Lawlike Generalizations and Marketing Theory

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The author explores the fundamental characteristics of lawlike generalizations in marketing theory and proposes a procedure for transforming ordinary conversational generalizations into lawlike generalizations in marketing.

MY note "The Morphology of Theory and the General Theory of Marketing" attempted to explore the basic nature of theoretical structures, evaluate the purported "general theory of marketing" presented by Robert Bartels, and stimulate more rigorous analysis of the basic issues involved in generating marketing theory. A recent thoughtful critique of my note by Pinson, Anglemar, and Roberto suggests the note achieved some success in stimulating discussion in theoretical analysis. However, in their critique, Pinson et al. misinterpreted my position on a number of key issues and then, unfortunately, compounded the error by using these misinterpretations to draw fallacious inferences.

On Lawlike Generalizations

Pinson et al. grossly misinterpret my position when they contend "that the sole test of a lawlike generalization is the specification of a relationship." They focus on one sentence in a paragraph and completely ignore its successor, "Generalizations are necessary in order to make predictions concerning the occurrence or non-occurrence of the phenomena under investigation." In the very next paragraph, I state: "If the structure contains generalizations which yield predictive statements, then the 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." To summarize my position: in order for generalizations to be considered lawlike, the minimum necessary conditions are that the generalizations specify a relationship in the form of a universal conditional (such as my example in the original note) which is capable of yielding predictive statements (hypotheses) which are composed of terms that have empirical referents and, thus, permit empirical testing.

5. Same reference as footnote 1, p. 65.
6. Same reference as footnote 1, p. 65.
7. Same reference as footnote 3, p. 68.

Does the "General Theory of Marketing" Contain Lawlike Generalizations?

After misinterpreting my position as to the criteria for lawlike generalizations, Pinson et al. analyze two statements in Bartels' "subtheories" and conclude (contrary to my original note) that the statements are lawlike generalizations. Since both statements have the same form, I shall discuss only the first, "Different societies attain similar ends (in relative measure) by different means." Does this statement meet even the minimum requirements to be considered lawlike? Note first that the statement is ambiguous in adequately specifying any relationship, let alone one in the form of a universal conditional. Ignoring completely all the ambiguity surrounding the hedge phrase "in relative measure," a few of the possible interpretations of the statement are: (1) different societies can never attain similar ends by the same means; (2) similar societies can never attain similar ends by different means; (3) although all societies have similar ends, different societies achieve these ends by different means; (4) although different societies sometimes achieve similar ends by the same means, they usually attain similar ends by different means.

The preceding analysis demonstrates that the statement is so ambiguous that it fails to meet the criterion of specifying a relationship in the form of a universal conditional. Because of this ambiguity, the statement suffers from predictive impotence; that is, it cannot generate unambiguous hypotheses. This shortcoming renders the statement non-testable and, hence, not a lawlike generalization. Rather than continue to elaborate in greater detail why the statement is not lawlike, a much more constructive approach would be to show how the statement could be transformed into a lawlike generalization.

On Transforming Conversational Generalizations into Lawlike Generalizations

There are a number of ways the preceding statement could be recast into lawlike form and, for simplicity, we shall continue to ignore the hedge phrase "in relative measure." One pro-

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procedure would be to start with the three basic substantive terms of the statement: (1) societies, (2) ends, and (3) means. These terms encompass the subject matter of the statement. Next, note the two categorical terms different and similar, and the logical relationship term attain. The theorist must establish empirical referents (operational definitions) for the substantive terms, unambiguous classificational schemata for the categorical terms, and a clear definition for the logical relationship term. Only then can the terms be cast in lawlike form.

A skeletal outline of the preceding procedure would be as follows:

**Empirical Referents of Substantive Terms**

(1) “Society” is operationally defined as . . . ; (2) “societies’ ends” are operationally defined as . . . ; (3) “societies’ means” are operationally defined as . . .

**Classificational Schemata**

(1) “Different” societies can be unambiguously classified into the following categories: S₁, S₂, S₃ . . . Sₙ by means of the following classificational schema . . . ; (2) the “different” ends societies seek can be classified as: E₁, E₂, E₃ . . . Eₙ by means of the following classificational schema . . . ; (3) the “different” means used by societies to seek ends can be classified as: M₁, M₂, M₃ . . . Mₙ by using the following classificational schema . . .

**Logical Relationship Terms**

(1) The term attain shall imply . . . (e.g., we might take it to imply “always uses”).

**One Possible Lawlike Generalization**

(1) Given any two societies of types S₁ and Sₖ (where j ≠ k), if S₁ and Sₖ have a common end Eₗ, then they will always use means Mₗ and Mₖ (j ≠ k).

The preceding generalization is only one example of the kind of generalization which could be created. Note that an unambiguous relationship is specified in the form of a universal conditional. Unambiguous predications (hypotheses) can be generated. The predictions will be composed of terms with empirical referents, thus facilitating empirical testing.

**Operationalizing Criteria and Mutual Exclusivity**

The final two charges of Pinson et al were (1) that I failed to operationalize my evaluative criteria for theoretical constructions and (2) that I erred by assuming that a classificational schema could not be theoretical construction, i.e., the terms classificational schema and theoretical construction were mutually exclusive.

I agree that the original note did not fully operationalize my evaluative criteria as I have done here. All the criteria for “minimum requirements” were there, but not in fully explicated form. At the time, I did not believe that full explication was necessary. Apparently this belief was unwarranted.

On the “mutual exclusivity” charge, a careful rereading of my note supports my plea of “not guilty.” Nowhere did I state that a classificational schema could not be part of a theoretical structure, which is what the phrase “mutually exclusive” implies. Constructions of many types are components of theories, but, standing alone, structures like definitional schemata and classificational schemata are not theories. On this my position is clear: “All theoretical structures will have definitional schemata as parts, but no definitional schema is itself a theory. . . . Classificational schemata are very useful in theory development because they organize the elements of the universe.”

**Conclusion**

The thoughtful critique by Pinson et al is quite justified in requesting a more complete elaboration of my original evaluative criteria for theoretical constructions. The present note provides a much more complete articulation of the evaluative criteria, and the conclusion must remain the same. The “general theory of marketing” is 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. It is neither a theory of marketing nor a “general” theory of marketing.

8. Same reference as footnote 1, p. 66.