MARKETING—
A RETRENCHMENT EXERCISE

Daniel T. Seymour

ABSTRACT

The main objective of this paper is to argue for a retrenchment of marketing thought: a shift away from one paradigm and toward another. The contention is that the hypothetico-deductive paradigm has been implicitly adopted and raised to a dominant position in the field of marketing. Arguments are defined as to why such a perspective is inappropriate for the marketing discipline in this stage of its development. An alternative paradigm in the form of a popular sociological approach known as phenomenology is then offered as an additional framework within which marketing scholars should seek work.

I. A DOMINANT PARADIGM

In defining paradigm as a conceptual framework, it is reasonable (although arguable) to state that there are currently two dominant paradigms in the marketing
Marketing—Retrenchment Exercise

II. ADOPTION OF THE PARADIGM

A. The Social Science Evolution

In sociology, the development of neopositivism in the late 1920s and early 1930s was the forerunner of an evolved obsession with the scientific method. Men like E. S. Bogardus, F. S. Chapin, W. F. Ogburn, and G. A. Lundberg contributed to the “advanced respectability” of the discipline as they began to push for a valid analytical model for sociology. In psychology the parallel development occurred with the advent of the behaviorist thrust spearheaded by J.B. Watson and B.F. Skinner. Experimental psychology was based on the basic canons of empirical investigation as defined in the hypothetico-deductive paradigm.

Bartels (1970), in his book Marketing Theory and Metatheory, describes the decade 1910–1920 as the period of conceptualization in marketing when the foundation was built on which the structure of marketing thought rests. The “new discipline” of marketing, therefore, was in a stage of embryonic development at the time that sociology and psychology had already begun to mature. And since the new discipline overlapped considerably with sociological and psychological thinking, it is reasonable that an essentially monolithic “school” should emerge—passively adopting the parallel evolution of the scientific method in the social sciences.

B. Marketing Science

In addition to this parallel assimilation, the marketing discipline has also suffered from the same insecurities and need for prestige as have other nonphysical disciplines. For example, Filstead (1970) chided his colleagues’ acceptance of the natural science model in sociology as the “best” model in the following manner: “There are other reasons for adhering to the natural science model: ego fulfillment; the achievement of scientific respectability; and the quest for social status on a par with that of the natural scientist . . . . (p. 3). It is only too evident that marketing has suffered the same identity crisis. The “Is Marketing a Science?” argument crystallized by Hutchinson (1952), and more recently
debated by Philip Kotler, Sidney J. Levy, and David J. Luck, has been both informative and entertaining. It also follows that the debate would center around the basic nature of what a science contains. According to Buzzell (1963, p. 32) a science is—

- A classified and systematized body of knowledge
- Organized around one or more central theories and a number of general principles
- Usually expressed in quantitative terms
- Knowledge which permits the prediction and, under some circumstances, the control of future events

The marketing science war seems to reflect the striving of an immature discipline to gain respectability. Attention is being paid to the quantitative terms, with "science" being the end product. As Lord Kelvin (1891–1894) proclaimed:

When you measure what you are speaking about, and express it in numbers, you know something about it; but when you cannot measure it, when you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is a meager and unsatisfactory kind: it may be the beginning of knowledge, but you have scarcely, in your thoughts, advanced to the stage of science.

If marketing science is a goal, it follows that we not only use quantitative terms but also evaluate our theories for their "scientificness." Indeed, in this volume Firtt (1985) contends, "I think it is important for marketing to make such an evaluation [regarding scientificity of theories and methods of theory development] if it is to continue on a path which will be deemed today and in the future as relevant, useful, and scientific."

C. The Logical Appeal

There is something to be said for the usage of the hypothetic-deductive paradigm in nonphysical disciplines. First, it is noted that a detached perspective on the part of the researcher results in data which are impartial and open to public verification and criticism. The researcher maintains control of the measurement process just as would happen in a physics lab. For example, in the practice of medicine the patient hardly ever participates in decision making about his/her own treatment. In the same manner, objectivity is implicit in the scientific method: our respondent's business is to sit still and be measured—to answer questions, push the buttons, or otherwise provide researchers with what they need to describe him/her. Second, the notation system used to describe the world is produced by assigning numbers to objects. As such the description is more accurate information in that it provides a clearer, more distinctive picture of the world. The information that is produced to enable a researcher to accept or reject a specific hypothesis is expressed in charts, graphs, tables, and figures; if nothing else, the results are nice and neat. And, finally, the objective criteria used in describing an object or relationship result in systems which can be compared and reported.

D. The Easy Way Out

Much of the methodology involved in the hypothetic-deductive paradigm successfully avoids the messy data and ill-fitting concepts of a subjective world. There is a certain comfort in numbers, a sense of security which exudes from a thick printout of crosstabs. The numbers speak for themselves. As such, being able to state that two factors are significantly different (and therefore reject the null hypothesis that they are equal) alleviates the researcher of any responsibility or insight. There is a decided tendency to respond to numbers as though they were the repositories of occult powers and as though the exactness of a figure equates to validity, to truth. Numbers seem to have intrinsic scientific value.

III. REJECTION OF THE PARADIGM

The evidence to explain the hypothetic-deductive paradigm in marketing is quite compelling. It certainly makes some sense that we should be at this place at this time. However, there are also good arguments which could be used to question the continued usage of this dominant paradigm.

A. Under Attack

Since we apparently got caught up in the shifting of paradigms in the social sciences (adopting the hypothetic-deductive paradigm almost by default), we should be aware of the concerns currently being raised in those disciplines. For example, Wilhelm Wundt is generally regarded as the father of modern experimental, laboratory-based psychology. But almost a century after he applied the scientific method in a controlled experimental setting, the laboratory-experimental method is coming increasingly under question. Two of the most articulate critics have been McGuire (1973) and Helmreich (1975), who have noted three objections to the experimental tradition:

1 Laboratory studies often attain so much control over behavior that the meaning of what occurs is lost.
2 The scenarios in many laboratory studies are very artificial, minimizing the correspondence between laboratory and real life.
3 Behavior in real life cannot be reduced to two or three independent variables.
The obvious point to be made is that “That’s interesting for psychology but we don’t really do a lot of laboratory experimentation.” Quite true. In fact, we don’t even do that much field experimentation. Scholarly research in the marketing discipline consists mainly of single-shot, self-report, student-sampled survey research which may more appropriately be labeled opportunistic rather than scientific.

The lack of a replication tradition in marketing, almost by itself, undercuts the argument of ‘Is Marketing a Science?’ Replication is one of the key elements in the scientific method. As Lastrucci (1967) points out, “The whole effort of a scientific study is directed toward one single end: verification.” And yet one study recently reported that, out of a total of 649 articles analyzed from the Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Research, and Journal of Consumer Research, there were 0 pure replications and only 13 replications with extension. So much for verification.

B. Too Narrow, Too Soon

As disciplines grow and mature, there seems to be an increasing need for them to become more of a science and less of an art. And, while explanation and understanding are legitimate goals of a discipline, we have hurdled these for the more prestigious emphasis on prediction. Given the infancy of marketing, the unitary conception of the scientific method should not even be of concern.

Certainly experimental designs and controlled quantitative methods should be encouraged, but the notion of a dominant paradigm is almost ludicrous. Different problems demand different methodologies; and the state of a discipline should dictate the paradigm(s). At this point in marketing’s development, concern should be on understanding human behavior in the consumption process. But instead we have an immature discipline, misdirected in its striving for respectability, which is increasingly enameled with a narrow range of quantitative instruments. Both Arndt (1985) and Venkatesh (1985) have noted in this volume that such “instrument-itis” can erode the core of a discipline, making it less relevant and less comprehensible. At a time in which we should be reaching out to embrace as many procedures as possible to advance the discipline, we have chosen instead to inflict ourselves with a set of academic blinders.

C. Summary

The argument has been advanced, in this section, that we have “bought-in” on the hypothetico-deductive paradigm. Although the choice may not have been conscious, the marketing discipline has nonetheless sought refuge from insecurity in the legitimacy of the scientific method.

However, it is more important to note that neither the notion of the scientific method nor a dominant paradigm seem to be appropriate for the discipline at this stage of its development. The whole topic reminds me of a section which Adams (1979) devotes to emotional blocks to problem solving in her book Conceptual Blockbusting. She argues that as individuals we have a tendency to latch on to initial solutions to problems because we have “no appetite for chaos.” Problem solving and perhaps the maturation of a discipline are messy processes. In both cases you must be willing to wallow in misleading and ill-fitting data, hazy and difficult-to-test concepts, opinions, discontent, and other such untidy quantities. As Adams notes, “A desire for order is therefore necessary. However, the ability to tolerate chaos is a must” (p. 45).

We have unconsciously attempted to bring order to the discipline by pulling off the shelf the most ordered approach to studying an area—the scientific method. We seem to be trying to accomplish in several decades what the social sciences have struggled with for a considerable longer time. Patience, apparently, is not a marketing virtue.

IV. AN ALTERNATIVE PARADIGM

A. A Phenomenology Overview

While the heading of this section implies an either/or choice, the fact is that an alternative paradigm is useful just because it represents an alternative—a form of opposition. While the hypothetico-deductive method is a very useful approach to reality, there are other approaches to the empirical world. Opposition, therefore, needs to be stressed so that the shortcomings of the “dominant” paradigm are exposed and the assets of alternative approaches are illuminated. Rather than discussing alternative approaches, I would like to focus attention on one alternative paradigm which has resulted in important advances in sociology. Its application to the discipline of marketing will, I hope, become apparent.

The conceptual framework known as phenomenology stems most prominently from Max Weber. The phenomenologist views human behavior as a product of how people interpret their world. The task of the researcher, then, is to capture this process of interpretation. To do this requires what Weber has termed Verstehen, emphatic understanding or an ability to reproduce in one’s own mind the feelings, motives, and thoughts behind the actions of other individuals. The emphasis is on feelings, or as the poet Philip James Bailey (1839) has noted: “We live in deeds, not years; in thoughts, not breaths; in feelings, not figures on a dial.”

It follows that phenomenology employs a basically inductive method in building knowledge. In contrast to the “traditional scientist” who sets up preconceived realities which he/she seeks to verify, the phenomenologist begins with the data and inductively forms hypotheses to fit the data. The procedure is from the bottom up, with the researcher attempting to reduce preconceptions of their subject to a minimum: “He must have no hypotheses to direct him as to what
he should find in his investigation. The investigator goes into the situation to be studied with a totally open mind—open, in fact, in depth to all stimuli that impinge upon his consciousness” (Bryun, 1966, p. 22). Because of the complex nature of human emotion and action, it is of singular importance that an inductive approach be available to researchers. With the approach beginning with specific observations and building toward general patterns, the researcher is able to develop an understanding of the situation as it emerges from the data.

Another contrast is the phenomenological commitment to study people (in situ) as a process of discovery. Detachment and objectivity on the part of the researcher is replaced by a need to get close to the data:

The basic position of this orientation is that in order to understand social phenomena, the researcher needs to discover the actor’s “definition of the situation”—that is, his perception and interpretation of reality and how these relate to his behavior. Further, the actor’s perception of reality turns on his ongoing interpretation of the social interactions that he and others participate in, which, in turn, pivots on his use of symbols in general and language in particular. Finally, in order for the researcher to come to such an understanding he must be able (albeit imperfectly) to put himself in the other person’s shoes (Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979, p. 7).

While a hypothetico-deductive approach is based on a response or effects framework created by the research, the phenomenology approach is grounded in the language and symbols of the subject, who becomes the expert about his/her world. The data consists of people's own written or spoken words as they define their world. For example, "He lives there; he knows better than we do what it is like and how best to describe it" (from Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979, p. 7). Phenomenological methods allow us to know people personally and to see them as they are developing their own view of the world. The researcher has the opportunity to experience meaning in the form in which people see it, i.e., to understand naturally occurring phenomena in their naturally occurring states. In general, then, the phenomenologist must preserve the essential subjectivity of human behavior by subtly entering into it, whereas the researcher using the scientific method must objectify human behavior and make it measurable. The only measurement which makes sense to the phenomenologist is the measurement employed by the people he or she studies.

While there are many negative aspects to the phenomenology paradigm, let me organize two major areas within which positive benefits can be realized in order to justify such a retrenchment: the first area is concerned with the techniques used in phenomenology, and the second with the type of theory which is developed.

B. Techniques

In large part, qualitative techniques are the only research strategies which enable the researcher to obtain first-hand knowledge about the empirical world in question. Qualitative techniques such as participant observation, depth interviewing, and focus groups allow the researcher to “get close to the data.” What enables our researcher to get close is the realization that although human emotion and behavior is a complex, messy business, people are simple and straightforward. Given such complexity, it follows that the preconceived, rigidly structured quantitative techniques that pigeonhole people may not be capable of capturing the essence of humans. It can be difficult to fit them into categories and make them stay there.

Robert Merton (1968) has suggested that the cumulative nature of science requires a high degree of consensus among scientists and leads to an inevitable enchantment with problems of reliability. In contrast, the problem of validity, or measuring that which one intends to measure, has been unconsciously pushed into the background: “We concentrate on consistency without much concern with what it is we are being consistent about or whether we are consistently right or wrong. As a consequence we may have been learning a great deal about how to pursue an incorrect course with maximum precision” (Deutscher, 1966 p. 241). Qualitative techniques are appropriate for phenomenological research, then, because of the increased validity of the results due to the lack of preconception and structure which is inherent in the hypothetico-deductive process. It would seem to be more worthwhile to make a shrewd guess regarding that which is essential than to measure accurately that which is likely to prove irrelevant.

In spite of all this, it must be noted that qualitative methods have major drawbacks. LaPiere (1934), for example, observed almost three decades ago that “The questionnaire is cheap, easy, and mechanical. The study of human behavior is time-consuming, intellectually fatiguing and depends for its success upon the ability of the researcher” (p. 237). Even though qualitative methods are undoubtedly the most appropriate research measures of human attitudes and behaviors (within a phenomenological framework), the awkwardness of the resulting data is troublesome. Quantitative surveys break things down into little units not so much because subjects think in little units but because that is the framework adopted by the researcher. However, those nice, neat little units come in very handy when it is time to analyze data and present results.

The “bottom line” seems to be that while qualitative techniques may have increased validity and intuitive appeal, the subjective interpretation, cumber-someness, and noncomparability of the results represent significant obstacles to the practical shift toward a phenomenological paradigm. It should be noted, however, that with the use of increased computer capability some very realistic qualitative programs can be set up. Numerous software packages are currently available to do word processing and numerical coding of the text. As such, large qualitative data bases can form the foundation for theory construction and managerial decision making. For example, Becker and Nowak (1983) have been successful with their “everyday life approach,” in which a two- to three-hour open taped interview provides the basic data. In capsulized form, the following outline
briefly shows the methodology which they have used for clients in the automobile, cigarette, and food industries:

- Open interview along with various sociodemographic data
- Interview is transferred verbatim into storage on magnetic disk
- Interview is coded (segmented according to content), with numerical codes assigned to each text element
- Code numbers, verbatim records, and sociodemographic data are maintained as a case on the computer

There are many possibilities for the evaluation of the data processed in this way. For example, a client may be interested in the leisure time interests of young married women. On the basis of the sociodemographic characteristics of the women, the data bank is accessed and the corresponding parts of the text are printed out.

In concrete terms, such research is ideal for practitioners. Proctor and Gamble (Prestbo, 1980), for instance, gathers ongoing consumer dialogue on how people go about washing clothes, preparing meals, doing the dishes, and other household facts. There is no reason to believe that such “everyday life” phenomenological data, gathered via qualitative methods to facilitate practitioner decision making, cannot be of equal importance to the basic researcher.

C. Theory

Although the shift toward a phenomenological paradigm has some intriguing payoffs in terms of offering a different perspective to the discipline, a specific long-range benefit may come on the theory side. Theory, which is generated from the dominant (content) paradigm, is essentially of a formal nature. That is, scientific inquiry starts from a “formal” theory from which hypotheses can be deduced and empirically examined. The resulting data, therefore, are not used to produce theory but as quantitative verifications to support, reformulate or modify the presented theory.

Ward and Robertson (1973) offer a simple distillation of Abraham Kaplan’s thoughts on formal theory:

Interestingly, in fact, philosopher of science Abraham Kaplan, sees enormous difficulties for formal-theory development in any area of behavior science. In his view attempts to develop theory in applied fields (such as consumer behavior) are naive and doomed to failure. He argues that the behavioral sciences are not building on what is known, but rather laying out new foundations, or conducting research which is essentially redundant to previous research (p. 17).

A more practical approach to theory building in the marketing discipline seems to flow directly from the proffered phenomenology paradigm. Given the applied nature of marketing, perhaps we should be less concerned that data should fit the theory and more concerned that the theory should fit the data. Again, the proposed theory-building perspective is readily adapted from sociology, namely, the grounded theory approach that has been defended by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The main tenet of grounded theory is the discovery of theory from data.

The process of verifying hypotheses leaves us with evidence to either support a theory or generate a reformulated hypothesis. In the worst instance we end up with a theory that does not seem to fit or work. Grounded theory, in contrast, is a process of discovery in which theory is generated from evidence. Since the theory has been derived from data and not deduced from logical assumptions, the theory that emerges is the result of what the researcher “knows” about his/her own data. Additionally, grounded theory places a high emphasis on theory as process, as an ever-developing entity.

In a very real sense, grounded theory as articulated by Glaser and Strauss is ideally suited to the applied nature of marketing. Since conceptualization begins with the facts, it parallels a problem-solving approach to research. In the area of consumer behavior, Ward and Robertson (1973) have distinguished between formal theory vs. problem solving:

An alternative to the formal deductive theory approach to consumer behavior research is to take a problem-solving point of view, that is, to isolate a particular problem involving consumer behavior and to conceptualize and design research which will appropriately bring empirical data to bear on that problem (p. 17).

Such a problem-solving/inductive/grounded approach to research and theory development is faithful to the everyday realities of an area when it is carefully induced from diverse data. As Glaser and Strauss (1967) have pointed out, “Only in this way will the theory be closely related to the daily realities (what is actually going on) of substantive areas . . . ” (p. 239).

The phenomenology paradigm, therefore, provides a logical conceptual framework for both research and theory building (as shown in Figure 1) and provides an obvious contrast to its hypothetico-deductive paradigm counterpart. But it should also be noted that, while the issue of grounded theory “ties in” with the critical developments of the present paper, it also can be directly applied to immediate concerns in the area of marketing and consumer behavior. Jacoby (1976), in an Association for Consumer Research (ACR) Presidential Address, “Consumer Research: Telling It Like It Is,” enumerated several key problems with consumer behavior theories, models, and concepts:

1. Look Ma—No Theory. Little reliance is placed on theory either to suggest which variables and aspects of consumer behavior are of greatest importance and in need of research, or as a foundation around which to organize and integrate findings.

Grounded theory does not rely on direction based upon logical assumptions intuited by the researcher and is not hog-tied by the rhetoric of verification.
Glaser and Strauss (1967) comment that “Grounded theory can help to forestall the opportunistic use of theories that have dubious fit and working capacity” (p. 4). The contention is that the usefulness of a theory is related to how it is generated—and it is likely to be a better theory to the degree that it has been inductively developed from empirical data.

4. **Single-Shot vs. Programmatic Research.** Another theory-related problem evidenced in the contemporary consumer behavior literature is the widespread failure to engage in programmatic research. The very nature of qualitative research and the adoption of a phenomenological perspective almost precludes the notion of “easy.” As was witnessed in the example from Becker and Nowak’s “everyday life approach” (1983), the payoff is substantial but the start-up costs of doing this kind of research are formidable. The phenomenology paradigm, within which qualitative data are used to derive grounded theory, necessitates a commitment which goes well beyond single-shot research.

V. CONCLUSION

Marketing is an adolescent discipline and exhibits many of the same growing pains that are characteristic of teenage children. As an example, we seem to have casually adopted an approach (hypothetico-deductive), a way of advancing the discipline from our older brothers and sisters (psychology and sociology), in the hopes of acting a little more mature. Unfortunately, our set of hand-me-down clothes does not flatter us; in fact, our attire is extremely ill-fitted and downright sloppy. The unconscious assumption of the hypothetico-deductive paradigm (which is characteristic of mature disciplines) has left us with a framework which is unworkable and untenable. We simply don’t do it well, if we do it at all.

Earlier in this paper it was mentioned that different problems demand different methodologies and the state of a discipline should dictate the paradigm(s). Given the youthfulness of marketing as a discipline, it is suggested that rich, deep understanding and explanation of market situations should be of primary concern. Examination of highly specific relationships by deductively defining a set of variables and then subjecting the data to a series of complex statistical tests would seem to be the order of the day.

In my mind, the key to advancement of the marketing discipline is in programmatic research and grounded theory. Marketing is applied psychology; it is applied sociology; it is applied economics. Our research should be geared to generating the practical understanding of various marketing phenomena. A thorough description and explanation of daily realities needs to be developed through
research programs which build on everyday facts. Theory that is generated from this source (grounded theory) is derived from these data. And general meaning simply results from the process of trying to account for or interpret the research.

Little of this can be accomplished via the hypothetico-deductive paradigm—either in its pure form or in the corrupted manner in which we have implicitly assumed it and practiced it. A shift toward the phenomenology paradigm would seem to be the best way of advancing the discipline as a whole and solving a few practical marketing problems along the way. While many of my “marketing science” colleagues may disagree, I do not see the discipline in terms of “fast forward.” Rather, I believe that the basis for advancement should be a little different; something like “To the rear—march!”

REFERENCES

In Nikhiles Dholakia & Johan Amrdt (Eds.), Changing the course of marketing: Alternative paradigms for widening marketing theory. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.