While the study of marketing began over seventy years ago, interest in marketing theory is generally considered to be a development of the post World War II era. In fact, Robert Bartels, a foremost marketing historian and theorist, cites Revis Cox and Wroe Alderson's collection of essays entitled Theory in Marketing as the first significant work in a period in which many authors, including William Lazer, Eugene Kelley, George Schwartz, and John Howard, were concerned with marketing theory.

Recently, Sheth and Garrett indicated that marketing theory--a distinct topic--has dominated scholarly thought in the marketing discipline during the 1980's. And they offer three reasons for this renewed interest in marketing theory:

(a) the recognized need by practitioners and academicians alike for more effective and efficient marketing practices (to permit keeping pace in today's competitive environment);

(b) the desire on the part of marketing professionals and scholars to improve the image of marketing as a discipline; and

(c) the strong demand on the part of practitioners and scholars for a theoretical framework to permit better usage of the advanced quantitative techniques available to marketing technocrats.

If Sheth and Garrett are correct about this renewed interest in marketing theory, and one can only applaud them for their candor, marketing scholars have taken a distinct turn in the past decade. Surely, this represents a departure from the focus on specific topics, such as consumer behavior, quantitative marketing techniques and narrow methodologies that were so pervasive in the late 70s and early 80s. In fact, a study conducted in 1973 identified some movement away from a scholarly interest in marketing theory.

But has marketing theory ever really been de-emphasized as a focal point for marketing academics and practitioners; de-emphasized as an area of critical importance by those serious about the field? Even of course, when the attention given to marketing theory par

The Surveys (1973 and 1987)

In 1973, Ryans and Van't Spijker conducted a mail survey among the Editorial Board Members of the A.M.A.'s Journal of Marketing (JM). Employed in this study was a highly-structured questionnaire that sought the Board Members' views/attitudes on the types of marketing theory issues raised above. Since the JM was the lead journal of the top professional body in the field, it was assumed that its Editorial Board could be considered thought-Leaders in the discipline. Some eighty (80) percent of the 50-member Board responded to the questionnaire.

This 1970's study was replicated by the authors in Spring, 1987, and the finding provide the data reported herein. The authors feel that there are many "plusses" to the approach (methodology) followed in this survey. First, the questions raised in 1973 are just as appropriate today. In effect, they seek to determine the current importance and direction of marketing theory...as seen by a representative group of marketing thought-leaders. Second, by repeating the earlier survey, including the questionnaire, methodology, and type of response group (JM Editorial Review Board), direct comparisons can be made between the two data sets. In other words, this approach provides the general benefits obtained by conducting a longitudinal survey. Of the 86 questionnaires mailed to Board members, responses were received from 56 (or a 65 percent response rate). While this rate is slightly lower than the 1973 study, it still is quite high in terms of typical mail surveys.

The Findings (1987)

Generally, the JM respondents demonstrated strong agreement with one another in their views/perceptions on the various issues. As shown in Table I, a heavy majority felt the quest for marketing theory is a worthwhile objective and that it has significance for academicians and practitioners alike. Further, more than 80 percent agreed with the notion that marketing has lacked the concern for theory building found in certain other social sciences, but disagreed with the statement that "problems with quantifying most market variables is the major obstacle to developing marketing theory."

Perhaps the most interesting series of questions concerned the practicality "potential dichotomy." To some degree the JM Editorial Board members did disagree regarding the "practical" vs. "research-for-research sake" issues. For example, fifty-four (54) percent felt that researchers should ask themselves..."what is the practical applicability of (their) findings?" And, they tended to feel (58 percent) that the undergraduate marketing course should have a practical bend.
However, a majority (58 percent) did not see the trend in marketing research going toward "a [more] practical orientation."

Regarding theory itself, most (over 85 percent) felt that marketing theory(ies) does(does) exist, but a slight majority did not feel that "general theory" should be the marketing theorists' goal. Nor did they tend to see the firm's orientation toward "solving marketing problems" as an inhibitor to developing marketing theory (Table I).

Table I
American Educator's Attitudes Toward Select Marketing Theory Status Statements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agree (%)</th>
<th>Disagree (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+3</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+2</td>
<td>-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+1</td>
<td>-3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1) The quest for theory in marketing is a worthwhile objective. 0.0 1.8 0.0
(2) Marketing theory has significance for the marketing academician. 3.6 0.0 0.0
(3) Marketing theory has significance for the marketing practitioner. 5.4 0.0 1.8
(4) Marketing has not had the numbers of writers or researchers concerned with the pursuit of theory that have been found in other areas of the social sciences. (a) 14.8 1.9 1.9
(5) Writers and researchers in marketing typically have not been concerned with building on the work of their predecessors, as has been true in certain other social sciences. (a) 36.5 18.2 5.5
(6) Problems with quantifying most marketing variables is the major obstacle to developing marketing theory. 39.3 28.6 16.1
(7) No theory or theories of marketing currently exist(s). 26.8 28.6 32.1
(8) The pursuit of a general theory of marketing should be a goal of marketing theorists. 23.2 28.6 5.4
(9) The firm's emphasis on solving marketing management problems has slowed the development of marketing theory. (a) 25.5 29.1 14.5
(10) The trend in recent research in marketing has been toward a practical orientation. (11) Every researcher in marketing ought to ask himself or herself the question, "What is the practical application of my findings?" 33.9 16.1 8.9
(12) Since the first marketing course taken by an undergraduate is often his or her only marketing course, it should be "practical application" oriented. (a) 21.4 12.5 10.7
(13) Knowing marketing techniques is more important for undergraduates than understanding marketing theory. 32.7 5.5 3.6
(14) Economic theory has provided more concepts for the development of marketing thought than has any other social science. (a) 36.4 12.7 5.5
19.2 19.2 21.2

Except where noted N = 56 percentage may not total 100.0 due to rounding.
a: N = 55.

Comparison of 1974 and 1987 Studies

Earlier reference was made to a similar study conducted in 1974. How did the respondents' views in 1974 differ from those that participated in the 1987 research? To make such comparisons, the statements were divided into two categories.

Marketing Theory Objectives/Significance (1974 vs. 1987)

In Table II, a series of comparisons are made between the 1974 and 1987 response patterns regarding the objectives for and the significance of marketing theory. Is theory, in fact, a useful area of concern for marketing scholars? The views from the two surveys reflected on these five key issues ranged from the value of pursuing marketing theory to its significance for the practitioners are quite parallel. In fact, about the only differences concerned the pursuit of a "general theory." While a heavy majority (72 percent) of the 1974 respondents favored a general theory approach, some fifty-seven (57) percent of the 1987 survey respondents disagreed. On the other hand, the 1987 respondents seemed slightly more favorable toward the "quest for theory" than did their 1974 counterparts.

Perceived Level of Theory Development (1974 vs. 1987)

Unlike the previous block of questions, the two JM response groups did disagree somewhat regarding their perceptions on the present level of development of marketing theory (Table III). In particular, their main disagreements concerned the second and fourth statements (Table III). First, the 1974 respondents tended to feel that writers and researchers in marketing typically have not been as concerned with building on the work of
Changes in American Attitudes on Marketing Theory(ies)  
as an Objective from 1974 to 1987  
Table II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Agree (%)</th>
<th>Disagree (%)</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The quest for theory in marketing is a worthwhile objective.</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>87.5</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>98.2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing theory has significance for the marketing academician.</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>97.4</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every researcher in marketing ought to ask himself or herself the question,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;What is the practical applicability of my findings?&quot;</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>55.4</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing theory has significance for the marketing practitioner.</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>95.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>92.9</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The pursuit of a general theory of marketing should be a goal of marketing</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>72.5</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>practitioners.</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

others, as have their counterparts in other social sciences, while the 1987 group disagreed. Similarly, they disagreed over the contributions made to marketing theory by the economists. The 1974 study group felt that the economic theorists had made greater contributions to marketing than had other social science contributors but the 1987 group did not share this view. Since the mix of marketers' backgrounds/orientations appears to have shifted toward psychology from economics in recent years, this latter finding is not surprising.

Summary and Conclusions

This paper reports the findings of a 1987 survey of the JM Editorial Board Membership that focused on their views regarding the importance and nature of marketing theory. This survey paralleled a 1974 Survey of the then JM Editorial Board in all methodological aspects and permitted examining/comparing the views of the two groups longitudinally.

Each response group (marketing thought-leaders) agreed strongly that the quest for marketing theory was a worthwhile objective; an objective important to academic and practitioner alike. Clearly, the overall pattern of response suggests that the interest in marketing theory development is on the increase. The only reportable differences concerned the questions of "practicality" vs. "pure research" and the primary influences on theory development...economists or other social scientists. Finally, while the 1974 JM study respondents saw a general theory of marketing as the marketing theorists goal, the 1987 JM study respondents generally disagreed. And, the general theory, a goal initially proposed by Bartels (1968), appears to have less relevance for marketing scientists today.

While a longitudinal study of this type offers some interesting perspectives on change within the field, one must not "over-interpret" the similarities and differences that resulted. For example, no attempt was made here to account for the bias perhaps reflected by the JM editors in the two time periods or to consider specifically the research interests or educational backgrounds of the Editorial Board members (either 1974 or 1987). Rather, an explicit assumption was made that by the very nature of the selection process, the Editor and his/her Board would be unlikely to vary greatly from the then current thrust of the field.

References

3. Ryans and Van't Spijker, op.cite, p. 193.


7. Ryans and Van't Spijker, op.cite, pp. 193-201.

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Marketing:
A Return To The Broader Dimensions

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