

Darren J. Good
Doctoral Candidate
Case Western Reserve University
Dept. Of Organizational Behavior

The work I am proposing for my dissertation will be a detailed theoretical development, analysis and hopefully validation of a new construct I am referring to as *Cognitive Agility*. In general this construct describes a state of being open and flexible with sustained attention of original intent. The key here is that agility requires a *reason* to be agile. Therefore, the original intent one has, whether it is toward completing a task, strategic issue or creative development, necessitates agile functioning in the situational demands to also be open and flexible.

The definition of *cognitive agility* is a quality of attending with flexibility, openness and vigilance. It requires using a combination of flexibility, openness with vigilance.

The components of cognitive agility are defined as:

Openness is a capacity and willingness to a) notice what you have not noticed before (novelty), b) framing things in a way you have not previously, c) form new associations, d) make distinctions among things

Flexibility is a capacity and willingness to change a mental strategy or framework previously used

Vigilance (or sustained attention) is a capacity and willingness toward maintaining original purpose and intent

Part of the interest in this construct development is based on earlier work I have done in the area of mindfulness and exploration of other related constructs like cognitive

flexibility. Mindfulness describes an ability to search for novelty, understand multiple perspectives and eventually to create new categories (Langer, 1997). While I see major overlap in the definition of mindfulness and cognitive agility, the main point of differentiation is sustained intent which mindfulness does not discuss. In fact, Langer views attention as a resource meant to vary and does not address at what point varying attention would lead to no longer being mindful (as long as the individual is searching for novelty, re-categorizing etc). The other existing construct that most closely connects with cognitive agility is cognitive flexibility. Flexibility has been previously defined and measured in a myriad of ways including creative thinking (Isen et al., 1987), intelligent adaptation to environment (Berg & Sternberg, 1985), preference for novelty (Gough, 1995), ability to permit new views of object domain (Scott, 1967), and finding distant associational links (Mednick, 1962). The notion of flexibility that I am utilizing as a subcomponent of cognitive agility relates to choosing and changing cognitive strategies, which is related to a few current operationalizations (Canas et al., 2003; Showers & Cantor, 1985). The definitions of cognitive flexibility are scattered conceptually and none seem to describe a state or ability open to new information, a change in cognitive strategies and vigilance toward original intent. Thus, I believe there is room for new construct inclusion in the cognitive based literatures of psychology and organizational behavior.

Methods have not been chosen as the proposal still is in the earlier stages of development. Yet, conversations regarding potential methods have been discussed and this construct presents some exciting measurement dilemmas. The primary obstacle is that the first two

subcomponents of the construct, openness and flexibility, oppose the third subcomponent, sustained attention. This opposition is what creates the agile state, yet any questionnaire attempting to measure individual capacity will undoubtedly demonstrate strong loading at either end of the construct spectrum. I would hypothesize that openness and flexibility would load strongly but would not show enough cross loading with sustained attention, indicating that the three components cannot exist simultaneously.

Further discussions have taken place regarding measurement in a laboratory task situation. Again, this issue of how to measure sustained attention to primary intent is hard to isolate with the other subcomponents. For instance, the Remote Associations Test (Mednick, 1962) would do a decent job of testing openness and Van Zomeren's Cognitive Flexibility Test could measure flexibility in that it looks at strategies used (1981) but no existing test, that I know of, could combine all three subcomponents. Again, isolating sustained attention in conjunction with openness serves an interesting point of measurement. Still, this is the potential methodological area that seems most compelling.

In the meantime, I will look into crafting a protocol for a series of critical incident interviews. Since part of the genesis for this construct has emerged from informal interviews in which individuals describe their thought processes when successful in complex tasks and strategic problem solving, it seems appropriate to thoroughly collect and examine a range of participants' thought processes. These interviews would be

coded with a thematic analysis and this may help to further clarify the parts of the proposed construct or shift the construct altogether.