THE SOCIOLOGY AND PSYCHOLOGY OF COMFORT ZONES

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores reasons for knowledge disavowal. Knowledge disavowal is related to comfort zones and tests used to evaluate knowledge. After examining the costs of knowledge acceptance, ways of reducing knowledge disavowal are advanced. The paper ends with a cautionary note on the dangers of reducing knowledge disavowal.

INTRODUCTION

The extension of knowledge is the central purpose of inquiry in marketing. It involves both the creation, dissemination and application of knowledge. Because the extension of knowledge is so fundamental to our profession (as in any profession) there exists a pro-knowledge bias in our sensitivity to research and theory development. This is, there is a bias toward understanding how knowledge is created, diffused and applied. However, a bias toward something implies a bias away from something else. There is a relative absence of research into knowledge disavowal phenomena. Knowledge disavowal refers to the tendency not to extend knowledge. It is our contention that knowledge disavowal phenomena are just as present and important as knowledge advancing phenomena. The tendency to avoid creating, disseminating and acquiring or to misappropriate and misapply knowledge when encountered is as strong and significant as the tendency to create, disseminate and apply knowledge (Zaltman et al. 1983). It is important, therefore, that we understand better the nature of these important dynamics.

One particular phenomenon in the knowledge disavowal process concerns "comfort zones." A comfort zone is the domain of information established by our current assumptions, expectations and decision rules. Information falling outside this zone tends to create social and psychological discomfort. The breadth of comfort zones and the flexibility of their boundaries are major factors affecting pro-knowledge and knowledge disavowal biases. This paper explores several aspects of comfort zones. The concept of comfort zones will be seen to serve as a useful organizing concept for a wide array of existing ideas. The concept is a particularly important one since the extension of knowledge, which is so very central to the development of marketing thought and practice, may frequently violate our comfort zones.

Pro-knowledge biases result in attitudes that knowledge disavowal is a bad thing. Indeed, the discussion in this paper may reinforce that attitude. To offset this bias just a bit, it will be useful to comment very briefly at the outset on the value of knowledge disavowal. While ignorance may not be bliss it does serve important purposes. A functionalist approach to knowledge disavowal phenomena and particularly to comfort zones would ask what valued social functions these phenomena serve which might explain their prevalence and continued existence. One of the early commentaries on the social functions of ignorance suggests several reasons why ignorance is so very comforting so very often to so very many people (Moore and Tumin 1949). For one thing, ignorance preserves privileged positions. Substantial market research and even research technology is kept proprietary to ensure or to gain a certain market status. Marketing consultants maintain their status by virtue of certain kinds of ignorance among their clients. Ignorance also helps reinforce traditional values. Ignorance also enables us to comfortably avoid knowing that certain values have been violated. That is, there are times when managers prefer not to know that bribes, kickbacks, and reciprocity were instrumental in achieving a major sales agreement. Such knowledge may require very painful corrective action. Additionally, ignorance preserves stereotypes which enable people to simplify their world. Changing stereotypes involves major, often uncomfortable and costly alterations in our thinking. Maintaining ignorance helps avoid these costly efforts. Ignorance may also function as an incentive. This could be as simple as sales personnel working harder when they cannot predict the outcome of sales calls. Finally, it might also describe the attractiveness of games of chance and even the researcher's quest for information, the so-called "need to know" motivation of researchers.

We turn now to a more complete description of comfort zones. This will be followed by a discussion of our proclivity to disavow information falling outside our comfort zones. Following this the issue of how knowledge disavowal may be reduced will be explored. However, remembering that there are social functions ignorance serves, we shall conclude with a cautionary note about the dangers of reducing knowledge disavowal.

COMFORT ZONE CONTOURS

A manager's comfort zone is the range of research findings which would be compatible with his or her assumptions, expectations and decision rules. Information which violates comfort zones tends to be ignored. A finding which conforms to a manager's assumptions or doesn't deviate very far from them would fall within that manager's comfort zone. A research finding falling outside this comfort zone would be a surprise. If information falls outside a manager's comfort zone the market researcher will have difficulty getting this information accepted.

The notion of surprise and comfort zones is expressed in Figure 1. The further away from a comfort zone a research finding is, the more likely it is to be rejected.

FIGURE 1

![Figure 1](image)

There are two important dimensions to comfort zones. One dimension concerns their breadth. The broader a comfort zone is the more likely it is to encompass a particular item of new information. A second dimension concerns their flexibility. The more readily a comfort zone can be expanded the easier it is for a new item of information to
It might be argued that it is not absolute levels of knowledge that cause a narrowing of comfort zones but rather the means whereby this knowledge is accepted. This issue is discussed in the following section.

REALITY TESTS

One determinant of the breadth of a comfort zone and its flexibility may be the truth tests or reality tests used to evaluate and accept or reject knowledge within a comfort zone. That is, it is not only what we know but how we know it that influences the width of our comfort zones. Several types of reality tests are described in Table 1. Two ways

| TABLE 1 |
|-------------------|-------------------|
| Source            | Consequences      |
| Application       | Traditional       | Magical               |
|                   | Authoritative     | Consensual            |
| Learning          | Rational          | Empirical             |
|                   |                   | Pragmatic             |

In which these reality tests may function will be noted here. First, reality tests may display primacy and/or recency effects. For example, when information is judged to be true because of the source making the claim an authority that is being used. If an authority test was used as a basis for accepting a judgment about the feasibility of a new retail site or a new sales compensation plan, it may be more difficult for another comparable authority to gain acceptance of a subsequent and contradictory finding. In this instance there is a primacy effect: a given reality test when applied first has greater "staying power" than when it is applied second. A recency effect is obtained when another comparable authority making a later counter claim would have his or her judgment accepted. Thus reality tests may differ in the duration of their impact.

A second way in which reality tests may operate involves the relative impact of reality tests. For instance, in a given circumstance one reality test may carry greater weight than another. The example reported earlier in which a reality test established by a consensus among managers about market share to be obtained by a new product clearly outweighed substantial but conflicting evidence from an empirical reality test which later proved to be much more accurate.

The role of reality tests in the acceptance and rejection of new ideas is a complex and subtle one about which we can only speculate. It would appear that the impact of reality tests on the width and flexibility of our comfort zone boundaries is one of the more important issues facing the marketing community. Just as it is important to understand brand-supplier switching behavior or the acceptance of innovations, so too it is vital to understand how marketing professionals evaluate the overall quality of alternative conceptual frameworks, specific conceptual tools, and decision aids such as market research findings. This issue might be rephrased in the following way. A differentiation can be made between data (e.g., the number of new households formed will double in 3 years), information (i.e., this doubling means there will be a growth of a certain magnitude among selected extractive industries such as lumber), and intelligence (i.e., the acceptance of the data and its meaning as true). More effort needs to be given to the intelligence component, that is, to how and why managers accept or reject as true certain data and the meanings (information) ascribed to them. The reality
or truth tests used are ultimately social in nature. They may involve a deference to authority, participation in consensus formation, the acceptance of professional norms regarding the conduct of inquiry, and so on. This raises the important issue of socially negotiated reality and how this impacts comfort zones. The following section introduces this idea.

NEGOTIATED REALITY

Whether or not an event is construed as being within or beyond a comfort zone may depend upon how reality is negotiated through social interaction. Joan P. Emerson (1970), for instance, argues that whether participants in an event take the stance “nothing unusual is happening” or “something unusual is happening” depends upon several factors such as the emotionality of the event, the complexity of the response required to maintain a “nothing unusual” demeanor, just how clear it is that an unusual event has occurred, experience in imposing “an unusual event has occurred” definition of the situation, their attitude toward and their status relative to the “nothing unusual” advocate, and so on (Emerson 1970). In general, the simpler the conceptual scheme used to define a situation which has been contradicted, the greater the likelihood of ambiguity. The greater the ambiguity, the more opportunity there is for negotiating reality. When something unusual occurs we may ignore it for reasons of tact—to avoid embarrassing someone. When one party knows that another is experiencing something unusual, there may be a substantial disagreement of factual data to convince the party that it is really not so unusual. During a medical examination the physician and support staff may go to substantial lengths through ritual displays to convince a psychologically uncomfortable patient that the exam is totally routine and that there is nothing wrong with them. The patient may not know if most social interactions are not intended to be conflictual and since people may often prefer not to have to adjust to a “nothing unusual” situation, there may be a bias toward accepting a “nothing unusual” definition of a situation, at least publically.

In a research setting, considerable effort is often expended explaining why surprising results were obtained. These explanations generally create the impression that the results are not surprising after all. The research is then explained as having empirical results, much like the earlier theory. The unexpected results are sometimes introduced by the researcher as if they were expected all along. There is evidence, in fact, that we tend to assign higher probabilities to a particular chance occurrence taking place after we know it has transpired than we would have assigned prior to its occurrence. Stated somewhat differently, the simple occurrence of a research result which we would have labeled “unusual” if someone were to predict it as an outcome may cause us to think it more “usual” and cause us to say “I could have told you that would happen” when in fact prior to the research we might have said “I doubt you’ll find that.”

THE REASONS FOR KNOWLEDGE DISAVOWAL

In describing the functions of knowledge disavowal, the costs to the individual of considering and accepting new knowledge can be detailed. Given exposure to new knowledge, an individual may have a cost in terms of considering the idea. Then, if acceptance of the new idea is contingent on rejection of old knowledge, the individual incurs additional costs in rejecting familiar ground. Finally, to accept the new knowledge (independent of its relationship to old knowledge) also requires the payment of certain costs.

Some of the costs of movement from exposure to adoption of new knowledge have been discussed in this context and other settings as well (Ratchford 1962; Shuman 1980; Stigler 1961; Aczelov, 1970). In particular, for each phase of this movement there are the considerations of time and effort resource costs incurred. For example, the time and effort required just to consider new ideas is substantial. Because we can’t afford in terms of time and effort a brand-based information search we may rely on certain cues as to the potential efficacy of an idea. Hence in the same ways that a consumer might restrict search to a few brands or a few retail outlets, and use price and brand name as a cue for quality, researchers may keep up with only a few journals and look for and where it appeared (authority tests) as a cue to knowledge quality. These cues may appear dysfunctional, it serves the functional goal of limiting the search task, and perhaps focusing on those goods which have the highest probability of meeting the desired ends. In this way, researchers may be able to avoid ideas not couched in familiar terms and positioned in traditional journals, not because they believe that good ideas can’t occur in other ways and other forums, but simply because they do not have the time or energy to invest in searching them out. Beyond the time and effort costs of evaluating the potential efficacy of an idea there are very real cognitive costs associated with handling conflicting ideas or evidence. It may be far easier to avoid dissonant information than to resolve dissonance. This may be particularly true if the dissonant information would require a partial restructuring of knowledge.

In addition to resource costs of considering a new idea, there are also resource costs associated with accepting a new idea. As is true with adoption of an innovation, accepting a new idea requires the adopter to integrate the new concepts into their intellectual lifestyle—investing the time and effort to become comfortable with a new perspective, new techniques, new evidence. Leibenstein argues that individuals are often unmoved in the face of conflicting evidence because of a conflict between two positions (Leibenstein 1976). On the one hand, most people actively dislike making decisions which involve meticulous calculation and concern over consequences (there is a disability for effort). At the same time, most people aspire to certain standards of behavior, which imply carefully reasoned choices. Accordingly, individuals seek a compromise, and it is a compromise which favors the status quo. In the case of a researcher who has invested heavily in another way of looking at things, reengagement may seem very costly.

These traditional resource costs are likely to be an important basis for knowledge disavowal and have crucial implications for how we reduce knowledge disavowal. However, for each phase of the adoption/rejection process for new knowledge there are other subtle costs. The remainder of this section focuses on hidden pressures to stay inside of our comfort zones. We begin with the costs of considering a new idea, move to the costs of rejecting or modifying an old idea and conclude with the costs of accepting a new idea.

Some Costs of Considering New Ideas

Koestler (1964) writes:

"The progress of science is neither continuos nor cumulative in the strict sense. Its discoveries are often forgotten or ignored, and radical ideas are left to wither and die. Its history echoes with controversies which prove that the same bundle of objective data and even the same critical experiment can be interpreted in more than one way."

In circumstances where the evidential basis for beliefs is not firmly couched in the hard facts of an uncontroversial physical reality, our reliance on a socially defined reality is likely to be correspondingly high (Feather 1950). In an environment where what is correct or valid is anchored in a socially defined reality (such as a group of
people with similar beliefs) an individual is faced with two subtle problems in considering new ideas. The first problem is how to handle incoming information which is discrepant with the individual's own current information. The second problem is how to handle incoming information which is believed to be discrepant with socially defined and shared information. These are slightly different problems which involve differing costs. However, in both cases ego maintenance or self-esteem comes into play.

When new information conflicts with current information or beliefs, the individual may resolve the conflict by changing position, assigning a special and/or innocuous interpretation to the new information, or deciding that the source of the information is unreliable at least in this, if not in every, case. Substantial evidence has accumulated to suggest that when a person is strongly committed to a position even seemingly contradictory evidence may be interpreted in a way which gives support to that position (Abelson and Ross 1980). Furthermore, research in social comparisons has suggested the reluctance of individuals to expose themselves to countervailing viewpoints, even from acknowledged experts, when making informationally based social comparisons (Jones and Gerard 1967). Although researches on comparison show that a person with similar training and beliefs as a source of information are not unequivocal, willingness to access an expert seems to depend on (among other things) the extent to which it threatens self-esteem (Fazio 1982). Theorists have described the delicacy of the balance in which the individual is caught. On the one hand, people want to see things honestly, but also want to see things in the best possible light. When new information is relevant to an ego involving position, a tension exists between receiving an honest versus a favorable appraisal (Jones and Gerard 1967). Positions taken on the basis of scientific matters are often highly personal in terms of ego involvement. How researchers define themselves and are defined by others is related to the perceived quality and importance of the work they do. Thus, while researchers seek honest appraisals from those (who have the capacity to reward or punish) about quality and importance, they naturally desire favorable appraisals as well. In the interest of self-maintenance, a researcher may ignore, distort or discredit the "hostility" of a source of discrepant information if it is not favorable.

Some Costs of Rejecting Old Ideas

In the product adoption decision for consumers and the product planning programs of organizations, we tend to treat the new product decision as independent from the abandonment decision, although accepting the new often begins with getting rid of the old. Hence, the abandonment decision for consumers and organizations has been the focus of very little research (Rogers 1982; Kotler 1965). As a way of thinking about the deterents to theory abandonment, consider some of the real and imagined costs of product deletion or divestiture decisions by companies. Some sources of inertia have already been mentioned. There are many more. For example, companies may fear the organizational disruption of getting rid of a particular product (Kotler 1965). Alternatively, individuals may stick with an unsatisfactory situation because at least it is predictable. Also, there is a sunk-cost mentality. Because we have invested so heavily in an idea, product or service we try to recover that investment even when traditional logic suggests we should abandon the enterprise.

Do we as researchers also fall victim to a sunk costs mentality—doing piecemeal repairs on ideas that should be put to rest, or hoping for one more publication? Do we fear the disruption of abandoning a current research stream, or stick with an unsatisfying but familiar domain rather than take the risk of doing something we're not known for?

While sunk costs, organizational disruption, and uncertainty are all commonly acknowledged sources of inertia, there are some more subtle sources of commitment to a current belief. Underlying some types of inertia is a self-justification process in which individuals seek to rationalize their previous behavior, often by repeating or maintaining that behavior (Staw 1976; Staw and Fox 1977). Empirical research on forced compliance has demonstrated that when an individual feels he has committed himself to a course of action which is not easily reversible and feels personally responsible for the negative consequences of his action, he will perceptually bias the behavioral outcomes to justify his behavior (Staw 1974; Carroll and Freedman 1968; Copper 1971). Hence, to the extent that some kind of investment in an action has taken place, and the individual has some choice in that action, self-justification may lead to an escalation of commitment to that position in the form of resources or strength of conviction. Evidence of this is found in forced compliance studies, but has been demonstrated in other decision contexts as well (Staw 1976; Staw and Fox 1977). Since in most situations a researcher would be considered to have both an investment in a position (in the form of time, effort, self-esteem, reputation, etc...) and some choice in taking that position, self-justification may be an important deterrent to theory abandonment.

This section has put forward the need to consider the costs of rejecting old ideas in accounting for researcher reluctance to accept new knowledge. While these costs are not always incurred, they are likely to be an important source of inertia in many cases. Even when new information is not relevant to old knowledge there are costs involved, but personal and social costs need to be weighed against the potential costs of new knowledge. In many cases, the results of new developments are so important that rejection of new ideas may be counterproductive. In other cases, the costs may be so high that rejection of new ideas is warranted.

Costs of Accepting New Ideas

Historically, there are many examples of science bent on collectively preserving the status quo. For example, in 1842 Ward amputated a leg painlessly under hypnosis trance. Not only did his peers refuse to believe him, arguing that the patient pretended to feel no pain, but the note of the paper being read to the Royal Medical and Chirurgical Society was struck from the record. Semmelweiss was hounded out of the medical profession for his suggestion the surgeons might be carrying death in their hands, despite the fact that his introduction of washing with chlorinated lime water reduced childbed fever mortality rates from 1 in 8 to 1 in 100 (Kessler 1964). These examples are interesting not only because they illustrate knowledge disavowal but also because of the way in which knowledge disavowal occurred.

It seems an individual fights an uphill battle in accepting new knowledge. If knowledge disavowal is to be reduced, researchers must be willing to trade in the familiar for the unknown, and their impact on contexts for the role of novice. They may be required to risk social unacceptability. Also, they may need to find other ways of establishing the correctness of a belief than through social comparisons. In accepting a new idea, a researcher may be forced to admit past mistakes and put self-esteem on trial. Finally, the researcher must be willing to incur many kinds of resource costs—the costs of considering new ideas and the costs of integrating them into their research perspectives and programs.
After only a cursory examination of the reasons for knowledge disavowal, it seems likely to remain a pervasive phenomenon. However, a delineation of some of the reasons does offer some guidance for reducing knowledge disavowal. The purpose of the next section is to use an understanding of the costs of accepting new ideas to consider ways of reducing knowledge disavowal.

WAYS OF REDUCING KNOWLEDGE DISAVOWAL

An important implication of the above discussion is that in considering how researchers choose among theories, ideas, and evidence, social forces play an important role. In particular, for a variety of reasons including self-esteem, group conformance and efficiency of effort, who says it, where and how may be at least as important as what is said. After all, what is said is far more difficult to evaluate and work into an understanding of social acceptance may be small. These symbolic qualities of ideas which contribute heavily to the acceptance or rejection of knowledge have received very little attention. At the same time they have significant import for reducing knowledge disavowal and may justifiably be significant.

Symbolic qualities of ideas can be used both to improve the evidence for an idea and to change the socially defined stance from a "something unusual is happening here" (i.e., this is deviant) to a "nothing unusual is happening here" (i.e., making the unfamiliar familiar).

An interesting forum for examining the symbolic qualities of research is parapsychologists' efforts to gain scientific recognition for their findings and the tactics used by other scientists to deny their legitimacy. It appears both groups use the symbolic hardware of science and authority to argue their positions (Collins and Pinch 1979). In this the tactics of disavowal range from a blank refusal to believe to arguments that plausible, neutral, or cultural explanations have not been included, to accusations of fraud. To counteract these disavowal tactics parapsychologists have gone to great lengths to use accepted experimental design and acquire conventional scientific credentials. This serves both to demonstrate that both groups (advocates and disavowers) are relying on reality tests other than those oriented to argue their points.

The implications for reducing knowledge disavowal in our own disciplines are straightforward. While it may be impossible to move certain research results inside our comfort zones it may be feasible to make surprising research results more acceptable by using the terminology, techniques and authorities of the discipline. This suggests that surprising research results be actively negotiated to appear more familiar, less at odds with our current assumptions, expectations and decision rules. The risk, of course, is that if traditional and authority reality tests are more powerful than results tests, knowledge acceptance may become a much more active process than anything else. It's not clear that a reduction in knowledge disavowal resulting from more effective marketing of ideas is entirely desirable; perhaps, however, by being sensitive to the need for effective positioning of ideas relative to the discipline's and our own comfort zones we give ideas a better chance of being exposed to fair debate rather than dismissed as ridiculous. Further, by recognizing the reality tests we are applying and some of the reasons for reliance on them perhaps we can change the flexibility of our comfort zones making it easier for a new item of information to become accepted.

CONCLUSION

At the outset of this paper it was suggested that knowledge disavowal serves important social functions. The importance of these and other social functions underscore the prominence of knowledge disavowal phenomena. In this concluding section, we would like to suggest that dangers can exist in reducing knowledge disavowal. The processes served by knowledge disavowal may sometimes be healthy ones. For one thing, very frequent changes of ideas may be dysfunctional. Ideas need time to develop and to be adapted and improved in order to work effectively or efficiently. If ideas were to be discarded very quickly, replaced by others that may intuitively be more appealing, there would be relatively little time for particular ideas to be implemented well. Before an idea could be properly evaluated it would be discarded in favor of another.

The second reason why it could be dangerous to reduce knowledge disavowal too far is that many ideas may in fact be harmful. Very ready acceptance of a new idea may short-circuit the process of debate. The process of debate may produce considerable improvement or refinement in an idea. If ideas are accepted too quickly before full debate can take place, important improvements may be missed. Additionally and relatedly, many ideas may be inherently harmful. The debate about new ideas serves therefore as a healthy screening process. During the screening process, formative evaluation takes place which allows for the improvement of an idea in its adaptation to local circumstances. It also helps weed out ideas which could be dysfunctional.

Another problem with the reduction of knowledge disavowal or making comfort zones too wide has to do with the process of replacement or, more accurately, displacement. As indicated earlier, the acceptance of new ideas may require displacement of existing ideas or practices. While we may find a new idea to be in some technical sense superior to an existing idea or existing practice, the process of adopting a new idea may cause trouble if inadequate attention is given to the process of displacing or replacing the old idea. An existing idea may have important roots in individual or organizational practice. To dislodge an idea too quickly may threaten these important roots which provide social and psychological stability.

In general, resistance to new ideas is not entirely bad. Important social and psychological functions are performed by maintaining comfort zones in their current state. Consider what would happen if instead of accepting only fifteen percent of all papers submitted, journal editors increased their acceptance rate by a factor of two so that we had an average of, say, thirty percent as opposed to fifteen percent of all articles submitted. This would yield roughly twice as many publications in journal issues which are twice as long or twice as frequent. What proportion of these new ideas would be read? Quite conceivably an even smaller percentage of published articles would be read with the larger volume than is presently the case.

REFERENCES


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