

THEORIES IN MARKETING SERIES  
GERALD ZALTMAN, EDITOR

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# THEORY CONSTRUCTION IN MARKETING

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SOME THOUGHTS ON THINKING

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1982



JOHN WILEY & SONS

*New York • Chichester • Brisbane • Toronto • Singapore*

though they could not be treated here. If the so-called contemporary view receives greater stress in this chapter (and possibly others), it is because it is not very conspicuous in the field of marketing. Many readers may not yet have had significant exposure to current ideas in the sociology, psychology, and philosophy of science. Inquiry into and the practice of marketing should improve if both views are equally understood and appreciated by researchers, managers, and teachers. This chapter also identified a number of barriers which often block exposure to different viewpoints and limit our ability to develop a special kind of theory called *generative theory*. The concluding section of this chapter addressed the practical relevance of learning about theory. A basic idea in that section is simply that learning about theory will help a manager think about his or her frame of reference for handling responsibilities. This knowledge, in turn, should improve the exercise of those responsibilities.

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## TWO

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### BEING INTERESTING

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*In this chapter we introduce the special idea of being "interesting" and offer some guidance for those readers who dare to be noticeably different. Being interesting and different is essential although not sufficient for constructing good theories. Readers may also use the conditions for being interesting as criteria for assessing the interestingness (or dullness) of the marketing literature they have encountered. For example, how much of what you have read in the last year has been interesting according to these criteria? Do you think there is an upper limit to the number or proportion of interesting ideas a field can accommodate within a specified period of time?*

Research usually is not searching for a new idea but trying to beat the dust out of an old rug.

Anonymous<sup>1</sup>

We are continually confronted with the perversity of friends and colleagues who, despite our best efforts to enlighten them, persist in misguided political, social, and even scientific beliefs; just as they find us, no doubt, intractable and obstinate in our preconceptions.

Lee Ross and Mark R. Lepper<sup>2</sup>

The human understanding when it has once adopted an opinion draws all things else to support and agree with it. And though there be a greater number and weight of instances to be found on the other side, yet these it either neglects and despises, or else by some distinction sets aside and rejects, in order that by this great and pernicious predetermination the authority of its former conclusion may remain inviolate.

Francis Bacon<sup>3</sup>

Being "interesting" is one of the necessary ingredients for the healthy development of conceptual and theoretical thought in marketing. This ingredient—which will be defined shortly—is not particularly prominent in contemporary marketing thought, although it is perhaps the one ingredient that best distinguishes impactful from unimpactful thinking. For example, Murray S. Davis suggests that the great theorists are not considered great because of the truth of their theories, but because their theories are interesting.<sup>4</sup> The truth of a theory may have only incidental relevance to its impact. If, indeed, being "interesting" is very important and yet is also insufficiently displayed, then perhaps the body of marketing thought might benefit substantially by a greater infusion of this ingredient. This infusion will not happen merely by calling for it. The relative absence of this ingredient may result partially from the lack of a well-diffused technology for being interesting. This section presents some possible components of such a technology. The thinking methodology for being interesting that is presented here is not a substitute for creativity, intelligence, or extended

<sup>1</sup>An anonymous senior creative director at Young and Rubicam. Quoted by Joseph T. Plummer in "The Ratio of Basic vs Applied Research: What Is the Optimum Balance?" American Marketing Association Conference on Research, New Orleans, September 8, 1980.

<sup>2</sup>Lee Ross and Mark R. Lepper, "The Perseverance of Beliefs: Empirical and Normative Conclusions," *New Directions for Methodology of Social and Behavioral Sciences*, no. 4 (1980), p. 17.

<sup>3</sup>Francis Bacon, *The New Organon and Related Writings* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1960; originally published, 1620).

<sup>4</sup>Murray S. Davis, "That's Interesting! Towards a Phenomenology of Sociology and a Sociology of Phenomenology," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 4 (1971), 309.

and careful thought. However, it does offer ways of gaining new perspectives, and it is through new perspectives that scientific disciplines advance most.<sup>5</sup> This chapter concludes with several important caveats concerning the notion of being interesting as it is developed here.

## Definition of the Interesting

### Transcending the Taken-for-Granted World

The first requirement of an interesting theory is that it capture attention by appealing to a consciousness beyond the state in which most persons operate on a daily basis, a state in which knowledge is routinely taken for granted. For the marketing academic, this taken-for-granted world includes a body of literature containing the current "state of the art." In addition, for all persons shared experiences lead to what is termed "common sense." The value of using common sense as a basis for action is enculturated in life and has widespread social acceptance. Common sense defines a particular portion of the world to which our intellect is adapted. However, common sense can operate at a disadvantage, as it may obscure opportunities not apparent at the time.<sup>6</sup> A fundamental difference between the theorist who is great versus one who is mediocre is the ability and courage to challenge established patterns of thought. A mind that is flexible and open is continually assimilating new knowledge and forming broad conceptualizations that expand creative and perceptual powers. The work of Einstein illustrates how the creative mind can produce ideas that germinate and illuminate thinking for decades to come.

An interesting theory, then, is one that both challenges existing assumptions and that, if it were true, would cause many people to change much of their thinking or behavior. A clue to just how interesting a theory or idea may be lies in the answer to the following question: *How much current thinking will have to be altered by how many people if the theory were true?* If the answer to both aspects of this question is, "Lots!" then the theory should be a very interesting one indeed.

### Practical Applicability

A second requirement of an interesting theory is that it be of practical import. It should be perceived as useful or appropriate to the needs of the intended audience. "If (the) practical consequence of a theory is not immediately apparent

<sup>5</sup>Ian I. Mitroff and Ralph H. Kilmann, *Methodological Approaches to Social Science: Integrating Divergent Concepts and Theories* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1978), Chapter 1.

<sup>6</sup>We shall return briefly to the concept of common sense in Chapter 6.

to its audience, they will respond to it by rejecting its value until someone can concretely demonstrate its utility: 'So what?' 'Who cares?' 'Why bother?' 'What good is it?'" Creative thinking involves not only the ability to bring forth new ideas, but also the ability to help solve everyday problems. Creative thinking is not only thinking at a higher level of consciousness, freed from trivialities, but also the translation of these thoughts into positive action. For example, the sun as a source of light and life has been an object of worship since ancient times. To present a discourse extolling the symbolic virtues of the sun would be an esoteric exercise likely to be appreciated by only a few. However, to conceive of solar energy as one solution to the world's growing resource shortage and to present a blueprint or, better yet, slides of an actual office complex designed and functioning with reliance on the sun's rays would surely raise the interest quotient for the audience. The latter involves action. Habitual ways of thinking are broken through such an action. As Bergson notes:<sup>8</sup>

It is of the essence of reasoning to shut us up in the circle of the given. But the action breaks the circle. If we had never seen a man swim, we might say that swimming is an impossible thing, inasmuch as, to learn to swim, we must begin by holding ourselves up in the water and, consequently, already know how to swim. Reasoning, in fact, always nails us down to the solid ground. But if, quite simply, I throw myself into the water without fear, I may keep myself up well enough at first by merely struggling, and gradually adapt myself to the new environment: I shall thus have learnt to swim. So, in theory, there is a kind of absurdity in trying to know otherwise than by intelligence; but if the risk be frankly accepted, action will perhaps cut the knot that reasoning has tied and will not unloose.

### Firmly Held Assumptions

The theory builder should first be familiar with the assumption ground of the audience (the taken-for-granted world) and then successfully challenge part of this ground. Merely confirming what persons already know, for example, in a replication study involving a population with similar characteristics to the sample used in the original study, may add to scientific knowledge, but it does not qualify as "interesting." This suggests a third requirement of an interesting theory: that it challenge *firmly held* assumptions rather than either *weakly held* (at one end of a continuum) or highly central and even *fanatically held* (at the other end of a continuum) assumptions. As Davis notes, "There is a fine definite line between asserting the surprising and asserting the shocking, between the interesting and the absurd."<sup>9</sup> The interesting theorist must therefore not only be aware of the assumption base of the audience, but also be sensitive to which

assumptions can safely be challenged and which ones are best left alone because a challenge would prove too threatening, at least in the short run. Many theories labeled as "absurd" die instant deaths or go into comas lasting for years. History is richly imbued with examples of people who eventually achieve fame but only at immense personal cost. The mathematician Copernicus was one such person. His heliocentric theory in which the sun, rather than the earth, formed the center of the universe challenged the thinking of the Roman Church. Because Copernicus realized that his theory would be regarded as heretical, he published it late in his life. The twentieth-century scientist Einstein, with his curved-space theory, challenged the assumptions of Copernicus and won a place among interesting theorists. However, the scientific community is often slow to accept *radically* different ideas.

Managers in both private and public sector organizations are similarly reluctant to have their assumptions challenged. For example, a study of the use of market research in major product line decisions indicates that the more "surprising" the research findings, the less likely the research is to be used.<sup>10</sup> Surprising research results were those that were unanticipated and counter-intuitive and that contradicted firmly held assumptions. Such results, even if of a positive nature, tended to increase uncertainty, whereas the purpose of conducting research was primarily to reduce uncertainty. Managers tended to have comfort zones within which information should fall if it is to be accepted readily. If information challenged assumptions, it tended to fall outside the comfort zone and was likely to be rejected. In this respect managers and academic scholars are very much alike. The reader might refer back to the first section in Chapter 1 for the discussion of the Mahoney experiment. The reader familiar with both communities might wrestle with the question, "Who has the wider comfort zone, the practicing manager or academic scholar?" In this question a wide comfort zone implies a greater ability to accept challenging information.

The tendency to cling to existing beliefs, especially when they are challenged, has been the subject of considerable research in social psychology. Some of this research and its possible implications for the manager-researcher will be discussed below. An important theme present in this research is that biases in judgment are common<sup>11</sup> and since we are in the position of having to judge our judgment, we are probably in substantial error in our beliefs about our ability to make judgments.<sup>12</sup> A marketing manager or researcher may read a research report, make a judgment about the implications of that report, apply the

<sup>8</sup> Davis, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (New York: Modern Library, 1944), p. 211.

<sup>10</sup> Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 343.

<sup>10</sup> Gerald Zaltman and Rohit Deshpande, *The Use of Market Research: An Exploratory Study of Manager and Research Perspectives* (Cambridge, MA: The Marketing Science Institute, 1981).

<sup>11</sup> P. Slovic, B. Fischhoff, and S. Lichtenstein, "Behavioral Decision Theory," *Annual Review of Psychology*, 28 (1977), 1-39.

<sup>12</sup> Hillel J. Einhorn, "Overconfidence in Judgment," *New Directions for Methodology of Social and Behavioral Science*, no. 4 (1980), pp. 1-16.

judgment in the form of a market decision, and then evaluate (judge) the quality of that decision. According to extant research, even undesirable consequences are likely to be interpreted as being supportive of poor original judgment about the research's implication.<sup>13</sup> Thus basically negative feedback is sometimes interpreted favorably, so prior assumptions cannot be challenged.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, poor judgments may be associated with very good outcomes because of factors unrelated to the judgment and beyond the control of the manager or researcher. Thus possibly wrong assumptions underlying judgments are reinforced. Conversely, a judgment might in some way be the best possible one but be associated with an unfavorable outcome, again for unrelated or uncontrollable reasons. In this case if we question and discard our initial assumptions, we would also be making an error. Table 2.1 is overly simplified but is presented to make a special point. We might expect that a large set of decisions made on a random basis might be equally distributed across the four cells. For example, a pigeon or a child in a kindergarten class or a coin might be employed to make judgments as to whether or not to introduce a new product or to increase promotional budgets or to hold or cancel a national meeting of sales personnel. Of course, pigeons, children, and coins "don't know any better" in this situation so we employ at much greater expense a very bright manager or management team to make such decisions.<sup>15</sup> Certainly they "know better." However, because they know better it is quite possible that fewer than one fourth of their decisions will fall into Cell 1. In fact, in many cases in Cell 1, the correct decision may have contributed very

Table 2.1

Judgment	Outcomes	
	Favorable	Unfavorable
Correct	Cell 1	Cell 2
Incorrect	Cell 3	Cell 4

<sup>13</sup> Charles G. Lord, Lee Ross, and Mark R. Lepper, "Biased Assimilation and Attribute Polarization: The Effects of Prior Theories on Subsequently Considered Evidence," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37, no. 11 (1979), 2098-2109.

<sup>14</sup> See especially C. D. Batson, "Rational Processing or Rationalization? The Effect of Disconfirming Information on a Stated Religious Belief," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 62 (1975), 176-184.

<sup>15</sup> The reader may find interesting a study in which eight teams totaling 228 MBA students had their performance in a marketing simulation game compared to experimentally managed teams using either arbitrary rules such as "Never order market research" applied consistently or arbitrary rules applied randomly in making decisions. "The experimentally managed teams operated at approximately the same level as half the human teams. The surprising fact is that they did not perform significantly worse than their (human) counterparts." See Robin M. Hogarth and Spyros Makridakas, "The Value of Decision Making in a Complex Environment: An Experimental Approach," *Management Science*, 27, no. 1 (January 1981), 93-107, esp. p. 102.

little to the actual favorable outcome. (However, this would be no less true for pigeons, children, and coins.)

We are not advocating making decisions at random. We do know, however, that even with substantial data from various types of feasibility studies to guide decisions, new products often fail in national introduction or in major test markets.<sup>16</sup> These rates may be as high as 60 percent or more.<sup>17</sup> The basic difficulty is that we are prone to accept at face value evidence confirming our prior inclinations while critically evaluating disconfirming evidence. A survey of managers' responses to research studies relating to a major product decision found a strong tendency for managers to critically examine the research methodology only when they didn't like the results.<sup>18</sup>

Interestingly, managers in this study indicated that when unhappy with the results, they examined the methodology to find out what was wrong with it rather than whether it was valid or sound. Extrapolating from this study and that by Lord, Ross, and Lepper cited above, we can say that managers involved in new product decisions may identify with a favorable decision to launch the new product and on a less than conscious basis interpret mixed or negative evidence in such a manner as to support a decision to launch the product. With some good fortune the result might fall in Cell 3 of Table 2.1. Nielsen and other data sources suggest Cell 4 as being more likely.

### Conceptualization of the Interesting Theory

As depicted in Figure 2.1, the creator of interesting theories breaks out of the circle of thinking that constitutes the routine world. While most persons assume the boundaries of the given to be fixed, those who construct truly interesting theories challenge these boundaries. By perceiving that all boundaries are permeable, the theorist has taken a first major step toward the creation of an interesting theory. Otherwise, the circle will not be broken.

Analysts of social change processes, notably Boulding,<sup>19</sup> have drawn distinctions among dialectical/nondialectical and evolutionary/revolutionary processes which are germane to our conceptualization. Holistically, the three concentric circles within the assumption ground can be viewed as follows:

(A) Earth, composed of fanatically held or ideological assumptions. From this vantage point, a particular world view is projected in association with a

<sup>16</sup> Alvin J. Silk and Glenn L. Urban, "Pre-Test Market Evaluation of New Packaged Goods: A Model and Measurement Methodology," *Journal of Marketing Research*, May 1978, pp. 171-191.

<sup>17</sup> Nielsen Marketing Service, "New Product Success Ratios," *The Nielsen Researcher*, 1979, pp. 2-9.

<sup>18</sup> G. Zaltman and R. Deshpande, *op. cit.*, 1981.

<sup>19</sup> Kenneth E. Boulding, *A Primer on Social Dynamics* (New York: Free Press, 1979).

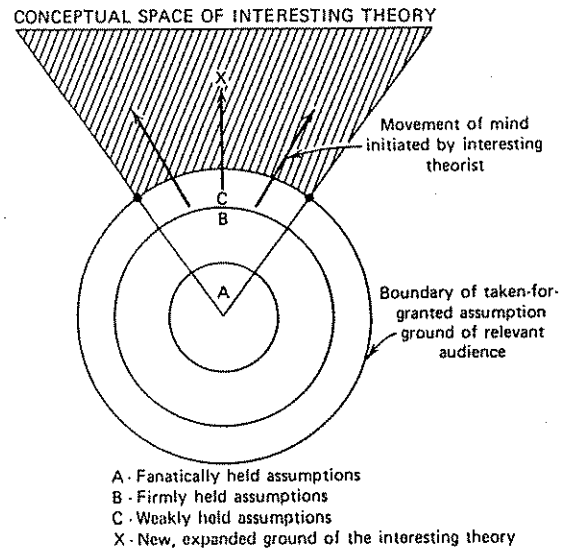


Figure 2.1. Escaping the world of routine thought.

power base. A direct challenge to (A) sets into motion a threat system and results in a dialectically revolutionary situation.

(B) Vast Expanse of the Universe, made of generative assumptions which are firmly held. Webster's dictionary provides a working definition of *generative*: "Having the power or function of generating, propagating, originating, producing, or reproducing." Herein lies the positive, energizing force of a set of assumptions serving as a generator of new ideas. The process of challenging these assumptions may be viewed as "nondialectically revolutionary" representing a "discontinuity in the total evolutionary process because of some mutation which has a profound, long-term effect on the whole system"<sup>20</sup> Area (B) is composed of firmly held assumptions.

(C) Cloud Cover, formed by peripheral assumptions. To the uninitiated, this layer may appear to be rigid, but the "interesting theorist" knows that the force generated by (B) will quickly penetrate and extend this area. A challenge to (C) alone is evolutionary, or a gradual change. The assumptions in (C) are weakly held.

How, then, is the theorist to challenge this mixture of assumptions and achieve a high interest quotient? Here we diverge from Davis and assert that the use of the dialectical approach could be misleading, as illustrated in Boulding's thesis: "The growth of knowledge is not advanced by the dialectical process at all; it is hindered by it . . . for when questions are posed in dialectical terms, that is, in

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

terms of the conflict between two cultures or two power centers, each center gradually loses the ability to learn from the other."<sup>21</sup> Essentially, an effective challenge can produce a symbiotic (mutually beneficial) relationship between old and new, instead of a dialectical (conflictual) one (by, for example, adding alternative, plausible explanations for the same phenomenon).

All three assumption bases are involved in this formulation, since a challenge to any *one* is insufficient. A direct challenge to the peripheral layer (C) in Figure 2.1 is likely to result in an audience reaction of "That's boring!" In contrast, a head-on attack on (A), the fanatically held assumptions (ideological ground), is very threatening and is likely to produce a defensive reaction and draw cries of "That's absurd!" It is only by using the firmly held (generative) assumptions of (B) as a springboard to penetrate the limits established by prior thinkers that the birth of an interesting theory occurs, acknowledged by the comment, "That's interesting!"

While the major thrust of the new thinking involves firmly held (generative) assumptions, a "spillover" or "leakage" trickles into the other two areas. A successful challenge to (B) almost automatically ensures a reformulation of the peripheral weakly held assumptions (C). The seeds might well also be planted to enable growth inward to the fanatically held assumptions of the ideological layer; that is, in order to accept and integrate (B), (C), and (X) into a total framework, revisions in (A) thinking must ultimately occur. If the ideological center is focused on its integrative function rather than its threat system, such movement can take place. Otherwise, a breakdown in communication is likely.

How the "pic" shown in Figure 2.1 can be "sliced" depends upon many factors, such as the size of the theoretical knowledge base in existence at the time, and the researcher's combination of economic, psychological, and intellectual resources. The center dot represents the beginning, with the expansion of the circle being the cumulative accretion of scientific knowledge. In one sense, disturbance of any of the parts of the pic affects the whole; as Boulding notes, "A scientific theory is a Gestalt, not a mere collection or dictionary."<sup>22</sup>

Keep in mind that the aggregate audience is under consideration here. Obviously, there are individual differences. Some persons feel comfortable only when firmly ensconced within the circle. Others, such as those who are very high in arousal needs or are extreme innovators, would eagerly welcome a direct challenge to (A) as well as to (B) and (C).

An alternative depiction of this same phenomenon can be made in terms of the familiar normal curve (see Figure 2.2). If our world of "interesting" ideas can be depicted as a challenge to this routine world, we can attempt to position ourselves along this curve, choosing, for example, to operate at one standard deviation on either side of an average value of intensity of all the assumptions we view as routine for our specified research issue/problem. Indeed, the curve may be skewed in one direction or another. A well-established area of inquiry may

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

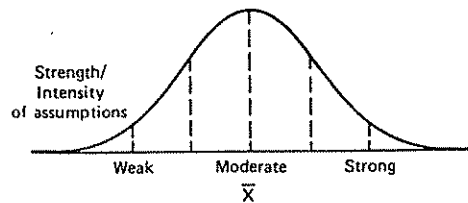


Figure 2.2. Composition of the routine assumption ground.

contain many strongly held assumptions, making our task both potentially more interesting and also more difficult. Or, in a relatively new area (such as the sociology of consumption), the curve may be skewed in the other direction. In the latter case, all three areas (B, then C, then A) can be effectively challenged. Therefore, the rate at which boundary expansion occurs can be seen to be more rapid in areas of inquiry not yet firmly established. The frontiers of knowledge are pushed forward until the curve assumes its normal shape and eventually becomes skewed more heavily in the other direction.

Because we are dealing with a methodology for thinking, an analogy from psychology may help to clarify the distinction between the conceptual space within which the interesting theorist operates as contrasted to that of the noninteresting theorist. A rapidly developing area of interest in psychology is transpersonal psychotherapy, a nondirective process of expanding consciousness in which the main focus is on the inner work of the psyche reaching toward transcendence and self-realization. Transpersonal therapy stands in contrast to other Western approaches, which stress specific techniques and seek to solve particular ego problems. This perspective is evident in the work of Carl Jung, who stressed transpersonal experience in therapy rather than the treatment of neurosis. In relation to Figure 2.1, we may conceive of the traditional approaches as being contained within the circle, whereas the transpersonal moves into the triangle. The process of awakening to a new state of consciousness, or transpersonal identity, is depicted in Figure 2.1 by the arrows moving upward, breaking through the boundaries of conventional thought. Three distinct stages are involved in this process: identification, disidentification, and self-transcendence.

### Identification

Identification is a stage characterized by the growth of self-awareness, insight and a new sense of understanding, and an increase in tension and discomfort.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Frances V. Clark, "Transpersonal Perspectives in Psychotherapy," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 17, no. 2 (Spring 1977), 76.

The initial examination of accepted beliefs in theory building may involve similar experiences. The interesting theorist must be sufficiently in touch with self to risk challenging the accepted way of viewing the world. Ability to handle the conflict which occurs when one attempts to break out of the circle of conventional thought and acceptance of responsibility for the consequences are also important characteristics at this stage.

### Disidentification

The second stage is characterized by disidentification with roles, relationships, activities, and so forth: "When [the client] comes to the basic experience of *I Am*, no longer deriving identity from the usual definitions of the self as object, and recognizing the essential no-thingness of the self as experienter, there is no longer the same investment in preserving self-image or problem solving in terms of ego gratification."<sup>24</sup> According to many Eastern philosophies, attachment forms the basis of all suffering and problems.

For the interesting theorist, disidentification is essential. Going against the tide of popular opinion involves a greater risk if one's ego is heavily invested in acceptance of the new position. One achieves the freedom to think creatively only to the extent that such freedom is granted by the self.

### Self-Transcendence

The third stage, self-transcendence, is characterized by "the emergence of wisdom" or the ability to play with opposites. An increased awareness and appreciation of ambiguity is attained. The theorist who reaches this third stage has solved the mystery of how to realize his or her potential. Frederick Perls, originator of Gestalt therapy, provides an excellent summary statement for this section.<sup>25</sup>

The average person of our time, believe it or not, lives only 5% to 15% of his potential at the highest. A person who has even 25% of his potential available is already considered to be a genius. So 85% to 95% of our potential is lost, is unused, is not at our disposal. Sounds tragic, doesn't it? And the reason for this is very simple: we live in clichés. We live in patterned behavior. We are playing the same roles over and over again. So if you find out how you prevent yourself from growing, from using your potential, you have a way of increasing this, making you more and more capable of mobilizing yourself. And our potential is based upon a very peculiar attitude: to live and review every second afresh.

Self-transcendence may make available at least some of the 85% to 95% of our lost potential.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>25</sup>Frederick S. Perls, *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim* (New York: Bantam, 1974), pp. 31-32.

In summary, the theorist who desires to be interesting keeps the following suggestions in mind:

1. Know the "taken-for-granted" assumption base of the audience.
2. Know the intensity of the assumptions. Are they (a) held with extreme tenacity or even fanaticism, (b) firmly held, or (c) weakly held?
3. Appeal to a higher state of consciousness of the individual by directly challenging the *firmly held* assumption base through the use of the creative power within.
4. Be sure that the theory has a practical value to the audience.

## Thinking Interesting Thoughts

### A Typology of Propositions

How does one go about constructing an interesting theory? A common thread among interesting propositions is that they always seem to involve negation of accepted ones. What seems to be X is in reality non-X. However, as noted earlier, reliance on a dialectical approach could be misleading. Tables 2.2 and 2.3 do express a dialectical orientation and thus we caution the reader: rather than focusing on the negation of current knowledge, one should create additional propositions which may or may not require negating current thinking. The categories in Tables 2.2 and 2.3 are simply helpful to start the idea generation process.

How can the theorist use the schema in Tables 2.2 and 2.3 in theory construction? First, the appropriate category for the problem being studied must be located. Then the assumption ground currently accepted as "truth" in that area must be specified. Finally, it must be shown that what was thought to be true might, in reality, not be true at all. It could be entirely false or it could simply not be truly important. A classic nonmarketing illustration relates to category 9 in Table 2.3, Co-Existence, subtype B: What seem to be phenomena that cannot exist together are in reality phenomena that can exist together. This category is illustrated by Sigmund Freud's assertion that love and hate, which were considered at the time he wrote to be incompatible, are in fact compatible (in the psychological state of "ambivalence"). In other words, what was thought to be X (love and hate are never compatible) turned out to be non-X (love and hate are compatible, under some circumstances). Similarly, the use of crucial experiments may not be an appropriate methodology for understanding complex phenomena (see Table 2.2, Methodology). The position that theory and practice are separate activities has been strongly challenged by persons advocating theory-in-use approaches for developing social theory as a substitute for conventional research approaches (see Table 2.2, Separation). Category 1-B in Table 2.2 is illustrated

*Table 2.2*  
*Categories for Studying the Interestingness of Propositions*

- 
1. Form
    - A. What appears to be a multidimensional phenomenon is in reality a unidimensional one.
    - B. What appears to be a unidimensional phenomenon is in reality a multidimensional one.
  2. Measurement
    - A. What appears to measure a concept well does not.
    - B. What does not appear to measure a concept well does.
  3. Evidence
    - A. What was considered evidential support for a position is not.
    - B. What was not considered evidential support for a position is.
  4. Methodology
    - A. What seems to be appropriate methodology is not.
    - B. What seems to be inappropriate methodology is appropriate.
  5. Assertion
    - A. What seems to be an underlying rationale for an act is not.
    - B. What seems not to be an underlying rationale for an act is.
  6. Values
    - A. What seems to be an objective assessment of a phenomenon is in fact a highly value-laden assessment.
    - B. What seems to be a highly value-laden assessment of a phenomenon is in fact an objective assessment.
  7. Separation
    - A. What appear to be inseparable are separable.
    - B. What appear to be separable are inseparable.
  8. Supply
    - A. What appears to be a fixed resource is not.
    - B. What does not appear to be a fixed resource is.
- 

by the assertion of Paul Lazarsfeld *et al.* in *The People's Choice*<sup>26</sup> that the flow of mass communications, which was assumed at the time to be direct, is in fact indirect, flowing in two steps through opinion leaders who pass on information to those whom they influence.

The marketing literature also contains numerous examples of Table 2.3 categories. For instance, category 1-A is illustrated by the following proposition: Pierre Martineau's assertion in "Social Classes and Spending Behavior" that the consumption patterns of individuals, who were considered to be unaware of a formal class structure in America at the time he wrote (1958), can in fact be organized according to Warner's six-class system,<sup>27</sup> which ranges from the

<sup>26</sup>Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, *The People's Choice* (New York: Columbia, 1948).

<sup>27</sup>Pierre Martineau, "Social Classes and Spending Behavior," in Louis E. Boon (Ed.), *Classics in Consumer Behavior* (Tulsa, OK: Petroleum Publishing, 1977).



Table 2.3

*Additional Categories for Studying the Interestingness of Propositions*

<i>Single Phenomenon</i>	
1. Organization	
A.	What seems to be a disorganized (unstructured) phenomenon is in reality an organized (structure) phenomenon.
B.	What seems to be an organized (structured) phenomenon is in reality a disorganized (unstructured) phenomenon.
2. Composition	
A.	What seems to be assorted heterogeneous phenomena are in reality composed of a single element.
B.	What seems to be a single phenomenon is in reality composed of assorted heterogeneous elements.
3. Abstraction	
A.	What seems to be an individual phenomenon is in reality a holistic phenomenon.
B.	What seems to be a holistic phenomenon is in reality an individual phenomenon.
4. Generalization	
A.	What seems to be a local phenomenon is in reality a general phenomenon.
B.	What seems to be a general phenomenon is in reality a local phenomenon.
5. Stabilization	
A.	What seems to be a stable and unchanging phenomenon is in reality an unstable and changing phenomenon.
B.	What seems to be an unstable and changing phenomenon is in reality a stable and unchanging phenomenon.
6. Function	
A.	What seems to be a phenomenon that functions ineffectively as a means for the attainment of an end is in reality a phenomenon that functions effectively.
B.	What seems to be a phenomenon that functions effectively as a means for the attainment of an end is in reality a phenomenon that functions ineffectively.
7. Evaluation	
A.	What seems to be a bad phenomenon is in reality a good phenomenon.
B.	What seems to be a good phenomenon is in reality a bad phenomenon.

*Multiple Phenomena*

8. Co-Relation	
A.	What seem to be unrelated (independent) phenomena are in reality correlated (interdependent).
B.	What seem to be related (interdependent) phenomena are in reality (independent) phenomena.
9. Co-Existence	
A.	What seem to be phenomena that can exist together are in reality phenomena that cannot exist together.
B.	What seem to be phenomena that cannot exist together are in reality phenomena that can exist together.
10. Co-Variation	
A.	What seems to be a positive co-variation between phenomena is in reality a negative co-variation between phenomena.

Table 2.3 (Continued)

B.	What seems to be a negative co-variation between phenomena is in reality a positive co-variation between phenomena.
11. Opposition	
A.	What seem to be similar (nearly identical) phenomena are in reality opposite phenomena.
B.	What seem to be opposite phenomena are in reality similar (nearly identical) phenomena.
12. Causation	
A.	What seems to be the independent phenomenon (variable) in a causal relation is in reality the dependent phenomenon (variable).
B.	What seems to be the dependent phenomenon (variable) in a causal relation is in reality the independent phenomenon (variable).

Source. Adapted from Murray S. Davis, "That's Interesting! Towards a Phenomenology of Sociology and a Sociology of Phenomenology," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 4 (1971).

"upper upper" or old families to the "lower lower" or unskilled laborers. The social class position of the consumer influences the mix of products and services purchased, the stores patronized, and so forth. This proposition refuted several assumptions firmly held at the time:

1. American society is not organized around social class since incomes tend to be distributed fairly evenly.
2. Since marketing is economic exchange, income serves as the major segmentation variable. Warner's thesis is therefore applicable to broad sociological issues, such as macro living patterns, but not to specific types of consumption.
3. "It is assumed that a rich man is simply a poor man with more money and that, given the same income, the poor man would behave exactly like the rich man."<sup>28</sup>
4. According to Veblen, conspicuous consumption applies primarily to the upper social class.

The requirements of category 1-A are met. What appears to be unstructured (a lack of social stratification relevant to consumer behavior) is in reality a structured phenomenon (according to Warner's social class typology). Martineau's creativity lies in part in his ability to see relationships between ideas that had not been previously connected by researchers. He saw the applicability of a sociological thesis to consumer behavior. Social mobility was shown to have a strong impact on spending versus saving patterns: "Whereas the stable individual would emphasize saving and security, the behavior of the mobile individual is characterized by spending for various symbols of upward movement."<sup>29</sup> Lower-class persons accumulated material artifacts, such as

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 305.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 308.

appliances and cars. Middle-class acquisitions went beyond this level and focused on the consumption of "experiences"—through recreation, travel, and education. Travel was considered to be almost solely the aspiration of the middle class. Consumption patterns therefore served as symbolic separators of class membership.

Assuming that the proposition is now part of the assumption ground of marketers, how would one go about forming a new proposition that would be judged interesting today? Is social class as relevant a concept today as it was a couple of decades ago? Have social changes taken place that make any of the assumptions in the 1958 article obsolete? Is stratification, with its implied rank ordering, applicable to consumption (and, if so, what are the relevant dimensions), or are there alternatives to stratification that are more promising?

Historically, social change has taken place vertically, primarily from the top down (the "trickle down" effect). Lower social classes have adopted fashions popular with the upper classes. Recently, however, horizontal or bottom-up change has become evident. Deviant groups such as the hippies have been initiators of changes in lifestyles and fashions. The principles of humanistic psychology have generated diverse lifestyles, with a consequent blurring of distinctions formerly used to designate social class. Ballet and opera, once considered to be an upper-class experience, now draw attendees from diverse segments of society. Prestigious universities have a more varied enrollment; some Ivy League graduates have rural or ghetto backgrounds instead of Park Avenue addresses. Some middle-class persons are questioning the "success ethic," which involves a high degree of mobility, and are striving instead to build an integrated family life. Persons from all classes are packing tents and bicycles and traveling across country.

How can these trends change the assumption base apparent in the Martineau article? One possible proposition would be the following, suggested by Mayer:<sup>30</sup> "The consumption patterns of individuals, which were considered to be organized along social class lines, are actually organized along several political dimensions, independent of income or occupation." Consumers whose lifestyle includes night baseball games, frequent automobile trips, and other resource-intensive consumption may have quite different political interests from those who prefer pollution-free consumption. The empirical question is whether these are correlated with economic considerations.

Now that the basic process of generating interesting propositions has been described, here are brief examples of some of the other categories from Table 2.3.

*Category 2-B.* The market, which was once considered to be homogeneous, is in fact composed of target markets, differentiated on the basis of such dimensions as demographics and psychological and sociological variables.

<sup>30</sup>Robert N. Mayer, "Exploring Sociological Theories by Studying Consumers," Faculty Working Paper, Family and Consumer Studies, University of Utah, September 1977.

*Category 5-A.* Lawrence Wortzel asserts, in "Young Adults: Single People and Single-Person Households," that the concept of stable stages of the life cycle, based on marriage and the family as commonly accepted in the marketing literature, is in fact about to be transformed by the evolution of the young adult life cycle stage from one of marriage preparation to one of personal growth, including alternative living arrangements such as cohabitation.<sup>31</sup>

*Category 5-B.* What appears to be changing behavior on the part of the consumer who continually switches brands, as perceived by the manufacturer interested in obtaining brand loyalty, is actually stable, unchanging behavior as perceived by the consumer. The marketer sees the brand as being differentiated from other brands, while the consumer sees all brands as being the same.

*Category 6-A.* Selective distribution, which was once considered to be an inefficient way of obtaining sales response, is in fact an efficient method for promoting prestige items.

*Category 6-B.* John Dickson and Philip Albaum assert, in "A Method for Developing Tailormade Semantic Differentials for Specific Marketing Content Areas," that the widespread use of the original semantic differential scales developed by Osgood *et al.* for the measurement of attitudes may in fact be ineffective when the scales have not been tested in the actual context of the particular problem being researched.<sup>32</sup>

*Category 7-A.* The assertion that selling less, which has been considered to be a bad thing, may in fact be a good thing and the basis for actual strategy. (In demarketing, for example, to preserve the natural beauty of an area, tourists may be discouraged from visiting there.)

*Category 8-A.* Philip Kotler and Gerald Zaltman assert, in "Social Marketing: An Approach to Planned Social Change," that the art of selling such commodities as steel and soap, and the art of selling social objectives such as family planning, which were considered at the time to be uncorrelated, are in fact correlated.<sup>33</sup>

*Category 10-A.* David Caplovitz's assertion in *The Poor Pay More* that expenditures for many goods and services, which were considered at the time he wrote to decrease at the lower income levels, in fact increase at the lower income level.<sup>34</sup>

*Category 10-B.* The assertion that an increase in price, which was once considered to lead to a reduction in sales, in fact leads to an increase in sales in the case of some prestige items.

<sup>31</sup>Lawrence H. Wortzel, "Young Adults: Single People and Single Person Households," Paper presented at 1976 Conference, Association for Consumer Research, 1976.

<sup>32</sup>John Dickson and Philip Albaum, "A Method for Developing Tailormade Semantic Differentials for Specific Marketing Content Areas," *Journal of Marketing Research*, vol. 14 (February 1977).

<sup>33</sup>Philip Kotler and Gerald Zaltman, "Social Marketing: An Approach to Planned Social Change," *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 35 (July 1971).

<sup>34</sup>David Caplovitz, *The Poor Pay More* (New York: Free Press, 1963).

### Some Prescriptions

Being interesting is very idiosyncratic. We do not suggest that there is only one way to be interesting or that any one style is preferable to another. What are presented below are some prescriptions which could be useful. These prescriptions relate primarily to the *generation* of interesting ideas and not to the process of having them accepted.

1. Identify favored tools or concepts and try to understand the viewing constraints these might pose. What might your perspective cause you to exclude as ideas or relevant data? For example, if you tend to favor the use of cross-sectional survey data, what might be missing by not using laboratory experiments? Or vice versa? If you tend to use concepts from one particular discipline to explain market behavior what might you be missing by not using concepts from a very different discipline?
2. Adopt a devil's advocate role concerning your own school of thought. This is perhaps the most difficult prescription. Tables 2.2 and 2.3 are helpful, but before they or other aids may be used, it is necessary to first identify or map out your own assumptions. Which ideas or knowledge are you not questioning, or which are you assuming are so convincing that they need not be tested?
3. Specify the type or magnitude of evidence necessary for you personally to question an assumption. What would you need to be shown? Substantial information exists, discussed elsewhere in this book, indicating a very marked tendency among people to avoid disconfirming evidence. Is such evidence available? Have you allowed for it? Have you specifically not allowed for it? (Initially, this evidence need not be adequate to convince others to challenge their assumptions.)
4. Consider every potential description/explanation of a phenomenon as equally plausible, especially those that contradict one another.
5. Be mischievous. Would many people have to suffer intellectual discomfort by adding or deleting substantial bodies of information from their current inventory of knowledge if what you are proposing is true? Have you something surprising? Does your theory require an audience to widen their comfort zones?
6. Favor those interesting scientific or intellectual findings or assertions that rate a high evangelical quotient. Do you feel strongly, even insistent, about your newly found challenge to firmly held assumptions?
7. Don't stop at being interesting. Being interesting does not necessarily require being creative. However, creativity in developing an explanation of your challenge is necessary if others are to pay continued serious attention to your challenge.

### Some Important Caveats

It has been suggested that theories be built that challenge firmly held (as opposed to weakly or fanatically held) assumptions. Such theories are most likely to be greeted as interesting. However, several qualifications need to be kept in mind when you are considering this suggestion. These qualifications or caveats are discussed below.

An interesting theory is not necessarily an important theory simply because it challenges firmly held assumptions. A theory that challenges weakly or fanatically held assumptions may have very significant consequences and hence be very important. Similarly, a theory that does not challenge any assumptions may be very important as well. Thus, posing a theory that gains attention is not the same as posing an important theory.

Being interesting is not a substitute for conventional tests of validity and reliability. In fact, establishing statistical validity and reliability may be an important part of the process of gaining attention. The presence of statistical validity makes it more difficult for someone quickly to dismiss a set of ideas as absurd. Even when empirical verification is not possible or not yet obtained, the various "truth" tests to be discussed in Chapters 7 and 8 should still be applied.

Theories may be relevant for purposes of explanation, prediction, and control. Being interesting does not guarantee the relevance of a theory for any of these purposes. A theory that is interesting because it challenges the assumptions of an audience concerned with explaining market behavior may be of very limited value or relevance to an audience that wants to control or influence market behavior. The latter audience may not have particularly firm assumptions as to why a market behaves as it does; the question of being interesting is not important. On the other hand, this audience would find interesting a demonstration that an intervention strategy that has been assumed effective is actually ineffective. For example, the apparent success of a strategy could be shown to be the result of other actions or a result of bias in the interpretation of data.

As just indicated, not everyone for whom a theory might be relevant will hold even weak assumptions about the phenomena of the theory. For example, a manager or a student unfamiliar with theories of information processing may upon first exposure find them very relevant to his or her interest in consumer behavior. However, because this is an area that is new to the student, he or she may not yet have developed assumptions that could be challenged. The theories encountered are interesting because of their relevance to some task, not because of any challenge they provide to existing assumptions. Thus the notion of familiarity with an area or problem becomes an important mediating factor. A certain degree of familiarity and involvement with an issue is necessary in order for one to establish a groundwork of firmly held assumptions. In fact, we often find interesting those matters about which we have no prior knowledge. For reasons quite unrelated to any preexisting assumptions, they catch our fancy.

### *Summary*

This chapter has developed one particular definition of being interesting—the degree to which firmly held assumptions are challenged. Several important caveats about relying exclusively on this criterion were also presented, even though just briefly. It is most important that assumptions be challenged. Only by challenging assumptions can we reassert our confidence in them. The need to challenge existing assumptions is especially high in a field such as marketing, where many phenomena change over time. Thus a set of assumptions may have been correct at the time they were established, but because of changes in the marketplace, perhaps resulting from actions based on those once correct assumptions, the assumptions may be less valid.

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## THREE

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### CAUSALITY

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*The notion of causality is a central one in the philosophy of science. Some scholars view causality as it applies to social behavior with considerable skepticism whereas others view it as integral to our thought processes. Here we consider a sample of the ideas concerning causality with a bias in favor of causal thinking as a central phenomenon in theory construction. The student familiar with the treatment of causality in the social and philosophical sciences might wish simply to skim this chapter.*