ON TAKING THE THEORETICAL SUBSTANCE OF OUTCOMES SERIOUSLY: A META-CONVERSATION

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We contend that the field of behavioral ethics in organizations, in large part, has not explicitly attended to the theoretical substance of outcome variables in studies of individuals' morally relevant judgments, decisions, and behaviors, and that we should do so. We review the recent literature, finding that conceptual definitions of the moral domain are provided in only a small percentage of articles and that the operationalizations employed are drawn from a narrow set, with the majority of studies focusing on cheating or lying. We also review relevant conversations on the theoretical substance of morally relevant outcome variables found largely outside of this literature. We present these conversations in the context of a meta-conversation, or a conversation about conversations in which we point to the potential fruitfulness of discussing the theoretical substance of our outcome variables, and the forms that such discussions might take. We conclude with suggestions for carrying the conversation forward within the field of behavioral ethics in organizations.

Key Words: Behavioral ethics, organizational ethics, meta-conversation, moral psychology, ethical/moral outcomes, descriptive vs. normative ethics, moral domain

As the large number of review articles in recent memory demonstrates, research on behavioral ethics in organizations has exploded (e.g., Bazerman and Gino, 2012; Kish-Gephart, Harrison, and Treviño, 2010; Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe, 2008; Treviño, den Nieuwenboer, and Kish-Gephart, 2014; Treviño, Weaver, and Reynolds, 2006; Weaver, Reynolds, and Brown, 2014). Scholars in this area focus on individuals' ethical judgments, decisions, and behaviors, particularly those relevant to organizations.[1] Treviño and colleagues (2014) trace the beginnings of this field to the 1980s and describe the overall endeavor like this: "Most research in the field begins with the premise that ethical behavior in organizations is good and unethical behavior is bad, and that understanding the predictors of each can help organizations produce more of the former and less of the latter" (p. 637). We find this description to be not only apt, but also illuminating. It highlights something

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[1] We use the terms "ethical" and "moral" interchangeably.

that those of us working in this area seem to take for granted: our theoretical focus should be on the predictor side of the model.[2] While we struggle to achieve a degree of parsimony out of the kaleidoscope of possibilities on the predictor side of the equation, we tend to keep things simple on the criterion side (i.e., the outcomes we study). There is ethical and unethical. Usually we focus on predicting unethical outcomes.

The cost of relative inattention to theory development on the criterion side is ultimately an impoverishment of theory more generally. We often vaguely refer to "unethical" behavior without acknowledging the potential for conceptual complexity. Such complexity surely holds implications for theorizing on the predictor side. In the long run, we cannot expect our theories to systematically connect predictors with outcomes when we have not specified the nature of the outcomes. Our contention is that, to the end of systematic theorizing, as a field we should take the theoretical substance of outcomes seriously, meaning that we should focus theory development not only on the predictor side of the equation, but also the criterion side.

In order to support our contention, we report the results of a somewhat unconventional literature review. First, we review the outcomes employed by those studying behavioral ethics in organizations. Though there are numerous reviews to date, they are organized around the predictors of unethical outcomes. By focusing on the outcomes, we highlight some limitations of this body of work. Second, we review a series of scholarly conversations about the theoretical substance of morally relevant outcomes. We use the term "conversations" in a nontechnical sense to refer to instances of scholars explicitly writing about this topic. These conversations are drawn largely from literatures outside of the literature on behavioral ethics in organizations, particularly psychology. We present them in the context of a "meta-conversation," or a conversation about the potential fruitfulness of having such conversations within our own field and the forms that they might take. Rather than agreeing or disagreeing with their content, we highlight features of these conversations, connecting them to theoretical advancements. While an overarching theoretical framework of behavioral ethics outcomes in organizations is beyond the scope of this chapter, we hope that reflection upon these examples, which we organize by type, will inspire and otherwise engender similar conversations within our literature. We conclude by suggesting topics for further conversations that are particularly relevant to behavioral ethics in organizations. Importantly, we number among those engaging in this field of research and we mean to include ourselves in the collective "we," making our essay both outwardly and inwardly focused, a reflection on the state of the field and a reflection on our own work.

THE OUTCOMES WE STUDY

We begin by reporting the results of our review of the outcomes we study in the field of behavioral ethics in organizations. Here our focus is contemporary rather than historical.

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[2] We do not take this statement to be a reflection of Treviño et al.'s (2014) view on how things *should* be as they are explicitly describing the field as it exists, rather than offering normative commentary. Also here and elsewhere (e.g., Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; Treviño et al., 2006) they give greater attention to the criterion side of the equation than is the norm.

As such, we limited our review to recently published articles: 2009-2015.[3] Given our focus on organizational research, we also limited our review to six top organizational behavior and management journals publishing empirical work: the *Academy of Management Journal*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Organization Science*, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, and *Personnel Psychology*. We searched each issue of these six journals during the specified time period to identify all behavioral ethics articles – that is, articles in which the outcome variables were individuals' ethical judgments, decisions, or behaviors.[4] Based on this criterion, we identified 201 studies reported within 74 articles[5] published with the following frequencies across journals: 67.1% in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 13.4% in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 9.5% in the *Academy of Management Journal*, 4.5% in *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 3.5% in *Organization Science*, and 2% in *Personnel Psychology*.

The vast majority of the studies were conducted in the laboratory (80%), with field (18%) and archival (2%) studies occurring in smaller numbers. The studies were also largely experimental (73%), rather than correlational (24%) or other types of designs (i.e., quasi-experimental, qualitative, and exploratory). Most studies entailed student (51%) or online (26%) samples; 18% of the samples consisted of employees, managers, professionals, or military personnel. The remaining samples were drawn from other sources (e.g., individuals at an airport). Consistent with Rest's (1986) four-stage moral decision-making model, we can classify the outcomes of these studies generally as being related to awareness of a moral issue, a moral judgment as to whether something is right or wrong, intention to act based on one's judgment, and the resulting decision or behavior. In the majority of these studies the outcomes were participants' decisions or behaviors (62%), with the second most modal type of outcome being judgments (28%). Relatively few studies focused on intentions (16%) or awareness (1.5%). Note that these percentages sum to more than 100 because in a small portion of studies researchers employed multiple types of outcomes. Also, very few studies (7.5%) focus on prosocial outcomes like charitable donations.

Beyond being classifiable in these general terms, the outcomes employed were for the most part not grounded in a conceptual definition of what is unethical. Only twenty of the articles (27%) included an explicit definition. In nine of these articles Jones' (1991) definition was cited: "…an *ethical decision* is defined as a decision that is both legal and morally acceptable to the larger community. Conversely, an *unethical decision* is either illegal or morally unacceptable to the larger community" (p. 367). Notably, Jones characterized his definition as being "admittedly imprecise and relativistic" but "adequate for the purposes of [his] article" (p. 367). In ten of the articles the definitions presented were broadly consistent with Jones's, including features like "legal," "normative," "consensual," and "universal." In only one article did the presented definition diverge from this pattern, with the authors specifying that altruistic intention is necessary for an action to be moral (Casciaro, Gino, and Kouchaki, 2014).

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[3] We concluded our search for articles in early November of 2015; thus, our date range is just short of six full years.

[4] Consistent with the behavioral ethics literature, we use the terms "decisions" and "behaviors" largely interchangeably. For instance, the decision to cheat in an experimental task is equivalent to the behavior of cheating.

[5] Consistent with meta-analytic techniques, which focus on effect sizes, here, unless otherwise noted, we focus on studies as the unit of interest rather than articles.

In addition to the absence of an explicit definition in 73% of the articles, also striking is the limited variety of outcome variables in terms of moral content. Across studies, 69% of the decision and behavioral outcomes were either cheating (44%) or lying (25%). For example, researchers frequently used the matrix task (Mazar, Amir, and Ariely, 2008) to assess cheating and the Gneezy (2005) deception game to assess lying in laboratory studies.[6] In the matrix task, participants are instructed to search for two numbers that add up to ten (e.g., 3.81 and 6.19) in a set of twelve three-digit numbers (i.e., matrix) and to report on a separate sheet the number of matrices they have successfully solved. Since their payment is determined by their self-reported performance, participants can earn more money by cheating, or over-reporting the number of matrices they have solved. The deception game is, at least ostensibly, dyadic, and entails two payoff options. The participant stands to gain more money from one option (Option A) than the other (Option B), and the reverse is true for the other player who stands to gain more money from Option B compared to Option A. The participant knows what these options are but the other player does not. The other player must choose between Options A and B, thereby determining how much money each player gets, based on information provided by the participant. The participant has an opportunity (and incentive) to lie to the other player by saying that Option A is better for her (i.e., the other player) than Option B, or to honestly tell the other player that Option B is better for her than Option A. Lying is measured by which message the participant sends to the other player. Like the matrix task and deception game, the majority of studies (53%) were carried out via decontextualized, non-organizational materials.

These results suggest that, as a field, we are not talking much about the theoretical substance of outcomes and the outcomes employed are drawn from a fairly narrow set. We wish to be clear that we consider the research we are reviewing to be a fine body of work. Fundamentally, rather than quality, the issue we raise here is one of scope. The study of individuals' moral judgments, decisions, and behaviors in organizations is a very large topic of which we seem to study a very narrow slice. We suggest that to the extent that we want to build a body of knowledge about ethics in organizations more generally, we would do well to expand our horizons. A primary obstacle to such an expansion is our limited understanding of the theoretical substance of outcomes. In the next section we engage in a meta-conversation – a conversation about having conversations – in which we describe the existing conversation in our field around the theoretical substance of outcomes and then we describe a number of relevant conversations outside of our field, which we present as examples. These examples serve to illustrate what such conversations might look like in our own field, and how productive they can be.

CONVERSATIONS AROUND THE THEORETICAL SUBSTANCE OF OUTCOMES

Though we are a field of study essentially aimed at predicting when people will cross the line into immorality and when they will refrain from doing so, we ourselves do not seem to really know where that line is. In the parlance of science, we do not have a generally accepted construct definition of our primary outcome variable: ethicality. To be sure this is a particularly thorny issue. When faced with the question of how to define ethicality, the

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[6] Indeed, we ourselves have used the Gneezy (2005) deception game in our published and ongoing research.

familiar refrain justifying retreat is that philosophers and other scholars have wrestled with this question for centuries with no consensus in sight. Thus, we cannot expect to resolve the issue, especially as our expertise is in descriptive research (focusing on what people do) rather than normative theorizing (focusing on what people ought to do). We see the wisdom in this humility. Yet defining one's constructs is fundamental to good descriptive research. It affects the questions we ask, the data we collect, and the inferences we make from our data. Herein lies the conundrum: when it comes to behavioral ethics research, it is not possible to draw a solid, impermeable line between descriptive and normative ethics, yet how to proceed?

Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe (2008) suggested that our field could draw on the work of those who engage in normative theorizing, philosophers and theologians, to help us think about a construct definition. They offered Kant's (1785/1964) respect principle as an example: what is ethical is to treat people always as ends in themselves and never merely as means to ends. That is, this principle provides one conceptualization of ethicality. Palmer (2012) questioned whether this *content approach* to defining ethicality is likely to be fruitful, pointing out that it has yet to produce a consensus on the definition of ethicality. Drawing on sociological traditions, he suggested an alternative particularly meant to capitalize on consensus: what is unethical is what is labeled as such by social control agents, who are those designated to monitor and control unethical behavior. Taking this approach, we can look to a body like the Supreme Court to see what is moral and what is not. His suggestion overlaps with the tack taken by the few researchers who have offered definitions of ethicality in their work, generally stipulating that what is ethical is what is normative and widely accepted. Thus, the *consensus approach* is the dominant definitional approach in the field (among those providing explicit definitions). While the consensus approach has its appeal, Warren and Smith-Crowe (2008) argued that by focusing exclusively on outcomes that are obviously or intuitively unethical (arguably two pathways to consensus), we miss important ethically relevant experiences of people in organizations, namely the experience of grappling with moral ambiguity – those things that seem to have ethical import, but which are neither obvious nor intuitive. Palmer also noted that some would take issue with the relativistic nature of the consensus approach. Most recently, Moore and Gino (2015) raised the question of whether a precise definition of what is ethical is indeed needed by the field.

One might look at this exchange and conclude that, alas, still no progress has been made as researchers have not been able to rally around a singular definition of what is ethical. We, however, see progress in that we are collectively engaging in a burgeoning conversation about the theoretical substance of our outcome variables, raising questions about how to proceed and engaging in debate about what is ethical. This exercise in itself holds promise and we should carry it further. We take the opportunity here to engage in a meta-conversation, a conversation about having conversations in which we focus on examples of relevant, fruitful conversations around the theoretical substance of morally relevant outcomes. We present these examples not to the end of producing an overarching theoretical framework of moral outcomes, but rather to the end of promoting the notion that having these conversations is valuable. Importantly, our purpose is not to take a stance of our own with regard to the specific content of the example conversations; rather it is to highlight the connections between having these conversations and theoretical progress. Given these connections, instead of marking progress by whether or not we have achieved consensus on a singular definition of ethicality (a rather all-or-nothing proposition), perhaps

we could better mark progress by the quality of the conversations we are having around the theoretical substance of the outcomes we study. Interestingly and contrary to a convergence on a singular definition, the examples we present in large part are conversations about expanding the notion of ethicality, with scholars arguing that phenomena are misunderstood when ethicality is conceived within overly narrow bounds.

Next, we describe three relevant debates. In each of these cases, scholars took the substance of moral outcomes seriously and in doing so opened up opportunities for questioning assumptions, examining disagreements, and promoting prescriptions. We then provide examples of other ways of engaging in a conversation around the theoretical substance of outcome variables: mapping the moral domain, reconsidering moral status, and building theory. These conversations too, we show, have been productive. We organize these examples by the forms they have taken as we assume that, in addition to the general point that these conversations have been theoretically valuable, the forms themselves may be instructive to anyone wishing to engage in such conversations. We draw these examples from the psychology and management literatures, though, notably, the majority of them are from psychology where such examples are far more plentiful.

Debates

Questioning Assumptions. Of long-standing interest to psychologists has been human moral development. In this tradition Kohlberg (1963, 1976) advanced his highly influential cognitive-developmental stage theory of moral development. It has been said that his work and ideas reflect his experience of being imprisoned by the British on Cyprus after World War II for his attempts to help Jewish refugees break through the British blockade on Jewish immigration to Israel (Garz, 2009). Notably, his conception of the moral domain is "deontic," entailing obligations and rights (Colby, Kohlberg, Gibbs, and Lieberman, 1983); it is often described in terms of justice and rules. His theory is grounded in the ideas that moral judgments about right and wrong reflect reasoning, and that one's reasoning shifts qualitatively across developmental stages. He identifies six successive stages occurring at three levels: preconventional (characterized by obedience and a self-serving morality), conventional (characterized by prioritizing duties to close others and society), and postconventional (characterized by an appreciation of social contracts, individual rights, and universal principles).

Kohlberg and his colleagues (Colby et al., 1983; Colby and Kohlberg, 1987; Kohlberg, 1976) developed interview protocols designed to elicit the reasoning underlying people's moral judgments. For instance, they devised the now well-known Heinz dilemma, pitting the preservation of life against upholding the law: Heinz's wife is sick and will die unless she takes a drug, which they cannot afford, and, thus, she can only survive if Heinz steals the drug from the druggist. Participants are asked what Heinz should do (Colby et al.): Should he steal the drug? What if he doesn't love his wife? What if it's not his wife, but a stranger who is threatened with death? What if it's not his wife, but a pet, whom he loves and is threatened with death? They developed corresponding procedures to score participants' reasoning according to the theoretically specified stages of development. Kohlberg and his colleagues, using such protocols, find evidence supportive of his theory. For instance, Colby et al. (1983) report the results of a 20-year longitudinal study of 58 boys who began the study

at ages 10, 13, and 16. They proceeded through the stages as specified by the theory, without skipping any steps, and only in very few cases regressing.

Gilligan (1982/1993) questioned the prevailing assumption of what constituted the moral domain, reacting to Kohlberg's theory and research, as well as a tradition of understanding human development using male development as the yardstick (in which she also implicates Freud, Piaget, and Erikson). She quipped that "it all goes back, of course, to Adam and Eve – a story which shows, among other things, that if you make a woman out of a man, you are bound to get into trouble" (p. 6). The trouble she saw was that women and girls were seen as flawed, failed, or underdeveloped. As such, she came to question the validity of the yardstick. She illustrates her point by describing the responses of Amy and Jake, two eleven-year-olds, to the Heinz dilemma; notably, besides age, they are matched for socio-economic status and intelligence. Also notable, they in some ways defy gender stereotypes in that Amy wants to be a scientist and Jake prefers English to Math. They also differ markedly in terms of their moral reasoning.

Jake is confident that Heinz should steal the drug and makes compelling points for his assertion:

> For one thing, a human life is worth more than money, and if the druggist only makes $1,000, he is still going to live, but if Heinz doesn't steal the drug, his wife is going to die. (*Why is life worth more than money?*) Because the druggist can get a thousand dollars later from rich people with cancer, but Heinz can't get his wife again. (*Why not?*) Because people are all different and so you couldn't get Heinz's wife again. (Gilligan, 1982/1993, p. 26)

He also speculates that if Heinz did steal the drug, a judge presiding over the trial, were he arrested, would deem Heinz's actions as "the right thing to do," reasoning that "the laws have mistakes, and you can't go writing up a law for everything that you can imagine" (p. 26). Amy sees the situation quite differently, also making compelling points. In fact, she rejects the intended dilemma altogether when asked if Heinz should steal the drug: "Well, I don't think so. I think there might be other ways besides stealing it, like if he could borrow the money or make a loan or something, but he really shouldn't steal the drug – but his wife shouldn't die either" (Gilligan, p. 28). Amy goes on to say

> If he stole the drug, he might save his wife then, but if he did, he might have to go to jail, and then his wife might get sicker again, and he couldn't get more of the drug, and it might not be good. So, they should really just talk it out and find some other way to make the money. (Gilligan, p. 28)

Gilligan interprets the difference between Jake and Amy like this:

> Seeing in the dilemma not a math problem with humans [as Jake sees it] but a narrative of relationships that extends over time, Amy envisions the wife's continuing need for her husband and the husband's continuing concern for his wife and seeks to respond to the druggist's need in a way that would sustain rather than sever connection. (p. 28)

Gilligan further argues that

> Just as Jake is confident the judge would agree that stealing is the right thing for Heinz to do, so Amy is confident that, 'if Heinz and the druggist had talked it out long enough, they could reach something besides stealing.' As he considers the law

to 'have mistakes,' so she see this drama as a mistake, believing that 'the world should just share things more and then people wouldn't have to steal.' (p. 29)

Importantly, using Kohlberg's scheme, Amy is rated as less morally developed than Jake (Gilligan, 1982/1993).[7] Gilligan argues that this assessment is unreasonable, that it reflects a value of justice over care: whereas Jake sees "… a conflict between life and property that can be resolved by logical deduction, Amy [sees] a fracture of human relationship that must be mended with its own thread" (p. 31). Gilligan contends that an ethic of care is just as valid as an ethic of justice, and that Amy's reasoning is therefore just as valid as Jake's. In this way, Gilligan entered into a debate about the theoretical substance of the relevant outcomes: moral judgment and reasoning. She questioned the assumption that these outcomes should be conceptualized exclusively in terms of justice and rules, with relational aspects of morality being devalued.

Two especially interesting elements of this debate are Gilligan's (1982/1993) academic insider status and the historical context with regard to women's rights. She was trained in the tradition that she came to criticize. She worked with Erikson and Kohlberg at Harvard; she found Kohlberg's arguments to be "powerful" (p. xvii). She taught psychology "in the traditions of Freud and Piaget" (p. xiv). She described suppressing inklings of dissent:

> …I remember moments in classes when a woman would ask a question that illuminated with sudden brilliance the foundations of the subject we were discussing. And now, remembering those moments, I also can hear the sounds of my own inner division: my saying to the woman, 'That's a good question,' and then saying, 'but that's not what we are talking about here.' (p. xiv)

Gilligan's eventual dissent was predicated on self-awareness, listening to her own voice which was telling her that she should be listening to other female voices too, even if these voices were pushing against the weight of accepted scholarship stretching back to the previous century. This came during what she described as a "resurgence in the Women's Movement" (p. iv), including the 1973 Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion, when women were struggling to speak up and to be heard. Today, the ethic of care is generally an uncontroversial component of the moral domain. In fact, as we will discuss in a later example, researchers are again criticizing the narrowness of the moral domain, but now the movement is to expand beyond the limitations of justice and care to include other aspects of morality (e.g., Graham et al., 2011). Even so, the taken-for-grantedness of Gilligan's (1982/1993) relational view of morality seems somewhat unlikely upon reflection on the factors surrounding its genesis. One might even read this as a David and Goliath story, the Goliath being both Gilligan herself and her academic discipline; in this light it suggests the potential fruitfulness of debate even if it is against the odds.

Examining Disagreements. Our next example of a debate is more recent but is grounded overtly in Kohlberg's (1963) work. Wading into the debate on whether moral judgment is the product of reason or emotion, Monin, Pizarro, and Beer (2007) argue that it depends on the situation. They trace the current debate in psychology back to eighteenth century philosophy (Kant versus Hume, advocating for reason and emotion, respectively). In modern times Kohlberg's view that judgment is a product of reasoning has dominated,

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[7] Gilligan (1982/1993) observed that adult women reasoned similarly to Amy when faced with the Heinz dilemma (i.e., they reasoned in relational terms).

though research on bounded rationality, automaticity, and emotion has made way for a different perspective, one in which emotion is primary (e.g., Haidt, 2001). Yet sound arguments and compelling data exist on both sides of the debate, making neither easily dismissible. Monin et al. contend that the debate hinges on researchers' conceptualization of moral judgment: "we suggest that these diverging conclusions have arisen because investigators have started with differing understandings of what constitutes moral judgment and, as a result, have designed methods that capture very different phenomena" (p. 101).

They identify two "prototypical situations" – moral dilemmas and moral reactions – and demonstrate their asymmetrical employment (Monin et al., 2007). Those who conceptualize moral judgment as a reasoned process test their hypotheses in the context of moral dilemmas, and those who conceptualize moral judgment as an emotional process test their hypotheses in the context of moral reactions. Kohlberg is well known for confronting his participants with moral dilemmas, whereby satisfaction of one moral principle means the violation of another (e.g., in the Heinz dilemma). Monin et al. point out that not only is there no easy answer to the question of what the actor in these dilemmas should do, thus necessitating reasoning on the part of participants, but also participants would be typically probed by the researcher to explain and elaborate on their reasoning (via 9-12 "standardized probe questions"; Colby et al., 1983, p. 9), thus further necessitating reason. Hence, the methodology itself, based on a particular conceptualization of moral judgment, seems to inevitably provide evidence of moral judgment as a reason-based process.

In contrast is research on the emotion-based view of moral judgment, particularly Haidt's (2001) social intuitionist model, which holds that moral judgment (almost always) is affective and intuitive and arises suddenly in one's consciousness. In this tradition the methodological approach is to present participants with the shocking transgressions of others and ask them whether the behavior is moral, effectively measuring participants' moral reactions (Monin et al., 2007). Such transgressions include the following: college-aged brother and sister, Mark and Julie, while vacationing in France, have sex using two forms of birth control, enjoy it but decide not to do it again and to keep it as their special secret (Haidt, 2001), and a man weekly buys a chicken at the grocery store, takes it home, masturbates with it, cooks it, and then eats it (Haidt, Koller, and Dias, 1993). Monin et al. suggest here too that the choice of methodology, derived from the researchers' conceptualization of what constitutes a moral judgment, likely promotes theory-consistent results. Participants faced with these scenarios react immediately and emotionally to behaviors that are likely to provoke disgust and contempt. What is more, the action in the scenario has already taken place, leaving participants with no decision to make, only with an opportunity to react.

In light of their critique, Monin et al. (2007) emphasize two points. First, far from being unfruitful, this research has advanced our collective understanding of moral judgment albeit in a less generalizable way than was perhaps originally intended. That is, Kohlberg and his colleagues' research sheds light on how people reason in the face of moral dilemmas, and Haidt and his colleagues' research sheds light on the affective nature of moral reactions. Furthermore, they argue that there is room for emotion in a reason-based conceptualization of moral judgment: anticipated emotions (e.g., guilt), or even incidental emotions (i.e., those not related to the situation at hand), can influence one's choices, and strong emotions experienced because of the aversive experience of being in a dilemma might lead some to avoid making a choice all altogether. They also maintain that there is room for reason in an

emotion-based conceptualization of moral judgment: intuitions may be formed, activated, or overridden by reason, and reason may direct one to engage or disengage with emotions depending on their utility or disutility. Second, to the extent that methodological choices represent a broader set of options, our collective understanding of a phenomenon is enhanced. Even moral dilemmas and shocking transgressions, they contend, are a limited set. As such, they advocate for an expansion of the types of situations studied to include, for instance, moral temptation situations, whereby moral judgment is considered from a self-regulation perspective.

Promoting Prescription. Our final example of a debate is more formalized than the previous examples: a point-counterpoint exchange in a single journal issue in which one set of scholars presented an argument in an initial article, other scholars commented on this initial article in three subsequent articles, and then the original scholars responded to these comments in a final article. At stake in this debate is prescription: the most effective process for making moral decisions, and, hence, the process one should use for making moral decisions. Far from being merely an academic exercise, the consequences are far-reaching. Bazerman and Greene (2010) note the influence of decision science research on what is taught in professional schools, which explicitly focus on improving the effectiveness of students' decision-making skills. They also suggest the promise of this work for informing national policies around things like organ donations. Importantly, the Obama administration seems to agree: "by executive order Mr. Obama directed federal agencies to incorporate behavioral science – insights into how people actually make decisions – into their programs" (Sustein, 2015).

Hence, decision science is quite influential, and in their focal article Bennis, Medin, and Bartels (2010a) raise doubts about its core prescription with regard to moral decision-making. They describe the project of decision science like this: the quality of decisions should be judged based on the likelihood of their leading to outcomes consistent with decision makers' goals, raising the question of which decision-making process is most likely to produce the highest quality decisions. The dominant answer in the field, they contend, is cost-benefit analysis. Their essential question is whether cost-benefit analysis is the optimum process for all types of decisions, particularly moral decisions. Though they focus particularly on moral rule adherence as an alternative consideration, noting that it is seen as the product of biased (and, thus, suboptimal) decision-making. To illustrate their point, they refer to the interpretation of participants' decisions with regard to the following scenario:

> As a result of a dam on a river, 20 species of fish are threatened with extinction. By opening the dam a month each year, you can save those species, but 2 species downstream will become extinct because of the changing water level. Would you open the dam? (Ritov and Baron, 1999, p. 87)

The optimal answer derived from the cost-benefit analysis prescription is "yes." Some participants, however, answered "no" because they did not want to cause the extinction of any species. The decisions of these participants are considered "biased." Notably, the rightness of the decision is defined in terms of the decision-making process deemed to be optimal; said differently, the decision science prescription for effective moral decision-making is based on the field's definition of morality. According to Bennis et al. (2010a), if moral rule adherence were to be the prescribed process, then "no" would be considered the right course of action as it is consistent with the rule of "do no harm."

Similar to the argument made by Monin et al. (2007), Bennis et al. (2010a) raise the issue of methodological choices based on theoretical commitments. They criticize what they call "closed world assumptions," essentially arguing that scenarios designed to clearly distinguish an optimal decision from a suboptimal decision (via calculable costs and benefits) necessarily present participants with artificial decision-making situations that do not reflect the complexity of real life.[8] They argue that when people make moral decisions they care about and attend to a variety of features, not only maximizing benefits relative to costs. They also criticize what they see as the false transparency of the "right" answer in these scenarios, arguing largely in bounded rationality terms that real-world cost-benefit analyses are fraught with numerous limitations and do not readily yield right answers. Given their criticisms of cost-benefit analysis, they consider moral rule adherence as an alternative conceptualization of the best decision-making process, particularly drawing on game theory research to argue that groups and individuals are better off when they adhere to moral rules compared to other strategies.

Commenting on Bennis et al.'s (2010a) article, Schwartz (2010) and Tetlock and Mitchell (2010) present largely sympathetic views, posing challenges to a morality defined exclusively in terms of cost-benefit analysis. Schwartz describes practical wisdom (Schwartz and Sharpe, 2010): a truly wise person is anchored by moral rules, making "…exceptions at just the right times, in just the right ways, for just the right reasons" (Schwartz, 2010, p. 204). Taking it to its extreme end, he characterizes the widespread and routine use of cost-benefit analysis, whereby rule-following occurs only when the benefits outweigh the costs, as socially destabilizing. Tetlock and Mitchell portray real-world decision makers as pragmatists who are accountable to a variety of audiences, including themselves, to whom they would like to appear both morally principled and cognitively flexible. They argue that decision-making shifts according to the social context, where moral rule adherence is the relevant process in one situation, and cost-benefit analysis in another. Tetlock and Mitchell's perspective raises the question of whether the pursuit of a single best decision-making process for moral decision-making is even a sensible endeavor.

In contrast, Bazerman and Greene (2010) take a stand against what they characterize as Bennis et al.'s (2010a) misrepresentation of cost-benefit analysis and subsequent unjustifiable prescriptions for moral decision-making. The foundation of their counter-argument is their contention that Bennis et al. present a "straw man" argument grounded in a version of cost-benefit analysis that relies on a "deprived utility function" (Bazerman and Greene, p. 209). Essentially, they argue that this portrayal of cost-benefit analysis is overly simplistic in its narrow definition of utility, and that the scholars who advocate for this decision-making approach are talking about a much richer form of cost-benefit analysis that incorporates a variety of considerations including moral rules. They dispute some of Bennis et al.'s points (that closed world experiments are not readily generalizable outside the laboratory and that moral rule adherence is a superior decision-making strategy), but embrace others, albeit coming to a different conclusion: "In sum, we agree with most of the challenges to CBA [cost-benefit analysis] that BMB [Bennis, Medin, and Bartels] identify, but we view their

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[8] Gilligan (1982/1993) made a similar point (cf. Schwartz, 2010), which is exemplified by the 11-year-old Amy's attempts to expand the dilemma posed to her so that she could access additional possible solutions beyond Heinz stealing the drug and his wife dying.

critiques as a set of considerations that can contribute to more careful CBAs" (Bazerman and Greene, p. 211).

In their reply to these commentary articles, Bennis et al. (2010b) acknowledge points of common ground, particularly that as decision-making processes, cost-benefit analysis has its advantages and moral rule adherence has its disadvantages, and that closed world assumptions are not exclusive to cost-benefit analysis. They also reaffirm several of their initial points in response to Bazerman and Greene's (2010) counter-arguments. Not surprisingly, the two sets of authors who started from the most distal points of view did not come to perfect agreement through the process of this debate. Yet, both also indicate having been benefited from the process. Related, Schwartz (2010) made a point in the context of the closed world assumptions question that we think is more generalizable. We need to have conversations, not because we can expect the end result to be agreement but because they can bring clarity, and, we think, insights into the phenomena we are studying. In the course of this particular conversation, a number of important issues came to light including the dominant definition of morality within decision science and the implications for its far-reaching decision-making prescriptions, the relation between cost-benefit analysis and moral rule adherence, and the place of moral flexibility.

Other Types of Conversations

Mapping the Moral Domain. Beyond debates, there are a number of other types of conversations to be had around the theoretical substance of outcome variables. Perhaps the most obvious conversation is one about what constitutes the moral domain. Undaunted by the lack of agreement on the normative question of the line between right and wrong, Haidt and his colleagues' reaction to this state of affairs is to advocate for a conceptualization of morality that embraces diversity (Haidt and Graham, 2007; Haidt and Joseph, 2004), a moral pluralism (Graham et al., 2012). As they put it, "people disagree about the size and content of the moral domain – that is, about what 'morality' means. Researchers therefore need theories that encompass the true breadth of human morality, and they need measurement tools that can detect a broad array of moral concerns" (Graham et al., 2011, p. 382). They particularly note that the ethics of justice (Kohlberg, 1963) and care (Gilligan, 1982/1993) have been the rather exclusive focus of researchers for some decades (Haidt and Graham, 2007) and that, while these ethics may largely represent Western, educated liberals (Graham et al., 2011), they do not capture the full spectrum of moral concerns of people more generally. As such, "a major goal of MFT [moral foundations theory] is to expand the range of phenomena studied in moral psychology so that it matches the full range of moral concerns, including those found in non-Western cultures, in religious practices, and among political conservatives" (Graham et al., 2011, p. 366).

In order to generate a more inclusive mapping of the moral domain, they (Haidt and Graham, 2007; Haidt and Joseph, 2004) draw on anthropological and evolutionary perspectives, as well as previous efforts to map the moral domain (e.g., Fiske, 1992; Schwartz and Bilsky, 1990; Schweder, Much, Mahapatra, and Park, 1997). The result of their efforts is moral foundations theory, which indicates five foundations as constituting the moral domain, with the possibility of additional foundations being recognized (Graham et

al., 2011): care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation.[9] Put simply, fairness/cheating has to do with issues of justice, rights, and autonomy, while care/harm has to do with compassion and an aversion to others' suffering. Together these comprise the "individualizing" foundations because they prioritize the protection of the individual (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek, 2009). The remaining foundations comprise the "binding" foundations because they prioritize the protection of the group above the individual (Graham et al., 2009). Loyalty/betrayal reflects a devotion to the group, while authority/subversion reflects respect for authority. Sanctity/degradation reflects the human capacity for disgust binding groups through a common sense of what is sacred.

Research on moral foundations theory has been generative (see Graham et al., 2012, for a review) not only in terms of research testing the core theory and additional hypotheses derived from the theory (e.g., Cornwell and Higgins, 2014; Smith, Aquino, Koleva, and Graham, 2014) and research to develop new theory (e.g., Fehr, Yam, and Dang, 2015), but also in terms of sparking fundamental debates, such as whether pluralism is the best approach to conceptualizing the moral domain (e.g., Frimer, Tell, and Haidt, 2015; Graham, in press; Gray and Keeney, in press a, b; Gray, Schein, and Ward, in press). Notably, moral foundations theory has been applied to the US culture war and the seemingly intractable divide between political liberals and conservatives. Graham et al. (2009) argue that liberalism is grounded in an optimistic view of human nature and a belief in individual liberty whereby individuals are allowed to pursue their potential. This viewpoint privileges the individual consistent with the individualizing foundations. They argue, conversely, that conservatism is grounded in a pessimistic view of human nature and a belief that individual liberty must be curtailed for the greater good. This viewpoint privileges the group consistent with the binding foundations. They hypothesize that, while conservatives would tend to care about all five moral foundations to an equivalent extent, liberals would care more about the individualizing foundations than the binding foundations. They report data consistent with this hypothesis.

Building on this work, Day, Fiske, Downing, and Trail (2014) recently investigated the extent to which framing messages in terms of moral foundations can actually change liberals' and conservatives' political attitudes, either further entrenching an existing attitude or leading to a shift in attitude. They find that framing conservative issues in terms of authority or purity (e.g., "Authorities should not allow people to live off the system" and "Our way of life is sacred, and should not be sacrificed by new environmental policies," p. 1562) leads conservatives to become further entrenched in their existing attitudes, while framing liberal issues in terms of harm or fairness leads liberals to become further entrenched in their existing attitudes. Very interestingly, Day et al. also find that conservatives' attitudes became more liberal, when liberal issues are framed in terms of the ingroup (loyalty), authority, or purity foundations. Grounded in an understanding of the conflicting moral systems of conservatives and liberals (and more fundamentally in the project of mapping the moral domain), this work is an important step toward the possibility of these groups gaining common ground, which is of no small significance in an era of political dysfunction to the point of federal government shutdowns.

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[9] Different labels have been used for the foundations over time. To reflect the most updated wording, we took these labels from www.moralfoundations.org.

Reconsidering Moral Status. Another example of how we can engage in a conversation about the theoretical substance of outcomes is to question the moral status of our well-trod outcome variables. Levine and Schweitzer (2014) challenge the scholarly wisdom and common sense by which deception is classified as immoral and harmful. They point out that prior research confounds deception with selfishness, thus promoting the view that deception is immoral. Instead they consider deception through the lens of an ethical dilemma: justice versus care.[10] Levine and Schweitzer argue that while principles of justice prescribe rule-following (and hence honesty), principles of care prescribe the protection of others, and at times protecting others may entail dishonesty. They define prosocial lies as "…false statements made with the intention of misleading and benefitting a target" (2014, p. 108). Reasoning that care and the protection of others is more fundamental to morality, with justice and rule-following likely to have evolved as a means to promote care, they predict that when faced with a moral dilemma in which care and justice are in conflict, individuals would likely prioritize care over justice, judging prosocial lies to be morally permissible. They test their hypothesis in a series of laboratory studies based on a modification of Gneezy's (2005) deception game in which participants judge the morality of others' honesty or dishonesty. They find that participants judge prosocial lying (beneficial to the other party but disadvantageous to the liar, or in some cases not affecting the liar) to be more indicative of moral character than selfish truth-telling (disadvantageous to the other party but beneficial to the truth-teller). This effect holds regardless of whether prosocial lying entailed self-sacrifice or beneficial outcomes.

Levine and Schweitzer (2015) follow this initial work with research on the implications of deception for trust. Again, they challenge conventional thinking, which holds dishonesty to be detrimental to trust. They argue that prior research confounds benevolence with integrity, in that reductions in trust are seen in the wake of behaviors that are both harmful and unethical. Similar to their argument about justice versus care dilemmas, they argue that benevolence and integrity may sometimes conflict such that acting with integrity is harmful to others, and that benevolence ultimately influences the extent to which individuals trust one another more so than integrity. They demonstrate support for their hypothesis in a series of laboratory studies entailing economic and trust games. Prosocial lying increases trust in the prosocial liar both among those lied to directly and those who observed lying to a third party. Consistent with their reasoning, prosocial lying increases trust in another's benevolence but not in another's integrity.

Notably, deception is one of the most common operationalizations of unethicality used in our field. Taking the rare approach of thinking in terms of moral dilemmas, Levine and Schweitzer (2014, 2015) consider complexities of the moral status of deception not well documented in our field. More specifically, by disentangling notions of justice, care, benevolence, and integrity, they are able to offer a more nuanced view of deception. As they put it, "quite possibly, our understanding of deception may simply reflect attitudes towards selfish behavior, rather than deception per se" (Levine and Schweitzer, 2014, p. 108). Not only is their research fruitful in the sense of promoting our understanding of the moral status of deception, it is also fruitful in the sense that it opens the door to previously

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[10] Notably, recognition of this dilemma can be credited to Gilligan (1982/1993) whose work put the ethic of care on a moral par with the ethic of justice.

unasked questions like the one addressed in their subsequent (Levine and Schweitzer, 2015) article: if prosocial liars are seen as moral, then might such behavior also engender trust? Additionally, their work raises questions around the moral status of deception when motivations are mixed (prosocial and selfish) or unclear, when morality is conceived in terms of courage (perhaps prosocial lying is seen as cowardly), and when prosocial lying behavior is habitual (perhaps eroding the liar's credibility over time; Levine and Schweitzer, 2014). Without first reconsidering the moral status of deception, these questions are unlikely to have arisen.

Building Theory. Our final example is theory building substantiated by an approach to defining ethicality. We end with this example purposefully as it is a departure from the others. Whereas they all share a psychological approach and are connected to the earlier work of Kohlberg (1963) and Gilligan (1982/1993), our final example comes from Palmer (2012), who, as we noted previously, advocates a sociological approach to defining what is ethical and what is not. His premise is provocative: wrongdoing is *created* by social control agents who draw the line between right and wrong. For instance, governments act as social control agents when they deem some behaviors as illegal and others as legal. Drawing on examples from the legal domain, he noted that social control agents can create wrongdoing by instituting new rules (e.g., passing new laws) or altering the enforcement of existing rules (e.g., by delaying enforcement of new laws). Palmer gives the example of the Cellar-Kefauver Act, passed in 1950, which strengthened earlier anti-trust laws. The passing of this act gave rise to cases in which certain types of organizational acquisitions were legal in 1949, but not in 1950. Further complicating the matter, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and Department of Justice (DOJ) largely turned a blind eye to these newly illegal practices until the 1960s, meaning that companies were prosecuted for anti-trust law violations in the 1960s, which went unprosecuted, while being just as illegal, in the 1950s.

Further, Palmer (2012) provides an extensive analysis of social control theory's implications for wrongdoing in organizations, including both why social control agents draw lines where they do and how the lines drawn can increase wrongdoing. In explaining how social control agents influence individuals, he describes instances of first and second-order wrongdoing. First-order wrongdoing is constituted by a relatively direct path stemming from social control agents. He argues that social control agents can blur the line between right and wrong (e.g., by creating confusing rules and inconsistently reinforcing them), thus leading to individuals inadvertently crossing the line. Referring back to the Cellar-Kefauver Act, he notes that the corporate executives in this era complained that they could not pursue acquisitions without fear of inadvertent wrongdoing. The FTC and DOJ blurred the line by enforcing the same law differently. Palmer further argues that social control agents can facilitate individuals crossing the line in an even more direct manner (e.g., through entrapment). He refers to the Archer Daniels Midland scandal, which involved a company executive, who, in his role of FBI informant, participated in price-fixing deals. Second-order wrongdoing is constituted by a relatively indirect path stemming from social control agents. Individuals may engage in wrongdoing in order to cover up previously committed wrongdoing like the Arthur Anderson executive who was convicted of impeding an investigation because he shredded documents. Or they may engage in wrongdoing in order to facilitate engagement in subsequent wrongdoing. For instance, Lance Armstrong and the US Postal Team were investigated for fraud because they allegedly sold sponsor donated bikes in order to raise funds to pay for their illicit performance-enhancing drugs.

Moreover, Palmer (2012) considers the influence of incentives on behavior and the ensuing possibilities for how social control agents can influence individuals' identities, potentially fostering what he calls a "deviant identity," such as that exemplified by Walter Pavlo who defrauded MCI and named a boat purchased with the proceeds "Miss Deeds" (p. 250). To the extent that individuals labeled as wrongdoers by social control agents may come to see themselves as deviants, it will be more natural for them to cross the line between right and wrong. The concept of this identity follows from Palmer's analysis of why social control agents draw lines where they do. He argues that it is inherently a political process, and that realizing the political nature of where the line is drawn can lead some to the cynical perspective that compliance is a "practical necessity" rather than a "moral imperative." The implication is that those with a deviant identity are likely to engage in unethical behavior when it benefits them and they feel they are unlikely to be caught.

Beyond the particulars of Palmer's (2012) analysis, we want to highlight the fruitfulness of his consideration of the best approach to defining ethicality. His application of social control theory suggests a theoretically grounded path toward a definition of right and wrong, and, even more relevant to our contention that we should take the theoretical substance of outcomes seriously, it led to novel questions and insights about why individuals engage in unethical behavior in organizations. In particular, he engaged with the question of why some actions are considered wrong and other are not. As a field, we have largely ignored this question. In contrast, through his engagement of this question, he develops novel theory, connecting structural and psychological factors that facilitate wrongdoing in organizations.

Summary

Here we have engaged in a meta-conversation about conversations on the theoretical substance of morally relevant outcome variables. We have detailed six examples of conversations. Our purpose in doing so has been to suggest what such conversations might look like, as well as to provide evidence of their fruitfulness in terms of advancing theory and providing insights. Based on these examples, we might expect that such conversations in the field of behavioral ethics in organizations could positively affect the questions we ask, the data we collect, and the inferences we draw from our data. We hope that our discussion of these rich examples might inspire our colleagues to join in the burgeoning conversation in our field. We conclude by suggesting pathways for further conversation.

CARRYING THE CONVERSATION FORWARD

The conversations we present in the preceding section are all highly relevant to the field of behavioral ethics in organizations, but they are largely not grounded in an organizational context per se. As rich and as useful as decontextualized conversations may be, they are not sufficient for a science of organizations. Rather it is important that we also think and talk about the theoretical substance of outcome variables in the context of organizations. A parallel point has been made by others who have argued that we should attend to the contextual forces that influence moral outcomes (Anteby, 2013; Brief and Smith-Crowe, in press; Tetlock and Mitchell, 2010; Treviño et al., 2014). More broadly, Staw (in press), in

reaction to what he describes as the movement of the overall field of organizational behavior toward decontextualized research, calls for phenomenon driven scholarship. This is to say that we should look to organizations to learn what problems are relevant and we should set about to study those problems (cf. Tushman and O'Reilly, 2007). Thinking in terms of phenomenon driven, organizational problem-solving could help us to expand the scope of our field in terms of the outcomes we study, as well as helping us to think through their theoretical substance.

While there are any number of possibilities, we limit ourselves to raising one general topic, though one that is rich enough to sustain numerous conversations: the problem of how and when and why individuals deal with moral ambiguity in organizations (e.g., Sonenshein, 2007, 2009; Warren and Smith-Crowe 2008). Though there is some recognition of this problem, more typically we think of morality in organizations as being dichotomous: ethical and unethical. We less often seem to recognize shades of grey. Yet there is work, that is notably phenomenon-driven (Staw in press), demonstrating the reality of moral ambiguity for organizational members. For instance, Manning and Anteby (in press, this volume) contemplate situations in which social control agents (e.g., organizations) do not draw clear lines of right and wrong for members, leaving them to figure it out for themselves. Drawing on rich examples from a variety of organizational and cross-cultural settings, they detail the types of strategies people employ to justify where they draw the line for themselves. Reinecke and Ansari (2015) too provide rich, cross-cultural examples in describing the highly complex collective sensemaking that goes into the Fairtrade pricing of coffee, rooibos, and cotton, where what is ethical is far from apparent. Without first conceding uncertainty and equivocality, questions of justification strategies and bases for collective understandings of morality are much less apparent.

One can also think about moral ambiguity in terms of dilemmas, whereby one moral principle is pitted against another, leaving the actor with the choice of which principle to violate. Though there is a rich history of studying how people grapple with dilemmas (e.g., Colby et al., 1983; Gilligan, 1982/1993), it is rarely pursued today. The work by Levine and Schweitzer (2014, 2015), in which they consider the dilemmas of justice vs. care and integrity vs. benevolence, is exceptional, and, as we noted previously, allowed for an opportunity to reconsider the moral status of one of the most widely used outcome variables (deception) in the field of behavioral ethics in organizations. Flynn and Wiltermuth's (2010) use of moral dilemmas is also a rare exception. They constructed dilemmas based on three "right-right" dilemmas discussed by Kidder (1995): individual vs. community (where either an individual or a community must bear a cost), truth vs. loyalty (where one must be honest or keep a confidence), and justice vs. mercy (where one must choose between delivering a swift punishment and leniency). The ambiguity introduced by these dilemmas afforded them the opportunity to study the extent to which people assume others agree with their moral judgments, finding evidence of a false consensus bias among employees in the marketing department of a large food manufacturing company, MBA students, and executive students. Without introducing ambiguity and the variance it affords, it would seem difficult to study such a phenomenon.

Moreover, one can think about moral ambiguity in the sense of situated morality, whereby people's judgments may change across time and space. Tetlock and Mitchell (2010) raised this issue in response to the debate in decision science over the ideal process for moral

decision making, suggesting that a more illuminating question is why and when do people use different processes for making such decisions. They draw on Tetlock's (2002) social-functionalist metaphors to describe moral decision-makers as "intuitive politicians," who operate in a social environment and must cope with its complex of cues, pressures, and constituencies to whom they are accountable. In the context of the decision science debate, Tetlock and Mitchell characterize the choice between cost-benefit analysis and moral rule adherence as the threat of appearing unprincipled or self-righteous. Consistent with these ideas about the effect of accountability on moral reasoning, Leavitt, Reynolds, Barnes, Schilpzand, and Hannah (2012) found evidence among engineers and Army soldiers that their moral judgments shifted according to which of their occupational identities and corresponding relational obligations were cued. Related, Smith-Crowe and Warren (2014) theorized that sanctions from organizational spokespersons can evoke moral emotions (shame, guilt, and embarrassment), which can trigger shifts in moral judgment even if these shifts are away from societal norms. Importantly, the questions raised in these articles stem from a recognition of moral ambiguity.

CONCLUSION

Here we offer a reflection on the state of the field of behavioral ethics in organizations, albeit from an unusual vantage point: the outcomes we study. Based on a review of the recent literature, we contend that we would do well as a field to focus greater attention on the theoretical substance of our outcome variables. We present, in meta-conversation form, examples of what taking the theoretical substance of our outcomes more seriously might look like and evidence of the potential fruitfulness of doing so. We also suggest a path for carrying the conversation forward that is particularly grounded in an organizational context. We hope that this conversation about having a conversation will engender a useful dialogue for the field.

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