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What Designers Can Borrow from Social Science Theorizing

Like many design and technology practitioners, I'm questioning what will remain of our respective professions after we sort out the destruction left in the wake of AI. In a study conducted by Anthropic, the authors state, with no sense of irony, that computer-related professions are some of the most exposed careers [1]. I recently left a long career in consulting and went back to school to get my PhD. While prospects of a scholarly career are just as bleak and uncertain [2], my transition has given me a more measured view of industry and some thoughts about how practitioners might adjust to threats of commoditization. I've observed that the core analytic skills underlying scholarly social science work have meaningful applicability in industry, and seem, at least for the moment, AI-proof. More specifically, I think theory production and strategy definition are very similar, and academia has figured out how to successfully create a theory and argue in support of it. We should borrow parts of a scholarly approach.

THINKING ABOUT THEORY PRODUCTION AND STRATEGY DEFINITION

A social science theory is a conjecture about social phenomena, norms, and interactions. It is a way of explaining how social life works [3]. A well-known example of a social science theory is Erving Goffman's dramaturgical view of social interactions [4]. This theory argues that the world is a stage, and we are all players: In a social context, we always put on a show. Goffman explains that "when an individual appears before others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize

his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey." He then builds a comprehensive narrative of how performance is a valuable lens through which to see the world. And once you *do* start to see the world this way, it's hard to stop. That's the power of a strong theory: It's simultaneously authentic, plausible, and critical [5].

The idea of a theorist brings to mind someone sitting around, thinking, and then delivering a genius insight. Social science theorizing requires deep thinking, but the theory itself is anchored in things that are observable and that really happen. Goffman didn't make his theory up out of nowhere. He spent a year conducting qualitative, ethnographic research with people in social contexts. He interpreted that data, identified themes and anomalies, framed and reframed his findings, and then imagined what might be happening. Only *then* did he assert a theory of how society works [6].

This might feel familiar to a designer, as these activities are similar to the work done while developing a design strategy (sometimes called an experience or product strategy). Typically, designers spend time with people, watching them live, play, and work. They then marinate on the data that has been gathered, interpret it, apply different lenses to it, relate it to other concepts, and frame and reframe what emerges from this interpretative inquiry. This effort produces insights

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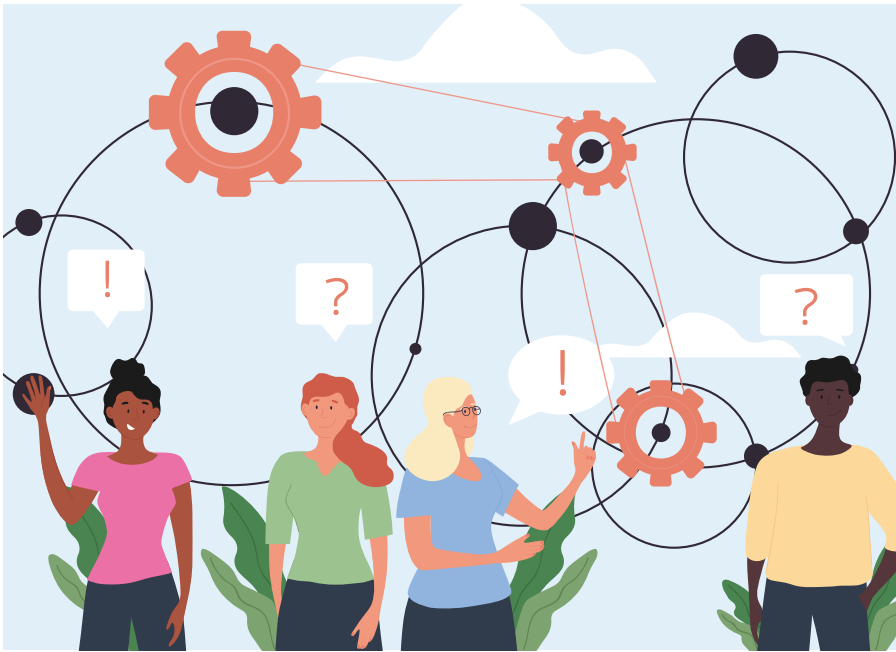
or provocative statements of truth about human behavior. Those insights are then visualized through drawings, models, prototypes, and other artifacts. A vision emerges, and that's frequently called a north star.

Theory production and strategy definition have similar commitments. Both ground vision in empirical data, and both lean heavily on qualitative evidence that is gathered by spending time with people. Both expect that the gathered data does not hold an "answer," but instead is the basis for interpretative investigation. Both are highly iterative and require trying on different frames and perspectives and "playing" with what emerges. And both have an audience: They are producing knowledge not simply to know it, but to share it (in one case with internal stakeholders and, ultimately, with customers; in the other with scholars). To be successful, in both cases, the sharing must be persuasive; the audience needs to believe.

Two things are notably different.

First, theory makes an argument about how the world works, while design makes an argument about how the world could be changed. Second, theory is concerned with patterns of social behavior instead of the artifacts themselves. A theory works to explain how people relate to one another and to the institutions and norms around them. Design strategy proposes changes to the artifacts and systems that shape those relationships.

When we put this all together, we arrive at something powerful and maybe immune to Anthropic's exposure. As designers, we spend time with our customers in their homes and offices, flexing our observation muscles. We bring that data back to the studio, synthesize it, and arrive at



design pillars. We establish a vision of what our products and services should be in the future—a north star—and AI can help us make it look great. We can simultaneously develop an argument about how the social world currently works and how it might change if we *reach* that north star. This is not a formal social theory like Goffman’s, but it uses the same kind of explanatory reasoning that theorists use to describe patterns of social behavior.

Imagine two things: Goffman’s theory doesn’t exist and you work at a massive social media company in a leadership role. Your qualitative research with influencers might lead you to think of their behavior in a way that feels similar to dramaturgy—that social interactions are theatrical performances. That same research also likely leads to a vision for product and feature ideas. *You can advance both the social theory and the product vision at the same time* in your organization.

You’ll still make a north star vision, and it will look great, but in a world of AI, so will everything else. Grounding that vision in theory that emerged from *your research* will position your creative work as a meaningful intellectual contribution in two ways.

First, it will paint a rich picture of the social fabric in which your products currently exist, and this understanding

is fundamental to knowing your customers and your market. Next, it will illustrate how your work will *change* that social fabric, and that’s a fundamental part of long-term innovation success. Both benefits are social and highly context-specific, and that’s why this integration of design strategy and social theorizing may be AI-resistant.

CONCLUSION

Author Michael Schrage describes innovation as “an investment in your customer’s future—a human capital investment in who your customers really want or need to become” [7]. He offers a simple example: “George Eastman didn’t just create cheap new cameras and films; he created photographers.” Apple CEO Tim Cook similarly explains that when Apple considers entering a category, the company asks if it can “make a significant contribution to society” with its new innovations [8]. In both cases, they are talking about more than just the products; they are talking about shaping patterns of social behavior. This is the point where social theory and design strategy intersect, and it’s a space that I think designers should spend more time in.

Social science theorizing is a skill that designers can start to explore. In combination with our old familiar

ways of drawing and making specific things, we can learn to observe the world in a broad manner and make reasoned and scholarly arguments about general behaviors. We’re well positioned to try this approach, because we already understand the value of qualitative research, the way imagination can bring the abstract to life, and a philosophy of user centrality. I encourage designers to explore this world of social science theorizing and find ways to leverage these approaches. I don’t claim that theorizing will never be usurped by AI, but I have a feeling that building a compelling vision of the future will always require understanding and describing people, and their relationship to others and to the things we introduce into culture.

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