A GENERAL PARADIGM OF MARKETING: In Support of the ‘3—Dichotomies Model’

Relying to Criticisms by Gumucio, Robin, Ross & Etgar

EDITOR’S NOTE: Because of the importance of the subject and the amount of controversy it has generated, I have decided to publish Professor Hunt’s response as an article, rather than as a Letter to the Editor. Also, I should like to remind JM readers that Professor Hunt’s article received the 1976 Harold H. Maynard Award.

THE “THREE DICHOTOMIES MODEL” of marketing suggests that all of the activities, issues, theories, and research in marketing can be categorized by way of the following dimensions: micro/macro, profit sector/nonprofit sector, and positive/normative. Since its first publication in my article entitled “The Nature and Scope of Marketing,” the model has generated substantial controversy. Although the positive/normative dichotomy has sparked the most spirited comments, it is fair to say that all aspects of the model have been questioned. And this is as it should be, since models in general are not (a positive observation), nor ought to be (a normative observation), inscribed in stone.

Four authors, to this date, have written letters to the JM editor commenting on my article: F. R. Gumucio (January 1977), Donald P. Robin (January 1977), Will H. Ross (April 1977), and Michael Etgar (October 1977). I would like to thank the writers both for their interest in the model and their very kind comments on it. Further, I would like to answer some of the questions they collectively raise.

Documentation?

Mr. Gumucio believed that the article presented “a pretty solid case” that certain parts of marketing could be considered a science, but that I failed “to illustrate with the same precise and analytical detail the discoveries of uniformities and regularities in marketing phenomena.” I plead guilty, guilty, guilty. Alas, the original article was already very long by JM standards. Although space limitations prevented further clarification of this issue in the article, the documentation can be found elsewhere.
A Science?
Mr. Ross challenged the conclusion that certain parts of marketing can be considered a science. The essence of his argument is imbedded in the following quote:

The human parameter which enters into any establishment of mathematical description of a marketing phenomena is an uncontrollable and unknown and totally random parameter. As such, its introduction into the study of marketing phenomena would always introduce a totally unpredictable factor.

When the people engage in a discussion, it is crucial that they agree on what issue they will discuss. For example, one does not discuss the merits of a "secret ballot" versus a "nonsecret ballot" with someone who does not believe in balloting at all! The issue in the original article was whether marketing is a science. Mr. Ross proposes that the "human parameter" is "totally random," and, therefore, attacks all the social sciences. Please note his statement that my argument "is reminiscent of bygone years when social studies placed the same garment of veracity on their discipline."

Mr. Ross is debating an issue that was decided decades ago. To those who would set up criteria that would preclude disciplines like psychology and anthropology from being considered as sciences, I have nothing to say. However, to those who admit that the behavioral sciences are in fact "sciences," the original article presents an argument (still unscathed) that the study of positive dimensions of marketing constitutes the science of marketing.

Unnecessary?
Professor Robin suggests that the positive/normative dichotomy is "unnecessary" for considering the "is marketing a science?" controversy because "using scientific explanation in marketing simply requires that the normative statements be used as antecedent conditions." To illustrate his point of using normative statements in scientific explanation, Robin offers the following "explanation" as an example:

EXHIBIT 1
Robin's "Explanation"

Antecedent Conditions

\[ C_1 = \text{Long-run profit maximization is the primary objective of the organization.} \]

\[ C_2 = \text{One or more competitors of approximately equal economic strength exists in the market.} \]

\[ C_3 = \text{The organization has the opportunity of offering several different variations of a new product, at varying prices, with different promotional possibilities, and through a variety of channels.} \]

\[ C_4 = \text{The products of the firm are of the type such that buyers can adequately determine their value (functional and/or psychological).} \]

Generally Accepted Propositions

\[ L_1 = \text{Strong competitors can and will produce products desired by buyers if a large enough number desire them.} \]

\[ L_2 = \text{Buyers purchase goods in a manner that they perceive to be in their best self interest at the time of the purchase.} \]

Robin concludes, "It should be noted that the antecedent condition \( C_i \) represents an assumed organizational objective which is, as previously explained, a normative judgment."

Is the positive/normative dichotomy unnecessary? Do normative statements play a role in scientific explanation? To evaluate these questions requires us to refer to the meaning of positive statements vs. normative statements:

The positive/normative dichotomy provides categories based on whether the focus of the analysis is primarily descriptive or prescriptive. Positive marketing adopts the perspective of attempting to describe, explain, predict, and understand the marketing activities, processes, and phenomena that actually exist. This perspective examines what is. In contrast, normative marketing adopts the perspective of attempting to prescribe what marketing organizations and individuals ought to do or what kinds of marketing systems a society ought to have. That is, this perspective examines what ought to be and what organizations and individuals ought to do.\(^3\)

Thus, one signal (but not the only one) of a normative statement is the existence of an "ought," or "should," or similar term.

Returning to Robin's "explanation," does it contain any normative statements? In particular, is \( C_i \) normative, as Robin indicates? Clearly, it is a positive statement, not a normative one. \( C_i \) states: "Long run profit maximization is the primary objective of the organization." If it were normative, it would state: "Long run profit maximization ought to be the primary objective of the organization." As a matter of
fact, there are no normative statements in Robin’s “explanation.” Note that C2 states, “economic strength exists,” not “ought to exist.” Further, C3 and C4 state that “the organization has” and “products of the firm are” both positive statements.

There are no normative statements in Robin’s “explanation” precisely because, as Robin himself points out, in scientific explanation “the explanation [the statement to be explained] must be logically derivable from the explanans” [the statements doing the explaining]. And any statement with an “ought” cannot be an antecedent condition in a logically valid scientific explanation. Thus, far from showing that the positive/normative dichotomy is unnecessary, Robin’s “explanation” gives powerful justification for considering the dichotomy to be necessary.

Robin finds the positive/normative dichotomy disconcerting on still other grounds. He suggests it is a “meaningless” dichotomy because the information derived from a positive “study is of little interest unless it is given prescriptive overtones. That is, the positive issues are barren except where they have prescriptive implications.” To analyze Robin’s position, one can begin by asking: To whom are positive studies “of little interest” unless there are prescriptive implications? Is it to the marketing manager? Are all positive studies “barren” unless they provide guidance as to how the marketing manager can make better decisions? This seems to be the “meaninglessness” criterion that Robin is proposing.

No one would dispute that much of the positive study in marketing has managerial implications. In my article I noted that “explanation and prediction [from positive studies] frequently serve as useful guides for developing normative decision rules and normative models.” However, to state that all positive studies are “meaningless” unless they assist the marketing manager, is exactly the kind of narrow perception of the scope of marketing that has for so long caused so much mischief in our discipline. The entire discipline of marketing does not exist solely and exclusively to serve the needs of the marketing manager, just as the entire discipline of psychology does not exist solely to help the clinical psychologist. Research in marketing has many functions.

The prime directive for scholarly research in marketing is the same as for all sciences: to seek knowledge. The knowledge must be intersubjectively certifiable1 and capable of describing, explaining, and predicting phenomena. Sometimes the knowledge will assist marketing managers in making decisions. Other times the knowledge will guide legislators in drafting laws to regulate marketing activities. At still other times the knowledge may assist the general public in understanding the functions that marketing activities provide society. Finally, at the risk of “waxing philosophical,” the knowledge may simply assist marketing scholars in knowing, a not inconsequential objective.

No Direct Use?
Professor Etgar repeats many of the same issues developed by Robin, and then raises a few of his own. First, Etgar mis-states my position by suggesting that I assume all positive studies in marketing “to be devoid of purpose or direct application . . . a study of a phenomenon for its own sake; accumulation of knowledge without any direct use.” I plead innocent! At no time did I ever assume or imply any such position.

Obviously, many positive studies are undertaken with the purpose of accruing knowledge that will be helpful to marketing managers. Obviously, many positive studies have direct application. It is also obvious that the linkages connecting many positive studies with their applications are long, indirect, and, sometimes, nonexistent. It should be equally obvious that many marketing studies are, by their very nature, normative. For example, developing a model to optimally allocate advertising expenditures amongst various media is a normative venture. The study may be based on positive research, but the model itself is normative. Please note that there are substantial differences between developing a normative model about how firms should allocate their media budgets and a positive study examining how firms actually allocate their budgets.

Etgar laments that many issues in marketing have both positive and normative dimensions and concludes that this “casts serious doubts on the potential use of the classification.” Far from it. The positive/normative dichotomy is a powerful spur to clear thinking and analysis in marketing.

Clear thinking in marketing requires us to carefully distinguish between the positive issue of whether marketers perceive themselves as having “social responsibilities” from the normative issue of whether marketers should have social responsibilities. We should attempt to clearly separate the issue of whether the poor do, in fact, “pay more” from whether it is morally wrong that they pay more. Finally, the issue of how managers do make marketing decisions must be distinguished from how they should make those decisions.

The ultimate usefulness of the “three dichotomies model” is an empirical question that requires more time to answer. Nevertheless, the results to date are:
1. The model has been found useful in analyzing the "broadening the concept of marketing" debate.

2. The model has been used to analyze and (hopefully) resolve the "Is marketing a science?" controversy.

3. The model is being used as a pedagogical device by many marketing academicians to introduce students to the subject of marketing.

4. The model is beginning to find a niche in the marketing literature.

These results appear promising. I wish to thank the readers of J/M for their encouragement concerning the model.

ENDNOTES


3. Ibid., pg. 20.