

# **Developing Theory and Theoretical Contributions Session 5 – construct clarity**

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# Topics for today

- Introducing the main issues
  - Brief introduction into the specifics of construct clarity and the craft of defining constructs
    - Definition clarity exercise
    - Scope conditions exercise
    - Conceptual relations exercise
  - Why are there so many definitions anyway?
    - Self-assessment and classification exercise
  - Identify opportunities for construct development

# Context

- *“a major factor retarding progress in our field—and almost every intellectual field today—has been the use of sloppy, careless, or subjective definitions”* (Locke, 2003, p. 415).
- Later Locke (2012) took an even more pessimistic view of the field when he concluded that *“As someone who has been reviewing journal articles for more than 30 years, I estimate that about 90% of the submissions I get suffer from problems of conceptual clarity”* (Locke, 2012, p. 146).

# What is a concept?

- “*We define concepts as cognitive symbols (or abstract terms) that specify the features, attributes, or characteristics of the phenomenon in the real or phenomenological world that they are meant to represent and that distinguish them from other related phenomena.*”
- “Thus, a concept is a cognitive symbol that has meaning for the scientific community that uses it”
- Concepts are similar to *hypothetical constructs*, which are viewed as *theoretical* entities
- (Podsakoff, et al., 2016, p. 3)

# Construct validity is NOT construct clarity

*Oh, wait! What is  
leadership anyway?*



Vs.



**Soapbox!**  
**Suddaby (2010)**

# Why is construct clarity important for *you*?

*How do I know which definition to use???*



# Why is construct clarity important for social science?

- Critical to scientific progress because...
  - It facilitates falsification of substantive theory
  - Eases operationalization
  - Assists communication and dissemination in scholarly expert networks
  - Stimulates the creative application of theoretical terms in seemingly unrelated domains

# What is construct clarity?

- *The precise and parsimonious articulation of the intended meaning of a theoretical term*
- The process of clarification = the skillful use of language to persuasively create precise and parsimonious distinctions between concepts' (Suddaby, 2010, p. 347).
  - *“What is X and what is non-X?”*
  - *“How is P different from Q?”*
  - *Etc...*

# What makes for a 'good' construct? (see e.g. Hempel, 1970)

- Precision (accuracy),
- Parsimony (simplicity)
- Communicability (is it 'catchy'?)
- Coherence (how do attributes hang together?)
- Generality (universality, abstraction),
- Differentiability (Is  $P$  distinct from  $Q$ ?)
- Inter-textual consistency (Pfeffer, 1993 vs Welch et al 2015)?
- A consistent flow of empirical research done under its name (McKinley, Mone, & Moon, 1999, AMR)

# Suddaby (2010)

**What is construct clarity?**

## **Definitions**

**Skillful use of language to persuasively create precise and parsimonious categorical distinctions between concepts**

## **Scope conditions**

**Delineate contextual circumstances under which a construct will or will not apply**

## **Relations**

**Demonstrate the semantic relationship to other related constructs**

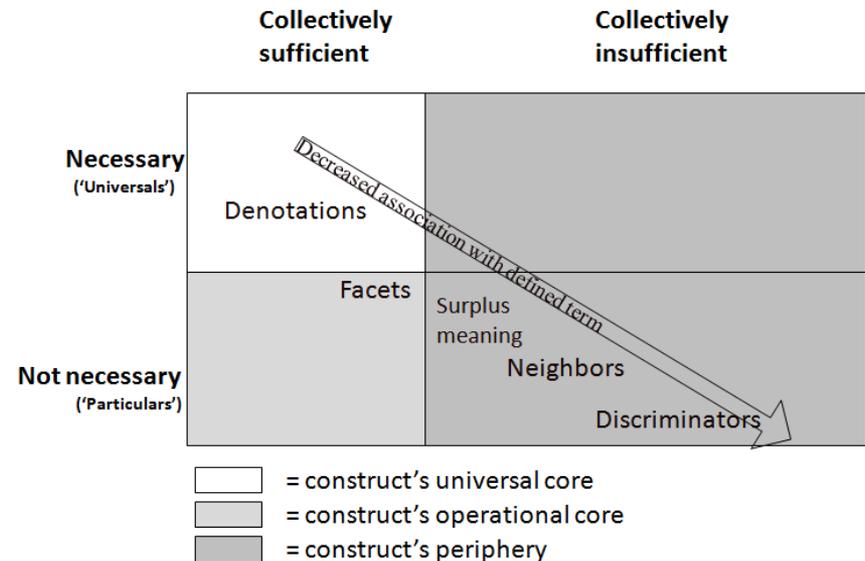
## **Coherence**

**The logical consistency of the construct in relation to the overall theoretical argument**

# The classical approach

Komatsu (1992), “The distinguishing assumption of the classical view is that concepts are defined by sets of individually necessary and collectively sufficient attributes” (p. 502).

The necessary and sufficient concept structure dates back to Aristotle (see also Goertz, 2006; Sartori, 1970, 1984)



# Some common errors in construct definitions

- **Little conceptual analysis** (e.g., practise-defined terms)
- **Redundancy** (e.g., 40+ definitions of the same term)
- Concept **stretching** (X is all-encompassing, thus *underspecified*)
- **Overspecification** (too many markers)
- Including unessential/too many/too generic/too fancy descriptors in a definition.
- **Incoherence/Misspecification:** A and Z are of a different kind, but nevertheless conflated in a single construct
- **Lack of differentiability** (*Isn't P the same as Q?*)
- **Circular reasoning** (e.g., cause and effect in a single construct)

# Literature search questions

Look at your own construct (phenomenon) and analyze the conceptual/empirical work that has appeared in print

1. Do scholars converge on a single or a few definitions?
2. What attributes do these definitions posit?
  - Compare the ‘attribute sets’ in the definitions with the actual coverage/empirical indicators of the construct.
3. Have original definitions been contested and have alternatives emerged?
  - Additional attributes, subtypes, rival concepts?
  - Have assumptions about the construct been debated?
  - What were the theoretical motives for these alternatives?
  - Do you see instances of concept stretching and/or a drifting of meaning?

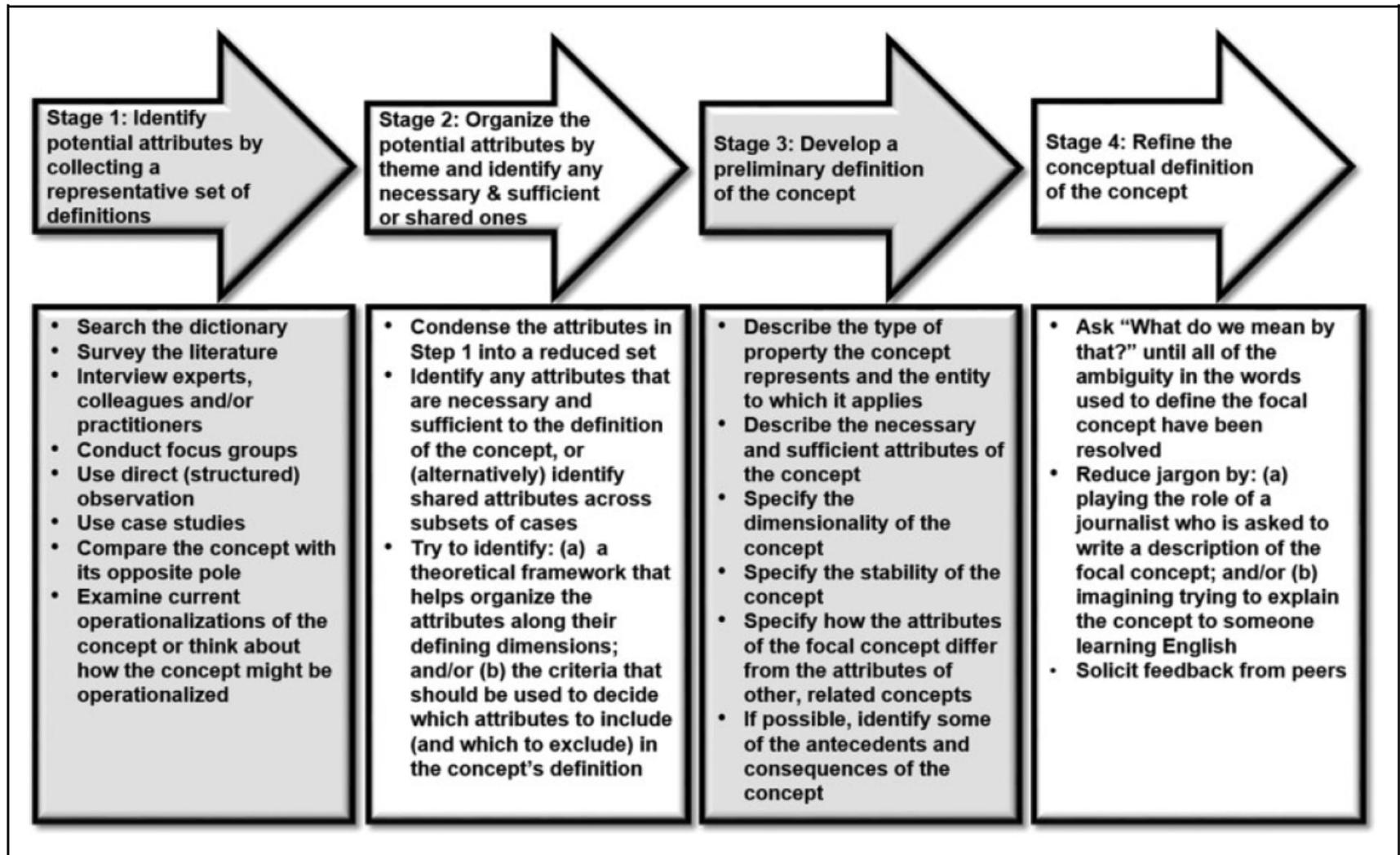
**Soapbox!**

**Podsakoff et al. (2016)**

# Podsakoff et al., (2016). Organizational Research Methods

**Table 1.** Differences Between Necessary and Sufficient and Family Resemblance Concept Structures.

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**Figure 1.** Summary of stages for developing good conceptual definitions.

# Definition exercise

- Form groups of 2-3 participants
- Discuss the quality (e.g. relative precision and parsimony) of the two definitions.
  - Which one is the most clear, Why?
    - Think of the criteria of good definitions!
    - Think of common errors
  - Which one fits best for your own research?

# Suddaby (2010)

## What is construct clarity?

### Definitions

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### Scope conditions

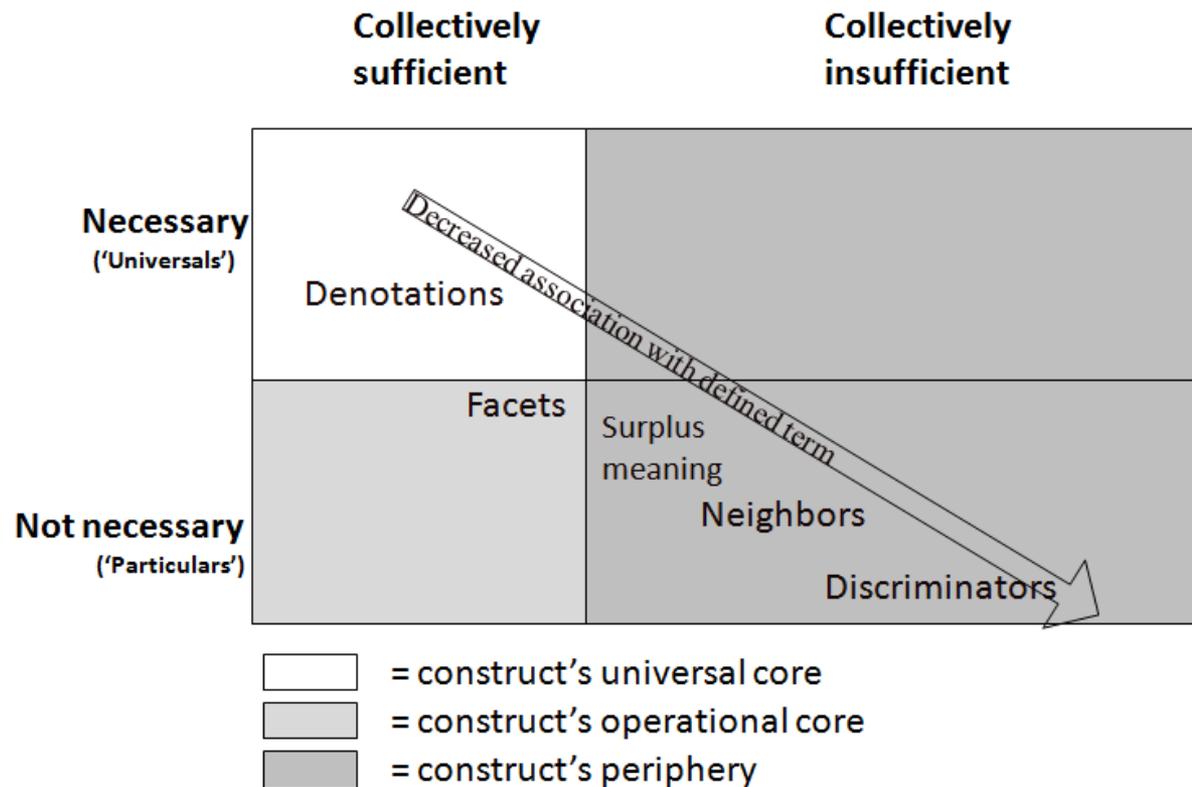
**Delineate contextual circumstances under which a construct will or will not apply**

### Relations

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# The value of discriminators



**Table 8.** An Example of Identifying the Key Attributes of a Construct by Contrasting It With Its Opposite (from Organ, 1988).

Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB) <sup>a</sup>	Task Performance <sup>b</sup>
<p>OCB represents individual behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system . . .</p>	<p>Task performance is individual behavior that is a required part one's job. Task performance is generally the basis for organizational rewards.</p>
<p>By <i>discretionary</i>, we mean that the behavior is not an enforceable requirement of the role or job description, that is, the clearly specifiable terms of the person's employment contract with the organization;</p>	<p>Task performance is: (a) generally considered an enforceable requirement of a person's role in the organization, (b) often included in one's job description, and (c) is often clearly specified in the person's employment contract with the organization.</p>
<p>The behavior is rather a matter of personal choice, such that its omission is not general understood as punishable.</p>	<p>Task performance is generally not considered a matter of personal choice. Employees are expected to perform their tasks and may be subject to punishment when they do not do so.</p>

<sup>a</sup>Definition taken from Organ (1988, p. 4). <sup>b</sup>Task definition provided by current authors.

# Exercise

- Form groups of 2-3 participants
- Select a construct of interest, and discuss
  - What are the ‘neighbours’ of this construct?
  - Between which construct should your definition really discriminate?

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# Example: Scope conditions

*'When does x NOT apply'?*

- Lack of universal applicability
- Space
  - Sensitive to and contingent on contextual conditions
  - Culturally sensitive
  - Borrowed concepts
  - Different level of analysis
- Temporality
- Values

# Scope demarcation exercise

- Form groups of 2-3 participants
- When does X NOT apply?
  - Discover the limits...
    - Which boundaries apply for your own research?