

A SET-THEORETIC APPROACH TO ORGANIZATIONAL CONFIGURATIONS

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I argue that research on organizational configurations has been limited by a mismatch between theory and methods and introduce set-theoretic methods as a viable alternative for overcoming this mismatch. I demonstrate the value of such methods for studying organizational configurations and discuss their applicability for examining equifinality and limited diversity among configurations, as well as their relevance to other research fields such as complementarities theory, complexity theory, and the resource-based view.

The study of organizational configurations, broadly defined as "any multidimensional constellation of conceptually distinct characteristics that commonly occur together" (Meyer, Tsui, & Hinings, 1993: 1175), has occupied an important and central role in both organization theory and strategy research (e.g., Bensaou & Venkatraman, 1995; Dess & Davis, 1984; Doty & Glick, 1994; Hambrick, 1984; Ketchen et al., 1997; Miller, 1986; Miller & Friesen, 1978, 1984; Mintzberg, 1979, 1980). In essence, a configurational approach suggests that organizations are best understood as clusters of interconnected structures and practices, rather than as modular or loosely coupled entities whose components can be understood in isolation. Proponents of a configurational approach thus take a systemic and holistic view of organizations, where patterns or profiles rather than individual independent variables are related to an outcome such as performance (Delery & Doty, 1996). Because of its multidimensional nature, the configurational approach is particularly relevant to the study of strategic management (Amburgey & Dacin, 1994; Dyas & Thanhetser, 1976; Inkpen & Choudhury, 1995; Ketchen, Thomas, & Snow, 1993; Miller, 1996). A core theme of strategy concerns how firms can achieve a match among structures, activities, and the environment, suggesting that configura-

tion itself is the very essence of strategy (Miller, 1996). Likewise, different typologies of configurations, such as those suggested by Miles and Snow (1978), Porter (1980), and Mintzberg (1983), have occupied a central place in the strategy literature.

While a configurational approach presents a very attractive perspective, the progress of empirical research has been less than satisfying. To establish and measure configuration membership, authors have used a variety of clustering algorithms (e.g., Bensaou & Venkatraman, 1995; Cool & Schendel, 1987; Fliegenbaum & Thomas, 1990; Hambrick, 1983; Ketchen et al., 1993), interaction effects (e.g., Baker & Cullen, 1993; Dess, Lumpkin, & Covin, 1997), and deviation score approaches (e.g., Delery & Doty, 1996; Draxin & Van de Ven, 1985) to identify configurations and their effects, typically on performance as the key outcome variable. However, evidence on the relationship between configurations and performance has been equivocal. While some reviews of previous studies cast doubt on the existence of such a relationship (Barney & Hoskisson, 1990; Hatten & Hatten, 1987; Thomas & Venkatraman, 1988), a meta-analysis of configurational studies by Ketchen et al. (1997) nevertheless suggests that configuration membership does predict performance. Other research has proposed that the inability to find a reliable link between configurations and performance may be due to insufficient statistical power in previous studies (Ferguson & Ketchen, 1993). In reviewing these results, Delery and Doty (1996) conclude that while the configurational approach holds promise, additional test-

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A Set Theoretic Approach To Organizational Configurations

SJ Ball



A Set Theoretic Approach To Organizational Configurations:

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