AMS Review (2023) 13:169–172
https://doi.org/10.1007/s13162-023-00271-5

EDITORIAL

Conceptual reconciliation for clarity and impact

Stephen L. Vargo[1]

Published online: 27 December 2023

Introduction

The fundamental purpose of, and contributions from, most impactful conceptual-only articles—and, arguably, the primary source of the contribution of impactful empirical articles as well—is the development of theoretical frameworks to address problems or classes of problems. These theoretical frameworks are usually synthesized from multiple other theoretical frameworks. They are often represented by conceptual figures that are intended to capture the relationships among the frameworks' core concepts, assist in their digestibility, and provide readers with easily transportable takeaways from the articles.

However, one of the most common problems I run across as an editor is complicated conceptual frameworks, usually accompanied by related, equally complicated and unwieldy figures, neither of which is easily digestible nor transportable. That is, they result in "Frankenstein" models (see Jaakkola & Vargo, 2021; Vargo & Koskela-Huotari, 2020 for additional discussion)—that are unlikely to have any significant academic or practical impact, regardless of the quality of the scholarly endeavor otherwise.

The source of this complexity is usually straightforward: the contributing frameworks, consist of similar concepts, though part of different lexicons. For example, "institutions" in economic and organizational theory might be called "norms" in sociological theories, "attitudes" in psychology, and "structures" in systems thinking. That is, although the specific concepts might have nuanced meanings to some degree or might be related to different levels of analysis—e.g., attitudes as micro-level social (i.e., macro-level) norms—fundamentally, they are referring to comparable, if not identical, phenomena, in this case, most generally referred to as "institutions" (e.g., Scott, 2013). Unless the purpose of the model is to specifically address these differences, treating them as separate concepts in the same model just adds unneeded complexity, at best, and incoherence, at worst.

Reducing complexity through the reconciliation of theoretical frameworks

Two steps can greatly reduce these problems. The first is to designate one of the theoretical frameworks, usually the most general and comprehensive of the contributing theoretical frameworks, given the problem at hand (as will be discussed) as the *organizing framework*. The second step is to reconcile the other, *informing frameworks,* both with each other and the organizing framework. These designations of organizing and informing frameworks (the O-I orientation) are similar to what Jaakkola (2020) discusses in terms of *domain theory* and *method theory* (the *D-M orientation*). However, the concept of domain theory—"a particular set of knowledge on a substantive topic area situated in a field or domain," (Lukka & Vinnari, 2014, p. 1309)—is usually rather specific to a particular problem and context, whereas method theory is usually more general and *metatheoretical* (Jaakkola, 2020).

The orientations (O-I and D-M) reflect subtly different orientations and processes, if not slightly different purposes. Arguably, the D-M orientation lends itself most readily to *mid-range* theory *generation and application* (from metatheory) in a particular domain or context, whereas the O-I orientation is less restricted, lending itself to *theory building* (and eventual application) in general—including *metatheoretical, midrange, or micro-foundational* (see Vargo & Lusch, 2017). For example, in Brodie et al. (2011), engagement theory is the organizing theory and service-dominant logic (S-D logic) is the informing theoretical framework, whereas in Vargo and Lusch (2016), S-D logic is the organizing theoretical framework and institutional theory is a primary informing framework. Both D-M and O-I models of synthesis are useful but, arguably, the latter is more generalizable and encompassing. The latter also recognizes the likelihood of multiple informing frameworks, whereas the former does not.

✉ Stephen L. Vargo
sv@ou.edu

[1] Price College of Business, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK 73019, USA

Framework reconciliation

However, it is not the purpose of this editorial to pit O-I against D-M. Rather, it is to emphasize the need for *framework reconciliation*, which, importantly, the D-M orientation does not explicitly advocate, but which is considered critical to the I-O orientation. This reconciliation can be of great assistance in reducing the number of moving parts in a model, as well as for drilling down on and elaborating aspects of an existing or synthesized theoretical framework.

The driving issues, as they relate to impact, are twofold: accessibility and generalizability—what Jaakkola and Vargo (2021), capture in "simplicity" and "breadth". *Simplicity*, as it relates to theory, is relatively straightforward: less theoretical complexity is better than more. As Einstein expressed it, "The grand aim of all science is to cover the greatest number of empirical facts by logical deduction from the smallest number of hypotheses or axioms" (cited in Barnett, 2005). I argue that this applies to the number of concepts, as well (consider for example the simplicity and generalizabilty of $E=MC^2$). A similar idea is captured by Occam's Razor: essentially, that the best explanation for a given purpose is the simplest one—or more precisely, "entities [assumptions, foundations] should not be multiplied beyond necessity." More directly, marketing scholarship contends, "A good theory is a simple explanation of a phenomenon. The best theory is the simplest explanation for a wide set of phenomena … simplicity is a virtue" (see also Jaakkola & Vargo, 2021).

Tellis' contention, as well as Einstein's ("a wide set of phenomena" and"greatest number of empirical facts" respectively), not only relate to simplicity but also to the second issue: *generalizability*. That is, for maximum impact, theories and theoretical frameworks should be as general as possible. However, generalization is at least in part, driven by the *level of abstraction*, which is something of a two-edged sword. While *abstraction* drives generality, it potentially makes the associated theoretical frameworks more difficult to understand (Warren et al., 2021), by distancing the language from that normally associated with the phenomenon being addressed and, potentially, from the knowledge base of the reader. Together, these considerations suggest being as abstract as is reasonable, given the specificity of the problem at hand and the familiarity of the conceptual language used in the organizing theoretical framework. In short, as a general rule, the *highest level of abstraction suitable for the intended problem and audience* is likely to have the *greatest impact*.

At the risk of overstatement, it is likely that academics will be used to, and thus more comfortable with, a higher level of abstraction than practitioners, but there are limitations to this

Table 1 Reconciliation of theoretical frameworks for a study of diffusion of innovations

Service-Dominant Logic Narrative	Geel's Multi-level Perspective	Rogers' Complex Adaptive System's Perspective	Adner's and Kapoor's Ecosystem Perspectives
Core Components			
Value cocreation		Higher-order/fitter systems (p 4)	Value propositions
Actors	Agents	Network members/individuals (p10)	Actors
Resource integration			Activities
Service exchange		Communication	Links
Institutions	Norms, rules, regimes	Social norms (p 8)	Positions/ alignment structure
Institutional arrangements	Sociotechnical regimes	Rule sets	Technology ecosystems (old and new)
Service ecosystems	Sociotechnical systems	Self-organizing systems (p 9, 18)	Ecosystems (as structure)
Other Components and Approaches			
Levels			
macro	Sociotechnical landscape	Macro scale	Emergence challenge & extension opportunities
meso	Sociotechnical regimes		Old and new technology systems
micro	Sociotechnical niches	Micro scale	Leaders and followers
Structuration		Scale connectivity/"feedback" (p 13)	
Emergence		Emergence, critical mass/inflection point (tipping point) (p 13, 17)	
Diversity	Heterogeneity	Heterogeneity	
Zooming in and out	Supply side & demand side	Innovation adopters	Upstream and downstream & old new technology
Business models & inst. work			Ecosystem strategy

Table 2 Conceptual reconciliation of theoretical frameworks for study of emergence

S-D Logic Literature	Emergence Literature	Complex Adaptive Systems Literature	Institutional Literature	Updated S-D Logic Model/Framework
Perceived Value (outcome)		System viability / survivability		**Service ecosystem viability**
Value (co)creation (process)	Adaptation	Adaptive behavior/ Autopoiesis	Goal-directed behavior	**Adaptation/Value (co)creation**
Actors (resource-integrating & service exchanging)	Basal elements	Constituent Elements	Humans	**Actors**
Service exchange	Interaction	Interaction	Interaction	**Service exchange/Interaction**
Institutions	Tangible and intangible structures	Memory or internal structure	Regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements	**Institutional structure/memory**
Institutional arrangements	Structure	Structure	Assemblages of related institutions	**Institutional arrangements**
Institutionalization	Conditioning	Lock-in	Habituation, Institutionalization	**Institutionalization/lock-in**
Feedback	Amplification	Positive and negative feedback	Feedback dynamics	**Feedback/amplification**
Service ecosystem	System	Complex adaptive system	Social system	**Service ecosystem**
Emergence	Emergence	Emergence	Proto-institutions	**Emergence/Orders of emergence**

comfort. For example, abstract concepts from within academic disciplines (or subdisciplines), are more likely to be relatable than abstract concepts from other (sub)disciplines. In short, whereas abstract concepts can potentially increase impact, the appropriateness of the level of abstraction is audience specific.

Facilitating reconciliation through reconciliation tables

One way to facilitate this reconciliation is through the use of *reconciliation tables*. These tables can be used informally in the theorizing process or be more formally developed and used in theorizing and theoretical explanations in published articles. Table 1 shows an example of an informal reconciliation table used in the development of the Vargo et al. (2020) article on the reconceptualization of the diffusion of innovation. Table 2 is a reproduction of a reconciliation from Vargo et al. (2023) on emergence in marketing. In both, perhaps predictably given the authorship, S-D logic was used as the organizing framework because it was seen as the most *accommodating* (Koskela-Huotari & Vargo, 2019) of the various other frameworks to be synthesized. At the same time, being indigenous to academic marketing, it was seen as easily connectable with the intended audience. Thus, it was seen as both generalizable and context relevant.

As can be seen, the columns represent the various frameworks and the rows represent concepts. Each column might reflect a single author's research stream (e.g., in Table 1) or groups of similar, related frameworks (e.g., in Table 2). It is important to note that not all terms in the rows of a reconciliation table must have identical meanings—as intimated above—but rather that the term in the organizing framework is sufficiently accommodating of the others, often because it *transcends* them (Koskela-Huotari & Vargo, 2019). In some instances, the term used in the informing framework might be more general and preferable, given the purpose at hand. It is also important to note that not all cells in a reconciliation table need to be populated. In fact, the lack of a comparable concept in the organizing framework can signal essential additions contributed by the informing framework, either for a specific purpose or more generally. Finally, note that the reconciliation process (and tables) might specifically result in a modification of the original organizing framework, at least as it relates to the specific problem, as seen in Table 2, though it can also result in a more permanent modification.

Conclusion

This short editorial is not intended as an exhaustive discussion on article impact (for a more general discussion, see Jaakkola and Vargo, 2021), but rather to highlight the importance of the joint roles of simplification and generalization in optimizing the digestibility and applicability of articles and thus, their impact. In my opinion, one essential process toward that end is the reconciliation of theoretical frameworks

in instances in which multiple frameworks contribute. A guiding principle in the reconciliation process is to make the most accommodating and abstract framework primary, with the caveat that it needs to be digestible by the intended audience(s)—primary and otherwise. Based on my experience, the use of reconciliation tables can be of great assistance in the reconciliation process, and if published, often also for comprehension by the readers. This is especially true if the readers are more familiar with one or more of the contributing theoretical frameworks than others. However, unlike the reconciliation process, these tables are not essential.

Declarations

Competing interests The author has no competing interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this editorial.

References

Barnett, L. (2005). *The universe and Dr. Einstein*. Dover.

Brodie, R. J., Hollebeek, L. D., Jurić, B., & Ilić, A. (2011). Customer engagement: Conceptual domain, fundamental propositions, and implications for research. *Journal of Service Research, 14*(3), 252–271.

Jaakkola, E. (2020). Designing conceptual articles: Four approaches. *AMS Review, 10*(1–2), 18–26.

Jaakkola, E., & Vargo, S. L. (2021). Assessing and enhancing the impact potential of marketing articles. *AMS Review, 11*, 407–415.

Koskela-Huotari, K., & Vargo, S. L. (2019). Why service-dominant logic? In S. L. Vargo & R. F. Lusch (Eds.), *Sage handbook on service-dominant logic* (pp. 40–58).

Lukka, K., & Vinnari, E. (2014). Domain theory and method theory in management accounting research. *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal, 27*(8), 1308–1338.

Scott, W. R. (2013). *Institutions and Organizations: Ideas, Interests, and Identities*. Sage.

Vargo, S. L., Akaka, M. A., & Wieland, H. (2020). Rethinking the process of diffusion in innovation: A service-ecosystems and institutional perspective. *Journal of Business Research, 116*, 226–234.

Vargo, S. L., & Koskela-Huotari, K. (2020). Advancing conceptual-only articles in marketing. *AMS Review.*

Vargo, S. L., & Lusch, R. F. (2016). Institutions and axioms: An extension and update of service-dominant logic. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 44*(1), 5–23.

Vargo, S. L., & Lusch, R. F. (2017). Service-dominant logic in 2025. *International Journal of Research in Marketing, 34*(1), 46–67.

Vargo, S. L., Peters, L., Kjellberg, H., Koskela-Huotari, K., Nenonen, S., Polese, F., & Vaughan, C. (2023). Emergence in marketing: An institutional and service ecosystems framework. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 51*, 2–22.

Warren, N. L., Farmer, M., Gu, T., & Warren, C. (2021). Marketing ideas: How to write research articles that readers understand and cite. *Journal of Marketing, 85*(5), 42–57.