Industrial and Organizational Psychology (2026), **19**, 237–240
doi:10.1017/iop.2026.10085

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

COMMENTARY

Practical barriers to reducing construct proliferation

Francesca A. Catalano and Liana Kreamer

College of Psychology and Liberal Arts, Florida Institute of Technology, Melbourne, FL, USA
Corresponding author: Francesca A. Catalano; Email: francesca.angela.catalano@gmail.com

We agree that construct proliferation is an ongoing challenge for I-O psychologists, contributing to conceptual ambiguity and weakening the practical applicability of research findings (Bowling et al., 2026). Although several viable solutions have been proposed, many rely on implicit assumptions based on collective consensus and coordination that are difficult to achieve in practice. In this commentary, we present three main barriers to solutions proposed by Bowling and colleagues: (a) measurement and operationalization divide, (b) misalignment with practice, and (c) unrealistic adoption and professional consequences. In doing so, we hope to advance prior arguments by reframing proposed solutions in more practical, implementable terms. We see the importance of addressing construct proliferation in our field, as noted by the authors of the focal article. However, we believe that a more formal restructuring of thinking and adaptation needs to be implemented for us as a science before we can truly tackle this widespread concern.

Challenge 1: Measurement and operationalization

Discussions of construct proliferation in I-O psychology research tend to focus on redundancy at the construct level, overlooking another source of practically meaningful overlap: measurement. Researchers debate whether constructs are theoretically distinct and pay less attention to whether the measurement items used to assess constructs meaningfully overlap. For example, measures of transformational and charismatic leadership often include items that reflect comparable leader behaviors, such as inspiring followers, articulating a compelling vision, or fostering motivation. To illustrate, the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ; Bass & Avolio, 1995), a commonly used measure of transformational leadership, includes the item "articulates a unified vision of the future." Similarly, the Conger-Kanungo Charismatic Leadership Scale (Conger & Kanungo, 1994)—a common measure of charismatic leadership—includes the item "has vision; often brings up ideas about possibilities for the future." Although these items are intended to assess different constructs, they capture similar behaviors in practice. This raises the possibility that redundancy may come less from the constructs themselves and more from how they are operationalized in practice. Improving operationalizations via measurement instruments might be a more realistic path than trying to overhaul the entire construct/s in question.

Challenge 2: Misalignment with practice

From a practitioner perspective, efforts to resolve construct proliferation may overlook what many practitioners value most: stability, clarity, and practical utility. Even if clarifications of constructs are made in the academic literature, what will stop I-O practitioners (and leaders within

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2026.10085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

organizations) from continuing to use their preferred labels? As an illustration, if job involvement and employee engagement are treated as a single construct in attempts to reduce proliferation, what would prevent organizations from sticking with their usual language and evaluation methods? Attempts to reduce construct proliferation may inadvertently increase confusion rather than improve decision-making or clarity within the workforce. When constructs have different names in practice but ultimately lead to similar assessment tools or interventions, refining or relabeling them does not add significant practical value. Practitioners are unlikely to give up tools and labels they already use and find effective. With these efforts to address construct proliferation in research/academia, we do not want to inadvertently contribute to the scientist–practitioner gap. Construct-level refinements that are not aligned with practitioner needs, preferences, and existing practices are unlikely to be adopted or sustained in applied contexts. Thus, it will be important for I-O psychology as a discipline to tackle construct proliferation, gaining equal buy-in from academics and practitioners alike.

Challenge 3: Unrealistic adoption and professional consequences

Many proposed solutions to construct proliferation assume that I-O psychologists will agree on shared definitions of constructs and consistently implement standardized practices, which may not be realistic. Although construct proliferation is currently a highly discussed limitation of our science, the existence of construct proliferation across different focal areas has been raised for decades. For example, job attitudes (Morrow, 1983), work-related outcomes (Le et al., 2010), individual differences (Erdheim et al., 2006), and role-related factors (Banks et al., 2016) have all been identified as areas with substantial construct proliferation beginning in the 1980s. Despite this long-standing recognition, construct proliferation remains prevalent in 2025, particularly within the same areas previously identified. Given the longevity of this problem, it is unrealistic to assume that researchers, journals, and practitioners will suddenly align and adopt a standardized way of thinking about I-O constructs. After years of attempting to bring attention to this issue, expecting widespread agreement and enforcement without additional support may be overly optimistic.

This challenge is further complicated by the potential professional consequences associated with construct-consolidation efforts. When scholars have careers built around a particular construct, that construct often becomes tied to their scholarly identity, reputation, and career trajectory. As a result, attempts to consolidate, relabel, or eliminate constructs may understandably be met with resistance. These efforts have real human and professional consequences that the field must acknowledge and address before pursuing large-scale reform. For example, it remains unclear whether journals plan to invite reviewers with expertise in specific constructs to address construct proliferation in those areas or whether professional organizations such as SIOP intend to formally recognize and reward scholars who focus on overhauling constructs and condensing the literature. Without more formal incentives and protections in place, it is unlikely that researchers will undertake work that may put them at professional risk.

How I-O psychology can address these barriers

Addressing construct proliferation in the practice and application of I-O psychology will require formal incentive structures that support the evaluation, integration, and consolidation of constructs. First, it is essential to communicate that an overhaul is not necessary to solve the construct proliferation that is present; rather, a greater focus on our measurement may improve the operationalization of these constructs, in turn creating better alignment with scientists and practitioners. For instance, regularly testing discriminant validity against closely related constructs would provide researchers with a clear view of how unique (or not) constructs are, which will

https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2026.10085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

either validate or invalidate their usefulness in new research. Researchers should create nomological networks and maps of these constructs and present this information in graphics that are easily understandable and shareable, inviting practitioners to engage with updated information on constructs. Second, we must recognize that the absence of collective adoption has enabled construct proliferation to persist and grow into a larger concern over time. Meaningfully addressing this problem requires incentives aligned with consolidation efforts. This may involve the field's leading journals and professional organizations explicitly calling for research aimed at construct consolidation to signal the importance of this work, such as opening special issues to encourage discussion and investigation of our field's most pressing controversies regarding overlapping constructs. Another possible incentive would be for professional organizations to fund research investigating specific instances of construct proliferation or to create awards recognizing leading and influential work specifically tackling construct proliferation. Third, practitioners may not adopt new, condensed terminology right away, but these changes are more likely to be incorporated into practice gradually. Importantly, we need to support scholars who originally introduced constructs that may later be viewed as redundant. Scholars should not be penalized for contributing ideas that advanced the field, especially given that construct development often reflects the state of theory and evidence available at the time. Providing recognition and protection for this work may also make scholars more willing to engage in construct consolidation efforts without fear of professional disadvantage. One approach is to invite experts to investigate construct proliferation in their respective fields. This gives scholars the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to consolidation efforts without discouraging or penalizing past work in that research domain. Having experts and highly respected individuals investigate construct proliferation may encourage others to do the same, contributing meaningfully to the mission to align our science to recognize and act on consolidation efforts. In the long term, these efforts have the potential to enhance the credibility of our science and related disciplines while gradually shaping practitioner tools and materials to provide more relevant and useful information.

Concluding remarks

We agree that construct proliferation is a problem that needs to be addressed within I-O psychology, with some of the strongest suggestions being from Bowling and colleagues. However, many of the ideas addressing what to do about past and already existing construct proliferation are limited in their practicality. Without clearer incentives, structural support, and guidance for scholars and practitioners, efforts to consolidate constructs will remain largely aspirational. Meaningful progress will likely require coordinated changes in how journals, professional organizations, and the field at large reward and evaluate construct work. We risk repeating the same cycle seen in the past: identifying the problem, acknowledging it as an issue, and ultimately failing to take meaningful action. As such, if we fail to put better structures and incentives in place, construct proliferation will persist. Real progress will require coordinated actions and a shift in thinking on a discipline-wide scale that will make it feasible and worthwhile for consolidation to occur and for proliferation to be resolved.

References

Banks, G. C., McCauley, K. D., Gardner, W. L., & Guler, C. E. (2016). A meta-analytic review of authentic and transformational leadership: A test for redundancy. *Leadership Quarterly*, **27**(4), 634–652.

Bass, B. M., & Avolio, B. J. (1995). *Multifactor leadership questionnaire: 5X short form.* Mind Garden.

Bowling, N. A., Sessa, V. I., Shaffer, J. A., & Banks, G. C. (2026). Read my lips: No new constructs! Construct proliferation as a threat to the future of I-O psychology. *Industrial & Organizational Psychology*, **19**(2), 186–202.

Conger, J. A., & Kanungo, R. N. (1994). Charismatic leadership in organizations: Perceived behavioral attributes and their measurement. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, **15**(5), 439–452.

https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2026.10085 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Erdheim, J., Wang, M., & Zickar, M. J. (2006). Linking the big five personality constructs to organizational commitment. *Personality & Individual Differences*, **41**(5), 959–970.

Le, H., Schmidt, F. L., Harter, J. K., & Lauver, K. J. (2010). The problem of empirical redundancy of constructs in organizational research: An empirical investigation. *Organizational Behavior & Human Decision Processes*, **112**(2), 112–125.

Morrow, P. C. (1983). Concept redundancy in organizational research: The case of work commitment. *Academy of Management Review*, **8**(3), 486–500.

Cite this article: Catalano, F. A. & Kreamer, L. (2026). Practical barriers to reducing construct proliferation. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* **19**, 237–240. https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2026.10085

https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2026.10085 Published online by Cambridge University Press