Positioning Alternative Perspectives of Consumer Behaviour

This paper argues that no perspective of consumer behaviour can be fully understood or properly evaluated without reference to their basic underlying assumptions of human nature. In an attempt to make explicit and examine these usually taken for granted assumptions, this paper "positions" five contemporary perspectives of consumer behaviour (Cognitive, Behavioural, Trait, Interpretive and Postmodern) on Hjelle and Ziegler's (1992) nine basic assumptions, or dimensions, of human nature (e.g., freedom-determinism, holism-elementalism, knowability-unknowability). It is argued that the more aware consumer researchers become of the larger metatheoretical picture that alternative perspectives of consumer behaviour fit into, the more reflexive they will be in generating and evaluating the knowledge claims of the particular perspective they are working within.

Introduction

Although students of marketing are often taught various theories, or perspectives, for understanding consumer behaviour (for reviews, see Kassarjian, 1994; Lawson, 1995), rarely is this teaching enriched by directly examining some of the basic assumptions and research implications hidden within these perspectives (Buttle, 1989; Olson, 1983). Whilst critical evaluations of the methodological and theoretical elements of different perspectives of consumer behaviour are sometimes offered (e.g., Mowen, 1988), these criticisms seldom do more than scratch the surface of the larger metatheoretical structures within which these elements are also embedded (Arndt, 1985; Bristor, 1985). It is argued in this paper, however, that no perspective of consumer behaviour can be fully understood or properly evaluated without reference to their basic underlying assumptions of human nature (Zinkhan, 1992). Three interrelated reasons are given why consumer researchers should make explicit and critically examine the metatheoretical assumptions of alternative perspectives of consumer behaviour.

Probing Basic Assumptions

First, consumer researchers need to examine the basic assumptions of alternative perspectives of consumer behaviour before granting "epistemic authority" (Anderson, 1986) to their knowledge claims because they fundamentally shape the research process in terms of the types of questions
asked, preferred methods of inquiry and the interpretation and evaluation of results (Hudson and Murray, 1986). For example, in the field of advertising consumer research Zinkhan (1992, p. iii) points out that:

"At the very least, each advertising manuscript or article implies and perpetuates a model of human nature. Therefore, it is important for advertising researchers to state explicitly their assumptions about human nature in the research design itself."

Indeed, Murray and Evers (1989) argue that the failure to identify the philosophical assumptions of alternative perspectives of consumer behaviour has often confused and exacerbated research disagreements. The attempt to use and evaluate qualitative methodologies within the rules and standards of the quantitative methodological paradigm (e.g., objectivity, validity), for instance, has led to various conceptual misunderstandings and operational problems (Hirschman, 1986). As we shall see, this is because qualitative and quantitative methodologies differ from each other not only in terms of the detailed research methods and techniques through which each collect data, but also in terms of the more general philosophies upon which this collection and analysis of data are based (Haralambos and Holborn, 1990). Probing basic assumptions of consumer behaviour perspectives reminds consumer researchers, therefore, that the assessment of alternative research methodologies need to be grounded in the assumptions of their underlying paradigms (Salter, 1989).

Secondly, probing the basic assumptions can be a useful strategy for generating alternative frameworks of inquiry (Wells, 1993; Wicker, 1985). Indeed, it is an irony that although the field of consumer behaviour research, like the marketing discipline in general, has attempted to find acceptance on the academic scene by emulating the methodological procedures and technical standards of the older “natural sciences” (for a review, see Grunert, 1988), the major developments in the latter have actually occurred mainly at the metaphysical, and not the methodological, level (Kuhn, 1970). For example, Harré (1993, p. 24) notes that:

"In physics the driving force has always been metaphysical. Deep reflection on the nature of physical phenomena prompted every major physicist from Gilbert and Galileo to Newton through to Faraday to Einstein and Bohr, in their programmes and methods of scientific research.... At every step fitting the methodology to the metaphysics was the key to progress."

And as we shall see, the potential advantage of such metaphysical inquiry is that it can throw fresh light on some of the recurring controversies in consumer behaviour research, particularly the relationship between consumer rationality, emotion and behaviour. Lastly, and following on from the above, the different ways in which marketers’ construct ideas about the role and requirements of consumers constitute the assumptions on which marketing strategies are organised (Kardon, 1982; Mostyn, 1977). Only by challenging the implicit assumptions of consumer behaviour perspectives, therefore, in addition to other
assumptions underlying the decision making process, will alternative strategies emerge (Varadarajan, Clark, and Pride, 1992; Varney, 1994). As McGregor (1995, p.40) points out, in the dynamic competitive environment of the 1990s 'an understanding of such fundamental theories of consumer behaviour may be more important to the practising marketer than a knowledge of the tools and techniques which worked effectively in the past'.

Overall, then, it can be seen that the better consumer researchers understand the larger metatheoretical picture that alternative perspectives of consumer behaviour fit into, the better they can conduct and critically evaluate research within the particular theory they are working within. In an attempt to make explicit and examine the usually taken for granted assumptions of the different perspectives of consumer behaviour, therefore, this paper "positions" five contemporary perspectives (Cognitive, Behavioural, Trait, Interpretive and Postmodern) on Hjelle and Ziegler's (1992) nine basic assumptions, or dimensions, of human nature (e.g., freedom-determinism, holism-elementalism, knowability-unknowability). The purpose of this analysis is to reveal the different genres, or "styles" (Hirschman, 1985), of consumer behaviour research and to evaluate the usefulness of this framework for encouraging a more pluralistic culture in the field.

**Theoretical Myopia**

From this analysis it is argued that despite calls for a more pluralistic and interdisciplinary culture in consumer research, particularly by Foxall (e.g., 1995 and 1992), most of the alternative perspectives of consumer behaviour that have been proposed (including those by Foxall himself, most notably radical behaviourism and cognitive style) suffer from what Deshpande (1984) calls "theoretical myopia". That is to say, although focusing on apparently incommensurable units of analysis (e.g., behavioural responses, cognitive traits), most of the suggested alternative perspectives are essentially alike in the sense that they are all based on the assumptions of a single scientific style which has been fashioned in the image of the natural science, or "positivist", paradigm (Morgan, 1992; Murray and Ozanne, 1991). As will be seen, however, over the last decade or so both marketing academics and practitioners have begun to increasingly question the usefulness of this paradigm, or world view, and its underlying assumptions for guiding consumer behaviour research because as Buttle (1994, p.9, emphasis added) observes:

'Consumer behaviour is a black hole... We cannot predict consumer responses to marketing initiatives. The only thing we know with certainty is that we do no: know very much at all. Not much of an outcome for 50 years' scientific endeavour.'

Whilst some take this to be a sign that more technical/methodological refinements at the intraparadigm level will eventually lead to the same success as the natural sciences (e.g., Ehrenberg, 1988), others argue that although this is a necessary and important part of the evolutionary development of consumer
behaviour research, alternative perspectives and methods of investigation at the inter-paradigm level are also required (e.g., Arndt. 1985; Buttle. 1989). Although a variety of “new” perspectives of consumer behaviour have been proposed in recent years in response to the intellectual hegemony of the positivist paradigm (Interpretive and Postmodern), however, they have tended to be discussed at a rather abstract level divorced from some of the key marketing concepts and practical issues of concern to marketers (Kavanagh, 1994). Consequently, the basic assumptions and implications of these perspectives for consumer behaviour research have not been well understood (Hunt, 1994; Sheth, 1992).

The overall aim of this paper, therefore, is to use Hjelle and Ziegler’s (1992) framework to examine the relationship between the underlying assumptions of traditional and new perspectives of consumer behaviour, to clarify their implications for approaching consumer research and from this analysis to identify new research opportunities. The rest of this paper is structured as follows. First, the conceptual basis and marketing implications of five generic perspectives of consumer behaviour are briefly outlined. Secondly, each perspective is positioned on nine basic assumptions of human nature and the dominant styles of consumer behaviour research identified. The main criticisms that have been made against the different styles of research are then discussed. Some observations for ways of developing a more pluralistic culture in consumer behaviour research in light of this analysis are set out in the conclusion.

**Consumer Behaviour Perspectives**

This section provides a brief summary of the main theories that are associated with five general perspectives of consumer behaviour, these being the: (1) Cognitive (information processing, grand utopian, hierarchy of effect), (2) Behavioural (behaviour modificationlearning, radical behaviourism), (3) Trait (psychographics, decision making styles), (4) Interpretive (humanistic, phenomenological) and (5) Postmodern (postructuralism, deconstructionism) perspectives.

*Cognitive Perspective*

The cognitive perspective, which emerged in psychology in the 1960s, constitutes the normal science component of consumer research’ (Foxall, 1997, p.230) and forms the basis of the various grand utopian, hierarchy of effect and, as explained first, information processing theories of consumer behaviour. From the cognitive perspective, the study of consumer behaviour basically becomes the investigation of consumers’ information processing mechanisms (e.g., Bettman. 1979), that is, how consumers mentally process, store, retrieve and use marketing information in the decision making process (Tybout and Artz, 1994). Information processing theory is at the heart of what are known as the comprehensive, or grand utopian, theories of consumer behaviour (e.g., Nicosia, 1966). This can be seen in the way that all the grand utopian theories take the form of elaborate computer flow diagrams depicting the different stages in the decision making process (for a review, see Woods, 1981).
Information processing theory is also central to the variety of hierarchy of effect models which, as Barry and Howard (1990, p.121) explain, posit that consumers go through a ‘variety of stages, namely cognitive, affective, and conative, in responding to advertising, and other marketing messages’. Importantly, the dominant pattern of relationship between the three stages is that cognition (thought) precedes both affect (feeling) and conation (behaviour) (e.g., Lavidge and Steiner, 1961). Overall, the main implication for marketing strategy of the cognitive perspective is that: ‘Consumers must be exposed to information [e.g., mass media, personal selling] if it is to influence their behavior’ (Sternthal and Craig, 1982, p. 314). The standard criticism of the cognitive perspective in consumer research, however, is that it assumes consumers are complex, rational decision makers (Olshavsky and Granbois, 1979). And as we shall see later, at a more penetrating level the cognitive perspective has also been criticised for its reductionistic assumptions of human nature.

**Behavioural Perspective**

Whilst the cognitive perspective currently dominates the field of consumer research, the most used and intuitive perspective is the traditional stimulus-response, or “black box”, behavioural perspective (Bagozzi, 1980; Stewart, 1991). This influence stems from behaviourism’s dominance in psychology up to the 1960s, the period when the key principles of consumer research (e.g., market segmentation) were being laid and legitimised (Keshal, 1990). In response to the hegemony of the cognitive perspective after the 1960s, behaviourism was explicitly revived in the early 1980s in the form of the behaviour modification, behavioural learning and radical behavioural perspectives; all of which focus on the external environmental influences on consumer behaviour. In terms of the behaviour modification perspective, for example, an expanded set of behaviour modification techniques (respondent conditioning, operant conditioning, ecological design, vicarious learning) are set out for ‘influencing, modifying and controlling consumer behavior in order to achieve organizational objectives’ (Peter and Nord, 1982, p. 102).

The behavioural learning perspective proposed by Rothschild and Gaidis (1981), in contrast, focuses specifically on the marketing implications of operant conditioning. The main difference between respondent and operant conditioning is that in the former case environmental stimuli are used prior to behaviour in order to cause it (S-R) whereas in the latter case environmental stimuli are used to reinforce behaviour, through various rewards and punishments (e.g., hedonic, informational, aversive), after it has actually occurred (R-S) (Foxall, 1995; Martin and Pear, 1996). What unites these two behavioural perspectives, however, is the belief ‘that it is useful and desirable to theorize about and investigate internal, psychological processes which affect behavior’ (Nord and Peter, 1980, p.36). Indeed, the behavioural learning perspective is a synthesis of operant conditioning and Bandura’s social learning (cognitive) theory (Peter and Nord, 1982; Rothschild and Gaidis, 1981).

The notion that behavioural theorists should consider psychological processes in general or incorporate them into operant conditioning in particular is severely criticised from a radical behavioural perspective (Foxall, 1992). Here,
the existence of inferred mental states, or "psychodynamic phenomena", are
denied and instead 'are interpreted as inner, physiological processes which are
the by-products of behaviour but not reinforcers' (Foxall, 1983, p.38). The
standard criticisms of the overall behavioural perspective, however, are that it
originally derives from experiments with animals, rather than humans, and that
it is only useful for understanding low involvement purchasing behaviour
(Mowen, 1988). More fundamentally, and as we shall see later, it has also been
criticised for its deterministic assumptions of human nature.

Trait Perspective

Trait theory views the behaviour of consumers as being the result of
relatively enduring personality characteristics (e.g. introverted-extroverted,
adaptors-innovators) and forms the backbone of various personality inventories
and statistical techniques (e.g., factor analysis) designed for identifying: (a)
psychographics/lifestyle market segments (Lawson, 1995; Mostyn, 1977) and (b)
for exploring consumers decision making styles and strategies (Kassarjian,
1982). In terms of the former, most psychographic/lifestyle market segmentation
techniques consist of a battery of standardised statements designed to capture
the traits of consumers in terms of their attitudes, interests and opinions
(Michman, 1991). The latest Values, Attitudes and Lifestyles programme
(VALS2), for instance, uses 65 factors (traits) to discriminate between eight
consumer lifestyle segments (Gates, 1989).

Similarly, most research frameworks that have been developed for exploring
consumers' decision making styles and strategies consist of a standardised
battery of trait dimensions (for reviews, see Bates and Mitchell, 1995;
Kassarjian, 1982). For example, Heylen, Dawson and Sampson's (1985) Implicit
(trait) Model of consumer behaviour proposes that consumers can be positioned
on eight standardised trait dimensions (assertive, energetic, extroverted, warm,
affiliative, subdued, introverted, cool). Likewise, consumers' "cognitive styles"
are examined within the standardised framework of Kirton's (1989) 32-item
Adaption-Innovation inventory (KAI). From this perspective, consumers are
differentiated in terms of whether they use adaptive (recognised viewpoints/approaches) or innovative (reconstructing recognised viewpoints/approaches) cognitive styles in the decision making process (Foxall
and Goldsmith, 1989). The main criticism of the overall trait perspective,
however, is that standardised research frameworks ignore individual differences
(Steenkamp, Van Trijp and Ten Berge, 1994). And as we shall see later, in terms
of its basic assumptions of human nature the trait perspective has also been
criticised for its inherent reductionism and claims of objectivity.

Interpretive Perspective

The interpretive perspective emerged in the field of consumer research in the
early 1980s in response to the growing dissatisfaction with traditional
psychological models of consumer behaviour such as those outlined above
(Kerin, 1996). Drawing its inspiration mainly from the humanistic (e.g.,
Hirschman, 1986) and phenomenological (e.g., Thompson, Locander and Pollio,
1989) movements in the social sciences, particularly in the field of psychology.
the interpretive perspective is concerned with understanding consumer behaviour at the individual level within the realm of consumers’ subjective consciousness and meaning systems, variously referred to as consumers “logics of meaning” (Buttle, 1989), “mind-sets” (Stewart, 1991), “belief systems” (Lannon, 1996) and “meaning frameworks” (Mick, 1986). The interpretive perspective is mainly identified with the use of naturalistic qualitative methodologies in order to explore the relationship between consumers’ subjective meaning systems and the ‘symbolic, hedonic, and esthetic nature of consumption’ (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982, p.132).

Probably the most celebrated example of interpretive consumer research is the “Consumer Odyssey” project (Holbrook, 1995; Sherry, 1987). Aimed at generating a thick description of American consumption behaviour, a series of ethnographic interviews were conducted with consumers at various consumption-oriented venues (e.g., flea markets, county fairs, shopping malls). The main findings from the Consumer Odyssey project can be found, for example, in Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf’s (1988) detailed ethnographic study of a particular marketing exchange - a swap meet. As described below and discussed more fully later on, the interpretive perspective can be differentiated from the emerging postmodern perspective in consumer research in terms of some of its basic assumptions of human nature, particularly those concerning consumers’ rationality and methods of knowing.

Postmodern Perspective

The postmodern perspective in consumer research emerged in the late 1980s and along with the interpretive paradigm is the predominant form of critical academic thought in marketing (Kassarjian, 1994). Deriving from the French post-structuralist school of Derrida, Lyotard and Baudrillard, to name just a few (for a useful introduction, see Burr, 1995), postmodernism replaces the search for “truth” with a celebration of multiple, and equally valid but nevertheless competing, representations of the world or “regimes of truth” (Foster, 1983). Although it is difficult to pin down postmodernism, not least because it is pitched at a very general and abstract level (Parker, 1995), the common themes related to consumer behaviour research include: (a) a rejection of a “pre-given” subject (e.g., the cognitive consumer, the interpretive consumer), (b) a scepticism towards rational methods of inquiry and “grand-narratives” (e.g., quantitative, qualitative) and (c) the denial that consumer behaviour can be “objectively” known (Firat, Dholakia and Venkatesh, 1995).

Instead, the main concern of postmodern inquiry is to explore how consumers are constituted by different discourses, e.g., “sexuality” (Elliot, Jones, Benfield and Barlow, 1995), and to critically examine the emergence, form and transition of different “regimes of truth” in consumer behaviour research (Firat, 1992). One of the main methods employed to meet this end is “deconstructionism” (Brown, 1995a; Burr, 1995). Very briefly, deconstructionism involves the close reading, or interrogation, of “texts” (anything that can be read for meaning, e.g., literature, films, adverts, products and, of course, theories and methods in consumer behaviour research) in order to expose their inconsistencies, contradictions, unrecognised assumptions and implicit
conceptual hierarchies' (Brown, 1995b, p.303). Thus, deconstructionism attempts to reveal the inner meaning, or lack of meaning, within texts (Derrida, 1984, cf. Elliot et al., 1995; Firtat. Sherry and Venkatesh, 1994). As discussed next, the main characteristics of postmodernism and the previously mentioned perspectives of consumer behaviour can be more fully understood and evaluated in terms of some of their basic assumptions of human nature.

**Consumer Behaviour Perspectives: Basic Assumptions**

As shown in Table 1, Hjelle and Ziegler (1992) contend that different psychological perspectives of human behaviour can be better understood and more fully evaluated when examined against nine basic assumptions, or dimensions, of human nature. The framework was originally developed in the late 1970s, the time when the hegemony of quantitative methods and the natural science paradigm in the social sciences, most notably sociology and psychology, were beginning to be seriously challenged (cf. Burrell and Morgan, 1979). These assumptions are particularly relevant for examining, or “positioning”, alternative perspectives of consumer behaviour, therefore, because they are used by Hjelle and Ziegler (1992) to evaluate the main theoretical traditions in the field of psychology; precisely that field upon which consumer theory and research has largely been fashioned (Hirschman, 1985; Tybout and Artz, 1994).

Although the nine dimensions are represented separately and are in themselves problematic in their oversimplification of the metatheoretical issues of human nature, they nevertheless provide a useful organising and explanatory framework. As we shall see, traditional perspectives of consumer behaviour (Cognitive, Behavioural and Trait) are largely associated with the first mentioned terms on the nine dimensions, that is, the positivist world view; whereas the new perspectives of consumer behaviour (Interpretive and Postmodern) are mainly associated with the second mentioned terms. The meaning of these assumptions, their implications for consumer behaviour research and some of the main criticisms that have been made against them are discussed below.

**Table 1. Basic Assumptions of Consumer Behaviour**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Perspectives</th>
<th>New Perspectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Determinism</td>
<td>Freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmentalism</td>
<td>Constitutionalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reactive</td>
<td>Proactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unchangeability</td>
<td>Changeability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeostasis</td>
<td>Heterostasis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationality</td>
<td>Irrationality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectivity</td>
<td>Subjectivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementalism</td>
<td>Holism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowable</td>
<td>Unknowable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Traditional Perspectives of Consumer Behaviour

The first set of assumptions that are discussed relate to the ontological status of traditional perspectives of consumer behaviour, that is, assumptions they make about the consumer's existence and nature of being (Buttle, 1989). As shown in Table 2, traditional perspectives are inherently "deterministic" because they implicitly assume that consumer behaviour is controlled by forces which operate largely beyond the control of consumers themselves (Anderson, 1983). For example, the behavioural perspective is based on the assumption of "environmentalism" which suggests that consumer behaviour is largely determined, or conditioned, by external environmental stimuli (Bagozzi, 1980). From the radical behaviourist perspective, for instance, Foxall (1995, p.22) states that:

'The scientific enterprise is deterministic and its application to human behaviour demands ... that behaviour is shown to be lawful; prediction and control would be impossible if it were not so.'

The cognitive and trait perspectives are also deterministic because they are based on the assumption of "constitutionalism" which maintains that consumer behaviour is determined by some internal motivating force (cf. Valentine, 1992). In terms of the cognitive perspective, for example, consumers are described as being shaped by their information processing mechanisms (cf. Shoter, 1975). The cognitive perspective is deterministic, therefore, because it 'reduces all questions and explanations to an innate, determined structure - the cognitive system' (Slife and Williams, 1995, p.42). In other words, although the cognitive perspective suggests that there is an active process of information construction going on within consumers, Thompson et al., (1989, p. 134) point out that this process is nevertheless 'determined by structural mechanisms such as short-term memory capacity'.

The trait perspective is more explicitly deterministic because it suggests that consumers are preprogrammed by their inherited genes (cf. Rose, Lewontin and Kamin, 1990). For example, in terms of the KAI framework used to measure consumers' cognitive styles, Kirton (1989, p.3) explains that: 'A key assumption is that cognitive style is related to numerous aspects (traits) of personality that appear early in life and are particularly stable, as is cognitive style.' Similarly, in their implicit trait model of consumer behaviour Heylen et al., (1995, p.54) contend that 'all consumer behaviour originates within an innate bioenergetic dynamic principle or imprint'. Although this latter model recognises the influence of social and cultural factors on consumers' genetic make-up, these influences are nevertheless reified and treated as just another set of immutable traits (e.g., affiliative). A key feature of most trait perspectives of consumer behaviour, therefore, is that they see traits as being genetically endowed which means that the traits consumers are born with, or develop very early on in life, determine the kind of personality they will have and, ultimately, the types of products and services they will buy and the general lifestyles that they will follow (cf. Burr and Butt, 1992).
Table 2. The Position of Five Contemporary Perspectives of Consumer Behaviour on Nine Basic Assumptions of Human Nature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Environmentalism</th>
<th>BEHAVIOURAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknowable</td>
<td>Reactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changeable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holism</td>
<td>Objectivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irrational</td>
<td>Determinism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POSTMODERN</th>
<th>Elementalism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjectivity</td>
<td>Heterostasis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proactive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INTERPRETIVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COGNITIVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TRAIT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Consumer behaviour perspectives
- Basic assumptions of human nature

Not surprisingly, then, traditional perspectives of consumer behaviour assume that consumers are basically "unchangeable" in the sense that they are unable to consciously change either themselves or their world. Change is not something which consumers do for themselves, rather it is a result of something that is done to them by some internal (e.g., traits) or external (e.g., environmental) force over which they have little or no control (O'Shaughnessy, 1985). This static portrait of consumers is also reinforced by the fact that traditional perspectives are based on the assumption of "homeostasis" - which suggests that consumers are motivated primarily or exclusively to reduce tensions and maintain an internal state of equilibrium (Hjelle and Ziegler, 1992, p. 19). As Firat et al., (1995, pp. 43-44) observe:
'Consumer behaviour theories believe in consistency and orderliness of consumer behaviour... Thus, the general assumption has been that if and when informed about such characteristics of the consumer [e.g., cognitive mechanisms, behavioural responses, genetic traits], some meaningful prediction of their actions can be achieved'.

From the assumptions discussed so far, it can be seen that traditional perspectives paint an essentially “reactive”, or passive, picture of consumer behaviour because they portray consumers as either the receptacles upon which an active world writes its message (behavioural perspective), the receptors of incoming information stimuli where the mind is seen as a storage bin of inaccurate copies of the real world (cognitive perspective) or as the impulses of inborn predispositions (trait perspective). For example, the behavioural perspective assumes that consumers are essentially “irrational”, lacking any conscious self-reflexive capacity of their own and as a result can be totally controlled and manipulated by marketers through environmental engineering (Foxall, 1997; cf. Hudson and Murray, 1986; Rose et al., 1990). And as we have already seen, although the cognitive perspective implies that consumers are conscious, “rational” decision makers it nevertheless takes consumers to be passive entities ‘responding to the push and pull of past impressed forces and current situational stimuli’ (O'Shaughnessy, 1985, p. 180). For example, Grundy (1987, p.2:7) points out that most of the cognitive hierarchy of effect models view advertising as an active force working on passive consumers:

‘All the transportation models, presume advertising carries messages largely about rational information. They presume a passive consumer, who obediently absorbs and acts upon what she is told’.

This leads to one of the main criticisms of the ontological assumptions of traditional perspectives of consumer behaviour which is that by treating consumers as passive organisms, or pawns, they actually diminish the “primacy” of consumers in marketing exchanges (Bagozzi, 1980; Lannon and Cooper, 1983; Runyon and Stewart, 1987). For instance, Phillips and Bradshaw (1994, p.51) forcefully argue that: ‘One of the main problems with many classical theories of consumer behaviour is that they condemn the customer to a role of semi-passive reaction in the purchasing situation’. Illustrating why it is important that consumer researchers should make explicit the basic assumptions underlying alternative perspectives of consumer behaviour, however, it is an irony that Phillips and Bradshaw (1994) should then go onto advocate the use of the behavioural (radical) perspective because as noted earlier behaviourism offers probably one of the most deterministic, manipulative and “impoverished” conceptions of human behaviour (Rose et al., 1990, p.78). Instead, and as we shall see later on, it has been argued that in order to understand consumer behaviour in dynamic competitive environments (McGregor, 1995) it may no longer be sufficient to ask “what marketing stimuli do to consumers?”, but rather “what consumers do to marketing stimuli?” (Lannon, 1996; Stewart, 1991).
These criticisms also relate to the remaining epistemological assumptions of traditional perspectives of consumer behaviour, that is, the assumptions that they make about methods of obtaining knowledge about consumer behaviour (Slife and Williams, 1995). As can be seen from Figure 2, traditional perspectives of consumer behaviour are based, by definition, on the assumption of "elementalism" because they assume that just as with the analysis of natural phenomena (e.g. chemicals) consumer experience can be broken down (reductionism) and analysed in terms of its component parts, or boxes, as reflected in most cognitive and behavioural depictions of the consumer (O'Shaughnessy, 1985). Perhaps the most reductionistic of all contemporary perspectives of consumer behaviour, however, is trait theory because it suggests that all human (and social) behaviour is best studied at the level of biological genes (Rose et al., 1990). In each of the above cases, therefore, the different component parts of consumer experience become the target for various "objective" analytical techniques such as standardised surveys, experimental techniques and personality tests respectively (Mostyn, 1977). In terms of the cognitive perspective, for instance, Mowen (1995, p. 14) points out that:

'Researchers taking a decision-making approach to consumer behavior tend to approach problems via a particular scientific philosophy, labelled logical empiricism. Those employing logical empiricist research methods focus on using the scientific method to collect data, attempt to eliminate sources of error in collecting data, and seek to predict the choices of consumers'.

Overall, the different ways of knowing associated with traditional perspectives of consumer behaviour assume that 'consumers are knowable, limited entities, the characteristics of which can be captured in the same way as can the characteristics of natural phenomena' (Morgan, 1992, p. 140 emphasis added). Again, however, the main criticism of objective approaches to consumer research is that they result in consumers being treated, quite literally, as passive objects of study to be experimented on by marketers rather than as active subjects participating with marketers in the research process (May, 1981; Wells, 1993). For instance, Braithwaite (1983, p.34) criticises experimental techniques for creating 'artificial situations so that people's reactions are unnatural, in circumstances which appear ambiguous, meaningless and secretive' and criticises standardised quantitative methods, such as questionnaires, because they are 'restrictive in the way respondents can describe and explain themselves, and it makes respondents mere passive reactors'.

And the main criticism of reductionistic approaches to consumer research is that they are incapable of dealing with the richness of consumer behaviour phenomena because as Runyon and Stewart (1987, p. 19) emphasise, consumer behaviour is a 'complex, interdependent system in which the isolation of a single characteristic for detailed analysis ignores the system as a whole'. In other words, reductionistic approaches are inherently incapable of dealing with the complexity of consumer experience (cf. Varney, 1994). Indeed, because consumer behaviour researchers are puzzled as to how all the different parts of consumer experience fit together, we are often left with a crazy-patchwork of
arbitrarily related "variables" as reflected in the plethora of hierarchy of effects models (Lannon, 1996). Overall, even the AMA (1988, P. 4) implicitly criticise the intellectual hegemony of positivist-based theories and methods in consumer behaviour research because:

'The role of customers in producing marketing knowledge, unfortunately, is much like the role of laboratory animals in experiments: they are observed, interviewed, and counted. Perhaps marketing would benefit if the customer had... a less passive role'.

The core assumptions and main criticisms of the new interpretive and postmodern perspectives of consumer behaviour that aim to redress some of the criticisms of traditional perspectives are discussed next.

**New Perspectives of Consumer Behaviour**

As shown in Table 2, the interpretive and postmodern perspectives of consumer behaviour attribute consumers with the capacity to "proactively" assign meaning to and represent their environments rather than just passively responding to them (Hirschman, 1986; Calder and Tybout, 1987). In terms of the ontological status of the interpretive and postmodern perspectives of consumer behaviour, therefore, the focus of inquiry becomes consumers' "subjective" meanings and the language, i.e., discourses, that constitute consumers respectively (Buttle, 1989; Firyat, 1992; Hirschman, 1985). In terms of whether consumers are rational or irrational, for example, the interpretive perspective suggests that behaviour is channelled by the content and structure of consumers' subjective meaning systems (Holbrook, 1995). Thus, consumers behave and make decisions by reference to the internal (psycho) logic of their subjective meaning systems as O'Shaughnessy and Holbrook (1988, p.206) explain:

'From an interpretivist point of view, actions like buying are not simply matters of rational calculation with consumers computing up the pros and cons of objective facts, but rather are matters involving felt expectations as to how the consumption episode will be personally experienced'.

According to Brown (1995b, p. 295), however, the interpretive perspective can be differentiated from the postmodern perspective in marketing because the former 'presupposes an autonomous human subject, the free-thinking, self-conscious individual.' For example, humanistic and phenomenological perspectives conceive the individual consumer as 'a unified, coherent and rational agent who is the author of his or her own experience and meaning' (Burr, 1995, p.40 emphasis added). Like the cognitive and trait perspectives, therefore, the interpretive paradigm is based on a diluted form of constitutionalism and determinism because it assumes that there is some pre-given natural essence of consumers (Silfie and Williams, 1995). Similarly, whilst
the interpretive paradigm stresses the experiential side of consumer behaviour such as “fantasies, feelings and fun” (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982), it is nevertheless aligned with the assumption of homeostasis because it suggests that consumers construct coherent and consistent representations, or subjective maps, of the world in order to make it more meaningful and predictable (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Moreover, these subjective maps are assumed to be intersubjective, which means that they are shared and understood by most people in society (Buttle, 1990).

In contrast, the postmodern perspective argues that there is no fixed, pre-given or constitutional essences residing inside consumers that make them behave the way they do (Brown, 1995a; Firat et al., 1994). Rather, self-identity and subjectivity are assumed to be constituted by particular forms of language, or discourses, which in turn are mediated by the consumer’s social interactions (Foster, 1983). Thus, identity is said to be constantly in flux and “changing” depending upon whom the consumer is consuming with, in what circumstances they are consuming and for what purposes (cf. Burr, 1995). The postmodern perspective of consumer behaviour is firmly based on the assumption of “heterostasis”, therefore, because it points to the fragmentary and fluid nature of consumers’ self-identity.

Firat et al., (1995, p.44) contend, for instance, that consumers ‘frequently change their self-concepts, characters, values and often subscribe to ‘multiple and often highly contradictory value systems, lifestyles, etc., without feeling inconsistent or improper’. Thus, the postmodern perspective places great emphasis on the creativity, autonomy and power of consumers to define and change themselves and the world in which they live through different patterns of consumption and lifestyles (Brown, 1995b). As emphasised by Firat (1992, p. 204), this reflects the general association of consumer culture with human “freedom”:

‘[The] ability to switch images and represent different selves, by switching products that represent the images, allowing oneself to lay claim to powerful, successful images is considered as a liberation: freedom from monotony, boredom, and the necessity to conform’.

This, however, leads to one of the main criticisms of both the postmodern perspective and to a lesser extent the interpretive perspective of consumer behaviour, that is, their blindness to the nondiscursive limits to human action (Rose et al., 1990). As Thompson and Hirschman (1995, p.151) point out, for example, postmodernism is based on an idealist assumption that consumers ‘stand above the constraints of culture, the ties of history, and the material reality of the body’. Like buying a pair of shoes, therefore, postmodernism in particular suggests that consumers can simply select or discard self-identities as they like, free from any sense of anxiety or uncertainty (Robins, 1994). Further still, and as returned to later on, Bauman (1990, p.211) argues that in western capitalist societies some people have more money, i.e., cultural capital, than others and therefore more practical freedom of choice:
‘At the end of the day, it transpires that with all the alleged freedom of
customer choice the marketed life-styles are not distributed evenly or
randomly; each tends to concentrate in a particular part of society and thus
acquires the role of a sign of social standing. Life-styles tend to become, one
may say, class-specific’.

The remaining assumptions of the new perspectives of consumer behaviour
relate to the epistemological status of research methods. As shown in Figure 2,
interpretive and postmodern perspectives argue that consumers can only be
fully understood as totalities, that is, “holistically”. As noted earlier, for example,
the interpretive perspective is strongly associated with the use of naturalistic
methods of inquiry that attempt to get as close as possible to the experience-as-
lived by consumers (Gabriel, 1990). Qualitative methods (e.g., ethnographic) are
privileged within the naturalistic approach, therefore, because it is assumed
they can reveal how individuals ‘describe, explain, or otherwise account for the
world in which they live’ (Gergen, 1985, pp.3-4). In contrast with traditional
objective-quantitative methods, therefore, qualitative methods ‘give more scope
for accounting by allowing individual expression in respondents’ own terms’ as
well as ‘more freedom to explain the action in whatever way seems important,
by bringing in particular aspects of the situation, and relevant others, as deemed
necessary’ (Braithwaite, 1983, pp.34-35).

Unlike the postmodern perspective, however, interpretive methods of inquiry
are actually quite similar to traditional positivist-based approaches to consumer
research because they assume that the “truth” about consumers’ world views
can be rationally known and accurately represented ‘through careful use of
appropriate naturalistic, interpretive and ethnographic research methods’
(Brown, 1995a, p. 32). The research process from a postmodern perspective, in
contrast, starts from the assumption that consumer behaviour is basically
“unknowable” because all forms of human knowledge and understanding are
culturally and historically loaded (Burr, 1995; Firat et al., 1994). Postmodernist
inquiry replaces the search for the true or real nature of consumer behaviour,
therefore, with a celebration of a multiplicity of (equally valid) perspectives
(Robins, 1994). As was noted earlier, one of the methods favoured by
postmodern consumer researchers is deconstructionism which is used to
interrogate texts (e.g., interpretive theories and methods) in terms of their hidden
assumptions and implicit meanings (Firat et al., 1995).

One of the main criticisms of the epistemological status of both the
postmodern and interpretive perspectives of consumer behaviour, however, is
that they are discussed at a rather abstract level ‘detached from the
epistemological claims and consequences of actual explanatory systems’ (Foxall,
1995, p. 8). In other words, the implications of the programmatic statements of
new perspectives of consumer behaviour have yet to be fully translated into
‘actual theoretical frameworks which can guide our investigations and
understandings’ (ibid., p.8). Some of the implications of this overall analysis for
developing a more pluralistic culture in the field of consumer behaviour
research are discussed next.
Conclusion

In summary, the principal component analysis that was derived from Hjelle and Ziegler's (1992) metatheatrical framework identified a number of distinct genres, or styles, of consumer behaviour research. From this it was argued that despite the increasing calls for a more inter-paradigm culture in the field of consumer behaviour research, most of the so-called alternative perspectives that have been proposed (Cognitive, Behavioural, Trait) are actually very similar in terms of their adherence to the assumptions of the natural science, or positivist, paradigm. The main criticisms of the different perspectives of consumer behaviour based on this paradigm, it was argued, were that they tend to treat consumers as passive objects of study to be manipulated in the research process and as a result ignore much of the complexity and richness of consumer experience.

In response to these criticisms, a number of new perspectives have emerged in the field of consumer behaviour research over the last fifteen years, most notably interpretivism and postmodernism. From the analysis of the basic assumptions of interpretivism it was shown to differ from traditional perspectives of consumer behaviour in terms of its focus on the subjectivity, or agency, of consumers. Through the careful use of qualitative frameworks of inquiry it was shown that the major aim of interpretivist research is to identify the meanings that consumers attach to their consumption experiences. And in terms of the postmodern perspective, it was shown to be different from both traditional and interpretive perspectives of consumer behaviour in terms of its rejection of all such grand narratives and rational attempts to understand consumer experience. Instead, the aim here is to interrogate different representations, or regimes of truth, of consumer behaviour and to celebrate a plurality of views. However, it was argued that the trouble with the new perspectives of consumer behaviour is that they tend to be pitched at a very abstract level divorced from some of the practical issues of concern to marketers and the material basis of everyday consumption. From this analysis, therefore, it can be seen that one of the main advantages of Hjelle and Ziegler's (1992) metatheatrical framework is that it broadens the debate on alternative perspectives of consumer behaviour from the intraparadigm level of inquiry (i.e., methodology) to the interparadigm level (i.e., epistemology).

And as discussed next, the other advantage of this metatheatrical framework is that it can stimulate our ways of thinking about and approaching consumer behaviour research (cf. Varney, 1994). Whilst some of these observations are not new, it is worth reiterating them within the context of the findings in this paper because it appears that they have yet to fully penetrate the collective consciousness of consumer researchers. To begin with, then, it has been shown that researchers have traditionally split up consumer experience into different component parts, or variables, elevating one or another of these into predominance in an almost cyclical fashion over the last fifty years or so (cf. Kassarjian, 1994). This division of labour, however, has resulted in the restriction of researchers to his/their special perspective with few taking a more comprehensive or holistic view of consumer behaviour phenomena. It must be
noted here, however, that the disadvantage of Hjelle and Ziegler's (1992) framework is that the dualistic assumptions they isolate also tends to reproduce this reductionistic impulse in consumer behaviour research (cf. Heath, 1992). A number of strategies need to be developed, therefore, in order to try and break down some of these unhelpful divisions and encourage more holistic approaches to consumer behaviour research at the methodological, theoretical and metatheoretical levels.

At the methodological level, for instance, it is suggested that consumer researchers can move closer to a more holistic view of consumer experience by adopting a multi-method approach that encompasses both subjective-qualitative and objective-quantitative methods of inquiry. In order to meet the objectives of our own work, for example, we have used in-depth interviews to explore consumers' subjective meaning systems, i.e., the reasons why they buy products, the values they associate with them and the specific decision making styles that they use when choosing between products; as well as standardised questionnaires to evaluate the dependability of these meanings systems in terms of the extent to which they actually guide consumers' purchasing behaviour; i.e., what they buy, how frequently they buy them, when and where (as recommended by Hirschman, 1956).

And at the theoretical level, it is suggested that consumer researchers can also move closer to a more holistic view of consumer experience by adopting a multi-conceptual approach that combines different perspectives of consumer behaviour to explore the same behavioural phenomena. For example, it would be interesting to see the results from a study of, say, consumer decision making, from different theoretical perspectives such as radical behaviourism and cognitive style. Finally, at the metatheoretical level a multi-paradigm approach to consumer behaviour research could also generate more holistic, and complex, representations of consumer experience which would basically involve viewing the same phenomena (e.g., consumption and identity) from different research paradigms (Arndt, 1985). For instance, Burrell and Morgan's (1979) four research paradigms (functionalist, interpretive, radical humanist and radical structuralist) have been usefully adopted as a multiparadigm framework for exploring organisational behaviour (see Hassard, 1987). Whilst such paradigms are often viewed as being incommensurable (Kuhn, 1970), their integration into consumer behaviour research could open up a useful dialogical space for developing alternative representations of consumer experience (for further suggestions, see Morgan, 1992). The basic principles of a holistic approach to consumer research, therefore, are that:

1. no part of consumer experience can be fully or meaningfully understood apart from its whole and
2. that the combined results of different methodological, theoretical and metatheoretical approaches to consumer research will yield more insights about consumer experience than those results obtained from any one particular approach.

Another useful strategy that could be used to transcend the reductionistic
impulse of much consumer behaviour research would be to adopt more
dynamic and longitudinal methods of inquiry, the aim being to identify the
general features or patterns of consumer experience over time that traditional
snap-shot methods miss. On the first point, for instance, O'Shaughnessy's (1992)
description of "shopping episodes" is illustrative of a more dynamic, multi-
method approach to consumer research. The name episode is given to any
sequence of happenings which human beings engage in that has a unity and
structure of meaning from the beginning to the end: 'Thus we might speak of
the shopping episode to cover the whole set of actions involved in choosing a
brand' (ibid., p.88). The research process that underpins shopping episodes,
termed ethogeny, begins with identifying the meanings, or rules, that guide
behaviour and essentially involves collecting accounts from consumers, as well
as observing their behaviour, before (anticipatory), during ( contemporaneous)
and after (retrospective) shopping episodes. This process could also provide the
basis for conducting longitudinal research into consumers' shopping episodes in
order to try and understand the patterns, or general trends, of consumer
behaviour over time. Again, in our own work we are planning to track a number
of consumers' purchasing behaviours, using a dynamic research framework as
described earlier, for a variety of products and services over a period of time in
order to explore consumers' self-governed rules of consumption.

Moving on, another suggestion for developing a more pluralistic culture in
consumer behaviour research in light of the findings in this paper is that
researchers operating within the traditional perspectives of consumer behaviour
are too technical and methodologically oriented and need to become more
aware of the conceptual foundations upon which different methods are based
(Olson, 1983). Conversely, and as noted already, those researchers operating
within the new perspectives of consumer behaviour tend to pitch their work at a
very abstract level and therefore need to focus on more "localised" studies
within concrete social and cultural settings (Foxall, 1995). Overall, it is argued
that a dialectical epistemology is required in consumer research studies that
recognises the importance of both the theoretical elements in any study and the
necessary empirical basis on which any theoretical generalisations must stand.

In terms of researchers operating within the new perspectives, for instance,
the emergence and development of consumer research as a field of knowledge
and its political, or "ideological", role in society needs to be further explored (for
suggestions, see Murray and Ozanne, 1991). Also, the way in which consumer
choice and freedom is restricted by material circumstances such as consumers
cultural capital; i.e., money, as well as the insecurities and anxieties of modern
life; whether it be from the fragmentation of identity or the availability and
social standing of particular consumption lifestyles, also need to be critically
examined (Bauman, 1990; Robins, 1994). Similarly, the self-disciplining, or
"governmental", effects of consumer research technologies such as market
segmentation practices and attitude questionnaires, which constitute consumer
behaviour; and advertising strategies which normalise consumer behaviour, is
another potentially useful area of research for the future (Thompson and
Hirschman, 1995). Such explorations, it is suggested, would help to qualify some
of the more general, one might even say totalising, statements emanating from
interpretive and postmodern writings (Alvesson, 1995).

And the last suggestion for developing a more pluralistic culture in consumer behaviour research in light of the findings in this study is that researchers can develop alternative approaches to understanding consumer experience by breaking with mainstream psychology, the dominant mother discipline, and reaching out to other fields of inquiry because as Wells (1993, p.494) makes clear:

'Neighbouring disciplines harbor concepts, data and problem-solving strategies that [can] expand horizons, heighten creativity, and increase validity in consumer research. By participating in these disciplines - learning their models and their methods and enlisting them as partners - consumer researchers can bring new power to their work'.

The field of consumer behaviour research, like much of marketing, lags behind conceptual and methodological developments in the social sciences, particularly critical organisational sociology; as many of the issues now being raised in the field such as the postmodern condition have already been extensively debated in organisational studies (for example, see Alvesson, 1995; Parker, 1995). Consumer researchers therefore need to break down some of these entrenched demarcation lines by engaging with and contributing to the debates on metatheoretical issues in other management related disciplines.

Returning to the main reasons set out at the beginning of this study for why researchers should explicate the underlying assumptions of consumer behaviour perspectives, therefore, it is concluded that the use of Hjelle and Ziegler's (1992) metatheoretical framework in this study to meet this end: (1) provides a rigorous and insightful analysis of some of the advantages and weaknesses of the methods of inquiry and marketing implications associated with different perspectives of consumer behaviour, (2) emphasises the fact that the production of knowledge in consumer behaviour research, just as with the production of knowledge in the natural sciences, progresses not solely from empirical investigations at the methodological level but also, and probably more importantly, from creative conceptual developments at the metatheoretical level and (3) highlights the limitations of researchers' tendencies to rely on a limited number of rather simple representations of consumer experience for developing competitive marketing strategies. Overall, therefore, it is argued that the explication and critical evaluation of the underlying assumptions of alternative perspectives of consumer behaviour can help in the process of (re)directing attention to some important new areas of interest in consumer behaviour research and in so doing contribute to the development of a more pluralistic and interparadigm culture in the field.

Note As shown below, each perspective of consumer behaviour was rated on each of the nine basic assumptions of human nature on a scale of one (e.g. Determinism) to seven (e.g. Freedom) and plotted along the first two dimensions of a principal component analysis in terms of their variance loadings. As discussed in the main body of the paper, this obviously represents the authors'
personal interpretations of the assumptions of the different perspectives of consumer behaviour.

Appendix. Ratings of Alternative Perspectives of Consumer Behaviour on Nine Basic Assumptions of Human Nature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ABCDE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Determinism</td>
<td>21147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmentalism</td>
<td>61754</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reactive</td>
<td>31257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unchangeability</td>
<td>22147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeostasis</td>
<td>22437</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationality</td>
<td>16537</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectivity</td>
<td>21237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementalism</td>
<td>22157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowable</td>
<td>21137</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


References


Belk, R. W., Sherry, J. F. and Wallendorf, M. (1988), 'A naturalistic inquiry into buyer and seller behavior at a swap meet', Journal of Consumer Research,


Buttle, F. (1990), 'Seven questions about paradigmatic change in consumer research', *Proceedings of the 22nd Marketing Education Group*, Oxford Polytechnic, pp.170-188.


pp.311-316.


Mick, G. (1986), 'Consumer research and semiotics: Exploring the morphology of signs, symbols, and significance', *Journal of Consumer Research, 13*, pp.196-


Merrill: Ohio.
Shottier, J. (1975), Images of Man in Psychological Research, Methuen: London.