WHAT IS MARKETING RESEARCH
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Fundamentally, the panel session to which this paper is addressed confronts the question, "What is marketing research?" and raises the issue of whether academic marketing researchers can live happily with the definition recently announced by the American Marketing Association's Board of Directors:

Marketing Research is the function which links the consumer, customer, and public to the marketer through information -- information used to identify and define marketing opportunities and problems; generate, refine, and evaluate marketing actions; monitor marketing performance; and improve understanding of marketing. Research specifies the information required to address these issues; designs the method for collecting the information; manages and implements the data collection process; analyzes the results; and communicates the findings and their implications.

I believe that most of us would agree that marketing research is research on or about marketing and that the needed definition is transparent in this sense. The real problems arise in specifying what we mean by research on the one hand and by marketing on the other. The official AMA statement appears to commit itself on both issues. I wish to suggest (1) that it errs in its attempt to specify the meaning of "research," but (2) that it appropriately encapsulates its own concept of "marketing." In essence, putting these two observations together, one might conclude that the AMA's definition of marketing research is half right and half wrong.

First, let us consider the AMA's "implicit" definition of research. Here, the official statement appears to adopt a perspective that is hopelessly enmeshed in the spirit of logical empiricism. Specifically, the statement talks about research as a process of (1) specifying the information required, (2) designing a method, (3) collecting the information, (4) analyzing the results, and (5) communicating the findings. One can scarcely doubt that, except for the fact that it is badly worded, this pronouncement stems from an implicit devotion to the hypothetico-deductive method. Yet even the most hardened positivist who defines science as synonymous with logical empiricism would hardly dare to apply that characterization to everything that we typically consider to be research. Surely, under the general heading of "research," we wish to include other highly respectable areas of scholarship that do not proceed by collecting data and analyzing results. Surely, the scholar who approaches marketing from the viewpoint of philosophy or history or literature or other branches of the humanities still engages in what we would gladly call "research." Hence, I argue that the AMA's conceptualization has blundered badly by attempting to foist a narrow and confining concept of research upon the community of marketing scholars.

However, a second and more problematic issue concerns the concept of marketing itself. Here, I suggest that the AMA's official pronouncement creates safer ground. This is not to say that it is not problematic because -- in the usual way -- it still eludes a clear and accurate definition, as in the case of "research." The AMA's Board of Directors has addressed an ontological question that plunges us immediately into all sorts of deep philosophical difficulties. This question concerns the nature of something's (namely, marketing's) Essence, Essence, or Being. It quickly raises perplexing metaphysical issues that pose immense barriers to reaching agreement. The need for this panel session provides one indication of the enormity of those barriers.

In this, the question "What is marketing?" reminds me of another perennial favorite among philosophically inclined thinkers -- namely, the question "What is art?" Perusal of a small part of the voluminous literature on this topic suggests that it embodies human creative activity, Philosophy B might ask about the ontological status of driftwood sculpture or other objects found by artists. If philosopher B insists that artistic objects are characterized by Beauty, philosopher D might inquire about the monstrousities presented by Guernica or Hiroshima, More. If philosopher E invokes Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblance and comments that art is a genealogy of meaningfulness, philosopher F will remind us that family members look alike because of common ancestry and will demand an account of the common ancestry of artworks. In short, the debate continues, and no philosopher has yet provided a satisfactory answer to the question "What is art?"

Ultimately, in a frame of mind approaching exasperation, some philosophers such as George Dickie have turned to what they call the artworld (namely, the people and institutions involved in the practice of art) and have stipulated that some artifact qualifies as a work of art if it is so designated by someone claiming to be a member of that artworld. In spite of its partial circularity, this definition does have the advantage of offering (1) an independent criterion for the ontological status of art and (2) an operational measure based on this criterion. Specifically, some object is a work of art if someone claiming membership in the artworld says it is. However, this conceptual play runs the risk of missing philosophers and art confronted by a choice. Either (1) they can remain detached, can acquire from the artworld what art is, and can study that; or (2) they can get involved, can participate in the artworld, and can play a role in defining art (but can no longer study it with detachment).

In a sense, then, one cannot have it both ways. If you want to let the artworld define art independently (so that you can study the phenomena thus identified), then it becomes circular if you regard yourself as part of that artworld (thereby helping to choose the identity of the phenomena that you claim to take as independently determined).

One approach to a definition of marketing might posit the existence of a marketing world (namely, the people and institutions involved in the practice of marketing) and might then stipulate that some action qualifies as marketing if someone claiming membership in the marketing world says it is. Adoption of this rule, while rescuing us in part from the aforementioned ontological mess, would leave us faced by a dilemma similar to that found in the philosophy of art -- or, perhaps, by a range of choices arrayed along a continuum between two extremes. At one extreme, we can remain detached, inquire from the marketing world about what constitutes marketing, and then study...
that. At the other extreme, we can become part of the marketing world and can then play a role in defining marketing. In other words, to varying degrees, we can be either (1) philosophers who let someone else tell us what marketing is or (2) practitioners who become part of the definition. In this sense, the contribution we try for helping to define marketing is that we lose our detachment.

This contrast leads toward a clarification of an otherwise surprising discrepancy between my own view and the position adopted by two of the presenters in this discussion. On the surface, it might seem puzzling that two people who share so many values and who agree so deeply on the nature of consumer research should differ so dramatically on the question of what constitutes marketing research. Yet I do depart radically from Hirschman's orientation toward marketing research. In light of the foregoing discussion, we might characterize her position as "define marketing research broadly and then get involved" and mine as "let the marketing world define marketing research and then study it from afar." More specifically, Beth seems frustrated to be excluded from the marketing world's definition of marketing research. She wants to participate in the definition, wants to adopt a broad view of marketing that extends way beyond managerial relevance, and wants to become actively involved in marketing (thus defined) via the pursuit of knowledge beneficial to society. (The fact that Beth also emphasizes the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake directly contradicts her espousal of societal benefits and cannot logically be sustained within the content of her own argument.) By contrast, I favor letting the marketing world (as represented, for example, by the AMA Board) define marketing, favor adopting a narrow view of marketing that emphasizes its managerial relevance, and favor removing myself from marketing (thus defined) via the pursuit of knowledge about consumer behavior as an end in itself. It thus seems clear that, however much Beth and I might agree about the objectives of consumer research, when it comes to marketing research, we have adopted diametrically opposed positions.

All this receives further clarification if we now pause to observe that the varying orientations toward marketing research actually differ on not one, but two dimensions. These differences reflect the dual nature of the problem in defining marketing research. First, we may regard marketing according to either (1) the narrow view of the marketing world or (2) the broad view of the marketing academic. Second, we may regard research as either (1) pursuing relevance or (2) pursuing detachment. These two distinctions (or, if one prefers, continua) produce the typology (or space) of orientations toward marketing research shown in Table 1. (Notice that I have filled in the cells of this typology with some tentative examples shown parenthetically.)

The typology in Table 1 serves the dual role of distinguishing the orientations of Holbrook and Hirschman while also providing some speculations about the orientations that might characterize the other participants in this session (identified by question marks). Specifically, one might expect Bieda and Frank to define marketing research according to the orientation of consulting pragmatism by adopting the relatively narrow view of the marketing world and emphasizing the importance of managerial relevance. By contrast, Beth's movement to that societal beneficence by adopting the broad view of the marketing academic and arguing for relevance in terms of ethics and social welfare. Diametrically opposed to Hirschman, Holbrook has adopted the orientation of ivory-tower specialization by retaining the marketing world but pursuing detachment from this view (by seeking knowledge about the consumer as an end in itself without regard for its managerial relevance). (This latter perspective receives further attention in my paper for another session at this year's Winter AMA Conference.) Finally, one might expect Hunt and Anderson to define marketing research according to the orientation of philosophical globalization by sharing my own pursuit of detachment but adopting the broader view of marketing espoused by the marketing academic.

I hope that my presentation of this speculative typology helps (1) to organize the content of this session on the definition of marketing research, (2) to indicate the existence of a variety of viable orientations, (3) to emphasize in accord with Hirschman's paper that one's adoption of a perspective depends very much on one's worldview and on one's personal values, and (4) to show that conceptually the viewpoint of ivory-tower specialization is at least as respectable as various competing orientations. In the present case, for example, my own tendency toward the latter viewpoint causes me to reject the AMA Board's concept of research while accepting its concept of marketing. Beth has reached more or less opposite conclusions (though she does take pains to divorce herself from the positivistic perspective implicitly endorsed by the AMA's definition). Meanwhile, one might expect Hunt and Anderson to react with double horror to the AMA's view, while one might anticipate finding Bieda and Frank in essential accord with the official doctrine.

I must end by emphasizing that, while I endorse the position that I have characterized as ivory-tower specialization, I should also warn my readers about the inevitable dangers that accompany movement in that direction. Specifically, anyone who climbs up to keep me company in the ivory tower will soon discover that this orientation meets with something less than complete enthusiasm among those avowed members of the marketing world who ply their devotion to managerial relevance as editors, reviewers, and other intellectual gatekeepers for our field of inquiry. Similar difficulties have sometimes greeted those approaching our journals from the direction of societal beneficence. Further, one sometimes discovers that those who espouse philosophical globalization in theory can approach their roles on editorial boards from the viewpoint of consulting pragmatism. Thus, in part, is born a phenomenon that I have referred to elsewhere as "sadomasochism in the review process."
Here again, the situation resembles that found in the arts. A researcher who pursues science or scholarship for its own sake without regard for its managerial practicality as defined by the marketing community resembles the artist who listens attentively to his own muse and who pursues his own vision of artistic integrity without regard for popularity or commercial success. Both may suffer disappointment in the size of their potential audiences. But both may view this sacrifice as the inevitable price of their intellectual freedom.

This dilemma appeared rather vividly in the life of Anton Bruckner. Described by Milton Cross as a quiet, timid, humble, homely, kind, and studious man, Bruckner devoted his whole heart and soul to the composition of massively passionate orchestral works that creep with glacier-like slowness from one momentous musical climax to another via a painstaking relentlessness that tries the endurance of even the most patient listener. At the premier of his Third Symphony in Vienna on December 16, 1877, the proud composer himself conducted the performance. But, as he led the orchestra through its lengthy course from one shattering symphonic peak to the next, members of the audience gradually began to leave the concert hall. Ultimately, after the final mighty crescendo had subsided, Bruckner whirled around to accept what he doubtless thought would be a tumultuous ovation. Confronted to his utter dismay by the tiny handful of people who remained, he stood for a lengthy time rooted to his spot, trembling in unspeakable humiliation, with enormous tears streaming down his cheeks.

Today, over a hundred years later, we recognize Bruckner's symphony as a great masterpiece of Western Civilization. And, even while he was treated with contempt by the Viennese critics, Bruckner himself never doubted the inevitability of this ultimate outcome. "When God calls me to Him and asks me, 'Where is the talent which I have given you,'" Bruckner said, "Then I shall hold out the rolled-up manuscript . . . and I know that He will be a compassionate judge."