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The Art of Phenomena Construction: A Framework for Coming Up with Research Phenomena beyond 'the Usual Suspects'

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ABSTRACT   Despite the centrality of research phenomena, the process of their definition is often neglected and reduced to a simple choosing of pre-established subjects of interest. However, good research not only includes empirical work aimed at more or less 'given as fact' phenomena. It also involves phenomena construction: that is, the process of generating and establishing phenomena to investigate and theorize. We contend that phenomena construction is not separate from, but integral to, both the empirical and theorizing phases in research. As few phenomena are truly 'given' or straightforward to observe, good research calls for careful and creative construction of the phenomenon under investigation. We propose and elaborate a framework that enables researchers to generate and establish research phenomena beyond those currently available in their specific area of interest and, based on this, to produce more imaginative and impactful research.

Keywords: research phenomena, theory development, theory, research methods

INTRODUCTION

Although research studies vary enormously within and across disciplines, they have one thing in common: a *phenomenon* deemed sufficiently important and interesting to investigate and theorize. At the most general level, a research phenomenon refers to what is being studied, which 'can be any problem, issue, or topic that is chosen as the subject of an investigation' (Van de Ven, 2016, p. 265). Management scholars may, for example, investigate 'workforce diversity' and 'strategic decision making'. But these 'phenomena' can also be viewed as different themes of interest rather than specific research phenomena.

It is therefore important to ask: what characterizes research phenomena more precisely, and how are they generated and established?

Research phenomena are commonly seen as more or less given, waiting 'out there' to be discovered (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2021), and the task of the researcher is then to describe and explain them as they are (Mol, 2010). Advocates of phenomenon-driven research similarly point to mainly obvious phenomena to investigate and theorize (e.g., Fisher et al., 2021; Schwarz and Stensaker, 2014; von Krogh et al., 2012). Establishing a research phenomenon then becomes a simple choice based largely on the researcher's disciplinary and theoretical interest, experience, or convenience, and/or the emergence of something easily observable due to changes such as new technology, a pandemic, or social movements. As a result, the process of generating and establishing a phenomenon does not in itself become a key issue in the same way as the processes of producing a theoretical framework, design, sample, analysis, and connections to the literature. For example, although researchers have written extensively about theory development within both management and organization studies (e.g., Sandberg and Alvesson, 2021; Shepherd and Suddaby, 2017) and social science more broadly (e.g., Reed, 2011; Swedberg, 2014), they have largely ignored the process through which research phenomena are generated and established.

However, several scholars argue that many, if not most, research phenomena are rarely just matters of fact to be studied; rather, they are indeterminate and ambiguous, and therefore require further clarification through research (e.g., Abbott, 2004; Merton, 1987). It is, for example, not uncommon for research (particularly more original research) to lead to revisions of what was believed at the outset to be the relevant phenomenon (Davis, 1971). A case in point is the famous Hawthorne studies (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939), in which the research phenomenon was initially a variation in job performance (assumed to be related to physical work conditions), but gradually shifted to people's sensitivity and responsiveness to social relations at work. In other words, the phenomenon that emerged through research was significantly different from the researchers' initial expectations.[1]

Still others argue that research phenomena are typically not just lying around waiting to be discovered and investigated, but need to be created, further developed, and perhaps radically revised (Bourdieu et al., 1991; Hacking, 1983, 1999). As Van de Ven (2016, p. 265) declares, 'phenomena do not exist objectively "out there"; they are uniquely perceived and framed by different people'. The phenomenon of 'authentic leadership', for example, is not only (or mainly) a direct mirroring of reality, but has in significant ways been determined through researchers' choice and specification of constructs, such as self-awareness, relational transparency, and internalized moral perspective, arbitrarily combined and then made up as a 'phenomenon' (Alvesson and Einola, 2019; Nyberg and Sveningsson, 2014).

Although the insight that the characteristics and generation of research phenomena are rarely fixed and definite, but often constructed, is far from new, it is not well developed within the research community. Instead, researchers have paid considerably more attention to the epistemological question of how to develop valid and reliable knowledge about research phenomena (e.g., Jarvie and Zamora-Bonilla, 2011; Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002), rather than to the more ontological question of how they arrive at research

phenomena. One could argue that much research (including phenomenon-driven research) simply misses a vital step, namely the process of generating and establishing a phenomenon to investigate and theorize, and prematurely moves on without careful consideration of what is to be explored. Phenomena construction is thus often addressed only marginally or even bypassed altogether, with researchers relying instead on convention and common sense. As a result, easily available, off-the-shelf research phenomena tend largely to predetermine what researchers choose to study, which discourages the construction of new and less self-evident phenomena. There are also disciplinary and scientific norms and expectations of 'adding to the literature' that pressure researchers to investigate well-known phenomena, rather than constructing new or reconstructing existing phenomena, and which consequently encourage them to reproduce rather than rethink selected parts of our world view.

Importantly, given the scant attention paid to phenomena construction in research, there are currently few resources that encourage and support researchers in constructing new research phenomena (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2021). Although phenomenon-driven research offers some valuable tools for identifying and conducting research on new and fairly obvious phenomena, such as online rumours and CEO socio-political activism (Fisher et al., 2021; von Krogh et al., 2012), it does not really address the creative construction of less obvious phenomena. Hence, instead of just asking how we can better understand, conceptualize, and label already established phenomena – including phenomena that are 'novel' but easily identifiable, such as a specific AI technology, or the effects of the pandemic on work behaviour – we should also ask: how can we creatively generate and establish new phenomena in research? Furthermore, and central to this paper, we also need to ask ourselves: what *is* a 'novel' research phenomenon? Although it is difficult to specify in general terms what makes a research phenomenon 'novel', its qualities should, as a minimum, allow us to see things in a new and different light, and thereby lead to empirically rich and original theoretical contributions. Often there is a provocative element, as newly constructed phenomena are to some degree in opposition to established ones.

Our main concern in this paper, then, is how new *and* novel research phenomena can be constructed in research, rather than how knowledge is produced about already established research phenomena. In other words, we want to move phenomena construction to the centre stage of research: that is, to construct phenomena that offer new insights, open up new lines of inquiry, and move beyond adding to established bodies of literature about already established phenomena. Specifically, the aim is (a) to develop and propose a framework for constructing new phenomena in research, and (b) to show how such a framework enables researchers to generate research phenomena that may make more imaginative and impactful contributions.

We begin by discussing the 'nature' of research phenomena in terms of their characteristics, how they differ from data and theory, the concepts of established versus new phenomena, and what makes research phenomena interesting. We then develop a framework for phenomena construction consisting of two core dimensions: input ingredients from which phenomena are constructed, and the spiral of phenomena construction, consisting of five interrelated phases through which the construction of novel phenomena can take place. We demonstrate how this framework can be used to

generate and establish research phenomena beyond the 'usual suspects' in a particular field. Finally, we relate the framework to the overall research process and discuss what distinguishes phenomena construction from systematic empirical investigations and theory development, and how the framework of phenomena construction can be productively used in research.

THE 'NATURE' OF RESEARCH PHENOMENA

Phenomena Not Given but Constructed

We have already noted that a deeply seated assumption within both natural and social science is that research phenomena are more or less given, waiting 'out there' to be discovered and investigated by the rigorous researcher. This assumption has, however, been widely refuted within both social and natural science (Rose, 1999). Philosophers, sociologists of science, interpretivists, critical theorists, and post-structuralists have over several decades shown that the research phenomena we encounter and investigate in social science are not objectively given, but always mediated through our lived experience as well as through the specific culture, historical time period, language, paradigms, and social practices in which we are situated (Sandberg, 2005). For example, although (what are addressed as) various economic, political, managerial, organizational, educational, religious, and health phenomena may appear as obvious and matters of fact, they have all at some stage been constructed and established through social practices and institutions, such as academics and their associations, mass media, companies, trade unions, teams, and political organizations (e.g., Czarniawska, 2009; Mallon, 2016; Sandberg, 2001). In the words of Berger and Luckmann (1966, p. 123), 'all social phenomena are *constructions* produced historically through human activity'.

From the other end of the research spectrum, Niels Bohr and Albert Einstein have effectively debunked the assumption that phenomena are objectively given to us, showing that the research phenomenon and the social-scientific practice (i.e., the philosophical premises, theory, and methods) involved in investigating it are not separate but entangled. That is, scientific practice not only shapes the investigation but simultaneously constructs the phenomenon under investigation in significant ways (e.g., Barad, 2007). As Giere (2006, p. 30) notes, 'There is no such thing, for example, as *the* way the Milky Way looks. There is only the way it looks to each instrument'. This has also been frequently demonstrated in social and technology studies (STS) (e.g., Knorr-Cetina, 1999) as well as in ethnomethodological studies of scientific practices (e.g., Goodwin, 1995; Lynch, 1993).

Needless to say, definitions of research phenomena partly reflect researchers' ontological and paradigmatic stance: from strong ideas about robust, objective reality to radical constructionist versions emphasizing the processual and discursive generation of social reality (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2017; Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Fuhse, 2022; Jarvie and Zamora-Bonilla, 2011; Mir et al., 2016). Researchers taking a radical constructionist stance are often considerably more open about the constructed nature of phenomena and therefore more inclined to challenge the robustness of what we normally study, while those with an objectivist view are more likely to see

phenomena as given, and therefore are less inclined to look for creative and imaginative ways of constructing phenomena.

We take a moderate constructionist view but think that researchers – irrespective of paradigmatic commitments – can do much more than is commonly done in terms of phenomena construction. Not only societies 'out there' but also research collectives and individual researchers construct phenomena. We also take a more pluralistic stance in terms of 'a commitment to avoid reliance on monist assumptions' about phenomena (Kellert et al., 2006, p. xii) and aim to say something of broad relevance for research. Similar to the multi-paradigm literature (e.g., Gioia and Pitre, 1990; Lewis and Grimes, 1999), we therefore do not advocate a specific ontological camp when it comes to the development of scientific knowledge. As Fuhse (2022, p. 99) argues about theories, we contend about phenomena: namely, that they 'should be assessed not for their ontologies but for what they allow us to see', and what new lines of inquiry and theoretical insights they generate.

Defining the Characteristics of Research Phenomena

Considering the largely constructed nature of phenomena, it is important to examine the defining characteristics of a research phenomenon in greater detail. Given its ambiguous character, one way to begin defining it is by considering what is *not* a research phenomenon. A research phenomenon is typically wider than an *object of study*, which commonly denotes an example or specification of a particular phenomenon or a source of one. For example, a specific company, meeting, or procedure is an object of study that may exemplify something but also house or be part of a particular phenomenon, such as 'bullying' or 'organizational sub-cultures'. A research phenomenon is, however, more specific than a *research domain*, which comprises several phenomena. For example, 'strategy' is a research domain that comprises phenomena such as 'strategy implementation' and 'strategy making'. The exact boundaries between research phenomena, objects of study, and research domains are, of course, hard to draw, partly because a phenomenon can be defined more or less specifically. However, we can say that phenomena refer to a category 'in-between' research domains and objects of study.

Looking more precisely, the term 'phenomenon' originates from Greek, in which it denotes 'appearance': that is, how a thing, event, or process appears to us in our experience of it (Heidegger, 1962 [1927], pp. 51–63). A commonly cited definition is by Hacking (1983, p. 221), who states: 'A phenomenon is *noteworthy*. A phenomenon is *discernible*. A phenomenon is commonly an event or process of a certain type that occurs regularly under definite circumstances'. In their seminal paper 'Saving the phenomena', Bogen and Woodward (1988) further elaborated Hacking's definition by differentiating phenomena from data and theory. They argue that a phenomenon is something which is to be explained by theory, while data (e.g., interview transcripts, observational notes) are the evidence for the existence of phenomena. Through these distinctions, Bogen and Woodward put phenomena at centre stage in research by showing that theory does not explain data – as is commonly assumed, including in management studies (Cronin et al., 2021) – but phenomena do. This means, as Haig (2014, p. 3) notes, that the 'the proper role of data [is] to provide the observational evidence for phenomena, not theories'.

The relationships are, however, more complicated than this, as data, phenomena, and theory co-construct each other – they are intertwined without being reducible to each other (Apel, 2011; Fuhse, 2022). Data are indicators of some reality 'out there', phenomena are patterns that (seem to) appear in the data, and theory is what makes phenomena intelligible. We therefore contend that theory is involved in constructing phenomena as much as data are. As Fuhse (2022, p. 118) aptly notes, theories 'make certain sides of the social visible. They construct phenomena … that they are supposed to represent'. For example, if a pattern in activities, talks, and interactions among employees appears as a phenomenon of 'power abuse', it incorporates more information than merely the observed data pattern. Neither power nor abuse, and even less the combination, is directly observable or easily represented in interview speech or through questionnaires. This is because for a data pattern to appear to us as 'power abuse', we need prior experience and knowledge about both power and abuse – and, perhaps above all, a shared language and concepts which enable us to represent and conceptualize the observed data pattern as 'power abuse'. Phenomena, therefore, are constructed through a combination of an observed data pattern and a collection of theoretical concepts used to articulate the data pattern in a particular way through language. Hence, while concepts are inherent in phenomena construction, phenomena are distinct from concepts in that they incorporate observed data patterns, whereas concepts are abstract notions employed to elucidate data patterns more accessibly. Thus, there is no one-to-one correspondence between a particular phenomenon and the concepts used to depict it. Various concepts can be used to describe the same phenomenon, and each concept can reveal unique aspects and subtleties of the phenomenon that are worth exploring in greater depth.

Established Versus New Research Phenomena

We will now discuss two extreme types of constructed research phenomena: established and new phenomena. These refer to how researchers, in a specific situation, relate to their research tasks. Do they pick a ready-made and established phenomenon, or do they try to come up with something new?

Established phenomena. Researchers are mostly guided by established phenomena, which are found primarily within academic disciplines, but also often in public discourse, and studied over and over again. Such phenomena may initially have been a pure fabrication by researchers, but over time, they have been naturalized and are thereby taken as given in a particular field. Examples of established phenomena are 'customer orientation', 'clans', 'identity work', 'trust', 'intersectionality', 'routines', 'strategic HRM', 'knowledge management', and 'service innovation.' Hence, when focusing on established phenomena, researchers enter and work in a landscape of more or less given phenomena which they choose between and seek to increase knowledge about, by identifying and investigating unexamined aspects of them, or use in order to add to theory.

New phenomena. When researchers focus on creating new phenomena, they are not impressed or overwhelmed by established available phenomena. Instead, they are

engaged in creating new phenomena in different ways, such as interpreting a new pattern in data, slicing and framing data in a new way, or producing a new idea of a phenomenon based on broad readings, everyday observations, accumulation of research, creative sparks, and other experiences. This, of course, does not mean that researchers can construct new phenomena at will. Research phenomena are heavily constrained by the way in which they have been constructed historically within a specific discipline and/or society at large, and deviations from established constructions sometimes have difficulty gaining acceptance (and are not necessarily motivated).

Between the two extremes of just adopting and studying an established phenomenon or constructing something completely new, there are, of course, a wealth of options including reconfiguring phenomena: that is, coming up with a somewhat new conceptualization or framing of an established phenomenon. Identifying new but fairly obvious phenomena, as advocates of phenomenon-driven research commonly do, can sometimes help us to break out of the straitjacket of established phenomena (e.g., Fisher et al., 2021; von Krogh et al., 2012). However, just observing something new is not the same as creatively constructing novel phenomena. As we will develop further below, original and innovative research is about constructing phenomena that are hard to observe, and it may not so much start as end with a phenomenon. So how can we construct new and more original phenomena to study?

The Quest for Interesting Phenomena

Constructing research phenomena in a more thoughtful and innovative way calls for a combination of: careful reflexivity, considering different options and being self-critical about habits and preferences, including how research traditions, paradigms, and vocabulary pre-structure and limit choices (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2017); creativity, including efforts to overcome common views of the world that use established phenomena templates (Saetre and Van de Ven, 2021); and pragmatic considerations, as time, brainpower, and options are not limitless (McDonnell et al., 2017). Central here is that the newly constructed phenomenon needs to be seen as well grounded, credible, and useful to consider, but also, perhaps most important, as interesting.

Being 'interesting' is partly a matter of relevance and significance in terms of social and practical concerns. But importantly, it also involves adding novel and challenging insights that fuel rethinking or sharpen our thinking about something. Although what is viewed as interesting varies, most people find something interesting if it deviates from expectations (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013; Davis, 1971): that is, from what is already considered well known in a research collective or by the educated public. 'Interesting' is here typically not a purely cognitive issue, but often relates to social and practical relevance – we find something interesting if it can connect to a recognized (or unrecognized) problem. There is an element of originality and surprise in an interesting phenomenon, and if seen as credible, it becomes worthy of attention because its investigation is likely to identify something significant. *The construction and establishment of new phenomena is, then, an intellectual contribution which leads to new insights and opens up the research horizon.* Interestingness can therefore be seen as a key quality of

innovative research (as well as of highly cited research: e.g., Judge et al., 2007) when accompanied by a rich empirical study of a phenomenon, and by developed theory explaining or perspectivating that phenomenon.

Some Examples of Novel Phenomena Construction

To specify further how to construct an original and interesting phenomenon, let us consider some examples. Alvesson and Robertson (2016) set out to study identity constructions and identity work, which are commonly seen as given phenomena. But contrary to established knowledge, the studied participants (investment bankers) did not appear to engage in much identity work. Disrespectful behaviour from employers and clients did not seem to trigger much effort to repair or restore a positive, coherent sense of self – key elements in most definitions of identity work (Brown, 2015; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Instead, instrumental (monetary) concerns dominated, and people seemed to demonstrate what the authors call *teflonic identity manoeuvring* (i.e., potential threats to identity and self-esteem bounced off). This could be viewed as a newly constructed phenomenon, as it departs significantly from established ideas of identity always 'being there' and being significant, at least for professionals.

Another example is Gabriel (2012) who constructed the phenomenon of *organizational miasma*, a contagious state of material, psychological, and spiritual pollution that afflicts all who work in certain organizations that undergo sudden and traumatic transformations. In Gabriel's study, managers generally presented the 'old' organization as full of shortcomings, in contrast to the 'new' organization that was entrepreneurial, dynamic, and flexible. Yet, for many surviving members, the new organization was tainted by the presence of 'murderers' (i.e., managers who had initiated a series of dismissals) and 'corpses' (i.e., employees who had been dismissed or were about to be dismissed and 'disappear'). 'Miasma is seen as the result of a failed separation rite, one that instead of honouring loss, finitude, and discontinuity in today's organizations seeks to obliterate and repress it. In this sense, miasma represents a contemporary version of tragedy where attempts to offer cleansing end up by reinforcing it' (p. 1137). In miasma, feelings of depression and worthlessness become endemic, along with a paralysis of any fighting spirit or resistance. This phenomenon resembles Kets de Vries and Miller's (1985) 'depressed organization', but miasma points to somewhat different qualities and can thus be seen as an original phenomenon.

Inspired by Frankfurt (2005), Spicer (2018, 2020) identifies *bullshitting* as something that 'entails people articulating empty and misleading statements that are processed in a shallow way and lead to surface-level agreement' (2020, p. 2). Spicer then develops the bullshitting phenomenon and views it as a social practice that organizational members engage with to become part of a speech community, to get things done in that community, and to reinforce their identity. He identifies that 'speech communities tend to encourage bullshitting when they have three characteristics: they are occupied by many conceptual entrepreneurs (who create a plentiful supply of bullshit), there is noisy ignorance (which creates a demand for bullshit) and there is permissive uncertainty (which creates an opportunity for bullshitting)' (p. 8). Bullshit speech communities, as specified and shaped in this way, can be seen as a discovered or invented phenomenon.

Other examples of phenomena being innovatively produced are organized hypocrisy (Brunsson, 2003), garbage can decision making (March et al., 1976), audit society (Power, 1997), culture of fear (Furedi, 2018), concertive control (Barker, 1993), cynical consciousness (Fleming and Spicer, 2003), empty labour (Paulsen, 2014), and organizational dischronization (Alvesson and Jonsson, 2022). These phenomena are imprinted by certain assumptions, theoretical ideas, and empirical support, and called for creative construction work more than a simple and straightforward observation, but they are still open to further empirical investigations and theorizing. Interesting new questions can be raised, and a set of theoretical developments can be imagined. Our key point is that, compared to proceeding from conventional and established phenomena, these examples illustrate the construction of new phenomena, bearing the fruits of novel empirical inquiry and theorizing. Of course, this novelty is a matter of timing. In the future, teflonic identity manoeuvring, miasma, and bullshitting may become part of the academic supermarket of established phenomena available for further research. In the worst case, researchers may assume and impose these phenomena on the reality 'out there' without careful consideration. But for a time, they may be fairly novel phenomena which 'cannot be explained or [are] poorly understood using existing knowledge' (Saetre and Van de Ven, 2021, p. 684), thereby opening up interesting research.

Summing up: Basic Characteristics of Research Phenomena

Based on this discussion, we can summarize the characteristics of research phenomena as follows. First, research phenomena are not given but *constructed* through social-scientific practices (e.g., culture, language, institutions, philosophical premises, theory, and methods). Second, research phenomena are *wider* than objects of study (e.g., a sample from a category or a case company) but *narrower* than a research domain (e.g., strategy or leadership). Third, research phenomena are situated *in-between* data and theory, but such that these three research elements form a complex, interactive whole. Fourth, research phenomena need to have some *empirical grounding*, showing that they 'exist' empirically. Finally, research phenomena need to be seen as *interesting*: that is, as breaking with received wisdom, opening up new thinking, and therefore worthy of further elaboration.

Although these five basic characteristics should be evident in all (novel) research phenomena, they are likely to vary quite significantly, depending on the specific research phenomena under construction. They should therefore be seen not as a strict formula but more as guidelines for the minimum characteristics necessary for novel research phenomena. As with other key concepts, such as 'theme', 'theory', and 'data', it is difficult, and also counterproductive, to be very precise in defining the characteristics of phenomena because we need to consider the variety of ways in which phenomena can be constructed.

A FRAMEWORK FOR PHENOMENA CONSTRUCTION

Having outlined the basic characteristics of novel research phenomena, in this section we develop and propose a framework for constructing such phenomena. The framework consists of two main dimensions: a triangle of input ingredients for phenomena

construction (theory, empirics, and pre-understanding), and a spiral of five interrelated passage points (creating, specifying, scrutinizing, elaborating, and linking) through which phenomena are generated and established.

A Triangle of Input Ingredients for Constructing Phenomena

Constructing research phenomena requires a set of input ingredients as they cannot be created *ex nihilo*: that is, out of nothing. There is a view that one can generate phenomena by observing and focusing on pure data, as in grounded theory, at least as originally formulated (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), and proceeding from there. Alternatively, one can work deductively by using existing theory as the main input for identifying and generating phenomena to theorize (Mouzelis, 2003). There are also ideas on abduction-based theorizing, combining data and theory for generating phenomena (Saetre and Van de Ven, 2021; Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). However, as Alvesson and Sandberg (2022, p. 1) note, in addition to theory and data, there is 'a more basic, but considerably less actively and systematically used' input ingredient in phenomena construction, namely researchers' pre-understanding. This, of course, influences how we interpret data and relate to theory, but also affects matters outside these areas, and can be seen as a third input ingredient in phenomena construction. Below we elaborate the three basic input ingredients for constructing research phenomena.

Theory. All research is informed by certain meta-theoretical frameworks (e.g., paradigms and research traditions) and typically also by more specific theoretical frameworks (e.g., institutional, discourse, or practice theory). These theoretical frameworks and their specific theoretical concepts often shape the construction of research phenomenon in significant ways. For example, leadership scholars informed by trait theory construct the phenomenon (or rather the label or domain) of 'leadership' as a set of attributes, such as the formal knowledge, skills, attitudes, and personal traits possessed by an individual (Yukl, 2006), while leadership scholars who apply a practice theoretical perspective construct 'leadership-as-practice' (Raelin, 2017). Researchers following attribution theory, on the other hand, emphasize how leadership is principally a matter of people ascribing causal powers to a 'leader' (Meindl, 1995). These theories therefore construct 'leadership' in very different ways.

One could say that these constructed leadership phenomena are quite different, suggesting that there is no such thing as a leadership phenomenon, or even specific types of leadership, such as transformational or servant. The signifier (leadership) hides a range of possibilities for constructing different phenomena, also within a specific theoretical tradition. One can, for example, imagine quite different attributions, from more romantic to more analytic forms, and ideas of practice emphasizing the manager/leader or the group involved – some leadership practice may actually be better described as collective action or group work. And within each different option there are, of course, many alternative ideas and perspectives. Phenomena may, for example, be targeted at different levels, reflecting various ideas of what is a precise phenomenon versus what is an over-sized or over-sliced phenomenon. A good phenomenon may not be middle managers in a specific company or type of situation (e.g., downsizing), but rather the subordinate manager (Laurent, 1978)

or the middle manager as a yo-yo, switching between superior and subordinate positions (Alvesson and Gjerde, 2020), and evident more broadly in organizations. There is a certain specificity and unconventionality here that adds to valuable 'phenomenon qualities'.

However, theory can also be used more reflexively in phenomena construction to challenge assumptions underlying established theories of research phenomena in a specific field (Davis, 1971). Here assumptions are problematized and unpackaged, and new ways of producing phenomena are encouraged (Foucault, 1984). To be able to problematize assumptions underlying existing literature, the following principles are central: (1) to identify a domain of literature; (2) to identify and articulate assumptions underlying this domain; (3) to evaluate them; (4) to develop an alternative assumption ground; (5) to consider it in relation to its audience; and (6) to evaluate the alternative assumption ground (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013). While the core is the problematization of existing theory, empirics and reflexivity support this endeavour. The common, simple reproduction of theoretically established phenomena is thus prevented. Against the ordering of the selected parts of the world in specific, established, pre-packaged ways, alternative phenomena constructions are considered. A 'profession' may be defined as an occupation with status built around socially valuable expertise, or as an exclusion mechanism whereby monopoly is preserved as people without the 'right' standardized education face barriers to entry. But it may also be seen as an empty signifier of prestige by which highly diverse people in the labour market are summarized. Successful problematization is very much a matter of reading inspiring texts that offer critical insights (but without these being accepted as a new fixed framework), talking to other people, having specific experiences, or making observations that may generate new research phenomena.

Empirics. A central assumption in research is that the application of scientific method enables researchers to produce objective and trustworthy knowledge about research phenomena. But as discussed above, research methods not only capture, but also to a large extent construct the very phenomena they investigate. As Law (2004, p. 5) puts it, 'methods, their rules, and even more methods' practices, not only describe but also help to *produce* the reality that they understand'. Researchers therefore need to reflect critically on the phenomena their methods create. Different data collection methods, such as interviews, participant observation, surveys, and daily self-reports, are likely to construct a phenomenon in a particular way. For example, if you ask a person what they do, and if there are hints in the interview about the person as a 'manager', 'leader', 'strategist', 'team member', 'subordinate' (to the CEO), 'organizational politician', or 'senior bureaucrat', somewhat different phenomena are likely to emerge, even if the interview questions are the same (e.g., what do you do? how do you interact with people during a typical work day?, what tasks call for extra smartness from you?). Similarly, questionnaires not only generate knowledge about specific phenomena but also construct them in significant ways (Einola and Alvesson, 2021). We may therefore end up studying 'methodological artefacts' as much as something factual (e.g., Böhnke and Croudace, 2015).

Although research phenomena are always partly methodological artefacts, the intimate and complicated relation between phenomena and research practice can be

handled in more or less thoughtful and productive ways in terms of not only 'finding out' but also 'finding what': that is, what is the potential phenomenon to (re)construct/address? One approach to empirics that encourages the rethinking of possible phenomena is to avoid the well-known and instead to consider the unfamiliar and strange. In conventional theorizing, empirical material is mainly used for testing theoretical ideas and hypotheses, or building grounded theories (Eisenhardt et al., 2016; Ermakoff, 2017; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Here, new phenomena can be encountered, but 'rigorous' data management often means the use of conventional categories and, thus, the research of familiar phenomena. One way to overcome this is to address phenomena with some independence in relation to specific sets of data and, thus, to 'liberate' considerations of phenomena from the straitjacket of data management rigour, seeing rich empirical material as inspirational for a variety of ways of thinking about potential phenomena. We need to bear in mind that phenomena construction is not the same as efforts to build a solid empirical case. For the former, imagination is more important than rigour.

Although empirical material is commonly used to judge what is right or wrong, or as a building block in hypothesis testing or inductive theorizing, it can also be used to create breakdowns in understanding, thereby forcing or encouraging us to think differently about phenomena. Specifically, one strategy for generating novel phenomena through encounters between theoretical assumptions and empirical impressions may be to aspire to create a mystery, triggered and supported by empirics, rather than proved by them (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011). It is the unanticipated and the unexpected – the things that puzzle the researcher – that are of particular interest in the encounter (Agar, 1986). A mystery is created when empirical findings deviate from what is expected, given established knowledge, and lead the researcher into a temporary stage of bewilderment and loss. The mystery may concern a predefined phenomenon, calling for a new way of understanding, but may also involve unpacking and redefining the phenomenon, or even creating a new, novel phenomenon, as in the Hawthorne studies or the three examples mentioned above (Alvesson and Robertson, 2016; Gabriel, 2012; Spicer, 2018).

Pre-understanding. The strong focus on data and established theory means that researchers commonly overlook another more basic ingredient in phenomena construction, namely the researcher's *pre-understanding* (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2022). Although not completely separate, pre-understanding differs significantly from empirics and theory. In contrast to these specific categories, pre-understanding refers to our broader and more basic understanding of ourselves and society. It consists of our sociocultural preconceptions and prejudices, which constantly guide and bring about certain inclinations in seeing and reasoning (but also 'unseeing' and 'blocking' opportunities for thinking) about phenomena (Fehér, 2016). As highlighted by hermeneutics, pre-understanding originates from our shared world, the world into which we have been born and socialized through upbringing, education, work, and leisure (Heidegger, 1962 [1927]; Gadamer, 1994 [1960]).

This internalized and largely shared pre-understanding of our world (formed and re-formed by personal experiences and observations) becomes the background and basic framework for making sense of our actions and activities. It is, for example, only on

the basis of our particular sociocultural pre-understanding that we can encounter and develop ideas about candidates for phenomena. It would, for instance, be impossible to conduct research about (targeted aspects of) 'gender', 'age', and 'leadership' without the researcher and the research participants possessing reasonably shared presuppositions or prejudgments of what these phenomena mean, involve, and stand for within our society. Similarly, the scientific concepts we use get their meaning primarily from our largely shared collective pre-understanding, rather than from formal scientific definitions and vocabularies, which sometimes say rather little. Phenomena construction is therefore not an individual but largely a social endeavour (McDonnell et al., 2017).

Although most scholars are aware that they cannot avoid drawing on their pre-understanding in research, they typically see it as something mainly detrimental to knowledge development in terms of fixed ideas, personal bias, collective prejudices, or folk theories (Astley, 1985; Sandberg, 2005). Pre-understanding often means that common sense dominates. But rightly used, pre-understanding can also be genuinely positive for phenomena construction, functioning as a *source of inspiration* to think differently about things relative to theory and data, and as a *rich source for generating additional empirical material* (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2022) as well as for noticing new phenomena or thinking quite differently about them. This is because most phenomena that we, as social scientists, study through formal research are also phenomena we encounter through our everyday participation in society. For example, we know about hospitals through mass media, visits, conversations with healthcare workers, and stories from relatives. Many of the now-classic management researchers, such as Taylor (1911), Barnard (1938), Penrose (1995) [1959], Dalton (1959) and Argyris (1980), drew deliberately and explicitly on their pre-understanding in constructing new and original management and organizational phenomena.

A great advantage in seriously considering pre-understanding in the context of phenomena construction is that experiences and observations from life outside the formal setting of reading academic theory, and doing formal study with data management, provide much broader and varied inspiration for thinking about phenomena, particularly those phenomena of which one (as a researcher or private person) has had direct experience in topics such as leadership, authority, identity, gender, service work, bureaucracy, and organizational cultures. Embracing pre-understanding – keeping eyes, ears, and imagination alert in everyday life – therefore enables the development of more novel and untapped phenomena. Fuller awareness and use of our pre-understanding can guide us to broaden our reflections on what it is relevant to consider, and provide us with a larger set of reference points for thinking about a phenomenon. Thus, using pre-understanding may counteract inclinations to concentrate on minor research 'sub-subfields', adding to the literature by generating marginal knowledge about an already established and taken-for-granted phenomenon.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Taken together, the TEP triangle of input ingredients – theory, empirics, and pre-understanding – points to the possibility of (or, rather, the impossibility of avoiding)

using a variety of input ingredients in phenomena construction. It is misleading to separate the three. All data are impregnated by theory and informed by pre-understanding. Similarly, theory is never free from empirical observations or a strong feeling for reality obtained through our pre-understanding, and any pre-understanding of a subject matter targeted for phenomena construction is likely to be informed by the researcher's empirically and theoretically informed understandings of it. There are mutual impregnations but seldom any merger or fusion between different TEP ingredients. Hence, theory, empirics, and pre-understanding are to various degrees typically interrelated in phenomena construction, though each may be more or less significant in specific cases and stages of the research process. The interactive input ingredients of the triangle also mean some 'tempering' of the limitations of each in regard to the encouragement of candidate phenomena in research. A critical dialogue between challenging the assumptions of theory (not only applying or adding to it), trying to find something novel/mysterious in empirics (not exclusively engaging in data management), and using pre-understanding to enrich our outlook on aspects of the world (rather than taking it for granted) may thus lead to better ideas for the careful and creative thinking-through and production of phenomena.

A Spiral of Phenomena Construction

Having outlined the TEP triangle of input ingredients, we now develop a spiral for constructing phenomena that can lead to more original research. Outlined in Figure 1, the spiral proposes that phenomena construction can be conceptualized as a movement through five stages: creating, specifying, scrutinizing, elaborating, and linking. We do not, of course, rule out other routes to coming up with phenomena, including sudden, extraordinary creative insights. However, in most cases we need to rely more on hard work than our genius, and to use the repertoire of resources to facilitate the generation of novel ideas for phenomena construction. Even an exceptional creative spark needs to be supplemented with critical scrutiny and fine-tuning, and here also our framework may be helpful.
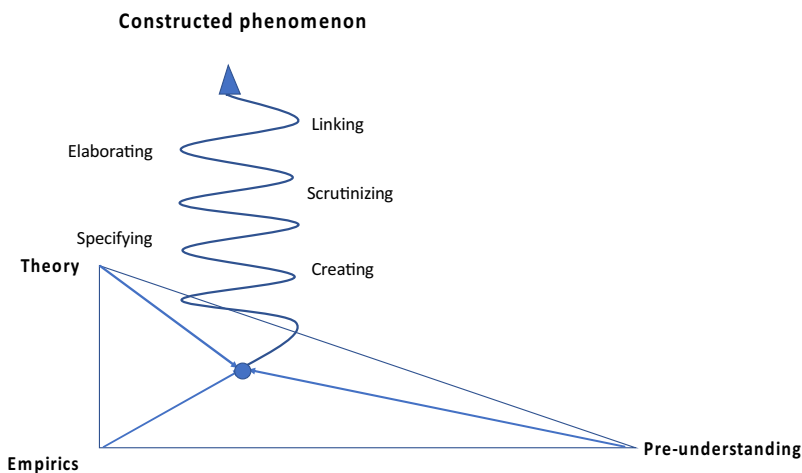

Figure 1. A framework for phenomena construction [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

As Figure 1 shows, all five stages can be informed by the constellation of input ingredients provided by the TEP triangle: that is, considerations and interplaying of theory, empirics, and pre-understanding. The TEP ingredients may carry different weights in the various stages of phenomena construction. It is also possible to work intensively with theory, empirics, and pre-understanding in sequence in various stages rather than in parallel. It all depends on the nature of the specific phenomenon-constructing work, the initial key driver or trigger, and the subsequent possible TEP ingredients available to draw upon. But seriously considering all three may arguably strengthen the prospect of constructing new and interesting research phenomena.

During movement through the spiral, the researcher therefore needs to think carefully about theories and empirics, and, at the same time, consider the pre-understanding that can enrich understanding and ideas about the emerging phenomenon. This constant evaluation may mean that the emerging phenomenon is 'forced back' to an earlier stage for further reshaping. Our idea is that – to enhance the construction of novel phenomena – the researcher should, at significant points during the spiral process, challenge the assumptions underlying established literature, mobilize reflexive pre-understanding, and search for the empirically unexpected and unexplained, avoiding a strong focus on codification which often encourages a conservative, commonsensical, and cautious use of readily available vocabulary. The framework for phenomena construction is summarized in Table I, and further elaborated below.

Creating. Here the researcher senses or imagines something potentially interesting – a rudimentary or preliminary phenomenon – which is not immediately pre-formed or explainable and does not fit neatly into existing frameworks, concepts, standard categories, or patterns. It is important to give the emerging phenomenon a tentative name and, thus, initial identity. Such creation and naming can sometimes be seen as *carving out* an entirely new phenomenon, such as 'garbage can decision making' (March et al., 1976) or, in less complicated cases, *bringing out* an already existing but 'hidden' or only vaguely referenced phenomenon, such as 'concertive control' (Barker, 1993). It may also mean that established phenomena need to be unpacked and problematized, and inclinations to squeeze something into established categories resisted, as in Alvesson and Robertson's (2016) study of 'teflonic identity maneuvering' discussed above.

All three TEP ingredients (theory, empirics, pre-understanding) are typically involved (in varying degrees) in sensing and imagining a new and potentially interesting phenomenon. For example, what observations, patterns, or events in our pre-understanding (academic and non-academic) or earlier empirical studies may indicate something potentially interesting to pursue? Theory is typically less significant at this stage, as it is often tied to existing phenomena and not especially helpful in creating a potentially new phenomenon. Still, theory can be a central input when it comes to creating a new phenomenon by unpacking and problematizing existing phenomena (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013; Davis, 1971). Broad theoretical knowledge, for example, meant that Spicer (2018) was sensitive to pre-understanding-based clues about the 'bullshitting phenomenon' he constructed. Furthermore, existing theories may usefully be put into a dialogue with what we have noticed in our pre-understanding and empirical studies to create a potentially interesting phenomenon. Hence, working broadly

Table I. A framework for phenomena construction

Stages	Focus	Core activities	Main role of TEP input
1. Creating	Brings into being some new, hidden, or rethought established phenomena.	• Imagining an interesting phenomenon. • Tentatively naming the emerging phenomenon.	T: What existing theories can be put into a dialogue with P and E to create a potentially interesting phenomenon? E: What ideas from our earlier empirical studies can be used to create a new phenomenon? P: What observations, patterns, events, etc. in our pre-understanding may indicate something interesting to pursue?
2. Specifying	Gives the emerging phenomenon an initial gestalt and meaning.	• Sorting out boundaries and key characteristics of the phenomenon. • Assigning a more precise meaning to the phenomenon.	T: What theories are likely to help me see how the emerging phenomenon is different from other phenomena? E: What empirical studies may help to sort out the boundaries of the emerging phenomenon? P: What aspects of my pre-understanding can help to specify the characteristics and meaning of the emerging phenomenon?
3. Scrutinizing	Examines whether and to what extent the emerging phenomenon is interesting and promising.	• What empirical and theoretical insights does the phenomenon add? • What speaks against the phenomenon? • Is there enough empirical support for the phenomenon? • Decide whether to proceed, revise, or (for the time being) end the actual phenomenon construction.	T: To what extent does the emerging phenomenon challenge existing theory? E: Is it possible to identify empirical studies that support – or question – the emerging phenomenon? P: To what extent does the emerging phenomenon resonate with my (and others' broader pre-understanding?
4. Elaborating	Identifies and elaborates the most distinctive features of the phenomenon and potential research domain.	• Examine what is distinct and what is shared between the phenomenon and other phenomena. • Examine how the phenomenon might be narrowed down to allow differentiation, or expanded to some broader generalization.	T: What specific theories may help the identification and further elaboration of the key features of the phenomenon? E: Further elaboration of existing, relevant empirical studies with the ambition of specifying the phenomenon being developed. P: Does the researcher's pre-understanding give a well-informed sense of the scope and relevance of an emerging phenomenon?

(Continues)

Table I.   (Continued)

Stages	Focus	Core activities	Main role of TEP input
5. Linking	Identifies to which research domains the phenomenon may be related.	• Clarify how the phenomenon is linked to specific research domains and to other phenomena within those domains. • Enrich the phenomenon further through contextualization.	T: Into which theoretical domain(s) are the emerging phenomenon most likely to offer new and interesting intellectual insights? E: Do the researcher's previous empirical studies support the linking of the phenomenon to those theoretical domains? P: In what domains does the researcher's pre-understanding suggest the phenomenon is present? Imagine the phenomenon in different types of context.

with TEP generates a continuum of possibilities: from construction of new phenomena to stronger and weaker reconfiguration of existing phenomena.

Specifying. In this stage the focus is on sorting out the boundaries and main characteristics of the phenomenon by starting a (re)conceptualization process, which can be called *gestalt creation*. Researchers engage in a differentiation process that emphasizes the peculiarities and distinctive characteristics of the emerging phenomenon (von Krogh et al., 2012). This stage also involves giving the phenomenon a clearer identity, not in a 'fixed' way or in terms of essential characteristics, but rather, assigning a meaning to it that allows further thinking and specification. Here we can talk about *meaning specification*. This concerns the more precise features and vocabulary used to indicate the nature of the emerging phenomenon. Specification also calls for some idea of what the phenomenon is *not* (i.e., what is different about it) as well as some exemplification. Pure abstract reasoning seldom leads to sufficient clarity.

In specifying the emerging phenomenon, all the TEP input ingredients are relevant. For example, in specifying his phenomenon of organizational miasma, Gabriel (2012) put into dialogue his broader pre-understanding of Greek tragedy from which he obtained the idea of miasma, his own experience of organizational toxicity, as well as some key aspects of psychoanalytic theory. More precisely, important TEP questions at this stage are: what specific theories or aspects of pre-understanding can be explored further to specify the phenomenon's central characteristics? What empirical studies (own and others) may help to sort out the boundaries of the emerging phenomenon? Although working with some empirical input is important, engaging too much with empirical details should be avoided. Instead, the researcher should focus more on interpretation and analysis. Theory can be helpful here, as it sharpens thinking – particularly in terms of specifying differences between established ideas and reasoning, and potential novel views triggered by a novel phenomenon.

Scrutinizing. Here the researcher critically considers whether the emerging phenomenon is 'really' interesting and promising. The process becomes less about creativity and

more about critique and (modest) rigour. The researcher also looks at whether there is sufficient empirical support for making a credible case for the phenomenon. As Merton (1987) pointedly asked: 'Is it really so?'. Is it, for example, possible to find counter-examples? Similarly, does the phenomenon resonate with the researcher's and others' pre-understanding? For example, has the researcher had direct personal experience of the phenomenon and/or is it possible to trace broader patterns and instances of it in newspapers, social media outlets, and conversations with friends? Likewise, on what (theoretical) assumptions is it based? Are these assumptions current or valid? Are there alternative ideas for phenomenon construction? Does the phenomenon candidate add something to established phenomena already available to the research community? This might involve new options for empirical inquiry or potentially saying something novel in terms of insights or theoretical ideas.

Preferably, at least for ambitious research, there should be theoretical potential, such as new ideas or concepts, or inspiration to engage in a new line of thinking. If careful scrutiny does not encourage the categorization of the emerging phenomenon in 'conventional', established ways, the researcher should move forward with constructing it. For example, when the phenomenon of 'teflonic identity maneuvering' first emerged in Alvesson and Robertson's (2016) study, they scrutinized it by further interrogating not only their empirical material, but also their pre-understanding and theories outside the identity field. Pre-understanding included the experiences of professionals, such as younger academics often being instrumental about career issues and less concerned about meaningfulness and identity issues. The authors also considered other theories, such as those concerning roles and role distancing, and cynical consciousness. This scrutinization confirmed that 'teflonic identity manoeuvring' was actually taking place and was a phenomenon of some broader relevance, worth pursuing as it challenges existing understandings of professionals' ongoing identity work.

Elaborating. In this stage the researcher's focus is on fleshing out and expanding some interesting key features of the phenomenon. Here the 'what' and 'how' can be explored. In what sense does the emerging phenomenon offer a novel or unexpected theme or topic for inquiry? What is distinctive about the phenomenon, and what is shared with other phenomena? How can the phenomenon be reduced or possibly expanded to allow differentiation or broader generalization? This elaboration we can label *domain clarification*. A phenomenon can then be scaled up or down, or reshaped, in terms of the research domain it is supposed to say something about. This involves further specification of the phenomenon's meaning and what it reveals, particularly to give it more sharpness (Geertz, 1973).

Although all of the TEP ingredients should be drawn upon, pre-understanding is particularly important here, as it has the potential to give a well-informed sense of the scope and relevance of an emerging phenomenon: does it work and what is a reasonable range of its use? Is the researcher aware of similar kinds of empirical example being instances of the phenomenon? What existing theories may help the researcher to identify and further elaborate the key features of the phenomenon? As we are addressing the level of phenomena construction and not large-scale empirical inquiry, researcher judgement and 'gut feeling' for theoretical value is more vital than massive data support to elaborate on the phenomenon. Both Alvesson and Robertson (2016)

and Gabriel ([2012](#)), for example, seem to rely on their broader academic and non-academic pre-understanding in their efforts to elaborate on and evaluate the theoretical value of 'teflonic identity maneuvering' and 'organizational miasma' respectively.

Furthermore, to construct and elaborate a phenomenon with high novelty, it should be neither under- nor over-determined by the TEP but somewhere in-between: that is, being inspired by but also transcending 'pure' theory, summaries of data, and cultural and linguistic conventions, as in March et al.'s ([1976](#)) construction of decision making as a 'garbage can'. If the constructed phenomenon is deemed over- or under-determined, it needs to be further elaborated.

Linking. The linking stage is more specific and rigorous than the previous stages as the actual construction of the phenomenon more or less stops at this point. Instead, the main focus is to link the phenomenon to its broader setting or research domains, and other phenomena within those domains, in order more clearly to bring out and evaluate its novelty and relevance. Alvesson and Robertson ([2016](#)), for example, linked their phenomenon of 'teflonic identity maneuvering' to the broader domain of identity at work and specific phenomena such as 'self' and 'identity work'. This helped them to see more clearly what the phenomenon of 'teflonic identity manoeuvring' may have to offer in terms of intellectual insights to its broader research domain, contrasting some dominant views of the significance of identity issues for people at work.

Again, all the TEP ingredients are likely to generate important inputs in this stage. For example, if we consult existing theory, to which research domain(s) are the emerging phenomenon most likely to offer new and interesting intellectual insights – that is, not only adding to the domain, but also changing it or starting up a new conversation? Similarly, in which research domains do the researcher's pre-understanding and previous empirical studies suggest the phenomenon is present? And how is the phenomenon connected to other phenomena within these specific domains?

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When this (linking) stage is complete, the researcher has 'fixed' the emerging phenomenon. It is then possible to *shift* from constructing the phenomenon to starting to investigate it empirically and theoretically. Theory then changes its *role* from an input ingredient used in constructing the phenomenon to making the phenomenon intelligible: that is, to explaining or understanding it (Sandberg and Alvesson, [2021](#)). This role shift does not, however, mean that the theory being developed is separate from the constructed phenomenon, and therefore stops shaping it. Instead, the theory being developed continues to shape the phenomenon as it articulates and explains some aspects of the phenomenon but not others. For example, when the theory aims to explain a constructed phenomenon, it may articulate the causal structure of the phenomenon, but when the theory aims to comprehend a phenomenon (i.e., what it signifies), the theory may articulate the phenomenon's specific meaning structure (Sandberg and Alvesson, [2021](#)). Similarly, the particular research methodology that the researcher uses for empirical study of the established phenomenon, such as surveys or observations, brings about some aspects of the phenomenon and downplays

or ignores other aspects, and, as such, continues to construct the phenomenon. Our point is that constructed phenomena do not exist as fixed entities outside theory and empirical work: the relationships between phenomena, theory, and empirics are dynamic, interactional, and dialectical. Consequently, there are no strict boundaries between constructing a phenomenon and investigating it.

Our proposed framework of phenomena construction focuses only on the (often) initial but crucial phase in research, namely the process of creatively constructing new and potentially interesting phenomena, and not on the phases of systematic empirical investigation and theory development. However, it is important to note that phenomena construction does not always need to take place at the beginning of the research process but can occur at later stages. Sometimes researchers may construct a new phenomenon through early thinking (reading, contemplating) or a creative spark, which can be qualified, nuanced, and developed in an inquiry. On other occasions, phenomena construction may take place later in the research process through empirical findings that bring it about. In other instances, phenomena construction may be more on-going throughout the research process. Rich empirical studies may, for example, lead to further options for research, not only filling in details or exploring the same phenomenon in a new context, but also constructing something novel.

Putting the Framework to Use: Constructing the 'Theragogy' Phenomenon

To demonstrate the intellectual usefulness of the framework, here we illustrate how it can be used for constructing a novel and potentially interesting research phenomenon, namely 'theragogy'. Our purpose is not to construct a 'complete' new phenomenon, only to provide some pointers to how the framework may work in practice.

One of us is currently working with the idea of 'theragogy'. This is made up of a combination of therapy and pedagogy, and refers to the work of some people *outside* the core professions of therapy (i.e., health professionals, such as psychologists and therapists helping people with severe mental and emotional problems) and pedagogy (i.e., educational professionals, such as teachers and HRM specialists teaching people specific knowledge and skills). In contrast to therapy and pedagogy, which are offered in specific contexts such as hospitals and schools, theragogy seems to be an activity increasingly practiced in a range of situations: a framing of what many managers, leadership consultants, coaches, diversity specialists, equal opportunity officers, educators, and others are doing, being much more attuned to the sensitivities and vulnerabilities of employees. Theragogy may be an embryo to a novel phenomenon – or set of phenomena – that can be generated and established with help from our framework for phenomena construction. The idea is to point to a phenomenon beyond what is already established and institutionalized in professional practices and occupations, which may be regarded as interesting by a larger audience (researchers and practitioners), particularly if it helps them to better understand and deal with some aspects of reality (McDonnell et al., 2017).

Creating – Bringing a new phenomenon into being. The impression from our pre-understanding is that therapy and therapy-like activities are expanding in society: from dealing only

with people with severe mental problems, to dealing also with people who have minor issues of frustration, worry, or unhappiness. Feelings and relations are central. At the same time there is an expansion of education: from learning basic occupational knowledge and skills, to learning in all sorts of 'people improving' areas, such as how to deal with other people in terms of gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and values, and being able to practice 'leadership' in an 'authentic' or 'ethical' way. Here, having the right mindset of sensitivity to norms and what drives their establishment is crucial. This potential merger between therapy and pedagogy that we have labelled 'theragogy' draws its inspiration from several sources, including: broad cultural knowledge of *Zeitgeist* (pre-understanding); theoretical work like that of Foucault (1976); studies of leadership increasingly focusing on 'psychopolitics' (Zaleznik, 1997); observations of increased and expanded notions of psychiatric and therapy-oriented labels, so-called concept creep (Haslam, 2016); as well as, to some extent, our own empirical research on diversity, gender, leadership, and HRM. Some of these sources suggest an increased victimization and self-victimization of people, but more broadly a general sensitivity to their perceived vulnerability. Expressions such as 'the coddling of the American mind' are in circulation (Lukianoff and Haidt, 2018).

Specifying – Giving the emerging phenomenon an initial gestalt. Theragogy addresses (perceived and claimed) shortcomings and vulnerabilities in human functioning and aims to handle them through a combination of pedagogic and therapeutic means. It may include norms, skills, mindsets, and attitudes that make or help people to function in socially smooth ways: for example, being able to adapt to workplace conditions and being attuned to the right social orientations as regards corporate culture, prescribed leadership, and ways of relating to gender, age, and ethnicity. Relational and emotional sensitivity is at stake here and imperfections are targeted. At this stage, the specification of the emergent phenomenon is, of course, fairly loose in order to leave open the identification and elaboration of further characteristics in later stages. All input ingredients in the TEP triangle may be used in specifying the theragogy phenomenon, such as digging deeper and further scanning one's own pre-understanding for more specific patterns and aspects of theragogy. The researcher may try to identify specific episodes of theragogy in their own workplace. Consulting relevant literature, such as theories of professions, leadership, gender, diversity, and HRM, may help to specify aspects of theragogy further, and to distinguish between theragogy and other activities and phenomena. For example, what parts of leadership, HRM, or education could qualify as theragogy, and what would be outside this concern for the sensitivities of the subjectivity of subordinates?

The process of specifying may also motivate more emphasis on empirical work. In our current research on values and value platforms in organizations, there are often strong ingredients of theragogy. For example, a large municipal document states that:

> Our values and approach to matters relating to *the working environment, gender equality, cultural diversity and age composition are common and fundamental*. All activities in the city of X must be based on high competence, *job satisfaction and a spirit of service*. As an employee in the city of X, *you must have a positive view of people, show respect and be sensitive to the needs of X residents*. [Our italics]

As not all of this extract indicates theragogy, we have italicized the text that we see as signs of the phenomenon. The specificity of theragogy is hard to catch, and one needs to work with uncertain clues. The focus on a specific mindset, a sensitivity, and the correct orientation is not only about work, ability, and accomplishment per se, and what directly facilitates it, but also about subtle emotional and personal virtues that are to be cultivated through nurturing a specific subjectivity.

Another example is from a description of a leadership course at a university where it is emphasized that the leader 'Motivates and *supports* employees in their development; Is clear in your leadership and leads by example; and, *Prevents and acts on early signals of stress, discord and abusive behaviour*'. As the italicized text suggests, leadership is not so much about creating results as about being supportive and highly sensitive to signs of discomfort. Of course, most people agree that clear signs of stress, discord, etc. should be taken seriously, but the cited material points far beyond that, arguably to a novel phenomenon of being alert also to mild indicators.

Scrutinizing – Examining the promise of the emerging phenomenon. The term 'theragogy' may be too broad to create a distinct phenomenon gestalt. Instead, it may offer only a first step, which encourages a more precise conceptualization of the phenomenon later in the construction process. Scrutinizing questions may include: Is identifying the theragogy phenomenon (i.e., carving out and conceptualizing something 'out there' as theragogy) productive or helpful? Does it offer something new? Is it possible to identify specific groups and activities anchoring the phenomenon candidate in empirical material? Are HR people, team facilitators, diversity managers, and leadership experts doing something that resembles theragogy? Are there sufficient empirical examples to motivate the idea of a significant phenomenon labelled 'theragogy', performed by theragogues? Will it sound like another buzzword and lead to concept proliferation? Here, of course, pre-understanding and the general use of judgement are central, before the potential phenomenon is tested on an audience.

Elaborating – Identifying key features of the emerging phenomenon. Theragogy may illuminate specific aspects of what a range of professionals do, and what may sometimes happen in education, workshops, conflict, and other problem-handling situations. Here preliminary empirical observations of examples of theragogy are potentially helpful. The researcher engages in careful empirical consideration of key aspects of theragogy through examples that were encountered in the researcher's earlier study, or which are familiar through conversations with people, workplace experiences, or literature. For example, the researcher may have some experience of managers who have been exposed to ideas about 'authentic leaders' working with mindfulness or emotional intelligence in their interactions with employees. Again, phenomenon construction at this stage does not aim for final empirical answers; elaboration is about developing more specific ideas about the emergent phenomenon. Here it may be wise to make further distinctions and find nuances in the phenomenon, possibly reducing its scope to produce a more manageable target, such as parts of HR work; alternatively, it may be 'scaled up' and expanded in scope and generalizability. The 'right' level or scope of a phenomenon is typically an open question and one may work with phenomena on different levels. One might see theragogy as a highly general phenomenon – many Western

organizational cultures have some elements of this – or one may target certain, fairly distinct practices (e.g., in HR and consultancy) as theragogy.

Linking – Relating the phenomenon-relevant research domain. Theragogy needs to be placed in context and related to other phenomena. The theragogy phenomenon may, for example, be seen as part of a specific cultural or societal context, such as the culture of narcissism (Lasch, 1978; Twenge and Foster, 2010) or a society cultivating risk, fear, vulnerability, and victimization (Desmet, 2022; Furedi, 2018; Svendsen, 2008). Certain problem areas and industries are more likely to be engaged in theragogic activities and to employ people with these skills. We might talk about a theragogy industry. It could be explored if theragogy is, to varying degrees, a central aspect or activity in what many people do in workplaces. Contextual aspects such as class, industries, domains of work, and professions might be relevant to consider. One would, for example, guess that theragogy is less on the agenda in mining and investment banking than in many public sector organizations. Experiences of situations where managers and others are considering how to deal with certain issues could be helpful. It might also be productive to consider theragogy in the context of gender. Finally, it is important to consider to which research domains theragogy could be linked and what intellectual insights it might bring to those research domains. Potentially relevant research domains include theories of professions, organizational identity, and HRM.

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Taking these stages together, we think 'theragogy' is likely to be seen as a fairly novel phenomenon that cannot easily be understood and explained by existing theories and, as such, may open up the possibility for generating interesting and impactful research. To be clear, the idea of phenomena construction is not to develop a full theory, making distinct empirical claims or providing strong support for certain knowledge claims, but to provide something beyond the specifics of a concrete, observable object (e.g., the working days of HR managers or some people engaged in health and safety gathering in a meeting room at regular intervals). It includes theoretical ideas and is based on empirical support, but it refers to another level of inquiry, different from pure or full theorizing or detailed accounts of a specific empirical target.

However, when the researcher has completed the linking stage, they need to consider whether the theragogy phenomenon is 'stable' or credible enough for a systematic investigation. If not, they may need to take another iteration of constructing it. If it is, the researcher can move on from the construction phase of theragogy to start investigating it systematically. Importantly, while the phenomenon of theragogy may be deemed worthy of empirical and theoretical study, it should be noted that it is not fixed and may continue to evolve over time. As discussed above, how we go about studying it empirically (e.g., whether we use interviews or observations), what theoretical frameworks we use (e.g., institutional theory or identity theory), as well as what type of theory we develop about it (e.g., explanatory or comprehending theory) all in different ways continue shaping or constructing the theragogy phenomenon. However, how the research phenomenon gets (re-)constructed during the systematic empirical investigation and theorization of it is, as they say, another story.

Placing Phenomena Construction in the Overall Research Process

In placing phenomena construction in the overall research process, it must be distinguished from two other key aspects, namely systematic empirical investigation and theory development. Phenomena construction is predominantly an *ontological* process whereas systematic empirical investigation and theory development are predominantly *epistemological* processes. In other words, phenomena construction is largely about reality making (i.e., bringing into being a new or 'reconfigured' aspect of reality), whereas systematic empirical investigation and theory development are largely about developing knowledge of aspects of reality, new or old.

Given the ontological character of phenomena construction, a significant shift typically occurs in the research process when a phenomenon has been constructed and stabilized enough to be investigated empirically and theoretically. Research then moves from an ontological to a mainly epistemological focus, although the constructed phenomenon continues to be shaped by both the empirical investigation and the specific theoretical framework used for analysing the empirics and developing a theory about the phenomenon. Phenomena construction is therefore ongoing, and therefore not something that happens only at one particular time in the research process.

A critical question, though, is what researchers should do differently now, armed with the framework of phenomena construction? Given its potential to generate more novel research phenomena, it may be tempting to apply the proposed framework in any kind of research. There are, however, good reasons also to consider other ways of choosing research phenomena, as it may not always be most beneficial to construct new or reconfigure established phenomena. Sometimes, phenomenon-driven research, based on new, but already accepted phenomena, can be more suitable. There are, of course, also many established phenomena that are worthy of additional attention and which can be understood much better than at present. Some might argue that we have enough or even too many phenomena already and we should be restrictive in adding more; there may be a saturation effect and more phenomena may lead only to new labels and confusion. Consequently, replicating and standardizing established phenomena may hold value in developing a consistent terminology for identifying and theorizing such phenomena.

But sometimes we may be stuck in received wisdom and just following established routes, endlessly adding details to what has already been studied repeatedly, without generating much value (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2014). Here, the proposed framework for phenomena construction can help researchers to break away from the established phenomena in existing research fields and to rejuvenate these fields, either by inventing a new phenomenon or by reconfiguring an established one. We also think the framework can support researchers more generally, as it provides a structured approach to generating and establishing research phenomena in a systematic way, not only at the beginning of research but also in the later stages. However, we would like to reiterate that the framework should be seen, not as a strict template to be followed in all circumstances, which would tend to restrict creativity and imagination, but rather as a set of heuristic guidelines that support the construction of new research phenomena.

CONCLUSION

As we have shown, most research aims to increase knowledge about already established phenomena. However, investigating established phenomena may lead to misleading or counterproductive ways of relating to the social world, and especially missed opportunities, since conventional categories and ways of carving up reality may be a cornerstone of unimaginative studies. After some time, phenomena may pass their 'use-by date' in terms of offering productive themes for study, but this seldom seems to prevent academics from finding new details to focus on. Moreover, when new phenomena are addressed in phenomenon-driven research, the target is often something fairly trendy and easily recognized (e.g., Fisher et al., 2021; von Krogh et al., 2012). To break away from such mainstreaming effects, we need to pay more attention to how we construct and reconstruct phenomena, *and* how to generate and establish new research phenomena actively and systematically. We need to engage less in phenomenon picking and more in what we might call phenomenon 'wrestling', since this is not an easy enterprise and typically calls for more than registering new trends.

Against this background, this study makes two contributions to existing literature in management and organization studies and social science more broadly. First, in contrast to existing literature, it offers a more comprehensive and distinct elaboration and specification of the 'nature' of research phenomena. It suggests that intellectually promising research phenomena are defined by the following characteristics: they are (typically) not given but constructed; they are wider than objects of study but narrower than research domains; they are situated in-between data and theory; they require some empirical grounding; and they need to be seen as interesting and, therefore, worthy of further elaboration.

Second, and most importantly, this study offers a framework that enables researchers more deliberately and systematically to construct novel phenomena that can lead to interesting and impactful research. It consists of two interrelated dimensions: an interactive set of three basic input ingredients (theory, empirics, and pre-understanding) from which phenomena are constructed, and a spiral of five interrelated stages (creating, specifying, scrutinizing, elaborating, and linking) through which construction of novel phenomena takes place. The framework can be used for both constructing new phenomena and reconfiguring established phenomena into something more interesting and novel. More generally, one could argue that the construction of new phenomena that open up avenues for original work should, like the development of new theory, be seen as a key contribution. We need theorizing, careful empirical studies, and beneficial interplay between theory and data. But we also need to work more carefully and ambitiously with *phenomena construction*, as well as with how to accomplish successful interplay between theory, data, and phenomena. This is relevant irrespective of one's view of ontology and epistemology.

Innovative research may be less about starting with a phenomenon, or identifying a phenomenon very early, than about arriving at one. For the creative researcher working with generative material, this new phenomenon may be something quite different from the loose or conventional phenomenon with which the project started. We therefore suggest sometimes reversing how a phenomenon is viewed in the research logic: rather than starting with a phenomenon specification and then proceeding to empirical work and interpretation, we could perhaps start with empirical work and interpretation, leading to a phenomenon specification. The latter is not necessarily

the beginning of good research, but it may be the outcome of creative and intensive work, and thus be a major contribution in itself.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NOTE

[1] There is still considerable debate about what the phenomenon being studied in the Hawthorne case really was, but discussing the various critiques of the Hawthorne study is beyond the scope of this paper (Haig, 2014; Tourish, 2019).

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