© *Academy of Management Review*
2012, Vol. 37, No. 1, 152–154.
http://dx.doi.org/10.5465/amr.2011.0129

DIALOGUE

More Than Just Novelty: Conceptual Blending and Causality

One of the central questions in the April 2011 *AMR* special issue on new theories of organization (Suddaby, Hardy, & Huy, 2011) concerns how such theories come into existence. The answers that are provided all combine an acknowledgment of pragmatic factors around the positioning of a novel theory in a particular scholarly community with the observation that analogical thinking, as a way of blending concepts and relations, is at the heart of the conception of new theory (Boxenbaum & Rouleau, 2011; Oswick, Fleming, & Hanlon, 2011; Shepherd & Sutcliffe, 2011). This crucial observation is not matched with adequate detail on the mechanisms of conceptual blending. However, providing such detail seems essential in order to understand not just simply that we rely on analogies in our theorizing but, more important, how we do so and with what consequences. Conceptual blending is a basic theory of conceptual integration that is central to modes of inferential reasoning within the social sciences (Turner, 1996; see also Cornelissen, 2005), including counterfactual arguments, analogy and metaphor, paradox and irony, and prototype-based logics of argumentation. Here we first add an understanding of conceptual blending and of how blending works. Second, we suggest ways in which blending may be used not just to develop novel theory but also to support the development of theories that lean toward explanation and can form the basis for sustainable programs of research.

In essence, conceptual blending theory suggests that the analogical correlation of mental inputs or frames sets up a number of blending processes in which the imaginative capacities of meaning construction are evoked to produce emergent and novel meaning. Within blending, structure and elements from the input mental frames are projected to a separate "blended" mental space (e.g., Cornelissen, 2005, 2006, but see also Shepherd & Sutcliffe, 2011). The projection is selective, and through completion and elaboration the blend develops a structure and set of inferences not provided by the inputs. The emerging representation and inferences developed in the blend, in turn, can lead us to change our view of the corresponding situations and may indeed, upon reflection, capture and explain novel and important aspects of organizations (Boxenbaum & Rouleau, 2011; Cornelissen, 2005).

When developing theory, theorists may intentionally vary the inputs to blending processes and may contrast the selectivity of their projections to distinguish different constructions and inferences (Weick, 1989). They may also combine inputs from radically different or distant domains of knowledge and language use. This distance can turn out to be productive in that it may prompt alternative insights and may provide a novel schematization and inferences for theorizing (Cornelissen, 2005). Crucially, however, it is not similarity or dissimilarity between domains per se (Oswick et al., 2011) that is the key here. As previously argued (Cornelissen, 2005, 2006), blending involves two separate axes: an axis of similarity in the correspondence between inputs from two domains (within-domains similarity) and an axis of distance between the domains of knowledge and language use from which these inputs are drawn (between-domains distance). These are essentially two independent scales that apply to the same blending process. Okhuysen and Bonardi (2011) demonstrate these axes in their recent discussion of how the combination of theories may involve a greater or lesser compatibility in terms of the assumptions shared between theories and a greater or lesser conceptual distance in terms of their antecedent scholarly and disciplinary traditions.

The intersection of these two axes is crucial to theory development. It is core to the oft-cited notion of interestingness in theory development (Davis, 1971; Weick, 1989). A novel conceptualization or explanation is generally considered interesting depending on the degree to which it is analogically "related" or "connected" and, as such, plausible or informative while simultaneously being counterintuitive, surprising, or unexpected, given the novel parallel that is drawn between previously unconnected and disparate

domains and modes of understanding. The two axes also support the aptness of an emerging conceptual representation or model and its ability to project inferences that are more likely to be useful to the development of theory. What this implies is that when theorists draw distant or opposing domains together, there needs to be as a base condition some within-domain similarity that can be conceived or constructed (Cornelissen, 2005). Such a correspondence is furthermore necessary for the transfer of initially dissimilar attributes or implications, which, once blended, may contribute to a novel emergent conceptual representation and set of inferences (Cornelissen, 2005; Durand & Calori, 2006).

However, producing a blend at the intersection of within-domains similarity and between-domains distance is not by itself a guarantee that the resulting novel theory will turn out to be valuable, let alone valid or predictive. As an analogue representation that connects concepts, conceptual blends need close scrutiny. Indeed, a real obligation, incumbent on all of us, is to identify whether, through blending, we generate novel theorizations in terms of underlying causal relationships—and this is arguably more important than just pinpointing gaps or proposing novel suppositions (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). Probing such causal relationships involves systematic forms of counterfactual reasoning (Durand & Vaara, 2009), although not all forms of counterfactuals are equally useful. Turner (1996) distinguishes in this respect between what he calls "lab rat" and "spotlight" counterfactuals, respectively.

The first type of counterfactual, illustrated by Tsang and Ellsaesser's (2011) theory of "contrastive explanation," entails an effort to contrast a given explanation of an actual scenario with a reasonably different imagined explanation so as to isolate some causal factors from others in the actual situation of interest and to determine precise causal relations. With this kind of counterfactual, the theorist first of all attempts to isolate important causal factors and then, akin to a controlled lab experiment, manipulates them while holding constant everything else prior to the antecedent so that complexity and ambiguity will not arise in attributing causal relationships.

The second type, demonstrated by Alvesson and Sandberg (2011) and referred to by Oswick et al. (2011), involves highlighting and revealing strongly held and arguably erroneous beliefs or assumptions (in the actual or given scenario) through a comparison with an alternative imagined scenario. It starts with theorists simply asking, "What if we would think about the base assumptions and default explanations differently?" Theorists subsequently construct alternative imagined scenarios, which may incorporate basic variables from a particular literature or default theory, but through the insertion of a different set of base assumptions or alternative explanations, such scenarios would then suggest alternative directions for research. The primary purpose, thus, is to spotlight base assumptions or ideas in the preexisting domain of a given theory or literature, to stimulate reflectivity, and to see the potential (but only the potential) for changing conceptual frames (Turner, 1996). When constructing spotlight counterfactuals, there is little concern, in contrast to the lab rat counterfactual, with clearly specifying antecedents, consequents, and principles of causal connection. The spotlight function simply revolves around the interestingness of the basic supposition (Turner, 1996), a point reiterated by Alvesson and Sandberg (2011). Turner (1996) warns, however, that interestingness bears the risk of being fooled by local perceptions of interest, or ignorance.

By themselves, spotlight counterfactuals are merely a potential starting point for reconsidering theory and research in a particular domain, and the question of whether an interesting thought or reflection translates into progressive theory with explanatory value is far from certain. In fact, to make this very transition, we suggest that it may be preferable for theorists to concentrate on lab rat counterfactuals (using historical or causal modeling methodologies as described, for instance, in Durand & Vaara [2009]) or, alternatively, to use spotlight counterfactuals alongside lab rat counterfactuals to prevent reflection and imagination from running wild or, even worse, from turning out empty and of little utility to organizational theory. Combining the two types of counterfactuals may lead to more useful thought experiments in which causal connections between antecedents and consequents are established and explanations elaborated and deepened.

In conclusion, we extend the contributions in the special issue by suggesting that, as theorists, we should use the mechanisms of concep-

tual blending to develop theories that have explanatory power and are able to energize coherent and sustainable programs of research. Mere creativity or novelty amounts to little, unless the proposed blend and its inferences generate causally specific and plausible theories and associated programs of research.

REFERENCES

Alvesson, M., & Sandberg, J. 2011. Generating research questions through problematization. ***Academy of Management Review,*** 36: 247–271.

Boxenbaum, E., & Rouleau, L. 2011. New knowledge products as bricolage: Metaphors and scripts in organizational theory. ***Academy of Management Review,*** 36: 272–296.

Cornelissen, J. P. 2005. Beyond compare: Metaphor in organization theory. ***Academy of Management Review,*** 30: 751–764.

Cornelissen, J. P. 2006. Making sense of theory construction: Metaphor and disciplined imagination. ***Organization Studies,*** 27: 1579–1597.

Davis, M. S. 1971. That's interesting: Towards a phenomenology of sociology and a sociology of phenomenology. ***Philosophy of the Social Sciences,*** 1: 309–344.

Durand, R., & Calori, R. 2006. Sameness, otherness? Enriching organizational change theories with philosophical considerations on the same and the other. ***Academy of Management Review,*** 31: 93–124.

Durand, R., & Vaara, E. 2009. Causation, counterfactuals and competitive advantage. ***Strategic Management Journal,*** 30: 1245–1264.

Okhuysen, G., & Bonardi, J. P. 2011. The challenges of theory building through the combination of lenses. ***Academy of Management Review,*** 36: 6–12.

Oswick, C., Fleming, P., & Hanlon, G. 2011. From borrowing to blending: Rethinking the processes of organizational theory building. ***Academy of Management Review,*** 36: 318–337.

Shepherd, D. A., & Sutcliffe, K. M. 2011. Inductive top-down theorizing: A source of new theories of organization. ***Academy of Management Review,*** 36: 361–380.

Suddaby, R., Hardy, C., & Huy, Q. N. 2011. Where are the new theories of organization? ***Academy of Management Review,*** 36: 236–246.

Tsang, E. W. K., & Ellsaesser, F. 2011. How contrastive explanation facilitates theory building. ***Academy of Management Review,*** 36: 404–419.

Turner, M. 1996. Conceptual blending and counterfactual argument in the social and behavioral sciences. In P. Tetlock & A. Belkin (Eds.), ***Counterfactual thought experiments in world politics:*** 291–295. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Weick, K. E. 1989. Theory construction as disciplined imagination. ***Academy of Management Review,*** 14: 516–531.

Joep Cornelissen (j.p.cornelissen@vu.nl)
VU University Amsterdam

Rodolphe Durand (durand@hec.fr)
HEC Paris