EDITOR'S COMMENTS:
CONSTRUCT CLARITY IN THEORIES OF MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATION

One of the more commonly cited reasons for rejecting a manuscript at *AMR* is that reviewers feel the submission lacks "construct clarity." Yet reviewers (and editors) often find it difficult to articulate precisely what construct clarity is. Indeed, in contrast to other social sciences, such as sociology and psychology, where the nature and role of constructs are subjects of considerable debate, the field of management seems unusually silent on the subject. The absence of an open discussion about theoretical constructs is somewhat surprising given their widespread use in and undeniable importance to management theory.

The purpose of this essay, thus, is twofold. My first objective is pragmatic. I hope to offer some degree of clarification about how the issue of construct clarity is dealt with at *AMR*. I do so by offering a review and synthesis of prior writing on the subject in management journals and in journals from related social science disciplines. Ideally, this will assist authors of prospective *AMR* manuscripts to improve the clarity of their theoretical constructs. My second objective is less pragmatic but, arguably, more important. I hope to open a dialogue within the *AMR* community about the role and use of constructs in developing theories.

Before doing this, however, I should be clear about the scope of this essay. The intent is not to discuss issues of construct *validity*. This is a subsidiary topic of high importance that has received and continues to receive considerable attention (i.e., Bagozzi & Edwards, 1998; Cook & Campbell, 1979; Schwab, 1980). Questions of construct clarity and validity are quite distinct (Bacharach, 1989). Issues of construct validity, which flows from the ability to crisply and precisely describe theoretical constructs, are more narrowly constituted on empirical questions of operationalization and measurement.

Nor is my intent to discuss the broader question of what constitutes "good" theory. This topic has already received substantial prior, more skilled attention (i.e., Bacharach, 1989; Sutton & Staw, 1995; Weick, 1989). While recognizing that strong, clear constructs contribute to good theory, my goal here is more modest. I simply intend to focus the discussion on why we need clear constructs in developing theories of management and how best to accomplish this.

This essay proceeds in four parts. In the first I discuss what constitutes a theoretical construct and how to best create clarity in our constructs. Second, I outline why we need clear constructs in management theory. In the third part I outline how the term *construct* means different things to different kinds of researchers, and I explore how standards of construct clarity vary across epistemological and methodological divisions. Finally, I present a more normative argument about the need for more open dialogue about the role of constructs in our discipline.

WHAT ARE CONSTRUCTS . . . AND WHAT IS CONSTRUCT CLARITY?

Constructs are conceptual abstractions of phenomena that cannot be directly observed (MacCorquodale & Meehl, 1948). Kerlinger defines a construct as a concept that has "been deliberately and consciously invented or adopted for a special scientific purpose" (1973: 29). Constructs are not reducible to specific observations but, rather, are abstract statements of categories of observations (Priem & Butler, 2001). Clear constructs are simply robust categories that distill phenomena into sharp distinctions that are comprehensible to a community of researchers—that is, animal, mineral, or vegetable; gas, liquid, or solid.

Constructs are the foundation of theory. Bacharach defines theory as a "system of constructs . . . in which the constructs are related to each

other by propositions" (1989: 498). Just as constructs are the building blocks of strong theory, clear and accurate terms are the fundament of strong constructs. As Sutton and Staw (1995) remind us, constructs are not a substitute for theory. They are, however, essential to the process of building strong theory. Constructs, therefore, are a necessary but *in*sufficient condition for theory.

The essence of construct clarity comprises four basic elements. First, *definitions* are important. Construct clarity involves the skillful use of language to persuasively create precise and parsimonious categorical distinctions between concepts. Second, construct clarity requires the author to delineate the *scope conditions* or contextual circumstances under which a construct will or will not apply. Third, not only must the theorist offer clear conceptual distinctions, but he or she must also show their *semantic relationship* to other related constructs. Finally, the theorist must demonstrate a degree of *coherence* or logical consistency of the construct in relation to the overall theoretical argument he or she is trying to make.

Reviewers are quick to reject a manuscript where the core constructs are weakly defined, where contextual conditions are not specified, or where their connection to other constructs and to the overall theory is not clear. Unfortunately, the typical rejection letter offers little space to contextualize or elaborate these conditions. How do these constituent elements contribute to clear construct development? How do they contribute to theory? More significantly, what can I, as an author, do to ensure that the constructs used in my theoretical argument meet the requisite standard for clarity and precision? My intent is to address these questions in the balance of this section. I begin by elaborating each of the four subcomponents of construct clarity described above under the following four headings; definitions, scope conditions, relations between constructs and coherence.

Definitions

Theory construction relies on the ability of theorists to accurately abstract empirical phenomena into robust conceptual generalizations. Accomplishing this requires an unusual skill in translating abstract concepts into crisply defined theoretical constructs.

Perhaps the most common definitional issue in manuscripts is that authors simply fail to define their constructs. Authors often use terms described as constructs and assume that the reader understands the intended meaning. This is clearly problematic since any word has both a denotative and connotative meaning. In *The Structure of Complex Words*, famous literary critic William Empson (1995/1951) demonstrates that even individual words like "knowledge" and "honest" contain a complex "inner grammar" that can generate multiple and sometimes contradictory interpretations of the same word. Offering definitions of key terms and constructs, thus, is a bare minimal standard of construct clarity.

A good definition should accomplish several tasks. First, the definition should effectively capture the essential properties and characteristics of the concept or phenomenon under consideration.

Second, a good definition should avoid tautology or circularity. This occurs when a theorist uses elements of the term being defined in the definition or incorporates antecedent or outcome variables as part of his or her definition. Thus, defining a "transformational leader" as a "leader who transforms organizations" is an empty definition because it uses the construct in the definition. Similarly, defining "cognitive ability" as "a capability that enables people to learn more effectively in contexts that are dynamic or complex" creates confusion because it incorporates, as part of the definition, antecedent variables (i.e., complex and dynamic contexts) that are likely causally related to the construct being defined.

Third, a good definition should be parsimonious. That is, it should try to capture as concisely as possible the essential characteristics of a phenomenon or concept. The challenge here is twofold. On the one hand, the definition should focus the meaning of the term as narrowly as possible. On the other hand, there is a danger of overshooting the mark—offering a construct definition that is so narrow it lacks relevance and cannot be generalized.

These three characteristics of a good definition are intended to help fix the meaning of a theoretical term. Meanings, however, are notoriously difficult to specify, for a variety of reasons. One reason is that the meanings of words are never fixed or permanent. When different re-

searchers apply an existing construct to a new empirical context, they often change the meaning of the term, however slightly. Over time and over multiple empirical applications, the definition of a construct tends to drift—that is, it acquires substantial "surplus meaning" (MacCorquodale & Meehl, 1948) or meaning beyond the parameters of its original intended definition. Therefore, it is incumbent on the theorist to first demonstrate the prior uses of the term and then to illustrate, as exhaustively as possible, prior variation in how the term has been used.

Similarly, new constructs are often given names used in common speech—for example, "organizational performance." In this case the term *performance* has acquired substantial surplus meaning as a result of its use in literature and advertising, as well as its everyday use. The term has a depth of connotation, some of which works well for the intended theory and some of which does not. As a result, researchers working at both the organizational (Hansen & Wernerfeldt, 1989) and individual (Rogers & Wright, 1998) levels of analysis have expressed concern about the difficulty of constraining the definition of performance as a construct. The construct of "family business" also suffers from definitional clarity as a result of its surplus meaning acquired from everyday use. Sharma, Chrisman, and Chua (1996) found thirty-four different definitional uses of the term in management literature.

In any case, it is critically important for the theorist to attempt to strip away the extraneous meaning that has become attached to a construct. He or she can accomplish this by offering a contextually specific and clear definition of the term. But achieving this is no simple task, particularly where, as in most instances of theory development, there is no clear agreement on the substantive definitional content of a construct.

There are, however, excellent illustrative examples of how this can be done. Consider, for example, how Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997) develop their definition of the term *stakeholder* in their groundbreaking *AMR* article. They begin by acknowledging the "maddening variety" of uses of the term. They then catalog these definitions across various theories, including agency, behavioral, ecological, institutional, resource dependence, and transaction cost theories of the firm. The authors go on to offer a new definition of the term—a purposefully broad def-

inition—which they then recalibrate by trimming away the surplus meaning of prior uses and introducing their own three salient attributes (power, legitimacy, and urgency). In this way the authors demonstrate their command of the relevant literature by illustrating the prior accumulation of surplus meaning in a term and then impose some order on the construct by introducing a new, refined definition of the term.

The most common error in developing constructs is making them too general. There is, however, considerable danger in extending this logic too far. That is, on occasion constructs can be presented *too narrowly*. Recall that a key function of constructs is to create robust categorizations of phenomena. If the categories are expressed too narrowly, the theoretical relevance of a construct will be compromised (Astley, 1985). The creative capacity of theoretical constructs rests on the tension between definitional accuracy and ideational scope. Effective constructs create broad categories and, thus, should not be reducible to narrow empirical observations. Some degree of linguistic ambiguity is therefore a useful component of any theoretical construct (Astley & Zammuto, 1992). The challenge is to create constructs that are sufficiently narrow enough to strip away unintended connotations and surplus meaning but are conceptually broad enough to capture the underlying essence of the phenomenon.

Scope Conditions

In contrast to the physical sciences, few constructs in organization theory have universal application. Rather, organizational constructs tend to be highly sensitive to and contingent on contextual conditions. So, for example, constructs developed from research on large, publicly traded corporations may have little relevance for closely held corporations (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000) or family businesses. Similarly, organizational constructs are highly culturally sensitive. Constructs formulated by studying North American corporations may not exhibit the same characteristics in Asian organizations (Gibson & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2001; Shenkar & von Glinow, 1994; White, 2002).

There is also a noted tendency within management scholarship for researchers to "borrow" concepts from other disciplines, such as psychology or biology. In addition, organizational

researchers often take constructs developed at one level of analysis, such as the individual, and apply them to another level of analysis, such as the group, team, or organization (Floyd, 2009). While the practice of borrowing constructs can be beneficial, it is often done unreflectively, without considering how the borrowed construct might vary as a result of the distinctive nature of organizations (Whetten, Felin, & King, 2009). In the process of borrowing constructs, researchers often assume universality and neglect to clarify whether the essential characteristics of a construct that may have been present in the original context are equally present in the new one.

Because organizational constructs lack universality, it is very important for theorists to spell out the contextual conditions under which a proposed construct will or will not adhere (Dubin, 1969). Failure to specify the "boundary limits" or "scope conditions" of a construct exposes one's theoretical argument to almost certain rejection. When an author claims universal application of a construct, it is usually very easy for a reviewer to identify at least one exception to the hypothetical abstraction. Indeed, as Walker and Cohen observe, "One can easily find exceptions to most of the propositions which are advanced as general . . . principles" (1985: 288).

Finding a single exception is often fatal to a construct because it implies that any proposition associated with the construct is false. Reviewers may take this position even in cases where there is substantial positive empirical support for a construct, largely because most reviewers have been oversocialized to accept falsification as the basis of scientific truth. An easy resolution to this problem, however, is simply to avoid overgeneralizing the nature of your constructs by placing scope conditions on them—that is, carefully outlining the contextual conditions under which the constructs will or will not apply.

There are three general categories or types of scope conditions: space, time, and values (Bacharach, 1989). The first two are relatively straightforward and easy to address. Constraints of space, discussed above, refer to the fact that constructs may apply differently in different types of organizations, at different levels of organizational analysis, under different cultural conditions, or in varying environmental circumstances. Perhaps the most common omission in theory manuscripts is a failure to specify the

level of analysis under which a proposed construct will apply (Rousseau, 1985). As Klein, Dansereau, and Hall remind us,

> No construct is level free. Every construct is tied to one or more organizational levels or entities, that is, individuals, dyads, groups, organizations, industries, markets, and so on. To examine organizational phenomena is thus to encounter levels issues. Levels issues create particular problems when the level of theory, the level of measurement, and/or the level of statistical analysis are incongruent (1994: 198).

So, for example, employee performance is a construct that is highly dependent on the level of analysis within the organization where observations are made. An individual might be performing extremely well in reference to his or her past performance (individual level) but below average relative to group performance and merely average at the organizational level.

Organizational constructs are subject to constraints of time because organizational phenomena tend to be temporal, and as a result, changes in time may affect the expression of any construct (Avital, 2000; Zaheer, Albert, & Zaheer, 1999). Critics, however, have observed that management theorists tend to ignore the temporal boundaries of phenomena and assume invariance over time in key constructs. George and Jones offer two key examples:

> So, for example, any conceptualization of motivation must contain reference to its inherently subjective and changing nature and definitions should not be constrained by viewing it through the lens of standard time. As another example, it should be recognized that the desire to act opportunistically can be viewed as a state of mind that can change, often quickly; however opportunism is often treated as a stable tendency that exists across people and situations (2000: 667).

Another example, recounted by Zaheer et al. (1999: 726), is that the antecedents and nature of trust seem to vary over different time scales. When observed over short time frames, trust appears to be based on stereotypical features of a potential alliance partner. But when measured over longer time frames, trust is based on more specific or individualized elements of potential partners.

Often, organizational constructs implicitly assume boundary conditions of time, without making them explicit. George and Jones (2000: 662) point to research on job satisfaction as an illustration of this, where research typically mea-

sures job satisfaction at time 1 and then measures absenteeism at time 2—usually one year later. The methodology implies certain assumptions about the temporal scope conditions of job satisfaction as a construct—that is, that job satisfaction is stable over that time period but absenteeism is incremental. Job stress, similarly, has been viewed as a construct with both incremental temporal scope conditions—it increases incrementally as an employee encounters increasing levels of stressors—and discontinuous temporal scope conditions—a specific event increases stress temporarily but the stress then subsides. Both conceptualizations of the construct of stress are accurate, but they operate under different boundary conditions of time. The onus is on the researcher to clearly state the temporal scope conditions under which he or she assumes the construct to operate.

Constraints of value are more complex and arguably more difficult to address. Constraints of value refer to scope conditions of a theoretical construct that arise as a result of the assumptions or world view of the researcher. So, for example, Pierce, Gardner, Cummings, and Dunham (1989) note that most of the constructs developed by human resources theorists, such as turnover, climate, and citizenship, tend to "privilege" or adopt the point of view of the employee and his or her role within the organization. These authors point out the implications of these value assumptions and how they might limit, theoretically, the depth of each construct. They go on to suggest that researchers might correct for their "employee bias" by adopting a broader set of assumptions that are "anchored in an organizational frame of reference" (Pierce et al., 1989: 624).

Because constructs are subject to conditions of value, researchers must make their best efforts to explicate the hidden assumptions that they bring to the theorization of a construct. As organizational theorists, we must adopt an ongoing position of critical reflexivity about how our individual point of view, our often taken-for-granted assumptions, and our institutional biography might introduce bias and distortion into how we conceptualize and abstract reality.

In sum, clearly stating the scope conditions of constructs contributes directly to building strong theory. Whetten (1989) summarizes this relationship neatly in his description of the four essential conditions of a strong theory. A theory should provide answers to what the constructs are, how and why they are related, who the constructs apply to, and when and where they are applicable.

Relationships Between Constructs

With apologies to John Donne, no construct is an island. Constructs exist only in referential relationships, either explicit or implicit, with other constructs and with the phenomena they are designed to represent. New constructs are rarely created de novo. Rather, they are usually the result of creative building upon preexisting constructs, which themselves refer to other extant constructs, in an ongoing web of referential relationships. Constructs, thus, are the outcome of a semantic network of conceptual connections to other prior constructs. Psychologists refer to this as the *nomological network* (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955) and semioticians as the *system of signification* (Saussure, 2000). While these two groups of researchers may not share much in terms of epistemology, they both seem to understand that theoretical constructs are suspended in a complex web of references to and relationships with other constructs.

Part of the task in demonstrating construct clarity, thus, is to draw out these relationships in a fashion that the reader can understand. Describing the historical relationships between the proposed new construct and the prior historical constructs on which it was built is a critical component of the literature review of any theoretical manuscript. Theorists need to "acknowledge the stream of logic on which they are drawing and to which they are contributing" (Sutton & Staw, 1995: 372). Similarly, theorists also need to carefully describe the logical connections between the proposed new construct and other extant constructs, a process Bacharach (1989) suggests is usually carried out in the form of propositions.

The key observation here is that the clarity of a construct is only partly achieved by the precision of its definition. The notion of clarity extends beyond this to include clarity in how the theorist describes the complex relationships that exist *between* constructs. One effective way of addressing this is for the theorist to demonstrate the historical lineage of a new construct and position that construct on the horizon of extant related constructs.

Constructs may be "relational" in a different sense, however. Some constructs are relational not just because they are derived from other constructs but because they are embedded in *processes* that involve other constructs. That is, some constructs are processual in nature because they are derived from process data (Langley, 1999). Constructs in process theory are qualitatively different from constructs derived from variance theory (Mohr, 1982). Process data are inherently "messy," in part because they are collected in real time through direct observations in the field (Langley, 1999). Constructs derived from processes, therefore, tend to be relational inasmuch as they focus on events that are multidimensional, temporally embedded, and often spanning multiple levels of analysis (Langley, 1999; Van de Ven, 1992). So, for example, some theorists have identified stories or narratives as distinct constructs in process theory (Pentland, 1999).

A critical question that arises when assessing the clarity of constructs used in process theory is what the tipping point is at which complex process constructs should be broken down into more concise theoretical units. Addressing this issue is difficult in that it illustrates, in part, how different epistemological assumptions produce different standards of construct clarity (discussed in more detail below). Some general principles of construct clarity, however, may shed some insight here. Notwithstanding the complexity and multidimensionality of constructs used in process theory, authors should still strive to capture the essential characteristics of phenomena with constructs that balance accuracy (comprehensiveness) with simplicity (parsimony) and generality (Langley, 1999). Constructs derived from process theory might well be more densely embedded in relation to other constructs. The goal of the researcher, however, should still be to strive for clarity, parsimony, and precision in capturing the essential elements of the construct and in mapping out the relationships between the focal construct and other constructs within which the focal construct is embedded.

Coherence

A final component of construct clarity is the notion that the construct, its definition, its scope conditions, its lineage, and its relationship to other constructs must all make sense. That is, they must all cohere or "hang together" in a logically consistent manner. In part, the need for coherence derives from the inherently multidimensional nature of management research. Most of the constructs we use are highly contextually sensitive, and over time constructs developed in management research tend to consist of a number of interrelated attributes or dimensions that may vary somewhat in different organizational contexts but still meaningfully capture a comprehensive element of organizational experience. As a result, constructs often become multidimensional. That is, they describe abstract concepts that are themselves composed of multiple attributes.

So, for example, organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) is a recognized construct that has been based on five distinct foundational elements: civic virtue, sportsmanship, altruism, conscientiousness, and courtesy (Law, Wong, & Mobley, 1998). Each of these foundational elements is based on distinct measures and may vary somewhat across different organizational contexts in terms of its proportionate contribution to the "umbrella construct" of OCB. However, the umbrella construct retains an overall coherence or consistency that is more than the sum of its foundational parts. Law et al. (1998) describe this internal coherence of the umbrella construct as a "latent model" and the summated elements as an "aggregate model." They also use the term *profile model* to describe the different profiles that occur when the elements vary as a result of different contextual conditions. The key element of their argument, however, is the understanding that the core construct is greater—that is, more resilient—than its foundational elements. This perhaps best illustrates the notion of coherence in that a true multidimensional construct demonstrates greater resilience than its component elements.

Often, the issue presented by questions of coherence is the ability of the theorist to use the constructs to create logically consistent and theoretically integrated arguments. As Sutton and Staw (1995) have observed, theorists will regularly offer up complex schematics or intricate process flow diagrams in lieu of coherence. The diagrams are a good start, but ultimately, the

power of coherence of such an assembly of constructs can only be provided by a compelling and coherent explanation.

Coherence is a difficult characteristic of construct clarity to explain, in part because it reveals the recursive or dialectical relationship that exists between constructs and theory. That is, in large part constructs gain their coherence, both internally and in relation to other constructs, as a result of the theory in which they are embedded. It is difficult to understand the construct of legitimacy independent of one's knowledge of institutional theory (Suchman, 1995). Kaplan calls this the "paradox of conceptualization," noting that "proper concepts are needed to formulate good theory, but we need a good theory to arrive at proper concepts" (1964: 501).

Coherence, thus, is a somewhat intuitive assessment of whether the various attributes of a phenomenon are adequately contained within a construct—that is, do these attributes hang together in a logical and empirically convincing way? Is the construct plausible, given one's experience in similar contexts (Weick, 1989)? Are the relationships described or implied by the construct plausible? Does the construct make sense?

Collectively, these four characteristics (definitions, scope conditions, relationships between constructs, and coherence) capture the essential elements of construct clarity. It is perhaps trite to note that the characteristics mutually reinforce each other. It is difficult, for example, to demonstrate scope conditions without first providing a sound definition. Similarly, coherence is highly dependent on clearly stated scope conditions. Construct clarity requires considerable skill in crafting each of these essential elements.

WHY DO WE NEED CONSTRUCT CLARITY?

There are three main justifications for clear and concise constructs, each of which builds on the core idea that such clarity is critical to the accumulation of knowledge. First, clear constructs facilitate communication between scholars. Second, improved clarity of constructs enhances researchers' ability to empirically explore phenomena. Third, clear constructs allow for greater creativity and innovation in research. I elaborate each of these points in the balance of this section.

Clarity Facilitates Communication

Construct clarity allows us to build on prior research by providing the research community with a common language. A common language is an essential prerequisite for a community of scholars interested in the same or similar phenomena to exchange ideas and build knowledge. The ability to precisely articulate the key elements that underpin an idea helps us to understand the degree to which ideas overlap or differ. Moreover, the advancement of theory and knowledge relies on the ability of new researchers to build on the work of prior researchers. If new and old researchers cannot agree on or communicate the basic elements of a phenomenon, the accumulation of knowledge cannot occur.

The ability to precisely define the essence of an abstraction in such a way that differentiates it from other similar abstractions produces serious advantages for a scholarly community. Foremost, it avoids the proliferation of different terms and labels for similar phenomena—a problem that is often colloquially described as putting "old wine in new bottles." Truman Kelley, one of the founders of the Stanford Achievement Test, called the proliferation of different labels for the same underlying construct the "jangle fallacy." Kelley (1927) observed that when researchers used different words—"intelligence" or "achievement"—to describe the same underlying construct of general intelligence, there was a tendency to start treating the terms as completely different constructs, even though the overlap in individual differences that underpin the two terms was over 90 percent (Lubinski, 2004).

When researchers use different terms for similar phenomena, it produces confusion—"confounding effects"—that impede the ability of members of a research community to communicate with each other or to accumulate knowledge. The creation of a common vocabulary avoids the "Tower of Babel" effect, in which subcommunities of researchers have no common means of communication. In the absence of common and well-articulated constructs, the boundaries between subcommunities become more

sharply defined and organizational knowledge becomes increasingly fragmented.

Clear constructs can and should also extend the scope of knowledge beyond the academic community to include practitioners. Management scholars have expressed considerable dismay about the failure of academic research to penetrate the practitioner community (Rynes, 2007; Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft, 2001). In part, this is the result of weakly articulated constructs or constructs that are so narrowly defined they lack relevance. Effective constructs, however, can help immensely in bridging that gap. As Astley and Zammuto note, it is at the abstract level of ideational constructs "where much of the knowledge transfer between scientific and practitioner domains occurs" (1992: 444). An effective construct, thus, navigates a narrow path between definitional accuracy and communicable generality—that is, it is precisely and accurately constructed, but in a way that broad audiences can understand and participate in the process of empirical elaboration and exploration.

Clarity Assists Empirical Analysis

Construct clarity aids in the empirical application of theory. For positivists, construct clarity helps them test theory, since precisely defined constructs are easier to operationalize and test (Schwab, 1980) and it is easier for researchers to compare and contrast results (Bagozzi & Edwards, 1998). For constructivists, construct clarity is not intended to lead to precise operationalization and measurement but is still critical (perhaps even more essential) for capturing and communicating with precision the often subjective meaning and interpretation of an abstraction by individual subjects. Berger and Luckmann, for example, argue that construct clarity helps constructivist researchers avoid the positivist dilemma of reification or "confusing its own conceptualizations with the laws of the universe" (1967: 187). Similarly, the success of grounded theory research lies, in large part, in the ability of researchers to clearly identify and express "concepts or constructs that are grounded in actors' meaning-in-use, rather than categories or constructs that are imposed by the researcher" (Bob Gephart, personal communication).

In sum, careful description of phenomena is the fundament of empirical exploration. The essence of empiricism is the ability to create clear classifications of phenomena that structure experience into meaningful categories (Hacking, 1975). Clear constructs are simply robust categories that organize experience. Moreover, clear constructs help researchers identify anomalies or phenomena that defy categories and force researchers to reevaluate their theories.

Construct Clarity Enhances Creativity

Clearly defined theoretical constructs serve a creative heuristic purpose in the elaboration of theory. Like metaphors, a well-crafted construct can capture the essential elements or characteristics of a phenomenon and, simultaneously, highlight both its similarities to and differences from related phenomena. Constructs are carefully articulated abstractions that, if effectively crafted, expand the range of phenomena and relationships they capture. Effective constructs, thus, can enhance research creativity by "allowing managers to redefine problems in ways that are more amenable to resolution" (Astley & Zammuto, 1992: 455). Constructs are conceptual frames, and clear constructs expose a phenomenon to multiple perspectives.

A clear construct, thus, not only serves as a useful means of description but can stimulate insights into additional possible relationships, related constructs, and often related theories. Like a well-chosen metaphor, a carefully crafted construct is a powerful creative tool that enhances theory development.

HOW DOES CONSTRUCT CLARITY VARY?

Thus far, I have presented the notion of construct clarity in a somewhat catholic fashion—that is, with an implicit assumption that its importance and basic characteristics are universally accepted across the various epistemological and ontological regimes that comprise the Academy of Management scholars. Clearly, that is not the case, and at various points in the discussion above, I have made some effort to foreshadow that, for example, positivists and social constructionists might hold different views as to what might constitute a good definition. Indeed, the term *construct* itself is likely to be contested by nonpositivists, based on the connotations of hypothesis testing and operationalization typically associated with the term.

For researchers using a constructivist perspective, *concept* might be a more acceptable value-neutral term.

Different traditions of research have very different understandings of what construct clarity is and how constructs might best be used in building theory. Let me illustrate through two examples. The first comes from Eisenhardt's (1989) classic paper on how to use case studies to build theory. Here Eisenhardt adopts a very positivist view of what constructs are and how they should be used in building theory:

> A priori specification of constructs can also help to shape the initial design of theory-building research. Although this type of specification is not common in theory-building studies to date, it is valuable because it permits researchers to measure constructs more accurately. If these constructs prove important as the study progresses, then researchers have a firmer empirical grounding for the emergent theory (1989: 536).

Note that Eisenhardt sees constructs as essential to theory building but acknowledges that the researcher will bring preexisting constructs into the research to be "tested" through empirical application. Eisenhardt qualifies this position somewhat with an admonition to the researcher to keep an open mind about the possibility of refining the construct in accordance with the data as the research progresses:

> Although early identification of the research question and possible constructs is helpful, it is equally important to recognize that both are tentative in this type of research. No construct is guaranteed a place in the resultant theory, no matter how well it is measured (1989: 536).

Eisenhardt's (1989) view of the role of constructs in theory building is not universally accepted and was subsequently challenged by researchers who thought that entering the field with narrowly defined constructs would interfere with the researcher's ability to create new constructs or enrich our understanding of existing ones. Drawing from a research tradition that encourages more creativity and flexibility in the research process and one that might adopt the term *concept* in place of *construct*, in their rejoinder to Eisenhardt, Dyer and Wilkins suggest that researchers ought to aim for "good stories" rather than "good constructs":

> Eisenhardt's approach [is] to start with . . . constructs and measurement instruments. Such an approach leads the case researcher to confirm,

disconfirm or build upon existing theories. . . . We argue that the classic case study approach has been extremely powerful because these authors have described general phenomena so well that others have little difficulty seeing the same phenomena in their own experience and research. We return to the classics because they are good stories, not because they are merely clear statements of a construct. Indeed the very clarity of the constructs stems from the story that supports and demonstrates them (1991: 617).

On its surface, the debate between Eisenhardt and Dyer and Wilkins seems to reflect two opposing and irreconcilable epistemological positions. On closer examination, however, they simply illustrate different assumptions regarding the role of constructs in the research process. Eisenhardt (1989) sees constructs as lenses through which data can be analyzed in the theory-building process. Dyer and Wilkins (1991) see constructs as emerging from the data. Both, however, seem to acknowledge the need for clear constructs; they simply differ on their role in the process of building theory.

In fact, Eisenhardt (1989) and Dyer and Wilkins (1991) are assuming two distinct roles in an ongoing dialectic or tension over theoretical constructs that Hirsch and Levin (1999) describe as the "umbrella advocates" versus the "validity police." The term *umbrella advocates* refers to those researchers who argue that constructs should be viewed as large buckets or broad concepts loosely defined because this better captures the inherent complexity and messiness of the empirical world we study. The term *validity police* refers to those researchers who argue that constructs should be small buckets narrowly defined in order to bring more scientific rigor and validity to the study of organizations.

Hirsch and Levin (1999) argue that the tension between these two regimes creates a distinct life cycle for theoretical constructs in organization studies, where umbrella advocates first introduce a new construct, which then succumbs to demands from the validity police to "clean up the concept" (for a recent example of this stage, see Briner, Denyer, & Rousseau, 2009). In some instances constructs become so clearly defined, measurable, and operationalized over time that they lose relevance with the empirical world and, ultimately, reappear under a different name. Hirsch and Levin (1999) illustrate this phenomenon through an analysis of the emergence, clarification, and disappearance of the theoret-

ical construct "organizational effectiveness." Hirsch and Levin (1999) remind us that this construct was itself a replacement for a prior similar construct called "organizational performance."

In contrast to the evident disagreement in the debate between Eisenhardt (1989) and Dyer and Wilkins (1991) about the proper role of theoretical constructs, Hirsch and Levin argue that this tension between broad and narrow interpretations of constructs is not only healthy but is necessary for the advancement of knowledge:

> Though each of us may have his or her own leanings, the field as a whole probably needs both broad (umbrella) and narrow (policing) perspectives, for this dialectic can be useful for understanding and explaining the underlying issues of organizational life. This struggle thus enables the field as a whole to balance its competing needs to be both scientific and relevant (1999: 209).

The standards for the meaning and use of constructs, thus, appear to vary considerably across different research traditions, epistemologies, and ontological positions within organization studies.

While different research traditions may have different interpretations of how constructs are constituted and how they should be used in research, the need for clarity and precision in the description of constructs remains intact. For positivists, precise language is necessary to capture, as effectively as possible, the essence of the subject matter under study. The challenge is to use language to create constructs that accurately represent reality. For nonpositivists, precise language is equally important, not to capture reality or to enable the measurement of constructs but, rather, to recognize that linguistic constructs are themselves the embodiment of knowledge (Gergen, 1982). As Astley observes, for nonpositivists, "Language is not simply a vehicle for transmitting information. Rather it is the very embodiment of truth. . . . Scientific fields are word systems created and maintained through a process of negotiation between adherents to alternative theoretical languages" (1985: 499).

So, while the interpretation of what a construct means might vary across subdisciplines of organizational research, I believe that the requirement for clarity of description as well as the four key elements of construct clarity out-

lined in this essay still applies. Phenomenologists may not agree with the notion that constructs must be made measureable, but they would not argue with the notion that the concepts they derive from their research must be communicated clearly, with appropriate limiting conditions and assumptions and with some explanation of how these concepts fit in relation to other concepts used in similar research. Similarly, while a researcher using grounded theory might be striving for novel insights from his or her data, when writing his or her theory, the researcher must still bear the burden of demonstrating how his or her insights fit on the horizon of prior knowledge of the subject under study, even those drawn from other research traditions.

WHY WE NEED AN ONGOING CONVERSATION ABOUT THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS IN ORGANIZATION STUDIES

I have tried to demonstrate how construct clarity lies at the heart of theory building. Clearly defined conceptual categories encourage researchers to generate more effective research questions, apply appropriate and epistemologically consistent methods, and identify exceptions to the categories that open opportunities for future research. All of this serves to strengthen our understanding of phenomena. Construct clarity also aids in the communication and accumulation of knowledge. Clear conceptual categories can help overcome fragmentation in the field, make our research relevant to broader audiences, and enhance the legitimacy of management as a research discipline.

What surprises me is how unusually mute our discipline seems to be on so important a subject. While management journals devote some space to discussions of constructs and their role in theory development (i.e., Astley & Zammuto, 1992; Hirsch & Levin, 1999; Preim & Butler, 2001), the coverage seems disproportionate to the importance of the topic. This anomaly is reflected, somewhat, in how we train graduate students, where considerable time is devoted to understanding how constructs are measured and operationalized but substantially less time is devoted to understanding how constructs are created and used in the research process.

One clear conclusion from this essay is that construct clarity is highly dependent on a theorist's facility with language. Good constructs ef-

fectively balance some competing (if not contradictory) tensions. So, for example, constructs must strip away surplus meaning but not be made too narrow. Constructs should offer clear boundaries and scope conditions but also be sufficiently "linguistically ambiguous" to spark new connotative relationships. These are no small tasks, even for those trained in the skillful use of language. Yet even though we understand that language matters to effective theory development in the same way it matters to philosophy (Hacking, 1975), we devote considerably less time to training new researchers in understanding the nuances of language than we do to understanding the nuances of statistical measurement.

Our silence on the subject of use of constructs in management may be a pragmatic effort to avoid the "paradigm wars" of the past, or it may simply reflect the ongoing fragmentation of our field. My hope is that this essay will not only help aspiring theorists understand how to more effectively develop constructs but will also renew the conversation on constructs in management theories and focus discussion on techniques for improving their clarity, increasing our understanding of their role in bridging research disciplines, and improving both the relevance and rigor of organizational research.

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