Discretion, defined as freedom of action or control over how one does their work, is a fundamental aspect of organizational behavior, with important consequences for both individuals and organizations. For individuals, psychologists have identified control as a fundamental human need; all people desire some measure of control (Depret & Fiske, 1993). For organizations, discretion is inevitable because it arises in any ambiguous or equivocal situation (Hambrick & Finkelstein, 1987), and it is these situations that shape organizational structures (March & Simon, 1958; Thompson, 1967; Williamson, 1994). Consistent with this fundamental importance, discretion has been shown to influence a vast range of outcomes, including corporate social performance (Aragon-Correa, Matias-Reche, & Senise-Barrio, 2004), strategic attention (Abrahamson & Hambrick, 1997), strategic persistence (Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1990), fairness (Hendrickson & Harrison, 1998), affirmative action (Weisman, 1994), knowledge creation (Oh, 2002), power (Carpenter & Golden, 1997), compensation (Finkelstein & Boyd, 1998), interpersonal trust (Perrone, Zaheer, & McEvily, 2003), creativity (Shalley, 1991), innovation (Nemeth & Staw, 1989), safety behavior (Zohar & Luria, 2005), job satisfaction (Dwyer & Ganster, 1991), motivation (Spector, 1987), stress (Bond & Bunce, 2001), well-being (Ganster, 1989), burnout (Glass, McKnight, & Valdimarsdottir, 1993), and physical health (Karasek, 1990).

Despite the many studies demonstrating the importance of discretion, there is as yet no coherent theory of discretion in organizations. One reason for this lack of unifying theory is that most studies have used discretion as a means to understand some other phenomenon, such as CEO dominance (Haleblian & Finkelstein, 1993) or role-breadth (Morgeson, Delaney-Klinger, & Hemmingway, 2005). In addition, those research projects that were primarily concerned with discretion have remained isolated from one another. This has produced a number of partial or strictly delimited models about aspects of discretion, but no overarching theory to integrate them. The result is that research on discretion exhibits pockets of local clarity, but global uncertainty. For example, while previous research has examined the consequences of “general control” (Dwyer & Ganster, 1991) and of “decision authority” (Karasek et al., 1985), it has only recently been shown that these two constructs overlap at least partially (C. S. Smith, Tisak, Hahn, & Schmieder, 1997). This raises questions about how findings concerning general control relate to those of decision authority, and vice versa. In the absence of a theory to integrate individual studies, there are no clear answers to such questions.
A unifying theory of discretion would offer several benefits. Most obviously, a comprehensive theory of discretion would improve understanding of the phenomenon itself, clarifying issues such as the relationship between general control and decision authority, as well as allowing better explanations and predictions. In addition, a theory of discretion also has the potential to advance organizational theory more generally (Hambrick & Finkelstein, 1987). A better understanding of discretion would benefit theory about the many organizational phenomena that discretion influences. For example, in a recent synthesis of research on motivation and commitment, Meyer and colleagues (2004) identified discretion as a key missing variable. By including discretion in their model of the relationship between motivation and employee commitment, they were able to resolve longstanding ambiguities and advance theory about both motivation and commitment. These are just two of the many phenomena influenced by discretion, suggesting that the extensive potential benefits of a general theory of discretion.

This paper takes an initial step toward a general theory of discretion in organizations by clarifying the multidimensional structure of the phenomenon. Prior research has suggested a variety of different aspects of discretion, but most of these have not been integrated. In this paper, these isolated findings are synthesized to derive a single, encompassing taxonomy of discretion. This taxonomy unites existing research and can serve as a foundation for a complete theory of discretion.

**Background**

A recent review of the job design literature suggested that discretion was the single most studied work characteristic (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). The literature is certainly extensive. Subsumed under the various labels, such as autonomy or work control, is a vast array of constructs and models pertaining to discretion. Unfortunately, this large body of evidence is in a state of conceptual and methodological disorder. This disorder arises from two sources: balkanization and uncertain dimensionality.

**Balkanization**

There are three distinct research traditions that focus specifically on discretion. The first is the autonomy literature, which arose from investigations of the motivational consequences of different job features (Hackman & Lawler, 1971; Hackman & Oldham, 1975). The second tradition began from the recognition that there is far more to a job than is ever explicitly specified (Katz, 1964), and developed into the organizational citizenship literature which examines employees’ discretionary behavior (Organ, 1988; C. A. Smith, Organ, & Near, 1983). The third research stream proposed the construct of executive discretion to explain why senior organizational leaders sometimes have profound effects on their organizations, but seem powerless at other times (Hambrick & Finkelstein, 1987). While the specific details in each tradition vary, the substantive concerns of each have more in common than not. For the sake of clarity, I use “freedom” here to refer to the actual phenomenon of interest (i.e., choice in how to do one’s work), and use “autonomy,” “citizenship,” and “discretion” to refer to the specific research traditions. I return to the issue of terminology later in the paper to explain my ultimate use of the term discretion to encompass all three literatures.

Despite their common interest in understanding freedom of action in organizations, there has been little interaction among the autonomy, citizenship, and discretion research traditions. The reasons for this balkanization in the literature are differences in emphasis and research subjects. Discretion research has focused almost entirely on senior management and objective measurements of freedom. In contrast, most of the autonomy and citizenship work has involved lower level staff and self-report (perceived) measures of freedom. However, there has also been relatively little contact between autonomy and citizenship
research because these traditions are framed as studying in-role versus extra-role behavior, respectively. As a result, the three research traditions have developed largely independent of each other.

This isolation is unfortunate. Opportunities to inform and advance each other’s work have been missed. Moreover, the differences that separate these three research traditions could be used as powerful tools for theoretical insight, rather than sources of division. There is extensive evidence that studying phenomena in different contexts offers important insights (O'Connor, 2000; Orlikowski, 2002; Sutton & Hargadon, 1996), suggesting that much could be learned, for example, by comparing executive discretion findings with factory-based autonomy findings. Achieving such integration was the aim of this paper.

However, to justify the claim that these three literatures should be integrated, the extra-role distinction of citizenship research must be addressed. The behaviors labeled as organizational citizenship have often been described as a distinct category of action, entirely separate from normal or in-role task behavior (e.g., MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Fetter, 1991; Morrison & Phelps, 1999; Motowidlo, Borman, & Schmit, 1997). Nonetheless, accumulating evidence suggests that the in-role/extra-role distinction is of questionable value. Organ’s (1988) original definition of citizenship stressed its discretionary nature (p. 4). Moreover, he stated that citizenship behavior was probably best understood as a continuous phenomenon, and that the binary comparison of citizenship to non-citizenship behavior was only a simplifying convenience. This implies that rather than extra-role versus in-role behavior, there are simply behaviors in which individuals have varying degrees of discretion. Consistent with this view, research has shown that individuals engage in task revision and role broadening to intentionally modify their in-role behaviors (Morgeson et al., 2005; Staw & Boettger, 1990), further undermining the distinction between in-role and extra-role behavior. Even more important, there is accumulating evidence that both managers and staff often make little distinction between citizenship and “non-citizenship” behaviors in practice (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000; Tepper, Lockhart, & Hoobler, 2001). As such, this paper abandons the in-role/extra-role distinction, and simply focuses on varying levels of discretion.

Uncertain Dimensionality

Although they refer to it by different names, each of the three research traditions is concerned with the same fundamental issue. In all cases, the focus is on how much freedom individuals have in their work (e.g., Abrahamson & Hambrick, 1997; Campion, 1988; Dwyer & Ganster, 1991; Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1990; Karasek, 1990; Landsbergis, 1988; Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006; Spreitzer, 1995; Tetrick & LaRocco, 1987; Wilkinson & van Zwanenberg, 1994). As a concrete example, consider a manager who is required to increase sales by fifty percent in one year. S/he presumably has little choice about the target level of sales; it is given by organizational superiors. However, in the absence of other stipulations, the manager is free to decide how to increase sales (e.g., a sales promotion, increased productivity, or working longer hours). Therefore, the manager has discretion over the means of achieving the goal, but not in the selection of the goal itself. All of the research integrated in this paper is consistent to this level of detail.

However, once one moves beyond the simplest cases, disagreements arise. For example, the observation that the sales manager can choose the method but not the goal implies that his or her freedom is multidimensional. S/he has more control over means than ends, so discretion must have at least two dimensions. However, many measures of discretion have not included multidimensionality. For example, autonomy was initially conceived as uni-dimensional (Hackman & Oldham, 1975), though subsequent research has suggested it is multidimensional (Breaugh & Becker, 1987; Fried, 1991). However, there is no consensus about the specifics of those multiple dimensions (e.g., C. S. Smith et al., 1997). Citizenship research has followed the same general pattern, moving from simple (C. A. Smith et al., 1983) to more complex dimensional structures (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990), with ongoing debate about the appropriate dimensionality (Organ, 1997; Organ & Paine, 1999). Research in executive
discretion has yet to move beyond a uni-dimensional approach, but there are indications that it could follow the same path (e.g., Carpenter & Golden, 1997).

Lack of agreement about the dimensional structure of individual freedom at work is problematic. It leads to disagreement about how to measure the phenomenon, and by implication, disagreement on the precise definition of the key construct. This limits the ability to compare studies and to generalize findings, since researchers claiming to study the same phenomenon may be using incompatible operationalizations. In fact, this situation is bad enough that it has been explicitly recognized as impeding progress in each of the three research traditions (Hambrick & Abrahamson, 1995; Podsakoff et al., 2000; C. S. Smith et al., 1997). The emerging consensus seems to be that discretion is multidimensional, and that failure to determine the specific nature of that dimensionality threatens the utility of the construct.

**Proposed Solution**

Thus far, this paper has highlighted four interrelated points: first, discretion plays a central role in organizational behavior; second, there is currently no comprehensive theory of discretion; third, research findings about discretion are isolated in three disparate literatures; and fourth, theoretical progress is currently blocked by disagreement about the dimensional structure and measurement of discretion. Together, these four points highlight the need to clarify discretion’s dimensional structure.

Identifying the dimensions of discretion promises numerous benefits. The most obvious is for future operationalizations, as it would allow researchers to focus on the dimensions most relevant to their aims. Delineating the dimensions of discretion may also clarify anomalous results in existing research. For example, if one dimension of discretion has a different antecedent than another, seemingly conflicting findings may simply reflect the fact that different dimensions have been measured. (This point is developed more concretely in the Discussion section.) Moreover, identifying the relationships among dimensions is an essential part of a comprehensive theory and integration. For example, civic virtue (Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1994) and work methods autonomy (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006) are two dimensions of discretion that have been previously identified, but never studied together. Until the relationship between them is clarified, it is impossible to unite findings about them, despite their both being aspects of discretion. Clarifying the dimensional structure of discretion will assist the integration of the three disparate research streams, enrich existing findings, and support the design of more precise research in the future.

Given these potential benefits, this paper seeks to derive a dimensional structure for discretion by combining the findings from autonomy, citizenship, and discretion research. This paper integrates the many previously identified dimensions of discretion into a single, multidimensional structure. However, before describing the synthesis, an issue of terminology must be addressed. This paper makes primary use of the term “discretion.” Discretion is preferred because its common language meaning best represents that of the construct under consideration. Having discretion is having a choice. It is behavioral freedom in being able to choose among alternate courses of action. Discretion is a better term than control, because control is a larger construct. Control includes being able to decide about one’s actions (discretion), but also includes issues of predictability, efficacy, and interdependence (C. S. Smith et al., 1997). Similarly, the term autonomy implies an absence of interdependence that is not an inherent part of discretion (Breaugh, 1985). For these reasons, discretion is adopted as the term to refer to individual choice in executing work, and to encompass all three of the relevant research traditions.
Method

A four-stage process was used to derive discretion’s dimensional structure from prior research. For the purposes of this paper, “dimension” refers to an analytic category with two features. First, a dimension describes a domain or sphere of work where discretion can be perceived and exercised. Second, the domain described by the dimension is meaningfully distinguishable from other domains. For example, Wall and colleagues (1995) identified two dimensions of discretion: timing control and method control. The pattern in their respondents’ answers indicated that the workers saw the timing of work and the methods of work as distinct aspects of their job, and that their discretion over one was potentially different from their discretion over the other. A dimension represents a useful level of aggregation. The workers in Wall and colleagues’ (1995) study distinguished between timing and method, but did not distinguish among the individual items for each dimension. For example, their responses indicated that their discretion about when to start a piece of work and when to finish it were so closely related as to be effectively indistinguishable. Thus, two dimensions were derived from the ten items used in that survey.

The method used here to derive a dimensional structure for discretion combined aspects of traditional literature review, qualitative meta-synthesis, and thematic analysis of secondary data (Heaton, 2004; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006). Classical meta-analysis was inappropriate because the relationships of interest (i.e., among dimensions of discretion) were rarely part of the studies reviewed. Other quantitative approaches to secondary analysis were similarly excluded, given the vast array of operationalizations and the fact that most of the dimensions have never been measured simultaneously. However, the method used for this paper can be summarized by approximate analogy to familiar statistical techniques. Stage one, identifying previous dimensions, approximated collecting survey data. Stage two, integrating previous dimensions, resembled an exploratory factor analysis seeking a structure that would account for the patterns observed in the data. Stage three, identifying managerial behaviors, was conceptually similar to a second data sample, and stage four, integrating managerial behaviors, approximated a confirmatory factor analysis, testing and refining the previous EFA results. Each of these four stages is described below.

One: Identifying previous dimensions. Analysis began by identifying potential dimensions of discretion based on previous empirical studies. Dimensions proposed on purely theoretical grounds without empirical corroboration were excluded. Studies using exact replications of measures were also excluded (e.g., Abrahamson, 1997; Karasek, Triantis, & Chaudhry, 1982), though different operationalizations of the same construct were included. For example, three different measures of altruism were identified and included, each with similar, though not identical, items. Studies where discretion was assumed (e.g., Hambrick, Geletkanycz, & Fredrickson, 1993) or manipulated (e.g., Shalley, 1991) were excluded. Finally, measures that failed to receive empirical support were also excluded (e.g., the Barnett & Brennan, 1995 operationalization of “decision authority” failed to achieve traditional reliability standards, and they were unable to distinguish the construct in a subsequent factor analysis). In the end, 45 potential dimensions of discretion, and their associated measures, were identified in the literature.

Two: Integrating previous dimensions. Very different measures have been used to operationalize discretion, and in some cases, identical items have been used in scales purporting to measure different dimensions. Discretion has been operationalized as uni-dimensional, with a handful of dimensions, or with as many as 15 different aspects of work. However, when examined together, the potential dimensions clearly did not represent 45 distinct domains of work; an integration of previous results was required. This integration was achieved by treating each previous dimension as an individual case for use in a template analysis. Template analysis is a qualitative research technique for creating a hierarchical ordering of thematic codes (King, 1998). In simple terms, this involved an iterative grouping exercise that is best illustrated by example.
Barnett and Brennan (1995) identified one relevant dimension of discretion: “schedule control.” (The criteria of relevance are discussed after this example). As the dimension label and the items measuring it suggest, this aspect of discretion concerns control over the timing of work. Scheduling discretion was thus tentatively adopted as a potential dimension of discretion (i.e., a preliminary thematic code). The next “case” was then considered, being Breaugh’s (1985) “work scheduling autonomy.” The items in this scale were consistent with the preliminary dimension of scheduling discretion. There was clear similarity between the two scales, though they were not identical. Considering Breaugh’s (1985) scale to be another instance of scheduling discretion clarified the dimension’s nature, by showing that work sequencing, in addition to work timing, should be included. This process continued iteratively through each of the 45 dimensions and measures identified. In some cases, new dimensions were added. For example, Breaugh (1985) showed “work criteria autonomy” to be a distinct dimension from scheduling, so a second dimension was tentatively adopted as a new thematic code. In this way, each measure served to expand or refine the emerging dimensional structure to discretion. This iterative aspect of template analysis uses the grounded theory technique of constant comparison, allowing each new case to inform and modify the arrangement of all cases (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

One important pattern that was immediately obvious, and which motivated the use of template analysis, was the variance in level of measurement specificity. For example, one can compare schedule control (Barnett & Brennan, 1995) to general control (Dwyer & Ganster, 1991) and see that the former is implicitly subsumed by the latter. The only way to resolve such relationships was to presume that discretion had a hierarchical dimensional structure. This was consistent with the fundamental idea of a dimension being a useful level of aggregation. Depending on one’s frame of reference, more or less aggregation may be appropriate. To make an analogy to location, individuals can describe themselves as being in a particular country, in a specific city, or on a given street. Each of these is ordered in terms of hierarchical inclusiveness (e.g., everyone on the street is in the city, but not vice versa). The pattern of dimensions for discretion in previous studies suggested a similar structure. The assumption of a hierarchical structure is also consistent with the high cross-loadings found among dimensions in previous research (MacKenzie et al., 1991; Podsakoff, Ahearn, & MacKenzie, 1997), since these overlaps imply some structured relationship among the dimensions of discretion.

As pointed out above, only relevant dimensions and items were used in the template analysis. Dimensions and individual items that focused on aspects of control, as distinct from discretion, were excluded. For example, Dwyer and Ganster (1991) intended to measure control, in the broadest sense. In addition to items about discretion (e.g., choosing among tasks), their scale also included items other than discretion (e.g., ability to predict things at work, even if they cannot be controlled). Items outside discretion were excluded from the template analysis. These included issues such as level of interdependence (Sims, Szilagyi, & Keller, 1976), the importance of non-routine problem solving (Dobbin & Boychuk, 1999), work variety (Karasek, 1990), required skill level (Landsbergis, 1988), opportunities for learning (Karasek, 1979), task difficulty (Barnett & Brennan, 1995), and the frequency of errors (Farh, Earley, & Lin, 1997). Many of the excluded issues involve control and predictability, and the important managerial function that Mintzberg (1971) called disturbance handling, but they are distinct from discretion as freedom of action in doing one’s work.

The emerging template was iteratively revised as each new case was considered. The result was a preliminary taxonomy (i.e., hierarchically ordered structure) of the dimensions of discretion. This taxonomy reflected the patterns of data in all existing measures of discretion.

Three: Identifying managerial behaviors. The third step in the analysis was to collect a sample of specific managerial behaviors from secondary reports. This may seem a somewhat unconventional part of a research synthesis, but findings in the citizenship literature suggested its importance. Organizational
citizenship research has devoted considerable effort to developing theory-based operationalizations, and in doing so has identified a potential disconnect between theory and practice concerning the dimensional structure of discretion. Theory suggested that there should be five distinct dimensions of citizenship behavior (Organ, 1988), and research has been able to distinguish these five (Podsakoff et al., 1990). However, subsequent findings suggest that organization members rarely make such fine distinctions, and tend to blur some of the dimensional boundaries (Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1994). Given this, it seemed prudent for this paper’s analysis to impose some sort of practical check on the emerging dimensional structure of discretion, to prevent abstruse theorizing. To that end, an effort was made to examine whether the derived dimensional structure could encompass actual managerial behavior. In other words, before the proposed dimensions were finalized, their relevance to the practical concerns of managers was assessed.

Managers were selected as the test population, and more specifically, only those managers who described their work in terms of both personal tasks and supervisory tasks. Since the derived dimensional structure was meant to integrate the autonomy and citizenship research, conducted primarily with workers, with the executive discretion research, conducted with senior executives, it was judged that working managers represented an appropriate compromise. The managers were like workers, in having their own productive tasks to complete, but they were also like senior executives, in having subordinates and responsibility for directing them. It was assumed that at least some of what is true of senior executive discretion should also be true for lower level managers, and likewise for workers and managers.

Interviews with working managers were taken from an existing collection. Gig (Bowe, Bowe, & Streeter, 2000) presents more than 100 interviews that originally appeared in a weekly column called “Work.” The book’s editors describe their process as “sitting down with people, asking them what they did and how they felt about it, and tape-recording the conversations” (Bowe et al., 2000, p. xii). The book consists of the apparently unedited transcripts of those conversations, as the editors’ stated goal was to present the “unscripted voice of the individual” (Bowe et al., 2000, p. xii). Their sample was one of convenience, and the editors recognized that no general conclusions could be drawn from the interviews. However, these limitations were unimportant for the purposes of the research described in this paper, as noted below.

Fourteen of the interviews in Gig were used in this analysis, as they were the only ones in which interview informants explicitly mentioned both personal tasks and supervisory tasks. In addition to meeting the minimum criterion of mentioning both personal and supervisory work, these specific interviews offered several advantages. For one, seven of the informants had organizational superiors, and seven did not. This offered the possibility of contrasting between “senior” and “middle” levels of management. In addition, the use of secondary data, where the original study had nothing to do with discretion, eliminated the possibility of current study’s objectives biasing responses. Moreover, the obvious limitations of this sample were not relevant to current study’s purposes. The 14 informants are in no way representative of job frequencies, industries, or any other work characteristic. In addition, the fact that these individuals volunteered to talk on tape implies that idiosyncratic personality differences may have biased their commentary. Moreover, there were likely social desirability and impression management effects on what was said. Happily, none of these drawbacks are pertinent to this paper. The interviews were not treated as a representative sample, but used only to provide a diverse range of possible managerial behaviors to compare with the emerging dimensional structure.

Each of the interviews was examined for specific work behaviors. Any time the informant mentioned a specific personal action or interaction, the mention was flagged as an instance of managerial work behavior. For example, the town manager mentioned writing job descriptions for her staff and the construction foreman described teaching all new crew members how to use a Skilsaw. Each informant mentioned between 14 and 49 behaviors, totaling 386 managerial work behaviors.
**Four: Integrating managerial behaviors.** The final stage in the analysis was refining the dimensional structure of discretion to reflect the managerial behaviors identified. This consisted of another round of template analysis. The taxonomy produced in stage two was used to code each managerial behavior. For example, the food business owner described setting his workers’ hours, and this was coded as an instance of the scheduling discretion dimension. The coding process was once again iterative, and in fact involved a partial return to stage two. Whenever a managerial behavior was not adequately represented by some dimension in the coding template, the template was revised. This necessarily required revisiting all of the items previously coded. Table 1 presents counts of the managerial work behaviors coded.

| Table 1 |
| Counts of Managerial Work Behaviors |

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Internal Discretion</th>
<th>External Discretion</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Method</td>
<td>Schedule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owner (web bus.)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owner (cleaning bus.)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owner (food bus.)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owner (casting bus.)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEO (web bus.)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEO (insurance)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film Producer</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town Manager</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General (air force)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The result combined previous research findings with practical concerns raised by managers. The 14 interviews seemed a reasonably broad sampling of positions, industries, and settings (e.g., internet business owner, insurance CEO, construction foreman). No single informant mentioned every dimension and no dimension was raised by every informant, giving some sign of diversity in the sample. Nonetheless, these behaviors were only a sample, rather than the universe of managerial actions. As such, it would have been mistaken to let the behaviors counter previous empirical results. So, for example, method discretion and scheduling discretion were retained as distinct dimensions due to previous research findings (Barnett & Brennan, 1995; Breaugh, 1985; Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006; Wall et al., 1995), despite the absence of a method-scheduling distinction in the interviews. In fact, some informants implicitly denied the distinction. For example, the construction foreman reported difficulties with his boss about safety and timing. The foreman used the safest method for any given task, but his boss would have preferred a faster, less safe, approach. This would seem to contradict the independence of method and scheduling. However, given the assumed hierarchical structure of discretion, the fact that some managers conflated method and scheduling seemed insufficient grounds to deny the considerable research evidence available on the matter.

Results

The final product of the analysis was a hierarchically ordered, four-level dimensional structure for discretion, ranging from a unitary notion of general discretion to increasingly finer distinctions among the dimensions in which discretion can be exercised. Table 2 presents the dimensions, which are summarized below.
Table 2

Hierarchical Dimensional Structure of Discretion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Discretion</th>
<th>1. Internal Discretion</th>
<th>1.1 Task Discretion</th>
<th>1.1.1 Method Discretion</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.1.2 Scheduling Discretion</td>
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<td>1.1.3 Effort Discretion</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.2 Relational Discretion</td>
<td>1.2.1 Support Discretion</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.2.2 Monitoring Discretion</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.2.3 Reward Discretion</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.2.4 Interpersonal Discretion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The most common means of measuring discretion has been with a single, uni-dimensional measure meant to encompass all aspects of an individual’s work (e.g., Finkelstein & Boyd, 1998; Hackman & Lawler, 1971; Karasek, 1979; Morgeson et al., 2005; Parker, Williams, & Turner, 2006; Spreitzer, 1995). This approach has shown success, with researchers detecting anticipated relationships with various antecedents and consequences of discretion. However, there has also been criticism of this approach, and reviews suggest that sub-dimensions of the larger construct have unique relationships with antecedents and consequences, and so need to distinguished (e.g., Fried, 1991).

### Internal versus External Discretion

The most fundamental sub-division of general discretion concerned the individual’s control over internal versus external phenomena. For a manager, this is the difference between activities within his or her unit and those outside it. For a CEO, the “unit” is the organization, and for a staff member it is his or her work duties. The distinction may be most easily thought of in terms of formal organizational authority, which is likely an important antecedent of internal discretion, yet irrelevant to external discretion. The web business owner provided a concrete example. She had great discretion over matters within her organization. She set the schedules, assigned work, determined the staff evaluation criteria, and set the general tone of the atmosphere. In contrast, she felt little control over the environment in which her business operated. For example, she viewed herself as competing with similar firms for quality staff. She set a number of internal policies to make her organization more attractive to staff, but recognized that potential workers’ decisions would also be influenced by her competitors’ policies, which were outside her control. Therefore, her discretion in hiring staff was not as great as her discretion over internal matters such as scheduling.
1.1 Task Discretion versus 1.2 Relational Discretion. Internal discretion had two broad sub-dimensions, primarily distinguished by formal task orientation and interaction. Task discretion involved behaviors directly and formally involved in completing the productive work of the unit. Thus, the air force general developing plans to accomplish his assigned missions and the food business owner determining his staff’s work hours were examples of task discretion. In contrast, relational discretion involved direct interpersonal contact, and was more likely to support subsequent task activity, rather than contributing directly to production. This included behaviors such as the town manager’s creation of an employee award program and the telemarketing supervisor’s efforts to foster optimism in his callers.

1.1.1 Method Discretion. This dimension of discretion referred to freedom in determining how work was actually done. It included a range of issues, such as choosing among methods (Dwyer & Ganster, 1991) and planning work (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). The construction foreman’s decisions about task assignment, such as giving the “crummiest jobs” to the newest members of the work crew are a clear example (Bowe et al., 2000, p. 33).

1.1.2 Scheduling Discretion. Although choosing how (method) might seem to imply schedules and sequences of action, empirical evidence has shown that these issues are distinct at least some of the time (Breaugh, 1985; Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006; Wall et al., 1995). Thus being able to determine the scheduling of work (Moorman & Blakely, 1995), the pace of work (Tetrick & LaRocco, 1987), and the order of activities (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006) represents a distinct dimension of discretion. An example is given by the food business owner’s freedom to determine the hours his employees work.

1.1.3 Effort Discretion. The actual effort one devotes to their work is a straightforward area of discretion, though it has received little attention outside the citizenship literature (though see Dwyer & Ganster, 1991; Parker et al., 2006). This dimension encompassed the constructs of conscientiousness (Podsakoff et al., 1990) and generalized compliance (C. A. Smith et al., 1983). It addressed individuals’ discretion about actually doing what is expected of them and how much genuine effort they give. Thirteen of the 14 interviewees mentioned the long, hard hours that they often chose to work.

1.2.1 Support Discretion. Because most of the research about assisting others in their work was conducted in the citizenship tradition with staff workers, the phrasing of measures implies altruistic motives (e.g., Farh et al., 1997; Moorman & Blakely, 1995; Podsakoff et al., 1990; C. A. Smith et al., 1983). However, for the purposes of this analysis, the motive for an action was ancillary. The citizenship results clearly demonstrated that individuals could exercise discretion about helping others, including whether, when, how, and in what ways to provide help. In addition to direct help with tasks, this dimension also included broader issues such as providing motivation or encouragement (Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1994), so the more general label of “support” was adopted, rather than “helping.” Training was included as a component of this dimension, as it is intended to support the trainee’s subsequent performance. Therefore, both the town manager’s decision to give “a lot of atta boys” to relief workers (Bowe et al., 2000, p. 592) and the insurance CEO’s choices in developing the skills of his executive team are examples of support discretion.

1.2.2 Monitoring Discretion. The only mention of monitoring in the existing measures was a single item in one scale, concerning how much the individual helped “to monitor your team’s overall performance” (Parker et al., 2006). This was perhaps not surprising, given the previous focus on non-supervisory staff. Nonetheless, “monitor” is one of the ten central roles of managers according to Mintzberg’s (1973) description, and more recent examinations have affirmed the continued importance of monitoring behaviors (Friedman, Fleishman, & Fletcher, 1992; Kurke & Aldrich, 1983; Tengblad, 2006). Discretion in monitoring subordinates also figured prominently in the interview behaviors, and included issues such as decisions about the content of performance reviews and how much concern was paid to signs of burnout.
1.2.3 Reward Discretion. As with monitoring, the only explicit mention of discretion over rewards or punishment was in the measure developed by Parker and colleagues (2006). Again, this presumably reflects the previous focus on staff workers. While disciplining others may not be important enough to be meaningfully distinct for line workers (as in Parker et al., 2006), it was clearly an area in which the interviewed managers had distinct and varying degrees of discretion. The telemarketing supervisor had little discretion over rewards, as he was given guidelines about what behaviors to censure and how, whereas the casting director mentioned the range of outlandish behavior she tolerated without taking disciplinary action.

1.2.4 Interpersonal Discretion. This was a broad dimension encompassing various aspects of the individual’s personal attitude and interpersonal behavior. This appeared variously in existing scales as sportsmanship, courtesy, and interpersonal harmony (Farh et al., 1997; Podsakoff et al., 1990). However, the logic for placing an item in one of these scales rather than another was not always clear, and evidence suggests that individuals sometimes fail to distinguish among such constructs (MacKenzie et al., 1991; Podsakoff et al., 1997; Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1994). They were therefore combined in this analysis, and labeled interpersonal discretion because the freedom exercised revolved around issues of interpersonal style. Examples included the telemarketing supervisor’s decision to ring a bell and cheer when one of his subordinates made a sale, the cleaning business owner choosing to be culturally sensitive, and the political fund manager taking responsibility for understanding and responding to the emotional priorities of his staff.

2.1 Input Discretion versus 2.2 Output Discretion. Mintzberg (1971) noted that one of the defining characteristics of managerial work was serving as the link between the organization or unit and its external environment. This function was reflected in the dimensions of external discretion, which included control over what comes into the unit from outside (input discretion) and what goes out of the unit into the environment (output discretion).

2.1.1 Materials Discretion. This dimension concerned control over the materials with which work was conducted. It encompassed all necessary work inputs, including information (Dwyer & Ganster, 1991), tools (Frese, Kring, Soose, & Zempel, 1996; Semmer, 1984), and budgets (Parker et al., 2006), as well as the ability to modify the local working environment (Dwyer & Ganster, 1991). Examples included the high school basketball coach’s control over alumni spending in support of his team and the film producer’s choices about which story rights to purchase for future filming.

2.1.2 Staffing Discretion. This dimension was essentially the same as materials discretion, except it concerned the human resources available, rather than material ones. This dimension included all aspects of hiring and firing staff, as the two together determine who is available for the unit’s work (Parker et al., 2006; Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1994). The most frequent mentions in the interviews concerned choice of recruiting techniques (e.g., the HR director’s decision to waive many standard hiring practices such as reference checking) and judgments about termination (e.g., the cleaning business owner’s decisions to fire those who did not respond quickly enough to his requests).

2.2.1 Goal Discretion. Where method discretion was control over the means of achieving some given end, goal discretion was control over the end itself. Goal discretion was the ability to decide what one was trying to achieve in formal production or task-oriented work. This included the desired output and the criteria for evaluating it. Goal discretion appeared regularly in the existing scales, though given the usually low hierarchical level of analysis, it was often framed as influence, rather than outright choice (Breaugh, 1985; Langfred, 2000; Tetrick & LaRocco, 1987). Interview examples include the film producer’s editorial freedom to decide what constitutes a good movie and the web content CEO’s choice of which projects to develop.
2.2.2 Civic Virtue Discretion. The name for this dimension was retained from the citizenship measure that defined it, because the construct has shown repeated empirical success and the label evocatively conveys the content of the dimension (MacKenzie et al., 1991; MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Fetter, 1993; MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Paine, 1999; Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1994; Podsakoff et al., 1990). This dimension consists of selfless actions taken to benefit the organization. Civic virtue discretion concerns effort expended for the organization’s health and advancement. In existing scales, this included things as simple as attending non-mandatory meetings (Podsakoff et al., 1990) and volunteering (Smith et al., 1983) to more active advocacy, such as defending the organization’s reputation (Farh et al., 1997) or encouraging friends and family to use its products (Moorman & Blakely, 1995). The interviews had a similar range of behaviors, including the air force general’s decision to structure to his family life in support of his work and the HR director’s decision to spend the night in the ER with an injured worker.

2.3 Buffering Discretion. The final sub-dimension of external discretion was broad and complex, but did not lend itself to obvious sub-division. The issues included in this dimension have received relatively little attention in prior research on discretion. Although the manager’s role as a figurehead and environmental-mediator figures prominently in treatments of managerial work (Mintzberg, 1971; Stewart, 1982; Wilkinson & van Zwanenberg, 1994), most existing research on the dimensions of discretion did not address managers, and so neglected this issue. However, this dimension of discretion was plainly evident in the interviews. The air force general discussed his choices about when and how to represent his unit at meetings in Washington. The town manager described how she served sometimes served as the scapegoat when unpopular decisions were taken. The web business owner mentioned choosing to act as a buffer and liaison between her staff and clients. In all, 38 behaviors were coded as instances of buffering because they clearly involved discretion over interactions with the external environment, but they just as clearly were not instances of input or output discretion. Almost all of these behaviors combined elements of being a figurehead (i.e., symbolically representing a larger whole), a communicator, and a protector of those within the unit or organization.

Discussion

As others have observed (Podsakoff et al., 2000; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998), research on discretion has devoted far more attention to issues of substantive validity than to issues of construct validity (Schwab, 1980). In other words, more is known about the consequences of discretion than is known about discretion itself. This creates a potentially unstable foundation for theorizing, despite the demonstrated importance of the phenomenon. As a result, there is no coherent theory of discretion. This paper did not seek to offer a complete theory, but to contribute toward one by integrating previously isolated research to define the dimensional structure of discretion. Specifically, this paper proposes a four-level, hierarchical dimensional structure. The all-encompassing notion of general discretion can be decomposed into internal and external components. Each of these can then be reduced to another, more specific level, consisting of the task, relational, input, and output domains of discretion. At the finest level of specificity, discretion at work consists of twelve distinct dimensions: discretion over methods, scheduling, effort, support, monitoring, rewards, interpersonal style, materials, staffing, goals, civic virtue, and buffering behavior. Each of these dimensions represents a distinct domain for the exercise of discretion.

Clarifying the dimensional structure of discretion offers numerous benefits to theory and research. The most obvious and most important is the guide it offers for creating operationalizations in
future study. For example, Smith and colleagues (1983) reported the failure of one survey item to load as expected on their altruism and generalized compliance dimensions. They dropped it from the analysis. This anomaly was clarified several years later when subsequent work showed that the item was associated with another, distinct dimension of discretion (Podsakoff et al., 1990). Had the first authors been aware of the other dimension, they would not have been surprised by the loading failure, and in fact would have written items more precisely tailored to the aspects of discretion involved in their project. Knowing the full dimensionality of discretion will improve future research by allowing the creation of better instruments and more precise hypotheses, since researchers will be able to specify their focus more clearly.

The example of the seemingly anomalous survey item also suggests another benefit of specifying the dimensional structure of discretion. It can provide the insight to understand previous results that seemed mysterious or confusing. For example, consider the repeated failure to detect the predicted relationship between demand instability and executive discretion (Finkelstein & Boyd, 1998; Hambrick & Abrahamson, 1995). Given the multidimensional nature of discretion, the observed non-relation may be an artifact of measurement, rather than a failure of theory. The hypothesized effect of demand instability is two-fold: it will reduce the clarity of means-ends linkages and it will increase the complexity of conducting routine operations, creating greater demands on attention and information processing capacity (Finkelstein & Boyd, 1998; Hambrick & Abrahamson, 1995). The first effect suggests that input and output discretion should be increased by demand instability, as the CEO can more easily justify a range of production capacities, staffing levels, and pricing schedules. In contrast, if the increased complexity has any effect on discretion, it would likely be to reduce internal discretion, because overwhelmed CEOs will have fewer cognitive resources to apply to planning and supervision. Given this, it is not surprising that demand instability showed no consistent link with measures of general discretion. If one assumes that demand instability increases input and output discretion, while having either a negative or null effect on buffering, work process, and supervisory discretion, one would expect a null relationship with a uni-dimensional scale that aggregates these dimensions. A reexamination of the effect of demand instability that is sensitive to the distinctions among dimensions of discretion would provide both a better test of the underlying theory and potentially more informative results.

The taxonomy derived here also demonstrates the potential for success and benefit in combining the research traditions of autonomy, citizenship, and executive discretion. The results of this first effort at integration were encouraging. Ninety percent of the real-world managerial behaviors mentioned in the interviews were accounted for by previously existing measures of discretion. These dimensions were spread across three discrete research traditions, but when taken together they offered good coverage of discretion’s dimensions. While the sample of managerial behavior was not comprehensive, the comparative success of existing dimensions suggests that the three research traditions have made good progress, and so combining them will provide most of the foundation for an overarching theory of discretion.

The taxonomy identified here also points to a number of specific directions for future development and research. There is the clear need to develop and validate effective measures for each dimension, and to confirm their hierarchical relations. Moreover, patterns observed in the data used in this analysis suggest that there may also be other relationships among the dimensions, and these bear investigation.

One example is an inter-dimensional relationship implied by a pattern in the interview data. Because the sample, both of informants and of behaviors, was not representative, no firm conclusions can be drawn from behavioral frequencies, but one pattern does seem to be suggestive of a trade-off within the dimension of output discretion. Goal discretion was mentioned more often by those informants who did not have an organizational superior (e.g., CEO, business owner). Moreover, when those with superiors
did mention goal discretion, it was described in terms of issue selling rather than outright choice (Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, 1998). For example, the air force general mentioned watching for “hot spots” of potential trouble (Bowe et al., 2000, p. 570). He described his role as identifying such hot spots to his superior, who would choose the appropriate response. The general was issue selling, in the sense that he directed his superior’s attention to particular areas, but final decisions were out of the general’s control. As such, the air force general had some goal discretion, but it was not as great as that of the food business owner, who described choosing which products to make and where to market them. In general, those with organizational superiors were less likely to mention goal discretion at all, and when they did, their discretion was usually of an issue-selling variety. In contrast, informants with organizational superiors mentioned twice as many total instances of civic virtue, compared to those without superiors. This pattern of apparent trade-off between civic virtue and goal discretion could imply that as an individual increases his or her goal discretion, the meaningfulness of civic virtue behavior wanes. This is easiest to see at the extreme. Recall that civic virtue behaviors concern selfless actions that benefit the organization (MacKenzie et al., 1991). Imagine the owner and manager of a sole proprietorship: the owner has maximal goal discretion, and his or her primary task is the success of the business, so any action taken for the good of the organization is likely to be construed as simply part of normal work, rather than any sort of civic virtue. It may be that the civic virtue sub-dimension becomes increasingly less meaningful with greater goal discretion.

Since the research using the civic virtue construct has been at lower hierarchical levels, this possibility has not been tested. This fact reaffirms the need to integrate the three disparate literatures of discretion. The potential inverse relationship between goal discretion and civic virtue discretion provides one example of a testable hypothesis derived from comparing across the literatures. It implies that there may be little benefit in measuring the civic virtue discretion of CEOs or the goal discretion of line workers. However, it may be possible to compare these positions meaningfully using the more inclusive dimension of output discretion.

Comparing among CEOs and line workers would be a significant advance in the understanding of discretion in organizations, and is an opportunity revealed by the taxonomy of discretion derived in this paper. Much work is still needed to define a complete theory of discretion, but having a taxonomy that integrates the work of relevant research traditions is an important step in that direction.

References


