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ABSTRACT

Defining and redefining theoretical concepts is an essential part of HRM research, but its role in the theorizing process is still poorly understood. While concept redefinition practices are often dismissed as a scholarly malpractice ('concept proliferation') by methodologists, we argue that concept redefinition enhances the health of a literature if one makes a theoretical contribution. To learn what this entails, we first explore the various philosophical motivations for why and how concept definitions are reformulated, changed, and improved. This culminates in a general framework and a vocabulary of ten different opportunities for making theoretical contributions via conceptual redefinition, using the concept of charisma as an illustrative case. From our analysis we induce that concept redefinition is both inevitable and necessary as a form of theory development and conceptual maintenance in many fields of inquiry. We discuss the implications of our framework as being a methodological 'repertoire' that, we hope, spurs both useful and novel concept redefinitions that help maintain a healthy HRM literature.

It is well known that theoretical concepts are the foundation of theory development and scientific progress in any field of inquiry (Cornelissen, Höllerer, & Seidl, 2021; Kaplan, 1964). Both scholars and journal editors have therefore stressed repeatedly that it is vital to discuss how we develop and define constructs in our joint academic discourse (e.g., Bacharach, 1989; Locke, 2003; Schwab, 1980; Suddaby, 2010; Wacker, 2004; Whetten, 2002). In this piece, we wish to evoke such a meta-theoretical discussion in the field of HRM. A discussion such as this is called for because the meaning of theoretical concepts is notoriously slippery. Consider a novice researcher in the HRM field who is interested in learning more about the role of culture and leader charisma in explaining organizational effectiveness. S/he will quickly encounter more than 50 definitions of 'culture' (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2000; Denison, 1996), at least 45 definitions of 'charisma' (Antonakis, Bastardo, Jacquart, & Shamir, 2016) and 30 definitions of effectiveness (Hirsch & Levin, 1999; Miller, Washburn, & Glick, 2013). Further reading will suggest that in each of these literatures seminal

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definitions have branched out into different, sometimes even contradictory meanings. The concepts of interest have each acquired a dynamic of their own and have come to be attached to a myriad of different theories and connotations that, in many instances, can be far removed from the conceptualization of their originators (Astley & Zammuto, 1992; Benders & Van Veen, 2001a, 2001b; Giroux, 2006; Thompson, 2011). Such conceptual turns have been documented in HRM literatures on empowerment (Bartunek & Spreitzer, 2006), emotional intelligence (Locke, 2005), identity (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000), extra-role behavior (Van Dyne, Cummings, and Parks (1995), or organizational commitment (Solinger, Van Olffen, & Roe, 2008), and the list goes on. Even for experts it then becomes hard to oversee the state of knowledge around the subject matter and to understand what needs to be done to advance knowledge around a particular topic area.

While the practice of redefining concepts is ubiquitous in our field, it is also highly controversial. Many scholars and methodologists within the field of HRM, for instance, reject acts of redefinition as a scholarly malpractice, as efforts that hinder the buildup of a coherent paradigm and evidence base. The construct validity literature, for instance, is a prescriptive literature which emphasizes the technicalities of measurement based on solid definitions and the aim of establishing stable nomological networks (e.g., Bacharach, 1989; Bagozzi, Yi, & Phillips, 1991; Borsboom, Mellenbergh, & Van Heerden, 2004; Schwab, 1980). This literature generally privileges a definite meaning of a single concept, and argues for a cumulative buildup of knowledge based on that concept's strict meaning. The guiding assumption here is that any development that digresses from this ideal, inevitably dilutes the connection between concepts and their nomological networks and between concepts and their established measures. Furthermore, many scholars are critical toward the proliferation of concepts because adding new meanings without pruning the literature is considered unhealthy, violates the principle of parsimony, and introduces problems of empirical redundancy (Shaffer, DeGeest, & Li, 2016). Instead, they argue, theory-reducing contributions should be valued just as highly as theory-enhancing or expanding ones (Banks, Gooty, Ross, Williams, & Harrington, 2018; Gray & Cooper, 2010).

We would retort, however, that while confusing to a non-expert, the academic debate in the field of HRM is as lively as it can be, and the theoretical ground for novel contributions remains rich and fertile; given the possibilities for redefinition, a broad range of scholars remain inspired as they continue to discover new aspects to HRM phenomena and advance theorizing by covering new, additional facets through concept redefinition (see Astley & Zammuto, 1992). This is a less heard, but important alternative position on this issue and one that we will advocate in this piece. In our view, concept redefinition is an inevitable result of the HRM literature being an 'umbrella' that hosts scholars from different backgrounds and theoretical traditions who each rework and redefine HRM concepts in order to make them fit for purpose. Seen from this perspective, concept redefinitions are not inherently dangerous, but have a mixed bag of implications for a literature. Certainly, we agree that one should discourage any proliferation of sloppy, arbitrary, or empirically redundant redefinitions of HRM concepts (e.g., Banks et al., 2018; Gray & Cooper, 2010; Locke, 2005). While we thus acknowledge the presence of negative outgrowths of redefinition practices, we also contend that the controversy might subside if we would enhance our understanding of the role that concept redefinitions can play in advancing the theorizing process (e.g., Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007; Cornelissen & Durand, 2014; Welch, Rumyantseva, & Hewerdine, 2016).

In particular, concept redefinition is not a form concept proliferation, we argue, if one makes a *theoretical contribution* in doing so. Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan (2007), for instance, demonstrate that within the *Academy of Management Journal* the number of articles that build theory by defining new concepts or revising existing ones increased significantly in the 1990s and early 2000s, making it one of the most important types of theoretical contributions to this journal. If this is the case, the process that leads to such scholarly contributions should not be discouraged out of a misguided fear of 'concept proliferation'. Therefore, we propose an approach to HRM scholarship that is open to the continuous reshaping (rather than stagnating) through the differential use of concepts in a scholarly field of inquiry.

What is not clear in this research ideal, however, is specifically *how* theoretical contributions can be made via such forms of conceptual analysis. We take that turn here by arguing that, as highlighted above, the HRM literature is an open playground that has proven fertile ground for scholars with different theoretical interests (Cornelissen et al., 2021). We build a framework that explains at a meta-theoretical level why and how HRM concepts more generally keep being redefined, and that classifies ten different kinds of redefinitions and explain their possibilities for making a theoretical contribution. We will use the literature on charisma as an illustrative case mainly because it constitutes a core and well-documented concept in the HRM literature.

Our paper contributes to the HRM literature in three ways. *First*, our framework explains why competing definitions can (and arguably even *should*) persist as a result of epistemological tensions that are, along with cross-disciplinary exchange, inherent in the research endeavor. We do this by highlighting what these tensions entail and by showing why, because of these tensions, redefinitions are inevitable. This is a meta-theoretical perspective that is relatively unfamiliar to the HRM audience but is a contribution which chimes with Suddaby (2010, p. 355) who stressed the need for a better understanding of "how concepts are created and used in the research process" (see also Bort & Kieser, 2011). *Second*, while valuable studies cogently situate conceptual analysis as part of the theorizing process (e.g., Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2016), and specify how the formulation of a given definition can be informed by different philosophical research perspectives on research (e.g. realist and constructivist perspectives), their approach did not focus systematically on how researchers can make theoretical contributions and cause meaning shifts via distinct types of conceptual redefinitions – which is our main focus here. To wit, our framework exposes ten typical ways in which redefinitions can contribute to HRM theory. With this framework, scholars from different research traditions gain a vocabulary and a repertoire to better recognize opportunities for offering theoretical contributions and, in doing so, advance HRM theory. *Third*, our framework offers an alternative research ideal regarding how researchers from different backgrounds can use concept redefinition as part of an exercise of 'disciplined imagination' (Weick, 1989) so as to enhance the likelihood of progressing academic knowledge of HRM concepts.

In what follows, we first explicate the varying importance of theory in the conceptualization process and tensions inherent to using concepts as forms of conceptual inquiry. Using the core HRM concept of charisma as a running example, we then elucidate ten typical

redefinition practices that have proven to be especially impactful in the process of theorizing around charisma. In our writing, we stress how each of these redefinition types result from (1) epistemological tensions and (2) the presence of multiple research traditions within the field of HRM. We then elucidate how the Weick (1989) notion of ‘disciplined imagination’ can help us understand how to harness such redefinitions as part of the theorizing process and as ways to maintain the health and vitality of a literature.

1. Why meaning shifts happen

1.1. A general philosophy of conceptual inquiry

A ‘concept’ is a cognitive symbol that specifies the features, attributes, or characteristics of a phenomenon in the real or phenomenological world (Podsakoff et al., 2016, p. 3). While the terms ‘concept’ and ‘construct’ are often used interchangeably, a concept is any linguistic symbol that refers to a certain object, or phenomenon. A construct, however, is a particular type of concept, because its meaning is “constructed” specifically for scientific investigation (e.g., a multi-factor approach to leadership). Here we use the more inclusive term concept rather than construct and to highlight the role of concepts in the theorizing process. In general philosophy, conceptual analysis is the art of carefully describing the meanings of linguistic expressions (Carnap, 1956), typically by finding a close analogy between a concept and its key attributes (e.g., “water as H₂O”; Jackson, 1998). This is typically done by assessing via counter-factual analysis the possible worlds that (do not) fall under certain concept descriptions (Bishop, 1992). Ideally, one then arrives at a finite set of attributes that are each necessary and as a set sufficient to define the subject matter (Carnap, 1956). While such an a priori and universal ideal for concept definition may be achievable for some of the physical sciences, philosophers have since (e.g., Quine, Putnam, Wittgenstein) come to understand that this ideal is rarely, if ever achieved elsewhere. In fact, the degree to which the meaning of a concept can be fixed a priori depends on the degree to which concepts in use are abstract, language-based, theoretical, and contextual (Laurence & Margolis, 2003). HRM concepts like ‘organizational citizenship behavior’, ‘calling’, or ‘charisma’ are abstract concepts, which means that they are less easily imagined (McDonough, Song, Pasek, Golinkoff, & Lannon, 2012), while their attributes are (at least in part) dependent on how the concepts are used in a language community. Neuro-linguistic studies show, for instance, that concrete concepts are conceived of via perceptual experiences, while abstract concepts rely on linguistic experiences (Bolegnesi & Steen, 2019). If the understanding of abstract concepts is mainly based on how we deal with them in language, then concept meaning becomes dependent on the inherently dynamic nature of natural language. It is well-known in the field of linguistics (e.g., lexicography) that the definitions given to a concept inevitably leads to competing definitions with different mental images attached to it, and that a text, co-text, context, and socio-cultural environments within which concepts are used are critical for understanding their evolving meaning and use (Bentein, 2019; Cook-Gumperz, 2006; Haspelmath, 2009). In effect, in the field of lexicography, concept redefinition is not treated as a scholarly malpractice, but treated as a natural aspect of language use and understanding.

The role of theory. Moreover, the more abstract a concept is, the more equivocal it becomes. Therefore, abstract concepts become dependent on our perception and classification of typified activities and relationships in which it participates – in other words, concept meaning depends on the presupposed *theories* that are associated with them (Goertz, 2006). Therefore, it is commonly known in our HRM field that the concepts we are dealing with are theoretical entities (Podsakoff et al., 2016). Concept definition is, thus, first and foremost a mode of theorizing, that is, a specific form of theorizing widely known as a process of ‘conceptualizing’ (Cornelissen et al., 2021). Although concepts in and of themselves do not qualify as theory (Sutton & Staw, 1995), they do form the building blocks of a theory. That is, theories often outline a generative mechanism or process which explains why and how certain *concepts* are related (Bacharach, 1989; Goertz, 2006). Theories may thus directly impact the content of concept definition where a theoretical perspective determines how we conceive of a phenomenon. Indeed, concept definitions in the classical Aristotelian sense consist of a ‘genus’ (i.e., the higher-order theoretical category to which a concept belongs) and a set of attributes (see also Bishop, 1992; Podsakoff et al., 2016; Welch et al., 2016). For instance, democracy can be defined as a system of government (genus) by the whole population or all the eligible members of a state, typically through elected representatives (attributes). Theories directly determine the ‘genus’ and (albeit less directly) the attribute set of a concept. For instance, if charisma is redefined from a role theory perspective, charisma becomes a particular form of “role play” (i.e., genus). As a result, the attribute set of charisma would then be partly altered in line with dramaturgical theory (see Gardner & Avolio, 1998; Sharma & Grant, 2011). Yet, given that there are many theories that can be plausibly associated with a concept, and the theories are themselves open to revision and empirical investigation, then concept definition must inevitably be subject to change, and even when concepts are defined in a precise way (Laurence & Margolis, 2003).

The role of tradition. Further, and adding to the notion that the understanding of abstract concepts is language-based, Wittgenstein famously concluded that “*meaning is use*”: what a word means to an audience depends on how it is expressed, the context in which it is expressed, and hence its full meaning cannot be understood outside of such a language game (Astley & Zammuto, 1992). Regardless of the H₂O substance of water, the utterance: “Water!” could mean an expression of extreme thirst, an order, a request, or as an answer to a question. Therefore, the concepts in use must resonate with how a particular community (e.g., a research tradition within the HRM field) typically uses and understands them (Astley, 1985). Within the field of HRM, the most relevant communities are *research traditions*, which provides a set of research practices, methods and training that guides a group of researchers in their sensemaking and constrains the available options for theorizing so that those in the same tradition tend to define concepts in similar ways (Feyerabend, 1975). As a result of tradition, “different observers tend to apply favored theoretical perspectives in a more or less exclusive manner” (Astley, 1985, p. 500). Or in Feyerabend (1975, p. 11) words, a scholar’s “imagination is restrained, and even language ceases to be his own”. This assumption resonates with sociological observations on the practice of research, namely that knowledge and scholarship are social phenomena that to some extent center around – and differ according to – specific scholarly

traditions in which researchers are embedded through training and socialization (Astley & Zammuto, 1992; Feyerabend, 1975; McKinley, Mone, & Moon, 1999). What we define as “research traditions” are thus distinct sets of assumptions and methodological practices that groups of researchers share regarding how concepts are to be defined. These traditions embody distinct methodological approaches to conceptual inquiry; yet, as we will illustrate, their distinctions may also provide fertile ground for conceptual innovation and advances in measurement for those who are able to maneuver in between traditions (Furnari, 2014).

We specify three common traditions in management research with their own conventions and methodologies in terms of how concepts are defined and analyzed. These traditions originate from distinct philosophy of science assumptions on how objects are understood (i.e., rationalism, empiricism, and constructionism, respectively). Taken together, these traditions can be viewed as ranging on a continuum from metaphysical to empirical research environments (see Alexander, 1983, Vol I; Kuhn, 1970). Table 1 exposes the distinctions between these traditions, with examples from the literature on charisma.

A ‘rationalist’ definition: concepts as constitutive of theory. Rationalism holds that the mind is capable of representing the essential meaning of a phenomenon in a perfect manner and through logical reasoning only (Giere, 1988). Although few contemporary scientists would perhaps adopt this extreme position, many of them hold the view that in principle a ‘concept’ serves as an essential mediator between theory and the measurement of real-world data (Bacharach, 1989; Giere, 1988; Van de Ven, 2007).

As discussed above, in the rationalist tradition, definitions originate from, and are specified, according to *one particular* theoretical perspective (McKelvey, 2002). For example, the concept of charisma has been defined as attributions from fellow group members (based on ‘attribution theory’; Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985); if this theoretical definition is used, it makes sense to measure charisma through peer or followers’ perceptions of a focal person’s charisma. The rationalist tradition also implies that, in a literature, there can be different redefinitions and measures of charisma stemming from different theoretical ‘schools’ (e.g., definitions and their related measures based on trait theory, social contagion theory, psychodynamic theory, role theory, etcetera). Such successive redefinitions are each assumed to improve the clarity of the concept of charisma by embedding it in an existing literature, and thus within the broader web of relationships with other concepts of interest to researchers in that field (e.g., antecedents, consequents, concurrent phenomena). Exposing novel conceptual content, when done in this way, is therefore considered an important theoretical contribution (Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007; Cornelissen & Durand, 2014). The downside of this approach is that it can easily lead to a proliferation of theoretical definitions. Taken to its extreme, a concept can have as many definitions as there are theories. Therefore, it is worth looking at alternative philosophy of science of approaches that pay closer attention to the footing of a concept in the empirical world.


An ‘empiricist’ definition: things are what they do. In the empiricist philosophy of science, one emphasizes a concept’s operations in the real world; that is, one’s observational categories are dictated by processes, activities or operations (characteristic of a concept) which one can observe. In other words, the empiricist base assumption is that things are what they *do* (Bridgman, 1959). This assumption is line with the work of American pragmatists like Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) and John Dewey (1859–1952) who, among others, emphasized the fact that concepts must have some form of agency (and effects) for them to be of relevance. Based on this base assumption, a researcher needs to find a certain *classification* of behaviors or operations which capture what a concept ‘does’ so that it can be observed. Theory still is important for this approach to concept definition but only insofar as it dictates which observational categories should be used (Roskam, 1989). An example comes from Antonakis, Fenley, and Liechti (2011), who operationally defined charisma in terms of ‘charismatic leader tactics’ which classify leader signaling behaviors into emotion-laden (rhetorical delivery), value-laden (rhetorical content), and symbolic forms of communication (e.g., framing). The conceptual emphasis in this way of defining things is on the empirical classification scheme and arguably less on the theoretical framing of the concept’s definition. Other ‘empiricist’ approaches to concept definition place even less emphasis on theory. Likewise, many mathematically inclined scholarly traditions (e.g., in economics) prefer to describe the world by means of formal laws and algorithms only. A concept then plays the role of a ‘parameter’ in a deterministic model which means that it needs to be formulated in precise and empirically traceable way. Think, for instance, of charisma being defined by means of a social network parameter of ‘network centrality’ (Balkundi, Kilduff, & Harrison, 2011). Here, while theory remains important to arrive at predictive validity, theory is comparatively less important in determining the definition’s usefulness; its ability to predict relevant outcomes is more important. Even further down this continuum we find approaches to concept definition mainly emphasizing favorable psychometric properties (i.e., covariance structures) and the predictive validity of a classification scheme. Bass and Avolio (1990) approach to charisma in the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (the MLQ) is an example of the latter. Because of their psychometric strengths and a wealth of prior empirical findings, such approaches to concept definition often tend to persist and despite any theoretical weaknesses such definitions might have (e.g., Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013).

A constructionist definition: things are whatever people say they are. Unlike the previous two approaches, which both assign meaning to objects in a way that is ‘independent’ of the subject and the researcher, the constructionist philosophy¹ emphasizes that a concept’s meaning is given by whatever people in a given context and community say it is (Astley & Zammuto, 1992; Gergen, 1999). This tradition thus brings in the voice of the subjects being studied, with their subjective interpretations and language in a particular setting (however varied) featuring as the basis for a concept definition. Such individual and collective interpretations of a phenomenon are also likely to vary across cultural contexts and time, and the constructionist tradition thus also assumes that a concept definition is bound to change across time and space (Gergen, 1999).

¹ We realize that there are different traditions of social constructionist research (Cunliffe, 2008). Our focus here is on the general premise across many of these traditions that concepts are socially constructed, with their use and meaning being contingent on the choices and preferences of a linguistic community at a particular point in time.

Table 1

Three design traditions for conceptualization in management literature.

Research tradition	Description	Philosophical origin	Mode of Inquiry (Alexander, 1983; Kuhn, 1970)	Examples from definitions of the 'charisma' construct
1. Rationalist tradition	Meaning specifies to one particular theoretical perspective only; Concept as [theory]	<i>Rationalism</i>	Metaphysical inquiry; formality	Definitions of charisma based on role theory, trait theory, attribution theory, emotional contagion theory, social identity theory, network theory
2. Empiricist tradition	A concept is what it 'does'	<i>Empiricism</i>		Charisma as signaling leadership ability via charismatic leader tactics (Antonakis et al., 2011, 2016)
3. Constructionist tradition	A concept is whatever people say it is.	<i>Constructionism</i>	Empirical inquiry/Experience	Charisma means whatever the OB community wants it to mean: a hero (Calas, 1993; Khurana, 2002; Treat, 2004). Charisma as the embodiment of the Divine (e.g., Reed, 2013; Treat, 2004)

In a re-reading of Weber (1947) original work, for instance, Calas (1993) critically discussed the tendency of OB scholars (as a language community) to define charisma only in terms of 'wild' and heroic elements and to ignore the 'unexciting' elements of Weber's work on charisma (i.e., the routinization, institutionalization, and the disenchantment of charisma). Thus, Calas illuminated the fact that charisma is practically defined by whatever a particular community wants it to mean – such as in the case of the image of a superhero. What is talked about as charismatic is accordingly the outcome of the present preoccupations and aspirations of a particular community (see also Khurana, 2002).

1.2. Two mechanisms behind meaning shifts

Based on the crucial role of both theory and research traditions in conceptual inquiry, we argue that there are both epistemological tensions and socio-contextual dynamics (i.e., exchange between research traditions) that explain the occurrence of meaning shifts.

Mechanism 1: epistemological tensions. Epistemologically, the inherent tensions endemic to conceptual inquiry explain why one single definition can hardly satisfy all requirements at the same time. A concept definition is generally not robust and sustainable if it remains either universal or either particular all the time; nor is it sustainable if a concept definition remains either formal or based on empirical perception. This is why definitions are always plausibly subject to theoretical revision and it is often almost impossible to "fix" conceptual meaning in a discrete manner.

In fact, we see at least *two* dualities that produce inherent pressures that motivate concept redefinition. Dualities are opposites that coexist in a single system (Smith & Lewis, 2011). The first duality, as discussed above, is rooted in the classic distinction between metaphysical and empirical approaches to conceptual inquiry (Alexander, 1983; Kuhn, 1970; Hempel, 1965). At this formal, theory-driven end of the duality, a concept's meaning is dictated by one's particular theory. Concepts are formally defined which implies allowing concept definitions to be influenced by theory, objectivity, standardization, and a strict confinement of interpretation to a pre-set theoretical structure. At the opposite extreme, concepts are not believed to bear any inherent meaning beyond the meaning assigned to them through *experience*, which is bound to vary from context to context (Gergen, 1999; Ketokivi & Mantere, 2010; Thompson, 2011). This end of the continuum can be seen as an open-ended, discovery-oriented approach to conceptual inquiry. This is the position that the constructionist tradition tends to take (see Fig. 1). Here, a concept definition is more fluid because one allows concept definitions to be shaped by activity, experience, (social) context, and time, which usually implies an openness to multiple possible interpretations and shifts in meaning. These different philosophical base assumptions have a rather direct impact on the contents of concept definitions.

The second duality along which a concept's meaning can vary is a concept's intended scope: the universality-particularity distinction (McGrath, 1982). Universality refers to a defined term's 'breadth' (Osigweh, 1989), the meaningful applicability and relevance of a concept across situations and boundaries (e.g., temporal boundaries, spatial boundaries, theoretical boundaries, contextual boundaries, and so forth). Particularity refers to the opposite; a term's meaningfulness, accuracy and relevance for specific occasions and within specifically bounded contexts. This is another classic duality in conceptualization which has been given different names, such as universal versus observational (Hempel, 1965; Kaplan, 1964), a resilient 'core' concept versus its hard, 'empirical' elements (Law, Wong, & Mobley, 1998), and generality versus accuracy (Bagozzi & Edwards, 1998; Bagozzi, Yi and Phillips, 1991; Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012; Langley, 1999; Weick, 1999). Although each of these labels differs in emphasis, it nonetheless suggests that researchers have recognized the relevance of the universality-particularity duality in the definition of concepts.

These two dualities generally help in positioning, clarifying, and thus understanding, the roles and functions of concept definitions. Weick (1999) famously referred in this respect to Thorngate's trade-off between generality, simplicity and accuracy in producing theories and defining concepts. We similarly assume here a trade-off between concept definitions that highlight formality (theory-driven inquiry) versus experience (data-driven inquiry), and breadth (universality) versus accuracy (particularity). *Both* formality (e. g., theory) *and* experience (e.g., data) are needed for grasping a concept's nature because a definition without formality (i.e., devoid of a formal logic that applies across situations) is anecdotal, overly relativistic, and unnecessarily complex. On the other hand, an overly

A General Overview of Redefinition Practices

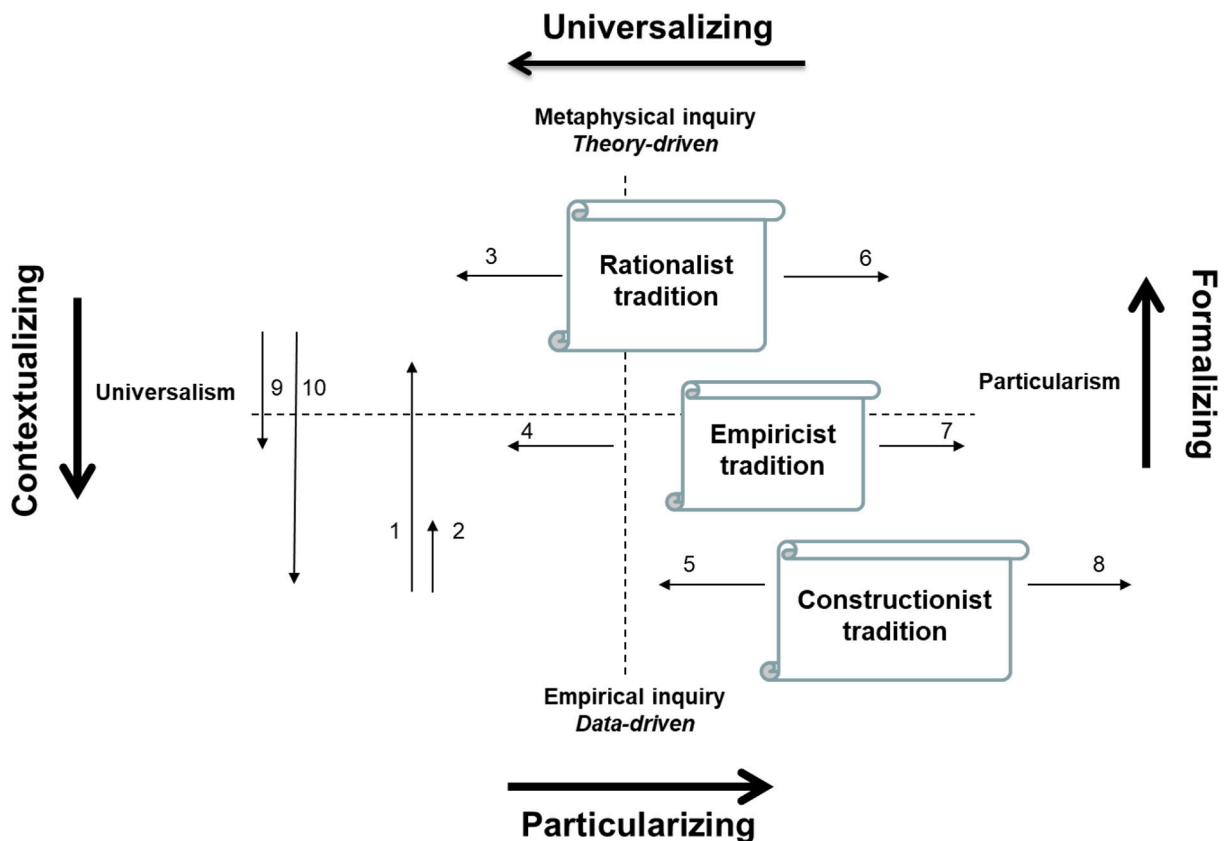


Fig. 1. A general overview of redefinition practices.

Note: 1 = theorizing; 2 = standardizing; 3 = synthesizing; 4 = lumping; 5 = stretching; 6 = refocusing; 7 = simplifying; 8 = relocating; 9 = processifying; 10 = subjectifying.

formal definition is reductionist in nature as the empirical reality around a concept becomes distorted and compressed (i.e., one pretends as if a specific theory equals the entire phenomenological domain). Given the fact that these tensions exist, it should come as no surprise that different research traditions occupy distinct positions on this spectrum.

Mechanism #2: the role of research traditions. Socially, meaning shifts are explained by the appropriation of concepts by new research traditions. From research on linguistics and the diffusion of ideas we know that as soon as concepts are introduced as loanwords into new disciplines (Haspelmath, 2009; Hua, Harvey, & Rietzschel, 2022), members of the new discipline tend to reinterpret them according to existing theoretical frames, research practices and methods (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Fiss & Hirsch, 2005; Benders & Van Veen, 2001a, 2001b; Giroux, 2006). For example, Bartunek and Spreitzer (2006) observed that as soon as the HRM construct of empowerment was introduced in the management literature in the 1990s, the conceptual emphasis on employee productivity became much more prominent (see also Giroux & Taylor, 2002; Scarbrough & Swan, 2001). At the same time, however, concepts retain much of the meanings which they had earlier (Bartunek & Spreitzer, 2006). The end result of such interdisciplinary movement between design traditions, then, is a meaning shift of the concept. As suggested, research traditions can be placed on a continuum of theory- versus data-driven in conceptual analysis. Placing traditions in this way helps us understand why different definitions of the same HRM concept persist side-by-side. They do partly because each approach to concept definition has its own strengths and weaknesses and takes its own position in classic trade-offs, or dualities, within the scientific endeavor.

Taken together, changes in concept definition can be described, we suggest, on a two-dimensional map where methodological backgrounds occupy different positions relative to the mentioned dualities of concept design. In Fig. 1 we furthermore see four major directions of concept redefinition: formalization (moving upwards), universalization (moving to the left), particularization (to the right), and contextualization (moving downwards).

Toward a framework of meaning shifts. According to the abovementioned differences in research traditions, the motivations for redefining concepts will differ as well in accordance with the research tradition of a researcher (see Table 2, for an overview). After all, each position on the two continua relates to another philosophy of science tradition that make different assumptions on what makes for scientific progress. For example, one can redefine a concept in a more universal way by arguing that one needs more of a synthesis of

Table 2
Type, motivation, and direction of redefinition practices.

Type of redefinition	Motivation for redefinition	Direction of redefinition	Documented changes in the definition of charisma
1. <i>Theorization</i> : Articulate meaning based on one theoretical perspective	Usefulness: increase predictability; Increase learning and accumulation; allow quantitative comparative research (e.g., House, 1977) Novelty: learn something new about charisma by placing it in a new set of theoretical relationships.	Formalizing	Role play (Gardner & Avolio, 1998), trait configurations (Judge, Piccolo, & Kosalka, 2009), follower attributions (Meindl et al., 1985), emotional contagion (Erez et al., 2008), follower social identity (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993) as charisma
2. <i>Standardization</i> : Streamline methods/ measuring	Usefulness: increase testability and knowledge accumulation	Formalizing	The Bass and Avolio (1990) Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (the MLQ test) as charisma. The MLQ assumed a life of its own and implicitly became the charisma concept
3. <i>Synthesizing</i> : Connect, combine, blend multiple theoretical definitions	Usefulness: Enhance wider appeal and mutual learning	Universalizing	Integrative and blended theories/models of charisma (e.g. Klein & House, 1995; Shamir et al., 1993).
4. <i>Lumping</i> : connect different operational definitions under a summative header	Usefulness: Comparative description and concept validation; better prediction (Bass, 1990b; Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012).	Universalizing	Tests of the full-range model (Bass, 1990b): Charismatic-transformational vs. transactional and laissez-faire leadership measures as proxy for 'good'/'bad', effective/ineffective leadership
5. <i>Stretching</i> : a concept's content domain becomes more encompassing	Usefulness: make concepts more encompassing to widen their appeal	Universalizing	Broadening of the charisma term to the degree of 'vulgarization' (e.g. assigning charismatic qualities to even inanimate objects: a 'charismatic' perfume)
6. <i>Refocusing</i> : Narrow a concept's meaning to one theoretical view; divest of unwanted meanings	Usefulness: cleanup to prevent concept from wearing out (Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013) Novelty: a strong critique where one theoretical interpretation is favored above others	Particularizing	Van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) – critique of 'behavioral' conceptions of charisma (the MLQ, in particular) in favor of more specific, theory-derived sub-phenomena.
7. <i>Simplifying</i> : Narrowing meaning to a few observable actions that characterize the concept	Novelty: Improve concept clarity, Enhance parsimony/ Come up with interesting counterfactual findings	Particularizing	Charisma as value-based, emotion-based, and symbolic leader signaling (Antonakis et al., 2016). A study of charismatic leadership tactics flows from this definition.
8. <i>Relocating</i> : Placing the concept in a new context	Novelty: Look for new meaning. Critically re-assess existing meanings	Particularizing	Tracking charismatic leaders across different managerial settings (Roberts, 1985; Roberts & Bradley, 1988)
9. <i>Processification</i> : concepts as processes (dynamic) rather than things (fixed)	Novelty: Improve a concept's ability to account for change and contextual variability	Contextualizing	Waxing and waning of charisma across time and context (Shamir, 2011; Shamir & Howell, 1999). Coupled interactions between leaders and followers produce an emergent state of charisma (Gardner & Avolio, 1998; Sy et al., 2018)
10. <i>Subjectification</i> : Advocate the role of enactment and historical imprints in how meaning is produced.	Novelty: Emphasize enactment, complexity, subjective involvement, history, and context.	Contextualizing	Neo-Weberian (Jermier, 1993): Performative models of charisma, where charismatic agents come to embody elements of the Divine (transcendental notions such as inspiration, God, and redemption) (e.g., Reed, 2013; Treat, 2004).

theoretical perspectives (a motivation that is consistent with a rationalist tradition at the theory-driven end of the spectrum) or to explore empirical commonalities of similar measures of the same concept (a motivation that is consistent with the empiricist assumption in the middle of the spectrum). Although the direction of redefinition is the same (i.e., universalization), the motivation for redefinition and consequences for the shifted meaning of the concept in the literature is quite different.

With the three basic methodological traditions and an assumption of full academic freedom in mind, we logically derive that there must be ten basic concept redefinition shifts (see Fig. 1): three lateral, disciplinary moves toward greater universality (emanating from within rationalist, empiricist, and constructionist traditions, respectively), plus lateral, disciplinary shifts toward greater particularity (again, emanating from within rationalist, empiricist, and constructionist traditions, respectively). On top of these 6 lateral shifts, there are also four cross-disciplinary shifts that happen between traditions on the vertical (theory-driven vs data-driven) axis. Two shifts toward greater formality (one toward empiricism and one toward rationalism on the receiving end), and two opposite shifts toward greater empirical grounding in context (one toward empiricism and one toward constructionism on the receiving end). After all, it is the research tradition on the receiving end that ultimately reworks the concept into a new meaning. This amounts to a total of ten typical practices of concept redefinition as defined and summarized in Table 2, depicted in Fig. 1, and discussed in further detail below.

2. How meaning shift happens: the ten typical practices of concept redefinition explained

To illustrate how concept redefinition practices can serve as vehicles for theoretical contributions, we will use the case of charisma as an example. The literature on leadership and charisma is a traditional concept within the study HRM (Paauwe and Boon, 2018;

Johnson & Szamosi, 2018), and especially suitable for illustration purposes considering how slippery the meaning of this concept has proven to be. Even after seven decades of research scholars still grapple with understanding what ‘charisma’ really means (Antonakis et al., 2016; Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). In Weber (1947) original definition, a charismatic individual was set apart from ordinary group members and endowed with almost supernatural qualities – charisma as ‘*charis*’, that is, a ‘gift.’ Since then, the charisma concept has been reworked and redefined many times, and to such an extent that all the redefinition practices we derived can be described using illustrative examples from this literature.

2.1. Redefinitions toward formalization

The first practice of concept redefinition is called formalization, where a concept is re-defined in light of an already existing theoretical structure, i.e., [theory] as charisma. Formalization can be achieved through multiple forms of modeling (Hartmann & Frigg, 2012; McKelvey, 2002; Whetten, 2002); the ones we will discuss are theorization (i.e., [theory] as charisma) and standardization (i.e., [test] or [parameter] as charisma).

#1: Theorizing. Theories are useful tools that help simplify an otherwise chaotic string of observations (Ketokivi & Mantere, 2010). As argued above, theorizing helps focus a learner’s attention on how a phenomenon fits a larger category of theoretical ideas (the genus) and then recognize certain prespecified attributes (e.g., ‘attribution’ as charisma). Consider, for instance, Weber (1947, p. 358) seminal definition where charisma is “*a certain quality of individual personality, by virtue of which he or she is set apart from ordinary group members and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader*”. This definition was unsatisfactory to many scholars not at home in the constructionist tradition because it is not suitable for deductive hypothesis testing and also rather imprecise as to which mechanism is at work. House (1977) redefinition of charisma retained some of Weber’s meanings by focusing on follower perceptions, but he also redirected research attention to testable propositions around more observable processes (Yukl, 1993). Namely, House (1977) specified what makes charismatic leaders extraordinary (need for power, strong conviction, self-confidence), which self-presentation behaviors this may involve, and how follower perceptions are affected by them in particular conducive situations. In one of the theorizations following House (1977), charisma was translated into a phenomenon with extraordinary motivational effects on followers based on self-concept theory (Shamir et al., 1993). Many other scholars followed House’s move toward increased theorization of the charisma concept. These include theoretical idealizations based on either trait theory (e.g., House & Howell, 1992), social contagion theory (e.g., Erez, Misangyi, Johnson, LePine, & Halvorsen, 2008; Sy, Horton, & Riggio, 2018), attribution theory (e.g., Meindl et al., 1985), or role theory (Gardner & Avolio, 1998). These theorizations allowed a more consistent flow of empirical research on charisma because they redefined it from a superhuman quality witnessed only in specific social contexts to something which may be experienced in everyday situations (Yukl, 1993). This move also satisfied the scholarly need for theoretical novelty and contribution, as new theoretical assumptions were integrated into the understanding of the charisma concept.

#2: Standardizing. Another type of formalization happens when a measure implicitly becomes the concept itself (Schimmack, 2010). For example, the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (the MLQ) which clusters two broad sets of charismatic behaviors, namely *idealized influence* (conveying a strong sense of purpose and instilling pride, respect, trust in followers) and *inspirational motivation* (communicating a strong vision and setting high performance expectations). Because of the widespread appeal of the MLQ, knowledge was able to accumulate around what charisma *does* to followers. Note that the latter emphasis on observable activity fits comfortably with the operationalist method. The MLQ successfully streamlined a diffuse set of observational accounts of charismatic leaders into a more focused debate (Bryman, 2004) to the degree that “*the dominance of the MLQ in charismatic-transformational leadership research means that to a substantial degree, charismatic-transformational leadership is de facto defined as what the MLQ measures*” (Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013, p. 5). The case of the MLQ measure of charisma does not stand alone. In the case of the Positive and Negative Affectivity (personality) concepts, Schimmack (2010, p. 243) similarly observed that measures of these two concepts assumed a life their own and gradually became the concept. Standardization is often also motivated by the need for cross-textual consistency, while also making concepts observable and testable.

2.2. Redefinitions toward universalization

The most natural type of redefinition is that of universalization; the combining of theoretical, empirical, and/or subjective facets into a single, universal concept definition. Across all three research traditions universalization shifts may occur. Universalization comes in three different forms: synthesizing, lumping, and stretching, resulting from the integration of theories, the integration of operational measures, and integration by means of practical application.

#3: Synthesizing. The practice of synthesizing is an effort to combine theoretical definitions to cover a larger set of meanings (Bass, 1990a, p. 18). In the charisma literature, it is often stated that researchers need to provide more integrative models which includes a fusion of multiple theoretical elements (e.g., Avolio, 2007; Yukl, 2002). Klein and House (1995) integrated trait-based, follower-interaction based, and context-based theories of charisma by using a fire metaphor. For a fire to burn one needs (a) a spark which stands for an agent with charismatic traits, (b) flammable material which stands for followers who are open to charisma, and (c) oxygen which stands for a conducive environment. For a fire to burn, these elements do not work separately, rather they *interact*. The expected gains of this universalization move is that charisma may gain strength and relevance in accounting for real-life organizational problems (Hirsch & Levin, 1999). For example, by merging trait-based, follower interaction based, and contingency based theories, Klein and House (1995) were able to form predictions regarding the degree to which perceptions of charisma might be

shared in a group – hypotheses which are more difficult to formulate with a singular theory.

#4: Lumping. In a piece on the relative merits of broad versus specific concepts, Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller (2012) stated that some researchers tend to favor broad and encompassing concepts ('lumpers') while other favor specific concepts ('splitters'). When lumping, scholars pull together different operational measures to form an umbrella which "loosely encompasses a set of diverse phenomena" (Hirsch & Levin, 1999, p. 200). There are recognizable justifications for 'lumping': it is a well-known best practice in experimental psychology – the home base of the empiricism tradition. In the early 1950s Boring (1953, p. 222) described the practice of lumping as follows: "As long as a new concept has only the single operational definition that it received at birth, it is just a concept. When it gets two alternative operational definitions, it is beginning to be validated. When the defining operations, because of proven correlations, are many, then it becomes reified." Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller (2012) argue that lumping is useful to discover empirical overlap in different measures of the same phenomenon. This often helps in improving a concept's predictive power (see e.g., Harrison, Newman, & Roth, 2006).

The charisma literature has also witnessed quite an influential instance of lumping in the full-range model of leadership (e.g., Bass, 1990a, Bass, 1990b) leading to recognizable 'styles' of leadership (Alvesson, 2020). In the full range model of leadership, charismatic leadership has comparable predictive relations with organizational measures of leader effectiveness, similar to transformational leadership (corrected r 's = 0.35 for charisma, 0.28 for individualized consideration, and 0.26 for intellectual stimulation; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996). The full-range model of leadership pulls together charismatic and transformational leadership in a broad summative measure (Bass & Avolio, 1990). Charisma, here, is only one part of a broader leadership style – charismatic-transformational leadership. Other styles in the full range model (i.e., contingent reward and management by exception) are known as increasingly less effective styles of leadership (corrected r 's = .08 and – 0.04, respectively; Lowe et al., 1996). Thus, charismatic-transformational leadership has proven its particular value in predicting organizational effectiveness (Lowe et al., 1996).

#5: Stretching. In contrast to the prior types of universalization, stretching happens naturally (as opposed to more or less strategically) since every time a concept (or any word, for that matter) is applied to a new case, its meaning is stretched a bit and incorporates more observations and interpretations (Giroux, 2006). Stretching happens when the meaning of concepts is broadened to make them more encompassing (Osigweh, 1989). Three decades after Weber's publication, Edward Shils (1965, p. 199) stretched the former's original definition by arguing that "*charisma is a quality which is imputed to persons, actions, roles, institutions, symbols and material objects because of their presumed connection with ultimate, fundamental, vital, or order-determining powers.*" Stretching broadens the definition of charisma to include applications to a broader range of cases, such as actions (a charismatic speech), institutions (e.g., Google as a charismatic employer), and cultural objects (e.g., a charismatic perfume, pop tune, shirt brand). While such a practice of abstraction may have benefits for theory building and most probably raises the appeal of a concept to practitioners (Hirsch & Levin, 1999), it also has its downsides (Osigweh, 1989). Around the 1990s, the term charisma had already become so all-compassing that "for the English-speaking world, charisma is a term that is difficult to avoid. It is frequently drawn from the stock of everyday knowledge and used with little restraint. Often it simply used to describe an individual after or during a charming encounter. Other times, it is used to describe media-inflated, popular-culture figures as synonym for presence or managed celebrity. It is also central to lay discourse about complex, mysterious situations where someone seems to command extreme loyalty and obedience from others to the point of cultic demise" (Jermier, 1993, p. 217). The stretching of the meaning of charisma is especially poignant in this instance because the original definition of charisma stemmed from the idea of persons endowed with supernatural gifts by the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 14). Sociologists therefore spoke of the 'vulgarization' (Bensman & Givant, 1975, p. 122) and the 'McDonaldization' (Treat, 2004, p. 66) of charisma in this regard. Yet, the most important advantage of stretching is that researchers and practitioners can apply a stretched (as in ambiguous) concept more easily to a wide variety of contexts and applications (Benders & Van Veen, 2001a, 2001b; Giroux, 2006; Heusinkveld, Benders, & Hillebrand, 2013).

2.3. Redefinitions toward particularization

If a concept's expansion of meaning is perceived to become too large, however, it is likely to contract in meaning again through redefinitions which make its meaning more simple and specific (Hirsch & Levin, 1999; Osigweh, 1989). This has, for example, been empirically documented for the empowerment concept, where after a period of universalization, there was a further marked period of contraction in meaning (Bartunek & Spreitzer, 2006). We have, as mentioned, derived three types of particularization: refocusing, simplifying, and relocating.

#6: Refocusing. Refocusing is a common form of particularization where undesired meanings of a concept are stripped away in favor of a more confined interpretation that is based on a single theoretical perspective (Heusinkveld et al., 2013). For example, Van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) observed that the charismatic-transformational leadership umbrella had assumed such a life of its own that it hampered cumulative knowledge building. As a way forward, the authors stressed the need for a unifying theory of charisma – that is, a move toward increased theorization. Missing in this refocusing effort, however, was a clear outline of the alternative, more confined definition. What the authors left on the table was then taken up by Antonakis et al. (2016), who in their review argued that charisma should be confined to leadership signaling efforts only and divorced from theories and measures that emphasizes the perceptions of followers. Accordingly, with signaling theory as the theoretical backdrop, their refocused definition specifies charisma to be "*values-based, symbolic, and emotion-laden leader signaling*" (p. 294).

#7: Simplifying. Relatedly, when a concept's meaning becomes ambiguous, meaning can also be redressed by a simplifying strategy. Simplifying is aimed at bringing back an ambiguous concept to a few observable actions that are indicative of the concept. It rejects previous (theoretical) interpretations of the concept in favor of a simpler version that more readily lends itself for empirical observation. As discussed above, one example is given by Balkundi and colleagues (2011) who simplified the phenomenon of charisma

to a parameter of centrality in a social network. This parameter captures, in fact, a great deal of variance that is associated with follower attraction to charismatic leaders in other measures and elegantly includes both the leader (central agent) and followers in the definition. Another example of simplifying comes from Antonakis et al. (2011) who have simplified the charisma concept as the learnt ability to deliver a speech in a way that is perceived as charismatic by others. Fifteen years earlier, Kirkpatrick and Locke (1996) simplified charisma in a similar way by bringing it down to three observable operations that have to do with communication: a strong vision about quality, a strong vision about how to implement this, and a charismatic communication style (in terms of delivery, body posture, tone of voice, confidence, etcetera). Simplifying usually leads to strong counterfactuals (inferences which contrast with the default) such as the conclusions that ‘charisma can be taught’ (Antonakis et al., 2011). This contrasts with earlier assumptions (e.g., those by Weber discussed above) that charisma is confined to those endowed with seemingly super-human qualities.

#8: Relocating. Another form of particularizing is relocating which is to redefine a concept based on placing it in a different context (see e.g., Heusinkveld et al., 2013). For instance, Roberts (1985) and Roberts and Bradley (1988) did a longitudinal case study where they followed a leader’s career across multiple organizations, while examining the leader’s behavior, as well as the context and the outcomes of the leader’s influence. In particular, they recorded a woman who was first celebrated as a highly charismatic superintendent of a public school district. However, after she got promoted to becoming commissioner of education for her state, which is a more political, inter-governmental management setting, she was no longer seen as ‘charismatic’. Her charisma ‘disappeared’ even though she exhibited the same traits and even the exact same management behaviors. The ‘relocation’ of charisma thus led to important conceptual inferences about the limits of both trait- and behavior-based definitions of charisma (Roberts & Bradley, 1988), and may even cast doubt on whether Antonakis et al. (2016) leadership signaling efforts can be considered ‘charismatic’ across contexts. Indeed, this observation led some authors to conclude that charisma is a more complex, essentially perceptual phenomenon (e.g., Conger & Kanungo, 1998). At the very least, such a relocation underlines the value of acknowledging the role of context in theories of charisma (Yukl, 2002). It is relocation shifts such as these that have inspired the rise of a lively research stream that emphasizes locally distinct lay conceptions of charisma under the banner of so-called ‘implicit leadership theories’ of charisma (Lord, Epitropaki, Foti, & Hansbrough, 2020).

2.4. Redefinitions toward contextualization

A final movement is contextualization, the act of enhancing understanding of a concept by exploring its relationship to the specifics of experience in a particular context (Thompson, 2011, p. 758). Contextualization involves a redefinition of a concept toward the assumption that the local experience of a phenomenon determines what a concept comes to mean and how it operates. Ketokivi and Mantere (2010) identify two relevant types of contextualization which we will recast here as processifying and subjectifying.

#9: Processifying. The practise of processifying involves a redefinition from seeing concepts as universal ‘things’ in an entitative ontology to seeing them as specific ‘processes’ with greater attention to its temporality, activity (even transitivity) and flow in an empirical context (Cornelissen & Kaandorp, 2023; Thompson, 2011). Dramaturgical (i.e., role) theory, for instance, specifies that charisma can neither be strictly confined to a performance of an actor, nor only to reactions from an audience. Rather, charisma should be seen as an iterative process of sending and receiving such that two parties (both actors and audience) produce an emergent experience that can be regarded as ‘charismatic’ (Gardner & Avolio, 1998). In a similar vein, Sy et al. (2018) have produced a circular process model where charisma elicits moral emotions in followers, which the leader must then channel into focused action. Experiencing the outcome of these actions, in turn, make the subsequent elicitations of emotions by the leader either easier or harder. It is interesting to note that, while processifying is an act of contextualization, it also allows for greater unification of seemingly incompatible approaches to charisma (e.g., including both the ‘sender’ and ‘receiver’ of charisma signals in an iterative model). While theories are available to support such a move, empirical studies that track charisma as a coupled interactive process in real-time are however rare (but see Caspi, Bogler, & Tzuman, 2019).

#10: Subjectifying. The research practice of subjectifying involves a redefinition from an objectified concept (‘[X] as charisma’) to a more descriptively subjective and performative concept where charisma emerges in context. In comparison with processifying, subjectifying focuses on performative characteristics of the phenomenon that explicitly acknowledges context as necessary for the process to unfold. Weber (1947) famously noted that charisma might wax and wane depending on the contextual environment (e.g., the ‘disenchantment’ of charisma following initial enchantment). He viewed charisma not as a fixed ‘thing’ but as a process that might evolve in perception and nature over time (e.g., the routinization and institutionalization of charisma) and in ways that are specific to a context. The move toward subjectification of charisma is also nicely illustrated by Reed’s (2013, p. 254) view of charisma. Based on a historical analysis of Bacon’s rebellion (1676) in Virginia, Reed argues that “a series of interactions between a leader and his followers takes on a specific pattern and tone: the leader’s startling successes in the world and, in particular, his or her public acts and displays, build upon each other to create, in followers, a perception of the inevitability of his or her rise, a deeply affective connection to the leader, and a tendency for the constructionist frameworks of these followers to centre upon the leader’s individual person. Simultaneously, the leader draws emotional energy and political possibility from his (growing) community of followers.”

In a similar vein, Treat (2004) argues that a charismatic agent may rise in a community where there is a dominant desire for a charismatic superhero. Based on such a desire, charisma emerges in a context-specific way based on the charismatic agent’s rhetoric and the ever more well-developed myths around this charismatic hero. Over time these myths assume a life of their own to the point that they have little to do with the real-life actions of the charismatic person, but more with the way this person comes to embody the followers’ need for transcendental involvements such as divine revelation and/or possible redemption.

2.5. A disciplined imagination approach to conceptual innovation

In the field of HRM, the practice of concept redefinition is oftentimes seen as controversial and dismissed as either a nuisance, a scholarly malpractice, or a criticized form of ‘concept proliferation’. In this piece we have tried to forward a more nuanced reflection on the topic, such that we may come to better appreciate the role that conceptual redefinitions play in the HRM theory-building process. Our analysis reveals three main reasons for why meaning shifts are commonplace in the HRM field. First, following the disciplines of general philosophy and linguistics, meaning becomes slippery when concepts (like those in HRM) are by their very nature abstract, language-based, theoretical. It is therefore axiomatic that meaning shifts happen in such fields. Second, given the fact that a knowledge field like HRM consists of several different scholarly communities with distinct research traditions, concepts will be redefined as soon as a concept is used and appropriated by that research tradition. Third, we have theorized that the inherent dualities of conceptualization (theoretical vs experiential, universal vs particular) make it hard to ‘fix’ conceptual meaning in a definitive way and for prolonged periods of time, because a definition always falls substantively short in one way or another. These dualities invite concept redefinition practices and on theoretically legitimate grounds. Given these three theoretical observations, the presently dominant position among methodologists in the field of HRM that concept redefinitions are inherently dangerous seems extreme and untenable.

Instead, faced with this reality, we advocate a disciplined imagination approach to concept redefinition that assumes that concept redefinitions are *healthy* for a knowledge field *if* they build theory around the subject matter. In fact, acknowledging this allows us to appreciate how meaning shifts produce a richness and variety of thought that complex and enigmatic concepts like charisma and other HRM concepts require. They do so by either expanding or building new understandings, or by integrating and trimming down meanings as a form of conceptual maintenance. As a result of such attempts, concept meaning tends to shift over time into a variety of different directions, namely from universality to particularity, from metaphysical to experience-driven inquiry, or vice versa. By making these conceptual shifts explicit in ten redefinition practices, we hope to have increased awareness among HRM researchers of different opportunities for a theoretical contribution and, in the process, further enhance our collective understanding of HRM concepts.

Below, we elaborate on this contribution and further reflect on the ways that the ten identified redefinition practices might produce a ‘healthy’ progression of understanding around the subject of HRM. We envision a disciplined imagination approach (Weick, 1989) to conceptual inquiry in the HRM discipline, which does not place any a priori preference on the value of either theory-driven or experience-driven, or either universalist or particularist inquiry, but which espouses the inherent need for a *variety* of conceptual ideas. Weick (1989) famously argued for both theoretical and disciplinary variety out of the conviction that theories are produced in a process of variation and selective retention. Higher theoretical and disciplinary variety maximizes divergent thinking and therefore the chances for the selection of a good conceptual idea (see also Harvey & Berry, 2023; Hua et al., 2022). To this end, knowledge around an HRM phenomenon should not be fixed around a single meaning but should ‘keep moving’ in order to ensure variety and the development of better ideas and concepts over time (Fabian, 2000).

That said, if meaning shifts are not forms of concept proliferation when they build theory, this begs the question of how one knows whether one truly builds theory, or whether one is dealing with a sloppy, arbitrary, or empirically redundant redefinition practices? The answer lies in the reflection on the criteria of what makes a ‘good’ conceptual innovation. As described above in Table 2, we have found two criteria to be especially relevant when it comes to conceptual innovation: theoretical novelty and usefulness. The aspects of theoretical novelty and usefulness (or utility) have been alluded to in relation with theoretical knowledge progress (Corley & Gioia, 2011; Weick, 1989), as well as in definitional elements of creativity (Harvey & Berry, 2023). The criterion of novelty protects a literature from introducing problems of conceptual and empirical redundancy. Novelty criteria place a premium on strong and original theory contributions which provide an alternative way of thinking about a phenomenon. The criterion of theoretical usefulness, on the other hand, protects a literature from sloppy or arbitrary definitions. To be useful a redefinition must make a concept more relevant to a proposed problem or more acceptable to the standards of a research domain (Harvey & Berry, 2023; Whetten, 1990). For instance, to empiricists a concept becomes more useful if it is “perceived as an advance that improves conceptual rigor or the specificity of an idea and/or enhances its potential to be operationalized and tested” (Corley & Gioia, 2011, p. 17–18). For others, a redefinition is theoretically useful if it produces equal meaning across texts (e.g., disrupting siloed understandings) and which is seen to foster continuity in the building up of coherent bodies of knowledge around the same concept (McKinley et al., 1999; Pfeffer, 1993). In short, the following corollary holds:

A redefinition builds theory if it reveals an aspect of the concept that was hitherto unrecognized (theoretical novelty) and/or when it makes concepts more relevant to a proposed problem or more acceptable to the standards of a research domain (theoretical usefulness).

It would be unfair (and even problematic) to assume that the process producing such variety happens randomly. Rather, conceptual variety is most likely produced deliberately and naturally as part of conceptual maintenance; that is, targeted corrections of meaning deemed necessary by HRM authors and reviewers to secure theoretical novelty and/or usefulness of knowledge around an HRM subject (as illustrated in Table 2). Crucial to the idea of maintenance is that creativity on the part of a scholar is combined with *reflexivity* (Weick, 1999) on what the literature in question needs in order to move forward. After all, we recognize that the ability to maneuver conceptually also has limits and may not always amount to a progressive HRM science. It is reasonable to assume that not all redefinitions would equally contribute to an informative and coherent body of knowledge around an HRM subject. At the same time, however, change toward greater institutional strictures on the definition and measurement in the field of HRM would arguably compress and, in the end, produce a narrow and more stale view of HRM phenomena. A *disciplined imagination* approach therefore combines creativity with reflexivity, and is guided by usefulness and novelty as guidelines for the selective retention of conceptual

ideas.

We will now discuss how the disciplined imagination to conceptual inquiry plays out in the HRM literature and in relation to the four meaning shift directions in our model.

Formalizing concepts as conceptual maintenance. Our framework (and Table 2) reveals how meaning shifts toward greater *formalization* generally improve both the novelty and the usefulness of a concept by exposing new understandings and by making it amenable to the standards of another research tradition. The inception of new concepts usually happens through experience-driven inquiry (e.g., Thompson, 2011). Ethnographies, for that matter, are important engines of renewal for a field like HRM, such that the field remains relevant (Paauwe & Boon, 2018) and up to date with the day-to-day reality (e.g., new trends) that it is supposed to describe. A premature dismissal of new concepts out of misguided fear of concept proliferation may in the end hurt, rather than help the field of HRM. But the inception of new concepts is not sufficient for producing a productive HRM science. After all, it is through formalization shifts that most of our current HRM concepts become more ‘mainstream’ subjects of investigation. The literature on charisma is also illustrative of this: in line with Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan (2007), theorizations such as redefining charisma as role play (as in Gardner & Avolio, 1998), as an attribution (Meindl et al., 1985), or as a central network position (as in Balkundi et al., 2011) maintain the health of charisma literature by expanding the concept, and in doing so enriching the literature with novel perspectives. At the same time, formalizing is *useful* in allowing researchers to use their established instruments (e.g., social network analysis) to progress knowledge around new concepts.

Universalizing concepts as conceptual maintenance. Our framework (see e.g., Table 2) reveals how meaning shifts toward greater *universality* generally maintain the theoretical usefulness of a concept. In particular, ‘synthesizing’ shifts solve a tenacious problem within the HRM discipline of scholars talking past one another on similar topics in siloed arenas (Banks et al., 2018; De Shaffer et al., 2016). In addressing this, synthesizing shifts develop “a vocabulary for describing divergent approaches” (Suchman, 1995, p. 572) to that scholars from various schools of thought can learn from one another.

‘Lumping’ shifts connect empirically redundant operational definitions under a common header. In fact, this is a typical pathway to solving many of the ‘proliferation’ and redundancy problems and as a way to reduce the number of different labels for the same phenomenon (jangle fallacies), which is a recognized problem in the HRM field (e.g., Banks et al., 2018; Gray & Cooper, 2010; De Shaffer et al., 2016). At the very least, such shifts (e.g., via meta-analyses) create a repository of pooled measures that allow for a comparative description of the different uses (theories, dimensions, variables) of similar constructs. Such pooled measures are called for to, for instance, evaluate the effectiveness of various HRM interventions. Solinger et al. (2021; but see also Harrison, Newman & Roth, 2006), for instance, pooled via meta-analysis the empirically similar measures of organizational commitment and job satisfaction (with a corrected correlation around 0.60) to evaluate the long-term impact of HRM interventions.

Finally, while concept ‘stretching’ has a bad reputation in the HRM field since Osigweh (1989), we should be mindful that through stretching one amplifies and extends a concept’s implications such that it becomes more relevant to a proposed problem or application in practice (Astley & Zammuto, 1992; Bort & Kieser, 2011; Giroux, 2006; Heusinkveld et al., 2013; Hirsch & Levin, 1999). Prior research shows that practitioners, through their activities, have an important role to play universalizing concepts as soon as they make academic terms relevant for practical problems (Giroux, 2006; Heusinkveld et al., 2013; Hirsch & Levin, 1999). Thus, this conceptual shift speaks to the need for HRM scholars to prove their relevance, legitimacy, and strategic value to practitioners (Paauwe & Boon, 2018). Again, a premature dismissal of such shifts may in the end hurt, rather than help the field of HRM.

Particularizing concepts as conceptual maintenance. Meaning shifts toward greater *particularization* are indispensable for the HRM literature which nowadays consists of a great variety of ‘multidimensional’ concepts (Edwards, 2001; Law et al., 1998). Such concepts represent a conceptually common element across different types, forms, reflections, profiles, building blocks, or sub-processes of the concepts in question – typically formed by means of synthesizing and lumping shifts in the scholarly history of the concept. Despite their usefulness, however, these shifts have the tendency to stifle theoretical novelty in the field of HRM. In the charisma literature, for instance, there was an initial enthusiasm following ‘lumping’ and ‘standardizing’ shifts that produced useful operational definitions of charisma in the full range model of leadership (Alvesson, 2020). The advent of a formal description of charisma via Bass and Avolio (1990) MLQ measure initially focused the debate and fostered a progressive field of inquiry (e.g., Bryman, 2004). Scholars then used and cited the MLQ measure *en masse*. Over time it turned into a detrimental drift as researchers no longer used it reflexively: the almost exclusive usage of Bass and Avolio (1990) MLQ in the 1990s and 2000s resulted in a situation where the test had become synonymous with the definition of charisma (Bryman, 2004; Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). Detrimental drift is not necessarily triggered by the fact that the (rich and multifaceted) meaning of charisma is compressed and reified in a single measure; it is rather triggered by a spiral of dogmatism and rule-following where authors and reviewers felt the need to comply with and enforce an external standard (e.g., ‘if not by means of the MLQ, one does not measure charisma’). Over-relying on psychometrics and empirical adequacy in the use of the MLQ, researchers then lost sight of the problematic assumptive ground underlying this measure, including (but not limited to) critiques that charisma is not the same as transformational leadership (Yukl, 1999) or any lack of solid theoretical underpinning altogether (Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). Critical reflection, original and active thought and analysis that are needed for novel contributions and for a healthy literature suffered as a consequence (see also Alvesson, 2020; Birkinshaw, Healey, Suddaby, & Weber, 2014; Calas, 1993; Koch, 1981; Mizuchi & Fein, 1999).

Reflective of such developments, a keen scholar can maintain the health of a literature around a subject matter via ‘corrective’ and even ‘theory-reducing’ (Banks et al., 2018; Gray & Cooper, 2010) meaning shifts. As said, the critiques of charisma by Van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) as well as Antonakis et al. (2016) have been highly instrumental in respectively refocusing and simplifying the literature around charisma. In a similar vein, Miller et al. (2013) have refocused the literature around organizational performance (a typical outcome measure of HRM practices; Wood, 2018), arguing that: “...the latent multidimensional approach is not scientifically grounded despite its very strong popularity in theory building...to resolve critical inconsistencies in their use” and where “full engagement with

the separate construct approach seems to be the best option available.” (2013:1, 4, 13). Similarly, the work of Brubaker and Cooper posited that the concept of identity has become ill-suited as an analytical concept in scientific analyses because: “...it is riddled with ambiguity, riven with contradictory meanings, and encumbered by reifying connotations” (2000: 34).

Podsakoff et al. (2016) have cogently argued for a critical reflection on whether the purported attributes of HRM concepts are indeed universal across contexts. To this end, ‘relocation’ shifts can reveal whether certain attributes carry universal or more local significance. The concept of ‘calling’, for instance, was originally coined in religious studies where religious individuals felt inspired by a transcendental summons and strong pro-social motivation. Hirschi (2011) discovered that, indeed, pro-social motives are relevant for some individuals experiencing calling in their careers, but not for others operating in secular contexts. He concluded that pro-social motives are a ‘particular’, rather than a ‘universal’ in the concept of calling. We see that, as a result, the meaning of this HRM concept has shifted over time toward more secular connotations.

Contextualizing concepts as conceptual maintenance. Finally, meaning shifts toward greater *contextualization* can prove both revelatory and useful by improving a concept’s ability to account for change and contextual variability (*processifying*). In doing so, studies involving processifying shifts have revitalized their target literatures that were hitherto dominated by static covariance relationships that abstract away from time. One example of this is found in research documenting how individuals can bounce back from breaches of the psychological contract over time (Solinger, Hofmans, Bal, & Jansen, 2016), thus reinterpreting both the HRM concept of psychological contract breach (from a ‘variable’ to an ‘event’) and the HRM concept of organizational commitment (from a ‘variable’ to a dynamic trajectory). Another example is the processification of the concept of *task variety* (Pentland, 2003). This construct is generally conceived of as a number of different task elements, required in the performance of a job. The higher the number of task elements, the more variety. This is an entitative conceptualization as task variety is seen as a fixed attribute, characteristic for a particular job and where *inputs* (i.e., task elements) define content. Recently, Pentland (2003) ‘temporalized’ the task variety construct first by stressing that the entitative conceptualization overlooked an inherent aspect of work processes, namely the *sequence* of actions. Thus, the time element was introduced as an inherently constitutive element in the conceptualization of task variety. Pentland continued to conceptualize task variety into a sequential variety of work processes, where high task variety is seen as high sequential variation, with little repetition from one iteration to the next (p.529). Thus, the functionality of task variety no longer lies in between-job differences in the number of task elements, but in cross-temporal variability in sequences of actions, fully consistent with the operational design of constructs.

Another way of contextualizing is revealing of how concepts are actively shaped and enacted in context, and of how historical dependencies produce subjective meanings (*subjectifying*). An example of the latter is found in Shipp and Jansen (2011) analysis of how the subjective stories individuals tell shapes their current assessments of person-job fit. Similarly, Schultz and Hernes (2013) revealed how different ways in which organizational actors evoke the past in their experience of organizational identity (through textual, material and oral memory forms) constrains the articulation of claims for future identity (such as organizational goals and identity claims).

The downside to the disciplined imagination research ideal, however, is that it does not prevent unproductive paradigm wars and/or fierce contention between diverse research schools that compete for prominence (e.g., Denison, 1996). Moreover, the disciplined imagination approach remains sensitive to a perpetual pendulum shifts that swing from universal to particular and from theory-driven to experience-driven definitions, as each of these aspects alone produces a fragmented, siloed view of a phenomenon (e.g., iterating between ‘sender-’ vs ‘receiver-based definitions of charisma’). More advanced use of definitions (that prevent this pendulum swing) will want to center on a closer coupling and interdependence between the opposing elements of conceptual inquiry, where paradoxical tensions hold each other in balance and mutually inspire one another (see Harvey & Berry, 2023; Smith & Lewis, 2011).

2.6. A ‘triangulation’ alternative

An alternative approach (in comparison to the ‘disciplined imagination’ ideal) is the strategic usage of *multiple* definitions to balance dualistic aspects of conceptual inquiry. Rather than building on *one* definition *only*, a great deal of clarity and knowledge progress can come from research where multiple perspectives and their definitions are triangulated in the same study. This includes, for starters, the definition and measurement of *multiple* relevant definitional attributes that classically belong to different definitions. Then, the process of triangulation involves a careful and reflective comparison of whether and how each of these attributes operate with a certain regularity, sequence or transitivity (Cornelissen & Kaandorp, 2023). Counter-factual reasoning is then called for to tease out exactly where and how the HRM concept operates in a new way that was hitherto undiscovered. This practice is not as far out as one may think. To wit, many high-quality charisma studies that have come out in the past years already include the triangulation of multiple definitional elements, especially when focused on both leaders and followers as well as their interaction.

For instance, Jacquart and Antonakis (2015) juxtaposed ‘attributional’ definition to charisma based on organizational / national performance (‘particular’), against a definition that emphasizes the ‘sending’ of leadership signals (‘universal’), combined with implicit leadership prototypes in the minds of followers (‘experience-driven’). In doing so, the authors were able to carefully delineate which conditions (e.g., high performance context) were conducive to specific elements of charisma (e.g., performance-based attribution of charisma versus invoking leadership prototypes following public performances). Caspi et al. (2019) similarly combined two contrastive approaches to charisma signaling (‘theory-driven’), audience impressions of charisma, and real-time tracking of impressions over the course of a speech (‘experience-driven’). Using this triangular approach, they discovered interesting nuances in how message delivery and its content are related. Seyranian and Bligh (2008) included a list of eight rhetorical strategies with a social identity approach to receiving charisma signals across different phases of a presidential candidacy. The authors found interesting clues as to which of the eight rhetorical strategies remained stable over time and which elements were used more in one phase and less in

another. [Maran, Furtner, Liegl, Kraus, and Sachse \(2019\)](#) performed an interesting study focusing the process of eye contact with an audience, including its relations with various leader traits (Big-5, dominance), leadership measured in various ways (i.e., influence, effability), and captured perceptions of charisma according to multiple templates (e.g., affect, prototypes, MLQ).

Although these exemplary studies differ in the angle they take to studying charisma, all of them ended up including definitions that possess different ends of the spectrum of conceptual inquiry in their triangular approaches. It is our position that such triangular approaches make for a compelling path forward in the study of HRM concepts. For such advanced approaches to work, though, a rich a pallet of charisma definitions (generally produced by the disciplined imagination approach) is not a hindrance or a nuisance, but a basic requirement for reaching a mature state of the science. We regard triangulation to be the most fruitful if there is an especially poignant tension in a particular HRM literature between the different ends of the spectrum (e.g., between universal ‘sending’ and the more particular ‘receiving’ of charisma signals).

3. Conclusion

While the practice of concept redefinition is ubiquitous in the field of HRM, it has traditionally been received as controversial, since methodologists dismiss the redefinition practices as either a distraction, a scholarly malpractice, or a form of ‘concept proliferation’. Here we offer an alternative position in this debate; a position that advocates the idea that meaning shifts are healthy for the HRM literature when they build theory around the concept matter. To this end, we have developed a framework which elucidates from a meta-theoretical perspective how scholars redefine concepts for theoretical reasons.

In our opening paragraphs, we started with spelling out how such a framework contributes to the HRM field in theoretical, normative, and practical ways. At this point, in concluding our arguments, we would like to revisit and expand on these contributions. Theoretically, we have provided a new logic that explains from a meta-theoretical angle why definitions of the same concept proliferate and continually get redefined over time. This has to do first of all, with fact that redefinitions result naturally from our use of abstract, language-based, and theoretical concepts. Second, the HRM knowledge field is populated by several distinct research traditions that borrow concepts from one another and then rework them to make them fit for purpose. Third, general epistemological tensions to conceptual inquiry explain why one single definition cannot satisfy all requirements at the same time. This combination of factors explains the ubiquity of concept redefinition as scientific practice at the level of the HRM knowledge field, and which goes beyond existing explanations that have focused on the craft of formulating individual definitions (e.g., [Podsakoff et al., 2016](#); [Welch et al., 2016](#)). Further, while [Podsakoff et al. \(2016\)](#) provided valuable insights and practical steps on how to define concepts, we intended to explain from a meta-theoretical angle how theoretical contributions can be made via the reformulation of existing concepts and how such reformulations can cause meanings to shift.

Lastly, in specifying epistemological and sociological mechanisms underlying such shifts in a knowledge field, we extend existing life-cycle models of concept development (e.g., [Giroux, 2006](#); [Hirsch & Levin, 1999](#)). In comparison, our framework delineates a more refined set of options for concept redefinition and that do not necessarily follow upon one another in a programmed fashion, but serve as a repertoire that can be wielded by scholars as different ways to maintain a healthy literature around a subject matter. As a set, the ten redefinition practices have the capacity to populate the entire spectrum of conceptual inquiry, ranging from metaphysical to empirical inquiry and from particularism to universalism. This repertoire answers prior called by journal editors like [Suddaby \(2010, p. 355\)](#) who stressed the need for a better understanding of “how concepts are created and used in the research process” (see also [Bort & Kieser, 2011](#)).

Beside these theoretical contributions, we have also worked out a normative contribution that rebuts the position of those who view redefining concepts as a malpractice. Instead of this dismissive view, we advocated a more nuanced understanding that appreciates the role that concept redefinitions can play in advancing *theory* around a phenomenon in question (e.g., [Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007](#); [Cornelissen & Durand, 2014](#); [Welch et al., 2016](#)). Our framework provides insight in exactly how such theoretical contributions are made, how concept redefinitions can, in fact, foster the health of a knowledge field. We have further substantiated this claim by spelling out how a field of knowledge (like HRM) is ideally kept in a healthy state, namely via a *disciplined imagination* approach to conceptual inquiry. In such an approach, imaginativeness and a variety of conceptual ideas are not discouraged, but rather stimulated, as long as new ideas can stand the test of novelty and usefulness. This will likely produce an HRM literature with a range of conceptual innovations spanning the entire spectrum of conceptual inquiry. Note that conceptual innovation practices also include the cutting away of excess or unnecessary meanings (via ‘refocusing’ or ‘simplifying’), or reducing conceptual redundancy (via ‘lumping’ or ‘synthesizing’), which are important practices advocated by methodologists in the field of HRM. Our normative alternative is in that sense not dismissive of earlier methodological advice but paints a picture of how such practices fit within a broader repertoire of practices in how a healthy literature is fostered and indeed maintained.

Finally, we aspire this piece to be of practical value by providing researchers with a repertoire of pathways as to how theoretical contributions can be made via conceptual redefinition. Based on this framework we hope to provide researchers with a vocabulary to name and critically reflect upon the different redefinitions and consider them as alternative ways to make a theoretical contribution and maintain a healthy and prospering literature.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Omar N. Solinger: Investigation, Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Visualization. **H.S. Stefan Heu-sinkveld:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation. **Joep P. Cornelissen:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Methodology.

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