The Morphology of Theory and the General Theory of Marketing

The author explores the nature of theoretical and nontheoretical structures and then evaluates the theoretical structure advanced in a previous JOURNAL OF MARKETING article.

The development of a unified body of theory is a worthy goal for any discipline. As Robert D. Buzzell has pointed out, a strong central theoretical structure is one of the four requirements for a discipline to be a science. Robert Bartels proposed a unified theoretical structure for marketing in his article "The General Theory of Marketing." The purpose of the present article is to explore the nature of theoretical and nontheoretical structures, and to evaluate "the general theory of marketing" as a theoretical structure.

The Morphology of Theory

Most structures which purport to be theories can be classified under one of the following schemata: theoretical, definitional, classificational, and analytical-conceptual.

Theoretical Schemata

"A theoretical schema is a systematically related set of statements, including some lawlike generalizations, that is empirically testable." Most philosophers of science and other students of theoretical structures employ definitions of theory which closely parallel the one suggested.

The definition provides three criteria for testing whether a given structure is a theory. One criterion is whether the structure contains a "systematically related set of statements." The term "systematically related" refers to the syntactical properties of the structure. Does the structure follow the laws of deductive inference? Does the structure contain such fatal flaws as predicting the occurrence of two events which are mutually exclusive; i.e., if "A" occurs, then "B" cannot occur? Are all concepts and constructs used in a consistent fashion? All supposed theoretical structures must pass such tests of internal consistency if they are to be taken as serious attempts in the development of theory.

A second criterion for evaluating a theoretical structure is whether it contains "lawlike generalizations." Lawlike generalizations always specify relationships between variables. The specified relationship may take many forms; e.g., each time "X" occurs, then "Y" will occur. Generalizations are necessary in order to make predictions concerning the occurrence or nonoccurrence of the phenomena under investigation. If the structure to be evaluated contains no lawlike generalizations, it cannot be described as a theoretical structure.

The third criterion is whether the structure is "empirically testable." If the structure contains generalizations which yield predictive statements, then these statements must be composed of terms which can be operationally defined. Unless the terms in the predictive statements (hypotheses) have empirical referents, the structure cannot be empirically tested.

By the very nature of "lawlike generalizations" no theoretical structure is directly testable; only specific hypotheses generated from theory are directly testable. As an example consider Newton's third law of motion, "to every action there is always an opposed and equal reaction." From this generalization a prediction can be made about a specific action which is then directly testable. The statement "to every action" is, therefore, not directly testable.

If the theoretical structure has been used to generate many empirically tested hypotheses, and if these hypotheses have been confirmed, then one can say there is substantial supportive evidence for the theoretical structure. One cannot say, however, it is "confirmed" in the same sense that a testable hypothesis can be "confirmed." Even if Newton's third law were found to predict correctly in all observed cases, the possibility that a future observation might yield contradictory evidence would still exist.

6 Hempel, same reference as footnote 4, p. 28.
The third criterion, therefore, is that all supposed theoretical structures must yield hypotheses or predictions which are at least in principle susceptible to empirical testing.

**Definitional Schemata**

All formal structures contain definitional schemata; i.e., the rules by which elements can be replaced by other elements without losing the truth value of the statement.

All elements in a system are either primitives (undefined within the system), or they can be defined in terms of the primitives. Many supposed theoretical structures are really nothing more than very complicated systems for defining the universe of discourse. All theoretical structures will have definitional schemata as parts, but no definitional schema is itself a theory.

**Classificational Schemata**

A classificational schema is a type of nontheoretic system which sets conditions for the applicability of its categorical (classificatory) terms. Classificational schemata attempt to take the universe of elements and divide them into homogeneous groups on the basis of the categorical variable.

Classificational schemata may be as simple as classifying human beings into “customer and non-customer” or as complicated as some of the classificational systems in biology. They can be expanded either latitudinally or longitudinally; i.e., by either adding categorical variables at the same level or by making a hierarchy of categorical variables. A very common kind of classificational schema is simply dividing the universe into “important variables” and “unimportant variables.”

Classificational schemata are very useful in theory development because they organize the elements of the universe. They are frequently confused with theoretical structures because of the very complex nature of some classificational schemata.

**Analytical-Conceptual Schemata**

An analytical-conceptual schema contains a definitional system as a component and also a set of analytic or logically true or “trutistic” sentences. These are trutistic in that their truth is established not by reference to any extralinguistic empirical evidence, but by recourse to the systems’ definitions. Suppose “brand loyalty” were defined as follows: Subject “X” is brand loyal to brand “A” if “X” buys over 50% of his requirements of the product from brand “A.” Assume also that brand “A” and brand “B” are in the same product class. One can conclude that “X” cannot be brand loyal to both “A” and “B” at the same time. The truth value of this conclusion is not established by empirical test, but by the way the terms are defined; i.e., it is an analytically true conclusion.

It is tempting to refer to these types of systems as theoretical since they contain “true and false” statements. However, for the system to qualify as a theoretical structure, it must be capable of empirical as well as definitional validation.

**The General Theory of Marketing**

The preceding discussion of the morphology of theory can now be used as a point of departure for analyzing Bartels’ “general theory of marketing.”

Many authors preface their proposed theoretical structures with such statements as “toward a theory of . . .” or “foundations for a theory of . . .” Because such structures are clearly intended to be only the first step toward a theoretical structure, the three criteria for theoretical adequacy cannot be applied too strictly. Such tentative statements are to be considered more in the “logic of discovery”; i.e., they are intended to stimulate the thinking of others toward the development of a full theoretical structure.

If the “general theory of marketing” were to be evaluated in terms of the “logic of discovery,” one would allow a decent interval of time to pass and then examine the extent to which the “general theory of marketing” had stimulated true theoretical development.

However, Bartels gave no indication that the “theory” was to be considered in the “logic of discovery”: “It is felt that collectively they [the seven component subtheories of Bartels’ general theory] constitute an integrated general theory for they are implicit in the stated concept of marketing, they proceed from general circumstances to detailed managerial applications and they embrace the several theories of marketing which have been separately developed.”

Since the theory was proposed as an integrated general theory, the criteria for theoretical adequacy should be applied. The remainder of this article is

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8. Same reference as footnote 3, p. 32.


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devoted to an evaluation of each of the seven component subtheories proposed by Bartels.

Theory of Social Initiative

There are six statements in the theory of social initiative, but nowhere does there appear a lawlike generalization. The first statement is a typical example: “Society, not the business entrepreneur, is the basic undertaker of all activity.” The statement apparently was not generated from any theoretical structure since none was given. Thus it is not clear whether it is supposed to be a theoretical statement, an axiomatic statement, an hypothesis, or something else. If it is anything, it would appear to be a quasi-hypothesis; i.e., if operational definitions existed for “society,” “basic undertaker,” and “activity,” the statement might be testable. However, “basic undertaker” might be defined in such a loose fashion as to make the statement true by definition; for there exist innumerable “activities” that are essentially individual in character.

The theory of social initiative seems to be condensed in the final statement: “Ecological orientation, in other words, is the starting point in marketing analysis.” This statement falls into the “logic of discovery.” It simply says that an ecological perspective might be a useful one for approaching marketing phenomena, generating research hypotheses, and ultimately generating a theoretical structure. It appears that the “theory of social initiative” is not a theory at all, but primarily an exhortation to fellow marketing students to adopt a particular perspective in approaching marketing phenomena.

Theory of Economic (Market) Separations

This “theory” can be reduced to three short statements:

1. Producers and consumers are separated.
2. Marketing activities contribute to the removal of market separations.
3. The character of market separations, therefore, influences marketing activities.

A theoretical structure must do much more than simply state that market separations are “important variables” in studying marketing. A theoretical structure must also present lawlike generalizations concerning the form of the relationship between the “important variables” and marketing phenomena. Classificational schemata which attempt to isolate important variables from unimportant variables are useful, but they do not constitute theory.

Theory of Market Flows, Expectations, Interactions

The essence of this “theory” may be found in the following three statements:

1. People who engage in marketing behavior have expectations.
2. Sometimes expectations are not realized.
3. When expectations are not realized, people may change their behavior.

This is another “important variable” classificational schema. At the very minimum there must be generalizations with respect to the relationship between expectations and other marketing phenomena before this structure could be termed a theory.

Theory of Flows and Systems

“Flows are the movement of elements which resolve market separations. Marketing does not occur as a single movement, but rather as a number of movements, in series, parallel, reciprocal, or duplicatory. They occur in the complex relations among the individuals who have found an economic basis for their existence and for their participation in the marketing process.”

The following “important variable” classificatory schema summarizes the “theory”:

1. The elements in marketing can be classified into those that flow and those that do not flow.
2. The flowing elements of marketing can be further classified by type—series, parallel, reciprocal, and duplicatory.
3. a. The marketing flows are very important and should be studied by marketing students.
   b. The relationships among marketing flows are very complex.

The schema does not have the requisite generalizations relating marketing flows to other phenomena which would be necessary to classify the “theory” of flows and systems as a theoretical structure.

Theory of Behavior Constraints

This “theory” can be summarized by the following statements:

1. Marketing behavior is constrained behavior.
2. a. Some of the constraints are designed by society.
   b. The societal constraints may be classified as economic, social, ethical, or technical.

Where are the generalizations relating societal constraints to marketing phenomena? As stated, this is another “important variable” classificatory schema exhorting marketing theoreticians to examine the nature of societal constraints on marketing.

Theory of Social Change and Marketing Evolution

This “theory” states:

1. Marketing systems change.
2. A theory of marketing must account for this change.

The observation that marketing systems change is neither new nor theoretical. The plea that marketing theory be dynamic is desirable. However,

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11 Same reference as footnote 2, p. 32.
12 Same reference as footnote 2, p. 32.
13 Same reference as footnote 2, p. 33.
the addition of a desirable goal to a rather simple observation does not constitute a theory.

Theory of Social Control of Marketing

"As society sanctions the emergence of a marketing mechanism, it also evaluates and regulates its appraisal. Standards by which it fulfills individual and collective social objectives are needed."14

A theory of social control would have to do much more than simply state that standards are needed. At the very least there should be generalizations relating standards and other marketing phenomena. An example would be generalizations relating marketing standards set by society and the requisite structure of distribution to achieve those standards.

Conclusion

The previous analysis has demonstrated that the seven component subtheories are not theories, and thus the collection of seven components cannot be referred to as a "general theory of marketing." They represent an assemblage of classificational schemata, some intriguing definitions, and exhortations to fellow marketing students to adopt a particular perspective in attempting to generate marketing theory. The collection may have heuristic value in stimulating others to generate theory, which may be its most significant achievement.

MARKETING MEMO

An Updated View of Ourselves . . .

Let's begin with an updated view of ourselves. We are, first of all, moving beyond the point where corporate and technical enterprise, privately and profitably pursued, can be viewed as an unmitigated good in its own right. The "legitimacy" of the Sixties rested easily on the faith that the sum total of private decisions increased the sum total of wealth and the sum total of goods to buy, and that was the best anybody could do for society. This concept stretched in its more liberal form to a belief that money redistributed to the poor, as in the negative income tax or the guaranteed annual income, would solve most of our social problems. It is no slight either to the skill of management's decision making, or to the case for income redistribution, to say (as has frequently been said) that the looming problems of the Seventies are public problems, and they simply are not being met within the "private" market mechanism. Continue to think that they are—that the economic end justifies the means—and the American productive system seems to have less and less point, its managers seem to become more and more "bored," its blue-collar workers more and more cynical and demanding—and the nation's youth to become less and less interested in being a part of it.