

# “Means-end laddering: a motivational perspective”

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## SECTION 3. General issues in management

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### Means-end laddering: a motivational perspective

#### Abstract

For the past thirty years, market researchers have used the technique of means-end laddering to understand consumer behavior. The prevailing thinking was that means-end laddering explored the hierarchical thought processes which were involved in making past consumer purchases. These would then be used as a basis for understanding future purchasing patterns.

This article looks at means-end laddering from the motivational perspective. Rather than taking on a static, retrospective view of consumers' thought processes, it argues that means-end laddering actually uncovers the theoretical basis for consumptive choice, which can then be used as a template for meeting consumer's future consumptive needs.

The article outlines the theoretical foundations of the motivational perspective in light of existing methodological limitations in the cognitive structure approach to means-end laddering. It presents two templates which drive individual consumptive behavior based on the core concepts of either affiliation (Theta) or achievement (Lambda).

**Keywords:** means-end laddering, motivational perspective, consumer behaviour, personal construct theory, affiliation, achievement, Theta, Lambda.

**JEL Classification:** D18, D10, D11.

#### Introduction

Means-end laddering is "an in-depth, probing interview technique, so called because it forces the respondent up a ladder of abstraction, linking relatively concrete meanings at an attribute level with abstract meanings of more pervasive existential importance" (Baker 2002 p.226). Since its introduction in the cognitive psychology literature by Hinkle<sup>1</sup> (1965), the technique has been applied to other fields which call for knowledge elicitation (Costigan et al., 2000), such as information systems (Rugg and McGeorge, 1995; Rugg et al., 2002), the recruitment of student-athletes (Kelonsky et al., 2001), and marketing research into consumer behavior (Gutman and Reynolds, 1978; Gutman, 1981; Gutman, 1982; Reynolds and Gutman, 1988).

As means-end laddering gained popularity as a tool for gathering and organizing information, researchers continued to investigate and refine the theoretical assumptions of this technique (Grunert and Grunert, 1995), such as its purpose, its mode of enquiry, and the validity of its results (Rugg et al., 2002).

The consumer marketing community takes two different views on the type of information that means-end laddering unearths and how it relates to business' marketing strategies (Grunert and Grunert, 1995). The cognitive structure view argues for a historical perspective aimed at accessing and hierar-

chically organizing the knowledge that has influenced actual past consumer purchases (Grunert and Grunert, 1995). The motivational view, on the other hand, argues for a future-facing perspective, which uses laddering to help construct relevant theoretical motives for consumption and gain insight into likely shopping behavior (Grunert and Grunert, 1995; Asselbergs, 1989).

While the theoretical basis for the cognitive structure view has been explored in the work of Grunert and Grunert (1995), the motivational view has been largely neglected within the marketing literature despite its closer association to the original principles of Hinkle (1965)'s core construct theory, on which means-end laddering was built.

Hence, this article aims to establish the theoretical basis for the motivational view and to draw distinctions with the approach of the cognitive structure view in terms of research purpose, measurement tools and validation criteria. The article then argues that consumer motivations can be looked at as a pair of motivation types based on a person's desire for either achievement or for affiliation and represented by the Greek symbols Theta and Lambda.

The article first presents the origin and development of the means-end laddering technique. It then critiques the assumptions behind the cognitive structure view and addresses its limitations as a tool for consumer marketers. After, it presents the theoretical basis for the motivational view and discusses its practical application in understanding and shaping consumer behavior.

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<sup>1</sup> Hinkle (1965) did not use the term « laddering »; the term was introduced by Bannister and Mair (1968), in their summary of Hinkle's work.

## 1. The means-end laddering technique

Means-end laddering is derived from the work of Kelly (1955)'s personal construct theory, which postulates that every person anticipates events in terms of constructs, the meanings and interpretations which they assign them. The fundamental postulate of the personal construct theory is that "a person's processes are psychologically canalized by the ways in which he or she anticipates events" (Kelly, 1955, p. 46) and it serves as the basis for a further 11 corollaries.

As one of the 11 corollaries, the organization corollary (Kelly, 1955, p. 56) argues that these constructs are inherently structured in hierarchical orders and should be defined by their relative position within them (Hinkle, 1965, p. 2). When building a series of related constructs, researchers can construct a hierarchy through superordinate implications by starting with concrete constructs and building up to abstract value constructs or through subordinate implications by starting with the latter and gradually deconstructing them downwards.

Using the personal construct theory as a foundation, Hinkle (1965) introduced a technique for accessing "the ideal self", a series of constructs created through superordinate implication and connected on a single hierarchy like the rungs of a ladder. Starting with a more concrete behavior, Hinkle argued that an interviewer could explore deeper into the person's self by asking constantly why each successive construct was important, or "laddering up" toward more abstract answers. In contrast, when using the subordinate structure, an interviewer could start with more abstract behavior traits and ask the respondent to question how it had been reached (Hinkle, 1965).

Another of the corollaries to Kelly's personal construct theory is the dichotomous corollary (Kelly, 1955), which posits that only two choices exist, one for the preferred choice (or pole) and the other for the non-preferred one. It also implies that people have a preference when choosing between two, equally worthy options. Although these two options could both be ladderred people typically only build a ladder for their preferred pole because they often fail to see the benefits of their less desirable choice, providing only half of the picture (Mostovicz et al., 2008). Hinkle (1965)'s study also revealed that people will resist more strongly a change in the choice of superordinate constructs than in subordinate ones.

Independent of Hinkle's model, Gutman (1982)'s model for means-end laddering is based on two particular assumptions. His first assumption is that values, or the "enduring end-states of existence"

(Rokeach, 1973), play a dominant role in guiding choice patterns. The second is that people make use of these hierarchies for the sake of cognitive economy, to maximize the information readily accessible with the least expenditure of cognitive effort (Rosch, 1978). In addition to these two particular assumptions, the theory positions that all consumer actions, in general, have consequences which consumers learn to associate with particular actions.

In order to operationalize the theory, Reynolds and Gutman (1988) posit that the ladder is better constructed if the interview is conducted using a superordinate structure. First, the product itself needs to be identified, then the participant should be asked to identify which concrete attributes make the product appealing to them. Then, by asking probing questions related to why the product is important to them, the interviewer can begin to sequence the core constructs in the hierarchy of consequences starting with these concrete attributes and working towards the consumer's core values.

As a participant may identify several attributes, Reynolds and Gutman's interview approach usually ends with several ladders. Even with a small sample of participants, the results tend to produce an overabundance of data. For this reason, further research within this school of thought has paid attention to identifying ways to reduce and measure the data to produce meaningful results (Bagozzi and Dabholkar, 1994; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 1999; Bagozzi et al. 2000; Bagozzi et al., 2003; Baker, 2002; Gutman, 1997; Reynolds and Gutman, 1988).

## 2. Examining the cognitive structure approach

The main criterion for evaluating the usefulness of the cognitive structure approach is its ability to predict behavior based on the cognitive structure and based on research data. This approach's validity increases as the value measured by laddering technique is deemed to approach the value of the respondent's "true" cognitive structure, as defined by classical test theory. However, it is impossible to measure a respondent's "true" cognitive structure through external means since new information is constantly changing the cognitive processes which feed into behavioral decisions (Grunert and Grunert, 1995). Because this external yardstick does not exist and because the data being gathered captured both the cognitive structure and related processes, the possibility for a positivistic "truth" cannot be achieved.

Instead, Grunert and Grunert (1995) look to establish a predictive validity which might be a useful, albeit not fully "true," solution. In their argument,

means-end research which follows a positivistic paradigm should adopt four criteria. The first criterion is that raw data should come from the cognitive structures of the respondent rather than the researcher. The second is that strategic processes in the data collection should be typical of the target situation being investigated, either by ensuring that they reflect those one would expect to find in that given situation or by collecting data with minimal strategic processes. Thirdly, related answers should be coded or grouped according to cognitive categories widely shared by consumers, researchers, and users of the research results. Grunert and Grunert (1995) suggest that researchers formalize the procedure for coding and clarify how data are elicited. Lastly, the algorithm for data reduction should be based on theory and should not be influenced by technical procedural aspects, such as an arbitrary cut-off level or a preference for direct rather than indirect pathways into the network.

Therefore, Grunert and Grunert (1995) propose that respondents participate in the process through a series of post-laddering interviews and by writing documents to reflect on the interview. These post-interview procedures should not create data coding which is based on the idiosyncratic cognition of the researchers but rather on widely-believed categories. Grunert and Grunert (1995) also draw a distinction between respondents who demonstrate weak cognitive links between categories and those who demonstrate strong links. The former are unable to reach higher levels of abstraction while the latter may give data which results in several higher abstractions. These differences call for tailored approaches during the interviews.

While, at first, the structure for this system of ladder interviewing (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988) does not seem to diverge significantly from Hinkle (1965)'s original concept, a close examination shows that the cognitive structure approach leaves three areas unaddressed, namely the nature of the data collected, the partiality of the data refinement technique, and the subjectivity of data categorization system. Each of these areas is examined below.

**2.1. The nature of data collected.** The means-end model as a whole (Gutman, 1982) is based on the underlying assumption of simple cause and effect relations. This assumption finds support in legal positivism, which claims no inherent or necessary connection between law and morality and that laws are simply socially agreed sets of rules made by human beings (Matzner, 1994). These causal chains are basic not only to legal positivism but to means-end theory as well (Matzner, 1994).

The assumption of these causal chains is eminently useful for organizing thought and action, with possible applications to virtually any area of social life (Matzner, 1994). The model was popularized in the social sciences by Max Weber (1930) through his theory of bureaucracy and in economics by Gunnar Myrdal (1965). The most influential version of the means-end model in economics was formulated by Jan Tinbergen (1940) who received the first Nobel Prize in economics for his work on causation (Matzner, 1994).

However, the means-end model has also been criticized by Matzner (1994) whose work presents several objections from the economic literature. Among them is that the explanatory content of the model does not discuss the extent to which the means-end model guides behavior nor that it can in fact be at odds with its claims. Another of his objections is the absence of a theoretical foundation for the application of the means-end model in social processes.

**2.2. Partial data resulting from refining techniques.** The cognitive structure approach of the means-end model (Grunert and Grunert, 1995) assumes that respondents will be able to relate realistically to the product. Based on this assumption, the interviews would be able to record the reasoning behind the respondents' past behavior (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988). However, one should question the ability of the respondents to provide reasons for their past behavior, as Bagozzi and Dabholkar (1994) highlight. Their research argues that means-end laddering might represent a stylized post-hoc interpretation of how people believe their cognition works but not necessarily a true representation of their cognitive processes at work. This perspective is supported by the research of Baumeister and Tice (1984) and of Greenberg et al. (1982) which show that people bias their cognitions even when given under completely private conditions. In other words, people's reasoning does not represent necessarily the cognitive processes that led to their past behavior. Pyszczynski et al. (1997) argue that this bias exists because people seek a positive self-image or affirmation of the faith they have in their cultural world-views. Kahneman et al. (1982) reported that cognition is prone to bias in interpreting evidence before it is committed to memory. Examples of this memory bias were also reported by Bartlett (1932), Loftus and Palmer (1974) and Baddeley (1990), among others.

For this reason, Bagozzi and his colleagues (2000; 2003) have adopted rules derived from discursive psychology when analyzing data. The central tenet of discursive psychology is to analyze accounts,

which are not seen as secondary to the real event, but as constituting it. Language, in this case, is treated as functional – it does things – rather than neutrally descriptive – a window to a person’s inner truth (1995). The philosophical paradigm that lies at the base of discursive psychology is that of critical realism, which argues for an objectively knowable reality that can be skewed by our cognitive processes (Harré, 1977; Harré, 1995; Harré and Stearns, 1995; Harré, 1998). However, proponents of the cognitive structure view are silent about the extent to which the use of an analytical method at odds with positivism affects the philosophical stance of the research as a whole.

**2.3. Categorization issues.** There is negative correlation between precise language and precise meaning (Kaplan, 1979). In his own words, Hinkle notes that “it is important that a contrast and its symbol not be equated” (1965, p. 22) and gives as an example the word “honest”, which might have very different meanings in the context of criminals as opposed to close friends. Means-end laddering in marketing (Bagozzi and Dabholkar, 1994; Bagozzi et al., 2003; Baker, 1996; Baker, 2002; Gutman, 1997) compares themes without paying attention to their social context or to their position in the laddering hierarchy, leaving the reasons behind the categorization as enigmas. Hinkle (1965) was careful not to compare labels, which may imply different meaning to different people, and his study focused on his ability to manipulate the construct systems of his individual subjects.

**2.4. Grouping of data.** Two issues of concern involve the calling for data reduction and for its refinement. The first looks at the quality of the data collected and how it is reduced according to its relevance to the research (Bagozzi and Dabholkar, 1994; Gutman, 1997). Laddering can start with any kind of free sorting and will result in superordinate constructs that are similar to those found by Gutman (1997). One study (Niemeyer et al., 2001) asked subjects to view movies or read books in order to start the process of laddering. The goal of the researcher is to explain the relevance of such data.

Typically, not all data are considered relevant, and as a result, some parts of the ladders should be excluded. Gutman (1997), reporting on an earlier ladder (Gutman and Reynolds, 1978) linking morning cereals to romance and coffee drinking to freedom and security, challenges the legitimacy of these associations and thus neglects these data from his analysis, an action also taken in the work of Bagozzi and Dabholkar (1994).

The other issue is the manageability of the data. Analyzing the data calls for further data refinement as to render the data manageable. The system for refinement is not predetermined, and researchers strive to be clear about the process they have applied. Baker (2002), for example, developed a system of six contextual steps which she took to arrive at systematic and manageable data levels and meaningful results. Refinement is done by using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Qualitatively, themes are categorized as to refine the data further. One method is content analysis, which looks to codify the content of the interview along topics and hierarchical levels. This can be done either by using a pencil and paper (Baker, 1996; Baker, 2002) or by using special software (Gengler and Reynolds, 1995). To increase its reliability, this codification practice is cross-controlled by two or more independent judges with the differences then being discussed (Baker, 2002; Feixas et al., 2002).

The quantitative method uses a wide range of statistical methods to refine the data further into elements (Reynolds and Perkins, 1987). These elements are derived from isolated interview responses which are allocated into various categories and then analyzed systematically. For example, Bagozzi and Dabholkar (1994) adopted an implication matrix (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988) to show how frequently a single element, or “goal”, led to other elements in the data set and with how many respondents it was associated. As all of their categories were defined as goals, they needed to define a way to measure each goal hierarchically based on its relative level of abstraction. To achieve this, the authors used a statistical procedure developed by Pieters et al. (1993) to measure each goal according to how it connected to the others on the ladder. Based on a scale between 0 and 1, higher values were assigned to goals which served as a destination rather than a source. Thus, those goals in the ladder which scored higher emerged predominantly as ends, and those which scored lower as means.

In the grouping of data, methods of reduction are based on capturing social agreement on salient issues. The reduction of values, as discussed above, suggests that some potentially valuable data will not be present. On the other hand, refining and managing data are the problems of the researcher himself. As a whole, research should strive to base itself on true solutions in order to overcome such problems.

**2.5. Applicability of general data to individual cases.** When used in mass marketing, many of the means-end studies create an agglomeration of the various ladders elicited from the sample to formulate

strategies for market positions. However, according to Hinkle (1965), the unit of research is the individual and it might be more useful to ladder each attribute individually instead, as proposed by Grunert and Grunert (1995). This ultimate need to understand the individual is at odds with an inductive strategy as this approach suffers from nomothetic/idiographic disjunction (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). In other words, the general results characteristic of a positivistic approach cannot be deconstructed to predict the behavior of the individual.

**2.6. Issues of external validity.** As one of the most fundamental concepts of modern marketing (Wind, 1978), market segmentation posits that the market is heterogeneous and different customers have different requirements (Smith, 1956). The principles of segmentation have been further augmented with the introduction of relationship marketing strategies targeting “a segment of one” (Grönroos, 1994). The uniform hierarchical map, typical of means-end laddering studies, does not reflect the heterogeneous concept of market segmentation.

Moreover, segmentation theory calls for devising a marketing mix for each of a variety of segments (McDonald and Dunbar, 2004). Currently, the market research making use of means-end laddering focuses mainly on the product segment and disregards other important elements of the marketing mix such as place (i.e., context) and people (i.e., consumers).

### 3. The theory of means-end laddering: the motivational view

Contrary to the cognitive structure approach, which views data from the laddering interview as a *post-hoc* recollection of existing structure, the motivational approach views this data as *in-situ*, emancipating and recording participants' reflections. In broad terms, the motivational view sees the core constructs revealed in means-end laddering to be either self-focused or socially focused, reflecting the various motivation theories. When reporting on the satisfaction that participants received from the laddering interview, Hinkle (1965) found that the core constructs they expressed were either related to achievement or to affiliation. Among the self-focused theories, one can count the need for achievement (McClelland, 1961) and the need for cognition (Cohen et al., 1955). The socially focused theories, on the other hand, explore the need for affiliation (Atkinson, 1958), or fitting in, and the need to exert control over oneself and others (Atkinson 1958). As shorthand, the authors have developed a classification system describing those who seek challenge and achievement as part of a Lambda

template ( $\Lambda$ ) while those who look for unity and affiliation as part of a Theta template ( $\Theta$ ).

Hinkle (1965) was interested in the constructs and their relative position within the construction system but did not look into the structure of the ladder itself. However, combining his two observations indicates both that motivation is a core construct linked to the enduring end-states of existence (Rokeach, 1973) and that laddering makes it possible to link these values to subordinate constructs in ways that provoke the motivation of the participant.

According to Kelly's construction corollary (1955, p. 50), it is the person being interviewed who places an interpretation upon what is constructed since “the substance which he construes does not produce the structure; the person does”. Thus, while the substance of the ladder differs from one person to another, the way in which this substance is interpreted would follow either the Lambda or the Theta templates.

We cannot expect people to construct spontaneously and to go through the cognitive and emotional process (Hinkle, 1965; Reynolds and Gutman, 1988) of linking subordinate constructs with more abstract (Niemeyer, Anderson, and Stockton, 2001) superordinate constructs. Unless provoked, people tend not to reconsider their interpretation (Weick et al., 2005). Thus, the laddering interview is a provocation where the interviewer is “leading the witness” across the ladder to ensure that the participant moves from the subordinate construct to the superordinate one. Nevertheless, the validity of the data stays intact. While the interviewer is in control of the substance of the answer, it is impossible to predict what the nature of the interpretation will be and whether it will follow the Theta or the Lambda template. For that reason, this provocation is not a deception, but rather a facilitator for linking concrete subordinate construct to the superordinate ones more difficult to express and more resistant to change (Hinkle, 1965).

**3.1. How many levels are in a ladder?** The goal of psychology research into core constructs has generally been to move from the concrete and limited to the abstract and open-ended. Hinkle (1965) was interested in identifying the superordinate construct and used ten to twelve ladders to achieve his goal. Bannister and Mair (1968) report that their ladders were of shorter length. In short, these researchers were not interested in the structure of the ladders as long as they could create one.

Alternatively, research into marketing pays attention to this issue and elaborates on the number of levels that a ladder should have. Market researchers are

generally interested in the content that emerges out of a laddering exercise, but they debate the role and degree of abstraction that each level in the ladder should consist of. Thus, research in this area recognizes, at least empirically, that an interviewee might not really advance when being guided up a ladder and might instead provide the same answer expressed differently.

Rugg and his colleagues (1995; 1999; 2002) identify the ladder hierarchies as sets of goals, tasks or explanations while Gutman (1982) and Reynolds and Gutman (1988) used a simple, three-level ladder consisting of attributes, consequences and values. A four-level ladder (Bagozzi et al., 2000; de Chernatony, 2001; Thompson and Chen, 1998) pays attention to the role and degree of abstraction that each level in the ladder represents by dividing consequences into two: benefits or abstract attributes and emotional rewards or psycho-social consequences. Even Reynolds, who advocates a three-level system (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988), is actually using a four-level one (Reynolds and Whitlark, 1995). A six-level ladder (Olson and Reynolds, 1983) was proposed as well, dividing values into two – instrumental and terminal – but the justification for linking these two types of values directly is still debated as Rokeach (1973), the conceiver of these taxonomies, refutes this idea.

Although disputed, the number of levels is important for two reasons. First, the basic assumption of means-end laddering is that the structured ladder is hierarchical and ordered by the level of abstraction (Grunert and Grunert, 1995). If a respondent's cognitive structure is especially weak and has only few and weak associations between levels, he will probably not progress in a linear way (Gruenewald and Lockhead, 1980; Strube, 1984) and will seek new patterns. On the other hand, a four-level ladder seems to offer sufficiently strong associations and clear differences in the levels of abstraction between levels. The four-level ladder is not only used by some market researchers (Bagozzi et al., 2000; de Chernatony, 2001; Thompson and Chen, 1998), despite some in the industry advocating a three-level one (Reynolds and Whitlark, 1995), but it also appears in other disciplines as well (Gagliardi, 1986; Korac-Kakabadse et al., 2003).

This discussion on the number of levels aims to look at how specific the questions asked in an interview should be. Although interviewers typically lead respondents with more general questions such as "Why is it important to you?", they can provoke more useful responses with more specific questions such as "What benefits do you get from a product

that has such-and-such attribute?". Asking specific questions ensures that the answers correspond to the desired level within the construct hierarchy. Thus, benefits refer to the product's attributes, are concrete with an objective flair, and always refer back to the context. For instance, if a chair is wide enough (attribute), it is comfortable (benefit). On the other hand, emotional rewards are abstract and subjective and refer back to the person.

**3.2. Methods of collecting data.** While some researchers, such as Hinkle (1965) and Grunert and Grunert (1995), recommend long, face-to-face interviews, others use collection methods via telephone calls (Bagozzi and Dabholkar, 1994), questionnaires (Bagozzi, Bergami, and Leone, 2003; Gutman, 1997), or unstructured interviews (Hodgkinson and Crawshaw, 1985). However, the method of data collection is less important as long as the data itself is able to produce a ladder which can be analyzed.

**3.3. The value polemic.** The motivational approach has a specific view on the value issue. The level of values is of concern in research both into psychology and marketing for they represent the deeper reasons which people have for seeking emotional rewards. As the deepest layers of our personality (Rokeach, 1973), they are difficult to explore (Niemeyer, Anderson, and Stockton, 2001) but can be approached through the Lambda-Theta templates using the characteristics of either affiliation or achievement as discussed previously.

How to define values is a polemical issue as well. In general, the debate is centred on whether to approach the topic from the macro perspective or from the micro perspective (Baker, 2002). The macro perspective uses values to profile respondents based on pre-determined inventories or lists of general human values (Baker, 2002). For example, Rokeach (1973, p. 5) provides an inventory of eighteen general values which he defines as "an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or an end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct." Other inventories include the Value and Life Style (VALS) (Holman, 1984) and List of Values (LOV) (Kahle et al., 1986) categorizations. The alternative approach is the micro perspective, which was developed in the context of marketing research and uses means-end laddering as its method of research (Baker, 2002). By seeking to identify those values which correspond to the attributes elicited during the research, this approach results in lists of values that are context-related.

The motivational view adopts the macro perspective, claiming that values are pre-determined even if they

are not always revealed through a laddering interview. Nevertheless, in terms of the level of abstraction and the meaning of each answer, the motivational view argues that it is possible to construct partial ladders which represents faithfully, albeit incompletely, the way a person interprets and the pre-determined template (Theta or Lambda) by which they are motivated.

**3.4. The contextual aspect.** Means-end laddering would benefit the practical research purposes of product marketing by incorporating contextual considerations when building people's ladder hierarchies. Kelly's range corollary (Kelly, 1955, p. 68) assumes that personal constructs are not relevant to all events in man's life and thus limited in their range. To improve trans-contextual relevance, the operating range should be closely controlled so that the constructs being compared belong to similar ranges. Thus, the research is most likely to uncover not only how people relate to each level of their construction system but also to the specific language they use in describing it.

**3.5. Sampling issues.** Most means-end laddering research uses semi-structured interviews which results in ideographic studies suffering from generalizability issues (Bandura, 1986). Two issues of concern are the size of the sample and its composition. However, means-end laddering is interested in finding out how each personality type expresses and interprets the product researched. To get a good grip on the language people use, the sample size does not need to be large before a saturation point is reached. Hinkle (1965) shows clearly that people reflect on their life motivations in one of two ways only. Thus, the role of the research becomes contextual in that it seeks to identify the language used by each of the two groups respectively.

Building an accurate sample composition calls for addressing two issues. Firstly, the sample should represent the general population being researched (Blaikie, 2000; Hussey and Hussey, 1997). Secondly, and of particular interest in marketing research, is how the means-end laddering method is used. The basic assumption of this field of research is that means-end laddering will reveal the logic used to make past purchasing decisions (Gutman, 1982; Reynolds and Gutman, 1988). Therefore, most of the academic literature recommends that studies find respondents who purchased the product recently (Baker, 1996; Botschen et al., 1999; Claeys et al., 1995; Dibley and Baker, 2001; Hirschman, 1988; Kelonsky et al. 1993; Kelonsky et al., 2001). If, however, means-end laddering is not a post hoc exploration exercise and rather a reflection of the respon-

dent's current construct system or the beliefs of the interviewer, then an interviewee can be a candidate regardless of whether he has bought or plans to buy the product as long as he has preferences about the issue being researched. Equally, the Theta / Lambda templates seem to be uninfluenced either by time, place or any socio-demographic variable. As long as the sample provides sufficient information on both personality typologies, there is no need to pay further attention to the composition of the sample.

**3.6. Application of means-end laddering to marketing.** When moving through the three phases of marketing, a marketer must weigh the relative advantages of strong theoretical research requirements with the practicalities of his managerial responsibilities. The transactional approach seeks a single universal solution for all; segmentation tries to find common taxonomies for consumer groups; relationship marketing requires the most research inputs since it attempts to market to segments of one. In practice, it is useful, as a compromise, to have between five and twelve segments (McDonald and Dunbar, 2004).

However, each product group operates under different marketing paradigms according to its market segmentation and the market's various needs. Means-end laddering helps marketers to explore how people are motivated and to demonstrate to customers how a product can enhance their lifestyle. Selecting the needs that the marketer wishes to enhance with his product depends on only two templates – Theta and Lambda.

#### 4. Means-end laddering in practice

While it looks to be a simple technique, laddering requires tacit skills and sensibilities which take time to develop; thus, its formal implementation is considered to be an art rather than a science (Fransella and Bannister, 1977, p. 108). Nevertheless, according to Niemeyer et al.'s (2001) recommendations, an interviewer should pay attention to limiting the prompting given during an interview. The interviewer should only take the initiative in selecting the starting point for the interview. This enables the development of a clear ladder and typically begins with the most subordinate construct. At this point, the interviewer should turn into an active listener and avoid making assumptions or predictions of the interviewee's responses or preferences. When the interviewee cannot express his or her ideas, the interviewer can elicit a comment by phrasing a question in the form of a negative, such as "What would have happened if this attribute had not been present?" or by asking him to summarise a lengthy observation.



Once a superordinate construct has been reached, Niemeyer et al. (2001) recommend the use of metaphors to express difficult, highly abstract ideas. This technique is in line with the personal construct theory (Kelly, 1955) and the work of Landfield (1976), which highlight people's tendency to conceive of difficult abstract concepts by their contrast – “not black” rather than “white”. This contrast is useful in explaining clearly people's preferred pole of the construct, but does not identify people's non-preferred pole.

The technique of means-end laddering can be learned in the course of a few hours; however, the accuracy of the information comes from the interviewer's interaction with the respondent and the confirmation they get of the language being used. Becoming an active, impartial listener is a long process of learning how to be sensitive to language and the way people talk. After thirty years of teaching, Covey (2004) admits that his biggest challenge is to listen uncritically.

## Conclusion

This article has argued the empirical and theoretical advantages of the motivational view as a facilitation tool for helping people to move further up their hierarchy of values, whatever they may be. In this way, it represents a useful, realistic inductive strategy for assessing personal behavior and its evolution over time.

The motivational approach posits that instead of trying to identify people's recollection of the past with the hope of informing the future, it is more

useful to help them move forward along their motivation type of Theta or Lambda. People are not always aware of how an action is linked to their core constructs because they often “do not know what they want” (Rugg and Hooper, 1999, p. 183) and keep changing their minds. However, as Hinkle (1965) shows, people change their minds more easily when dealing with subordinate constructs. Means-end laddering enables the marketer to link the product to superordinate constructs that are more difficult to change.

These links can be made either in-situ or as a-priori research, and they are based on ladders that describe either the way affiliation-seeking Theta types or achievement-seeking Lambda types are motivated. While these two ladders are a-contextual, selecting a narrow range for the research would facilitate the collection of the relevant language participants use when interpreting their own set of core constructs within that range.

This technique, although embedded in theory, can be useful both for practitioners who wish to communicate more deeply and meaningfully and to researchers who wish to identify the motivational language people use in various contexts. Although the practice of relationship marketing has been criticized as a self-serving tool for trapping or “hooking” customers into “captive” relationships and even punishing their escape with high switching costs (Dodd and Favaro, 2006; Gummesson, 1994; Kavali et al., 1999), it should rather be seen as an effective use of means-end laddering enabling more personalized relationships through various marketing channels.

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