

Besides, in analyzed group of quantitative researches in description of the methods of data analysis sometimes are emphasized: explanations/interpretations (69.9%), organization of data (48.4%), comparison (45.2%), data coding (33.3%), analytic memo (18.3%), descriptive statistics (18.3%), discourse analysis (15.1%), validation/triangulation of data (11.8%), and other techniques (10.8%). Statistically significant differences for a determined period were found for: phenomenological methods ($\chi^2=7.865$, $df=1$, $p=0.004$), discourse analysis ($\chi^2=5.323$, $df=1$, $p=0.020$), and data coding ($\chi^2=3.553$, $df=1$, $p=0.045$). Employment of these methods of data analysis (Figure 6) were statistically significantly higher in period 2012/2013, while in same period we found statistically significant decrease of application of descriptive statistics in data analysis ($\chi^2=6.815$, $df=1$, $p=0.008$).

Discussion and Conclusions

Representation of theoretical and empirical researches in articles encompassed in our research, and different types of empirical researches showed that key topics in the field of HRD, on one hand, are discussed at different levels, and on other hand, through usage of different methodology. Diversity of researches contributes and ensures a condition for holistic and comprehensive study of problems in this field. Moreover, through the intertwining of their specific qualities, improvement to such comprehensiveness comes from different sides of interactive continuum formed by different types of researches.

Regarding representation of some types of researches, results of analysis showed increase of empirical versus theoretical researches. We hold that such tendency contribute to usage of empirical data as base for testing of existing knowledge, their further development, and as foundation for new theories in HRD. An illustration is that in quantitative empirical researches we noticed certain improvement regarding quality of applied methods of data analysis, i.e. very complex mathematical techniques and procedures (structural equation modeling), designed to test a conceptual or theoretical model, were employed more often at the end of determined timeframe, which imply tendency of increase application of theory-to-research strategy in theory building of the field of HRD. Besides, escalation of empirical researches could improve methodology used in HRD, e.g. by development of instruments for data collection about different phenomena.

Very important changes were noticed regarding key research themes in the field of HRD, too. On the one hand, research interests directly connected to psychological issues in HRD decreased (related to: emotional intelligence, emotions, factors of cognitive ability, burnout, job satisfaction, personality, affectivity, job behavior, mental models, stress at work, etc.). Research interests connected to economy, or based in Human capital theory (human resources expertise; psychological capital; intellectual capital; social capital; Real Options Theory; shareholder value) were rare, while after adoption of code of ethics in

major HRD professional associations in 1990's and 2000's (e.g. AHRD Standards of Ethics and Integrity, 2001; 22nd Revision of ODI International Code of Ethics, 1999; ISPI Code of Ethics, 2007; ASTD Code of Ethics, 2007) and intensive discourses about professionalization of the field of HRD in the same period, empirical researches about these topics diminished. On the other hand, research interests are more focused to themes related to andragogy: *different HRD/andragogic practices and interventions* (identification of training needs, facilitation of different learning processes, facilitation of multisource feedback, evaluation of the training outcomes, spirituality and work, professional development, participation of employees in a particular external/internal HRD program, etc.), *learning in organization and organizational learning* (transformative learning, experiential learning, problem-based learning, formal workplace learning, incidental workplace learning, informal workplace learning, 'double-loop' learning, situated learning, action learning, just-in-time learning, etc.), *diversity issues in HRD* (related to: African Americans, women, LGBT, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and transgender issues, women and leadership, etc.), *learning supportive organizational climate and culture* (related to: organizational changes, organizational values, engagement, organizational commitment, organizational ethics, etc.), *knowledge management* (related to: knowledge retention, transfer of knowledge, feedback, practice-based approach, reflection, knowledge-sharing, innovative knowledge, etc.), and *HRD and social development*. Such findings imply trends for independence from some traditional scientific disciplines, i.e. psychology and economy, and at the same time a closer intertwining with theory of adult education and learning (andragogy), and a tendency for advances in theoretical foundation of the field of HRD, and autonomy of HRD as scientific discipline.

A few results of analysis designate that researchers in the field of HRD are acquainted with current trends in methodology, and that they made efforts to adjust and to apply new ideas and knowledge, e.g. enlargement in number of qualitative researches, which is compatible with changes notable since 1970's, when application of qualitative researches increased in social sciences in general. Moreover, mixed methods researches and online researches escalate. From the perspective that quality and development of methodology are essential for advances of social sciences, openness and readiness of researchers for application of new methods and techniques in the field of HRD is of great importance.

Even this research were among few systematic attempts to analyze empirical researches in the field of HRD, regarding that limited number of journals were included and regarding narrow timeframe, we were very careful in our conclusions and especially in our generalization of findings. Although we provided a number of interesting results, similar researches could be expanded with the inclusion of more journals and a broader timeframe. Therefore, obtained results would be tested and approved, and new challenges for advances in the field of HRD would emerge.

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