Critical marketing theory: the blueprint?

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Abstract There has been considerable recent discussion about the relevance of critical theory to
management discourse and its implications for the education of managers. Within this debate,
marketing, and by implication, marketing academics, have been extensively criticised by those
outside the discipline for failing to embrace more critical theoretical approaches in their work.
Unfavourable parallels have been made with management accounting which has a similar
academic/practitioner profile but where critical theory was embraced over two decades ago. The
objectives of this paper are threefold: to attempt to account for the lack of critical theory in the
discipline; to provide a critical evaluation of the usefulness of critical theory in marketing
discourse; and to assess some of the practical implications associated with the implementation of
critical theoretical approaches in teaching, research and publishing.

Theory development is an issue that has been widely debated in the marketing
academy over a considerable number of years. Extensive interest in the subject
is exemplified by a number of AMA educators conferences focusing on the
issue during the 1980s (Belk and Zaltman, 1987; Bush and Hunt, 1982; Lamb
and Dunne, 1980). In 1983 a special edition of the Journal of Marketing was
devoted to theory (Hunt, 1983a) and at the end of the millennium another
special issue charting new directions in marketing identified theory as an
important area for future development (Day and Montgomery, 1999). Recurrent
themes in the theory debate include: marketing boundaries (Kotler and Levy,
1969; Kotler, 1972; Tucker, 1974; Arndt, 1978; Sheth et al., 1988), the
development of theory in the specialisms (Kerin, 1996; Rosson, 1977); whether
marketing theory should be developed along the lines of art or science (Brown,
1995a); the feasibility of a general theory in marketing (Hunt, 1994); theory and
the academic-practitioner divide (Lazer, 1967; Spillard, 1967; Dillon-Malone,
1970; Bartels, 1983; O'Driscoll and Murray, 1998); and the Americanised nature
of marketing theory (Dholakia et al., 1980). Recently the debate has shifted as
academics both inside and outside the discipline have called for a critical
appraisal of marketing and marketing theory in the context of radical social,
economic and political change (see for example Brown, 1995a; Brownlie et al.,
1994, 1999; Firat et al., 1997; Thomas, 1999; Wensley, 1995; Morgan 1992;
Willmott, 1999; Cova, 1999).

The aim of this paper is to contribute to one aspect of theory development in
marketing, specifically, the relevance of critical theory to marketing discourse. Critical theory has not attracted a great deal of attention in marketing, despite
being widely debated in a range of disciplines including: sociology (Scambler,
1996), cultural studies (Kellner, 1988); criminology (Groves and Sampson, 1986),
socio-legal studies (Salter and Shaw, 1994), policy research (Ozanne and
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Murray, 1995); religious studies (Reed, 1995; Kim, 1996), archaeology (Leone and Potter Shakel, 1987), medicine (Waitzkin, 1989), nursing (Wilson-Thomas, 1995; Hopton, 1997), anthropology, history and politics (Bronner and Kellner, 1989). In the management disciplines critical theory has had the most impact in management accounting where several journals have been specifically developed to disseminate this discourse (Brownlie et al., 1999; Hopper et al., 1987), in organisation studies (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996; Morgan, 1992) and management education (Grey and French, 1996; Reynolds, 1999).

Since critical theory has been widely discussed outside of marketing, this paper will go some way to filling the “gap” in the existing literature by evaluating critical theory’s relevance in the marketing context. The first part of the paper documents the development of critical approaches in marketing theory since the 1970s by way of contextualising the subsequent discussion. In the second section of the paper, the key characteristics of critical theory are set out and its relevance to contemporary theoretical debates in marketing are discussed. Since critical theory is a distinctive approach rather than a single theoretical perspective, there are wide-ranging implications for all aspects of marketing activity. The final part of the paper will be devoted to drawing out the practical implications of adopting a critical theoretical perspective in marketing. Specific reference will be made to undertaking research, the publication outlets available to marketing academics wishing to promote critical theory and the implications for marketing education at undergraduate, postgraduate and post experience levels.

Marketing theory and the development of critical marketing discourse

Theory development in marketing has been debated since the 1940s (Alderson and Cox, 1948) but since the 1970s there has been a renewed interest in theory in the USA and Europe as evidenced by the number of articles appearing on the issue in quality US and European journals (Howard et al., 1991). It was during the 1970s that a more critically informed approach to marketing theory surfaced in the USA. It is significant that academic interest in marketing theory frequently coincides with periods when the discipline is under attack, or its relevance is being questioned, and the development of critical theory is no exception. A major debate about the adequacy of theory in marketing occurred as a direct response to the rapidly changing social, economic and political environment in the USA. The positive effects of marketing in society were questioned by social scientists, who viewed marketing as the handmaiden of capitalist enterprise rather than being capable of generating real, tangible use or benefit to society (Packard, 1960; Farmer, 1967; Gist, 1974; Marcuse, 1991). There was also concern that many of the areas in which marketing theory had been extensively applied were being drained of significance as the population’s priorities changed. The real distribution issues were not concerned with marketed goods, but bombs arrests, diplomas, medical services, welfare payments and jobs.
In their classic papers, Kotler and Levy (1969) and Kotler (1972) responded to some of these criticisms by arguing that marketing theory and practice should be broadened to include processes and institutions which were previously not included, for example non-profit making organisations. This in turn raised the issue of whether traditional forms of marketing theory and practice could be simply transferred over without adequately theorising consumer well-being or that of society (Tucker, 1974). Other concerns were whether “extracurricular” applications in non-profit institutions should be treated as an integral part of marketing and whether marketing should be developed into a fully-fledged behavioural science. Arndt (1978, p. 101) rejected the behavioural science argument on the basis that broadening the marketing concept would “threaten the conceptual integrity of marketing, add to the confusion in marketing terminology, and widen the gulf between marketing theory and practice”. A further objection was that in broadening the marketing concept, marketing academics would have to “imperialistically annex” significant debates from social anthropology, social psychology and sociology. There was considerable doubt whether the marketing discipline had the “power, conviction, and salesmanship to conquer and defend this territory”. This debate was particularly significant because it heralded the beginning of critical discourse that later became known as macromarketing, the primary function of which was to locate marketing in its wider social, economic, political and historical context.

The development of critical theory in the 1970s was partly a response to criticisms of marketing from individuals outside of the discipline. During the 1980s and 1990s an interest in critical theory occurred as a response to a different set of circumstances, specifically, the fact that social scientists outside of the discipline, especially cultural theorists and sociologists, became interested in consumption, markets and consumer culture issues. Most of these academics were based in northern Europe, not the USA, and they saw few problems in commenting about issues in marketing “territory” by contrast with some of the doubts shared by Arndt (1974) a decade earlier about the merits of marketers venturing into the social sciences. The broader based social science literature was highly theoretical and critical and developed in a number of different directions including collective consumption (Castells, 1980), individualised consumption associated with postmodernism (Baudrillard, 1988; 1998; Lash and Urry, 1987; Lash, 1990; Featherstone, 1988, 1991), and social groups based on consumption (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990). A small number of marketing academics also began to rethink marketing using theoretical frameworks for the social sciences (Dholakia and Arndt, 1985; Brown, 1995a). It was in the 1980s that critical theory and its relevance to marketing discourse made one of its first appearances with a presentation by a leading critical theorist, Mark Poster, at the 1987 AMA Educators Conference (Poster and Ventatesh, 1987).

During the 1980s the Americanisation of marketing thought also began to be questioned by a group of US critical theorists. Dholakia et al. (1980) argued that the US dominance of marketing theory had a number of undesirable effects.
particular concern was the fact that marketing concepts are a product of and contextually bound by the US industrial system, and as a result the validity of marketing concepts across time and space are extremely limited. One consequence of this scenario is that this context boundedness inhibits the emergence of a universal conception of the nature and scope of marketing per se. The knock-on effect is that specific bias and barriers are created in theoretical developments in the field. As a result they argued that there was an urgent need to deconceptualise, reconceptualise and thereby universalise the analytical categories of marketing. A number of Scandinavians also began to question the Americanised nature of marketing theory with specific reference to the 4Ps, in favour of what became known as the Nordic school of relationship marketing (Gummerson, 1994; Grönroos, 1994).

Another very significant development in the 1990s, was that US academics began a dialogue about how critical theory of any persuasion was being received in US business schools. One of the most damning criticisms comes from Ehrensal (1999) in his paper “Critical management studies and American business school culture: or, how not to get tenure in one easy publication”, in which he suggests that engaging in critical discourse amounts to career suicide. He argues that mainstream US culture promotes an ethos of management research that focuses on a “science of administration” and that the aim of management teaching is to train future managers and not to critique existing systems and values. This sentiment is shared by Usunier (1998, p. 48), who suggests that the strongly competitive system and the “publish or perish” culture leads to a high level of conformism based on “mainstream professional guidelines as to how research should be conducted”. PhD students are socialised into this system in which they are taught to be “unpolitical” and “keep their nose clean” (Trocchia and Berkowitz, 1999). It is significant that many of the strongest critiques of traditional marketing theory have a firm base outside of the USA. Indeed, many of the UK’s leading marketing professors are not advocates of US mainstream marketing theory (Brownlie et al., 1999; Brown, 1995a)

Placing the development of marketing theory into a historical context (albeit briefly) demonstrates that concern about theory development in marketing has been an issue among academics for over half a century. The stronger emphasis on techniques and concepts required in practical situations has marginalised the importance of theory. The production of research outputs in order to gain promotion and tenure has prompted short-termism. Theoretical discourse has lost out in this battle with empirically driven work. It also needs to be noted that the US domination of existing theoretical discourse has not been conducive to critical perspectives, although it needs to be recognised that the small number of US advocates of critical theory in marketing have been extremely successful putting this discourse on the agenda and planting seeds for others to develop.

**Critical theory and its relevance for marketing discourse**

Alvesson and Willmott’s (1996) review of critical theoretical approaches in management disciplines indicated that it has the most to contribute in
marketing, yet it was here where there was least interest. Part of the reason for this neglect has been that the development of theory has not attracted the same amount of attention from marketing academics as it has in other social science and management disciplines. Another contributory factor is that postmodernism has been considered the dominant theoretical challenge to existing marketing theory. An additional problem relates to conceptual difficulties in defining critical theory. The term critical in common sense usage usually implies negative evaluations. Although there is an essential element of deconstruction in using critical theory, and one possible outcome of using a critical theoretical framework may in fact be a negative reaction, the primary purpose of the term “critical” in critical theory goes beyond negative evaluations. There is also often confusion about the distinction between critical discourse and critical theory. For example, a particular line of empirical enquiry might lead a researcher to critically evaluate a particular model or position which would lead to critical discourse without using critical theory to frame the discussion.

The difficulties of defining critical theory are compounded by the fact that it is not a single unified theory. The critical element in critical theory contains three inter-related elements: demystifying the ideological basis of social relations; a questioning of positivist methodology whether that be in relation to the nature of reality, knowledge and explanation; and the importance of self-reflexivity of the investigator and the linguistic basis of representation. Critical theory rejects scientific, foundational approaches to human nature and instead favours interpretive approaches to human behaviour which need to be contextualised in time and space to avoid the ethnocentrism by which all other cultures are viewed and judged by one’s own. A significant task of critical theory is to simultaneously critique contemporary society while envisioning new possibilities. In this sense critical theory is normative theory, it is a theory about values and what ought to be rather than focusing exclusively on the here and now. Calhoun (1996, p. 35) suggests that critical theory generates a critique in four senses:

1. a critical engagement with the theorist’s contemporary social world, recognising that the state of affairs does not exhaust all possibilities, and offering positive implications for social action;
2. a critical account of the historical and cultural conditions (both social and personal) on which the theorist’s own intellectual activity depends;
3. a continuous critical re-examination of the constructive categories and conceptual frameworks of the theorist’s understanding, including the historical construction of those frameworks; and
4. a critical confrontation with other works of social explanation that not only establishes their good and bad points but shows the reasons behind their blind spots and misunderstandings, and demonstrates the capacity to incorporate their insights on stronger foundations.
Since there has been little interest in critical theory among marketing academics it is not surprising that there have only been a few attempts to operationalise the concept in the marketing context. One position has been advanced by Hetrick and Lozada (1999, p. 162) when they note:

The “movement” from traditional marketing theory to either anti-marketing theory (critical theory) or marketing anti-theory (postmodernism) allows us to supersede the strong and perverse adherence to the basic tenets of positivist and logical empiricist thought.

While Hetrick and Lozada (1999) have made a positive start in defining critical theory in marketing, a point of debate is their view that critical theory is anti-marketing theory. Critical theorists promote a pro marketing theory stance, but theory that adequately reflects the social, historical and political context in which marketing discourse and practice occurs. This final point is important since one criticism of existing marketing discourse is that it does not reflect social reality and is little more than hype at the hands of capitalist enterprise (Morgan, 1992; Willmott, 1999). There is also a presumption on the part of Hetrick and Lozada (1999) that critical theory and postmodernism are incompatible and/or oppositional. Card carrying critical theorists such as Habermas do not agree that postmodernism should be located under the umbrella of critical theory (Kellner, 1988). However, this position is not universally shared and is a point of debate rather than an absolute. Ray (1993) for example, notes that there are probably more points of convergence between critical theory and postmodernism than the reverse. It has already been noted that a minority of marketing academics write from critical or theoretical perspectives of any persuasion. Whether it makes sense to create boundaries between different approaches to critical discourse, whether that is postmodernism or any other, particularly when there are points of convergence, needs to be considered. Whether or not postmodernists in the marketing discipline would wish to be included in a broader based critical theory movement is another issue.

Saren and Brownlie, in a 1998 call for papers, provide an alternative definition of critical theory in the marketing stream of the first International Critical Management Conference held at University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology in 1999. They indicate:

By critical theory we mean any approach drawing inspiration from the substantive critical traditions of, for example, feminism, Marxism, ethnography and symbolism, post-structuralism, hermeneutics, postmodernism and environmentalism.

This is a more specific definition of the potential boundaries than that provided by Hetrick and Lozada (1999) and is a broader based definition than the “purist” critical theory position. However, if the scope of critical theory is widened further, a case might be made that good quality marketing theory of whatever persuasion has the potential to provide critical insights and therefore the ability to develop critical theory in the wider sense of the term. Perhaps it is the case that some theoretical perspectives are more critical than others, some already have the label and tradition and others have been longer established.
The adoption of critical theoretical traditions raises the issue of marketing becoming a fully-fledged behavioural science. Within this context it is important to have an understanding of where the existing marketing boundaries lie and why. This is a complex issue, but on the one hand there are academics within other social science disciplines that have not necessarily been attracted to marketing theory per se because of its strongly positivist methodological position, emphasis on individual consumer behaviour, and the manifestly uncritical nature of research enquiry. These are possibly some of the reasons why few marketing publications are written from a sociological perspective (Tetreault, 1987). This is in contrast with psychological theory, which has been widely embraced in consumer behaviour discourse since the 1970s because of the greater congruity between marketing scholars and psychologists in respect of their research purpose and philosophies of science (Mittelstaedt, 1990). Alternatively, there are other academics who wish to be included but believe they are excluded for being out of step with mainstream thought. For example, marketing historians believe that the small number of their papers finding their way into the prominent marketing journals sends clear signals that their work is being marginalised (Holden and Holden, 1998). As a result of this anti-historical or ahistorical stance (Hollander, 1980), historical perspectives in marketing discourse are highly dependent on the few academics that manage to be successful (see especially Fullerton (1988), Bartels (1976), and to a lesser extent Gilbert and Bailey (1990) and Vink (1992)). The lack of historical work is particularly important in relation to critical theory’s normative stance that emphasises learning from the past to make sense of the present and the future. This issue also ties in with the view that better use should be made of previous marketing contributions to avoid “re-inventing the wheel” (Baker, 1995; Hunt, 1995), minimising the duplication of effort, presenting a weaker analysis and distorting the evaluation of marketing developments (Hollander, 1980).

Critical theory’s support for a move away from positivist or more broadly foundationalist approaches in the social sciences (Hammersley and Gomm, 1997) to a more inclusive interpretive approach has implications for the widely discussed art versus science debate (Brown, 1996) and new paradigm research in marketing (Buttle, 1994). However, a complicating factor is that interpretive approaches to research are not overwhelmingly supported by all marketing academics who would position themselves in the critical/radical camp, nor do researchers who favour qualitative approaches have a monopoly on the view that marketing is theoretically deficient (Hunt, 1994). Foxall (1998) suggests far from recent trends towards a more interpretive approach in consumer research promoting greater tolerance and genuine methodological pluralism, a new retrenchment has developed.

A further issue is that if the marketing discipline is to genuinely adopt and encourage many of the theoretical traditions associated with the label critical theory, then there also needs to be an appreciation of the methodological traditions that accompany them. For example, there has been a considerable
debate amongst feminists outside of marketing on the issues of epistemology, methodology and method (see for example Oakley, 1981; Finch, 1984; Harding, 1987; Stanley and Wise, 1993; Kramarae and Spender, 1993; Lennon and Whitford, 1994; Stanley, 1990; 1997; Webb, 2000), whereas the methodological traditions associated with research on ethnicity, race and racism are particularly underdeveloped in and outside marketing (see for example Stanfield and Dennis, 1993; Williams, 1995; Sills and Desai, 1996; Jackson, 2000; Thomas-Bernard, 2000). Historical research has much to offer marketing theory in areas as diverse as postcolonialism (Burke, 1996), masculinity (Mort and Thompson, 1994) and the contribution women have made to marketing thought (Zuckerman et al., 1990). Yet Holden and Holden (1998) indicate that few marketing history articles appear in high status marketing journals because of the descriptive research methods employed, which are frequently regarded as of low status. A more flexible approach in marketing discourse that actively embraces methodological pluralism is an important ingredient of critical approaches to theory and practice. An issue which critical marketing theorists need to address is whether the importance of developing good quality theory is going to take precedence over arguing about research methodology.

**Some practical implications of adopting critical theory in marketing**

The adoption and implementation of critical theory in marketing discourse will certainly have wide-ranging implications and will challenge marketing academics and their students in a number of different directions. The aim of this section of the paper is to assess some of the practical implications of adopting critical theory in marketing in the context of research, publishing and teaching.

**Implications for research**

A research emphasis on developing theory in marketing goes against many of the norms in the discipline that are overwhelmingly rooted in applied research. The importance of basic research to theory development in marketing was acknowledged back in the 1950s (Lusch, 1980). Yet despite this debate occurring over half a century ago, basic research is rarely undertaken or published in mainstream US and European journals (Howard et al., 1991). The rationale for its value is that marketing managers use theories and concepts in their day-to-day activities and therefore theoretical research should be funded. This is not to suggest that empirical research has no theoretical value or that theoretical work has little practical application. The point is that critical theorists promote a position which states that research in marketing should be theory driven and that conceptual and theoretical work should not be regarded as the “poor relation”.

Interdisciplinary research is another key tenet of critical theory and is certainly favoured by research councils (Rappert, 1997), encouraged in research assessment exercises (Cooper and Otley, 1998), although less so in teaching (Knights and Willmott, 1997). Philosophically, the aim of developing good
interdisciplinary research is laudable, in practice it is difficult to achieve and is more often discussed than practised. Many academics feel more confident working within closely defined disciplinary boundaries, and to a large extent this is a rational view since trawling the literature across disciplines is a time-consuming activity which is usually not rewarded in equal proportion to the time invested. Although there are advocates of interdisciplinary research in marketing per se (Firat, 1997) there are no guarantees that interdisciplinary research makes a more significant contribution to debates over and above those drawn from a single discipline (Knights and Willmott, 1997). Ultimately there has to be some purpose or logic to working across disciplines or paradigms (Brown, 1997; Watson, 1997). That said, Zaltman (1999) suggests that some of the most interesting developments in marketing are to be found at the borders with other disciplines rather than at the centre of already well-colonised disciplinary territory.

A strength of marketing is the extent to which different disciplines are already included; therefore many links are already in place, in other instances links may need forging from scratch. However, this interdisciplinary strength can also be a weakness if imported theories are weaker, incomplete versions than those that exist in the “host” discipline, or are inappropriately used. Murray et al. (1995) suggest that indiscriminate and opportunistic use of borrowed theories can be counter-productive by misleading researchers in their attempts to understand the phenomenon of interest. Halbert (1965) also indicates that it is seldom the case that a completely adequate theoretical structure in one area is directly applicable in another. However, good interdisciplinary research should increase the speed with which important theoretical frameworks from other disciplines are critically evaluated. For example, Wensley (1999) suggests that some of the current debates in marketing occurred in sociology 20 years ago.

**Implications for publishing**

Other important issues to address relate to the status and acceptability of research outputs. Although interdisciplinary research is encouraged by research councils and is consistent with the philosophical approach advocated by critical theory, it does not always have the same status when it comes to publication. Another issue is the acceptability of critical marketing papers in mainstream marketing journals. Marketing is no different from many other disciplines, in the extent to which disciplinary boundaries are socially constructed and maintained. The publication driven nature of academia in Britain ensures that journal editors, referees and publishers act as “gatekeepers” and in so doing determine what gets published, in effect they set and deliver the agenda. A recognition that disciplinary boundaries are socially constructed introduces the issues of power and politics into the process by which marketing as a discipline is constructed, maintained, and undergoes rounds of restructuring. The perception that some topics are defined as marketing and others are not is an ongoing process, as Foxall (1989, p. 7)
explains: “reflects the consensus of opinion within the ‘scientific community’ of the nature of their subject matter, the most appropriate ways of examining it and the canons of judgement which should be applied in the appraisal of empirical findings”.

The notion of distance is particularly important in this regard. It is arguably the case that the further research differs from accepted norms in marketing the less likely it is to be accepted for publication. While there are senior academics who are advocates of the controversial (Baker, 1995; Carson, 1995), closure, although unacceptable, exists (Brownlie and Saren, 1995; Wilson, cited in Transfield and Starkey, 1998). Holbrook (1995, p. 643) argues that closure is at its worst in top US journals where the review process has been described as “fundamentally rotten and corrupt to its very core”, with those responsible protected by the veil of anonymity. Another issue is the ability of existing marketing academics to referee publications written from a critical interdisciplinary perspective. In acknowledging this point, McDonagh (1995) suggests, in the short term at least, there will be a need to source reviewers from outside the discipline. The acceptance of critical theory and the interdisciplinary research findings that accompany it will ultimately require a significant cultural change among a critical mass of marketing academics.

The availability of suitable publication outlets for critical marketing discourse will be a decisive factor in the speed with which it is accepted and mainstreamed. It is a point of debate among critical theorists whether or not their work should be concentrated in journals explicitly developed for that purpose for fear that a “ghetto” may be created. According to this view, critical theorists must challenge the prevailing orthodoxy in the high ranking international journals wherever possible. A different perspective is that for critical marketing theory to develop there needs to be a focus and a specific outlet to develop this work and help it gain momentum. Within marketing, the Journal of Macromarketing made its appearance in the 1980s and encouraged marketing academics to locate marketing theory and practice in its wider social and historical context. Consumption, Markets and Culture was launched in 1997 and was designed as a critical, interdisciplinary forum for academics from marketing, the social sciences and humanities. Similarly, Brownlie et al. (1994) toyed with the idea of a critical marketing journal based in Europe. However, it needs to be recognised that neither of these US-based journals had an explicit focus on the development of critical marketing theory. This final point was a decisive factor in the launch of Marketing Theory in 2000, a UK-based specialised outlet committed to the development and dissemination of critical and alternative perspectives on marketing theory.

The development of these journals indicates that critical discourse per se is becoming more widely disseminated in marketing. However, what is of crucial importance is how academics perceive the status of such journals. Despite the considerable importance attached to the international ranking of journals, the process is highly subjective (Hult et al., 1997). One negative effect in the context of discussions about critical theory is that it could result in authors not
targeting certain journals because the outlets are relatively unknown and not easily recognised by colleagues. Supporters of critical discourse in marketing should actively support a more sophisticated system of recognising the value of different journal contributions that may include development of marketing theory, critical perspectives, current marketing practice, and usefulness in obtaining tenure.

It also needs to be acknowledged that the development of critical theory in marketing has to go beyond the development of new journals and the publication of journal articles since they will only be read by a fraction of the staff who teach marketing and reach many fewer students than desirable. The development and mainstreaming of critical theory in marketing requires the material to be developed into texts which have a much broader remit than journal articles. However, within the marketing academy this activity could prove highly problematic. Different disciplines have different ways of recognising what counts as a scholarly contribution (Firat, 1997). The tradition of writing good quality, critical books is not well established within marketing in Britain or elsewhere, unlike other management disciplines (e.g. organisation studies) and social sciences (e.g. sociology) where articles and good quality critical books are both explicitly built into the career advancement process. Good quality texts that are both theoretical and critical in approach are conspicuous by their absence.

Although we live in a multi-media age, textbooks remain the most widely used teaching resource and their content has a very influential effect on the discipline. Despite the importance of marketing texts, the reasons why academics recommend one over another has rarely been the subject of academic investigation (Smith and Reed Muller, 1998). While many more marketing texts were written in the 1980s and 1990s there remains an overwhelming emphasis on prescriptive books which reflect the professional activity versus academic discipline dilemma. In reviewing the most popular marketing textbooks in the UK, Baker (1999, p. XIV) reports:

\[\ldots\] all the books conform to the prescriptive “what to do” model and give less attention to the theoretical insights derived from other social sciences that underpin the relatively new synthetic discipline of marketing. While this approach clearly appeals to the mass market, students wishing to pursue their studies in more depth may well appreciate texts that recognise that marketing is not a cut-and-dried subject but one that is dynamic, full of controversy and short on providing answers to the question why? For them a more challenging menu would be more appropriate.

There is little product differentiation or segmentation of marketing texts that are similar in price (most are too expensive for the average student to buy), attempt to cover too much material at a superficial level, and frequently merge theory and practice, with most emphasis given to the latter (see Brownlie and Saren (1995) for an alternative view). Brown (1995, p. 683) suggests most marketing texts are “clones of Kotler” infested with “bullet-points, learning objectives, pseudo-case studies, and normally written in words of one syllable or less”. Part of the problem is the time lag between the publication of research
literature finding its way into teaching texts (Dibb and Stern, 1999), which can take 10-15 years (Foxall, 1989). There is critical theoretical discourse being published in journals which is not finding its way readily into marketing theory texts. The texts which are available tend to be dominated by a particular theoretical framework such as postmodernism (Brown, 1995, 1997); a specific methodological approach (see Stern (1998) on interpretation); are written from the perspective of one discipline (see for example, Foxall (1997) on psychology and marketing); or have a broader brief of developing critical perspectives in marketing per se, which may or may not include critical theory (see Brownlie et al., 1999).

Clearly, in order for a more critical theoretical marketing focus to be mainstreamed there is going to have to be a radical shift in how writing books is perceived by marketing academics and a recognition of the importance of research-led texts. It is a fact of academic life in the UK as far as marketing is concerned, there is little recognition for writing books when it comes to research assessment exercises. The emphasis is very firmly on articles and the status of journals in which they are published. It is clearly a risk for authors who are willing to undertake an activity that is time consuming and may not necessarily have an immediate high value in terms of career progression. That said, there are risks involved in any new area of work, as the discussion by Brown et al. (1994) about the risks associated with developing the services marketing literature illustrates.

The implications for marketing education
Marketing education per se has suffered from having a low priority in marketing discourse as measured by the small number of articles appearing in mainstream, high status European and US journals. Contributions in the specialist *Journal of Marketing Education* tend to emphasise new methods of reinforcing traditional theory and an over-emphasis on practice rather than on the critical evaluation of theory and practice. There are also some interesting cross-national differences in the emphasis given to theory in marketing education. Howard et al.’s (1991) research indicated that far fewer US undergraduate and masters programs include a specific marketing theory course compared with those in Europe. Similar findings were noted by Howard and Ryans (1993), who noted that countries in Europe and the Pacific Rim put significantly more emphasis on the importance on marketing theory at undergraduate and MBA level than their US colleagues.

Alvesson and Willmott (1996) indicate that critical approaches in management education have wide-ranging implications for content and approach and advocate a more reflexive approach to teaching and learning. Cunliffe (1999) argues that it is simply not a question of thinking about new teaching techniques but requires a rethinking of assumptions about learning, identity and student-teacher power relations. A pertinent issue is how the integration of critical theory in the curriculum will be perceived by students both in terms of the content and a more reflexive approach to learning. The
cultural change whereby “patients, parents, passengers and pupils are re-imagined as ‘consumers’” (du Gay and Salamon, 1992, p. 622) or enterprising consumers (Keats et al., 1994; Abercrombie, 1994; Fuller and Smith, 1991) is arguably also applicable to university students. However, it is a point which has generated heated debate, controversy and in some cases extreme opposition from academics, who do not believe students are in an informed position to enable them to precisely define their educational needs (see for example Barrett, 1997). Another concern is that the existing literature in the UK has tended to focus on using critical theory with students on MBA programmes (see for example Gold et al., 1999; Reynolds, 1999). This feature neglects to acknowledge that the vast majority of management students are undergraduates. This point is at its most obvious in the USA where one in four graduates read business studies (Thrift, 1999). An over concentration on applications with practising managers neglects to take into account the range of students who study marketing and therefore fails to consider that the application of critical theory in marketing education may have a variety of effects.

Developing interdisciplinary, multi-disciplinary and reflexive approaches to teaching marketing to undergraduates has received more interest in the USA than in the UK (see for example, Graeff, 1997). One factor which prompted this change has been the declining numbers of business students since the mid-1990s combined with concern that some of the best students are siphoned off into accounting and finance rather than marketing. Marketing the marketing major has prompted alliances with liberal arts subjects in an attempt to develop students with a wider range of skills, abilities and being able to think in critical ways (Prindle, 1994; Hugstad, 1997). Another factor which is driving change are marketing professionals. Lundstrom et al.’s (1996, p. 15) research which involved professionals evaluating the course content of international marketing programs indicated a need for “an interdisciplinary, andragogical approach – one that combines area studies, political science, language training, communication, and general business and marketing classes” as opposed to simply including international material in existing courses. This approach will bring business school and marketing staff in daily working relationships with colleagues from across the campus.

The relevance versus rigor debate is particularly applicable in the context of critical marketing discourse. It is a far more demanding task for students to be taught traditional marketing theory, and be able to critically reflect upon it rather than simply move from traditional theory to practical application. It has been suggested that it is at the higher executive levels where there will be most resistance to this approach, as Holbrook (1995) suggests:

... executives demand what they perceive as managerial relevance but also insist on being charmed and entertained, usually at the expense of rigor. The inevitable result is that participants in executive programs want advice that they can use on the job tomorrow delivered to them in the atmosphere of a circus. Teachers who dare to veer from this pattern usually receive poor ratings (Murphy et al., 1987, p. 3).
How representative Holbrook’s (1995) experience is, is not clear. Berry (1993, p. 3) suggests that in a highly competitive educational environment the “issue is not rigor versus relevance” but “rigor and relevance”. Thrift (1999) also argues that as a result of “cultural circuits of capitalism” that are responsible for the production and distribution of management knowledge (business schools, consultants, gurus), managers are becoming better educated almost everywhere, resulting in the need for more advanced, conceptual, critical and creative ideas. The increased packaging of material (videos, books, management seminars, good quality press) makes it more likely that marketing academics will be charged with not only creating theory which closely reflects the real life working situations of managers (Brownlie, 1997), but with evaluating existing theory critically to help managers create novel solutions.

At PhD level the effects of critical theoretical approaches are more complex. Practices in the USA are particularly important in this regard since 100-50 students are awarded doctoral degrees in marketing annually (Trocchia and Berkowitz, 1999) and, given the highly Americanised nature of marketing discourse (Dholakia et al., 1980), some of them will undoubtedly go on to be leaders in the field. Tybout (1986) suggests that marketing has an anti-intellectual image among some sections of the population in the USA, causing problems in attracting good quality candidates from allied disciplines such as economics, sociology, politics and psychology that believe marketing has little to offer in respect of conducting basic/theoretical work. A more theoretically informed critical marketing could have a great deal to offer students in closely allied disciplines who wish to move into marketing because of the more attractive job prospects on completion of their studies, and in so doing could greatly enrich the discipline. Whether academics with backgrounds from other social sciences that move into marketing and also wish to keep a “foot” in their original discipline will be made welcome is another issue. Piercy (1999, p. 705) describes such individuals as “spreading poison and causing havoc” and undermining business schools from within. Clearly, this is not a position that critical theorists would support.

A different perspective on US PhD training culture is that it stifles dissent and critique in favour of promoting a science of administration and an unspoken code of political correctness (Ehrensal, 1999). Trocchia and Berkowitz’s (1999) analysis of the socialisation process of US doctoral students goes some way to demystify practices, the problem with their analysis is that it does not directly address the issue of politics or power relations between students and supervisors, which are crucial in understanding all aspects of the research student process from admissions to determining how the thesis is written up. Brand equity is an important factor in this discussion since supervisors want to protect their own reputation of producing quality research students and taking it on themselves to inform the marketing community if they have produced one which is a disappointment. In short, the US PhD training system militates against the dissemination of critical perspectives per se in favour of maintaining the status quo. Leong et al. (1994) suggest that a
liberalisation of research norms in US doctoral training associated with more exposure to critical discourse might generate more reflexive, enlightened academics. Academics based in Europe that are advocates of critical theoretical perspectives in marketing should also be concerned about the new cadre of taught doctoral qualifications (DBAs) that have been imported from the USA. DBAs contain a significant taught element, are highly practical, industry oriented and place little emphasis on the development of theory or critical discourse. Another point of disquiet is the fact that US business schools are some of the most advanced in the business when it comes to delivering IT based distance learning, which is potentially more of a threat than the European based DBA delivery.

A final issue that needs addressing is the relationship between undergraduate and postgraduate marketing courses and professional qualifications since both are linked by exemptions in many universities. There has been little extensive research or discussion about where the division of labour resides, or more to the point, where it should reside between university marketing courses and the role of professional marketing qualifications. This lack of clarity is paralleled in the uncertainty surrounding the currency of professional qualification in marketing. Walker and Child (1979, p. 32) raised the issue of credentialism in the industry over two decades ago when they noted, “The questions of how far membership of its occupational association should be restricted and whether according to criteria of formal qualification of practical experience are still unresolved to this day in marketing”. The failure to understand the importance of professional qualifications in the industry, particularly since graduates of any discipline are recruited for marketing positions on both sides of the Atlantic (Walker et al., 1986), suggests that at best marketing should be classified as a semi-profession. Articles entitled “Education could be the death of good marketing” (Bird, 1996) and “Do professors really know marketing?” (Morris, 1995) appearing in the industry press do little to improve the status of marketing education. The ambiguity over the currency of postgraduate diplomas has important gender implications since women with them earn less than men without (Reed, 1995). It is in the interests of critical theorists to engage in debates about professional marketing education since the issue of accreditation could have an important impact on the extent to which critical theoretical perspectives can be integrated into the marketing curriculum in undergraduate and masters programs.

Conclusion
Criticisms from academics inside and outside the discipline pointing to a distinct lack of critical theoretical discourse would appear to be well founded. The objectives of this paper were threefold: to attempt to account for the lack of critical theory in the discipline; to provide an evaluation of the usefulness of critical theory in marketing; and to assess some of the practical implications associated with the implementation of critical theoretical approaches in teaching, research and publishing. As far critical theory is concerned, a major
impediment has been a long-standing tradition in marketing of marginalising the importance of theory development. Few universities on both sides of the Atlantic extensively teach marketing theory as part of the curriculum and few marketing academics have an interest in developing theory. Furthermore, when senior academics are questioned about how they perceive theoretical developments evolving, they suggest that it is more likely to be generated through individual marketing specialisms rather than the creation of overarching theories that apply to the discipline as a whole. Given the lack of a theoretical tradition and relatively poor knowledge of theoretical developments in other social sciences, it is not surprising that the implications of critical theory have been slow to develop in marketing.

If adopted, critical theory would have a considerable impact on theoretical debates in marketing and generate a considerable number of new avenues of enquiry. The implementation issues are possibly the ones which are the most problematic to resolve. Critical discourse of any persuasion is frequently viewed as a threat by those holding positions of authority in particular disciplines (Firat, 1997), especially if they have built their careers on traditional forms of marketing thought. It is not unknown for power differences within organisations to be used to instigate subtle forms of coercion (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996) to ensure people toe the line. As far as the advancement of critical theory in marketing is concerned, one would hope that its influence will flourish in the future given the larger numbers of students who have been exposed to critical ideas as undergraduates. Some of these students may wish to undertake doctoral work in the area and possibly enter academia themselves.

References
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