Marketing, Theory Borrowing, and Critical Reflection

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The interdisciplinary nature of marketing and macromarketing has resulted in borrowing theories from other disciplines. Informed and purposeful theory borrowing, that is, the use of a theory in a context different from its original one to explain a new phenomenon, has developed and enriched the field. To the extent that theory borrowing is indiscriminate or opportunistic, however, researchers may be misled in their attempts to understand the phenomenon of interest. This article presents the key philosophical issues involved in theory borrowing and develops evaluative criteria for appropriate borrowing. The criteria are a workbench heuristic, useful to researchers engaged in theory borrowing, and important issues are illustrated with examples from marketing and macromarketing, including population ecology, financial economics, and motivation research.

When is it appropriate to remove a theory from its original context and use it in a new and different context to explain a phenomenon of interest? The interdisciplinary nature of marketing and macromarketing has resulted in the borrowing of theories, methods, and aims from other disciplines. For example, Holbrook (1987) has suggested that theories from anthropology, economics, the humanities, philosophy, psychology, and sociology have been borrowed to study marketing issues associated with value in acquisition, usage, and disposition. In macromarketing, theories such as Parsonian structural–functionalism (Dixon 1984), social exchange theory (Blau 1964; Homans 1961), and general systems theory (Berrien 1968; Buckley 1967) have been borrowed to explain the interaction between marketing functions and social systems. The types of theories borrowed from other disciplines by the macromarketing community determine, in part, how successful these researchers are in understanding the social effect of marketing strategies (that is, externalities) and the effect of social systems on marketing (that is, sanctions) (Fisk 1982).

Theory borrowing involves taking a concept or theory out of its original social and historical context and using it in another to explain the same or a different social or natural phenomenon. For example, in its original context of biology, life-cycle theory is used to explain a natural process, but in marketing it is used to explain the process of diffusion and obsolescence of products. That process, in turn, has implications for new market entry and for resource distribution to different strategic business units. In addition, a borrowed theory may be used at either the same or a different level of abstraction. For example, as Cundiff (1982) points out, although macromarketing inputs are often used for economic development, “they may fail in acceptance or implementation, particularly at the grass roots [micro] level” (p. 18).

Clearly, theory borrowing has been important for young interdisciplinary fields (Arndt 1985; Morgan 1980). Researchers have come to rely on this process as an important source of new ideas. On the one hand, informed and

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purposive borrowing, resulting from careful analysis of key issues, has developed and enriched the macromarketing discipline. On the other hand, theory borrowing often is a random or opportunistic process that overlooks the borrowed theory’s social roots, or what Merton (1968) refers to as the “existential base” (p. 516). Ignoring the existential base does not automatically lead to significant problems, but certainly increases the potential to be misled. As a number of marketing theorists have suggested (Anderson and Thatcher 1986, 1987; Anderson and Venkatesan 1987; Jones 1987; Murray and Evers 1989; Pinder and Bourgeois 1982), one reason some research traditions fail to realize their aims is that the borrowed theory was inappropriate for the new context. The purpose of this article is to clarify the key philosophical and pragmatic issues involved in theory borrowing and to present evaluative criteria for appropriate borrowing that are useful to researchers at the workbench level.

The following section identifies the fundamental elements comprising a theory structure. Since these are the elements that potentially may change when the theory is borrowed, it is important to define them. Next, the dynamics of borrowing theory structures are discussed, and a number of examples illustrate key points. The final section develops the process of critical reflection.

THE NATURE OF THEORY STRUCTURES

Since theories are constructed for particular purposes in specific social and historical contexts, they consist of more than just propositions (Friedrichs 1970; Gouldner 1970; Mannheim 1936)—they reflect the social and cultural circumstances that led to their construction. For this reason, knowledgeable sociologists refer to theories in terms of “theory structures” (Fuhrman 1980). A theory structure consists of a superstructure, or propositions, and an underlying substructure of values, interests, sentiments, and assumptions (Fuhrman 1980; Gouldner 1974). Key elements of theory substructure are captured by revealing the Cognitive Interests of the researcher and the Social Context (see Figure 1).

Serving as a foundation, theory substructure exerts a guiding influence on superstructural propositions. For example, cognitive interests provide a context of discovery and justification for the theory superstructure. At the same time, the social context may denote the purpose of justification (for example, to expand boundaries or solve a problem) or mark that aspect of a phenomenon considered interesting or relevant by a group of researchers. Since one important philosophical issue is that borrowing often is done without regard for theory substructure, it is important to explain each of these elements.

Theory Superstructure

Theory superstructure consists of empirical, interpretive, or critical propositions that are put forth for argument. These propositions may be formal if-then statements or more freely flowing thick descriptions. According to Martindale (1960), theory superstructure consists of the descriptive concepts or meta-

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**FIGURE 1**

**THEORY STRUCTURE**

- **Propositions**
- **Cognitive Interests**
- **Social Context**
- **Superstructure**
- **Substructure**
phors used as the basis for explanation. These are the statements that will be analyzed and evaluated by the researcher. An alternative way of characterizing the superstructure of theory is to define it as that which appears on the phenomenal level (Fuhrman 1980), meaning that aspect of theory the reader experiences.

Theory Substructure

Because the substructure of a particular theory is not easily perceived or understood, it usually needs to be inferred from a careful analysis of theory superstructure. Even then, if not consciously revealed by the theorist, the substructure may go undetected. Understanding the substructure usually puts superstructural propositions in a new light. Reading propositions deeply may enable the researcher to make clearer judgments as to their intuitive plausibility, usefulness, or transferability to a new context. The wide range of substructural elements may be categorized as cognitive interests or social context.

Cognitive Interests

In Knowledge and Human Interests, Jürgen Habermas (1971) proposes a typology for classifying science on the basis of cognitive interests. He begins by assuming that humans are toolmaking, language-using animals. Tools are necessary in order to produce from nature what is needed for existence. Language is necessary because the means of subsistence for modern societies have been removed from nature and now reside in rule-governed institutions. Since humans have an interest in knowledge that will help them subsist, they have a technical interest in the manipulation of tools and a practical interest in communication and intersubjective understanding (Habermas 1971). In addition, people need to be free to manipulate tools and communicate openly with one another. Thus, they have an emancipatory interest in knowledge that enhances the possibility of freedom (Habermas 1971).

Each of these interests is mediated by a different course of action: the technical interest by work or instrumental action; the practical interest by communication or interaction; and the emancipatory interest by power or asymmetrical relations (Held 1980). Interests, together with action, give rise to three different types of science: the empirical–analytic, the historical–hermeneutic, and the critical–emancipatory (Habermas 1971).

Researchers using the empirical–analytic sciences are interested in the covariance of particular events. The evolution of this approach through positivism, logical empiricism, and falsification has been aptly summarized by Anderson (1983) and Hunt (1983, 1989a). This approach assumes the existence in nature of an inherent order that can be discovered by the rational capacities of the researcher (Schroer 1970). Once regularities and causal relationships of the inherent order are found through careful observation, this knowledge can be used to explain, predict, and control.

Investigators using the historical–hermeneutic sciences focus on language, communication, and intersubjective understanding. This approach, as well as its practical use in marketing, has been summarized by Hirschman (1986), Hudson and Ozanne (1988), and Hunt (1989b). The emphasis here is on a thick description of subjective accounts generated by “getting inside” situations. Norms such as persistent observation and prolonged engagement are needed to achieve an insider’s point of view. Semiotics, phenomenological interviewing, and ethnography fit into this category.

Researchers using the critical–emancipatory sciences stress the importance of autonomy, freedom, and emancipation. In consumer research, this perspective has been introduced and summarized by Murray and Ozanne (1991). 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. Second, they analyze societal contradictions, seeking to become a force of emancipation. Third, critical theory has an unmasking or revealing function. One of its foremost aims is to expose those structures or tensions that inhibit or distort open communication and intersubjective understanding.
In sum, an important dimension of theory substructure is the type of science that justifies the theory. A useful way of classifying types of science is in terms of their overriding cognitive interests. Using Habermas's typology, three different scientific approaches have been identified. The purpose here has been, not to explain these types in detail, but to suggest that cognitive interests justify theory superstructure, which in turn constrains what is considered an appropriate test of theory. The implication for theory borrowing is that theory superstructure extends deeper than just the theoretical propositions. When researchers borrow a proposition, they are also borrowing an overriding cognitive interest.

**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 begins with primary socialization (for example, learning language) and continues throughout life via secondary socialization (for example, doctoral training). Internalizing a cultural context facilitates understanding and provides a taken-for-granted set of categories. This set of categories acts as a perceptual filter, or lens, that influences what is considered a "scientific" approach, the purpose of theory, and the appropriate domain for exploration. The process of doctoral training, for example, links cognitive interests to identity. Here, the researcher becomes a positivist, interpretivist, or critical theorist. Since research takes place within a community, different cognitive interests become associated with particular research communities, or what Crane (1969) refers to as "invisible colleges." These groups respond to different constituencies and evaluate their knowledge claims with different types of science or cognitive interests. Even whole cultures may, in general, emphasize different cognitive interests. For instance, since the empirical-analytic sciences dominate western marketing, virtually all Ph.D. candidates in the United States and Europe become well versed in such matters as the process of operationalization, experimental or survey design, and statistical analysis. Parts of Europe, however, are characterized by a greater focus on the critical sciences (Rogers 1987), and students may emphasize a more philosophical approach, greater attention to context, and a dialectical orientation. Given this, the social context serves as a foundation of the cognitive interests.

In addition to socialization and cultural diversity, social context includes the purposes of the researcher and significant social changes. Theories are borrowed in marketing for a variety of purposes. First, theories constructed in other fields are sometimes tested within the domain of marketing. These types of tests are often done to explore the boundaries of a given theory. For example, the generalizability of the elaboration likelihood model (Petty and Cacioppo 1980, 1981) was enhanced when it was shown that it applied, not only in situations where people were being persuaded on political and social issues, but also where people were being persuaded on purchase-related issues (Petty, Cacioppo, and Shuman 1983). Second, researchers can use theory borrowing to solve a particular applied problem. For example, the elaboration likelihood model might be used to develop a better advertisement for a low-involvement product. Finally, a theory may be borrowed to enhance understanding of marketing phenomena. This purpose occurs more within the context of discovery than justification.

In terms of significant social changes, two examples from the history of social thought illustrate this point. First, the research of early U.S. sociologists reflected the effect of industrialization (Fuhrman 1980). Social changes, such as the rise of the urban masses, waves of immigration, the organizational revolution, and domestic political conflicts, defined the social context for these scholars. Second, the critical theories of the Frankfurt School reflected the negative worldwide effect of Stalinism, Fascism, and Nazism. The critical theorists, forced into exile and subsequent isolation in the United States, experienced events that led them to construct an approach that was both scientific and political (Murray and Ozanne...
Certainly, the contemporary social context—the rise of the information society, the expansion of worldwide markets, ecological concerns, the fall of state socialism in Eastern Europe and Russia—affects current research in macromarketing. The implication for theory borrowing is that researchers need to be aware that, by definition, the social context will change when a theory is borrowed.

THEORY BORROWING

By emphasizing the social context of scientific endeavors, Figure 1 represents a sociology of knowledge framework. Its elements are mutually dependent, which indicates that, as marketers borrow propositions or a theory superstructure, a new theory structure emerges (see Figure 2). For example, James Bettman, in discussing interpretations of his information-processing theory of consumer choice, states: "I don't think one should present a reinterpretation as if it were the original model" (Hirschman 1989, p. 655). A new interpretation will be relative to a new context; it is in this sense that a new theory structure emerges. Although researchers may or may not have reflected on the usefulness of the new theory, they are implying as an hypothesis that it applies in the new context. Indeed, it is incumbent upon the research community to demonstrate the new theory's applicability.

The new social context may refresh the theory, changing it in progressive and creative ways. Whether the new theory structure remains meaningful depends on the kinds of changes that take place from Theory Structure 1 to Theory Structure 2, and a number of changes need to be considered. First, theory superstructure may change if the researcher modifies the propositions, borrows only a sample of the propositions, or selects only a few constructs. Second, the type of science (as defined by the cognitive interests) may change. Third, the social context will change. In addition, since the original elements of Theory Structure 1 are interdependent, the substructure of Theory Structure 1 does not disappear entirely. Many researchers will continue to interpret the borrowed theory on the basis of its original purpose and context.

The key issues involved in theory borrowing are summarized in the Exhibit. Some examples will help to illustrate the evaluative criteria listed there. The first example, population ecology, illustrates important superstructural issues. The second example, financial economics, illustrates cognitive interest issues. The third example, motivation research, deals with important social context issues.

Illustrative Examples

Population Ecology

The building blocks of propositions are concepts and their relation to one another. The way these concepts are used in the new
EXHIBIT
EVALUATIVE CRITERIA FOR THEORY BORROWING

Superstructure

Has the researcher

a) Identified all the concepts borrowed from T.S.1?
b) Reflected on any change in meaning of these concepts from T.S.1 to T.S.2?
c) Reflected on the way these concepts were used in T.S.1 (that is, relational vs. attribute, instrumental vs. realist, metaphorical vs. literal)?
d) Reflected on any change in use of these concepts from T.S.1 to T.S.2?
e) Identified the arguments (that is, premises and conclusions) borrowed from T.S.1?
f) Reflected on any change in these arguments (that is, nomological meaning) from T.S.1 to T.S.2?
g) Reflected on how the validity of the premises in T.S.1 was established (that is, derived from axioms vs. inferred from observation)?
h) Reflected on any change in how the validity of the premises was established from T.S.1 to T.S.2?

Substructure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognitive Interests</th>
<th>Social Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Has the researcher</strong></td>
<td><strong>Has the researcher</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) Identified the underlying guiding assumptions of T.S.1 (that is, ontology, epistemology, and axiology)?</td>
<td>a) Reflected on the purpose of T.S.1 (for example, solve a specific behavior problem, generate general laws, and so forth)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Identified the underlying guiding assumptions of T.S.2?</td>
<td>b) Reflected on the key elements of the environment, including significant social changes/events that influenced the construction of T.S.1?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Reflected on any changes in underlying guiding assumptions from T.S.1 to T.S.2?</td>
<td>c) Reflected on the key elements of the researcher's own environment that motivated the construction of T.S.2?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Combined Elements of T.S.1 and T.S.2

Has the researcher

a) Reflected on inconsistencies between the two theory structures?
b) Explored the potential consequences of inconsistencies between T.S.1 and T.S.2?
c) Reflected on the ways in which these consequences may be damaging to the purpose of T.S.2?
d) If there are negative consequences due to inconsistencies, explored ways of removing these inconsistencies?
e) Explored the possibility that T.S.1 was also borrowed? If so, T.S.1, T.S.2, T.S.3... T.S.n also need to be considered.

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In the 1980s, researchers in marketing strategy borrowed theories of population ecology (Lambkin and Day 1989) and evolution (Tellis and Crawford 1981) from biology. In marketing, these theories are used to understand and explain the nature of competitive behavior in changing market structures. According to Reid...
enbach and Oliva (1981), if researchers conceive of marketing organizations and processes as living systems, a more holistic perspective is emphasized. This approach satisfies the perceived need for a more comprehensive conceptual framework (Henderson 1983). To encourage a more macro conceptualization, a new vocabulary that emphasized connections and relationships, rather than isolated units, was needed. For example, in this theory the unit that is responsible for promotion is no longer the ad agency but the output transducer (Reidenbach and Oliva 1981, p. 33). Whereas the former denotes a single, isolated unit, the latter anticipates connections to the whole. Fisk and Meyers (1982) suggest that this approach emerged due to inadequacies in the competitive marketing management paradigm (see, for example, Bloom and Kotler 1975). That paradigm, which emphasizes oligopolistic competition, cannot explain such anomalies as symbiotic relationships (coalitions), parasitism (free-riding potential), and mutation (social change).

Turning to biology to help understand social structures is certainly not new. Auguste Comte (1798–1857) based his early work on organic analogies, as did one of his students, Herbert Spencer, who is widely recognized as the "father" of sociology. In marketing, Wroe Alderson (1957) was the first to use ecological terminology, such as behavior systems and ecological niches. In macromarketing, the social systems perspective of Talcott Parsons (Dixon 1984) is a direct extension of Comte, Spencer, Durkheim, Malinowski, and Radcliffe-Brown.

In general, both population ecology and evolution rely on the theory of natural selection applied within a broader ecological framework (Lambkin and Day 1989). Natural selection adopts a contingency perspective, predicting that the species best "fitted" to the environment will survive and prosper. From this perspective, product markets are defined as a resource space, which determines the density dependence, or the number of companies competing within a market. (Concept terms boldfaced in this article are borrowed from population ecology and evolution theories.) When the market is embryonic and resources are rich, niches are fundamental (that is, potential), meaning that there is a great deal of overlap between or among them. At this stage of evolution, it is predicted that r-specialists (small organizations designed specifically to pioneer an innovation) will predominate. As the market grows and competition begins to intensify, patterned change takes the form of cladogenesis (divergence), anagenesis (development), and adaptive radiation (differentiation). The market will continue to grow and competition will continue to intensify until the population nears its carrying capacity. At this point, niches are no longer defined as potential, but as realized, and there is little overlap. The market has now reached its saturation point and is characterized by stasigenesis (that is, stabilization or equilibrium). During the latter stages of market evolution, it is predicted that r-specialists will not be able to adapt to the intense competition and will become extinct. K-generalists (large organizations that can take advantage of scale and experience) will now predominate.

The first four questions under Superstructure in the Exhibit encourage reflection on the borrowed concepts, changes in meaning, and changes in use from one context to another. The unit of analysis in population ecology is the "species." In biology, this concept genuinely refers to observables in nature, so it is appropriate to take the concept literally. When borrowing this theory to use in a macromarketing context, the question arises, What is the corresponding unit of analysis? Tellis and Crawford (1981) refer to a correspondence between "species" and product class: "The changes undergone were cumulative [in reference to the washing machine], each building on the previous one to produce an improved version, much like that of species in nature" (p. 127). Lambkin and Day (1989) use competing organizations entering the market at the same time, and therefore characterized by the same level of technology, as the corresponding unit. One could develop a reasonable argument for product class, technology, the firm, competing organizations, the industry, or the product market as the relevant and corresponding unit of analysis. Since the concept "species" is used metaphorically in a marketing context, identifying
the corresponding referent is difficult. Relative to biology, concepts such as organizations, industries, and product markets represent abstract, enacted processes and structures. These social structures are continually produced and reproduced through communication and social action. For example, the boundaries of product markets are not concrete and literal but vary depending upon definitions and methods of measurement (Day, Shocker, and Srivastava 1979).

Once the researcher makes a decision on the corresponding unit of analysis, it is important to remember that it is still a metaphor. Pinder and Bourgeois (1982) observe that, when we consider borrowing concepts from disciplines other than our own, “too frequently we lose sight of the critical difference between metaphor and identity” (p. 642). An identity implies that the concept and that to which it refers are identical. This means that any property we associate with the concept is also possessed by the referent. Metaphor is weaker, in that the concept may fail to have many of the referent’s properties. The researcher must reflect on, and specify, the ways in which the metaphor is similar to and dissimilar from the phenomenon. If only similarities are discussed, the option of implied identity remains. If the metaphor is taken literally, and inferences are made that require an identity, the borrowed concepts may be misleading, since the inferences are inappropriate for the new concept. For example, it may be misleading to assume that R-specialists will not be able to compete in mature markets. If the managers of these organizations understand what is needed to compete in growth markets, they may be capable of changing their organizations over time. In addition, since metaphors are difficult to define and operationalize, they are difficult to falsify (Pinder and Bourgeois 1982). This is one explanation of why some metaphors persist long after it has been recognized that they are misleading.

The second four questions under Superstructure in the Exhibit encourage reflection on whether the borrowed propositions are appropriate in the new context. Since population ecology is designed to explain adaptation of a species to a physical environment, it may be too rigid and deterministic when used to study enacted forms of social organization. When used in marketing, population ecology presents a very ordered and stable view of competition within markets. This perspective encourages the analyst to view competition as something that unfolds gradually and predictably in an ordered and harmonious manner. Decision makers are treated as abstractions occupying statuses and roles that form organizations. It is as though each of these human beings is enacting a predesignated script, according to an abstract set of norms and rules. From a sociological perspective, this view has been criticized as the “oversocialized conception of man” (Wrong 1961). Population ecology directs attention away from social conflict, praxis, creativity, entrepreneurship, and managerial decision making. The premises of population ecology have been validated by the retrospective deductions made by biologists in the field. Marketing strategy results from conscious choice, however, and it would be a case of misborrowing to take the validity of these premises at face value in this new context.

Financial Economics

One of the most important issues in theory borrowing is the borrowing of superstructural concepts and propositions without regard for theory substructure. In this example, the concept of shareholder wealth maximization is borrowed without careful consideration of the cognitive interests that characterize financial economics (Anderson and Thatcher 1986, 1987).

John A. Howard (1983) proposed a marketing theory of the firm based on the financial criterion of “maximizing shareholder wealth” (p. 90). He suggested that shareholder wealth maximization guide theory development in marketing, as well as serve as the goal for practicing managers. This aim was borrowed from financial economics, specifically, the market value theory of the firm (Fama and Miller 1972).

The first question under Cognitive Interests in the Exhibit asks the researcher to identify the underlying guiding assumptions of Theory Structure 1. The market value theory of the firm assumes that markets are per-
fectly competitive and that individuals seek to maximize the expected utility of future wealth. The existence of perfect competition and utility maximizing consumers involves a number of other assumptions: consumers seek information and comprehend it rationally; consumers are price takers; there are perfect substitutes for all assets; there is efficient dissemination of information; there are no transaction costs; and corporate incentive and monitoring systems are foolproof. Given these assumptions, it is possible to deduce logically that market equilibrium can be achieved if the objective of all firm managers is to maximize shareholder wealth (Fama and Miller 1972). This aim cannot be disentangled from the deductive logic of financial economics. Like all aspects of theory superstructure, it is linked inextricably to substructural interests.

In addition to the above assumptions, the market value theory of the firm is an axiomatic model. In other words, the objective is the logical derivation of predictions, at the macro level, from a set of assumptions. Concepts are used instrumentally to articulate the logic of the derivation. Their function is to predict accurately, not to refer to an aspect of the real world. Thus, logical deduction and instrumentalism characterize the cognitive interests of financial economics, or, in this case, Theory Structure 1.

The second question under Cognitive Interests in the Exhibit asks the researcher to identify the underlying guiding assumptions of Theory Structure 2. Many of the paradigms in marketing consist of “normative” models, whose objective is the inference of practical decision rules at the micro level from a set of observations. Concepts are used realistically, emphasizing the practicality of the decision rule. In other words, the function of concepts and assumptions is to describe what the world is actually like. Thus, logical induction and realism characterize the cognitive interests of marketing, or, in this case, Theory Structure 2.

The third question under Cognitive Interests in the Exhibit asks the researcher to reflect on any changes in underlying assumptions from Theory Structure 1 to Theory Structure 2. Due to the differences between financial economics and marketing at the substructural level, that is, deduction versus induction and instrumentalism versus realism, it may be misleading to base marketing on conclusions derived from the market value theory of the firm without critical reflection. The kinds of normative models found in marketing will not be able to justify the aim of shareholder wealth maximization (through logical derivations), since they do not make the necessary assumptions. The value of realism (concepts must genuinely refer or correspond to the real world) prevents researchers from making these assumptions. Nor will this aim lead to market equilibrium, since markets are not perfectly competitive and consumers rarely make decisions that will maximize expected utility of future wealth. The purpose of this discussion is not to be critical of the market value theory of the firm, but to illustrate that if theory superstructure is borrowed without regard for key cognitive interests, we may expect too much of the theory. If a theory is extended beyond its boundaries, we are asking more than it is capable of giving.

Motivation Research

Although propositions and cognitive interests may remain the same when a theory is borrowed, the social context, by definition, will change. In this example, the motivation research era is used to illustrate the dangers involved in not reflecting on the effect of the original social and historical context.

In an attempt to explain emotional motives for consumption, Freudian psychoanalytic theory was borrowed by consumer researchers in the early 1940s. For three decades, Freudian psychology had a strong impact on marketing academics, practitioners, and consumer behaviorists (Horton 1984). Due to the emphasis of one assumption (that is, consumers are influenced by hidden motives), this research became known as motivation research.

The first question under Social Context in the Exhibit asks the researcher to reflect on the purpose of Theory Structure 1 and compare it with the purpose of Theory Structure 2. Freudi-
an psychoanalytic theories were structured specifically for clinical settings. Their purpose, therefore, was to provide an interpretive procedure for investigating unconscious mental processes and for treating psychoneuroses. This involves interpretation of individual case histories, with an orientation toward reinterpretation and reconstruction of specific experiences. This purpose contrasts with theories in marketing and macromarketing, which are designed to explain typical production, distribution, and consumption situations (for example, the average consumer, exchange systems, social institutions that facilitate or regulate exchange, the social effect of marketing strategies, and so forth).

The second and third questions under Social Context in the Exhibit ask the researcher to reflect on the key elements of the environment that influenced the construction of Theory Structures 1 and 2. Psychoanalysis originated in nineteenth-century Vienna, a society greatly influenced by Victorian ideas about issues of repressed sexuality. In marketing, the 1950s ushered in an era of logical empiricism; in an attempt to become more scientific, marketing and other social sciences began to emulate the hard sciences by embracing the “multivariate revolution.” This, combined with the baby boom materialism of postwar America, stands in sharp contrast to the conventionalism associated with the Victorian era.

In this example, the social context supporting Freudian theories justified historical-hermeneutic approaches. The social context facing marketing in the 1950s (that is, microchip innovations that made multivariate analysis practical, the proliferation of the “scientific method,” the Ford and Carnegie reports on business education, the shunning of qualitative methods for the seeming objectivity of empiricism) led to an emphasis on empirical-analytic cognitive interests. Forcing a theory based on an historical-hermeneutic interest into an empirical-analytic mold is asking more than the theory is capable of giving. This situation produced such inconsistency that concepts rich in meaning in one context (for example, the “unconscious”) could not be adequately operationalized in another. Deep motives rarely are relevant to the purchase decision. These theories were not inadequate, but in this context they were inappropriate.

**THEORY BORROWING AND CRITICAL REFLECTION**

From a sociology of knowledge perspective, the role of critical reflection is to help a society understand the connection between scientific reports, on the one hand, and “interests, desire, social being, and material groundedness” (Gouldner 1974, p. 10), on the other. Put differently, the purpose of critical reflection is to help researchers understand the connections between theory super- and substructure. *Reflection* is the examination of underlying cognitive interests and social context in a thoughtful and deliberate manner (Fuhrman 1984). *Critical* indicates the search for inconsistencies or contradictions between Theory Structure 1 (the original theory structure) and Theory Structure 2 (its reinterpretation and use in macromarketing).

Figure 3 presents a summary of the key processes involved in critical reflection. The first step is to reflect on, identify, and interpret the elements of Theory Structure 1. In order to consider the full implications of borrowing, the propositions, underlying cognitive interests, and key contextual influences need to be understood. Since the substructure is often hidden, this process involves reflection. The objective of this step is to understand the theory in its original context. It is important that the researcher become familiar enough with the original theory structure to understand the nuances, subtleties, and interrelationships of the concepts, propositions, methods, and purposes.

For instance, consider the financial economics example given above. The superstructure consists of key propositions and axioms of the market value theory of the firm. The cognitive interests of this theory include hypothetico-deduction, instrumentalism, “economic man,” and production of predictions consistent with ex post facto data at the macro level. The social context of this theory involves the evolution of the market value theory from criticisms of the neoclassical model. Specifically,
FIGURE 3
THE PROCESS OF CRITICAL REFLECTION

Researcher Is Considering Borrowing a Specific Theory

Identify and Define Elements of Theory Structure 1

Identify and Define Elements of Theory Structure 2

Are Combined Elements Compatible?YES

Can the Inconsistency be Removed?YES

Identify Negative Consequences

Can These Problems Be Resolved?YES

Does the Theory Fulfill the Practical Aims of the Researcher?

BORROWYES

Consider Alternative TheoryNO

NO

NO

NO
researchers in the field of finance challenged
the profit maximization assumption due to its
inability to consider risk differences among
investment alternatives (Anderson 1982).

The second step of critical reflection is to
understand Theory Structure 2. The objective
is to determine which elements change as the
theory is brought into its new context. For ex-
ample, in the three examples discussed previ-
ously, superstructure changed because only a
few propositions were borrowed. Assuming
that the original propositions worked togeth-
er, the researcher lost the synergy derived from
their interdependence. In all three examples we
also discover significant changes in cognitive
interests and social context.

Further reflection should assess whether
the combined elements of Theory Structure 1
and Theory Structure 2 are compatible (the fol-
lowing discussion is summarized by points a
through e in the Combined Elements of T.S.1
and T.S.2 section of the Exhibit). At this point,
the researcher searches for inharmonious or
contradictory patterns in the combined ele-
ments. For instance, the assumptions made by
economic theories create a narrowness of fo-
cus and internal consistency that may be con-
tradictory to understanding phenomena invol-
volving a variety of human motives and a broad
range of variables. Had the motivation research-
theorists been better informed as to the in-
commensurability between historical—herme-
neutic and empirical—analytic interests, they
might have considered alternative methods. A
key aim of critical reflection is to identify
problems that emerge due to inconsistencies
between Theory Structures 1 and 2. The aim of
consistency is appropriate, since it cuts across
different types of science. Consistency is ex-
pressed in terms of reliability for the empiricist
(Cook and Campbell 1979), dependability for the
interpretivist (Lincoln and Guba 1985), and con-
tradiction for the critical theorist (Murray and
Ozanne 1991). If the borrowed theory fails to
realize its aims in the new setting, this is
probably due to problems of inconsistency.

If the combined elements are consistent,
and if the theory fulfills the practical aims or
purpose of the research, then the theory may
make a positive contribution to the field. In-
consistencies, alone, do not indicate that the
theory should not be borrowed, only that the
researcher should be aware of potential prob-
lems resulting from these contradictions. Re-
turning to his reflections on how his model has
been reinterpreted, Bettman states, “I don’t
think it is necessary that the interpretation be
consistent as long as the researcher indicates
how it is and is not” (as cited by Hirschman
1989, p. 655; emphasis added). If inconsis-
tencies are clearly leading to significant prob-
lems, the researcher has a number of options.
First, the researcher may be able to alter The-
ory Structure 2, removing the inconsistencies.
Second, the researcher may be able to solve
the problems. Third, the researcher could
search for alternative theories that are re-
lated but would not result in the same contra-
dictions. Finally, the researcher could construct
theory appropriate for the specific problem.

CONCLUSION

Theory borrowing has resulted in cre-
ative and engaging uses of theory. It also has led
to dead ends and an explosion of undeveloped
ideas in the volumes of proceedings and aca-
demic journals. This presentation of key philo-
sophical issues and evaluative criteria, it is
hoped, will encourage critical reflection on
which theories should be borrowed and how
borrowed theories should be interpreted. Ande-
son and Venkatesan (1987) suggest that unre-
reflective interpretation of borrowed theories is
like the childhood game of Telephone.

The first person states the message and by the
time it is supposedly repeated through several
children, the original message is forever lost.
Each child has attempted to repeat the message
as they “understood” it and while some modifica-
tions were made for the “sake of clarity,” by the
time the message was returned to the originator,

it was usually unrecognizable. (p. 276)

Since the future of macromarketing will
be determined, in part, by the accuracy, con-
sistency, extensibility, and fruitfulness of the
theories borrowed, it is important that we re-
main cognizant of the risks. Finder and Bour-
geois (1982) state that one reason interdisci-
plinary borrowing is so widespread is that it
is easy. Clearly, informed borrowing, based on critical reflection, is not. Although critical reflection may decrease the total number of theories borrowed, the number of appropriate theories that endure into the future may actually increase.

The assumptions underlying our explanation of theory borrowing suggest a critical epistemic relativist construal of scientific method (Anderson 1986; Muncy and Fisk 1987; Peter and Olson 1983). This view of science calls attention to the contingent status of disciplinary knowledge claims. This construal is critical in the sense that it isolates contradictions and assumes that they are a source of change. The relativist notion has at least three implications relevant to theory borrowing. First, a theory that fails the evaluative criteria in one discipline may be successful in another. Second, the consensual claims of other disciplines should not be accepted at face value. Third, theories should be appraised relative to the appropriate substructure of interests, sentiments, and assumptions.

Often, creative solutions to problems result from bringing unlike things together. Thus, inappropriate borrowing does not result from inconsistencies, but from problems that may extend from these inconsistencies. In other words, inconsistencies alert the researcher to potential pitfalls. Also, researchers should not borrow only those theories that are consistent with existing research streams in marketing; this would merely reinforce what already has been learned. The purpose of critical reflection is not to stifle creativity or to encourage excessive conservatism, but to probe into the deep structure of theory. Indeed, theory borrowing is a complex process requiring further analysis from the perspectives of the philosophy of science and the sociology of knowledge. The theoretical issues and evaluative criteria discussed in this article can be considered an additional step toward reflection on macromarketing’s past and future.

References


