
On Rethinking Marketing: Our Discipline, Our Practice, Our Methods

Discipline,
Practice and
Methods

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In the early 1980s, Day and Wensley[1] proposed that the marketing discipline should adopt a more strategic orientation and urged the acceptance of a set of research priorities which emphasized marketing's role in the development of corporate sustainable competitive advantage. In his decade-later retrospective on marketing's lack of contribution to the current "strategy dialogue", Day[2, p. 328] laments: "Within academic circles, the contribution of marketing... to the development, testing, and dissemination of strategy theories and concepts has been marginalized during the past decade". Indeed, he points out that "Academics outside of marketing pay little attention to marketing literature or theory". Moreover, he believes "The prognosis for marketing – based on the present trend and past behaviour of other disciplines – is not encouraging". *Why has marketing made so few original contributions to the "strategy dialogue" over the last decade?*

Also over the last decade, marketing practice has increasingly turned towards alliances, partnerships, and other forms of relationship marketing, whose success requires effective co-operation. Yet, most academic theories and empirical works on marketing relationships have focused on power and conflict, which, as Young and Wilkinson[3, p. 109] note, characterize "sick rather than healthy relationships". *Why has marketing focused on dysfunctional relationships?*

Finally, numerous marketers have pointed out over the last decade that research using qualitative methods could usefully complement our quantitative analyses. I have never heard anyone dispute the potential value of qualitative research – but qualitative works in marketing are few. *Why are our major journals almost exclusively devoted to studies using quantitative methods?*

If we are to "rethink marketing", I suggest starting with these three questions: Why has our discipline made so few original contributions to the strategy dialogue? Why have we focused on dysfunctional, rather than functional, relationships, i.e. on unsuccessful marketing practice, rather than successful practice? Why do qualitative studies lack acceptance in marketing?

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Rethinking Our Discipline

Why has marketing made so few original contributions to the strategy dialogue? Day[2] offers three reasons:

- (1) the pre-emption by other fields of frameworks and concepts developed by marketing in the 1950s and 1960s;
- (2) marketing's shift in the 1980s towards research addressing "micro" issues;
- (3) marketing's tendency to stay too long with, in his words, "outmoded characterizations" of strategy and process issues.

Do these three reasons satisfactorily answer Day's question?

It is certainly true, as pointed out by Day[2] and specifically detailed by Priem[4], that the strategy literature – especially industrial organization economics – has borrowed from marketing such concepts and frameworks as segmentation, positioning and diffusion processes. Moreover it is also true that such borrowing often goes unacknowledged. (Porter's[5] influential work on sustainable competitive advantage contains not a single reference to Alderson's[6,7] seminal work on competition for differential advantage.) Nonetheless, the fact that the strategy literature borrows concepts and frameworks developed by marketing in the 1950s and 1960s does not explain why marketing's literature in the 1980s does not make original contributions to the strategy dialogue. It is also true that marketing has an extensive literature on "micro" issues at the brand and product level. But this cannot explain why our discipline does not also address longer term, strategic issues. Moreover, the fact that marketing has had a tendency to stay too long with, in Day's terms, "outmoded characterizations" of strategy processes simply begs the question of why marketing "stays too long". In short, Day's three proposed explanations really do not explain our discipline's failure to make original contributions to the strategy dialogue. To explain this failure, I suggest, requires examining how our literature is shaped.

Marketing's academic literature, like that of all disciplines, is shaped by two primary factors: (1) the research interests and skills of marketing faculty and (2) the norms employed by journal reviewers and editors in the peer review process. Since it seems unlikely that strategic issues would be considered uninteresting or unimportant to many marketing researchers or that marketers lack the skills to focus on strategy, I suggest that the absence of original contributions to the strategy dialogue can best be explained by, as I worded it in "Objectivity in Marketing Theory and Research"[8], the "norms that control assertion in marketing research".

As a result of being an author, a reviewer, a section editor, a proceedings editor, and a journal editor, I have read the reviews of well over a thousand manuscripts for both marketing and non-marketing journals (such reviews being written by both marketing and non-marketing referees). These reviews reflect the norms of several disciplines' "gatekeepers". Consistent with non-marketing reviewers and non-marketing journals, marketing referees (quite appropriately) want to know the nature and extent of a manuscript's

contribution to marketing's literature. However, quite inconsistent with non-marketing reviewers and non-marketing journals, marketing reviewers react quite negatively when a manuscript offers a genuinely original contribution to knowledge. Criticisms such as "where is the precedent?" and "where is the authority?" are, in my experience, disproportionately prominent in reviews by marketing referees. Indeed, marketing authors have been known to cite non-marketing researchers for authority (using locations such as "drawn from...") even when, strictly speaking, the marketing author has made an original non-marketing contribution. Marketers making genuinely original contributions to knowledge do so at their peril.

Why are original contributions to knowledge punished by marketing journal referees? How did it come to pass that original ideas by marketing authors are, for all intents and purposes, outlawed by our discipline's norms? I suggest that this sorrowful situation has come about, at least in part, as a result of marketers defining our discipline as an applied discipline. That is, the notion that marketing is an applied discipline implies for many journal reviewers that marketing's "job" is to take concepts, frameworks and theories from other "more basic" disciplines and then apply them to marketing. Stated succinctly, the norm is "new to marketing, but not new elsewhere". With such a norm, the absence of original contributions to the strategy dialogue (or any other dialogue) is unsurprising. Also unsurprising is the lack of attention that our journals receive from non-marketing academics. If original contributions to knowledge are systematically screened from our literature, only those (few) non-marketing academics who have an interest in other disciplines' theories applied in marketing will pay attention to our literature.

If we wish to broaden the impact of marketing's literature by making original contributions to knowledge, we need to rethink the notion that marketing is an applied discipline.

Rethinking Marketing Practice

Why has marketing focused on relationships that are dysfunctional and unsuccessful, rather than functional and successful? The decade of the 1980s saw marketing practice shift dramatically towards relationship marketing, which can be defined as all marketing activities directed towards establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges[9]. Global competition today should no longer be viewed as, for example, being between Ford, Nissan and Fiat. Rather, global competition is between Ford and its partners versus Nissan and its partners and Fiat and its partners. These partners include parts suppliers, marketing research suppliers, advertising agencies, employees, financial institutions, governmental agencies and distributors. In short, global competition is "network" competition[10]. In network competition, the long-term success of each organization is greatly impacted by the success of the overall network. Why do some partnerships or alliances succeed and others fail? Consider the case of the Ford-Mazda strategic alliance.

The alliance between Ford and Mazda began with Ford's purchase of 25 per cent of Mazda in 1979[11]. Since that time, Mazda-aided Ford products include

the Escort, Festiva, Probe and Explorer, whereas Ford-aided Mazdas include the MX-6, 323, Protege and Navaho. In these ventures, Ford contributed financing, as well as marketing, product-testing electronic systems, and styling expertise, whereas Mazda contributed their manufacturing and product development knowhow[12]. Unlike the General Motors-Daewoo, Chrysler-Mitsubishi, and Fiat-Nissan alliances, Ford-Mazda is widely acknowledged to be considered by both sides – and independent observers – as highly successful. Why?

Complementary resources, I suggest, cannot explain the Ford-Mazda success, because the partners in the failed (or at least less successful) alliances also “brought to the table” complementary resources which had the potential for synergism. Nor can cultural factors separate failure from success – all the auto alliances were cross-cultural. Instead, the successful relationship between Ford and Mazda, two competitors, can be attributed to certain characteristics of their alliance which have brought about effective co-operation. First, every project they co-operate on must be perceived by both parties to be mutually beneficial. Senior management makes sure that there is an overall balance of benefits. Second, top management has set the “tone” of the relationship by letting it be known in no uncertain terms that middle-level managers are *expected* to co-operate with their counterparts. Third, there are open lines of communication with frequent face-to-face meetings. For example, the senior management strategy group, comprised of top executives of both Ford and Mazda, meet for three days every eight months to discuss present and future projects. (Interestingly, the third day of the meeting is always reserved for informal “getting to know each other” activities.) As a result of these policies and actions, each party perceives the other as being committed to the relationship and, over the years, each has come to trust the other. Consequently, they effectively co-operate.

If marketing practice has been increasingly turning towards relationship marketing, and if relationship marketing success requires effective co-operation engendered by relationship commitment and trust, and if such factors as power, conflict and opportunistic behaviour are attributes of relationship marketing failures, why have our discipline’s theories and empirical studies been overwhelmingly focused on power, conflict and opportunism? The answer, traces again – at least in part – to the belief that “marketing is an *applied* discipline”.

As pointed out by Alderson[7, p. 239] almost three decades ago, although “economists speak of competitive theory, or pure and perfect competition, there is no corresponding development of co-operative theory, no concepts of pure and perfect co-operation”. Indeed, economic theory is highly suspicious of co-operation among firms, viewing it as collusion. Thus, marketing cannot look to economics for a worthwhile theory of co-operation. Nor can marketing look to political science. Indeed, power and conflict are key constructs underlying the very political economy framework which has for years guided inquiry into marketing relationships. Since marketing’s “job” is to apply the theories of other disciplines to marketing phenomena – according to the “applied discipline” notion – and since no discipline has developed a general theory of co-operation,

is it any wonder that the marketing discipline's theories and empirical studies have failed to keep up with relationship marketing practice?

If we wish even to keep up with marketing practice – let alone lead it – we need to rethink our theories and empirical studies of marketing practice.

Rethinking Our Research Methods

Why are our major journals devoted almost exclusively to studies using quantitative methods?

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Answering this question requires us to explore what might be called the “standard argument for qualitative methods”. Versions of this argument, I suggest, have been used by scores of marketing academics to justify their proffered, qualitative, “ways of knowing”. The argument can be succinctly summarized in six assertions:

- (1) All disciplines have paradigms and, because paradigms are incommensurable, objective choice between paradigms is impossible.
- (2) There is one paradigm which is dominant in marketing.
- (3) The dominant paradigm in marketing is positivism (logical positivism or logical empiricism), which implies the use of quantitative methods, the adoption of realism, the search for causality, and the assumption of determinism.
- (4) As a result of the writings of Kuhn, Hanson and Feyerabend, among others, by the 1970s the philosophy of science had abandoned positivism and, therefore, marketing's dominant paradigm is discredited or passé.
- (5) Upon the abandonment of positivism, the philosophy of science embraced relativism, constructionism and subjectivism.
- (6) Therefore, marketing should accept qualitative methods (e.g. naturalistic inquiry, humanistic inquiry, historicism, ethnography, postmodernism, critical theory, semiotics, semiology, deconstructionism, Marxism and feminism) because (a) marketing's dominant paradigm has been discredited and (b) qualitative methods embrace the “new” philosophy of science, i.e. relativism, constructionism and subjectivism.

The problem with the standard argument for qualitative methods is that, of the five premisses, four (1,2,3, and 5) are false and the remaining one (4) is misleading. As a result, the argument degenerates into obfuscation, obscurantism and what is now referred to as “postmodernist epistobabble”[13]. In this short space, I can only sketch the objections to the five premisses and point the reader towards literature discussing the objections in detail.

Premiss one. Writers use the term “paradigm” in numerous ways. Kuhn, himself, used the term in 21 different ways[14]. The most common conception in today's philosophy of science is that a paradigm consists of:

- a knowledge content, e.g. a theory and its concepts;
- a methodology, i.e. a procedure by which knowledge is to be generated;
- an epistemology, i.e. a set of criteria for evaluating knowledge claims.

For Kuhn[14, p. 108], the three components constitute a unified, interdependent whole: in learning a paradigm the scientist acquires theory, methods and standards together, usually in an inextricable mixture. Thus construed, disciplines probably have “paradigms”. However, no interpretation of paradigm “incommensurability” has ever been put forth which can justify the claim that choice between genuinely rival paradigms, i.e. paradigms which make conflicting claims, cannot be made on objective grounds[15]. The conclusion of Hintikka[16] is typical: “The frequent arguments that strive to use the absolute or relative incommensurability of scientific theories as a reason for thinking that they are inaccessible to purely scientific (rational) comparisons are simply fallacious”. Premiss one is false.

Premiss two. Laudan[17, p. 74] reviews the history of science and finds the complete absence of dominant paradigms: “Virtually every major period in the history of science is characterized both by the coexistence of numerous competing paradigms, with none exerting hegemony over the field, and by the persistent and continuous manner in which the foundational assumptions of every paradigm are debated with the scientific community”. Just as it is in other disciplines, there is no dominant paradigm in marketing[18]. In fact, marketing has historically been an extraordinarily open discipline, borrowing – often indiscriminately – methods, theories and concepts from everywhere. Premiss two is false.

Premiss three. Positivism does not imply quantitative methods[19]; nor does it imply scientific realism[20]; nor does it imply that researchers should search for causal relations[20]; nor does positivism assume that theories must be deterministic[21]. If positivism does not imply these things, what does it imply? In order to provide a philosophy that, among other things, could accommodate the indeterminacy of quantum mechanics (the “Copenhagen interpretation”), the positivists:

- adopted formal logic as a methodology for studying science;
- rejected the scientific realist view that unobservable concepts can be *real*;
- believed that science should avoid metaphysical concepts and rely exclusively on observables;
- viewed “cause” as an unobservable, metaphysical concept that is at best superfluous to science and at worst a source of great mischief;
- believed that, since science should restrict itself to “knowledge with certainty”, inductive reasoning is therefore impermissible, i.e. the positivists adopted Humean scepticism.

Premiss three is false.

Premiss four. Many of the tenets of positivism have, indeed, been discredited, but the influence of Kuhn, Hanson and Feyerabend has been exaggerated. Moreover, the attacks on “positivistic science” are often just an attack on science, *per se*. As Levin[22, pp. 63-4] puts it:

Logical positivism was the most self-critical movement in the history of philosophy. Every major objection to positivism was proposed by positivists themselves or associates on work on problems set by positivism, all in the scientific spirit of seeking truth. It is particularly unfortunate that the technical failure of particular positivist doctrines is so often used...to cover an attack on clarity and science itself.

Premiss four is misleading.

Premiss five. Although philosophy of science did flirt with the relativism, constructionism and subjectivism of Kuhn and Feyerabend in the 1960s, by the 1970s most philosophers of science had adopted some version of scientific realism, even though, as Lepin[23, p.1] puts it, "Scientific realism is a majority position whose advocates are so divided as to appear in a minority". To understand why philosophy of science turned away from relativism, constructionism and subjectivism, we need to explore briefly each of these "isms".

"Relativism" is a term of art from philosophy. All genuine forms of relativism have two theses: (1) the relativity thesis that something is relative to something else and (2) the non-evaluation thesis that there are no objective standards for evaluating *across* the various kinds of "something else"[24]. Five forms of relativism are especially significant:

- (1) *Cultural relativism* holds that (a) the elements embodied in a culture are relative to the norms of that culture and (b) there are no objective, neutral, or non-arbitrary criteria to evaluate cultural elements across different cultures.
- (2) *Ethical relativism* holds that (a) what is ethical can only be evaluated relative to some moral code held by an individual, group, society, or culture and (b) there are no objective, impartial, or non-arbitrary standards for evaluating different moral codes across individuals, groups, societies, or cultures.
- (3) *Rationality relativism* holds that (a) the canons of correct or rational reasoning are relative to individual cultures and (b) there are no objective, neutral, or non-arbitrary criteria to evaluate what is called "rational" across different cultures.
- (4) *Conceptual framework-relativism* holds that (a) knowledge claims are relative to conceptual frameworks (theories, paradigms, world views, or *Weltanschauungen*) and (b) knowledge claims cannot be evaluated objectively, impartially, or non-arbitrarily across competing conceptual frameworks.
- (5) *Constructionism* (alternatively spelled "constructivism") is the same thing as *reality relativism*, which holds that (a) what comes to be known as "reality" in science is constructed by individuals relative to their language (or group, social class, theory, paradigm, culture, world view, or *Weltanschauungen*) and (b) what comes to count as "reality" cannot be evaluated objectively, impartially, or non-arbitrarily across different

languages (or groups, etc.). Closely related to relativism, *subjectivism* is the thesis that there is something basic to the human condition – usually something about human perception and/or language – that categorically prevents objective knowledge about the world.

To understand why relativism, constructionism and subjectivism are minority views within the philosophy of science, consider how these “isms” would respond to the following questions: “Does the sun revolve around the earth or does the earth revolve around the sun?” Relativism answers: “First I must know whether you subscribe to the paradigm of Copernicus or Ptolemy, for these paradigms – like all paradigms – are incommensurable and, therefore, there is no truth to the matter independent of the paradigm you hold”. And subjectivism, with great exasperation, responds: “Because scientists see what their theories and paradigms tell them is there, the theory-ladenness of observation tells us that an objective answer to your query is impossible”. Question two: “Was Great Britain *right* in leading the drive in the nineteenth century to abolish slavery in cultures throughout the world”[25]? Relativism responds: “Since slavery is a cultural element that cannot be evaluated independently of the norms of the culture within which it exists, no judgement on this matter can be made – to apply one’s own norms elsewhere is simply cultural ethnocentrism”. Question three: “Should Great Britain work towards its abolition in the few remaining states, e.g. Mauritania[25], where slavery continues to exist?” Answer: “See response to previous question”. Question four: “Did the Holocaust occur?” Answer: “Since the Holocaust is a constructed reality[26, p. 84], just one of many multiple realities, the Holocaust’s occurrence or non-occurrence cannot be objectively appraised independent of the world view of a particular social grouping or culture”. Question five: “Is a culture that is tolerant of individuals from other cultures preferable to a culture that oppresses everyone outside the dominant culture?” Answer: “Although the predisposition towards tolerance is a cultural element which varies widely across different cultures, no judgement can be made across cultures as to the moral superiority of tolerant versus intolerant cultures”. Question six: “Should the academic discipline of marketing be open to the views of non-marketing academics?” Answer: “Although it is true that different academic disciplines differ in their relative openness to the views of outsiders, no judgement can be made across disciplines as to the relative desirability of such openness”.

It should be easy now to understand why relativism, constructionism and subjectivism are minority views in the philosophy of science. Relativism does not imply a constructively critical stance towards knowledge claims, nor does it imply acknowledging that the knowledge claims of science are fallible. Relativism implies nihilism – the belief that we can never have genuine knowledge about anything. Relativists, incoherently, know that no one else can ever know anything. Furthermore, relativism does not imply a tolerant stance towards outside ideas and other cultures; it implies indifference to the norm of tolerance. Moreover, relativism does not imply ethical sensitivity; it implies

ethical impotence. Finally, subjectivism does not caution science to work at minimizing bias; it maintains that the human condition makes the very ideas of objectivity to be a chimera. Therefore – like truth – it should be abandoned. In contrast, most scientists and philosophers of science not only adopt fallibilism and realism, but also hold the ideals of truth and objectivity in high regard. Modern philosophy of science recognizes that there is nothing in the nature of human perception, nothing in the nature of human language, nothing in the nature of “paradigms” that makes true theories and objective knowledge to be – in principle – impossible[8,27]. (The fact that each and every one of our theories may be wrong does not imply that they necessarily *must* be wrong.)

In conclusion, why have qualitative methods gained so little acceptance in marketing? A major reason, I suggest, is that many advocates of qualitative methods have justified their proffered “ways of knowing” by actually emphasizing their acceptance of relativism, constructionism and subjectivism. Because referees and journal readers do not have access to sources which would enable them independently to verify all the assertions in any given article, when researchers seek to publish their results they implicitly state: “Trust me”. However, if one truly believes that *all* research fails to “touch base” with some external world (i.e. all findings are equally paradigm-bound, world view encapsulated, incommensurable, subjective and researcher-constructed), then such a view licenses – for political, ideological, or egoistic purposes – any finding one wishes to report. Is it any wonder, then, that mainstream marketers have been reluctant to accept qualitative methods when their advocates have explicitly grounded them in relativism, constructionism and subjectivism? How could marketers trust the output of such research methods?

Since no research that is grounded in relativism, constructionism and subjectivism merits, or can merit, our trust, if we wish to broaden the acceptance of qualitative methods, we need to rethink their philosophical foundations.

Conclusion: An Agenda for Rethinking Marketing

How should marketing be rethought? Here, I can only sketch an agenda for rethinking our discipline, practice and research methods.

An Agenda for Our Discipline

If “marketing is an applied discipline” is pernicious in that it virtually outlaws original contributions to knowledge, how should we view our discipline? I suggest the following: marketing should be viewed as a university discipline which aspires to be a professional discipline and that, accordingly, has responsibilities:

- to society, for providing objective knowledge and technically competent, socially responsible, liberally educated graduates;

- to students, for providing an education which will enable them to get on the “socioeconomic career ladder” and prepare them for their roles as competent, responsible marketers and citizens;
- to marketing practice, for providing a continuing supply of competent, responsible entrants to the marketing profession and for providing new knowledge about both the micro and macro dimensions of marketing;
- to the academy, for upholding not only its mission of retailing, warehousing, and producing knowledge, but also its contract with society of objective knowledge for academic freedom and its core values of reason, evidence, openness and civility[28].

The preceding perspective on marketing recognizes that, although marketing practice has not been accorded professional status by society, marketing practitioners desire to be – and desire to be considered – professionals. Therefore, marketing academe should conduct itself accordingly. That is, we have responsibilities to four clients: society, students, marketing practice and the academy. In my judgement, marketing academe goes awry when it focuses on one or two clients, thereby excluding the others. For example, many marketing academics have been tempted to see themselves as responsible only for (1) turning out students who are technically competent in marketing and (2) conducting consulting research for marketing practitioners. I suggest such a perspective is misguided. If marketing practice is a profession, then technical competence is not enough – our graduates must comprehend their responsibilities to their own clients (and to society in general). If marketing is to be a university discipline, then we cannot content ourselves with just consulting research, i.e. just applying existing knowledge to current practitioner problems. Rather, we must adopt the university value system regarding the production of new knowledge – new knowledge for practitioners, for our students, for society, and for just knowing.

An Agenda for Rethinking Marketing Practice

If successful marketing practice requires marketers to be effective co-operators, marketing should work towards developing a theory of relationship marketing that focuses on effective co-operation. Key elements in any such theory, I suggest, would be relationship commitment and trust. Relationship commitment exists when an exchange partner believes that an ongoing relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it, i.e. the committed party believes the relationship is worth working on to ensure that it endures indefinitely. Trust exists when one has confidence in an exchange partner’s reliability and integrity[9]. When both parties in relational exchange are committed to the relationship and trust each other, the likelihood of effective co-operation is high, their network can then compete better in the global marketplace, and the likelihood of success for both parties is promoted. When either the parties are not committed to the

relationship or they do not trust each other, then effective co-operation is unlikely, their network will be disadvantaged, and success is in doubt.

Consider the complexity of modern strategic alliances. IBM, Toshiba, and Siemens – the world’s largest computer company and chipmaker, Japan’s second largest chipmaker, and Europe’s third largest semiconductor maker – has formed a \$1 billion strategic alliance to develop a 256-megabit chip[29]. At the same time, Toshiba has a separate alliance on memory chip technology with Motorola, which, in turn, is allied with IBM to develop ways to “print” ultra-dense circuits with X-rays. With this evolving spaghetti-like structure of alliances – all involving present or potential competitors – decisions as to what information should be either shared or kept confidential are crucial. Shared information promotes trust and co-operation, but information kept confidential promotes individual competitive advantage. Note that these decisions on sharing/withholding information lead to complex ethical issues for each alliance member. What are my rights as a partner? What are my responsibilities to my partners? Given the cross-cultural nature of the alliances, one might hope to find guidance in the international business ethics literature. But this literature is almost exclusively devoted to the ethical problems of multinational corporations in their “host” countries[30]. Ethical issues involving strategic alliances, especially transnational alliances, need to be documented, explicated and evaluated.

An Agenda for Rethinking Our Research Methods

How can qualitative methods take their place as useful complements to quantitative methods? I suggest that both a systematic rethinking of the philosophical foundations of qualitative methods and a major change in rhetoric would contribute greatly to bringing about the acceptance of qualitative methods. As long as mainstream marketing academics believe that advocates of qualitative methods embrace relativism, constructionism and subjectivism, mainstream marketers will – quite appropriately – be unreceptive to qualitative studies. As long as advocates of qualitative methods begin their analyses with the ritual of bashing what they misleadingly call “positivism” (i.e. science and/or quantitative methods), mainstream marketers will view such rhetoric as anti-reason, anti-evidence, anti-civility, and anti-science – in short, as untrustworthy. Progress requires both a civil, reasoned rhetoric and a rethought philosophy.

What kind of philosophy should advocates of qualitative methods embrace? I suggest that they give serious consideration to a philosophy encompassing critical pluralism and scientific realism. Critical pluralism is the view that, because both dogmatism and relativism are antithetical to science, we should both (1) adopt a tolerant, open posture towards new theories and methods and (2) subject all such theories and methods to critical scrutiny – nothing is, or can be, exempt[18]. Claims of “incommensurability” represent neither a state of nature to be accommodated, nor a problem to be addressed – they are a convenient catch-all for squelching debate or avoiding critical scrutiny.

Scientific realism is the view that:

- the world exists independently of its being perceived (classical realism);
- the job of science is to develop genuine knowledge about the world, even though such knowledge will never be known with certainty (fallibilistic realism);
- all knowledge claims must be critically evaluated and tested to determine the extent to which they do, or do not, truly represent, correspond, or are in accord with the world (critical realism);
- the long-term success of any scientific theory gives us reason to believe that something like the entities and structure postulated by that theory actually exists[31,32].

Note that a philosophy encompassing critical pluralism and scientific realism is open, without being anarchic; it is critical, without being nihilistic; it is tolerant, without being relativistic; and it is fallible, without being subjectivistic. Is adopting such a philosophy – or some other reasonable and well-reasoned philosophy – still a viable option for all forms of qualitative methods? Some forms may be so firmly committed to relativism, constructionism and subjectivism (and their attendants, dogmatic scepticism, nihilism, epistemological anarchism and ethical impotence) that rethinking their foundations in a positive manner will be difficult, if not impossible. Such methods may just have to be scuttled by their advocates and/or marginalized by mainstream marketers. However, it would appear that many forms of qualitative methods are not inherently relativist, constructionist or subjectivist – and therefore are potentially worthy of our trust. Given the contributions that such qualitative methods can potentially make to marketing, I urge their advocates, like the rest of us, to start rethinking. The time for obfuscation and obscurantism masquerading as profundity is past; the time for reasoned rethinking is just beginning.

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