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Reconceptualizing Conceptual Engineering

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Dear Sir or Madam,

Please find enclosed a dialogue contribution that we would like to have considered for possible publication in AMR. Our dialogue piece offers a response to the paper written by Piotr Makowski (Forthcoming) on conceptual engineering. We feel that are well placed to comment on this contribution because of our collective expertise in the area and the fact that Makowski extensively utilizes work that we have previously published in AMR. In particular, the *AMR* paper by Oswick (i.e. Oswick, Fleming & Hanlon, 2011) is heavily cited and used to formulate the key arguments. In addition, three of Cornelissen's past AMR papers are also draw upon to develop the key assertions (i.e. Cornelissen, 2005; Cornelissen & Durand, 2012; Ketokivi, Mantere & Cornelissen).

We feel that our dialogue offering is robust, constructive and offers some meaningful ways of progressing the optimal use of concepts in organizational theorizing and theory building. We hope you like it and we look forward to hearing from you in due course

Yours sincerely,

Cliff Oswick

Professor Cliff Oswick (and for Joep Cornelissen, Claudio Biscaro and Elena Bruni)
Chair in Organization Theory

Reconceptualizing Conceptual Engineering

Drawing upon insights from the field of philosophy, Makowski (2021) introduces conceptual engineering (CE) as a tool to optimize concepts within the field of management. Although there is considerable merit in embracing CE, we contend that the scope for application of CE, the utility of the overall approach, and the resulting benefits, need to be qualified and reframed. In doing so, we discuss how CE can be reconceptualized as a contingent and reflexive device in order to provide additional value to the process of management theorizing.

PRECISION ENGINEERING?

CE is concerned with scientifically and systematically constructing and reconstructing the concepts that form the building blocks of theory development. For Makowski (2021), CE "relies on a certain *know-how* allowing us to construe concepts, check if they are adequate, valid or sound, and correct them when needed" (p. 10). He also asserts that: "One of the key assumptions behind conceptual engineering used in theory development is that precision and correctness is something on the conceptual level: if a theory is practically significant, it also needs properly exercised micro-level conceptual rigor to realize the goal of scientific inquiry" (p. 6). For us, the importance of precision, correctness and rigor is somewhat overplayed, at least as general criteria that are assumed to apply to all concepts. And, this raises a practical question: Is it possible to precisely engineer management concepts?

Accompanying a preoccupation with precision, Makowski (2021) consistently refers to "correct and accurate concepts" (p. 4), using CE "to solve conceptual challenges" (p. 5), producing the 'right concepts' (p. 10), and that CE is necessary "if the management field is to be treated as a truly scientific discipline" (p. 27). Arguably, the metaphor of engineering seems to be somewhat over-engineered in this instance. We prefer to see CE as an ameliorative device

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which can aid the development of 'good theory' rather than as a precise tool to engineer the

'right theory'. As we will demonstrate, this is far more than just a semantic point of difference.

DISTORTED CONCEPTS

Makowski (2021) tells us that "concepts are susceptible to deformations" (p. 13) and that

CE is a way to avoid or overcome 'conceptual difficulties' (p. 5), 'deficient concepts' (p. 14) and

'conceptual distortions' (p. 21). The borrowing of concepts from other fields by management

scholars is singled out for criticism as a typical source of conceptual transgression. The notion

of 'conceptual blending' (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002), which comes from cognitive linguistics,

is used to illustrate this problem. When originally developed, conceptual blending was

formulated as an everyday mental process of meaning-making involving an analogically-based

correspondence between two constructs to create a new synthetic insight. It is argued that when

this concept was imported by Oswick, Fleming and Hanlon (2011) into the field of management

it lost its original meaning and, as such, it "becomes a *normative* tool that allows them [i.e.

Oswick el al, 2011] to formulate direct recommendations in theory development" (Makowski,

2021:20-21). Hence, the concept is reconceptualized (or in Makowski's terms 'distorted').

Ironically, this sort of conceptual distortion seems to be exactly what Makowski (2021) does

himself in borrowing the concept of CE from philosophy. Albeit inadvertently, this is

acknowledged:

> "Philosophy has been studying it [CE] on the meta-theoretical level. Here, conceptual
> (re)engineering will be used as a normative tool to advance theory" (Makowski,
> 2021:16).
> Equally, the idea of 'conceptual competence' is put to work by Makowski (2021) in his

'management-friendly' version of CE in an applied, normative way which is contrary to the

original formulation provided in philosophy by Higginbotham (1984). The point here is not to

score points. It is to assert that what Makowski (2021) refers to as conceptual distortions and

deformations are in fact an inevitable and unavoidable facet of theory building and of the process

of appropriating concepts and putting them to practical use. The transgression of existing

concepts is in fact the very lifeblood of theory development. Failure to depart, at least to some

degree, from the original usage and meaning of a concept is likely to stifle theorising and

knowledge development and will result in the reproduction and replication of existing theories

rather than the formation of new ones.

SHARED AND SLIPPERY CONCEPTS

Ultimately, the value and utility of a management theory is not generally determined by

the extent to which it rigidly adheres to pre-existing, established way of framing the underlying

concepts it draws upon (i.e., scientific rigor). Rather, it is determined by the relevance and

resonance it has with a given community of scholars in terms of persuasiveness, plausibility and

applicability (Ketokivi et al., 2017). Meaningful theory development does not typically happen

in a single academic contribution; it arises over time out of debate and dialogue between scholars

which involves both deliberate and unintentional 'conceptual distortion' during the process.

Having multiple actors involved in theory building and in conceptual development

presents a problem for advocates of CE who are focused on the pursuit of precise concepts and

eschewing distortions. It also creates a significant challenge for the representation of a concept

which, although ignored by Makowski (2021), is widely acknowledged in the philosophy

literature where it is referred to as 'externalism' (Cappelen, 2018). In effect, externalism

suggests that the CE concept (i.e., the theorist's preferred version) is mediated by the extent to

which there is an alternative commonly used alternative conceptualization (i.e. the dominant

version). Put simply, it is hard to make a conceptionally engineered concept stick if there is a

popular alternative(s) within a particular scientific or practitioner community.

It is also difficult to undertake CE if there is wider conceptual contestation and/or

significant conceptual ambiguity within a given area of inquiry. Hence, of all the possible areas

of management theorizing that Makowski (2021) could use to demonstrate the veracity of CE, it

is interesting that he settled on critiquing work on routines, performativity, habits and skill (e.g.

Feldman & Pentland, 2003). Arguably, these are relatively uncontentious constructs in the

extant literature and they are also quasi-concrete phenomena (i.e., they are largely visible and

enacted behaviours). It is perhaps more difficult to apply CE to more contested and abstract

management concepts (such as power or identity).

TOWARDS CONCEPTUAL CARTOGRAPHY

So, what can we conclude about CE? And, what are its prospects for management

theorizing? To begin with, we think that CE has a place in theorizing if we use it as a reflective

and orienting tool to generate multiple ways of thinking and towards ameliorative ends rather

than as a prescriptive tool to uncover the precise meaning of a given concept. It can also be

enlisted to provide greater clarity around our personal use of a concept (i.e. knowing why we

frame a concept in the way that we do) which can enable us to be more erudite in our exposition

of our theories and more effective in conveying ideas during dialogue with other scholars.

Beyond this, and although a very popular and topical area of inquiry within philosophy,

CE remains a controversial and contested concept (Cappelen, 2018; Simion, 2018). Perhaps part

of the problem is etymological. The use of 'engineering' as a metaphor-based descriptor tends to

evoke notions of fixity, precision and correctness. The recent arrival of the idea of 'conceptual

cartography' (Smithson, 2020) in philosophy is arguably a far more apt metaphor for describing

what we are advocating because it encourages us to interrogate a concept within the 'landscape'

(i.e. the wider conceptual context) in which it is located. As Smithson (2020) puts it:

"Conceptual cartography is the project of investigating the necessity and contingency of the various features of conceptual schemes" (p.1). Hence, for us, conceptual cartography offers a potentially more fruitful way of re-engineering than Makowski's (2021) conception of conceptual engineering within the field of management.

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