Theory Borrowing and Reflectivity in Interdisciplinary Fields
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ABSTRACT
The theory borrowing process has been important for relatively new interdisciplinary fields which do not have a long history of theory construction and testing. This process involves removing a theory from its original context and using it in another to explain a phenomena important to the field. In order to minimize misborrowing, it is necessary that the borrowing process become explicit, purposive and conscious. This can be accomplished only if researchers understand the important philosophical issues at stake. It is proposed that appropriate borrowing results from a harmony or consonance of theory superstructure, type of science, and social context. Inconsistencies revealed among these elements may result in substantial problems for the research program. This is illustrated in the next section by examining a classic case of misborrowing.

AN EXAMPLE OF MISBORROWING: THE MOTIVATION RESEARCH ERA
Until 1925, consumer behaviorists relied on neoclassical economic theories. The consumer was thus understood to be perfectly rational and consistent (Horton 1984). After 1925, researchers began to emphasize both emotional (affective) and rational (cognitive) motives for consumption. Lacking adequate explanations for emotional motives, Freudian psychoanalytic theory was borrowed in 1940. During the 1940's and 1950's, Freudian psychology had a strong impact on marketing academics, practitioners, and consumer behaviorists (Horton 1984).

Eventually, the motivation research era failed to move beyond the basic observation that consumers were sometimes motivated by forces they could not report. It is suggested that the reason this research program failed to produce significant findings was due to its use of Freudian theories. These theories were inappropriate for three reasons. First, psychoanalytic theories were structured specifically for clinical settings. Here the persons observed were seriously disturbed. Consumer behaviorists, however, were interested in explaining the behavior of the "typical" person. Second, the 1950's ushered in an era of logical empiricism, emphasizing the process of operationalization and the importance of an observational language. Freudian psychology was produced within a context stressing subjective interpretation, thus many important concepts (e.g., the "unconscious") could not be adequately operationalized. Third, psychoanalysis originated in nineteenth century Vienna, a society greatly influenced by Victorian ideas surrounding issues of sexuality (Horton 1984). As a number of theorists have recognized, the sentiments of the social context from which the theory emerges become intertwined in the theory itself (Fuhrman 1980; Gouldner 1976; Martindale 1979).

Table 1 depicts the important changes that occurred as Freudian theories were borrowed to explain consumer behavior. The aim (implicit to the theory superstructure) changed from one of helping disturbed patients to explaining the behavior of typical consumers. The research approach, or type of science, changed from an interpretive or historical-hermeneutic approach to logical empiricism. The social context changed from nineteenth century Vienna to 1950's post-war America. Assuming that aims, methods and theories are inevitably intertwined in relations of mutual adjustment and justification (Laudan 1984), it is logical to suggest that the motivation research era failed due to a disarray or inconsistency with the elements as summarized below. Neglect of how the theory changes when it is borrowed can lead to
inappropriate uses of theory, which in turn can lead to fundamental problems in the research program. The researchers of the motivation research era did not look for a congruence between the original theory structure and its use. Before the general issues are presented, it is important to focus on the elements comprising a "theory structure", that is, theory superstructure, and theory substructure (here theory substructure is understood to include both type of science and social context).

THEORY STRUCTURE

The structure of theory is not comprised of empirical propositions alone (Friedricks 1970; Fuhrman 1980). Theory structure can be understood in terms of a superstructure, as well as a deeper, more hidden substructure (Mannheim 1936; Gouldner 1970, 1976).

Theory superstructure consists of logical empirical and/or intuitive propositions that are put forth for argument. These propositions appear on the phenomenal level but not in the deep structure of theory (Fuhrman 1980). According to Martindale (1960), theory superstructure consists of the descriptive concepts or metaphors used as the basis for explanation. These are the statements that will be evaluated in terms of their truth or falsehood. For example, a number of Homans's (1958, 1961, 1974) propositions have been borrowed by researchers when constructing theories of marketing exchange (Bagozzi 1975; Houston and Gassenheimer 1987). Two of these propositions can serve as examples of theory superstructure.

The Success Proposition:
For all actions taken by persons, the more often a particular action of a person is rewarded, the more likely the person is to perform that action (Homans 1974, p.16).

The Value Proposition:
The more valuable to a person is the result of his action, the more likely he is to perform the action (Homans 1974, p.25).

The substructure of theory serves as a foundation for the theory superstructure. The substructure rests behind the scene, exerting a guiding influence on superstructural propositions. Unless consciously revealed by the theorist, the substructure is imperceptible or hidden. For this reason, it may go undetected. In reading Homan's propositions above it is not apparent that his view of human nature is borrowed from structural-functionalism which assumes humans are both rational (goal-directed) and determined by forces external to themselves. It is also unapparent that Homan's theoretical substructure is closely aligned with classical economics: "Indeed if he had learned to find reward in not husbanding his resources, if he values not taking any thought for the morrow, and acts accordingly, his behavior is still economic. In fact, the new economic man is plain man" (Homans 1961, p. 79). Lastly, Homans is assuming a rather narrow view of Skinnerian behavioral psychology that takes its principles from animal behavior (Ekeh 1974; Poloma 1979).

After the substructure is revealed to the reader, as in the above example, the propositions (superstructure) may be understood in a new light. The reader may now perceive that Homan's propositions are based on a unique mix of structural-functionalism, classical economics and behavioral psychology. Reading propositions "deeply" may enable researchers to make clearer judgments as to their intuitive plausibility or usefulness.

Theory substructure can be defined as a complex mix of values, interests, sentiments, and assumptions (Fuhrman 1980). Values, interests and sentiments are part of social structure and over time become internalized, to varying degrees, by the individual scientist (Berger and Luckmann 1967). They will influence the interaction between the reader and the text, as well as condition which theories will be accepted (Tiryakian 1979; Kuhn 1970).

Assumptions generally include ontological, axiological and epistemological suppositions (Hudson and Ozone 1988). These assumptions cluster in different combinations to form different scientific approaches. For the purpose of this paper, theory substructure will be understood as type of science (assumptions) and social context (values, interests and sentiments).
Type of Science

A number of researchers have developed a classification of the sciences based on ontological, axiological and epistemological assumptions. In marketing, this classification focuses on the juxtaposition of positivist and interpretive approaches (Morgan and Smircich 1980; Peter and Olson 1983; Hudson and Murray 1986; Hirschman 1986; Hudson and Ozanne 1988). This is appropriate given the dominance of the empirical-interpretive approach in marketing and the potential usefulness of the interpretive approach.

Most sociology and philosophy of science classifications add a third approach to science called critical theory or the critical-empiricist approach (Schroyer 1970; Habermas 1971; Bernstein 1976; Fuhrman 1979). This approach has not been emphasized in marketing, although recently there have been stirrings of some activity (Rogers 1987; Special Session on Critical Theory, AMA Theory Conference 1987). Thus, a more comprehensive classification should include three types of science: empirical-interpretive, historical-hermeneutic, and critical-empiricist.

The empirical-interpretive sciences are interested in the covariation of particular events. The evolution of this approach through positivism, logical empiricism, and falsification has been aptly summarized by Anderson (1983). The important issues involved in the positivist's approach to workbench research have been summarized by Hudson and Ozanne (1988). In the extreme, this approach assumes the existence in nature of an inherent order that can be discovered by the rational capacities of the researcher (Schroyer 1970). Once regularities and causal relationships of the inherent order are found through careful observation, this knowledge can be used to explain and predict (Burrell and Morgan 1979).

In short, this type of science is based on the fundamental assumption that propositions are meaningful only if they can be empirically verified (Anderson 1983).

The historical-hermeneutic or interpretive sciences focus on intersubjective understanding. "Access to the facts is provided by the understanding of meaning, not observation" (Habermas 1971, p. 309; as quoted by Fuhrman 1982, p. 222). This approach, as well as its practical use in marketing, has been summarized by Hudson and Murray (1986) and Hirschman (1986). From this perspective, causal linkages are meaningless since all entities are in a state of "simultaneous shaping" (Lincoln and Guba 1985, p. 38). The emphasis of the analysis is on the subjective accounts generated by "getting inside" situations (Burrell and Morgan 1979, p. 61). All generalizations are thus time and context dependent. Symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, ethnography, hermeneutics, and mixed forms of the above (Berger and Luckmann 1967) fit into this category.

Critical-empiriocritics do not stress covariance and control, nor do they focus on intersubjective meaning and understanding. This does not imply that critical theorists are unaware of determining social structures or the importance of meaning and understanding, rather, these approaches are simply not comprehensive enough. Critical science has an emancipatory interest. It focuses on the present but is also concerned with potential futures. Max Horkheimer (1972) states that critical theory is distinct from other kinds of science in three respects. First, critical theorists do not purport to be without political convictions. Assuming that all theoretical propositions are rooted in a substructure of interests, sentiments, and assumptions, all theory is ideological and therefore political. Second, critical theorists not only analyze societal contradictions but seek to become a force from within to stimulate change. The beginning of change and progress lies in the process of isolating and revealing the negative. Third, critical theory has an unmasking or revealing function. One of its foremost aims is to expose those structures or tensions which inhibit the social construction of a more humane social world.

In short, the emphasis critical theory places on social construction, human emancipation, and potentiality undermines the sense of inevitability and the natural order associated with the empirical-analytic sciences. At the same time, the emphasis placed on the constraints of social structure undermines the nominalism associated with the historical-hermeneutic sciences (Schroyer 1970). The unique feature of critical science is its tendency to reveal the possible by promulgating the constraints:

To discover in each system its essential limit, that is, those structural features which prevent the evolution of the system toward a more valuable state...and to show the concrete possibilities, and ways of superceding such a limit...this is the so-called principle of the negation of the negation (Markovic 1974).

Social Context

As stated above, values, interests, and sentiments are important components of the social context. The socialization process produces a degree of correspondence between a social, consensual reality and an individual, subjective reality (Berger and Luckmann 1967). This process includes both primary socialization (e.g., learning language) as well as formal, academic training (e.g., Ph.D. work). Over time the values, interests, and ideological sentiments of the social context become, in part, the individual's. For example, the empirical-analytic sciences dominate western marketing, thus most Ph.D. candidates are well versed in the process of operationalization and statistical analysis. At the same time, the critical sciences are dominant in parts of Europe (Rogers 1987), thus doctoral study abroad emphasizes a more philosophical approach, greater attention to context, and a dialectical orientation. The socialization process links paradigms and scientific approaches to identity. It involves emotional attachments, feelings of ethnocentrism, and inevitably perceptions of ingroup, out-group relationships. Thus, in some respects, this process is more influential or guiding than the underlying assumptions.
Social context also includes significant events and/or social changes. For example, the social theories of the early American sociologists reflected the impact of industrialization (Fuhrman 1980). Significant events, such as the rise of the urban masses, mass immigration, the emergence of the socialist party, the organizational revolution, and domestic political conflicts, became the social context from which these scholars lived and worked. The writings of Lester Ward, William Sumner, Albion Small, Franklin Giddings, Edward Ross and Charles Horton Cooley were, in part, a response to this period of American history (Fuhrman 1980). Clearly, the rise of post-industrial society, multinational capital, ecological concerns, micro-chip innovations, and the potential for nuclear annihilation effect scientific research today.

In summary, theories consist of a superstructure and substructure. The superstructure includes the empirical or intuitive propositions that exist on the phenomenal level. These propositions are then evaluated in terms of their usefulness, applicability, relevance, beauty, truth or falsehood (the purpose of this paper is not to discuss acceptable criteria from which theory should be judged; our point is that it is the superstructure of theory which is usually evaluated).

The substructure of theory includes the type of science (ontology, axiology and epistemology) which justifies the theory and the social context (interests, values, sentiments and significant events). It should be noted that type of science and social context are not mutually exclusive. However, for the purposes of this paper, it is important to distinguish these elements since type of science may remain unchanged when the theory is borrowed.

The above discussion of the substructure and superstructure of theory leads us to the salient issues to be considered when borrowing a theory to explain a phenomena important to marketing. Clearly, even if the superstructure is borrowed intact, changes in the substructure may alter the way a theory is used and thus the information it yields.

THEORY BORROWING AND REFLECTIVITY: SALIENT ISSUES

Theory structures cannot be borrowed intact since, by definition, theory borrowing involves a change in social context. We propose that when a theory is borrowed, an entirely new theory structure emerges (see Figure 1). This can have a variety of consequences. For example, the new context may refresh the theory, changing it in meaningful and creative ways. A theory that failed on evaluative criteria in one context may be successful in another. On the other hand, a change in substructure may render the theory barren and flat. Whether the new theory structure becomes useful or not depends on the kinds of changes that take place from Theory Structure One to Theory Structure Two (see Figure 1). Four important philosophical issues can now be considered:

1. What are the elements of Theory Structure One?

   As stated earlier, the substructure of theory is often imperceptible or hidden. Yet, in order to consider the full implications of borrowing, the substructure needs to be understood. Reflecting on the underlying assumptions and social context will, by itself, make the borrowing process less opportunistic.

   According to Gouldner (1974, p. 10), the role of a rational reflective theorist is to "help a society develop and maintain a consciousness of the connection between interest, desire, social being, material groundedness on the one side, and information, reports, news, and all references to social worlds, on the other." Rationality in this context means to "think about thinking" (Gouldner 1973). Reflection means to examine one's own assumptions in a thoughtful and deliberate manner (Fuhrman 1984, p. 228). Thus, the theorist needs to consciously consider the connections between theory superstructure and its history. What type of science was originally used to evaluate and justify the theory? What were the interests, values, sentiments and significant events which enveloped the social construction of the theory? For example, in looking back to the motivation research era, Theory Structure One consisted of propositions from Freudian psychoanalysis, an interpretive type of science, and was constructed within the ideological community that characterized nineteenth century Vienna.

2. Which elements changed when Theory Structure One became Theory Structure Two?

   The same reflective process as described above is required for Theory Structure Two. This will help to reveal which elements changed when the theory was borrowed. Returning to the motivation research example, all three elements of the original theory structure changed. The superstructure changed in that only a small portion of the propositions comprising Freudian psychoanalysis were borrowed. Assuming that the original propositions worked together in an organic manner, the borrowing theorist lost the synergy derived from their interdependence by selecting only a few. The type of science changed from historical-hermeneutic to empirical-analytic. The social context transformed from empirical-analytic to social-constructive Vienna to post-war 1950's America.

3. Are the combined elements from Theory Structure One and Two compatible?

   Further reflection can assess whether or not the combined elements are consistent or compatible. At this point of reflection, the theorist must look for opposing, conflicting, inharmonious, or contradictory qualities or trends. This is not meant to suggest that if two or more of the elements are contradictory, then the theory should not be borrowed. Rather, we are suggesting that change will emerge from the inconsistency or contradiction. This change may be positive or negative depending on the new context, evaluative criteria, aims of the theorist, etc.
FIGURE 1

Theory Borrowing and Theory Structure

Theory Structure One

Theory Superstructure 1 \hspace{1cm} \text{borrowed} \hspace{1cm} \text{Theory Superstructure 2}

Type of Science 1 \hspace{1cm} \text{Social Context 1}

Theory Structure Two*

Type of Science 2 \hspace{1cm} \text{Social Context 2}

* It is assumed in this figure that the theoretical propositions (superstructure) were borrowed intact and thus were unchanged.

In general, the cognitive aim of "consistency" cuts across different types of science. Consistency is expressed in terms of reliability for the empiricist (Cook and Campbell 1979); dependability for the interpretivist (Lincoln and Guba 1985); and contradiction for the critical theorist (Sayers 1981). Each of these expressions captures a different aspect of consistency. Still, if the borrowed theory is rendered useless in the new context, it is because the merging of opposites had a negative effect on the theory. For example, Freudian theory was constructed in a context using a historical-hermeneutic type of science. Yet, when it was borrowed, it was made to fit an empirical-analytic type. This type of inconsistency could very well lead to problems for the research program in the future.

4. If a fraction of the combined elements are inconsistent, what are the consequences?

If two or more of these elements do not seem to fit together in a harmonious and congruent way, what are the consequences? Are the consequences such that the theory will not prove useful over time? Will the new theory structure violate consensual standards in such a way as to leave it labeled uninteresting or absurd?

Since we are focusing on inappropriate or unreflective borrowing, we are emphasizing the negative side of contradiction. Clearly, the consequences of mixing an interpretive science with an empirical one were devastating to the motivation research program. Concepts which were rich in meaning in one context (e.g., the unconscious) could not be adequately operationalized in another.

CONCLUSION

The theory borrowing process is essential for marketing as well as other interdisciplinary fields. In the past it has lead to creative and illuminating uses of theory. However, it has also lead to dead-ends, wasted time of researchers and resources of academic institutions.

The purpose of this paper was to articulate and discuss the important philosophical issues at stake in the theory borrowing process. The process of reflection discussed above is a difficult and time-consuming procedure. In fact, the issues we presented are based on assumptions that need careful consideration as well. For example, we implicitly assume that the theorist will be able to accurately assess such abstract relationships as the existential connection between theory and its social bases; that Theory Structure One was not itself borrowed from an unknown context; that the theorist has a hand in shaping the structure of his/her field; that all theories are equally legitimized; and that the theorist is interested in doing the appropriate thing. Indeed, theory borrowing is a complex process which needs to be further analyzed from philosophy of science and sociology of knowledge perspectives. The theoretical issues discussed here can be considered an additional step toward reflection on how we acquire certain kinds of knowledge and the purposes to which this knowledge is applied.

REFERENCES


Habermas, J. (1971), Knowledge and Human Interests, Boston, MA: Beacon Press.


