

Insiders Only: Are Our Ideas about What Makes “Good Theory” Holding Us Back?

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Consumer researchers often prize relevance but overlook how narrow assumptions about good theory limit it. Much work focuses on *construct-to-construct* theorizing, which involves introducing new constructs or new links among them. Far less valued is *phenomenon-to-construct* theorizing, which begins with real-world patterns and seeks to explain them by identifying the underlying active ingredient constructs. Examples include why GMO labels reduce demand or why drip pricing leads people to choose higher-cost options. Our survey of authors in four leading journals shows that most believe only construct-to-construct work counts as theory. We argue that this view is too narrow. Drawing on a Bayesian framework for updating beliefs within a theoretical network, we show that phenomenon-to-construct theorizing follows the same logic of scientific inference. Both approaches rely on established links in the nomological network to draw stronger conclusions about the focal link of interest. Using well-supported construct-to-construct mechanisms to explain real-world phenomena is therefore a strength, not a weakness. We clarify how phenomenon-to-construct theorizing differs from both “mere application” and “empirics-first” research. Embracing this form of theorizing can broaden the reach of consumer research by connecting abstract ideas to meaningful, actionable phenomena that matter to scholars, practitioners, and policymakers.

Keywords: theory, relevance, construct-to-construct, phenomenon-to-construct, peer review criteria, nomological net

INTRODUCTION

For decades, leading consumer researchers have advocated studying problems that are directly relevant to managers, public policy makers, consumers, and researchers in other

academic fields (Deighton 2007; Fournier 2023; Hoyer, Wan, and Wilcox 2024; Inman 2012; Lutz 2018; Lynch 2011; Lynch et al. 2012; MacInnis et al. 2020; Mick 2006; Pham 2013; Wells 1993). Consumer researchers’ academic homes are mostly in business school marketing departments, and we

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see similar calls in marketing more broadly (Brown et al. 2005; Stremersch, Winer, and Camacho 2021; van Heerde et al. 2021). Lutz noted that calls for relevance have had little apparent effect. Schmitt et al. (2022) expressed the same frustration:

... apparently, relevance is a classic that must be revisited every few years. However, the mere fact that it is revisited with such frequency makes us wonder if speaking about the need for consumer research to be relevant has not been enough. What more can be said? (753)

Hoyer et al. (2024) attribute the limited relevance of consumer research to researchers' imperfect understanding of how to achieve it. They recommend that researchers (a) target a specific audience, (b) address issues that the audience cares about, (c) report actionable findings, (d) focus on real-world consumer behavior, and (e) write in language their audience can understand. Research following this sound advice will not be "insiders only"—that is, accessible only to experts and opaque to outsiders. That should broaden the set of readers who find the work relevant.

However, Hoyer et al. (2024) do not discuss the types of theory likely to be seen as practically relevant by nonacademic audiences. We claim that limited perceived relevance stems in part from how researchers think about "theory."

Kurt Lewin, the father of social psychology, made major contributions to the understanding of practically relevant problems (1943, 1946). He famously asserted:

We should be aware of the value of theory. A businessman once stated that 'there is nothing as practical as a good theory... Although we need theory, we will have to watch out that theory never breaks loose from its proper place as a servant, as a tool for human beings. (Lewin 1943, 119)

In this article, we posit that consumer researchers have fallen short in relevance and external impact for two reasons:

- a. Most researchers desire that articles in top journals not only should be relevant but also should contribute to theory.

- b. Most consumer researchers assume that theory must entail new statements about abstract concepts or constructs. We dispute this assumption and note that several philosophers of science do as well. Valuable theory can also explain important empirical phenomena in terms of established constructs or relationships among constructs. Many consumer researchers undervalue this form of theorizing despite its equal legitimacy and its potential to enhance the perceived relevance of our work to outside audiences.

By *phenomenon*, we mean some pattern of observables—either the distribution of one variable or relations among observables. Puzzling phenomena demand an explanation of why they occur. Exhibit 1 presents examples. Outsiders are likely to recognize the practical relevance of explaining puzzling phenomena through more general concepts or *constructs*. We define constructs as unobservable, latent variables for which no single operational definition serves as a gold standard (Cronbach and Meehl 1955; Ding et al. 2020). Examples include brand equity (Keller 1993), psychological ownership (Peck et al. 2021), liquid consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017), financial well-being (Netemeyer et al. 2018), search costs (Moorthy, Ratchford, and Talukdar 1997), impostor syndrome (Goor et al. 2020), stigma management (Crockett 2017), and price fairness (Bolton, Warlop, and Alba 2003).

Our article distinguishes between two forms of theory: (1) theory that explains puzzling real-world phenomena through preexisting higher-order constructs and (2) theory that introduces new constructs or new relationships among constructs. Before elaborating, we address a prior question: Must scholarly research contribute to new theory?

Must Scholarly Research Contribute to New Theory?

Most consumer researchers demand theory. Deighton (2007) argued that a good *Journal of Consumer Research*

Exhibit 1: Example Phenomena to Be Explained via Theorizing

- Consumers show resistance to medical advice from artificial intelligence (AI) compared to the same advice from a human doctor (Longoni, Bonezzi, and Morewedge 2019). Why?
- Consumers demand more of a product when its advertised price is partitioned versus advertised as a single "all in" total—for example, \$50 for a shirt + \$7.95 for shipping and handling versus \$57.95 all-inclusive (Morwitz, Greenleaf, and Johnson 1998). Why?
- When couples combine finances rather than maintaining separate accounts, this seems to increase overall marital satisfaction and decrease divorce (Gladstone, Garbinsky, and Mogilner 2022; Olson et al. 2023). Why?
- After a tragic choice to withdraw life support from a critically compromised newborn, French parents seem to be more able to go on with life than US parents (Botti, Orfali, and Iyengar 2009). Why?
- Genetically modified organisms (GMO) food labels reduce demand for genetically modified food products, with the strongest effects on those initially neutral about GMOs (Kim, Kim, and Arora 2022). Why?
- Despite strong pro-sustainability attitudes in Germany and the Netherlands, there has been no change in the carbon impact of consumers' grocery purchases in over a decade (Bronnenberg et al. 2025). Why?

(*JCR*) article should illuminate a puzzling consumption phenomenon but also make a theoretical contribution. He maintained that “papers that apply existing theory to practice without extending the theory belong in a practitioner journal.”

Recent and past editors have expressed a similar view, though with nuance. The *JCR* website states that in *Substantive Phenomena Papers*, “processes and explanations for the phenomenon should be provided but do not need to be fully conclusive, extensive, or advance a novel theory.” The journal also requires that theoretical components or explanations be well conceptualized. Thus, while theory can be less elaborate, some explanatory element must still be offered.

We share Alba's (2012, 985) view that “we should not regard theory as a defining feature of scholarship” (Lynch et al. 2012, 479; Pham 2013, 417). Golder et al. (2023) further advance the case for “empirics-first research.”

Nagel (1979) distinguished between *experimental laws* and *theories*. Experimental laws are inductive summaries of relationships among observables—for instance, Boyle's law describing the relationship between the pressure and volume of a gas at constant temperature. Early behaviorists in psychology similarly sought to identify stimulus–response laws. Discovering a descriptive, general, and substantively important real-world phenomenon can serve as a foundation for later theories that explain it.

Though we believe journals and reviewers should be open to purely empirical contributions, that is not our focus here. In the remainder of the article, we distinguish between a widely accepted form of theorizing in consumer research and a less appreciated form that, we argue, offers greater potential for perceived relevance to outside constituencies.

What Is Theory? Observable Phenomena, Constructs, and Explanations

Many consumer researchers reserve the label “theory” for new statements about unobservable concepts or constructs. Janiszewski, Labroo, and Rucker (2016, 201) write that “contributions to theory involve proposing, testing, and offering support for novel relationships between constructs.” Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan (2007) likewise equate strong theory building with introducing new constructs or new relationships among them.

This definitional stance is surprising and perhaps problematic. The view that articles need to contribute to theory in the form of new constructs may contribute to the unfortunate tendency of authors to give the impression of originality by giving a new label to what is fundamentally the same concept as others have studied (Larsen and Bong 2016). That inhibits scientific progress. The 2025 Association for Consumer Research conference had a session labeling this “academic rent-seeking.”

The narrow definition is also surprising. Many influential discussions of theory make no mention of unobservable constructs (Christensen and Raynor 2003; Popper 1959). Early 20th-century psychology was skeptical of unobservables' scientific status (Carnap 1950; Ding et al. 2020; MacCorquodale and Meehl 1948); for example, behaviorist B. F. Skinner (1963) called mental concepts “explanatory fictions.”

Cronbach and Meehl's (1955) landmark article reversed this posture and legitimized studying unobservable constructs in the social sciences. We say it is equally legitimate to theorize by explaining observable phenomena using established constructs or construct relationships. In *The Structure of Science*, Nagel (1979) identified three components in a theory:

- (1) an abstract calculus that is the logical skeleton of the explanatory system and that ‘implicitly defines’ the basic notions of the system; (2) a set of rules that in effect assign an empirical content to the abstract calculus by relating it to the concrete materials of observation and experiment; and (3) an interpretation or model of the abstract calculus, which supplies some flesh for the skeletal structure in terms of more or less familiar conceptual or visualizable materials. (90)

The connection between observables and unobserved constructs is thus central to theory. Some theoretical advances occur when familiar construct relationships explain new phenomena. Nagel (1979, 93) emphasized, “If the theory is to be used as an instrument of explanation and prediction, it must somehow be linked with observable materials.” He further proposed that the most satisfying explanations account for unexpected phenomena using conceptual relations well established in other, seemingly unrelated domains:

... since what normally requires explanation is something strange and unexpected, an explanation will yield genuine intellectual satisfaction only if it makes what is unfamiliar intelligible in terms of what is familiar... It would be flying into the teeth of the evidence to deny that important developments in the history of science have been controlled by the desire to explain new domains of fact in terms of something already familiar. One need only recall the persistent use of familiar mechanical models in constructing explanations for the phenomena of heat, light, electricity, and even human behavior to recognize the influence of this conception of explanation. (Nagel 1979, 45–46)

CONSTRUCT-TO-CONSTRUCT AND PHENOMENON-TO-CONSTRUCT THEORY

The focus of this article is on a distinction between “construct-to-construct” theory and “phenomenon-to-construct” theory. Construct-to-construct theory starts with a conceptual structure and attempts to make new claims at the level of concepts or constructs. For example, a researcher might posit the following:

- Increasing psychological distance should weaken the intensity of people's affective reactions when making judgments and choices. Increasing the abstraction of construal level should tend to make judgments more positive (Williams, Stein, and Galguara 2014).
- Consumers have multiple pathways to forming attitudes, including outside-in (object-centered) and inside-out (person-centered) pathways (Cohen and Reed 2006).
- Unlike "solid" consumption that is enduring, ownership-based, and tangible, "liquid" consumption is ephemeral, access-based, and intangible. Liquid consumption is lower in relevance to self and more commoditized (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017).

Despite undeniable scientific merit of articles like these, the abstractness of the concepts and unfamiliarity with the labels can make this kind of work come off to outsiders as for insiders only—not immediately relevant to their concerns. Construct-to-construct articles start with the theory rather than with a problem. As Hoyer et al. (2024) warn, that may be a path to limited perceived relevance to outsiders. Pham (2013, 415) suggests this test:

Approach some seasoned business professionals and try to discuss what you know about consumer behavior using only principles of information processing, social cognition, and BDT. I predict that they will lose interest within a few minutes.

We contrast the construct-to-construct approach with phenomenon-to-construct theory, which starts with a substantive empirical phenomenon to be explained—a "problem" in the words of Hoyer et al. (2024). Here, the theory explains some puzzling empirical pattern—like the phenomena in exhibit 1—in terms of some conceptual structure that includes unobservable mechanisms that may underlie disparate observable phenomena in other domains.

This distinction between construct-to-construct and phenomenon-to-construct theorizing has been noted by other consumer researchers, but only in passing (Lynch et al. 2012). MacInnis et al. (2020) briefly introduced the distinction in a single paragraph:

Consumer researchers often aim to provide theoretical contributions. An implicit rule is that this contribution is based on mapping relationships between constructs. Boundary-breaking opportunities can emerge when we use our conceptual skills to add structure to real-world, messy, and often disorganized phenomena... One way to do so is by engaging in phenomenon-construct mapping. Here, researchers start with observations of real-world marketing-relevant phenomena and then identify constructs and relationships that can explain them. (3)

Here, we greatly elaborate on this distinction, adopting the language of Cronbach and Meehl's (1955) canonical treatise introducing "construct validity" and the "nomological network." Like Nagel (1979), Cronbach and Meehl (1955, 290) argued that the theory involves observables, concepts, and their interrelations—the entire nomological network:

1. Scientifically speaking to "make clear what something is" means to set forth the laws in which it occurs. We shall

refer to the interlocking system of laws which constitute a theory as a nomological network.

2. The laws in a nomological network may relate (a) observable properties or quantities to each other; or (b) theoretical constructs to observables; or (c) different theoretical constructs to one another.

Our aim in this article is to provide a conceptual framework for evaluating both construct-to-construct and especially phenomenon-to-construct theorizing. We argue that many authors and reviewers do not understand the different aims of these two types of theorizing.

Consequently, many devalue phenomenon-to-construct research on misguided criteria if no new construct relations are shown. Many fail to recognize that the two types of research aim to shift different beliefs in a nomological network. Construct-to-construct research aims to shift beliefs about links between constructs or to propose new constructs. Phenomenon-to-construct research aims to shift beliefs about links between a real-world operational cause (or effect) and underlying active ingredient constructs. See also Corley and Gioia (2011), Lipton (2017), and Nagel (1979) for discussion of what we call phenomenon-to-construct theoretical contributions.

The best construct-to-construct research causes us to see the literature in a new way, an undeniable scholarly contribution. For example, one might unify a previously conflicted literature, as Petty and Cacioppo (1986) did to explain inconsistencies in the literature on the relationship between audience involvement and attitude change. However, the abstractness and unfamiliarity of construct labels can make this kind of work come off as for insiders only, with outsiders not immediately seeing relevance to their own concerns.

The best phenomenon-to-construct research causes us to see the observable phenomenon in a new way. The kind of belief shift engendered by good phenomenon-to-construct research appeals to audiences outside of academic consumer research by providing a new explanation of a material phenomenon that enables action affecting outcomes that matter to those audiences.

To date, our field has lacked any rigorous framework for evaluating the contribution of new research advancing phenomenon-to-construct theory. We propose a novel Bayesian framework to characterize how the two types of theorizing aim to use data to shift beliefs of different types—either about links between unobservable constructs or about links between observable causes and effects and underlying construct mechanisms. For both types of theorizing, new data has more power to shift beliefs about the focal links if the other links in the network are well established.

We will, along the way, distinguish between both types of research from (a) purely descriptive research that does

not explain a phenomenon or make statements about why it occurs and (b) “applied” research, such as mega-studies comparing interventions of how to influence some outcome like vaccinations by using different behavioral principles for the inspiration for intervention design. One does not undertake applied research to produce a shift in beliefs about key parts of a nomological network.

A SURVEY OF AUTHOR BELIEFS AT TOP JOURNALS

Before presenting our formal analysis, we sought to assess whether our conclusions diverge from prevailing beliefs in the field. In fall 2023, we surveyed authors of empirical articles published between 2013 and 2022 in *JCR*, *Journal of Marketing* (*JM*), *Journal of Marketing Research* (*JMR*), and *Marketing Science* (*Mar. Sci.*). Each respondent was asked about one article only. We emailed 1712 authors and 545 responded, a 32% response rate (489 finished the survey). Preregistration, details about the survey, and anonymized survey responses can be found on our OSF page: <https://osf.io/xzkag/overview>.

Of the authors responding, 56% either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement that “Lack of theoretical contribution is a good reason to reject a manuscript.” Agreement varied by journal: *JCR* 75%; *JM* 64%; *JMR* 47%, and *Mar. Sci.* 28%. Thus, consumer researchers in particular demand theory. We asked two questions about what constitutes a theoretical contribution.

- When asked whether “proposing, testing, and supporting novel constructs or novel relationships between constructs” qualifies, 82% said yes (87% at *JCR*).
- When asked whether “explaining an empirical real-world phenomenon using existing construct relationships documented elsewhere” qualifies, only 37% said yes (31% at *JCR*).

Thus, while most agree that a lack of theoretical contribution warrants rejection, relatively few recognize phenomenon-to-construct research as a theoretical contribution.

Finally, respondents estimated what percentage of *other authors* would endorse each definition of theoretical contribution. Figure 1 displays the full distribution of these responses.

Respondents estimated that $M = 81\%$ of authors would agree with the first statement and that only $M = 45\%$ would agree with the second (83% vs. 42% at *JCR*). Respondents’ own agreement that it is a theoretical contribution to explain an empirical real-world phenomenon using existing construct relationships documented in the literature in other contexts predicted their assessments of others’ agreement ($r = 0.47$).¹

Our survey data, corroborated by audience reactions when we present this work, suggest three implications. First, reviewers at *JCR* and similar journals may be predisposed to devalue phenomenon-to-construct research if they believe that (1) lack of a theoretical contribution justifies rejection; (2) phenomenon-to-construct research does not constitute a theoretical contribution; and (3) their peers share this belief.

Second, a substantial minority disagrees—especially at journals outside *JCR*. With favorable reviewer assignments, some consumer research proposing phenomenon-to-construct explanations does appear in top marketing and consumer research journals (Kim et al. 2022; Longoni et al. 2019; Mende et al. 2019). Yet, when we present this work at conferences and seminars, many in the audience report that their articles were rejected as “mere application,” despite fitting our criteria for useful phenomenon-to-construct theorizing.

Some authors of phenomenon-to-construct articles chose to avoid battles with reviewers at *JCR* or other top journals in our field. They sent their articles to alternative prestigious outlets with norms more sympathetic to their aims (Fernandes, Lynch, and Netemeyer 2014; Gladstone et al. 2022; Santana, Dallas, and Morwitz 2020).

In what follows, we:

1. Define and describe construct-to-construct versus phenomenon-to-construct research.
2. Develop a Bayesian framework for belief updating within Cronbach and Meehl’s (1955) canonical nomological network model of theory development.
3. Argue that well-executed phenomenon-to-construct research does make a theoretical contribution—and that its reliance on established construct relationships is a strength, not a weakness.
4. Discuss how such research can enhance practical relevance.
5. Provide illustrative examples and outline principles of scientific inference appropriate to each research type.

“SUB-THEORIES” AND THE NOMOLOGICAL NET FOR TWO TYPES OF THEORIES

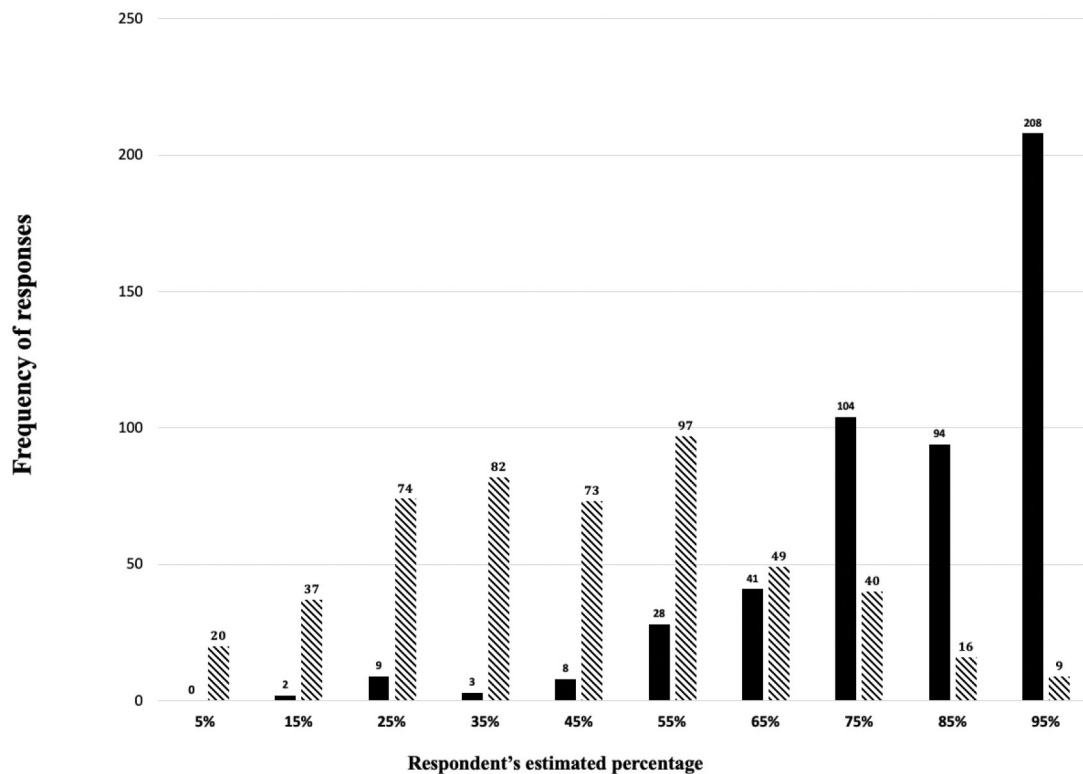
Cronbach and Meehl (1955) legitimized theorizing about unobservable constructs after nearly half a century during which psychology largely rejected such theorizing as unscientific. Researchers might posit an unobservable construct such as *involvement* (Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983), *financial infidelity* (Garbinsky et al. 2020), *psychological ownership* (Peck and Shu 2018), or *financial well-being* (Netemeyer et al. 2018). They might then develop a

¹ Beliefs did not vary materially by the year in which authors received their PhD. Nor did those publishing later in the decade we covered have different views than those who published earlier—

despite many efforts by *JCR* and others to legitimize “substantive” research. *JCR* and *JM* authors were most likely to express the modal views above.

FIGURE 1

RESPONDENTS' ESTIMATES OF WHAT OTHERS CONSIDER A THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION



■ What percent of authors will say that it is a theoretical contribution to propose, test, and offer support for novel constructs or novel relationships between constructs?

▨ What percent of authors will say that it is a theoretical contribution to explain an empirical real-world phenomenon using existing construct relationships that have been documented in the literature in other contexts?

measure or intervention that imperfectly captures that latent construct. A measure or manipulation—say, of involvement—is validated if it correlates with predicted antecedents and consequences within a nomological net (Park and Young 1986; Zaichkowsky 1985).

Cronbach and Meehl (1955) advanced the view that the nomological net constitutes one's theory. Researchers begin from a state of partial ignorance and make progress by trusting what is known about some links in the network to let new data inform less certain links. They illustrated this with an example:

... the Binet scale was first valued because children's scores tended to agree with judgments by schoolteachers. If it had not shown this agreement, it would have been discarded along with reaction time and the other measures of ability previously tried. Teacher judgments once constituted the criterion against which the individual intelligence test was validated. But if today a child's IQ is 135 and three of his

teachers complain about how stupid he is, we do not conclude that the test has failed. Quite to the contrary, if no error in test procedure can be argued, we treat the test score as a valid statement about an important quality and define our task as that of finding out what other variables—personality, study skills, etc—modify achievement or distort teacher's judgment. (286–7)

Cronbach and Meehl (1955) underlined the very incomplete nature of our understanding at a given point in time and the cumulative nature of scientific progress:

Since the meaning of theoretical constructs is set forth by stating the laws in which they occur, our incomplete knowledge of the laws of nature produces a vagueness in our constructs. (294)

We rely on this general nomological network framework to characterize two types of theories with different origins and different aims.

FIGURE 2

OPERATIONAL VARIABLES AND LATENT CONSTRUCTS IN THEORY TESTS

 operational $X \rightarrow$ latent construct $X \rightarrow$ latent construct $Y \rightarrow$ operational Y

An Elementary Nomological Net with Three Causal Subtheories

All empirical research draws conclusions by reliance on inference from observable, operational variables. But facts require concepts to interpret those facts and give them meaning (Kuhn 1962). Figure 2 reflects how we make inferences from data in an elementary nomological net. We use the example of an experiment manipulating some operational independent variable X and observing effects on an operational dependent variable Y .

In our notation for figure 2, *operational X* denotes one or more manipulated independent variables (or their interaction), which likely influence multiple latent variables. Similarly, *operational Y* represents one or more measured dependent variables. The link between *latent construct X* and *latent construct Y* may encompass mediation (latent $X \rightarrow$ latent $M \rightarrow$ latent Y) or interactions among multiple latent constructs.

In an experiment, researchers observe the relationship between operational X and operational Y , interpreting it as evidence for a causal relationship between latent constructs X and Y . This logic applies to both construct-to-construct and phenomenon-to-construct theorizing, but the motives, audiences, and types of belief updated by the data differ between them.

There are three causal subtheories embedded in the network shown in figure 2, which collectively constitute one's overall theory:

- i. Operational $X \rightarrow$ latent construct X
- ii. Latent construct $X \rightarrow$ latent construct Y
- iii. Latent construct $Y \rightarrow$ operational Y

Empirical research can contribute to theory by causing substantial updating of *any* of these links.

Bootstrapping Belief Shift about One Subtheory by Relying on Prior Evidence about Another

A central insight from Cronbach and Meehl (1955) is that, though evidence of an operational $X \rightarrow$ operational Y link logically bears on all three subtheories, stronger inferences about a focal link are warranted when the other links are well established. (The same idea was present in quotations from Nagel [1979] cited earlier—who in turn cited Aristotle.)

Compare inferences about construct-to-construct link (ii) based on an observed treatment effect, operational $X \rightarrow$ operational Y under two conditions:

- a. We are uncertain about links (i), (ii), and (iii).
- b. We are uncertain about (ii) but confident about links (i) and (iii) mapping operations to constructs.

Clearly, we would make more confident inferences about construct-to-construct link (ii) under investigation in case (b), when we are confident about the validity of links from the constructs to their operationalizations. This core argument applies to both types of theory. Inference about a focal claim about one subtheory in a nomological net will be more confident when we can rely on belief in nonfocal subtheories.

We now apply those ideas to bootstrapped belief updating in construct-to-construct versus phenomenon-to-construct theorizing. We argue that these differ first, in what subtheories in figure 2 are the focus of the investigation and the links of interest to the audience, and which subtheories (i), (ii), and (iii) are assumed based on prior evidence. We show why, for phenomenon-to-construct research, it is a feature and not a bug when the explanation offered for some pattern of operational variables relies on well-established construct-to-construct links.

Operational and Latent Variables in Construct-to-Construct Theorizing

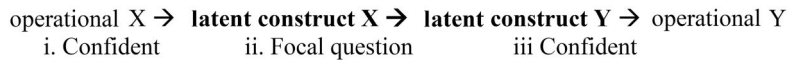
In construct-to-construct theorizing, researchers focus on the latent variables in the chain: operational $X \rightarrow$ latent $X \rightarrow$ latent $Y \rightarrow$ operational Y . The central goal is to establish or refine a new relationship between latent X and latent Y . Operational variables play a supporting role: Links between observables and links between operational and latent variables matter primarily insofar as they allow inference about the focal construct-to-construct relationship.

Strong empirical tests of construct-to-construct theorizing depend on readers' confidence that operational X accurately indicates latent X , and operational Y reflects latent Y . When that confidence exists, finding an empirical relationship between operational variables can justify inferences about general relationships between latent constructs.

Figure 3 depicts our nomological network from figure 2, but here assuming confidence in link (i) (operational $X \rightarrow$

FIGURE 3

BOOTSTRAPPING INFERENCE IN CONSTRUCT-TO-CONSTRUCT THEORY TESTS



latent X) and link (iii) (latent Y → operational Y). The theory test focuses on updating beliefs about subtheory (ii), the construct-to-construct connection under investigation.

Temporal Construal Theory as an Example. Liberman and Trope's (1998) foundational work on temporal construal theory illustrates this logic (Han, Duhachek, and Agrawal 2014; Trope and Liberman 2010; Williams et al. 2014). Their construct-to-construct theory proposed that actions can be represented at higher or lower levels of abstraction, and that temporal distance increases this level of abstraction—shifting the weights people assign to different cues when making decisions. They predicted that greater temporal distance increases the relative importance of *desirability* versus *feasibility* considerations.

In one study, participants rated their likelihood of performing three behaviors: attending a guest lecture, installing a word processor, and attending a show. Some imagined deciding for tomorrow, others for next year. Each scenario varied in desirability (e.g., whether the lecture was relevant to one's future work) and feasibility (e.g., convenient vs. inconvenient scheduling).

Results showed that for *next-year* decisions, intentions were greater when desirability was high and feasibility low (a relevant lecture at an inconvenient time) than when desirability was low and feasibility high (an irrelevant lecture at a convenient time). The reverse pattern appeared for *tomorrow* decisions.

Locating the Theoretical Contribution. The contribution of this research and the reason readers cite it is the novel construct-to-construct link—not the link between operational variables or links of operations to constructs. Without the underlying construct-to-construct theorizing, the specific operational X → operational Y relationship holds little intrinsic interest. What makes the findings meaningful is their evidential value for the hypothesized latent X → latent Y relation.

However, for readers to be persuaded, they must find it beyond controversy that the operationalizations of X and Y validly capture the intended constructs (Anderson and Gerbing 1988; Brinberg, Lynch, and Sawyer 1992; Campbell 1960) or authors must provide new supporting evidence (Perdue and Summers 1986; Sawyer, Lynch, and

Brinberg 1995). In short, construct-to-construct theorizing bootstraps belief shifts about new relationships between latent constructs by relying on the credibility of the existing subtheories linking constructs to their operational measures. But these operation-to-construct links are not the point of construct-to-construct articles.

Operational and Latent Variables in Phenomenon-to-Construct Theorizing

Unlike construct-to-construct theorizing, phenomenon-to-construct theorizing begins with interest in the outer, observable variables in the causal chain:

operational X → latent X → latent Y → operational Y.

Here, the motivating force is the phenomenon itself—a real-world pattern of observables that calls for explanation. Readers are drawn in by empirical findings and wonder why they occur.

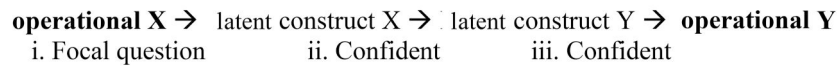
This form of theorizing typically starts with a *problem* rather than formal hypotheses (Kerlinger 1986), as in the examples shown earlier in exhibit 1. Its reasoning tends to be inductive (Berger, van Osselaer, and Janiszewski 2025; Zeithaml et al. 2020) or abductive (Alba 2012; Janiszewski and van Osselaer 2022; Lipton 2017), rather than deductive. Reasoning parallels how analytical marketing modelers begin with stylized facts and seek premises that could logically explain them (Moorthy 1993). Qualitative researchers adopt similar strategies when building grounded theory from cases (Eisenhardt, Graebner, and Sonenshein 2016).

The theoretical contribution in phenomenon-to-construct research lies in clarifying how operational variables connect to latent mechanisms—for example, linking operational X to latent X or linking latent Y to operational Y. The aim is to uncover the “active ingredient” (i.e., mechanism) that explains a real-world effect.

Consider an analogy: Many people know that taking ibuprofen (operational X) reduces pain ratings (operational Y), but understanding *why* requires linking it to the latent mechanism—ibuprofen inhibits prostaglandins, which in turn drive latent pain sensation. The scientific contribution comes from establishing the mapping between operational X (ibuprofen) and latent X (prostaglandin suppression).

FIGURE 4

BOOTSTRAPPING INFERENCE IN PHENOMENON-TO-CONSTRUCT THEORY TESTS



Data justify increased confidence in this link when the rest of the causal chain is well established. For example, a scientist trying to explain ibuprofen's efficacy would be more confident in identifying prostaglandin suppression as the key agent if prior research established a link between prostaglandin and inflammation and pain sensation. Thus, the better established the links from latent *X* (prostaglandin) to latent *Y* (inflammation and latent pain) and from latent *Y* to operational *Y* (pain reports), the stronger the inference about the link from operational *X* (ibuprofen) to latent *X* (prostaglandin suppression) as the reason why ibuprofen reduces self-reported pain.

Figure 4 shows bootstrapped inference from phenomenon-to-construct theory tests. The notation implies that the researchers seek to test new claims about the active ingredient in the operational *X* (ibuprofen) to latent *X* (prostaglandin suppression) by relying on prior evidence that prostaglandin suppression reduces inflammation and pain sensation (latent *X* to latent *Y*) and that latent pain sensation is related to ratings of pain (latent *Y* to operational *Y*). In other examples, the contribution could be in reinterpreting the active ingredient in the operational outcome measure (e.g., Spiller 2025).

EXAMPLES OF PHENOMENON-TO-CONSTRUCT CONSUMER RESEARCH

Desire for Autonomy and Emotional Reactions to Tragic Medical Choices

In phenomenon-to-construct research, empirical research does not aim to shift beliefs about construct-to-construct links. Rather, the focus is on discovering the "active ingredient" mechanism for some puzzling real-world phenomenon.

Consider Botti et al. (2009), who compared French and American parents of infants who had died in neonatal intensive care units after the tragic decision to withdraw life support:

... the treatment limitation was made by the parents in the United States, where parental autonomy prevails in the field of neonatology, and by the physicians in France, where parental consent is taken for granted. (340)

Thousands of studies have established the basic principles of self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 1985): Human well-being increases when actions are intrinsically motivated and satisfy basic needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. In a meta-analysis of 184 health studies, Ng et al. (2012) found "positive relations of psychological need satisfaction and autonomous motivation to beneficial health outcomes" (325).

Yet Botti et al. (2009) observed that US parents experienced wrenching emotional consequences from making the decision to withdraw care. French parents were also saddened, but they were more resigned. They reported less counterfactual thinking, grief, distress, and difficulty coping.

Why might this be? The authors conjectured that in tragic choices, parental involvement increases causal attributions to the self, producing lingering guilt. Emotions follow causal attributions (Weiner 1986). Outsourcing tragic choices, therefore, leads to less negative emotion:

Guilt and self-blame, both of which derive from the perception of a personal causal link to a negative decision consequence ... were commonly mentioned by the American parents who made the decision to withdraw their infants' life support. In contrast, the experience of guilt was never mentioned or even indirectly expressed in the French parents' narratives. Despite enduring the same loss as the Americans, the French parents seemed to have benefited from not being directly involved in the decision. (Botti et al. 2009, 342)

The authors used ethnographic observation to generate grounded theory (Eisenhardt et al. 2016). They followed this with three scenario-based experiments showing that people facing tragic choices preferred at the time to make the choice themselves. Yet regardless of whether they chose to withdraw or continue hopeless treatment and regardless of whether the doctor's recommendation aligned with their own, choosers experienced more negative emotion than nonchoosers—particularly when they could not attribute the decision to external causes.

Botti et al. (2009) received the JCR Policy Board's Best Article Award. The contribution of their article was not to propose new construct-to-construct links. Prior research had already shown that perceiving oneself as the cause of a

FIGURE 5

SUBTHEORIES IN [BOTTI ET AL. \(2009\)](#) AND BELIEF UPDATING**operational X** → latent Construct X → latent Construct Y → **operational Y**

Sub-theory i: operational X → latent construct X

Sub-theory ii: latent Construct X → latent Construct Y

Sub-theory iii: latent Construct Y → operational Y

Prior Schema: Autonomy	Updated Schema: Self-Blame
i. Self-choice of treatment (compared to doctor's choice) → greater perceived autonomy	i. Self-choice of treatment (compared to doctor's choice) → more perceived causality for tragic choice outcome
ii. Greater perceived autonomy → higher private positive feelings	ii. More perceived causality → higher private negative feelings
iii. Higher private positive feelings → higher self-rated emotional well-being	iii. Higher private negative feelings → lower self-rated emotional well-being
Thus, consumers should prefer choice autonomy (due to greater fulfillment of basic human needs) regardless of the stakes of such decisions.	Thus, for high-stakes decisions with no upside, the subjective utility of choice autonomy is undermined by perceived causality self-blame. In tragic choices, consumers with choice autonomy will experience higher emotional harm.

negative outcome increases guilt and self-blame ([Simos 1979](#); [Spranca, Minsk, and Baron 1991](#); [Weiner 1986](#)). Rather, the article demonstrated that in tragic choices, the emotional costs of agency swamp the benefits of autonomy. Ironically, those who valued autonomy before choosing suffered more *ex post*.

Links between operational variables (e.g., self-choice of treatment) and latent active ingredients (e.g., perceived causality vs. perceived autonomy) are often nonobvious because real-world phenomena are multiply determined. Most operational variables influence more than one latent construct ([Brinberg et al. 1992](#)). Multiple causal mechanisms can coexist. Prior explanations need not be wrong, but they may overlook mechanisms that are more psychologically consequential. [Figure 5](#) maps the research of [Botti et al. \(2009\)](#) onto the schematic nomological net from [figure 2](#).

Having a better model of the relevant causal mechanisms allows one to act on that system. US medical norms rest on the principle that informed choice enhances well-being. In

these tragic domains, that principle can intensify survivors' torment. If one accepts the "desire for autonomy in choices" view, patients or their representatives should retain decision authority. But in truly hopeless cases, the demonstrated psychological costs of agency suggest that medical policy should reconsider when and how autonomy is exercised. [Botti et al. \(2009\)](#) showed that when doctors framed withdrawal of treatment as the only reasonable option, the emotional disadvantage of being the decision-maker was eliminated.

This research is not a "mere application" of prior psychological work on autonomy and emotion. The authors did not apply an existing theory to a new context. They began instead with a *phenomenon*—cross-national differences in emotional reactions to tragic decisions—that demanded explanation.

In mere application, the researcher starts from an established construct-to-construct mechanism and applies it deductively to a new setting, without revising beliefs about the underlying links. The mapping from constructs to

operationalizations is straightforward, akin to an engineer applying known principles to a new design. Phenomenon-to-construct research moves in the opposite direction: It begins with relationships between operational variables and infers the latent constructs that explain them through inductive or abductive reasoning.

The Perils of GMO Food Labeling

We see similar high-level principles of phenomenon-to-construct theorizing in research by Kim et al. (2022) on the effects of labels for foods containing genetically modified ingredients. Some countries allow voluntary “non-GMO” labels, and others require “contains GMO” labels.

Mandatory labeling laws were enacted decades ago, when safety concerns about GMOs were widespread. Since then, a strong scientific consensus has emerged affirming the safety of GMO foods—comparable in strength to the consensus around human-caused climate change. In 2016, responding to activist demands for mandatory labeling, 107 Nobel laureates declared: “Scientific and regulatory agencies around the world have repeatedly and consistently found crops and foods improved through biotechnology to be as safe as, if not safer than, those derived from any other method of production” (Achenbach 2016).

Despite this consensus, public skepticism persists. Anti-GMO activists continue to push for mandatory labeling in countries such as the United States, where

such labels are not required. Fernbach et al. (2019) found that the strongest opponents of GMOs tend to know the least about the science but believe they know the most. This creates a challenge for firms and regulators: how to manage consumer beliefs that conflict with scientific consensus (Peikes 2023). The activist slogan “I deserve to know what’s in my food” resonates, implying that labels serve informed consumers — much as wine appellations serve connoisseurs.

Kim et al. (2022), however, found that “contains GMO” labels do more than inform—they persuade. Such labels reduce demand for GMO-containing foods relative to unlabeled versions, with stronger effects for mandatory “contains GMO” labels than for voluntary “non-GMO” ones.

Crucially for policymakers, the largest shifts in demand come from consumers who were not previously anti-GMO. These consumers are mistakenly persuaded that GMO foods are dangerous. Labeling also enables non-GMO products to command higher price premiums by making GMO and non-GMO items seem less substitutable. Compared to voluntary labels, mandatory GMO labels increase decision difficulty, reduce willingness to purchase in the category, and draw attention to the GMO aspect of food—all unintended consequences. These results echo debates over whether advertising informs or persuades (Mitra and Lynch 1995).

Before this work, regulators viewed “contains GMO” labels as neutral information tools meant to lower search costs and facilitate preference-consistent choices. Kim

FIGURE 6
SUBTHEORIES IN KIM ET AL. (2022) AND BELIEF UPDATING.

Prior Schema: Labels Inform	Updated Schema: Labels Persuade
i. GMO labels → latent ability to identify preference-consistent food	i. GMO labels → perceived persuasive recommendation
ii. More latent ability to identify → latent relative preference for GMO vs. non-GMO foods for those with strong preferences	ii. Perceived recommendation → latent relative preference for GMO vs. non-GMO foods for those with weak preferences
iii. Latent preference → observed demand for GMO vs. non-GMO brands	iii. Latent preference → observed demand for GMO vs. non-GMO brands
Thus, label effects should be stronger for those with stronger prior anti-GMO preferences	Thus, label effect should be stronger for those with weaker prior anti-GMO preferences

et al. (2022) show that labels can function as persuasive cues—government-sanctioned warnings against GMO foods. The largest effects occur among consumers with weak, not strong, prior preferences. This suggests a different causal chain, mapped in figure 6 to the framework introduced earlier in figures 2, 3, and 4.

If one believes that theoretical contributions arise only from new construct-to-construct links, then the key conclusions of this study might seem unoriginal. After all, we already know that persuasive communications have greater effects on individuals with less information and weaker attitudes (Davidson et al. 1985; Fazio and Zanna 1981; Herr, Kardes, and Kim 1991).

However, Kim et al. (2022) offer a major phenomenon-to-construct theoretical contribution to the understanding of government food labeling. Their findings reframe mandatory labeling—from a tool to reduce search costs for consumers with strong preferences to a persuasive device influencing consumers with weak preferences. Regulators, unintentionally, put their thumb on the scale to favor some producers over others. Once understood, the phenomenon becomes actionable.

As in the earlier example, powerful phenomenon-to-construct theorizing does more than reassign an “active ingredient.” It triggers a *schema shift*—a new way of seeing the phenomenon that becomes generative for other contexts. Kim et al.’s work drew significant attention from regulators and became the centerpiece of a joint JM/Marketing Science Institute workshop attended by academics, practitioners, and policymakers.

Faced with activist pressure contrary to the scientific consensus, U.S. Department of Agriculture regulators later required labeling with more neutral language: “Contains bioengineered ingredients.” They allowed disclosure through a green plant-based logo, the word “bioengineered,” or a QR code. This approach satisfied consumers seeking transparency without implicitly endorsing GMO avoidance.

The schema shift prompted by Kim et al. (2022) offers a broader lesson for regulators. In many domains, labeling can serve two roles. Labels can lower search costs for consumers with strong preferences in horizontally differentiated markets, or they can serve as a persuasive signal, unintentionally helping one group of producers at the expense of another. Regulators’ role is generally to promote transparency to facilitate competition. They should be wary of interest groups trying to persuade them to promulgate labels that have the effect of persuading consumers of the superiority of some products over other close substitutes.

Partitioned Pricing, Drip Pricing, and Price Opacity

Research on *partitioned pricing* and *drip pricing* exemplifies phenomenon-to-construct theorizing. Charging an

overall price in pieces reduces market efficiency. Mahoney (2024), who led the Biden administration’s initiative on junk fees, cited several of the consumer research articles discussed below as foundational to that multiagency effort.

Before the publication of Morwitz et al. (1998), it was puzzling why sellers would partition prices—for example, separating the price for the core product and for mandatory fees. Morwitz et al. showed that partitioned pricing raises consumers’ cognitive costs in processing prices, causing anchoring on the base price and thus higher demand.

In partitioned pricing, both the base price and surcharges appear from the outset. In *drip pricing*, by contrast, only the base price is initially displayed, and surcharges are “dripped” as consumers progress through the purchase—such as encountering mandatory airport fees or optional baggage charges (Blake et al. 2021; Santana et al. 2020).

Santana et al. (2020) examined cases in which add-on fees were optional, and consumers differed in their interest in those services. The authors asked whether consumers would be better off if all fees were disclosed upfront. The answer was yes: Drip pricing increased search costs, softened competition, and reduced welfare.

Consumers drawn to lower base prices often chose options with higher total costs, even when they could reverse their decisions after seeing the full price, and even though they were less satisfied afterward. The authors showed that when surprise fees appeared late in the process, consumers perceived that the cost of starting over outweighed the benefit of doing so.

Constructs such as cost of thinking, anchoring and adjustment, and search costs are well established. Nonetheless, both Morwitz et al. (1998) and Santana et al. (2020) made substantial phenomenon-to-construct contributions. Their work illuminated how these mechanisms operate jointly to explain the persistence and consequences of price partitioning. Reliance on known construct-to-construct links strengthened confidence in the explanation and increased its uptake by policymakers.

Why Don’t Consumers Search More for Information?

Phenomenon-to-construct theorizing can illuminate puzzling distributions of important consumer behaviors—not just links between independent and dependent variables.

Research on consumer search, central to policies promoting market transparency, shows that even for major durable purchases, search is surprisingly limited. Newman and Staelin (1972) found that the modal consumer considers only one brand and visits one store.

Two major explanations invoked different construct-level antecedents. Bettman and Park (1980) showed that low prior knowledge inhibits external search—consumers search less when they lack relevant schemas. Ratchford (1980), drawing on economic search theory, posited

diminishing returns to searching beyond n alternatives. He demonstrated empirically that the price advantages of additional search quickly taper off in the durable goods markets he studied.

Neither article introduced new construct-to-construct links. Bettman and Park’s (1980) argument echoed earlier work (Britton, Westbrook, and Holdredge 1978) showing that comprehension difficulties reduce attention. Ratchford’s (1980) analysis was built directly on canonical models from Stigler (1961) and Weitzman (1979). Yet both studies made significant phenomenon-to-construct contributions by resolving a real-world puzzle through established constructs. They connected limited consumer search to explanatory mechanisms that had not been salient for scholars or policymakers. Their work clarified a puzzling pattern and generated testable predictions.

Bettman and Park’s (1980) and Ratchford’s (1980) insights inspired a stream of research exploring how prior knowledge (a) substitutes for external search or (b) alters its cost. Prior category knowledge increases search by lowering search costs; prior brand knowledge reduces search by satisfying information needs internally. Influential articles include Punj and Staelin (1983; 1,369 Google Scholar citations); Urbany, Dickson, and Wilkie (1989; 865 citations); Srinivasan and Ratchford (1991; 1,128 citations), and Moorthy et al. (1997; 1,307 citations). The concepts of consumer confusion and substitution between internal and external search have since informed public policy, including Woodward and Hall’s (2012) analysis of mortgage-market confusion and its effects on suboptimal shopping.

This illustrates how even *partial* phenomenon-to-construct theorizing can advance cumulative theory

development and inform policy. As Cronbach and Meehl (1955) noted, early-stage theory—though incomplete—can establish a foundation for scientific progress.

Our framework is quite general. In our [web appendix](#), we provide four more examples of important articles that contributed phenomenon to construct theorizing:

- Bronnenberg, Dubé, and Kim (2022) on generational differences in preferences
- Roediger and Karpicke (2006) on why test-taking enhances learning
- Gladstone et al. (2022) and Olson et al. (2023) on the effects of couples combining finances on marital satisfaction
- Fernandes et al. (2014) on decay of financial education effects on financial behavior.

In each example, no new construct-to-construct links were introduced. Instead, the articles explained puzzling empirical phenomena by shifting beliefs about the active ingredients producing those phenomena, enabling practical action.

**PARALLEL SCIENTIFIC INFERENCE
PRINCIPLES FOR PHENOMENON-TO-
CONSTRUCT AND CONSTRUCT-TO-
CONSTRUCT THEORIZING**

We have argued that phenomenon-to-construct and construct-to-construct theorizing are equally valid forms of theory development, grounded in the same logic of scientific inference. Both rely on established elements of a nomological network to investigate less established links between observables and constructs. [Table 1](#) shows that the same inferential principles apply but manifest differently

TABLE 1
APPRECIATING CONSTRUCT-TO-CONSTRUCT VERSUS PHENOMENON-TO-CONSTRUCT THEORIZING

Criterion	Construct-to-construct	Phenomenon-to-construct
Nomological net links <i>aimed for updating</i>	Latent $X \rightarrow$ latent Y	Operational $X \rightarrow$ latent X or latent $Y \rightarrow$ operational Y
Nomological links <i>assumed</i> as foundations for bootstrapping	Operational $X \rightarrow$ latent X ; latent $Y \rightarrow$ operational Y	Latent $X \rightarrow$ latent Y
Types of schema shift for major contribution	See existing literature in a new light or connect previously disconnected literatures	See phenomenon in a new light, revealing implications for action or related solutions
Type of generality sought	Generative of new construct-to-construct links	Generative of related phenomena sharing similar “active ingredients”
Intended audience	Specialists studying same constructs	A broader set of practitioners and researchers interested in operational phenomenon
Phenomenon importance and pervasiveness	Not critical to the audience	Critical to the audience
Abstraction of operational variables from real-world context	Abstraction is valued for clean tests	Abstraction can impede relevance to application contexts
Molar versus molecular mechanism explanation	Molecular: detailed causal chain preferred	Molar: simplest actionable causal account preferred

(rows 1–4). Rows 5–8 summarize key differences between the two forms.

Updating Focal Nomological Links via Bootstrapping Assumptions about Other Links

The first two rows of [table 1](#) highlight how the two approaches differ in (a) which subtheories ([figure 2](#)) are the main targets for belief revision and (b) which links are assumed when bootstrapping confidence in new claims. In both, updating beliefs about the focal link—based on associations between operational *X* and operational *Y*—depends on prior evidence elsewhere in the theory, a process [Cronbach and Meehl \(1955\)](#) referred to as “bootstrapping.”

In construct-to-construct research, this logic is well accepted. Scholars routinely rely on validated operationalizations: for example, [van Boven et al.’s \(2010\)](#) manipulations of emotion through autobiographical recall tasks, or [Shiv and Fedorikhin’s \(1999\)](#) fruit-salad-versus-chocolate-cake choice paradigm as a measure of self-control. No one dismisses such reuse as “mere application.” Rather, validated manipulations enable cumulative progress.

Despite this parallelism, reviewers often undervalue phenomenon-to-construct theorizing—especially when it proposes new links between observables and underlying constructs without introducing new construct-to-construct relations. When presenting this article, we frequently hear from colleagues who felt their own research was underestimated in precisely this way—deemed “obvious” because reviewers looked for theory in the wrong part of the nomological net.

Yet understanding mechanisms behind consequential phenomena allows practical intervention and generalization. Reviewers can dismiss phenomenon-to-construct work as “mere application” if they misread which subtheories in the authors’ nomological network are the focal contribution.

Schema Shift as a Marker for Major Contributions

Both theorizing modes can yield contributions of varying breadth. The perceived magnitude of contribution depends on whether the work produces a schema shift: Construct-to-construct work reframes conceptual variables, while phenomenon-to-construct work reframes observed phenomena. We used our framework for belief updating to analyze schema shift in four exemplary phenomenon-to-construct streams of research: [Botti et al. \(2009\)](#), [Kim et al. \(2022\)](#), [Santana et al. \(2020\)](#), and [Bettman and Park \(1980\)](#) with [Ratchford \(1980\)](#).

Types of Generality Sought

Major contributions produce general insights. In construct-to-construct theorizing, generality often comes from integrating literatures—as construal level theory did by embedding temporal distance within the broader construct of psychological distance ([Trope and Liberman 2010](#)). In phenomenon-to-construct theorizing, generality arises from explaining mechanisms behind recurring real-world patterns. [Fernandes et al. \(2014\)](#), for instance, reframed financial education from early habit-building to “just-in-time” learning, recognizing inevitable memory decay. The logic extended beyond finance to other educational domains.

Similarly, [Kim et al. \(2022\)](#) showed that mandatory GMO labels had more effect on consumers with weak rather than strong prior attitudes. This pattern likely generalizes to other disclosure regimes in which mandated disclosures may unintentionally signal endorsement, such as geographic food labeling.

Strong phenomenon-to-construct contributions generate insights beyond their immediate domain. [Roediger and Karpicke \(2006\)](#) overturned the prevailing view that tests merely assess learning. Instead, they showed tests enhance learning—even without feedback—by inducing desirable difficulty ([Bjork 1994](#)). This insight led to a broad rethinking of educational practice and was popularized by [Brown, Roediger, and McDaniel \(2014\)](#) in *Make It Stick*. Instructors who make learning “easy” may unintentionally suppress the elaboration needed for long-term retention—for example, by giving students prewritten notes or by massing discussion of a topic. Again, the construct-to-construct link involved—that elaboration boosts memory—was not new. However, its use in explaining a real-world educational phenomenon created generative insight. We discuss this example in our [web appendix](#).

Intended Audience Breadth

Construct-to-construct theorizing speaks primarily to a specialized audience fluent in its terminology ([Warren et al. 2021](#)). Phenomenon-to-construct theorizing, by contrast, appeals to a broader readership—including policy-makers, interdisciplinary scholars, and the public ([Hoyer et al. 2024](#); [MacInnis et al. 2020](#); [van Heerde et al. 2021](#)). Its relevance is often clear from the abstract alone.

For example, [Gladstone et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Olson et al. \(2023\)](#) found that couples who combine finances report greater marital satisfaction and lower divorce rates. The operational variables are intuitively meaningful, explaining why both articles drew substantial media attention and high Altmetric scores.

We would expect the two types of research to generate similar academic citations within disciplinary silos. But phenomenon-to-construct research holds the potential for broader public, practitioner, and cross-disciplinary

resonance. A glance at recent Marketing Science Institute events reveals a clear pattern: Most scholars featured have contributed to explaining real-world phenomena rather than via construct-to-construct theorizing.

Importance, Effect Size, and Ubiquity of Operational Phenomena

In construct-to-construct theorizing, theoretical significance is not tied to effect size or real-world prevalence (Corley and Gioia 2011; Fern and Monroe 1996). Huber, Payne, and Puto's (1982, 2014) work on asymmetric dominance, for example, falsified choice regularity across axiomatic theories—its contribution lay in conceptual scope, not magnitude of effect.

In contrast, phenomenon-to-construct theorizing often derives importance from the size and ubiquity of the phenomenon explained. Work such as Morwitz et al. (1998) on partitioned pricing or Santana et al. (2020) on drip pricing matters precisely because these practices are pervasive and impactful.

Abstraction versus Concreteness

Construct-to-construct theorizing benefits from abstraction and formal rigor—elegantly demonstrated in paradigms such as dictator or ultimatum games (Camerer and Thaler 1995). In phenomenon-to-construct work, however, excessive abstraction can obscure practical relevance. Nonspecialist audiences seek actionable insight; when operationalizations are too removed from lived experience, they lose traction (Hoyer et al. 2024).

Molar versus Molecular Explanations

Construct-to-construct research often favors detailed, molecular accounts, but such granularity can discourage broader audiences. As Cook and Campbell (1979) noted, useful “molar” explanations need not be fully decomposed.

In phenomenon-to-construct theorizing, molar explanations often suffice. Fernandes et al. (2014) attributed the limited impact of financial education to memory decay without specifying underlying cognitive mechanisms; this was enough to recommend just-in-time interventions.

Calder et al. (2021) recount James Lind's 18th-century discovery that citrus cured scurvy. Centuries later, Szent-Györgyi (1938) identified vitamin C as the causal agent—so kale produced similar benefits to fresh citrus, but boiled limes did not. Lind's incomplete explanation nonetheless saved lives and directed later science. Early-stage theories, as Cronbach and Meehl (1955) observed, are necessarily partial yet crucial for cumulative progress. This truth applies equally to both theorizing types.

CONCLUSION

Consumer researchers prize both relevance and theory. Our survey evidence shows that consumer researchers and other marketing scholars often hold divergent assumptions about what kinds of theorizing are valuable—and are largely unaware that their assumptions differ. Many equate theoretical contribution with introducing new constructs (e.g., *liquid consumption*, *efficiency planning*) or proposing new construct-to-construct links supported by empirical validation. As a result, they tend to undervalue phenomenon-to-construct theorizing, which explains real-world phenomena—often through established construct relationships. This dismissal is mistaken and counterproductive. Arguably, this same view that articles need novel theoretical contributions in the form of new constructs contributes to the proliferation of construct labels.

Theoretical contributions arise not only from novel constructs or construct relationships but also from compelling explanations of meaningful phenomena that had previously escaped understanding. Far from being atheoretical, phenomenon-to-construct theorizing is a legitimate form of theory building with the potential to resonate more broadly with scholars in adjacent fields, practitioners, and the public.

This article offers a framework, grounded in philosophy of science, for recognizing such contributions: making novel claims that explain relationships among observable variables through links to “active ingredient” constructs. A basic principle of scientific inference is that new data justify stronger updating of beliefs about a focal theoretical link when nonfocal links are already well supported (Nagel 1979). Drawing on Cronbach and Meehl's (1955) model of scientific inference, we showed that construct-to-construct theorizing relies on confidence in links between constructs and their operationalizations, enabling stronger belief revision about new construct-to-construct relationships.

Phenomenon-to-construct theorizing, in contrast, begins with a substantive puzzle—an observed relationship between operational variables—and seeks to explain it by linking those variables to underlying constructs. Explanations are most diagnostic when they rely on well-established construct-to-construct relations. Because such theorizing starts from substantively important phenomena and avoids excessive jargon, its insights are accessible and actionable to a broader audience beyond like-minded scholars. By offering simple process accounts of meaningful real-world puzzles, such work helps identify when and where interventions may succeed.

None of this diminishes the importance of construct-to-construct theorizing. The two are complementary. Phenomenon-to-construct contributions often build on construct-level theory. For example, De La Rosa et al. (2021) showed that low uptake of government benefits reflects low psychological ownership—an insight made possible by prior work on psychological ownership (Peck and Shu 2018).

Hoyer et al. (2024) noted that perceptions of relevance depend on the audience's interests. Phenomenon-to-construct theorizing serves different audiences than the more accepted construct-to-construct theorizing. It does not aim to propose new construct relationships but to explain real-world phenomena in ways that enable practical intervention. When such explanations generalize across contexts, they become especially generative.

For years, scholars have lamented the limited influence of consumer research beyond academia. One response has been to promote “empirics-first” research that documents phenomena without offering theory (Alba 2012; Golder et al. 2023).

In our survey, most respondents believed that insufficient theoretical contribution justifies article rejection. Recognizing this, *JCR* editors have encouraged authors of Substantive Phenomena Papers to include some theoretical explanation, even if not fully developed. Yet the field disagrees on what qualifies as “theory” and devalues theory that explains puzzling phenomena using existing constructs. Phenomenon-to-construct theorizing is not *less* theoretical—it is *different* theoretical work.

Our survey confirms that most authors publishing in top marketing journals—especially *JCR*—associate theoretical contribution primarily with construct-to-construct theorizing. Our goal has been to show that both approaches are legitimate and grounded in shared principles of scientific inference. As a field, we may have limited our external influence by collectively undervaluing phenomenon-to-construct research that speaks to broader audiences.

A LOOK TO THE FUTURE

Technological advances and “big data” create opportunities for both “empirics-first” discovery and phenomenon-to-construct theory development. We are not yet at the stage of the “cyborg behavioral scientist” (Tomaino, Cooke, and Hover 2025), but new tools already enhance discovery. Observing how effects depend on contextual factors can stimulate theorizing (Lynch 1999); AI can assist in stimulus generation for generalization tests (Tomaino et al. 2025). Advances in transfer learning can reveal unexpected parallels across domains (Weiss, Khoshgoftaar, and Wang 2016; Zhuang et al. 2021). Automated content analysis facilitates phenomenon discovery with large, unstructured datasets (Berger et al. 2025). Generative AI is beginning to aid the identification of new phenomena and the formulation of preliminary explanations (Blanchard et al. 2025; Si, Yang, and Hashimoto 2025).

Applied to consumer judgment and decision-making, this suggests that heuristics, associations, or interpretive frames learned in one marketplace can transfer to others, as envisioned in our phenomenon-to-construct framework. For instance, Ludwig and Mullainathan (2024) used machine learning to analyze mug shots and judicial

outcomes, finding that facial features explained substantial variance in bail decisions even after controlling for crime type and demographics. By generating paired mug shots differing only in predicted outcomes, they identified grooming and facial heaviness as cues influencing judgments, revealing psychological mechanisms such as stereotyping and perceived self-control.

Phenomenon-to-construct theorizing and theory testing—technology-enabled or not—offer a path for consumer researchers seeking influence beyond the academy. A hidden barrier to such influence lies in our disagreement over what counts as a theoretical contribution and our underappreciation of the kind of theorizing that external audiences find relevant. We have outlined distinct “science appreciation” standards for phenomenon-to-construct theorizing alongside those for construct-to-construct theorizing. We hope this framework encourages more consumer researchers to pursue the former and reviewers to evaluate such work with greater openness. Done well, phenomenon-to-construct research is not “mere application.” It extends the reach and impact of consumer behavior and marketing theory—on practice, on policy, and across disciplines.

DATA COLLECTION STATEMENT

The article reports a survey of authors of articles published between 2013 and 2022 at *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, and *Marketing Science*. The survey was conducted in August–September of 2023. The first author determined the universe and sample and worked with a programmer to create an email list. The survey was written by all three authors using the Qualtrics platform. Preregistration and materials for the study reported in the article (deidentified dataset, graph, syntax, and output) can be found at <https://osf.io/xzkag/overview>. These data were collected using the Qualtrics email server, between August 15, 2023 (first round of emails sent), and September 21, 2023 (last round of emails sent). The third author managed the data collection, loaded the participants' emails into the Qualtrics server, and sent out batches of emails during the data collection period. The first and third authors jointly analyzed these data. The data, output, and syntax are currently stored in a project directory on the Open Science Framework.

DESCRIPTION OF SAMPLE

The universe for this study was made up of authors of articles published from 2013 to 2022 in *JCR*, *JM*, *JMR*, or *Mar. Sci.* We downloaded the records of all such articles from the Web of Science and excluded articles that were labeled “editorial” or “review” or “correction” rather than “article.” We also excluded articles by then-current editors. Our survey intended to sample exactly one author from

each article, with the restriction that no author was asked about more than one article. We wrote an algorithm that chose the author to ask for each article. First, we identified scholars with multiple articles in the interval and chose one of their articles randomly to be the subject of their survey. We then identified the key informant to be surveyed for the remaining articles. This yielded 1,712 articles/authors. The article–author combination is the unit of analysis. Of the 1,712 authors solicited, 543 responded—a 32% response rate.

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