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Marketing theory

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Chapter Topics

Why we need theory in marketing	26
Debates about theory in marketing	27
Can we have scientific theory in marketing?	29
What form should marketing theory take?	31
What's gone wrong?	36
Where to now?	40
Recommended further reading	44

Why we need theory in marketing

The evolution of theory is essential for any discipline. This assertion is taken for granted in sciences but has to be re-emphasized in an applied social science like marketing. All academic disciplines build their own bodies of theory and apply their own unique lens to particular phenomena. In this way marketing is a bit like a magpie in that it takes many of its theories from other disciplines, such as psychology and economics (Baker, 1995b) The challenge for marketing as a relatively young discipline is to build its own distinct body of theory (Murray et al., 1997).

One of the main reasons why marketing scholars cannot agree on a common definition for theory is because, depending on philosophical orientation, scholars will have different views of what constitutes theory. The term theory is sometimes used to refer to a set of propositions or an abstract conceptualization of the relationship between entities. At other times it can be a general principle that is used to explain or predict facts or events. Often 'theory' conveys verification of facts, systems of organization, lawlike generalizations and tested hypotheses. Consequently, it is frequently associated with the production of scientific knowledge and the notion of an objective, explanatory lens upon the world.

Hunt (1991) states that the purpose of theory, more broadly, is to increase scientific understanding through a systematized structure capable of both explaining

and predicting phenomena. If we look to the role of theory in the management literature, Bacharach (1989: 496) defines theory as ‘a statement of relations among concepts within a set of boundary assumptions and constraints’. He goes further to argue that theory is no more than a linguistic device used to organize a complex empirical world. Van de Ven (1989) maintains that it is the use of theory that matters. As Kurt Lewin is reputed to have put it: ‘nothing is so practical as a good theory’. Llewellyn (2003) argues that the value of qualitative empirical research lies in its ‘conceptual framing’ of organizational actions, events, processes and structures, and the possibilities for conceptual framing extend beyond the highly abstract schema generally considered as ‘theories’ by academics.

There is common agreement from all sides, however, that theory offers explanations of the physical and social worlds around us that can reveal deeper understandings of how and why things happen. Essentially, theory is really an organized way to think about a topic. The various views above also illustrate that theory is by no means value free. For example, some marketing theorizing implicitly adopts a machine metaphor to characterize human behaviour that is also inherently gendered in its assumptions. This metaphor has for a long time privileged the mind and cognitive activity (assumed male) over the (female) body and emotions (Campbell et al., 2009). Many other types of power relationships, such as those implicated by the Cold War, have also influenced the development of marketing theory (Tadajewski, 2006). As Maclaran et al. (2009) argue, this is why we also need to be suspicious of theory. Just like the use of metaphor, theory can both broaden our minds and tie us into particular ways of thinking, skewing our perspectives in ways that often go unquestioned and unrecognized.

An essential aspect in developing marketing theory is the understanding of its historical evolution, the current knowledge base, its relative strengths and weaknesses, potential dangers and future direction. Providing an introduction and review of these topics is the objective of this chapter.

Debates about theory in marketing

Debates around the best way of seeking knowledge about marketing phenomena are long standing. These can be traced all the way back to the philosophy of science debates that began at the turn of the twentieth century between the laissez-faire oriented scholars versus their German historical counterparts (Jones and Monieson, 1990). Serious discussion of the scientific nature of marketing began to appear in late 1940s (Alderson and Cox, 1948; Bartels, 1951; Converse, 1945). The reasons for the emergence of this interest in theory at that time were explained by Alderson and Cox (1948) as partly intellectual curiosity and partly ‘follow-the-leader’: ‘When some people become avidly and outspokenly interested in anything, others will take a look and see what is going on’ (1948: 138). More fundamentally, they argue that the underlying foundations of this interest in theory consisted of two core elements: (1) students of marketing, for all their efforts, have produced very few accurate, comprehensive and significant generalizations, principles or theories;

and (2) the belief that they have achieved little, even in setting themselves fundamental problems, and less still in developing procedures for solving such problems. They complain, 'the multitude of facts thus far assembled seems to add up to very little' (Alderson and Cox, 1948: 138). A sound theory is needed, not simply to produce immediate generalizations, but because it helps marketers to better initiate and direct their inquiries.

Alderson and Cox's fundamental rationale for their call in 1948 for better theory was that it would help identify salient problems to be solved and thus direct the researcher to understand which facts to assemble and how to analyse them. 'Only a sound theory of marketing can raise the analysis of such problems above the level of an empirical art and establish truly scientific criteria for setting up hypotheses and selecting the facts by means of which to test them' (1948: 139). This reasoning was subsequently endorsed by Baumol (1957: 160) who stated succinctly that 'facts are silent' and therefore theory is needed to describe and explain the workings of facts.

The Marketing Science Institute (MSI) was established in 1961 to 'create knowledge that will improve business performance' (Lehman and Jocz, 1997: 141). They established four 'position studies', which went some way to setting out the 'fundamental problems' that Alderson and Cox cited, and one of these was to conduct long-term research on marketing theory and its application in order to provide the 'concepts, methods and opportunities for more creative and imaginative solutions for more difficult and important problems' (Lehman and Jocz, 1997: xiv). Several reasons for the importance of this effort to improve the theory were presented in the 1965 report by Michael Halbert, as follows.

1. Theoretical rules are a prerequisite for learning. 'It is said that we learn by experience, but we really learn only by the analysis of experience ... But without a theoretical base, we cannot analyse, for the rules of proper analysis are theoretical rules; we cannot be selective about which experiences are relevant, for the criteria of relevance are theoretical criteria' (1965: xiv). There are a great deal of data and knowledge available about the operation of the marketing system but theory is needed to provide a formal structure for organizing, analysing and evaluating this knowledge. Adequate theories would also help present a much more 'coherent, understandable and useful picture' of the entire marketing process.
2. Practitioners need theory in order to make better decisions. As well as facts, the executive's informational needs also include marketing theory 'because it can reduce the cost and uncertainty of decision making while increasing the productivity and assurance of decision makers' (Halbert, 1965: xxii). Examples given here are theory concerning how pricing affects distribution and what happens if advertising spend doubles.
3. Marketing cannot rely on borrowing from other disciplines. Not all borrowing is bad, but one must distinguish between three classes of borrowing: (i) of content, which presents few problems; (ii) the adaptation of techniques and methods from other subjects, which is acceptable if properly applied; and (iii) the borrowing of theories and concepts from other disciplines which is 'dangerous at best and larceny at worst ... often semantic

similarity is mistaken for formal appropriateness' (Halbert, 1965: xxvi). It is seldom that a theoretical structure from one area is directly applicable to another and the many problems associated with marketing's reliance at that time on borrowing particularly from economics, behavioural sciences and law are examined in the report.

In his influential text, *Marketing: Theory and Practice* (1995) Michael Baker devotes a whole chapter to 'The need for theory in marketing'. Taking a marketing-as-exchange position along with Bagozzi (1978), he presents the core reason as '... the recognition and acceptance of the need to improve our understanding of the manner in which the [marketing] system works which underlies the need to develop a workable theory of exchange' (Baker, 1995b). The benefits resulting from this he agrees with Halbert (1965), will be; (i) the satisfaction of intellectual curiosity; and, (ii) improved operational performance. By solving immediate operating problems, the latter would permit marketing academics to concentrate on the more fundamental problems underlying them. This would also liberate marketing practitioners from 'fire-fighting' activities in order to concentrate on anticipating and avoiding marketing problems in an increasingly complex business world.

The need for marketing theory is now largely accepted (Kerin, 1996). In order to summarize all the arguments put forward above, they can be grouped into four main categories – practical, knowledge, academic and intellectual needs.

1. *Practical value*. Better theories will improve managerial decision making and problem solving.
2. *Knowledge creation*. Theory provides direction and structure to academic inquiry and helps 'make sense of facts'.
3. *Academic status*. Marketing as an academic discipline requires its own theory. It cannot rely on borrowing from other disciplines.
4. *Intellectual curiosity*. Only theory can provide the basis for understanding how the marketing system works and explaining the underlying foundations and forces.

In true demand–pull fashion, the early identification of a need for theory stimulated the start of its production by academics such as Alderson himself (1957), McGary (1953) (both functionalist), Bartels (1968) (general theory), and McInnes (1964) (systems model), which, as we shall see in the next sections, spawned over 50 years of debate as to what marketing theory should be like and, indeed, whether it is possible at all.

Can we have scientific theory in marketing?

Marketing would appear to be primarily an area for application of findings from the sciences (primarily the behavioral sciences) and not a science in itself. Should then the attempt to make it a science be abandoned as a wild-goose chase? (Buzzell, 1963: 34)

So Robert Buzzell in his 1963 *Harvard Business Review* article, 'Is marketing a science?', expressed the question over which marketing theorists have been locked in debate (in one form or another) ever since Alderson and Cox made their 'call to arms' 60 years ago. Indeed only six months after their article appeared Roland Vaile published a direct commentary on it in the *Journal of Marketing*, in which he took the contrary view that 'marketing will remain an art' (1949: 522). Thus began the 'marketing as science versus art' controversy that filled the journals up to the mid-1960s and still echoes today. Those who began the need for theory tended to recommend a scientific approach to its development and evaluation, at least along the positive lines of the social sciences, if not akin to the physical sciences (Alderson & Cox, 1948; Bartels, 1951). Those who responded from the managerial, normative perspective regarded marketing as a vocation, an application of scientific principles, like engineering or medicine (Vaile, 1949). Managers certainly don't regard marketing as scientific 'The businessman's practical wisdom is of a completely different character than scientific knowledge. While it does not ignore generalities, it recognizes the low probability that given combinations of phenomena can or will be repeated ... In place of scientific knowledge, then, the businessman collects lore' (Ramond, 1962, quoted in Buzzell, 1963: 34).

Few would disagree with this today, especially given the recent anthropological attention to management behaviour, but adducing the paucity of managers' use of marketing models and theories is not sufficient to refute the possibility of the development of scientific theories in marketing. To do so requires detailed attention to exactly what constitutes a theory. Vaile (1949) raised this issue initially in his critique of Alderson and Cox (1948), who proposed that a systematic theory of marketing can and should be developed and that it may become scientific. 'Useful discussion of the propositions just stated requires definition of the term "theory". This the authors do not undertake' (Vaile, 1949: 521). Vaile suggests a dictionary definition of theory as 'a coherent group of general propositions used as principles of explanation for a class of phenomena' (ibid.). Marketing theory cannot exist he argues because; (i) marketing has many, not one, coherent groups of propositions; and (ii) marketing must do more than explain, it also must make judgements about marketing policies.

Buzzell (1963) also argued that marketing is not a science because it does not meet his definition. In order to qualify as a distinct science in its own right, marketing will have to meet some rather stringent requirements. For example, it is generally agreed that a science is:

a classified and systematized body of knowledge, organized around one or more central theories and a number of general principles, usually expressed in quantitative terms, knowledge which permits the prediction and, under some circumstances, the control of future events. Few believe that marketing now meets these criteria. (Buzzell, 1963: 33)

Shelby Hunt, the leading proponent of the 'marketing-is-science' school, argued that these definitions are over restrictive, and, following Rudner (1966), proposed

that: 'Theories are systematically related sets of statements, including some law-like generalizations, that are empirically testable. The purpose of theory is to increase scientific understanding through a systematized structure capable of both explaining and predicting phenomena' (Hunt, 1971: 65). This avoids the central theory requirement, which, even today, for marketing is clearly untenable and by 1983 Hunt was able to assert that 'both philosophers of science and marketing theorists agree on the nature of theory' (p. 10). He cited the definitions adopted by many of the marketing-is/not-science writers such as Alderson (1957), Zaltman et al. (1973), Bagozzi (1980), Ryan and O'Shaunessy (1980) and even Keat and Urry (1975), to demonstrate that both advocates and critics 'basically concur as to the general characteristics of theory' (Hunt, 1983: 10).

In reviewing the *Journal of Marketing's* 60-year pursuit of the 'ideal' of advancement of science and practice in marketing, Roger Kerin argues that by 1965 marketing literature had become more scientific, particularly in terms of quantitative analysis being an integral element. 'Marketing phenomena, originally addressed by intuition and judgement, were increasingly studied with fundamental tenets of the scientific method' (Kerin, 1996: 5)

The debate about whether it is possible to have scientific theories in marketing then moved on from the 'definition' issue to the question of what marketing theory should be like.

What form should marketing theory take?

The Fall 1983 edition of the *Journal of Marketing* began the next 'round' in the contest about the nature of marketing theory (Kavanagh (1994) likens the debate to a boxing match). In that edition Paul Anderson questions particularly Hunt's positivistic concept of the scientific method: 'Despite its prevalence in marketing, positivism has been abandoned by these disciplines [philosophy and sociology of science] over the last two decades in the face of overwhelming historical and logical arguments that have been raised against it' (1983: 25). Thus, the debate moved from whether marketing can have scientific theory to what form of scientific theory is appropriate. It is argued that there is no longer one 'correct' method for evaluating theory and different research disciplines will adopt different methodologies, ontologies and epistemologies. These marketing theorists draw on Kuhn's (1962) revolutionary view of scientific progress in terms of competing paradigms (see Dholakia and Arndt, 1985), which within any discipline are 'incommensurable' – that is scientists of each persuasion have different 'world-views' and are unable to agree on salient problems, theories or terminologies to be employed, and thus could never agree on any 'experiments' or data that would resolve their differences. In marketing, Anderson (1983) cites theory of consumer behaviour and theory of the firm as incommensurable. With no agreed or agreeable 'demarcation criterion' between theory and non-theory, or even science and non-science, in marketing, Anderson concludes that a relativistic approach is the only viable one.

As Kavanagh (1994) notes, Hunt (1984) was quick to counter-attack Anderson's naive relativist advocacy, which can easily be forced to its (il)logical conclusion of nihilism, ontological solipsism (death of the *object*) and epistemological anarchy (can't know anything or can know everything). Interestingly, both Hunt and Anderson moved their positions somewhat after each other's attack in this 'round' in order to defend their 'weak flanks'. Hunt moved from logical empiricism to scientific realism, in which he accepts a critical realist position that some of our perceptions may be illusions and certainly some are more accurate than others (thus moderating pure empiricism). Therefore the job of science is to develop theories that have 'long-run predictive success' (Hunt, 1990) in explaining behaviour, 'even if we cannot finally "know" whether the entities and structure postulated by the theory actually exists' (McMullin, 1984: 26).

Anderson meanwhile was adopting critical relativism which accepts the possibility of a single pre-existing 'reality', but rejects the notion that it can be discovered via the scientific method (1986: 157). So, it seemed for a while that boxing had brought them closer together. This debate between realism and relativism in marketing theory mirrors debate which had been going on in the social sciences (see Burrell and Morgan, 1979) about how we can *know* the world; is reality out there or a product of one's mind? As Kavanagh rightly observes, epistemology and ontology tend to be conflated in all these debates – that is, 'being is reduced to knowledge and knowledge is reduced to being' (1994: 31). Although this certainly all follows from the Cartesian dictum *cogito ergo sum*, the question for marketing theory is that we need to be able to know more about reality beyond one's own existence.

Hunt (1976) refutes of all forms of relativism, arguing that the knowledge claims of any theory must be *objective* in the sense that 'its truth content must be intersubjectively certifiable' and that 'requiring that theories, laws and explanations be empirically testable ensures that they will be intersubjectively certifiable since different (but reasonably competent) investigators with differing attitudes, opinions and beliefs will be able to make observations and conduct experiments to ascertain their truth content' (Hunt, 1976: 27). He challenges all those academics in what he calls marketing's 'crisis literature' who have questioned the very possibility of objective marketing research, for example, 'Objectivity is an illusion' (Peter, 1992: 77), 'objectivity is impossible' (Mick, 1986: 207)), 'Researcher objectivity and intersubjective certifiability are chimeras – they cannot be achieved' (Fullerton, 1986: 433). Hunt categorizes and articulates the five 'primary arguments' which marketing writers have employed 'ostensibly implying the impossibility of objective marketing research' (1993: 80). He summarizes these along with their original philosophical sources (see Table 2.1) and then refutes each argument from a scientific realist perspective, often asserting that the marketing authors have misconstrued, misunderstood or misapplied the ideas from the philosophy of science literature.

Following the discussion above of the influence on marketing theory of Kuhnian ideas about the progress of science (see also Dholakia and Arndt, 1985), take, for example, Hunt's refutation of argument 2 in Table 2.1, which had been used by Anderson *inter alia*, that 'objectivity is impossible because the paradigms that

Table 2.1 Arguments against objectivity

1. Objectivity is impossible because the language of a culture determines the reality that members of that culture see.
2. Objectivity is impossible because the paradigms that researchers hold are incommensurable.
3. Objectivity is impossible because theories are undermined by facts.
4. Objectivity is impossible because the psychology of perception informs us that a theory-free observation language is impossible.
5. Objectivity is impossible because all epistemically significant observations are theory-laden.

Source: Adapted from Hunt (1993) *Journal of Marketing* 57, April: 76–91. Reprinted with permission from the *Journal of Marketing*, published by the American Marketing Association.

researchers hold are incommensurable'. Countering it Hunt (1993: 82) makes two points; firstly that it is 'simply incoherent' to compare and contrast different paradigms in marketing and then to claim that they are incommensurable because they are 'non-comparable', and secondly, that for incommensurability to bar objective choice between two paradigms implies that they are *rival*, but most of the so-called paradigms identified by marketers are simply *different*, not necessarily putting forward conflicting knowledge claims. Going on to counter all five arguments, Hunt concludes that 'there is nothing, absolutely nothing, in modern philosophy of science or psychology that makes objectivity either impossible or undesirable' (1993: 87).

Whether Hunt is correct or not about 'rival' or 'different' paradigms in marketing there certainly are a lot of them. Carmen (1980) identifies six (microeconomic, persuasion/attitude change, conflict resolution, generalist system, functionalist and social exchange paradigms), Fisk and Meyers (1982) classify another six (network flow, market scarcity, competitive marketing management, evolutionary systems change, general systems and dissipative structures paradigms). Sheth et al. (1988) list 12 'schools of thought' in marketing (commodity, functional, functionalist, regional, institutional, managerial, buyer behaviour, activist, macromarketing, organizational dynamics and social exchange schools). Kerin (1996) chooses six 'metaphors' which characterized marketing science and practice in each of the six decades since the launch of the *Journal of Marketing* in 1936. – marketing as applied economics, a managerial activity, a quantitative science, a behavioural science, a decision science and as an integrative science. Wilkie and Moore (2003) identify '4 eras' of thought development, which are: 1900–1920, 'Founding the Field'; 1920–1950, 'Formalizing the Field'; 1950–1980, 'A Paradigm Shift – Marketing, Management, and the Sciences'; 1980–present, 'The Shift Intensifies – A Fragmentation of the Mainstream'.

Of course, taking Hunt's point about interpreting Kuhn's ideas correctly, many of the above are not strictly 'paradigms' and it can be seen that they are by no means all posited as such. Indeed, as so often happens with even the supposedly technical language of science (cf. argument 1 in Table 2.1 above), a term loses its 'original' meaning in the noise of academic discourse. The 'paradigm' is (adopting the vernacular) an excellent paradigm of this phenomenon. Even those who take an 'alternative paradigm' approach to marketing theory recognize this. 'It is commonly agreed that the paradigm concept itself remains somewhat vague and unclear. This is partly because [it] has taken on different meanings over time' (Arndt, 1985: 19). Even in

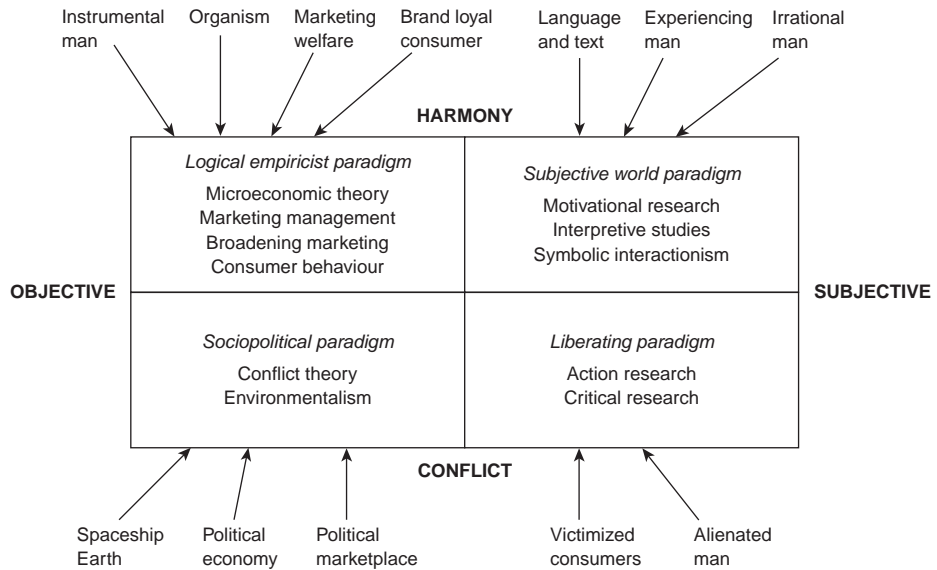


Figure 2.1 Paradigms and metaphors in marketing (Arndt, 1985)

Source: Arndt (1985) *Journal of Marketing* 49, Summer: 18–23. Reprinted with permission from the *Journal of Marketing*, published by the American Marketing Association.

its original formulation the notion was ambiguous and Kuhn has been accused of using the paradigm notion in many different ways (Morgan, 1980).

Arndt (1985) attempts to make sense of the concept for use in marketing theory by adapting Morgan's (1980) hierarchy, which distinguishes paradigms (alternative realities or world views) at the second level from *orientations* (perspective of the researcher relating to the role of data, theory and values) above it at level 1 with *metaphors* (basis for schools of thought) at level 3 and *puzzle-solving* (based on specific tools or procedures) at level 4. Using Morgan's framework, Arndt analyses and categorizes the different paradigms and metaphors in marketing theory, identifying four main paradigms based on different (and indeed one would have to say *conflicting*) world views. These contain 'different metatheoretical assumptions about the nature of science, the subjective – objective dimension and the explicitness of long-term conflicts in society. There are also assumptions about the nature of the marketing discipline and the study of marketing phenomena' (Arndt, 1985: 15). These are shown in Figure 2.1. classified along two dimensions – objective/subjective and harmony/conflict. He thus classifies four paradigms in marketing along these dimensions: (i) logical empiricist; (ii) sociopolitical; (iii) subjective world; and (iv) liberating paradigms.

The *Logical empiricist paradigm* emphasizes measurability and intersubjective certification. It takes a mechanistic approach, assuming that marketing relations have a real existence independent of the observer and a systematic character resulting in regularities in marketing behaviour and equilibrium-seeking marketing systems. Neoclassical economics provides the basis for many of its typical metaphors such as *instrumental man* with rational decision-making and the *organism metaphor* for the organized behaviour and environmental learning of the marketing system.

The *sociopolitical paradigm* is similarly based on the assumption of a real and measurable world of marketing phenomena and predictable uniformities in marketing behaviour. Unlike the value-free and equilibrium assumptions of logical empirical theories however, this paradigm explicitly recognizes conflicts of interests, resources and relations in marketing exchanges and systems. The metaphors of this paradigm constitute the *political markets and economies* and even spaceship *Earth*, the global, ecological approach of much of what would nowadays be called green marketing.

The *subjective world paradigm* rejects the existence of social reality in any verifiable or concrete sense. It is the product of the subjective experiences and inter-experiences of individuals and therefore marketing phenomena cannot be understood from the perspective of an external observer, but must be studied from the viewpoint of the participant. It thus incorporates the interpretive and social constructionist approaches and adopts the motivational and psychology-based metaphor of *irrational man*, the phenomenological metaphor of *experiencing man*, with an existential and semiological basis, and the *language and text* metaphor for understanding the behaviour of marketing actors from stories, myths, rhetoric and discourse.

The *liberating paradigm* also takes a social constructionist perspective regarding the ontological status of reality but focuses on the social, economic and technological processes that constrain and control human beings in the marketing system. The role of theoretical inquiry is to identify and analyse the conflicts and contradictions in the system and point the way to emancipation. Critical theory adherents within this paradigm often take *alienation* and *victimization* as metaphors for the oppressed groups in modern mass consumer society.

A strong case is made by Arndt (1985) that marketing has been dominated by one paradigm – that is, logical empiricism.

Even a cursory perusal of scholarly articles in marketing journals is bound to confirm the dominant status of logical empiricism. The principles of empiricism appear to be treated synonymously with the scientific method as such ... The control technology and instrumentalist of the logical empiricist paradigm may well be compatible with the problem solving needs and pragmatism of marketing practitioners. (Arndt, 1985: 19)

This is directly opposed by Hunt's contention that to even ask the question

'what philosophy dominates marketing?' presumes that marketing is dominated (which carries pejorative overtones) by one view or another and that in any case, on the contrary, 'the marketing discipline has been amazingly eclectic' and 'the most accurate answer is: 'No single philosophy dominates marketing. (Hunt, 1991: 398)

Arndt makes a strong case for pluralism in orientations and paradigms for the development of marketing theory: 'by limiting itself to the empiricist orientation and logical empiricist paradigms such as instrumental man, marketing has remained essentially a one-dimensional science concerned with technology and problem solving'. (Arndt 1985: 21). Adopting other paradigms and metaphors will result in the asking of quite different research questions. 'The *notion* of paradigms should be viewed as an argument for paradigmatic tolerance and pluralism'

(Arndt, 1985: 21). Perhaps this explains one reason why Hunt goes to such great effort to reject the notion itself for marketing theory?

Despite the length and intensity of the debate regarding the appropriate characteristics of and scientific underpinning for the development of marketing theories, and despite the coalescence of key positions around the two poles of relativism and realism, there is no consensus as to what marketing theory should be like. We do have several competing schools of thought, if not exactly 'paradigms'. Attempts at constructing 'general/generic' theories of marketing (Alderson, 1957; Bartels, 1968; Kotler, 1972) have not led to any shared, let alone agreed theoretical basis for the discipline. Worse still, whether it is because of over-emphasis on empirical research at the expense of theory generation by positivists (Deshpande, 1983; Peter, 1992: 72–79) or because of the advocacy of loosely thought out epistemological 'anarchy' by relativists (Hunt, 1994), the one thing that most authors on both sides agree about is that, since Alderson and Cox's call 60 years ago, marketing theory has not advanced as well as it should have done – or even satisfactorily. The next question then is: 'What's gone wrong?'

What's gone wrong?

The American Marketing Association (AMA) set up a task force in 1984 to investigate the development of marketing thought. Its report (AMA, 1988) recognized that 'the marketing discipline has come a long way since 1959. Nevertheless the task force believes that our self-evaluation of how marketing develops, disseminates and utilizes marketing knowledge indicates that, as a discipline, we still have a long way to go' (AMA, 1988: 24). An earlier commission set up under the auspices of the AMA and the MSI to assess the effectiveness of research and development for marketing management had concluded that marketing research 'has had relatively little impact on improving marketing management practice' (Myers, et al., 1980: 280). The AMA task force identified six principle barriers:

1. Insufficient resources devoted to marketing knowledge and development
2. Too few people generating and disseminating knowledge
3. The premature end to too many research careers at pre-tenure and post-tenure stages
4. Senior faculty do not devote sufficient time to knowledge generation
5. Restrictions against practical, innovative and long-term projects and reports by journals and doctoral programmes
6. Extremely limited dissemination of knowledge.

Other causes for the discipline's problems have been identified and discussed in the literature, which points to failings in the research approach of the discipline.

Lack of attention to history

Reflecting on the future of marketing, Stephen Greyser (1997) – one of the original AMA/MSI Commission authors – endorses Michael Baker's (1995a) observation that 'what is regarded as history by a new generation was an important element in the education and experience of the old' (Baker, 1995a: 1,004). This carries with it, Baker cautions, a grave danger for the new generation of marketing scholars in their rush to make their own impact that they may overlook or, even worse, ignore the lessons of the past. 'Will our concern for recency blur our vision of what is relevant? In ignoring the past will we reinvent what is already known ...?' (Baker, 1995a: 1,004).

According to Savitt (1980) this may be one reason for the subject's lack of progress in developing marketing theory. He argues for more attention to, and awareness of, the marketing's history and theoretical foundations in order for marketing scholars to gain a better understanding of the discipline's origins and patterns of change. Cunningham and Sheth similarly argue that:

Much research in marketing fails because its hypotheses are not well founded in theory. This inevitably leads to ill-defined research and excessively narrow research ideas ... An effective theory paper begins with an exhaustive and critical historical review of past work. Marketing theory is made up of a set of building blocks. Readers of a theoretical paper should be able to see how the new theory builds on past theoretical work. (1982: 11)

There has recently been much more attention devoted to historical research in marketing which is reviewed elsewhere in this volume. The application of the historical approach has made some significant shifts in academic thinking about the framework of evolution marketing (notably Fullerton's (1988) reassessment of the 'marketing era'). It has also provided an alternative technique for the analysis of practice and potentially for the development of theory. Nevett (1991) emphasizes the advantages of the historical approach to establishing facts, relevance, and causality, which is more impressionistic and intuitive than positivist 'scientific' analysis.

Too much attention to quantitative methods

Venkatesh (1985) presents one reason for the disappointing development of marketing theory in the lack of skills or training in marketing researchers, which was also highlighted by the AMA task force (1988). Training in theory development is not available to most academic marketers who come out of traditional marketing departments, 'where the emphasis is on empirical research, data analysis, and quantitative modeling. These areas offer little potential for theory generation' (Venkatesh, 1985: 62). Deshpande (1983) makes the same point that quantitative methods are more suitable for theory testing than theory generation. He recommends the use of qualitative methods to generate new theory and furthermore advocates them for triangulation in theory testing as well as quantitative methods. In consumer behaviour, Belk (1986) shows how art can be used, in particular, to suggest and inspire hypotheses

and theories. Anderson (1994) considers that progress has been impeded by the discipline's 'quantitative bias'. The analytical and empirical 'toolkit' has become ever more sophisticated with far less attention to techniques of theory development. 'Academic research in marketing has been more technique- than theory-driven' (Anderson, 1994: 11).

Armstrong (1982) proposes an 'author's formula' for a successful publication strategy as:

1. Do *not* pick an important problem.
2. Do *not* challenge existing beliefs.
3. Do *not* obtain surprising results.
4. Do *not* use simple methods.
5. Do *not* provide full disclosure.
6. Do *not* write clearly.

Even Shelby Hunt laments the paucity of qualitative research publications:

Numerous marketers have pointed out over the last decade that research using qualitative methods could usefully complement our quantitative analyses. I have never heard anyone dispute the potential value of qualitative research – but qualitative works in marketing are few. Why are our major journals almost exclusively devoted to studies using quantitative methods? (Hunt, 1994: 13)

Following his familiar *modus operandi*, Hunt proceeds to answer his own question by constructing a step-by-step refutation of the arguments of relativists, constructionists and subjectivists who, according to him, proffer their standard (and to Hunt totally false) reasoning as a basis for advocating the use of qualitative methods. 'Is it any wonder then' he concludes, 'that mainstream marketers have been reluctant to accept qualitative methods when their advocates have explicitly grounded them in relativism, constructionism and subjectivism? How could marketers trust the output of such research methods?' (Hunt, 1994: 21).

There is, then, little disagreement about the *need* for increased and appropriate application of qualitative, as opposed to quantitative techniques for research leading to theory generation in marketing.

Lack of impact on practice

In advocating a theory-in-use approach, Heffring asks what accounts for 'this seemingly dismal performance of marketing theory?' (1985: 106). The dismal performance to which he is referring is the conclusion of Myers, Greyser and Massey (1979) that marketing knowledge development, model building and theorizing has had little impact on the practice of marketing: 'There isn't a single problem area with regard to the practice of marketing and management that marketing research or the world of technology and concepts has mastered' (Myers et al., 1979: 280).

Heffring (1985) gives three broad explanations.

1. Marketing theories reflect the realities of the builder, not the user. Managers do have principles and theories that they have acquired over time and use when approaching marketing decisions. They are guided by their own theories-in-use. The trouble is that many of the academic theories do not reflect managers' language nor their business realities.
2. Marketing theory provides complex answers to marketing problems. On the contrary, managers want complex problems to be solved as simplified representations and with clarity. 'Why have concepts like the product life cycle and the product portfolio matrix been adopted so quickly? Primarily because they are simple representations of marketing phenomena that can affect their decisions' (Heffring, 1985: 107)
3. Marketing theories may be logically correct but practically incorrect. Managers have several problems with this: (i) many theories focus on strategy not tactics and do not give guidance for their implementation; (ii) theory is judged by academics by process not relevance of the content; (iii) theory focuses on problem formulation whereas managers are concerned with problem solving; and (iv) pro-theory bias. It is assumed that theory is good, that it improves manager's decision-making and that to have any theory is better than to have none. Managers in fact are often confused by theories that they find difficult to interpret.

Other authors have blamed the academic system for this state of affairs with its emphasis on research and publication regardless of their significance for managers (Anderson, 1992; Mason 1990). Venkatesh (1985: 63) describes this as the 'Crisis of Relevance' and considers that theories of researchers are not perceived as useful because practitioners want their everyday problems solved and marketing academics *cannot* perform this function.

These problems do not appear to have been overcome. In the July 2009 volume of the *Journal of Marketing*, Reibstein, Day and Wind, in a question remarkably reminiscent of the AMA task force, ask: 'Why do marketing academics have little to say about critical strategic marketing issues and emerging issues ...?', They point to wider concerns regarding wider management education.

Criticisms are being leveled at the dominant MBA focus on narrow analytical and cognitive skills, stylized treatment of complex issues by teachers with no direct business experience, self-centred careerism and the declining recognition that management is as much a clinical art as a science. It is further charged that the prevailing paradigm of reductionist, narrowly specified and fragmented research ... cannot address the multi-functional and interconnected problems for managers. Although these concerns loom large for management education in general, the dilemma is magnified in marketing – a field that is supposed to be concerned about the connection of the firm with its customers and other stakeholders. (Reibstein, et al., 2009: 1, emphasis added)

These comments come from authors who are senior established figures in the marketing discipline, not the 'usual suspects' from marketing's perpetual so-called 'crisis literature'. Indeed, some maintain that these are not really problems. Holbrook (1989) argues that managerially relevant applied research tends towards the dogmatic, and basic or pure research is best carried out by the curiosity-driven and self-directed academic, free from the constraints of relevance. The development of theory is necessarily basic and creative in nature, rather than applied research, and therefore the conditions best suited to theory development are those of 'pure' academic freedom. Furthermore, academic theory does not normally produce immediate impact and relevance is itself a problematic construct – try defining it (Wensley, 1995).

There is, nevertheless, a serious issue for marketing theory in this regard and indeed for the academy's understanding of its role. In the recent debate about the 'gap' between the approach and concerns of marketing practitioners and academics, between theory and practice, it is perhaps not surprising that the two 'worlds' are regarded as 'separate'. But the paradox is, as Halbert (1965) put the argument, that the criteria for relevance are theoretical criteria. If we all, academics and managers, need theory (or at least if it is *implicit*, if not explicit) in order to distinguish salient facts and to learn from experience, then what exactly are the reasons for the long-term continuance of this vast gap between the two 'world views'? The answer may be that it has been constructed and maintained by the marketing academy itself (Brownlie and Saren, 1996).

Where to now?

It was concluded in the first section here that despite earlier debates the need for marketing theory is now well accepted (Kerin, 1996). As we have seen, however, it has largely failed to live up to its potential to the satisfaction of either academics or practitioners. The need for theory may be even more important today than it was at the time of Alderson and Cox (1948) for two reasons.

First, there has been more emphasis and awareness of 'the power effects of knowledge' (Morgan, 1992: 151) that is, what knowledge *does*. The Foucauldian synonymy of knowledge and power (Foucault, 1980) implies that 'doing-in-the-world' (after Heidegger, 1962) is inexorably intertwined and embedded in 'knowing-the-world' in a particular way. If theory helps create knowledge, as most marketing academics accept (after Alderson and Cox, 1948), then theory also helps create power. This underlies and reinforces both managers' and academics' need for marketing theory in order to increase their relative *professional power* over competitors (and colleagues!).

Secondly, in an increasingly information-saturated world, knowledge needs to be firmly rooted in order to be distinctive and meaningful. It has been argued that information is now packaged, mediated and re-presented in various forms and that marketing knowledge has become a 'commodity' to be shaped, packaged, distributed and marketed like any other (Brownlie and Saren, 1995).

Academics are now, not only producers of marketing knowledge, but also merchandisers, retailers and consumers of it as authors, researchers, teachers and consultants. One effect of this process is that the product life-cycle of marketing knowledge is shortening, and thus its velocity of circulation is accelerating. The capital value of marketing knowledge has a shorter shelf life. Under these conditions the need for theory is now even greater in order to provide an anchor and a referent for marketing information and knowledge and to differentiate it and set it in context.

But where are the advances in marketing theory going to come from in the future? There are a number of possibilities.

New general theories

A distinct service marketing sub-discipline has developed along with the rise of service-based economies and markets over the past 50 years. Vargo and Lusch (2004) challenged this view of the key differentiators of services versus goods and proposed a new 'service-dominant logic' (SDL) for *all* marketing that constitutes a general theory of marketing. As a new contender for dominance in marketing theory, in a short time SDL has stimulated much renewed interest and discussion about theory development in marketing (Lusch and Vargo, 2006). The focus of SDL is on marketing as a value co-creation process that is service-based. Marketers can only provide value propositions, embedded in offerings, and their value depends entirely on the experiential evaluation of customers. Service, not goods, is the fundamental basis of exchange and goods are merely 'distribution mechanisms for service provision'. Another key aspect is the role of know-how, capabilities and competencies which are the key 'operant resources' for both creating value propositions and extracting value from them as the primary source of competitive advantage. The corollary is that the role of tangible, finite 'operand resources' is to provide the raw material inputs.

Central to SDL is its distinction from that approach referred to by Vargo and Lusch as the historical and still prevailing, goods-dominant logic (GDL), based on tangible goods and the activities associated with their delivery. The GDL approach is presented as an antithesis to SDL, which provides a '*shift in thinking*'. Vargo and Lusch advocate that SDL should form the basis of a unified theory of marketing. It can be seen more critically, however, in terms of an orientation – that is, a perspective providing guidelines on how certain existing schools of marketing should be utilized in normative fashion in value creation. Further, Schembri (2006) highlights the limitations of SDL and challenges its key foundational premises. She argues that while the service-dominant logic recognizes the emergent service orientation, Vargo and Lusch's analysis of its implications for marketing continues to be founded on the same rationalistic assumptions as the traditional goods-centered logic. Marketers and researchers need to question their underlying assumptions and seek to understand services as constituted in the customer's experience, as opposed to rationalizing the phenomena in terms a foundational 'logic'.

Perhaps consumer behaviour can provide the basis for a general theory since it occupies a unique position in marketing theory development, with the consumer positioned at the centre of the marketing concept, according to Zaltman et al. (1973). They argued that, as opposed to the conflicting and partial explanations of theories in marketing as a whole, the field of consumer behaviour alone contains several grand theories claiming to hold the key to explaining consumer behaviour. The situation today is, if anything, that these approaches are now even *more* divergent in their methodologies and research orientations, making agreement about theories or even core problems less likely. More recently though there has been a movement in consumer behaviour away from an information processing view of the consumer. This has involved more theoretical work from an interdisciplinary perspective based on interpretivist, ethnographic and semiotic methods, which adopt more macro, cultural perspectives to studying the consumer. Some of this is encompassed in the framework of consumer culture theory, as developed by Arnould and Thompson (2005), which maps out the conceptual domain and the theoretical advances in this field.

It may be that the seeds of a general theory are emerging with the adoption of a general integrative approach. Examples of this type of theory-building process in marketing are consumer culture theory (CCT) and service-dominant logic (SDL). Both adopt an integrative process by combining findings and theories from various disciplines, such as economics, political theory, consumer information processing, services marketing and cognitive psychology, thus producing a general theory that is inherently interdisciplinary in nature.

Networks and relationships

The traditional view of the firm and how managers conduct marketing activities has evolved significantly over the past 20 years or so. The theoretical basis has shifted from the biological analogy of the autonomous organism operating in a changing business environment towards an overlapping network of market actors operating in more or less contingent or strategic modes. In 1982 a research project reported how they had developed an approach that challenged traditional ways of examining industrial marketing and purchasing. In business-to-business settings this Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) study showed that companies were dominated by long-term business relationships with a limited number of counterparts, within which both marketing and purchasing of industrial goods were seen as 'interaction processes' between the two parties (see Ford, 1990; Håkansson, 1982; Mattsson, 1985). These researchers also observed that interaction in itself included an important content of its own. This concept of interaction in networks challenged the prevailing conceptualizations in B2B marketing in four major respects. Firstly, IMP challenged the narrow analysis of single discrete purchases and emphasized the importance of business relationships. Secondly, the view of industrial marketing as manipulation of marketing-mix variables in relation to a passive market was challenged. The third aspect concerned the assumption of an atomistic market structure

where buyers and sellers can easily switch business partners. Fourthly, IMP challenged the separation of theoretical and empirical analysis into either the process of purchasing or the process of marketing.

A range of alternative, broader perspectives of organizations' approach to markets has emerged, which have important implications for the theories regarding firms' relations with markets. Greater emphasis is now placed on marketing organizations' processes, relationships with customers and networks with stakeholders. Araujo, Kjellberg and Spencer (2008), argue that marketing practice and practices influence the operation of markets. They show that the particular definition and understanding of the market that managers adopt itself affects their operations and the outcomes in their chosen, 'enacted market-place'. Reviewing the research undertaken by the Contemporary Marketing Practice (CMP) group, Brodie, Coviello and Winklhofer (2008) develop the case for a multi-theory perspective of the marketing organization. They examine the conceptual foundations of the CMP research and how it evolved to encompass a multi-theory approach. Brodie et al. (2008) also point to the positioning of most marketing theories towards the level of middle-range theory (Merton, 1948; Saren and Pels, 2008).

These approaches all provide potential for the development of a unified general theory of marketing beyond the marketing-as-exchange view (Bagozzi, 1978). In contrast to traditional marketing's microeconomic base, the relational approach emphasizes long-term collaboration as opposed to competition between market and social actors (Webster, 1992). Conceivably all marketing activities, problems, systems and behaviour can be conceptualized and researched taking the unit of analysis as the relationships in which they occur. At the micro-level dyadic relational theory is being developed from social psychology and human relations literature. At the macro-relational level social network theory has been well applied and refined towards a theory of industrial marketing by the IMP group. Relationships and networks may not yet be a new general marketing theory, but as an expanding area of knowledge within the discipline it has considerable potential for providing the basis for a new theory of marketing.

Radical approaches

There are two prominent approaches to marketing that can be classed as 'radical', postmodernism and critical theory. Those marketing academics who have introduced the former to marketing theory make a strong case that marketing is *the* epitome of the postmodern condition (e.g. Brown, 1995; Cova and Badot, 1995; Firat, 1990,1991; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1992; Sherry, 1990; Venkatesh, 1989). 'Marketing has always been a postmodern institution in its fundamental tendencies ... it can be expected that marketing, the ultimate postmodern practice, will be the first institution to adapt to postmodernism' (Firat and Venkatesh, 1993: 246). There is no doubt that some of the concepts and ideas of writers who are labelled as postmodern are enormously powerful and directly applicable to marketing. Jean Baudrillard's (1981) notions of 'a system of

objects' and 'sign exchange' have made an enormous contribution. One could even envisage all marketing behaviour being conceptualized in terms of semiotic exchanges. Even if it were possible to construct a new marketing theory on this basis, Baudrillard's conceptualization of his 'critique of the political economy of the sign' is in this regard essentially *structuralist* (Marxist even) unlike his later ideas (such as hyperreality, fragmentation, simulation and free-floating signifiers) which can more easily be labelled *postmodernist*. And overall, as Hetrick and Lozada (1999) point out, postmodernism is essentially 'anti-theory' with its denial of the grand narrative. A postmodern marketing *theory* would appear to be an oxymoron (although I suppose its advocates would say that is precisely the point – and I've missed it!) and therefore this is unlikely to be capable of providing a general theory of marketing.

Critical theory attempts to look beneath the explanations and arguments of traditional marketing theories in order to unveil a 'deeper' reality and structures. Based on the Frankfurt school, particularly the ideas of Jürgen Habermas and Herbert Marcuse, this approach has had some impact on theory in marketing communications, consumer behaviour and green marketing in particular. Following Habermas (1971), critical theory distinguishes between: (i) empirical-analytical knowledge concerned with prediction and control; (ii) historical-hermeneutic knowledge, concerned with communicative interpretation in culture and discourse; and (iii) critical-emancipatory knowledge concerned with self-reflection, power relation and liberation. There are many areas of marketing where the critical theory approach can help researchers go beyond the 'one-dimensional' (Marcuse, 1964) perspective of existing theories and methods (Schroeder, 2007) and ask deeper questions, but, like postmodernism, it is unlikely to provide the basis for a complete marketing theory (Saren et al., 2007).

With so many different philosophies, methods and theories in the discipline and yet with so little agreement about marketing research in the academy, it may be that 'better theory' in the subject will inevitably be partial. In any case, several European academics have concluded that with so many new ideas being applied in so many different fields, from consumer behaviour to marketing ethics, there remains a strong case for 'rethinking marketing' again (Brownlie et al., 1999) as another step to realigning research in the future.

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