Postmodern marketing research: no representation without taxation

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"Postmodern" is one of those ubiquitous words that no-one quite understands. In marketing, there is a widespread assumption that 'postmodern' is an umbrella term for the plethora of interpretive research procedures - semiotics, hermeneutics, phenomenology and so on - which have materialised in recent years. This paper argues that such an assumption is mistaken, that postmodern and interpretive marketing research are polar opposites in certain important respects. The paper contends that the postmodern project has very serious implications for conventional marketing research, both qualitative and quantitative.

According to the proto-postmodern philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche (1986 pp 33), a word is like 'a pocket into which now this, now that, now several things at once have been put'. Although this pocket metaphor is true of innumerable words - just think of the diverse and ever-changing interpretations of marketing terms such as 'involvement', 'branding', 'impulse shopping' or indeed 'marketing' itself - there is perhaps no word to which this analogy is more applicable than 'postmodern'. Few words in contemporary discourse are so widely and indiscriminately used; few words carry as much intellectual baggage, arguably excess intellectual baggage; and, few words appear to be so wilfully and comprehensively misunderstood. Indeed, the postmodern project has variously been described as '..a con' (Hattenstone 1992 pp 7), 'the kiss of death to any art form, high or low' (Burchill 1994 pp 4) and 'tailor-made for the thinking man's fashion victim...to serious philosophy what flares are to fashion' (Beaumont 1993 pp 43).

The misunderstanding that surrounds the term 'postmodern' and its associated family of terms (postmodernism, postmodernity, postmodernisation and so on) is equally apparent in the marketing literature. The word has recently been added to the marketing lexicon and several interpretations of its meaning are already evident (Rothman 1992; Soderlund 1990; Morello 1993; Firtal & Venkatesh 1993). By far the most important of these, and by far the most widely accepted, derives from the sub-discipline of consumer research, where the term is closely associated with the latter-day advent of 'interpretive' or 'naturalistic' approaches to the analysis of
consumption activities (Hirschman & Holbrook 1992; Sherry 1991; Holbrook & Hirschman 1993). Although the postmodern movement has much in common with this 'interpretive turn' (which has now spread far beyond the sub-field of consumer behaviour), it is important to emphasise that these perspectives are not one and the same. On the contrary, they are diametrically opposed in certain important respects. In fact, interpretive researchers have frequently been accused of appropriating the term 'postmodern', with all its cutting edge connotations, and using it as a weapon in intra-disciplinary power politics (Grafton-Small 1993). While this may or may not be the case, the upshot of such terminological disputation is a widespread sense of confusion over the precise meaning of the central construct. If the definitions in best-selling textbooks are any indication, many marketing and consumer researchers appear to be under the mistaken impression that 'postmodern' is a portmanteau term for the plethora of unorthodox perspectives and methodologies which have materialised in recent years – humanism, semiotics, critical theory, hermeneutics, existentialism, phenomenology and many more besides (e.g. Solomon 1992; Engel et al 1995).

In light of this apparent misunderstanding, the overall objective of the present paper is to tease out the various threads that comprise the tangled skein of 'postmodern' marketing research. It commences with a summary of the postmodern condition, arguing that it is essentially a 'crisis of representation', where the old certitudes of rationality, objectivity and progress have been challenged, subverted and rendered all but redundant. The paper continues with an analysis of the interpretive research paradigm and highlights how its underpinning assumptions differ from those of the postmodern project. This leads into a discussion of the epistemological and ontological impediments to postmodern marketing research – the 'no representation without taxation' of the title – and the essay concludes with a brief assessment of alternative methodological options and the likelihood of their adoption. This paper, it must be stressed, does not claim to be the last word on the topic and acknowledges from the outset the difficulties involved in attempts to tie down and label the eclectic, pluralistic postmodern phenomenon. But, in its endeavour to cut one path (among many potential paths) through the postmodern thicket – the impenetrability of which has disorientated and deterred many would-be explorers – such a reconnaissance exercise may prove worthwhile and help provide a point of departure for future expeditions into the terra incognita (some would say Bermuda Triangle) that is postmodern marketing research.

The postmodern condition
The widespread sense of confusion that surrounds the postmodern project is partly due to the political proclivities of self-aggrandising academics (Featherstone 1991). It is also attributable to the notorious lack of a clear-cut and universally agreed definition, the fact that 'it gets everywhere but no-one can quite explain what it is' (Fielding 1992, pp 21). However, perhaps the best way of approaching the postmodern conundrum, and certainly the most accessible, is by means of the suffix rather than the prefix. As the term implies, 'postmodern' represents some kind of reaction to, departure from or extension of that which is considered 'modern'.

288
THE BIRTH OF THE MODERN
Although the nature and characteristics of the ‘modern’ have been subject to almost as much discussion as the postmodern, if not more, there is a degree of agreement that the modern world emerged from a series of profound political, economic, social and cultural transformations which began with the Age of Discovery in the fifteenth century; saw the creation of the modern nation state in the sixteenth; witnessed the gradual secularisation and democratisation of western society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; and which climaxed in the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions of the nineteenth. In point of fact, it was the excesses of the last of these that spawned the artistic and cultural movement commonly known as ‘modernism’. This began with avant garde developments in mid-nineteenth century Paris, reached its apogee prior to the first world war and continued to dominate artistic sensibilities until the late 1950s-early 1960s (Johnson 1991; Toulmin 1990; Wagner 1994).

Alongside the inexorable ‘rise of the west’, the emergence of the modern world was characterised by a dramatic transformation in scientific and intellectual endeavour. Prefigured by the insights of Galileo, Newton and Kepller in the physical sciences and Bacon, Descartes and Locke in philosophical method, this intellectual revolution came to fruition in the Enlightenment project of the eighteenth century. Like most intellectual movements, the Enlightenment exhibited considerable internal diversity. Nevertheless it embraced a constellation of concepts including a belief in the primacy of reason and rationality as a means of organising knowledge; empiricism, the idea that knowledge of the world is premised on empirical facts which can be apprehended through sense organs; the assumption that science, and the experimental method, is the key to isolating truth and expanding human knowledge; universalism, the presupposition that reason and science are invariant, apply in all circumstances and that general laws could be derived; scepticism, the conviction that no knowledge claims should be accepted at face value but subjected to detailed, objective scrutiny; and, not least, secularism, a belief that the disinterested pursuit of objective knowledge would lead to the extinction of ignorance, religious dogma, superstition and oppressive clericalism, and hence to a better, more tolerant, free and open society (Porter 1990).

As the foregoing synopsis indicates, modernity is a complex phenomenon, involving a variety of tightly interwoven, often contradictory, processes operating over an extended time scale. But, if it had to be summarised in a single word, that word would probably be progress. The modern condition is characterised, above all, by a belief that humanity ‘has advanced in the past...is now advancing, and will continue to advance through the foreseeable future’ (Nisbet, 1980, pp 4-5). Although the idea of inexorable human progress is a relatively recent development – prior to the Enlightenment the prevailing assumption was that the past was superior to the present and that life was lived against a backdrop of irredeemable decline (see Bowler 1989; Gordon 1991) – there is no doubt that compared with the bestiality, squalour and degradation of earlier times, it is our good fortune to be born into the modern world. We are better fed and educated, more affluent and live longer than our ancestors, we are free to think and say what we like, and live in the
reasonable expectation that things will continue to improve, diseases will be con-
quered, technological breakthroughs achieved and, periodic economic crises not-
withstanding, our material well-being maintained (Toulmin 1990).

THE POSTMODERN TURN
Just as the project of modernity was distinguished by the complex interpenetration
of contrasting artistic, technological, socio-economic and intellectual components,
so too the postmodern moment is made up of a multiplicity of highly diverse, often
antithetical, elements. Indeed, in our endeavours to comprehend this fascinating
yet frustrating phenomenon, perhaps the single most important point to note about
the postmodern condition is that it comprises four separate but interdependent
strands.

The first, and for most people, probably the most clearly identifiable aspect of
postmodernism, is a very distinctive post-war artistic and cultural movement (some
commentators restrict use of the term ‘postmodernism’ to this particular arena,
whereas others employ it in a catch-all sense, thereby adding to the terminological
confusion). In essence, postmodernism in the arts comprises a latter-day reaction
against the, once radical and challenging but subsequently tamed and canonised,
‘modern’ movement of the first half of the present century, and a tongue-in-cheek
return to pre-modern precepts of representation. Whether it be fine art, architec-
ture, literature, music, dance, design, drama or whatever, the postmodern move-
ment is characterised by the belief that there is no artistic orthodoxy, or single
overarching style. All traditions have some merit; there is a smorgasbord of choice;
the challenge is to combine elements of existing traditions in an eclectic, hybrid,
ironic style; and, not least, that the traditional boundary between élite and popular
cultural pursuits no longer exists. Just as popular preoccupations have been appro-
riated by ‘high’ culture (vernacular architecture, pop-art, science fiction etc.), so
too serious treatment is now accorded to what were once dismissed as ‘low’ or
degraded cultural forms – film, television, popular music, fashion, football, comic
books, hairstyles and, indeed, marketing and advertising (Boyne & Rattansi 1990;
Jencks 1989).

The second element of the postmodern project, which is often accorded the
epithet ‘postmodernity’, pertains to a series of significant post-war social and eco-
nomic developments (Bocock & Thompson 1992; Smart 1993). Socially, these in-
clude the decline of organised religion; the fragmentation of nation states and
political blocs; the collapse of traditional party politics; the demise of the nuclear
family; and, the proliferation of media and communications technologies, which,
according to the high priest of postmodernism, Jean Baudrillard (1983, 1988), have
created a depthless world of simulation where images bear no discernible relation-
ship to external ‘reality’ and where artifice is even better than the real thing. In
economic terms, moreover, recent years have witnessed a post-Fordist revolution
in the workplace, where the computer-aided, flexible production of specialised or
semi-bespoke products for niche markets has superseded the traditional Fordist
regime of the mass production of standardised products for mass markets (Cooke
1990). This has been accompanied by the emergence of an increasingly information
and services driven post-industrial order. In short, Silicon Glen rather than Clyde shipbuilding, science parks rather than steel plants, building societies rather than bricks and mortar, and mining museums rather than working pits (Rose 1991).

The third component of the postmodern movement is found in the physical sciences. Postmodern science is predicated on a repudiation of the mechanistic, deterministic, particularistic and static worldview of ‘modern’ science in favour of a new paradigm based on principles of uncertainty, indeterminacy, holism and change. For Galileo, Newton and the other giants of western science, the universe was akin to a vast mechanism governed by inviolate laws which functioned in a stable, orderly and predictable manner. The nature of these laws, what is more, could be deciphered through scientific observation, rigorous experimentation, precise mathematics and the disinterested application of the powers of human reason. Since attaining its apogee in the late nineteenth century, however, this mechanistic model of science has been slowly but inexorably undermined. Apart from the challenges presented by the advent of thermodynamics, quantum mechanics, chaos theory and ‘fuzzy logic’ (Griffin 1988; Best 1991; Kosko 1993), developments in the history and philosophy of science demonstrate that the behaviour of scientists is not rigorous, disinterested and unbiased but the expression of social, political and professional interests, which insinuate themselves into and taint scientific practice at every level (Woolgar 1988; Pickering 1992; Collins & Pinch 1993).

The fourth, final and, for many people, the most convoluted and impenetrable aspect of the postmodern moment derives from the work of several prominent ‘post-structuralist’ thinkers, principally Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard. Although the contributions of these post-structuralists are many and varied, ranging across fields as diverse as linguistics, literary theory, philosophy, history and psychoanalysis, they all exhibit a concern with textuality, narrative, discourse and language. Language, according to this perspective, does not reflect reality but actively constitutes it. The world, in other words, is not composed of meaningful entities to which language attaches names in a neutral and mimetic fashion. Language, rather, is involved in the construction of reality, the understandings that are derived from it, the sense that is made of it (for example, when an English speaker looks at an Arctic landscape, he or she sees ‘snow’, whereas an Eskimo, with over fifty words for snow, sees something quite different when looking at the exact same landscape*). Language, moreover, is by no means translucent, its meanings are not unequivocal and, indeed, there may be no discernible relationship to any extra-linguistic or textual referents.

* Few linguistic anecdotes have been more frequently recycled than the Eskimos and their forty-odd words for snow. Although this ‘fact’ is useful for pedagogic purposes, it is a complete myth! As Pinker (1994, pp 64) has recently pointed out, ‘no discussion of language and thought would be complete without the Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax. Contrary to popular belief, the Eskimos do not have more words for snow than do speakers of English. They do not have four hundreds for snow, as has been claimed in print, or two hundred, or one hundred, or forty-eight, or even nine. One dictionary puts the figure at two. Counting generously, experts can come up with about a dozen, but by such standards English would not be far behind, with snow, sleet, slush, blizzard, avalanche, rain, hail, hardback, powder, flurry, dusting and a coinage of Boston’s WBZ-TV meteorologist Bruce Schwoegler, snizzling.’

291
at all. 'Il n'y a pas de hors-texte' [there is nothing outside the text] (see Sturrock 1979, 1993).

**POSTMODERN POSITIONS**

While it is possible to identify four broad strands within the postmodern project - cultural, socio-economic, scientific and linguistic - it is necessary to stress that these strands are not entirely separate nor are they directly related to one another. Just as the project of modernity involved several deeply interwoven components, sometimes working together, sometimes cancelling out, so too the postmodern movement is a complex, inchoate phenomenon. Most of its key thinkers profoundly disagree; few, if any, are models of consistency in terms of the philosophical positions they adopt; and, almost without exception they have spurned the label 'postmodernist'. Indeed, it sometimes appears that the only thing they share is their utter and unremitting aversion to their 'postmodern' designation.

Despite these differences, it can be contended that the postmodern perspective is characterised by three shared assumptions - the death of the subject, the repudiation of meaning and the denial of progress - which together comprise a fundamental 'crisis of representation'. For most mainstream marketing researchers, the concept of the death of the subject can seem somewhat strange, at least initially. This confusion is largely attributable to the fact that the 'subject' of postmodern discourse means something quite different from the 'subject' as it is conventionally understood in marketing (i.e. the 'subjects' that participate in marketing experiments or the field of study itself). In postmodern analyses, it refers to the assumption that we - as individuals - are autonomous, coherent, free-thinking, self-determining human beings (i.e. subjects), who are directly responsible for their thoughts, actions and intentions and whose perceptions, motives and beliefs are the wellspring of consciousness, our sense of ourselves. Postmodernists, Michel Foucault (1972, 1974) in particular, reject this idea of rational, free, intentional human beings, arguing that the subject is a construct or effect of desire, power, the unconscious and, especially, language. Language precedes and exceeds us; it is something we are initiated into; our every utterance is governed and shaped by language; and, we are not free to deploy it whenever we write or speak. Human subjects, in short, are not so much the producers of language as the products of it.

If postmodernists eschew the Cartesian notion of human subjects as free intellectual agents in favour of subjects as epiphenomena of language, at least language is transparent with clear-cut and universally agreed meanings. Unfortunately this is not so. According to the majority of post-structuralist thinkers, most notably Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, linguistic meaning is extremely difficult to tie down. Contra Saussure, who argued that linguistic signs are like two sides of a coin, comprising a word (signifier) and the concept (signified) to which it refers, Derrida (1991, 1992) contends that the signifier and signified are more akin to two constantly moving layers which are fused together temporarily in the act of reading or listening. The linguistic sign is inherently unstable and its meaning is thus suspended, postponed, fragmented, fleeting, contingent, context-dependent and extremely diffuse. In a similar vein, Barthes (1977, 1990) maintains that the meaning
of a literary text does not derive from its author or creator but from its readers, those who bring their own idiosyncratic interpretations to bear upon the material and thereby generate a multiplicity of different, possibly incompatible, meanings. Readers, in fact, are free to enter a text at will, to undermine or reject the author’s intentions, to ‘take pleasure in the text’ and spawn as many irreconcilable meanings as they wish.

Just as the modernist search for ‘right’, ‘better’, ‘correct’, ‘privileged’ or ‘superior’ textual meanings has fallen into disfavour, so too the modern, western worldview – the idea of inexorable, if occasionally fitful, human progress – has been called into question (Toulmin 1990). While it is undeniable that four hundred years of modernity have provided unimaginable material well-being, incalculable knowledge accumulation, astonishing aesthetic accomplishment and incredible technological innovation, postmodernists argue that the material benefits of modernity and its promise of perpetual plenitude have been achieved at a very heavy social, environmental and political price. The mass of society may be better off than before but, as the homeless and destitute daily remind us, the division of wealth is as unequal, arguably more unequal than ever. The rise of the west has been at the expense of the subjugation, exploitation, usurpation and coca-colonisation of ‘the rest’, and left a legacy of political instability, famine, desertification, ethnic conflict, racial strife, economic dependency, resource depletion and environmental despoliation. Postmodernists acknowledge that while ‘progress’ may have been made by certain groups of people (white, male, heterosexual, university professors in the western world, for instance), the same is not necessarily true for others – coloured, female, homosexual, unemployed, non-westerners, the marginal, the underprivileged, the different, the ‘deviant’. For postmodernists, Foucault (1990) and Lyotard (1984) in particular, it is time to abandon the western ‘metanarrative’ of progress (and all its discredited ‘scientific’ paraphernalia) and listen instead to the voices of the hitherto excluded, the silenced, the ‘other’.

The upshot of postmodern scepticism towards human subjectivity, univocal meanings and the ascent of man is a profound crisis of representation which goes to the very heart of our conventional understanding of the human and physical world. The modern endeavour to develop rational science, objective knowledge, universal laws and absolute truths has been challenged, undermined and replaced with, well, a refusal to act as replacement. Postmodernists maintain that knowledge is bounded, that our capacity to develop meaningful generalisations is limited and rather than seeking the chimera of universal truth we should eschew foundationalist or totalising systems of thought, exercise the art of judgement in the absence of rules, emphasise the importance of pragmatism, provisionality and local forms of knowledge, and resist the temptation to seek consensus, since this only suppresses heterogeneity. Postmodernists, in effect, offer ambiguity where modernists offered certainty, they embrace complexity where their predecessors embraced simplification, they see disorder where their forebears saw order, and they replace the traditional modernist emphasis on analysis, planning and control with intuition, spontaneity and freedom, with paradox, uncertainty and creativity, with a rationale
that rejects rationality. Above all else, then, the postmodern movement is a way of looking at the world. It is a way of looking askance at the world (Brown 1995).

'Postmodern' marketing research: the interpretive interpretation
Although it is sometimes regarded as the latest intellectual affectation from Paris, the term 'postmodern' has a surprisingly long history in the marketing literature. It was first used by the codifier of the marketing concept, Peter Drucker, in a 1957 volume entitled Landmarks of tomorrow. Another early exponent was Weldon J. Taylor (1965) who, in a contribution to the perennial 'art or science?' debate, described the nature of marketing science in a postmodern world. Contemporary versions of postmodern marketing, however, date from the middle to late 1980s when a group of radical consumer researchers, inspired by Anderson (1983) and Peter & Olson's (1983) advocacy of philosophical relativism, sought to challenge the prevailing positivistic orthodoxy. Disillusioned by the traditionalists' mechanistic, hypothetico-deductive search for law-like generalisations, these self-styled 'postmodern' consumer researchers endeavoured to comprehend, through a variety of methodological approaches, the deeply felt beliefs, emotions and meanings that inhere in the rituals, myths and symbols of consumption behaviour.

As noted earlier, this latter-day profusion of epistemological alternatives (which has spread far beyond the sub-field of consumer behaviour) is such that many commentators have taken to using the term 'postmodern', with all its polysemic and ecumenical overtones, to describe the development. For example, in his introduction to the June 1989 issue of Journal of Consumer Research, which contains the apotheosis of interpretive consumer research, Belk, Wallendorf & Sherry's exposition of the Consumer Odyssey project, the editor of the journal, Richard J. Lutz, describes their work as 'post-modern'. The recent, exemplary monographs by Hirschman & Holbrook (1992) and Sherry (1991) place humanism, critical theory, hermeneutics, semiotics, phenomenology, existentialism, historical analysis and several other perspectives under the capacious 'postmodern' umbrella. Even critics of the interpretive turn, most notably Shelby Hunt (1994), have taken to using 'postmodern' in a catch-all sense. Closer examination, however, reveals that most of these positions do not accord with the postmodern project as it is conventionally represented.

HUMANISM
According to its principal adherent in marketing and consumer research, the humanistic perspective involves an 'orienting strategy' (a basic set of beliefs which cannot be validated as true or false and is rarely, if ever, replaced) made up of the following assumptions: that human beings construct multiple realities; that the researcher and the phenomenon under study are mutually interactive; that research inquiry is directed towards the development of idiographic knowledge; that causes and effects cannot be separated; that research is inherently value-laden; and, that the outcome of research – i.e. knowledge – is socially constructed, not discovered. Clearly, this is a world away from the controlled experiments and mathematical models of the traditional marketing metaphysic, which holds that there is a single
tangible reality, the researcher and the researched are independent, generalisable truth statements are identifiable, causes and effects can be distinguished, and, objective, value-free knowledge can be discovered (Hirschman 1986). Be that as it may, Hirschman’s humanism is not, and cannot be construed as, postmodernism, because it presupposes an autonomous human subject, the free-thinking, self-conscious individual that post-structuralists, such as Derrida and Foucault, categorically repudiated and considered to be essentially an epiphenomenon of language.

CRITICAL THEORY
The critical theory of the Frankfurt School is also often cited as an example of postmodernism in marketing and consumer research (Rogers 1987; Firtat 1989; Hetrick 1989; Iyer 1991). Perhaps the fullest expression of this perspective is found in a paper by Murray & Ozanne (1991), who presented a brief history of the Institute for Social Research and outlined critical theory’s principal principles. These include the belief that research should comprise a critique of society; that this criticism should be interdisciplinary; that theory and practice are inseparable; that orthodox Marxism should be rejected and the proletariat abandoned as an agent of change; that facts and values are interdependent; and, that genuine knowledge is a potential instrument of emancipation. Whereas, in other words, the positivistically inclined hold that reality is objective, singular and divisible, and humanists consider it to be socially constructed, multiple and holistic, critical theorists see reality in its dynamic, historical totality, as a ‘force field’ between subject and object.

Although marketing has much to learn from critical theory, it is quite incorrect to conclude that the postmodern movement and critical theory are one and the same. On the contrary, the foremost contemporary figure in the Frankfurt School tradition, Jürgen Habermas, is far and away postmodernism’s most formidable critic. Habermas (1985, 1987, 1992), in complete contrast to Lyotard, firmly believes in the continuing importance of the modern project, though he acknowledges that its record is far from perfect. He argues, nevertheless, that to abandon the emancipatory aspirations of modernity, to give it up as a lost cause, or to deny the genuine progress that has been made since the pre-modern period, is merely to acquiesce to anti-modernists like Nietzsche, Foucault and Derrida, which can only result in disillusion, entropy and neo-conservatism. Yet, despite Habermas’s doughty attempts to hold back the tides of irrationality – and the irrationalists’ tart rejoinders (see Rorty 1985; Foucault 1991) – it is generally accepted that the credibility of critical theory has been severely dented by the advent of the postmodern project and attempts to rethink the movement are underway (e.g. Bannet 1993). As Ray (1993, pp ix) acknowledges, ‘the notion of historically grounded reason, which offers both the legitimisation for Critical Theory and the impetus behind the resistance of oppression, has become unfashionable in an intellectual milieu informed by relativism and postmodernism.’

HERMENEUTICS AND SEMIOTICS
Closely aligned with critical theory, in so far as Habermasian insights are dependant
on a modification of the procedure, is the so-called 'linguistic turn' in consumer and marketing research (O'Shaughnessy & Holbrook 1988). Frequently portrayed as an integral part of the postmodern marketing project, this comprises hermeneutics, semiotics and several analogous positions (see Mick 1986), all of which are premised on what Hirschman & Holbrook (1992) term, a 'linguistic construction of reality'. Originally a method for recovering the meaning of ancient texts, and regarded by Dilthey as the key to the human sciences' ultimate aim of 'understanding', hermeneutics was extended by Gadamer and Ricoeur to the interpretation of the entire gamut of human activities (Silverman 1991). In effect, every human action or artifact can be 'read' as if it is a 'text' and an understanding of its meaning derived by recourse to the appropriate methodology, namely the 'hermeneutic circle'. For Gadamer, this is a self-correcting cycle of interpretive interplay between the whole of the text and its parts, whereby understanding derives from the fusion of the researcher's preconceptions and the context dependent meanings of the text under consideration (Outwaite 1985).

This interpretation of meanings is equally central to semiotics, the study or science of signs. Derived, on the one hand, from Saussure's subdivision of the linguistic sign into 'signifier' and 'signified' and indebted, on the other hand, to US philosopher C.S. Pierce's triadic distinction between 'sign', 'interpretant' and 'designatum', semiotics (or semiology, for those in the European tradition) involves the analysis of systems of signification, the means by which human beings communicate or attempt to communicate through gestures, music, language itself and, of course, food, clothing, possessions, advertisements etc. (Culler 1981). Although the development of semiotics owes much to the methodical, 'neo-positivistic' endeavours of Mills (Holbrook & Hirschman 1993), the semiological artiste par excellence was the early Roland Barthes (1973). In a series of dazzling analyses of French popular culture – wrestling, soap powder, steak and chips, the Citroen DS 19 – he stripped away the surface level of denotative meaning (e.g. a photograph in Paris-Match of a black soldier saluting the French flag) to expose a second level – the 'what-goes-without-saying' – of connotation and proceeded to examine its underlying ideological implications (i.e. French imperialism).

The marketing devotees of hermeneutics/semiotics/semiology occasionally complain of their maltreatment at the hands of unsympathetic reviewers (Holbrook & Hirschman 1993), but it is fair to say that such perspectives are now widely regarded as a legitimate, if not entirely mainstream, approach to consumer and marketing research (e.g. Holbrook & Grayson 1986; McQuarrie & Mick 1992; Sherry & Camargo 1987; Solomon 1983; Deighton 1992; Thompson et al 1994). The procedures, of course, are far from perfect (see Firt 1989; O'Shaughnessy 1992; Arnold & Fischer 1994), though, for the purposes of the present discussion, these shortcomings are inconsequential compared with the simple fact that semiotics and hermeneutics should not be confused with the postmodern. Roland Barthes, for example, eventually eschewed the science of semiology, abandoned his search for deep, underlying structures of meaning and in his late, post-structuralist phase, acknowledged the multiplicity of meanings in a text, the sheer profusion of potential interpretations (see Rylance 1994). Foucault & Derrida, furthermore, regarded
hermeneutics as old-fashioned, logocentric and predicated on the western metaphysic of progress (metaphysical in so far as it treats the text in a holistic fashion and progressive in its assumption that a closer and closer approximation to true meaning is possible). Nor, it must be emphasised, is this simply a matter of allowing multiple meanings in any given text – Ricoeur recognised this possibility, after all. Derrida demonstrates that meaning is indeterminate, that texts are saturated with irresolvable ambiguities, with innumerable, conflicting meanings that operate simultaneously and are disseminated across the iridescent surface of the text.

EXISTENTIALISM AND PHENOMENOLOGY

Besides the ‘linguistic construction of reality’ championed by hermeneuticists and semioticians, a number of ‘postmodern’ marketing exponents of ‘individual construction of reality’, in the shape of existentialism and phenomenology, are also evident (Hirschman & Holbrook 1992). Existentialism, as formulated by Kierkegaard in the nineteenth century, elaborated by Heidegger in the 1930s and popularised by Jean-Paul Sartre in the early post-war period, is a philosophical movement which holds that humans are self-creating beings, creatures who are not initially endowed with characters and goals, but who can choose them and what they want to be by an act of pure decision. Whereas everything else in existence merely exists, humans are – uniquely – aware of their existence and consequently have the potential to understand and (possibly) control it. Knowledge resides in the gestalt, the totality of human existence, and the key to knowledge is an on-going process of self-understanding, which is continually evolving, inherently unstable and never completed (Warnock 1970; Silverman 1988).

If, to paraphrase Jean-Paul Sartre, existence precedes understanding, phenomenology provides a means of comprehending the peculiarities of the human condition. According to its founding father, Edmund Husserl, phenomenology is nothing less than the ‘science of the subjective’. It assumes that even though we cannot be certain about the independent existence of objects in the external world, we can be certain about how they appear to us in consciousness. Objects, therefore, are not regarded as things in themselves but as things posited, or intended, by consciousness and hence the act of thinking and the object of the thought are interdependent. For phenomenologists, the external world is reduced to the contents of consciousness alone and it is the exploration of individual human consciousness, either through introspection or third person accounts of others’ experiences, that enables genuine, meaningful knowledge to be attained (Kearney 1986; Macann 1993).

Irrespective of its intellectual heritage, the existential/phenomenological perspective has quite a few contemporary adherents in the marketing research community (see for e.g. Holbrook 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988; Mick & Buhl 1992; Mick & DeMoss 1990). Like the hermeneutic/semiotic standpoint, however, it is not short of shortcomings (O’Shaughnessy 1992; Wallendorf & Brooks 1993). By far the most important of these is that it is not postmodern. More than almost any other philosophical position, existentialism/phenomenology is predicated on the ‘transcendental ego’, on free-thinking, autonomous human subjects. In Eagleton’s (1983, pp
58) words, it 'restored the transcendental subject to its rightful throne. The subject was to be seen as the source and origin of all meaning...The world is what I posit or 'intend': it is to be grasped in relation to me, as a correlate of my consciousness'. In fact, it was the outmoded existentialism of Sartre and Camus that French structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers, with their emphasis on the constitutive effects of language and their attempts to de-centre the human subject, were reacting to and stood four-square against (Hawkes 1977; Sturrock 1979). To conclude, therefore, that existentialism/phenomenology is a postmodern position, as Thompson, Locander & Pollio (1989, 1990) have done, is to stretch the concept some way beyond its elastic limit, ductile though it undoubtedly is.

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS
Popular as existentialism/phenomenology is proving, perhaps the single largest sub-field of 'postmodern' marketing research is historical analysis (see for example Hollander & Rassuli 1993). In fact, Sherry (1991) goes so far as to suggest that historical perspectives, with their inherently interpretive world view, provide the key to comprehending postmodern developments in contemporary consumer research. Nevet (1991) maintains that as there are many similarities between the problems that face practising marketing managers and those typically encountered in the study of history, an historical orientation provides a useful antidote to the sterility of the positivistic standpoint which continues to pervade academic marketing. And, according to Lavin & Archdeacon (1989), marketing's latter-day intellectual shift in the direction of interpretivism/relativism has been facilitated by – and has facilitated in turn – the growth of an historical consciousness.

Although historical analysis is inherently interpretive, it is important to emphasise that there are numerous schools of historical thought – positivist, Marxist, hermeneutic, psychoanalytic, structuralist, idealist, narrative and many more (Jones 1991). While the majority of these contrast sharply with mainstream marketing scholarship, to suggest that historical approaches per se count as 'postmodern marketing' is a gross exaggeration. Postmodernism, if anything, endorses the 'end of history' thesis, cultivates a posthistoire attitude or, like Foucault, champions an historical world view consisting of radical discontinuities and iconoclastic revisionism (Rosenau 1992; Niethammer 1992; Goldstein 1994). There is, admittedly, a postmodern movement within historical scholarship – several papers on the implications of postmodernism for history have been published and the 'new historicism' paradigm of contemporary literary theory is broadly postmodernist in ethos (e.g. Ankersmit 1989; Zagarin 1990; Veess 1989) – but none of this material has materialised in the marketing and consumer research literature. In fact, the one and only reference (to Hayden White's (1989) assessment of the New Historicism movement) specifically dismisses this particular line of thought (Smith & Lux 1993).

No representation without taxation
The foregoing discussion of 'postmodern' marketing research methods should not be construed as an attempt to denigrate or undermine the marketing insights that have been attained through the adoption of humanism, critical theory, semiology,
phenomenology, historical analysis or whatever. On the contrary, marketing is a much richer discipline thanks to the endeavours of the interpretivists. The Consumer Odyssey, to name but one of their achievements, will undoubtedly be remembered as a seminal moment of post-war marketing research. Nor, it must be stressed, does the above mean to imply that interpretive marketing researchers are unaware or somehow ignorant of the extant postmodern literature. Nothing could be further from the ‘truth’. As a glance at the recent publications of (say) Belk, Hirschman, Holbrook, Sherry, Stern or Thompson amply testify, the holy trinity of Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard are routinely referred to, Baudrillard’s ‘black hole’ of hyperreality has absorbed innumerable marketing researchers, and few would deny that Roland Barthes is presently enjoying a whole new lease of life in the marketing literature, the (literal) death of the author notwithstanding.

Nor, for that matter, does the foregoing overview suggest that there are no meaningful parallels between interpretive and postmodern marketing research; quite the reverse. The interpretivists espousal of multiple perspectives – their desire, in effect, to let a thousand methodological flowers bloom – is very much in keeping with the prevailing postmodern ethos of ‘anything goes’ (though we must not confuse the consequences of a postmodern outlook with its premises). What is more, if we imagine a conceptual continuum with (say) logical empiricism at one end and Baudrillard’s apocalyptic postmodern vision at the other, then it is undeniable that the bulk of interpretive research lies towards the latter end of the spectrum. True, most of the positions championed by interpretive marketing researchers have been specifically rejected by the leading lights of the postmodern moment – as many commentators on postmodern marketing have been at pains to point out (eg Firt et al 1994; Venkatesh et al 1993) – but compared with the worldview propagated by positivists, empiricists and their fellow travellers, interpretive and postmodern marketing research are cheek by philosophical jowl.

Indeed, the ultimate irony is that any postmodernistically informed attempt to denigrate the interpretivists, the very act of expressing a purist, ‘holier than thou’ evaluation of this self-styled body of ‘postmodern’ marketing research, founders on the very rock of postmodernism* with its emphasis on the inherent and irreducible undecidability of meaning. If some marketing scholars choose to employ the term ‘postmodern’ for perspectives – such as McCracken’s (1988, 1990) anthropological insights – which would be considered essentially ‘modern’ in the original discipline (cf Tyler 1987; Sanggren 1988), or which bear little or no relation to the postmodern condition as it is conventionally portrayed, then so be it. It is a perfectly postmodern thing to do, and for a postmodernist to deny them this freedom, or even attempt to tie down the meaning of postmodernism, is to repudiate the very position he or she

* I fully appreciate that the ‘rock’ metaphor is totally inappropriate descriptor for postmodernism. It is perhaps best described as a spider’s web, a vortex, a hall of mirrors, a cascade of soap-bubbles or an implosive Black Hole. But the very incongruity of the metaphor highlights the all-important part played by figurative thinking in the process of theory articulation, in our very understanding of the world (see Brown 1995). As Rorty (1980) makes clear – metaphorically of course – the important thing is not whether an analogy is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, but our reaction to it, our decision whether to savour the metaphor or spit it out.
purportedly espouses. Silence, as Baudrillard rightly reminds us, is the only appropriate postmodern reaction.

REFLECTIONS AND REFLEXIVITY

Despite these qualifications and circumlocutions, it is important to emphasise, if only for expository purposes, that there are a number of differences between the interpretive and postmodern marketing research paradigms. One possible way of representing these differences is by means of a basic, over-simplified and admittedly modernist four-cell matrix. Illustrated in figure 1, this distinguishes between epistemology (the grounds of knowledge) and ontology (the nature of the world) and arbitrarily subdivides these continua along objective and subjective dimensions (see Hudson & Murray 1986; Thompson 1990). The top left hand cell assumes that individuals have direct, unmediated access to the real world and that, notwithstanding the problems associated with sampling, questionnaire design and such-like, it is possible to obtain hard, secure, objective knowledge about this single external reality. The vast bulk of everyday marketing research, from attempts to measure advertising recall rates, through taste tests on new product prototypes, to empirical analyses of the shopping behaviour of green consumers, would fall into this category. The top right hand cell also assumes direct, unmediated access to external reality but assumes that people’s knowledge of this world is highly individual, subjective, unquantifiable, difficult to access and best illuminated through the use of ‘traditional’ qualitative research procedures like depth interviews and group discussions. Such studies not only provide hypotheses for subsequent empirical tests, but for some marketing researchers, they also form the basis of meaningful generalisations and model development in their own right (see Carson 1989; Gordon 1994). The bottom left hand cell presupposes that individuals do not have direct access to the real world – language, culture, theory and other distortions are interposed – but that their knowledge of this perceived world (or worlds) is meaningful in its own terms and can be understood through careful use of appropriate naturalistic or ethnographic research procedures, though generalisations and universally valid findings are unattainable. Much of marketing’s interpretive research tradition, from the celebrated Consumer Odyssey and Hirschman’s (1990, 1991, 1992) personal revelations, to Gould’s (1991) celebration of sex, drugs and rock ’n’ roll, is incorporated within this category. The final, bottom right-hand cell represents the postmodern position which not only rejects the notion that individuals have unmediated access to external reality, but it also questions the very existence of the free-thinking ‘subject’. It maintains that the knowledge people imagine they possess is unreliable, dispersed, fragmented, pre-existing and an epiphenomenon of language. In other words, it demotes the human subject from a constitutive to a constituted status and, more to the point, presents very serious practical problems for putative postmodern marketing researchers.

Indeed, according to Baudrillard and like-minded commentators on the apocalyptic wing of the postmodern movement, empirical research has been rendered impossible due to the implosion of the social into the media. By this he means that the extraordinarily vivid images, which are created, amplified, circulated and
analysed by the increasingly hydra-headed media, no longer represent the 'real' — some accessible external reality — but merely allude to each other in a complex self-referential arabesque. For Baudrillard, there have been four successive stages in the relationship between images and reality. First, they are a reflection of basic reality; secondly, they mask and pervert basic reality; thirdly, they mask the absence of a basic reality; and, fourthly, they bear no relation to any reality whatsoever. The upshot of this 'procession of simulacra' is a postmodern hall of mirrors where signs, images and representations are reflected, refracted and represented in perpetuity. In these disorientating circumstances, where the rug of representation has effectively been pulled from under our feet, the very notion of undertaking empirical research is subverted and problematised — to put it mildly.

This argument, admittedly, is somewhat abstract and can be readily dismissed as grand continental armchair theorising of the worst kind. But a glance at the current marketing scene suggests that Baudrillard's dystopian vision is closer to science fact than science fiction. Numerous commentators, for example, contend
that the contemporary marketing world is dominated by advertisements about advertisements, products that parody other products, pseudo-sales promotions, customer services and price wars, and, as pre-electoral ‘poll of polls’ amply testify, marketing research about marketing research (Adair 1992; Moore 1993). While such assertions are grossly exaggerated, they remind us that marketing and marketing research are indeed self-referential and deeply implicated in the phenomena they seek to portray. We are all familiar with the ‘problem’ of respondents’ ‘tactical’ responses to political opinion polls (the survey, in other words, is no longer measuring voters’ intentions but their response to being surveyed) and agonise over the extent to which interviewees present an idealised version of their behaviours to interviewers (Crewe 1993). We are equally aware of managers who have (to take but one example) deleted products because of their belief in the product life cycle, a theory which is far from proven, and have come to realise that the latter-day fragmentation of markets is partly attributable to the rise of marketing with the enormous emphasis that it places on segmentation, targeting and positioning (Brown 1995). Even the popular perception of ‘science’, the ideal to which marketing scholarship aspires but is unlikely ever to achieve, is partly a marketing creation thanks to generations of washing powder, cosmetics, shampoo and patent medicine commercials (white coats, spotless labs, all-pervasive air of rigour and objectivity). Marketing research, in short, does not reflect an external marketing reality in a neutral and transparent fashion. It does not stand outside the system it seeks to describe. Marketing research, rather, constitutes, conditions, affects, alters, influences, implicates, distorts and re-directs the very thing it purports to represent – and vice versa (Mort 1989).

IMPLICATIONS AND ALTERNATIVES

There is more to postmodern marketing research, however, than the difficulties of disentangling fact and artifact, cause and effect, theory and practice, reflection and reflexivity, observer and observed and so on. If, as noted earlier, the postmodern condition comprises a ‘crisis of representation’, then the implications for conventional marketing research are extremely serious – because marketing research is inherently representational. Whether it be representative samples, the representation of respondents’ actions, attitudes and intentions in survey research exercises, which themselves represent researchers’ representations of the topics under investigation, or indeed our very attempts to develop theoretical/statistical/diagrammatic representations of marketing phenomena, representation represents the raison d’être of marketing research. After all, the output of most marketing research exercises actually comprises a representation (verbal delivery), of a representation (report, academic paper), of a representation (data analysis) of a representation (survey instrument), of a representation (sample), of a representation (respondents’ response), of a representation (the researcher’s assumption, or the client’s belief, that there is an issue worth researching), of a representation (the textual context – secondary data, extant publications etc – from which this assumption derives). Even papers on the postmodern ‘crisis of representation’ represent representations of an anti-representative position!
More specifically, the concept of ‘death’ of the human subject – as an autonomous, free-thinking, self-knowing individual – transforms the bulk of workaday marketing research into the epistemological equivalent of re-arranging the deck-chairs on the Titanic. Mining data sets with the aid of statistical techniques, content analyses, hermeneutic circles or whatever is rendered redundant, not simply by the fact that such procedures create rather than uncover meaning, but also by the multiplicity, the sheer profusion, of potential meanings that may be inscribed therein. In fact, the very notion that one meaning, interpretation or representation may be better than the others is, in itself, a manifestation of the discredited modern metaphysic of inexorable progress, as is the assumption that superior concepts, theories, models, methodologies and, not least, the nirvana of marketing orientation, are just around the corner, almost within our grasp, achievable with one final supreme effort. For most postmodernists, such endeavours are doomed to inevitable failure, a complete waste of time and effort.

Faced with this epistemological impasse, most ‘mainstream’ marketing researchers might reasonably respond with the demand that postmodernists provide some methods and procedures of their own. Challenged, in effect, to put up or shut up, the ‘standard’ postmodern response is that any attempt to formulate meaningful alternatives should be resisted as yet another instantiation of the west’s progressive ideology. This point-blank refusal to participate in the modernist game of representation may seem like an utterly hopeless position – a dead-end that is best avoided – but it is important to emphasise that the postmodern project does not pretend to offer a way forward. It poses questions rather than provides answers. Its answer is that there is no answer. Postmodern philosophy, in Rorty’s (1980) apt phraseology, is edifying rather than systematic.

Despite their reluctance to play the modernist game – in theory at least – postmodernists do offer a number of anti-method methods in practice. Perhaps the most important of these are deconstruction and cognitive mapping. Although it has entered popular parlance as a chic synonym for ‘criticism’, ‘subversion’, or ‘analysis’, deconstruction is a procedure for interrogating texts, which, by means of careful and detailed reading, seeks to expose their inconsistencies, contradictions, unrecognised assumptions and implicit conceptual hierarchies. To show, as Norris (1991, pp 35) aptly puts it, that a text ‘cannot mean what it says...or say what it means’. The objective of the deconstructive exercise, however, is not to resolve textual shortcomings or elucidate inherent ambiguities, as this merely substitutes one subjective reading for another. The purpose rather is to demonstrate that there are no hidden truths within a text, that there is no fixed, correct or privileged interpretation and, not least, that the desire for a ‘centre’, or focal point of transcendent meaning, is itself meaningless. Initially applied to the literary and philosophical canon, deconstruction has since been adapted to all manner of social and cultural phenomena. These range from food and fashions to art and architecture, though as virtually anything can be considered a ‘text’ (advertisements, price wars, marketing theories, the research process etc), the potential applications to marketing phenomena are almost limitless.

Cognitive mapping, as originally developed by Lynch (1960) and subsequently
advocated by Jameson (1991), substitutes the modern emphasis on time (historical progress) with a postmodern emphasis on space. The technique, which requires respondents to draw sketch maps of geographical locations, is much less anarchistic than Derrida’s deconstruction. Indeed, it is predicated on the notion of representation – maps are representations too – but Jameson argues that in the confusing, chaotic and disorientating postmodern world, some form of representation is still required. Cognitive maps may be representative but they are not mimetic. In other words, they do not aspire to be accurate, precise or cadastral depictions of an unchanging external reality. On the contrary, they are idiosyncratic, impressionistic, distorted, fragmented and mutable, just like the postmodern world they seek to portray. Cognitive mapping, however, is not confined to spatial relationships – the procedure can be applied to social, political, cultural and economic phenomena – nor does it necessarily involve a map drawing exercise. According to Jameson, films, plays, poems, paintings and books, such as Herr's Dispatches (an especially vivid evocation of the Vietnam War ‘experience’) can also comprise a form of cognitive mapping.

ADOPTION AND ASSESSMENT
Many marketing researchers may be prepared to concede that the works of poets, novelists and film-makers provide privileged insights into the nature of contemporary consumer culture (or comprise a useful source of testable hypotheses, if nothing else). Some might be willing to entertain the addition of cognitive mapping and (even) deconstruction to marketing’s extensive methodological array. But few, one suspects, are ready to dynamite the tower block of modern marketing scholarship – a building that has been painstakingly constructed over generations of research endeavour – in order to play peek-a-boo among the postmodern ruins. The prospect of pressing the plunger is undeniably exhilarating, as is the vision of an ostensibly indestructible edifice sliding majestically to its doom, but the fact of the matter is that it is our abode that is under threat and the postmodern project offers little by way of shelter to dispossessed marketing researchers.

Postmodernism, in sum, is not a fashionable pied-à-terre to add to marketing’s already bulging property portfolio, its many methodological mansions. On the contrary, it dismisses modern marketing as the work of jerry-builders; it interprets the manifold cracks in marketing’s facade as evidence of subsidence rather than settling; and, it recommends demolition instead of conversion or additional bijou extensions. Postmodern marketing research is the equivalent of a detailed structural survey, an examination of the very foundations of the marketing discipline, a repudiation of the assumptions of representation upon which the fabric (or should that be fabrication?) of conventional quantitative and qualitative marketing research rests.

Now, it is arguable that such challenges to modern marketing ideology are long overdue. Numerous benefits flow from introspective self-examination, not least the realisation that marketing representation does not come without taxation. But it is quite incorrect to assume, as many marketers appear to maintain, that postmodern is just another word, albeit a chic and fashionable word, for the latter-day
'interpretive turn' in marketing and consumer research (Hill 1993; Hirschman 1993). The postmodern project is as much a threat to the interpretive research tradition as it is to the positivistic orthodoxy. It does not help us understand the (marketing) world, it forces us to try to understand ourselves. Above all, postmodernism suggests that the fundamental problem we face is not marketing myopia, but the myopia of marketing.

Conclusion
Few words in contemporary discourse have been so widely used and abused as 'postmodern'. As a result of its appropriation by a group of avant garde academics, many marketing researchers appear to be under the impression that 'postmodern' is an umbrella term for the host of unorthodox methodologies and perspectives that have materialised in recent years. Although the postmodern project has much in common with the latter-day 'interpretive turn', it is different in several important respects. This paper has attempted to highlight these differences, arguing that postmodernism is essentially a profound 'crisis of representation' which challenges long-standing assumptions concerning human subjectivity, determinate meaning and perpetual progress. Indeed, as representation is the raison d'être of marketing research, the postmodern turn renders traditional quantitative and qualitative market research procedures problematical at best and impossible at worst. While numerous benefits may flow from this methodological implosion – periodic assessments of marketing's most deep-rooted assumptions are both healthy and prudent – it is important to appreciate that postmodernism is not just another weapon in our specialism's intellectual arsenal. The postmodern marketing condition necessitates the surrender of many extant methodological weapons, though it remains to be seen whether the front line foot-soldiers of research are prepared to hand over their arms.

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