George M. Zinkhan & Rudy Hirschheim

Truth in Marketing Theory and Research: An Alternative Perspective

Numerous authors have discussed the possibility of a marketing science and have presented their visions to describe the characteristics of such a science. Fundamentally, these visions must come to grips with the idea of “truth” and the role truth plays in theory and research. In this article, the authors explore “truth in marketing science” by describing the essential problem of science in general and discussing the issues that shape the notion of a marketing science in particular. They note two limiting factors in viewing marketing as a science: (1) marketing as an applied field and (2) marketing’s attempts to explain human behavior—a phenomenon that is mutable, unpredictable, and reactive. They propose a scientific realist perspective, which can be useful for describing some of the “scientific” explanations offered in the marketing literature.

There is a continuing debate about the scientific status of marketing. If marketing is to be a science, what kind of science should it be? In a recent article, Hunt (1990) argues that “the pursuit of truth” (p. 8) is an appropriate goal for marketing science. He contends that “truth is essential in science” (p. 12) and is concerned with what appears to be happening with the notion of truth and its role in science (cf. Anderson 1983; Deshpande 1983). We believe there are several problems associated with Hunt’s discussion of “scientific truths” and “marketing truths.” Those problems fundamentally revolve around what might be termed the “essential problem in science”—“How do we know what we know?” and, following from that, “How do we acquire knowledge?” This age-old problem has been at the core of science since its inception and the solution is arguably as contentious now as it has been for centuries.

The Essential Problem of Science

The Greeks felt the primary role of science was to turn “doxa” (that which is believed to be true) into “epistemé” (that which is known to be true). But the Sophists questioned how, and even if, that could be done. They asked whether it is possible to know that something is true. The argument since then has centered around whether knowledge can ever be “proven.” To put it differently, does it make any sense to search for “truth” as though it exists as some independent reality? Conventional philosophical wisdom now holds that knowledge is not infallible but conditional; it is a societal convention and is relative to both time and place. Knowledge is a matter of community acceptance. The criteria for acceptance are an agreed set of conventions that must be followed if the knowledge is to be accepted by the community. The set of conventions are not arbitrary, but are well thought out and have historically produced knowledge claims that have withstood the test of time. In any society there are a myriad of knowledge claims; the ones that are accepted are the ones that can be supported by the forces of the better argument. They are an agreed best understanding of what has been produced at a particular point in time. (Such knowledge claims may be-
The Notion of Science in Marketing

This notion of science is well articulated in Laudan's (1977) so-called "reticulated model of scientific rationality" and forms the basis of Anderson's (1986) "critical relativist" position. It has come under attack in the recent marketing literature (cf. Hunt 1990; Siegel 1988), and it is with some of the arguments used against the critical relativist's position that we take exception. As Siegel's (1988) two primary criticisms (i.e., internal inconsistency and self-refuting) of Anderson's (1986) position were aptly addressed by Anderson (1988), we focus here on the comments of Hunt (1990), particularly his argument on the need to have "truth" in marketing research.

Hunt contends that "truth is essential in science" (p. 12) and is concerned with what appears to be happening with the notion of truth and its role in science. He perceives the trend away from the rather naïve notion of truth found in early marketing writing (the correspondence theory of meaning) toward the relativistic/constructionist position that "truth is a subjective evaluation that cannot be properly inferred outside the context provided by the theory" (Peter and Olson 1983, p. 119). However, it is with the critical relativist position that he takes specific exception, particularly its advocacy of the abandonment of truth: "I have made it quite clear that 'truth' plays no role in the ontology of critical relativism" (Anderson 1986, p. 134). Hunt argues that truth must not be abandoned in marketing theory and research; indeed, truth should be the goal. To support the case, Hunt seeks to destroy the arguments used by the critical relativists. For example, though the critical relativists make a strong case against convergent realism, Hunt suggests that there is no need to dispense with the notion of truth simply because convergent realism is philosophically untenable. He states (p. 5):

Does it "stand to reason" that marketing should abandon truth because "convergent" realism is false? Clearly the answer must be "no." It is totally incoherent to claim that truth should be abandoned as a goal because a particular theory of science (convergent realism) is false.

Hunt goes on to castigate critical relativism for using the very concepts that it purports to stand against, viz. truth and falsity. He continues his attack by showing that this latest version of relativism is still self-refuting and, moreover, incoherent and unintelligible. Those arguments are not new, nor are the arguments used by the critical relativists to defend their position. The problem seems to be with the notion of "truth." Any attempt to dispense with that notion typically incurs the wrath of the realist community. Hunt clearly can-
not accept its abandonment. Instead he proffers the views of scientific realism (p. 9):

Scientific realism is also a critical realism, contending that the job of science is to use its method to improve our perceptual (measurement) processes, separate illusion from reality, and thereby generate the most accurate possible description and understanding of the world. ... In short, scientific realism proposes that (1) the world exists independently of its being perceived (classical realism), (2) the job of science is to develop genuine knowledge about the world, even though such knowledge will never be known with certainty (fallibilistic realism), and (3) all knowledge claims must be critically evaluated and tested to determine the extent to which they do, or do not, truly represent or correspond to that world (critical realism).

But as has been argued both vociferously and voluminously in the past, that position too is unsatisfactory. The realist ontological position, in the social domain, is untenable; Berger and Luckmann (1967) have clearly shown that what we perceive as an objective reality is subjectively constructed. Because human beings cannot transcend their language and culture, they cannot obtain any absolute viewpoint. That point is eloquently made by Sayers (1987, p. 144), who states:

... the hope that we could have more than the certainty provided by our own language games and forms of life, involves an absurdity. It presupposes that we could somehow step outside our own network and judge it from a God’s-eye or no-eye view. Instead, although our most basic beliefs are social products, we are in them.

Hence, one must question whether, in the social domain, it makes sense to focus on the notion of truth as it is essentially a social construction. Instead, one might do better to focus on thebelievability of a knowledge claim—does it “speak” (in a hermeneutic sense) to the individual?

A second concern surfacing from Hunt’s article is his reification of terms. He uses the term “entity” to refer to a host of abstractions about which marketing researchers can inquire. Entities include both tangible and intangible things, and are postulated to exist. He states (p. 11):

... we are warranted in believing that something like the postulated entities and their structure of relationships exists, that is, they truly represent or correspond to some reality external to the theorist [italics added].

His examples in sociology of “racist beliefs” and “unfair treatment of racial groups” and in political science of “totalitarian political regimes” and “repress all human rights” are all at a very high level of abstraction. Their ontological “existence” is very different from that of something much less abstract, such as tables or chairs. The point missed by Hunt in both his 1990 article and his comment on “reification and realism” (1989) is that researchers reify those abstractions so they can research them by using orthodox (traditional) methods (e.g., hypothetico-deductive method). In so doing, they cause the inquiry to become contrived, artificial, and illusory. This is precisely the point made by Monieson (1988) in his call for “de-reification” and “enchantment.” Hunt’s (1989) criticism of Monieson is unfortunately based on a misconception of the notion of reification. He states that reification is the process whereby one treats a concept as real, taking unobservable concepts such as love and intentions and treating them as having a real existence. His argument with Monieson is that he feels the latter equates “treat as real” with “treat as a commodity” (Hunt 1989, p. 7). In fact, that is precisely what Monieson intends. According to the highly influential The Social Construction of Reality by Berger and Luckman (1967, p. 89), reification refers to the “apprehension of human phenomena as if they were things, that is, non-human or possibly suprahuman terms. ...” [The apprehension of the products of human activity as if they were something else than human products—such as facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will.” It is this abstracting away of human authorship that is at the core of the problem with reification, not the treating of a concept as real. Monieson (1989) too took offense with Hunt’s misuse of the notion of reification, extensively quoting Thomason (1982), who discusses it as elements of experiences that are attributed “unjustified concreteness, autonomy, facticity, impersonality, objectivity, and independence” (p. 11) Reification leads to what Whitehead (1925) referred to as the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness”—believing there is an underlying structure that explains all phenomena and pursuing it through research by “objectivizing” social constructs. The research provides an “illusion of objectivity.” The result according to Monieson (1988, p. 9) is a relentless pursuit of intellectualization in a world where “human values become unnecessary emotional baggage.” Hunt’s focusing on truth, believing it has an independent existence of its own, and his reification error must cast doubt on the call to adopt his version of scientific realism. His simple dismissal of critical relativism, on the grounds that it is incoherent and self-refuting and more fundamentally flawed on nihilistic and solipsistic grounds, misses the mark. As the scientific pursuit of knowledge is a communal achievement, it is not the “anything goes” vision portrayed by Hunt (1990), but the shared beliefs, understandings, conventions, and claims adopted by the community. In fact, communal acceptance is the essence of science.
Marketing Truths and Marketing as a Science

Hunt argues that his version of a fallibilistic and critical realism offers "a middle ground position between direct realism and relativism" (p. 9). Key contentions associated with this perspective are that "some of our perceptions are 'more accurate' or 'closer to the truth' than others" and that "the job of science is to develop genuine knowledge about the world" (p. 9). Both of those positions imply that there is an immutable truth that scientists can study. Over some reasonable time span (say, 10 millennia), such may be the case for some natural sciences. For example, as sixteenth-century astronomers struggled to understand the motion of the planets, the planetary orbits themselves were not changing (from decade to decade). Indeed, if they had been, physicists might still be without adequate theories to predict events within our solar system. However, we argue here that it is exactly such a situation that a marketing scientist must face. The objects marketers attempt to understand are in a constant state of flux (from generation to generation, for example), and any "marketing truths" that are discovered are not immutable.

Because marketing science is concerned primarily with transactions between buyers and sellers, whatever marketing truths exist are going to be embedded in a social world. Marketing is a social science; consequently, marketing generalizations are not going to be stable over time. Patterns of human activity may be in a continuous state of emergence, in the sense that they largely reflect contemporary contingencies (Gergen 1977). For marketing managers, those contemporary contingencies include fads, fashions, the type of product being sold, competitive activities, cultural changes, and so on.

As marketing scholars, we are trying to hit a moving target. Psychologists have long accepted the fact that human personalities change with passing generations (Gergen 1978). Of all the business disciplines, marketing may be the most influenced by changing fads and fashions. For example, we would not expect that a marketing study surveying a sample of housewives in the 1950s and one conducted in the 1990s would yield similar results. As buyers are increasingly motivated by wants (rather than needs), it becomes increasingly difficult to discover generalizations and truths that can be expected to remain stable over time. Hence, highly abstract theories of marketing behaviors have limited predictive value until they are linked to lower order generalizations (which take fashions into account). However, the lower order generalizations are subject to the tides of history and the changing whims of society. Under such circumstances, marketing theory can make few if any predictive statements about the concrete instance. One must already grasp the flow of concrete events before applying the theory (Gergen 1976).

In a similar way, we are discovering that marketing truths may not remain constant across cultures. For example, we are beginning to realize that the marketing strategies found to be successful in the United States may not be easy to transfer to Europe or Asia without significant alterations. There is an increasing interest in studying cultural differences and in identifying ways to adapt advertising and marketing strategies (Gilly 1988). Again, we are in the position of trying to hit a moving target.

Increasingly, we find that we must place qualifications around what we have "learned" in marketing. For example, we long have recognized that industrial marketing may be very different from consumer marketing, and that we must be careful about making generalizations from one subarea to another. Subsequently (circa 1975), we discovered that services marketing may be very different from product marketing; once again, a subarea of study was begun and we discovered that many marketing principles or traditions may not apply in the new area of inquiry.

In brief, marketing scholars and managers study human behavior. And, as sociologists and psychologists have previously noted, the social world is exceedingly complex. All sorts of explanation and description seem accurate in some respects. For example, to explain human behavior, there are biological accounts, physiological accounts, psychological accounts, sociological accounts, anthropological accounts, economic accounts, and so on. Each of those accounts are (sometimes) contradictory and involve (often) irreconcilable assumptions. Even more disturbing, the accounts really describe overlapping and interacting worlds. It is generally believed that those worlds interact in ways that are beyond the ability of modern-day social scientists to predict.

In addition, the objects of marketing inquiry (i.e., buyers and sellers) change their behavior in response to marketing research and practices. For example, there is a human drive for uniqueness; many people (consumers) do not like the notion that their behavior can be predicted. That observation provides one explanation for fast-changing Western cultural trends. Unlike the natural scientist, marketers (and other social scientists) use descriptive and explanatory terms that have the capacity to shape the character of social ac-

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2It must be noted, however, that predictive ability is not the sole basis of a theory's usefulness; highly abstract theories are more useful for organizing and explaining. The higher the level of abstraction, the less predictive power because predictions are usually tested empirically, thus only getting at the properties of the lowest level abstractions in the theoretical structure.
tivities about which accounts are fashioned. Thus, as is demonstrated in the following section, we have often faced difficulty when we have tried to establish firm philosophical foundations for a marketing science.

The Philosophical Foundations of Marketing

Throughout his article, Hunt is concerned with what he calls the “philosophical foundations” (p. 1) of marketing. However, for a variety of reasons, it has been sometimes difficult within the field of marketing to develop a consensus about the meaning of key terms and concepts (Dobni and Zinkhan 1990). Here, we perform a “foundations analysis” by examining the evolving definitions proposed for “brand image” and examine the knowledge claims made about that key marketing concept. A selection of brand image definitions, in chronological order, are stated in Table 1. We believe this collection of definitions demonstrates that marketing researchers have not succeeded in establishing a stable, immutable conceptualization of brand image. Instead, we see the definition constantly changing and, in some respects, the changes have more to do with evolving research fads (and interests) within the field than with an increasing refinement of knowledge or an approach toward truth (as Hunt describes).

In the early years, brand image definitions tended to focus on the product itself and its functions (cf. Newman 1957), though there was always a recognition that some other elements (e.g., advertisements) were involved in forming images. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, attitude research became an important concern and, correspondingly, image was defined as “an attitude about a given brand” (Bird, Channon, and Ehrenberg 1970). However, in the 1970s there was still a tendency to distinguish between the “functional value” of a good and the “symbolic (or image) value” (Pohlman and Mudd 1973).

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, as a psychological approach to marketing continued to dominate, there was a shift such that brand image was seen as located entirely inside consumers’ minds (cf. Bullmore 1984; Levy 1978). In the 1980s, the process of anthropomorphization continued and brands and products were viewed as having personalities, which were “not determined by the physical characteristics of the product . . . alone” (Sirgy 1985).

In the middle and late 1980s, a brand management approach became prevalent, and there was an interest in linking psychological concepts to strategic research. Thus, brand image was seen as a tool for fostering product differentiation (Reynolds and Gutman 1984) or as a major goal of brand management (Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis 1986). Also, by the time of the Park definition, functional aspects of the product were seen as a type of image. Contrast this view with the earlier distinction between functional value and symbolic value (Pohlman and Mudd 1973). This strategic direction has continued into the 1990s, such that brand image is now very close to the concept of brand equity and attempts are made to fashion appropriate financial measures to capture the long-term impact of brand image management.

As shown in Table 1, and as highlighted in the preceding analysis, a stable, immutable definition of brand image has not been established. Instead, the definition evolves as marketing researchers shift their attention from product functions to attitudes, to personalities, to brand management. There is not a steady progression of meaning as time passes, though it may be possible to identify certain dimensions of image, such as an emphasis on symbolism or an emphasis on personification (see Dobni and Zinkhan 1990). However, through overuse or misuse, the meaning of “brand image” has become blurred, which may in turn impede the process of knowledge development in marketing. The evolution of image definitions seems very remote from Hunt’s description of how marketing science works (vis à vis truth generation).

Similar foundational problems have been discovered for other key marketing terms such as “market” (Hyman and Skipper 1991), “store image” (Villanova, Zinkhan, and Hyman 1990), and “corporate image” (Johnson and Zinkhan 1990), though there is somewhat greater consensus for the last concept. As those terms evolve, it seems very much as though marketing researchers are “creating” reality rather than “discovering” reality. Hunt, however, argues the opposite and rejects the notion that scientific researchers create the phenomena they are studying (p. 3). Instead, he sees the “job of science is to . . . generate the most accurate possible description and understanding the world” (p. 9). Again, the definitions in Table 1 seem more to define the popular research paradigms of the time than to reflect an increasingly accurate description of the world.

Scientific Realism: An Alternative View

Scientific realism is proposed as a vehicle for marketing to become a science. Hunt discusses scientific realism in such a light and points out that there are many varieties of realism. Here, we discuss a different version of realism, a version not described by Hunt and one we feel is more appropriate for describing marketing phenomena. This version of realism is called “the realist view of science” (Manicas and Secord 1983) or “transcendental realism” (Bhaskar 1979). In contrast to the standard positivist view, which holds that science aims to study lawful properties consisting of
<table>
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<th>Author and Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1. Newman (1957)</strong></td>
<td>Emphasis is on the product generating the image, though there is also a role for other elements.</td>
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<td>(A) product is a symbol by virtue of its form, size, color, and functions. . . . Brand images may have several dimensions: functional, economic, social, psychological. . . . The limits are set by the brand image built through styling and advertisements as well as other product attributes.</td>
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<td><strong>2. Bird, Channon, and Ehrenberg (1970)</strong></td>
<td>This period represents the height of attitude research in marketing. It is now generally believed worthwhile to distinguish between “attitudes” and “images.”</td>
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<td>. . . [brand image is] an attitude about a given brand.</td>
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<td><strong>3. Pohlmans and Mudd (1973)</strong></td>
<td>Note the distinction between functional utility and utility as a prestige symbol. In this respect, there is a direct conflict with definition 8.</td>
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<td>The purchased item is conceptualized as having two kinds of value for the owner. . . . [F]unctional value is that which is conventionally meant by utility as a good, while symbolic value (i.e., image) is the extent to which a purchase enhances the worth of a person in his own eyes (self-esteem) and in the eyes of others (status).</td>
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<td><strong>4. Levy (1978)</strong></td>
<td>In contrast to definition 2, image is now construed to exist more in the consumer’s mind than in the product itself (though both elements are present in definitions 1 and 4).</td>
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<td>A brand image is a constellation of pictures and ideas in people’s minds that sums up their knowledge of the brand and their main attitudes towards it.</td>
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<td><strong>5. Bullmore (1984)</strong></td>
<td>Again, image has moved to the mind.</td>
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<td>. . . The image resides in the mind of the beholder—and is conditioned at least as much by the nature of the beholder as by the nature of the object itself.</td>
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<td><strong>6. Reynolds and Gutman (1984)</strong></td>
<td>A strategic or brand management flavor is now added to the consumer behavior conception of image.</td>
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<td>(a) . . . the set of meanings and associations that serve to differentiate a product or service from its competition.</td>
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<td>(b) The real key to understanding image lies in understanding linkages or connections between the levels that define the perceptual lens through which the consumer views the world.</td>
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<td><strong>7. Sirgy (1985)</strong></td>
<td>This is perhaps the most anthropomorphic definition and the epitome of the psychological approach.</td>
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<td>Products . . . and services are assumed to have personality image, just as people do. . . . These personality images are not determined by the physical characteristics of the product . . . alone.</td>
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<td><strong>8. Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis (1986)</strong></td>
<td>This is a brand management approach and conflicts with definition 3 by identifying functional aspects as image.</td>
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<td>The image is a perception created by the marketers’ management of the brand. Any product (e.g., toothpaste) theoretically can be positioned with a functional, symbolic or experiential image. . . .</td>
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<td>Brand equity [is] a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that add to or detract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm’s customers (p. 15)</td>
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Events and their causes, scientific realism views the aim of science to be the production of knowledge about “real structures which endure and operate independently of our knowledge, our experience, and the conditions that allow access to them” (Bhaskar 1975). Thus, science aims at discovering lawful processes, but the laws are about the causal powers of structures that exist and operate in the world. Under this con-

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ception, laws do not describe the patterns of events; rather, they set limits on the types of action possible. Causes are found in the natures of things, in their structural properties that create powers or liabilities (Zinkhan 1987).

Scientific realism in this context is more than an ontological stance in that it adopts a particular epistemology as well. This version of realism agrees with Kuhn that knowledge is a social and historical product, and thus accepts the inevitability of the hermeneutical circle. In fact, the hermeneutical circle underlies all of human knowledge. Realism accepts the hermeneutical circle as nonvicious and inevitable.

Because there can be no reinterpretation given, the task of science is to invent theories that aim to represent the world. In that way, science generates its own rational criteria that determine which theories are to be accepted or rejected. Crucially, it is possible for those criteria to be rational precisely because, on realist terms, there is a world that exists independently of cognizing experience (Manicas and Secord 1983). The theories that result from the rational criteria may be wrong—after all, they are based on the known world rather than the world itself—but, nonetheless, not anything goes. Again, they are what the community agrees on and are based on a community standard of what constitutes “valid” or “believable” knowledge claims.

It is our knowledge of the world that is circular; the world itself exists, and we experience perceptions of that world. The goal of science is to build sophisticated models, using rational criteria, to represent the world. As already mentioned, the models represent only what we know of the world and such knowledge is inherently flawed; but as we build successive models, we may improve our representation. By making use of cognitive materials and operating under the control of something like a logic of analogy or metaphor, we can postulate a model. We do not believe the model exactly duplicates the world but, if the model were to exist and act in the way specified, it would enable us to account for observed phenomena (Bhaskar 1975). Nonetheless, models are composed of abstractions and are untruthful, by definition, because they oversimplify. The greater the level of abstraction, the more this is so because the models move further from empirical phenomena and oversimplify by grouping lower level abstractions. Hence, an abstract scientific model cannot be known in the sense that Hunt uses the term “truth.”

The notion of a generative mechanism is one of the key concepts in the realist view of science. In brief, a generative mechanism is a causal principle or tendency rooted in the nature of the relevant entities. For example, in marketing, we may ask: Why does one viewer remember a television ad and another viewer forget it? Or, what makes a television commercial memorable? Here, the generative mechanism is construed to be the structure of memory and the way information is structured or stored in the human brain. Alternatively, the structure of television commercials is a legitimate issue for research in marketing. In both situations, the marketing researcher attempts to explain empirical observations through a consideration of causal powers. In other words, it is the structure and properties of an entity that, under the appropriate conditions, give it the power or capacity to act in certain ways (Secord 1983).

Thus, the scientific realist view provides an approach to causation that is very effective in describing (marketing) phenomena that act as enabling or inhibiting agents, rather than as primary causes. Consider a health care marketing project to study the effects of self-monitoring diaries, biweekly telephone reminders, and signed three-month contracts on adherence to preventive medicine regimens (Blair and Zinkhan 1984). The project was conducted as an experiment, and the three treatment variables are taken as causes (in the standard language of science). Yet they really were not conceived as causes in any sense of making patients adhere to regimens. Rather, the logic behind the experiment was that patients wanted to adhere to their regimens, and that their desire was the generative mechanism producing adherence. The belief was that decay of the initial message prescribing the program, the absence of a feedback mechanism measuring adherence, and the unbounded time over which compliance was requested acted as liabilities to the generative mechanism (in the terminology of scientific realism). The experimental treatments were seen as ways to alleviate those liabilities. Thus, the kinds of explanations offered by scientific realism seem to match rather well with the problems encountered in practical marketing research.

Implications for Marketing

There is more than one definition of science and, depending on the definition, marketing may or may not be a science. For example, marketing may not be accepted as a science by the community at large because it is viewed as advocating industry positions rather than pursuing knowledge from other perspectives (e.g., the perspectives of other stakeholder groups such as consumers, employees, or government regulators). As a result, marketing may not achieve “scientific” status because of the lack of societal consensus.

However, scientific realism posits another definition of science that marketing, as a discipline, may be closer to achieving. As articulated by Toulmin (1972), each scientific discipline generates its own rational criteria to determine whether theory will be ac-
cepted or rejected. To the extent that marketers can agree on those criteria, marketing may be a science. Nonetheless, we would also like to have something to show for our efforts in terms of knowledge we have gained or problems we can solve by applying our rational scientific rules and criteria.

One research direction that scientific realism suggests involves model building. Under the standard view of science, the term “model building” can have several meanings (Manicas and Secord 1983). Sometimes a model is taken to be a representation of real mechanisms; other times a model is understood as being purely mathematical or as being a “convenient fiction” (Achinstein 1969). Various models are compared by their ability to predict. From the realist perspective, models are real. They attempt to capture causal structures and generative mechanisms but, despite being real, they are still out of phase with reality. Importantly, competing models are compared according to their ability to explain. These models are only as good as the theory behind them. As prescribed by scientific realism, the outputs from models are also appropriate realms for scientific inquiry as the investigator proceeds to explain the model and its functioning.

Theory-based model building was popular among marketers in the 1960s and produced such results as the Howard-Sheth model (1969). Since that time, however, interest in such activities has declined, largely because it is difficult to operationalize and test such comprehensive models in marketing. Now there seems to be a predominance of studies examining one-to-one relationships in partially closed settings, but the logic outlined here suggests that marketers should consider returning to the task of comprehensive model building. Econometrics or computer simulation (among other methods) provides a set of tools that may be useful for the construction of such comprehensive structural models.

The scientific realist perspective emphasizes the importance of theory in scientific investigation. Identification of structures and their dynamics can be accomplished only by the multilevel application of imaginative theory that simultaneously guides observation, analysis, and experiment (Manicas and Secord 1983). Too often in marketing we undertake research projects to investigate the relationship between isolated variables and we do not make an attempt to integrate our findings into an overall framework. If we are to advance marketing knowledge, we must make our theories and models explicit and we must carry out integrated research programs with an aim to discover underlying causal structures and generative mechanisms. We need theories that really explain, rather than merely describe.

In summary, we feel that Hunt has performed an important service by raising the possibility of “marketing truths.” However, because of the transient nature of marketing phenomena, we do not believe that marketing truths (as outlined by Hunt) have been or will be discovered. To counter, we briefly describe an alternative view of scientific realism that adopts insights from critical relativism and provides a more realistic blueprint for the possibility of a marketing science.

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