EMPATHY: IS IT THE MISSING INDEPENDENT DISPOSITIONAL VARIABLE IN THE STUDY OF INNOVATIVE BEHAVIOR?

Emma Auer, Boston State College

Abstract

One psychological variable has not been studied in relation to innovativeness. That is empathic skill or social acuity. This study tested a sample of 763 female respondents for ownership of products warranted by the respondents as innovations. Scores on social acuity and opinion leadership were also collected and related to scores on ownership of products warranted by respondents as innovative as well as to those which respondents found noninnovative. Social acuity scores produced higher percentages of significant relationships to innovative product ownership scores and to both innovative and noninnovative product perception scores than did opinion leadership scores.

Introduction

Rosenberg (1968) has pointed out that "a very prominent type of research analysis...considers the relationship between a disposition, as the independent variable, and behavior (verbal or otherwise), as the dependent variable."

Over the last three decades attempts have been made to relate innovative behavior, which Engel, Blackwell, and Kollat (1978) has defined by at least 51 different criteria, with a plethora of psychological variables or dispositions.

Even a cursory survey of the voluminous literature on innovativeness reveals attempts to link innovative behavior with a list of dispositions which includes: secured anxiety (Schank and Simon, 1974), social mobility (Roberts and Smiley, 1977; Robertson, 1967), risk proneness (Darden and Reynolds, 1972), self confidence (King, 1971), dogmatism (Jacoby, 1971), inner-directedness (Donnelly and Ivancevich, 1974), venturesomeness (Darden and Reynolds, 1972; Robertson, 1967), and opinion leadership (Robertson and Myers, 1969).

Missing from the foregoing list, in this author's estimation, is a rather obvious candidate for inclusion. That psychological variable is social acuity, social intelligence, or empathic skill. If, as is now commonly believed, innovations have statuses ascribed to them by a culture, and their definitions by that culture depend upon their potential for visibly communicating those statuses for their possessors then it is all the more surprising that attempts have not been made to relate the possession of social acuity skills or acuity to social cues to innovative behavior.

With the exception of a small pilot study by the author (Auer, 1971), so much investigation has been reported. It is the purpose of this article to fill this gap in the literature of innovativeness. This study analyzes the relationship of social acuity score data and of opinion leadership score data to product ownership data (some of which refers to innovations as described below) collected from a sample of 763 female consumers.

Social Acuity or Empathic Skills Defined

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1958) defined social perception or social acuity or empathy as consisting of two major types: (1) sensitivity to individual differences (i.e. interpersonal sensitivity), and (2) sensitivity to the generalized other (i.e. awareness of social norms or the typical responses of social groups).

Concern with and testing for empathic skills have been largely confined to the psychological field.

Research Described

For purposes of this study a sample of 1200 female household purchasing agents was systematically chosen from Market Facts' Northeastern U.S. consumer panel maintained to replicate the demographics of the population at large. A total of 763 usable responses was received.

Data collected from the Market Facts sample included:

- scores on six self designated opinion leadership items (Trohlerd, 1963)
- scores on three tests of social acuity or empathic skills of the second kind described by Bronfenbrenner (Johnson, 1963)
- ownership data on 40 products (shown to be owned by less than 16% of a pilot study sample prior to their inclusion in the Market Facts sample study).

A distinctive feature of this study was that it collected data on consumer perception of the degree of innovativeness of the 40 products in the study. Such data was taken on a range of one to five—five being the most innovative in the consumers' perception. Analysis of the consumer data on how innovative respondents perceived each of the 40 products to be, revealed that 20 of the 40 received average innovation scores significantly higher (.05 level, one tailed test) than the mean of the average scores for all 40 products on innovativeness. These 20 products were defined as consumer warranted innovations in terms of the sample researched at the point in time at which this data was taken. The use of this criterion for defining innovations by consumer ascription of status to products given operational reality to a concept which has been given lip service in the literature of innovation without its being put into practice prior to this reporting.

The 20 products designated as innovations by consumers were:


The 20 products which failed to meet the test of consumer perception of innovativeness were:

(079) wide leg slacks, (080) ankle length hostess gown, (085) trench coat, (086) platform sandals, (087) envelope bag, (089) deep red '30s' lipstick, (092) phosphor, (095) garbage compactor, (097) electric char-b-que, (098) wok, (102) wicker furniture, (103) bent...

Chi square analysis of product ownership scores and scores on three social acuity tests and of perception of innovativeness of product scores and social acuity scores showed significant relationships of:

6 of 20 innovative product ownership scores related in 8 different ways (13% of 60 such possible relationships) to acuity scores,
5 of 20 noninnovative product ownership scores related in 6 different ways (10% of 60 such possible relationships) to acuity scores,
12 of 20 perception of innovative product scores related in 14 different ways (23% of 60 such possible relationships) to acuity scores,
9 of 20 perception of noninnovative product scores related in 11 different ways (18% of 60 such possible relationships) to acuity scores. (see Appendix 1)

Chi square analysis of product ownership scores and scores of six opinion leadership items, and of perception of innovativeness of product scores and opinion leadership scores showed significant relationships of:

6 of 20 innovative product ownership scores related in 7 different ways (7% of 120 such possible relationships) to opinion leadership scores,
12 of 20 noninnovative product ownership scores related in 18 different ways (15% of 120 such possible relationships) to opinion leadership scores,
3 of 20 perception of innovative product scores related in 3 ways (3% of 120 such possible relationships) to opinion leadership scores,
5 of 20 perception of noninnovative product scores related in 8 different ways (7% of 120 such possible relationships) to opinion leadership scores. (see Appendix 2)

Social acuity scores are seen to be related to innovative product ownership scores almost twice as they are to noninnovative product scores. The opposite is true for opinion leadership scores. Social acuity scores are related to perception scores of innovative products nearly eight times more frequently than are opinion leadership scores. Social acuity scores are related to perception scores of noninnovative products more than twice as many times as are opinion leadership scores.

Multigroup discriminant analysis carried out on social acuity scores divided into five categories suggestive of the categories of adopters of new products (Hepper 1967), with product ownership scores used as discriminators, resulted in significant results in the case of two of the three social acuity tests used. Best discriminators in the analysis of social acuity test one (Variable 036) were:

- Innovative product Great Gatsby white hose (Var 083)
- Innovative product Flokati rug (Var 106)

Best product discriminators in the analysis of social acuity test number three (Variable 038) were:

- Innovative product foam cushioned toilet seat (Var 100)
- Noninnovative product People magazine (Var 115)

Conclusions

This study shows that when innovations are defined or warranted by consumer perception scores, ownership scores on such products are significantly related to scores of social acuity or empathy nearly twice as frequently as they are to opinion leadership scores. Opinion leadership scores are significantly related to noninnovative product ownership scores more frequently than are social acuity scores. Social acuity scores are significantly related to perception of innovative product scores nearly eight times as frequently as are opinion leadership scores; they are related to perception of noninnovative product scores over twice as frequently as are opinion leadership scores. Discriminant analysis of social acuity scores from two of three tests used shows three of four significant discriminators in two analyses to be innovative products. Results of this study are heuristic for a new approach to the identification of innovative consumer segments in the market.

References

H. L. Schrank, "Correlates of Fashion Leadership: Implications for Fashion Process Theory," The Sociologi-