

Continuing Challenges to Scholarly Research in Marketing

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This response to Professor Gaski's commentary first clarifies the editorial background for the development of the set of Journal of Public Policy & Marketing essays titled "The Sages Speak," which appeared in the Spring 2005 issue. It then goes on to discuss three related issues: (1) the unrest about marketing scholarship that is currently gripping the academy, (2) the need for inclusion of an aggregate perspective in the official American Marketing Association definition of the field of marketing, and (3) the risks of an overreliance on a philosophy of "consequentialism" for the field.

Having served as *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing's* (JPP&M's) special issue editor for the Spring 2005 issue and having invited the 12 essays in "The Sages Speak" section, I am pleased that they have received attention and have sparked interested commentary. To clarify the time line, Elizabeth Moore and I published our lengthy article, "Scholarly Research in Marketing: Exploring the '4 Eras' of Thought Development" in the fall 2003 issue of JPP&M. We received many comments, constructive suggestions, and other feedback from research leaders, and I thought that it would be especially useful to structure the opportunity for some of the most experienced academics in marketing to share their views in a set of essays. I first asked each essayist to read and review the "4 Eras" article.¹ I then encouraged them to address any topics of interest to them, subject only to a space constraint. Among the options I suggested were (1) additional clarification of *historical developments* in marketing thought, emphasizing useful perspectives that are not generally available; (2) comments on the *current state of the academic field of marketing*, including how well key institutional entities (e.g., journals, associations, conferences, "B" schools, doctoral programs) are performing in terms of thought development; (3) comments on the *role of the societal domain* with respect to marketing thought; and (4) any further personal observations on *past, present, or future developments*. As is evident from the set of essays, different writers chose different topics and approaches. I greatly appreciate the time and effort the sages put into their pieces, and I learned a great deal while reading the wide range of views about the field.

With respect to Professor Gaski's (2007) commentary, I have no doubt that Professors Holbrook, McAlister, and Sheth and Sisodia will speak for themselves. Embedded in

¹Readers interested in consulting this article can download it from <http://www.marketingpower.com/content18995C5618.php>.

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this discussion, however, are several critical issues that I believe require continuing attention and discourse within the college of marketing and about which I have registered concern on previous occasions (e.g., Wilkie 1981, 2002, 2005, 2006; Wilkie and Moore 1997, 2006).

Scholarly Research Is the Focus, and Considerable Unrest Grips the Academy

As a background perspective, in my view, the academy of marketing needs its own identity in certain discussions; we need to be specific in our referents when analyzing our field. When discussing "Marketing," we often implicitly equate marketing practice and marketing academics, as if the problems, opportunities, and issues are equivalent in these spheres. Although the two indeed have a symbiotic relationship, there are also occasions for which issues, perspectives, and behaviors should be sharply distinct. The "4 Eras" article and "The Sages Speak" essays were specifically focused on scholarship in marketing, which is linked closely to research in marketing academia.

Moreover, it seems clear that concern with recent paths and performance in the academic sphere has reached high levels. In this regard, it is significant to note that the 12 Sages essays are but one collective source of concerns. Within just the past year, two books and an additional set of essays in a leading journal have been published and a redirecting initiative in a major academic association has been launched. Sheth and Sisodia's (2006) *Does Marketing Need Reform?* is illuminating reading in this regard. It contains 40 provocative essays by marketing thought leaders expressing a range of concerns and proposals. Lusch and Vargo's (2006) *Toward a Service-Dominated Logic of Marketing: Dialog, Debate and Directions* contains another 32 essays by marketing thought leaders addressing issues of the essence and direction of the field. If this were not sufficient, the October 2005 issue of *Journal of Marketing* provides 11 additional essays by thought leaders in a section appropriately titled "Marketing Renaissance: Opportunities and Imperatives for Improving Marketing Thought, Practice, and Infrastructure." In a completely distinct sphere, the Association for Consumer Research has recently announced its "Transformative Consumer Research" task force report

and initiative, which is intended to remind members of a key purpose of the original Association for Consumer Research and to direct research activity toward utility in improving consumers' lives. (These are just the examples that come to mind; there may be others as well.) In summary, it is clear that many thought leaders are concerned about recent trends, with a special concern that central tenets of marketing academia are being lost.

Is There Any Need for an Aggregate Perspective in the Field of Marketing?

This was a guiding question behind the research that Elizabeth Moore and I did for the "4 Eras" project, and we addressed it in depth therein. The modern conceptions of marketing are really not aggregate in nature; they are centered on individual managers, firms, or consumers. As a result, I believe that we likely do not possess the best mental frameworks to address some of the major problems confronting scholarship in the field. I direct the field's attention to the concept of an "aggregate marketing system" organizing framework from which we might better consider the field of marketing as a whole (Wilkie and Moore 1999).²

Unfortunately, events since the publication of the "4 Eras" article have enhanced pressures regarding aggregate perspectives. Specifically, the American Marketing Association (AMA) issued its new definition of marketing in 2004, and Professor Gaski's (2007, p. 128) commentary notes the following: "Scientific study of marketing pertains intrinsically to a managerial function ('Marketing is an organizational function and a set of processes'; see the official AMA definition at <http://www.marketingpower.com/mg-dictionary-view1862.php>)."

This type of reliance on the official definition underscores its significance for the body of thought. However, before relying completely on it, it is worthwhile to recognize that the new definition has already received heavy criticism, has been the subject of at least two large and critical sessions at national AMA conferences, and appears to be a good candidate for revision or replacement in the near future.

Deficiencies of the New AMA Definition of Marketing

Just recently the AMA convened a process (under Professor Robert Lusch) to update the definition of marketing. The first formal AMA definition was developed in 1935 and was retained for 50 years. It was modified in 1985 and again in 2004.³ Here are the three definitions:

[Marketing is] the performance of business activities that direct the flow of goods and services from producers to consumers. (1935)

[Marketing is] the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion, and distribution of ideas, goods, and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational objectives. (1985)

[Marketing is] an organizational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and its stakeholders. (2004)

An examination of the direction of these definitions reveals a narrowing of focus over time, in accord with the historical trends discussed at length in the "4 Eras" article. Notice that until 1985, the field's definition of marketing was pluralistic and thus easily translatable to more aggregated issues, such as competition, system performance, and contributions to consumer welfare. The 1985 change firmly turned focus toward the manager's tasks as embodied in the four Ps (notably, by focusing on the concept of mutually satisfactory exchanges, the 1985 definition also implicitly defined marketing to be in the best interests of consumers). Overall, this change made it more difficult to adopt aggregate perspectives on the field. The new 2004 definition is much in the same spirit, with a singular focus on the individual organization acting alone.

To be clear about my personal position, I agree that the conception of marketing as a strategic and tactical activity undertaken within individual organizations is a most reasonable view for marketing managers to take and for academics to use when appropriate. However, to me, this appears to be a definition of "marketing management," not of the entire field of marketing. Moreover, my concern is that it may be becoming such a dominant conception of our field that it is foreclosing other directions for thought development.

In essence, a sole focus on the firm seems to be incomplete, insofar as some broader questions will go unanswered precisely because the managerial perspective within a firm does not ever need to consider these questions while striving to act only in that firm's own interest. As I have discussed elsewhere (e.g., Wilkie 1994, 2005; Wilkie and Moore 2006), a narrow focus on within-firm processes brings several threats to the capacity to adopt rich perspectives on the field of marketing. These include difficulties in (1) assessing the value of a program's objectives and impacts, (2) comprehending the nature of markets and competition within them, (3) understanding certain elements of consumer behavior, (4) appropriately addressing significant societal and public policy issues, (5) reflecting key organizational activities that are not controlled by the marketing function, and (6) appreciating some rich topics that merit investigations by marketing scholars.

In general, I am suggesting that the impacts marketing is having on the world are a legitimate concern for scholarship in our field. Much of this is related to the fact that there are multiple marketers acting in parallel and in competition with one another, and this role needs to be formally recognized in conceptions of the nature of scholarship in marketing, as through an aggregated perspective of marketing systems in society.

Finally, I should mention that this line of thinking has helped me realize how interesting it is that "the marketing concept" was introduced just at the beginning of the shift to the managerial view of the field and has been a bulwark in characterizing marketing ever since. Because the field's mission has been overtly characterized as one of meeting the needs of customers, it has not been necessary to consider

²Interested readers can directly download the article "Marketing's Contributions to Society" (Wilkie and Moore 1999) from <http://web2.business.nd.edu/Faculty/wilkie.html>.

³An informative article (Keefe 2004) in *Marketing News* is worth consulting for background.

what the huge numbers of marketers who are working in parallel day after day are undertaking in terms of actually meeting consumers' wants and needs. Again, this would seem to be a much more reasonable task if marketing were conceptualized in a larger, systemic sense.

For the immediate future, then, it is important to strive to have the AMA modify its recent definition to recognize the larger impacts of marketing on the world. I believe that this is likely to happen, and if it does, it will represent a major recovery for scholarship on marketing in society.

A Positive Update on Publication Potentials

Another development, this one positive, has also occurred since the publication of the "4 Eras" article. In Elizabeth Moore and my discussion of the impacts of globalization on recent marketing thought, we report the following:

The picture with respect to authorship opportunities is quite different but interesting nonetheless. Apart from *JPP&M* (whose number of articles per year roughly doubled across this period because of the move from one to two issues per year), *the publication opportunities in the four most prestigious U.S. marketing journals have basically not changed during this time: The number of contributions per year is about the same today as it was in 1986 and 1987.* (Wilkie and Moore 2003, p. 134)

Although we did not further emphasize this point, Leigh McAlister (2005) took note about what this represented in terms of the reality of publication in leading journals for the rapidly increasing body of marketing academics. Her "Sages Speak" essay discussed this finding briefly and recommended that the number of pages in the leading journals be expanded to reflect the increased supply of research being done.⁴ Behind the scenes, moreover, Leigh used her influence as executive director of the Marketing Science Institute to push for such changes at *Journal of Marketing* and *Journal of Marketing Research*, and my understanding is that she has been successful in this project. Thus, together with the initiatives of Dawn Iacobucci and now John Deighton at *Journal Consumer Research* to expand the publications in that journal, the structural impediments to publication in the top journals will have been eased somewhat. (My kudos to Leigh for her efforts on behalf of thought development!)

Closing Thoughts: On Holbrook and Consequentialism

Virtually everything in marketing journals is about facts, theories, methods, and applications. However, behind this is the living reality of our academic lives and pursuits. Collectively, we are the College of Marketing. Individually, we are

talented people who have invested heavily to be in a position to contribute to knowledge. Several years ago, I ruminated on this point in a *Journal of Marketing* essay, using as an illustration a special session at an AMA conference in which marketing professors were being pictured as not having much useful input to directions for business education. My summary take was as follows:

Somehow in these discussions, "the faculty" sounds more and more to be a group of recalcitrant employees who don't quite "get it," rather than highly intelligent, conscientious, and accomplished professionals pursuing the highest goals of the academy. (Wilkie 2002, p. 147)

I believe that Professor Gaski's (2007) commentary makes some serious and useful points about the role of marketing education. However, the spirit of Professor Holbrook's (2005) positions also strongly resonates. In this regard, it may be instructive for all to consider the insights offered by the distinguished management educator James March (1996) on the occasion of his retirement from the Stanford Business School. March began his talk by characterizing the guiding rationale for modern business schools (as with the social sciences in general) as in the "consequentialist" tradition. Here, "action is seen as choice, and choice is seen as driven by anticipations, incentives, and desires" (p. 12). Although March recognized that this is a powerful and useful perspective, he also pointedly observed that John Stuart Mill once described Jeremy Bentham, the father of modern consequentialism, as having all "the completeness of a limited man." Similarly, March pointed out that extending a marketplace metaphor to business schools leads to the following situation:

The problems of business schools are pictured as problems of creating educational programs (or public relations activities) that satisfy the wishes of customers and patrons rich enough to sustain them.... But [this] fails to capture the fundamental nature of the educational soul.... A university is only incidentally a market. It is more essentially a temple—a temple dedicated to knowledge and a human spirit of inquiry. It is a place where learning and scholarship are revered, not primarily for what they contribute to personal or social well-being but for the vision of humanity that they symbolize, sustain, and pass on.... In order to sustain the temple of education, we probably need to rescue it from those deans, donors, faculty, and students who respond to incentives and calculate consequences and restore it to those who respond to senses of themselves and their callings. (p. 13)

March then offered a contrast to the consequentialist tradition—one not found much in business schools and one that should not replace consequentialism, but one to be considered nonetheless. It is based on a motivation to "fulfill the obligations of personal and social identities and senses of self" (p. 13). Reflecting this driving force are people

who support and pursue knowledge and learning because they represent a proper life, who read books not because they are relevant to their jobs but because they are not, who do research not in order to secure their reputations or improve the world but in order to honor scholarship. (p. 13)

In closing, I believe that this is a vision that impels many of us. It is a vision that cannot replace consequentialism entirely, but it is one that merits consideration and respect within the halls of marketing academe.

⁴In his "Sage Speak" essay, Bob Peterson (2005, p. 129) reported an additional finding using a longer time frame in his analysis of the structure of marketing scholarship: "As an aside, a comparison of the contents of the three journals [*Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, and *Journal of Consumer Research*] in 1978 and 2003 reveals that the total number of reviewed articles and notes ... decreased 27%."

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