Chapter 3

Sources and Status of Marketing Theory

Stephen Brown

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Introduction

Few would deny that marketing occupies a central position in the business environment of the late twentieth century and is becoming increasingly pervasive in non-business contexts. There is ample evidence, after all, that a marketing orientation is the key to long-term business success. Innumerable surveys of senior management attest to its continuing importance. The marketing concept is being enthusiastically embraced in fields as diverse as health care, public administration and the not-for-profit sector. It is rapidly colonising the erstwhile command economies of eastern Europe, where the market is supplanting marxism as the societal touchstone, albeit not without privation. And, as the proliferation of publications, professorships, degree programmes and professional societies clearly testifies, marketing is in the ascendancy as an academic discipline.

Despite the undeniable achievements of modern marketing, an undercurrent of concern is also discernible. Many latter-day commentators on the marketing condition have concluded that something is amiss, that the concept is deeply, perhaps irredeemably, flawed, that its seemingly solid foundations are by no means secure and that the discipline is teetering on the brink of a serious intellectual crisis. Piercy, for example, commenced his recent best-selling book with the assertion that 'the traditional marketing concept assumes and relies on the existence of a world which is alien and unrecognisable to many of the executives who actually have to manage marketing for real'. Gummesson states that 'the present marketing concept...is unrealistic and needs to be replaced'. Rapp and Collins contend that 'the traditional methods...simply aren't working as well anymore'. Brownlie and Saren argue that 'it is questionable whether the marketing concept as it has been propagated can provide the basis for successful business at the end of the twentieth century'. McKenna maintains that 'there is less and less reason to believe that the traditional approach can keep up with real customer wishes and demands or with the rigours of competition'. And, Professor Michael Thomas, one of Britain's most respected marketing academics, has recently made the frank, and frankly
astonishing, confession that after thirty years of propagating the marketing message he is having serious doubts about its continuing efficacy.\textsuperscript{18}

As on the previous occasions when marketing scholars felt it necessary to cry ‘crisis’,\textsuperscript{19} this sense of uncertainty is largely attributable to unanticipated events in the external environment – the rise of strategic alliances, the fragmentation of mass markets, the collapse of eastern Europe etc – which have exposed the inadequacies of extant assumptions and precipitated a period of academic introspection. It is compounded, however, by the growing disaffection over marketing’s apparent lack of theoretical progress.

For many people, admittedly, marketing theory is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. Marketing, they argue, is a practice, an enormously powerful practice which impinges on almost everyone’s daily existence. It is intuitive, creative, spontaneous and iconoclastic, where success is achieved by breaking rather than adhering to the rules.\textsuperscript{20} This argument, of course, is not exactly new. Variants of the ‘art versus science’ debate have been a mainstay of marketing thought for nigh on fifty years.\textsuperscript{21,22} Nevertheless, it has been revived in recent years thanks to the emergence of a new and enormously influential generation of management thinkers, most notably Tom Peters, who elevate gut feel and instinct over ‘scientific’ management perspectives.\textsuperscript{23,24} As Foxall rightly notes, ‘questions of theory and metatheory are still widely considered to be irrelevant to, or even obstructive of, useful market research and the effective practice of marketing’.\textsuperscript{25}

Another widely held perspective on the marketing condition concedes that theory development is a necessary and worthwhile pursuit but concludes that marketing has been held back by its undue reliance on the conceptual insights of other academic disciplines and a failure to formulate its own theoretical constructs.\textsuperscript{26} Apologists for academic marketing usually attribute this dependency culture to the comparative youth of the subject area – though at c.100 years of age, it’s hardly a babe in arms – and assert that theoretical achievements will occur as the discipline matures. Others are less convinced. Shelby Hunt, perhaps the foremost academic commentator on marketing theory and thought, appears to have reached the depressing conclusions that, in its current state, marketing cannot make a genuine contribution to knowledge.\textsuperscript{27} In a similar vein, George Day has recently denounced marketing for squandering its lead in the field of strategic management theory and for failing fully to exploit its own, original conceptual accomplishments.\textsuperscript{28}

The growing concern over marketing’s purported lack of theoretical achievements is not solely due to an inability to capitalise on conceptual innovations and excessive reliance on hand-me-down principles. There is also the issue of the deepening philosophical schism within marketing itself. Albeit largely confined to the sub-discipline of consumer research, recent years have witnessed a serious challenge to the ‘positivist’ orthodoxy by naturalistic, interpretive and humanistic researchers.\textsuperscript{29} Although both sides are at pains to point out their open-mindedness and their support for a multiplicity of epistemological perspectives, to the uncommitted it looks very much like a debilitating and potentially ruinous civil war. At one extreme, ‘post-positivists’ like Holbrook and Hirschman are advocating the secession of consumer research and an abandonment of the long-standing managerial orientation.\textsuperscript{30} At the other extreme, Hunt is happy to dismiss all interpretive approaches as ‘post-modern episto-babble’ (though, coming from someone who takes enormous care to position marketing scholarship in relation to positivism, such blanket dismissals are rather ironic, to say the least).\textsuperscript{31}

The unifying sight of prominent academic authorities indulging in mud-slinging and name-calling contests, coupled with the discipline’s conceptual dependency culture and an apparent anti-theory undercurrent among applied researchers and practitioners, could be construed as the clearest possible indication of marketing’s mid-life crisis. A closer examination, however, reveals that things are not quite so bleak as they appear. The anti-theorists’ position is demonstrably false; marketing is by no means the second-hand rose of scholarship; and, internecine epistemological struggle is not necessarily unhealthy or indicative of an intellectual impasse.
Theory über alles

Referring to theory construction in his recent book on consumer behaviour, Gordon Foxall noted that 'applied researchers and marketing practitioners often avoid what appears to be no more that academic speculation, preferring to “let the facts speak for themselves”'. There are at least three reasons why this apparent aversion to marketing theory is mistaken. The first is the theory-ladenness of observation; the second concerns theory-in-use; and, the third pertains to the reflexivity of knowledge.

Theory-ladenness of observation

Although the rise of post-positivism has provoked derision and hostility from mainstream marketing academics (I once heard the celebrated Consumer Odyssey described as ‘what we did on our holidays’), its emergence has also served to highlight the theory-ladenness of observation. According to the conventional wisdom of positivism, theories and hypotheses are tested against an observable, empirical reality. If the hypothesis or theory corresponds with a researcher’s observation of the facts, its truth is taken to be established or, if it fails to correspond, the theory or hypothesis is abandoned as erroneous. This ‘correspondence theory of truth’ has many advantages – logic, commonsense appeal and the basis it provides for evaluating rival hypotheses – but it is premised on the prior assumption that the facts of the external world can be observed in an objective and neutral fashion by the application of rigorous research procedures.

Dominant though it remains, the positivist perspective does not recognise the possibility that an observer’s (highly selective) perceptual apparatus and (implicit) theoretical preconceptions may in some way shape or influence what is ‘seen’. It is well known, however, that the same events are often viewed and interpreted differently by different people and it follows that observation is neither neutral nor objective. The world, in other words, is not composed of brute facts waiting to be discovered or observed. Facts only become meaningful within the context of an existing theory. They are not antecedent to theory, they are determined by it. The upshot of this state of affairs is that a theory or hypothesis can never be ‘proved’ or ‘disproved’ by empirical analysis alone. As Kuhn, Lakatos, Feyerabend and several other post-positivist philosophers of science have shown, empirical evidence is never decisive when it comes to theory testing (hence the survival of oft-refuted concepts like the product life-cycle, wheel of retailing and stages theory of internationalisation). The fact of the matter, therefore, is that facts do not speak for themselves.

Theory-in-use

The close interrelationship between theory, observation and behaviour is amply illustrated by the day-to-day activities of marketing practitioners. Albeit quick, in some cases, to condemn theory building, their own actions are invariably shaped by implicit theoretical constructs. Most retailers, for example, believe that sales will peak in the week before Christmas, that price-cutting helps clear unwanted stock, that car-parking restrictions discourage potential customers, that impulse goods should be displayed where customer flows are heaviest and that people who slink around the store in the middle of summer wearing loose, bulky overcoats with many inside pockets, are up to no good. All of these beliefs rest upon theoretical assumptions concerning human behaviour. As theories, admittedly, they are implicit rather than explicit and would fail to pass muster with the majority of philosophers of science. Nevertheless, they start from the premise that the world contains many continuing regularities and meet Baker’s definition of a marketing theory, namely, a ‘meaningful generalisation’.

Marketing theory, in other words, is being put into practice, but it is not always the formal theory that is contained in the journals and textbooks. According to Heffring, there are four factors which inhibit the use of marketing theories by practitioners: first, marketing theories describe the world as seen by the theory builder
rather than the theory user; second, marketing theory provides complex answers to marketing problems when simple guidelines are required; third, marketing theories may be logically correct but lack external validity; and, fourth, theory-builders believe that theory is useful in itself, whereas marketing managers maintain that additional theory only serves to confuse the issue. In an attempt to close the gap between theorists and practitioners, Heffring posits a procedure for exploiting managers' ‘theory-in-use’, that is the accumulated knowledge, developed through experience, reflection and experimentation, that determines their marketing decisions and which can be distilled into meaningful guidelines or ‘maps’ for others (Figure 3.1). This approach has recently been applied, with some success, by Jaworski and Kohli to the issue of marketing orientation.40

□ Reflexivity of knowledge

If, on occasion, marketing theorists stand accused of failing to formulate concepts that are meaningful for practitioners, it is wrong to conclude that marketing theories do not impinge upon the consciousness of practising managers. On the contrary, such is the wealth of marketing textbooks, periodicals, short-courses, degree programmes, consultancy services and so on now on offer, and so insistently are the providers of start-up finance and venture capital on the preparation of meaningful marketing plans, it is fair to assume that most practitioners have been exposed to marketing’s conceptual apparatus in some shape or form. Indeed, entire generations of managers have been inculcated into the mores of marketing and, if truth be told, they have readily embraced some of its concepts such as the product life-cycle and the Boston matrix.41 The managing director of Signet, the troubled retailing mini-conglomerate, recently described Ratners and Salisbury as the ‘problem children’ of the group, a clear indication of the influence of BCG’s time-honoured strategic framework.42 Unfortunately, however, a recent academic evaluation of the concept concluded that ‘it is a real worry that the original matrix is seductively simple and the temptations and risk of using it off the shelf are real...It is a

Figure 3.1. Theory-in-use development cycle

badly taught, outmoded and discredited orthodoxy, which is seductive and dangerous for our young managers of tomorrow.⁴³

Practising managers, it would appear are employing certain marketing concepts and acting on their predictions, yet the concepts themselves are far from firmly established. Although theoretical constructs can hardly be held responsible for the failings, or indeed the successes, of marketing managers per se, theory undoubtedly influences how managers ‘view’ their competitive environment and the strategic decisions they take. It is not unknown, after all, for perfectly sound products to be killed off because of management’s belief in the existence of a product life-cycle.⁴⁴ The codification of the retail hierarchy concept has given rise to decades of conflict between retail organisations and urban planning authorities, and impeded the introduction of innovative retailing formats.⁴⁵ Consider also the innumerable marketing practitioners who were exhorted to think in terms of marketing warfare and competitive advantage, a worldview that has since been superseded by the ‘co-operative’ rhetoric of relationships, strategic alliances, boundaryless corporations and the like.⁴⁶ Marketing theories, in short, do not simply reflect events in the marketing environment, they affect marketplace behaviour. Theory is not neutral, it influences and alters the phenomena to which it pertains, in the human sciences at least. As Giddens points out, ‘concepts...are not merely handy devices whereby agents are somehow more clearly able to understand their behaviour than they could do otherwise. They actively constitute what that behaviour is and inform the reasons for which it is undertaken’.⁴⁷

■ Sources of theory

Just as misconceptions continue to circulate concerning the place and importance of theoretical constructs, so too discussions of the sources of marketing theory tend to present a slightly distorted picture. Introductory overviews, such as those of Williams,⁴⁸ Chisnall,⁴⁹ Bartels⁵⁰ and Sheth et al.,⁵¹ almost invariably commence with a summary of the debt owed by marketing to adjacent academic disciplines, principally economics, psychology and sociology. This is followed with what can be termed either the ‘optimistic’ or ‘pessimistic’ scenarios. The former maintains that, although marketing is reliant on the theoretical constructs of other disciplines, it has strengths that cognate academic specialisms lack and thus acts as a much-needed bridge between them and the real world of the practising manager. The latter, by contrast, holds that marketing’s dependence on exogenous concepts serves to inhibit indigenous theory development and, whereas marketing is open to the ideas of outsiders, the reverse process does not obtain. Needless to say, neither scenario is entirely accurate. The situation is not as rosy as the optimists suppose, nor is it as bleak as the pessimists believe. What is more, the traditional emphasis on the economics-psychology-sociology axis serves to overshadow some of the more innovative and interesting extra-disciplinary theoretical intrusions of recent years.

□ Extra-disciplinary intrusions

It is generally recognised that marketing is heavily dependent on the theoretical achievements (and methodological apparatus) of adjacent subject areas. Most commentators on the emergence of marketing as a separate academic discipline emphasise that it grew from the rib of economics.⁵²,⁵³ Indeed, the influence of economic theory is evident throughout the marketing literature in concepts such as perfect and imperfect competition, price elasticity, utility maximisation, equilibrium, functional specialisation, game theory, countervailing power, the business cycle, marginal analysis, economies of scale, the theory of the firm and so on. Much of modern marketing theory, as Baker⁵⁴ points out, also rests upon the notion of ‘economic man’, the perfectly rational, profit maximising individual with full and complete information about the decision under consideration. Besides its debt to economics, marketing has drawn heavily upon concepts and procedures developed in psychology,
cognitive psychology in particular. Examples include cognitive dissonance, bounded rationality, operant conditioning, satisficing behaviour, attitude formation, motivation research, the hierarchy of needs, decision theory, stimulus-response models and the techniques of group discussion and laboratory experimentation.\textsuperscript{55} Sociology, similarly, has had a significant influence in the shape of opinion leadership, innovation diffusion, the family life-cycle, social stratification, conspicuous consumption and, not least, questionnaire design and social survey methodology.\textsuperscript{56}

Although economics, psychology and sociology are usually (and rightly) cited as the primary sources of marketing theory, a host of other academic specialisms have also contributed to a greater or lesser degree.\textsuperscript{57} The influence of mathematics, statistics and informatics is all pervasive. The management sciences have added much ranging from the linear programming preoccupations of operations research and the Chandler/Mintzberg/Aldrich models of organisational development, to the strategic matrices of Ansoff, Porter and their numerous imitators. Geography’s emphasis on spatial organisation is manifest in manifold models of retail and warehouse location, analyses of international markets and, increasingly, the growing interest in ‘green’ and environmental issues. Recent years, moreover, have witnessed the intrusion of disciplines from the ‘qualitative’ end of the social science spectrum. Thanks to the rise of post-positivist marketing research, concepts and techniques derived from anthropology, history and literary studies have had considerable impact. Sherry, McCracken and several other anthropologically inclined scholars, have endeavoured to explore, through a variety of ethnographic techniques, the deeply felt beliefs, emotions and meanings that inhere in the rituals, myths and symbols of consumption behaviour.\textsuperscript{58,59} Hollander and Rassuli note the appearance of ‘new marketing history’ and, as their two volume study amply illustrates, the ‘stunning growth’ of academic interest in the sub-discipline.\textsuperscript{60} Holbrook \textit{et al.} moreover, have argued that works of art – literature, the cinema, music, performance etc. – can provide meaningful insights into the nature and characteristics of marketplace behaviour.\textsuperscript{61} It would be hard, for instance, to find a better description of the shoe buying process than that outlined in Table 3.1.

\begin{table}[h]
\caption{Literature and consumption behaviour: an example}
\begin{tabular}{|l|}
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\textbf{Your Feet’s Too Big} \\
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I do not like buying new shoes: there is the bit where you walk up and down the window outside gazing at the gleaming ranks of these somewhat comic things and vainly attempting to imagine them poking out of the end of your trousers, there is the bit where you enter and engage in the unsettling intimacy of being unshod by someone you have never met, there is the bit where the shoes come out of their boxes and you limp up and down in one of them, very carefully so as not to crack it and therefore totally unnaturally and therefurtherfore totally uselessly for assessing its comfort, and there is the bit where you go out of the shop carrying the only pair of shoes you hated when you first saw them in the window. \\
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\section*{\textbf{The optimistic scenario}}

The optimistic interpretation of marketing’s conceptual legacy openly acknowledges its dependence upon propinquitous disciplines, but maintains that, thanks to its focus on the concerns of practising managers, marketing is ideally placed to curb their scholarly excesses and act as a much-needed intermediary between the groves of academe and the real world.\textsuperscript{62} It seeks to avoid the unreal, laboratory based ethos of psychology, eschews the oversimplified assumptions that characterise much of economic model building and treats with disdain the marxian turn which has
done so much to undermine people’s willingness to entertain the insights of sociology. Although this argument is not without merit, it can lead to blinkered thinking and the propagation of academic stereotypes. One suspects that few economists, psychologists and sociologists would welcome marketing’s offer to act as a bridge to the real world, especially as marketers appear to possess dated and distorted perceptions of the disciplines concerned. Indeed, it is ironic to note how marketing academics can become upset when their specialism is misrepresented as cynical, manipulative and possessed of powerful techniques with which to milk the hapless public, yet they are content to perpetuate caricatures of cognate disciplines.

In economics, for example, the *homo oeconomicus* stereotype is decades out of date and ignores manifold recent advances in the subject area such as uncertainty reduction, rational expectations, the introduction of increasingly ‘realistic’ assumptions into economic models and a growing awareness of influence of rhetoric and language in the dissemination of theoretical constructs. The depiction of psychology as laboratory bound is also dangerously close to distortion. To cite but a single instance, there has been a marked movement towards what is termed ‘ecological validity’ (i.e. real world applications) in the sub-field of memory research. At the same time, marketing has also seen a rapid growth of research into memory effects in consumer decision taking. The bulk of these studies, however, are laboratory (i.e. classroom) based and employ unrepresentative (student) samples. It is arguable therefore that the most ‘relevant’ work in memory research is not taking place in marketing but in mainstream psychology. Marxist sociologists, moreover, have undertaken many perceptive if disconcerting analyses of marketing artifacts, advertising especially, though comparatively few academic marketers appear to be aware of the conceptual opportunities provided by critical theory.

**The pessimistic scenario**

If, on occasion, certain marketing commentators stand accused of recycling antiquated and over-simplified pictures of proximate academic disciplines, this does not imply that our endeavours to develop indigenous marketing theory should immediately be abandoned for a heightened appreciation of the current conceptual concerns of our academic elders and betters (though wider reading never hurt anyone). Nor, for that matter, does it follow that endemic theoretical advances are inhibited, as Sheth has suggested, by marketing’s open-door policy towards individuals trained in other disciplines. On the contrary, it is arguable that marketing can only benefit from the infusion of outside ideas. After all, numerous studies of the innovation process, whether it be new products or concepts, have shown that the most original ideas often come from outsiders, rebels, individuals who are not part of the establishment or trained to think in the conventional manner.

More fundamentally perhaps, those clamouring for conceptual protectionism not only fail to appreciate marketing’s value-added function but they assume that marketing theories cannot compete in the open marketplace of ideas, that they are ignored or overlooked by adjacent disciplines. Nothing could be further from the truth. Although it is undeniable that the constructs of cognitive psychology underpin the various models of buyer behaviour, it is equally true to say that, for example, the EKB model (Figure 3.2) represents a significant and much cited contribution to knowledge. Likewise, the roots of the product life-cycle lie outwith marketing, but Lambkin and Day’s recent reformulation remains no mean achievement. Furthermore, despite its continuing conceptual balance of payments deficit, marketing theories and research techniques have had, and are having, an impact on adjacent academic disciplines. The ‘law of retail gravitation’ has spawned literally thousands of papers in the fields of economic geography, town planning and regional science, yet it was formulated some sixty years ago by William J. Reilly, a marketing researcher. The marketing literature on product positioning is regularly referred to in the mainstream economics journals, Day has described the debt owed to marketing by strategic management and Baker’s model of consumer behaviour.
has attracted a small but enthusiastic following among cultural theorists.\textsuperscript{76} Discussing the latter-day intellectual crisis in marxian sociology, moreover, Dick Hebdige acknowledged that 'marketing has provided the dominant and most pervasive classifications of social types in the 1980s'.\textsuperscript{77} Hebdige, admittedly, considered this state of affairs to be both morally repugnant and indicative of the bankruptcy of radical sociology, nevertheless it illustrates the extent to which marketing thought is being disseminated and the seriousness, if not respect and admiration, with which it is now treated.

\section*{Status of marketing theory}

It is apparent from the foregoing discussion that marketing is not in an unhealthy state conceptually. As the specialist chapters in section two of this book amply demonstrate, marketing's theoretical cupboard is by no means completely bare. The discipline is not entirely dependent on the scraps from the tables of its conceptual superiors. Nor, for that matter, are marketing theories treated with total disdain by cognate academic disciplines. Encouraging though it undoubtedly is, however, this position does not mean that all is well with marketing thought. Marketing remains beset by unprincipled principles and philosophical discord, though the former is common to all human sciences and the latter can be interpreted as a sign of strength rather than weakness, healthy conflict as opposed to debilitating debate.

\section*{Unprincipled principles}

Although marketing is not short of theories, be they imported or home produced, few if any can withstand detailed scrutiny. Despite decades of research, the validity, reliability, universality and predictive power of the product life-cycle, innovation diffusion theory, Howard-Seth model of consumer behaviour, fashion cycle, classification of goods theory, hierarchy of advertising effects, stages of internationalisation theory, models of the marketing development of the firm and so on, are far from firmly established. Indeed, even the strongest advocates of prominent marketing (or quasi-marketing) principles acknowledge that, when put to the test, the performance of the wheel
of retailing, Porter’s generic strategies model, Fishbein's behavioural intentions theory and many more, is far from perfect. Dignity, of course, is usually preserved through allusions to the pedagogic utility of the concept concerned and an assertion that with a modicum of additional research and in the fullness of time superior versions of the theory will become available. It is equally arguable that the process of diminishing returns has already set in and that the bulk of latter-day conceptual contributions comprise minor – and arguably worthless – variations of well worn themes (for example, does the ‘market maven’ construct add anything of substance to what is already known about the diffusion of innovations?).

The impression that marketing theories lack robustness, and the impoverishment implied by minor modifications to long-standing but unproven concepts, has been compounded in recent years by the materialisation of a host of vigorously promoted marketing cure-alls. These solutions to the discipline’s apparent ills come in a variety of forms, though a suitably sassy, dynamic, macho, evangelical or alliterative title is common to all – maxi-marketing, turbo-marketing, micro-marketing, after-marketing, value-added marketing, relationship marketing and so on. Granted, the marketing of marketing nostrums has always gone on to some degree – after all, it is only through the identification of latent shortcomings and the provision of an appropriate, albeit expensive, remedy that management gurus and marketing consultants can reap the rich financial rewards that are their due. However, the academics involved are so prominent and highly respected that the current proliferation of marketing panaceas appears to be more indicative of conceptual aporia that a cynical money-grubbing exercise.

**Philosophical discord**

Just as the multiplication of marketing catholics and minor me-too additions to established principles are suggestive of conceptual disfunctionalism, so too the growing sense of uncertainty is attributable to the deepening philosophical discord within the discipline. Traditionally, marketing has been dominated by the positivist paradigm, which seeks to apply the methods of the natural sciences to the study of social beings. As Table 3.2 indicates, positivism rests on the assumption that a single, external world exists, that this social reality can be meas-

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<th><strong>Table 3.2. Positivist and post-positivist paradigms: key features</strong></th>
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ured by independent observers using objective procedures and, not least, that this world can be explained and predicted through the identification of universal laws. Many active marketing researchers, admittedly, may be unaware that they are part of the positivist tradition and others have challenged the 'positivist' label, thereby effectively deflecting some of the criticism. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the 1980s witnessed the emergence, initially from the sub-discipline of consumer research, of an alternative to the positivist orthodoxy of marketing science. This 'post-positivist' challenge has been accorded a variety of appellations – naturalistic, interpretive, humanistic, phenomenological, postmodernism etc. – but, as depicted in Table 3.2, it is premised on the presupposition that the world is not objective and external to the observer but socially constructed and given meaning by people. Hence, the aim of social research is not to explain, predict and develop law-like generalisations but to understand and describe the different constructions and meanings that people place upon their individual experiences.85,86

The recent philosophical schism within marketing is usually portrayed as a two-way split, with the quantitatively orientated positivist monolith on one hand and a range of qualitatively orientated, post-positivist perspectives on the other. Albeit useful for the purposes of explication, the situation is rather more complicated than this. Qualitative techniques, for example, are often used for essentially positivist purposes and, as Venkatesh et al have recently argued,87 a distinction can be drawn between post-positivist (interpretive, naturalistic, humanistic) research and postmodernism, the so-called 'new perspective on life and the human condition that is sweeping across the globe'.88 A useful way of demonstrating these differences is by means of a basic and admittedly over-simplified four-cell matrix. Illustrated in Figure 3.3, this distinguishes between epistemology (the nature of knowledge) and ontology (the nature of the world) and arbitrarily subdivides these continua along objective and subjective dimensions. The top left-hand cell, which embraces the vast bulk of traditional, positivist academic marketing research, assumes that individuals have direct, unmediated access to the real world and that, notwithstanding the problems associated with sampling, questionnaire design and suchlike, it is possible to obtain hard,
secure, objective knowledge about this external reality. 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 and best illuminated through the use of 'traditional' qualitative research procedures like depth interviews and group discussions. 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 is meaningful in its own terms and can be understood through careful use of appropriate naturalistic, interpretive and ethnographic research methods. 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 human '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.

Debilitating debate or healthy conflict?

However many sub-divisions of marketing philosophy are identified, the process of fragmentation has not been without incident. Apart from the rebarbative exchanges between positivists and post-positivists, in the broadest sense, energetic debate is also evident between quantitative and qualitative positivists, and mainstream interpretative-cum-naturalistic researchers and post-modern fundamentalists. These differences of opinion have generated a rich brew of metaphorical descriptors, all of which emphasise conflict. For example, the long-running dispute between the respective champions of realism and relativism, Hunt and Anderson, has been depicted as a sixteen-round boxing march.\(^{89}\) A religious analogy - true believers versus heretics - has also been employed\(^{90}\) (a prayer for the 4Ps of peace has even been proffered\(^{91}\)). And Sherry, a prominent post-positivist, has variously described the situation of interpretive researchers as being equivalent to the accused in a court case and the defenders of an isolated frontier outpost surrounded by positivists on the warpath.\(^{92}\)

Few would deny that the challenge to positivist hegemony has led to a degree of disagreement, antagonism and recrimination among theorists. It can be argued, however, that such epistemological altercations are not necessarily unhealthy. In the first instance, they raise the profile of philosophical issues. One of the great strengths (and weaknesses) of positivism is that its emphasis on empirical observation enables researchers effectively to ignore philosophical issues in the pursuit of their specific research objectives. Unfortunately, this can also lead to 'the primacy of technique over problems', and over-emphasis on applying the latest research method (e.g. LISREL) rather than addressing meaningful marketing issues.\(^{93}\) Philosophical mud-slinging may be unseemly but it certainly draws a crowd, particularly when such prominent scholars are involved, and if the performance persuades onlookers to examine their own assumptions, the overall standards of academic marketing research can only be improved. Second, and somewhat ironically, the childish squabbling is actually a sign of the growing maturity of the discipline. As interpretive perspectives, broadly defined, are long established in cognate academic specialisms like sociology, psychology and, to a lesser extent, economics, their eventual diffusion into marketing is only to be expected. Bruised egos are a small price to pay for the wider range of research opportunities that are now available and the potential value of the links forged with like-minded scholars in other subject areas. Some of the most innovative research in marketing, as noted earlier, is being conducted by non-marketers. Third, it is arguable that conflict is not an unfortunate occurrence, nor an unifying sideshow, but vitally necessary, for the post-positivists in particular. Because it is only through conflict and the antipathy of the establishment that the (disparate) challenging group can generate a sense of cohesion, shared purpose and commitment to their 'subversive' cause. In these circumstances, therefore,
the more vitriolic the attacks of mainstream marketing academics the better is it for post-positivists. It is in the latter’s interest to antagonise the establishment. Fourth, and most importantly perhaps, this conflict is likely to prove a temporary phenomenon. Many studies of avant-garde movements in the arts, academic disciplines and most walks of life, demonstrate that hostility between the establishment and outsiders is the first stage of a development process which eventually leads to accommodation and mutual tolerance. For instance, the emergence of structuralism in literary studies, cognitivism in psychology and spatial science in geography were characterised initially by bitter conflict and schismatic tendencies, only to be replaced in due course by grudging respect and a search for common ground. Indeed, Foxall, after Feyerabend, maintains that it is only through the interplay of various tenaciously held theoretical perspectives that scientific progress can be attained.

**Metaphor and meta-theory**

The rise of post-positivism, and the associated internecine conflict, has not only encouraged many mainstream marketing academics to step back and take stock of their own philosophical assumptions, but it also illustrates the importance and pervasiveness of metaphorical thinking. Whereas positivist epistemology regards figurative language in general and metaphor in particular to be ‘deviant and parasitic’, most post-positivist philosophers and postmodern literary theorists maintain that knowledge claims are inherently metaphorical. Tropes, they argue, lie at the very heart of our understanding of the world and figurative thinking is central to the process of theory articulation. This point is amply demonstrated by extant marketing theories, the most frequently cited of which rely on metaphorical reasoning – the product life-cycle (biological), the marketing mix (cooking), information pro-

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**Figure 3.4. The wheel of marketing thought**

![The wheel of marketing thought diagram](image-url)
cessing (computational), wheel of retailing
(mechanical), channels of distribution (environ-
mental), relationship marketing (marriage),
marketing warfare etc.

Even theories about marketing theory (i.e.
meta-theory\(^\text{101}\)) are often couched in figurative
language. Hunt and Goolsby, for example, have
employed the product life-cycle concept to frame
the rise and fall of the functional school of mar-
keting research\(^\text{102}\) and a similar cycle has been
identified for the various theoretical constructs of
the regional (locational) school.\(^\text{103}\) Bartels’ model
of the development of marketing thought is
premised on a construction/building trope and
underpinned by the western world’s metaphysical
assumption of ineluctable ‘progress’ and the
ascent of man.\(^\text{104}\) Likewise, Sheth et al.’s
identification of twelve schools of marketing
theory is an excellent example of figurative rea-
soning, though their framework actually relies on
metonymy (where the part stands for the whole)
rather than metaphor as such.\(^\text{105}\) Indeed, it is
arguable that the entire trajectory of modern
marketing can be described in terms of an
expanded wheel of retailing theory (Figure 3.4).

As described in the previous chapters of this
book, the modern marketing concept emerged in the
1950s, when environmental conditions were
conducive, as a simple, radical and (at that time)
counterintuitive approach to doing business,
which proved to be enormously appealing and
highly successful. Through time, marketing pro-
gressively broadened its domain and, as a con-
sequence of inter-academic rivalry, it became
increasingly sophisticated both methodologically
and philosophically. This very success, however,
led to disciplinary status, academic esoterism
and, some would say, delusions of scholarship.
Most importantly, it was characterised by failure
to keep in touch with marketing’s principal con-
stituents, practising managers and prospective
managers, who faced a business environment
which bore little or no relation to that encoun-
tered by their predecessors forty years before-
hand. Marketing scholarship, in short, became
increasingly divorced from reality and this gave
rise to the fragmentation of the discipline into a
multiplicity of hostile and unco-ordinated fac-
tions. It also appears to have precipitated another
turn of the wheel with the recent emergence of
back-to-basics reformulations which eschew es-
oterism and appear to be more relevant to the
needs of the current generation of practising
marketing managers (relationship marketing,
micro-marketing, etc.).

Although the wheel metaphor can be applied to
the trajectory of marketing thought, and although
tropes are all-pervasive in marketing generally,
metaphorical thinking is not without its weak-
nesses. In particular, it can result in a suppression
of some aspects of the figurative relationship and
an overemphasis on others. This point is exem-
plified by the differences in perspective that can
occur when two contrasting metaphors are
applied to the same phenomena. As noted earlier,
the emergence of post-positivism has spawned a
host of conflict based tropes (boxing contests,
religious schism and so on), all of which empha-
size the differences between the two opposing
sides. The current state of marketing scholarship,
however, could just as easily be compared to the
cinema, where the monolithic, slightly down-at-
heel ‘picture palace’ of positivism is in the process
of being replaced by a glittering, multipa-
digmatic, multi-screen complex offering a
wide choice of research programmes.\(^\text{106}\) These
marketing research programmes vary consid-
erably in their content and certification, with some
suitable for a mainstream audience and others
reliant on art-house appeal. What is more, as
many of the programmes are incommensurable,
they cannot be viewed simultaneously, though
they are at least showing under the same roof,
which we term ‘marketing’. The multiplex
metaphor, in other words, retains the differences
that are central to the warfare analogy, but
replaces conflict and estrangement with
shared values, complementarity and mutual
understanding.

Regardless of the preferred metaphor – even
the metaphor that marketing thought is non-
metaphorical – the essential points about the
sources and status of marketing theory are as
follows: first, the contention that ‘marketing
should focus on effects application research,
problem orientation research and the like without
being concerned with explanatory theory', is mistaken.107 The very act of observation is theory laden, practitioners continually employ theoretical constructs, albeit implicitly, and, as concepts affect not simply reflect marketing activities, theory development is of the utmost importance. Second, marketing owes an enormous debt to theoretical developments in its parent disciplines, but, contrary to the claims of some conceptual protectionists, marketing can only benefit from exposure to ideas in adjacent academic specialisms. Marketing, moreover, is not entirely dependent on theoretical hand-me-downs; its own concepts are being appropriated and utilised by outsiders. Finally, marketing’s lack of firm and proven principles is common to most social sciences. More importantly, the current bout of internecine conflict is not only a necessary and temporary phenomenon, but it is also partly a function of the warfare metaphor itself.

Notes and references

19. For example, the spate of ‘marketing in crisis’ papers in the early 1970s probably reflects the general economic malaise, concerns over sustainable development and periodic oil crises of the time.

Although the terms ‘positivist’ and ‘positivism’ are widely used in discussions of marketing theory, they are slightly misleading as very few marketers would be considered positivists in the strict Carnap/Vienna Circle sense of the word. In practice, however, the terms are employed in a fairly loose sense – as they are in this chapter – to refer to marketing’s traditional emphasis on empirical research and hypothesis testing. ‘Positivism’ as practised in marketing is actually a mix of positivism, realism, pragmatism, instrumentalism and conventionalism (for an excellent discussion of these issues see O’Shaughnessy, n. 56 below).


101. In the marketing literature, the term ‘meta-theory’ is used in a variety of ways (cf. refs. no. 22 and 54 above). Strictly speaking, it means theory about theory. Just as ‘meta-marketing’ means marketing marketing, ‘meta-memory’ refers to memory of memory and ‘meta-fiction’ pertains to fiction about fiction, so too the term ‘meta-theory’ alludes to the science of science, the investigation of investigation, theory about theory.


