

HISTORIOGRAPHIC PARADIGMS IN MARKETING

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ABSTRACT

History is art and science, poetry and journalism, explanation, narration, and criticism; it is epochal and parochial, holistic and individualistic, materialistic and spiritualistic, objective and subjective, factual and normative, practical and theoretical (Abelson 1963, p.167).... This paper describes different approaches to doing historical research - "scientific" and "traditional" paradigms - and illustrates each with examples from historical research in marketing.

INTRODUCTION

Historiography deals with the theory and methods of historical scholarship. Certainly, historians are not known to be methodological zealots. Indeed, one observer has complained that, "historians show an almost pathological disinclination to commit themselves to general statements about their work, its aims, subject matter, and methods" (Gallie 1964, p.53). However, when they do reflect on the nature of their work the issues of interest include sources and types of primary data, research method, and methodology.

Historical method refers to the techniques of data collection and analysis as well as the writing of history, whereas methodology refers to the philosophy of the research process - for example, assumptions about epistemology, ontology, and voluntarism / determinism. The distinction between primary and secondary historical data is not always clear, but is nonetheless an important one.

Occasionally important historical research is conducted exclusively from secondary sources. In general, however, significant historical work is rooted in primary sources. As one historian has observed, "study of [primary] sources alone does not make history, but without the study of sources there is no history" (Marwick 1971, p.171). Primary, original, source materials are derived directly from the persons or events one is studying. It is not, however, necessary that a source be unpublished in order to be considered primary. For example, contemporary (to the persons or events being studied) pamphlets and periodicals as well as other published materials can be primary sources depending on the nature of the subject being studied and the purpose for which the materials in question were created.

Until recently most discussions by marketing historians of historiography focused on the relatively simple issue of justification (Jones and Monieson 1990, p.271), that is, why historical research was needed and legitimate. In the last decade, however, the discussion of historiographic issues has grown, both in the number of works as well as the range of issues examined. Savitt (1980) presented a thorough discussion of scientific historical method and followed this with a presentation (1983) of some sources and types of primary historical data. Firat (1987) described methodological perspectives (termed "traditions") of historical research ranging from Annales (positivistic) to Hermeneutics (phenomenological). Fullerton (1987a) contributed a discussion of the philosophy of German Historicism, a specific methodological perspective on historical research. Fullerton (1987b) was also one of the first marketing historians to distinguish historical method from methodology and to write about the essential connection between the two. And finally, there have been archival essays including Pollay's (1988) which describes source collections such as the Smithsonian Collection on Advertising, the Museum of Modern Mythology, and the History of Advertising Archives.

One point which, to date, has not been made clear, is that there are different methodological perspectives, corresponding methods of historical research, and sources and types of primary data - paradigms¹, if you will - of historical research in marketing. These paradigms are summarized in Table 1 together with citations of examples from the marketing literature, some of which are discussed in this paper.

The purpose of this paper is to describe those different paradigms of historical research in marketing and to illustrate them with examples from the literature. In this way I hope to organize, clarify, and expand somewhat, the discussion to date of historiography by marketing historians. It is not my intent to oversimplify any individual scholar's work by rigidly casting it into a category of one approach or another. Also, I will attempt not to advocate one specific approach since I believe that a range of approaches is useful and necessary. Often the nature of the research question being asked will demand one specific approach to historical research. In any case, as the examples cited here will demonstrate, no one approach to historical research has a monopoly on interesting and important contributions to our understanding of marketing history and the history of marketing thought.

¹ For the purposes of this paper the term "paradigm" refers to a general research tradition or approach to doing research shared by a significant number of scholars.

Table 1

Historiographic Paradigms in Marketing

<u>Paradigm</u>	<u>Methodology</u>	<u>Method</u>	<u>Sources */Types of Primary Data</u>	<u>Examples *</u>
Scientific	Positivist epistemology	Quantification	Demographics Records of government, organizations, and firms	Savitt (1984)
	Realist ontology	Classification		Pollay (1985)
	Determinism	Sampling	Census reports	Gross and Sheth (1989)
		Hypothesis testing	Occupation listings	Zinn and Johnson (1990)
		Statistical analysis	Daybooks, ledgers	
Traditional	Idealist epistemology	Theory & prediction	Advertisements	Hollander (1986)
	Nominalist ontology	Imaginative reconstruction, creative interpretation	Personal & family records	Fullerton (1988)
	Voluntarism	Synthesis	Artifacts & photography	Nevett (1988)
		Descriptive, narrative, story-telling	Correspondence	Jones and Monieson (1990)
			Diaries	Witkowski (1989)
			Unpublished manuscripts	

* These are representative only.

METHODOLOGY - THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

All historical research proceeds implicitly or explicitly from certain assumptions about the nature of history and historical phenomena. Such assumptions are related to ontology, epistemology, and human nature (Burrell and Morgan 1979, p.1).

Ontology is concerned with the essence of reality, the nature of "being". It is concerned with whether reality is something objective and external to individuals or is the product of individual consciousness. The Realist position assumes that the world is made up of tangible, empirical entities which exist independent of an individual's appreciation of them. On the other hand, the Nominalist position assumes that reality is created through the process of interpretation. The difference between the two views is perhaps best captured by Collingwood's distinction between the "inside" and "outside" of an event (1956), where the outside is the result or achievement itself, the "external of acts", the ready-made statements by individuals from the past (p. 213). The inside of an event (the essence of reality for a Nominalist) is "that which can only be described in terms of thoughts" (p.251), not accessible to observation. Individuals make sense of the world and give it meaning by using names, concepts and labels (Winch 1974). In short, Nominalists believe that reality is socially constructed.

Epistemology deals with the nature and grounds of knowledge - how we come to understand and communicate knowledge to others. Positivist epistemology has as its objective the search for causal relations, regularities and even laws. Using a rhetoric which is formal, quantitative, and sometimes mathematical, these laws are used to explain and predict what happens in the world. This epistemology is most typically characterized by the natural sciences, although it has often in the past been held as a model for social science as well. In history the Positivist epistemological position is most closely associated with Carl Hempel's covering-law model which builds on the premise that to explain a historical event is to show that a statement asserting it is deducible from certain empirically testable universal laws, or can be inferred from probabilistic-statistical laws (Hempel 1974). On the other hand, an Idealist epistemology asserts that we can only understand human action by occupying the frame of reference of the participant in the action, and therefore, that knowledge is relativistic. Again, drawing from Collingwood, to explain history is to understand it from the inside through a process of re-enactment of past experience; knowledge is an interpolation or imaginative construction in the Kantian sense (1956, p.240).

Finally, in historical methodology there are assumptions about human nature - the relationship between actors and their environment. The deterministic view is that we are a product of our environment, that human behavior is conditioned by external circumstances (Nagel 1974). Alternatively, there is the view that

voluntarism or human free will plays a more creative role in explaining human behavior (Dray 1974, Berlin 1974).

The alternate positions described with respect to the philosophical issues above create two different methodological perspectives from which one can approach historical research in marketing. From each of these methodological perspectives follows a consistent set of research methods as well as types and sources of primary data. These alternate paradigms or approaches to historical research are referred to here as "scientific" and "traditional" (see Table 1).

SCIENTIFIC HISTORICAL RESEARCH

The methodological perspective which is consistent with Realism, Positivism, and a deterministic view of human nature characterizes a scientific paradigm in historical research. The purpose of scientific historical research is to develop generalizations, descriptions of cause and effect and predictions involving observable events. Therefore, scientific history attempts to classify and quantify historical data and to develop formal hypotheses which are tested using statistical analysis (Savitt 1980). In practice, simple, descriptive statistics are most often relied on. However, some of this research makes use of sampling and statistical inference (Aydelotte 1971, p.27). Indeed, some types of historical data (especially in economic history) are analyzed using regression analysis or cliometrics. Not surprisingly the most common types of primary sources used in scientific historical research are aggregate, numerical data such as demographic and economic statistics (Aydelotte 1971, chap. 4) which are most often found in government collections. However, nonquantitative, verbal or pictorial data such as advertisements can analyzed when transformed into quantitative form using techniques such as content analysis.

There are several recent, classic examples of scientific historical research in marketing. Savitt's (1984) historical study of the wheel of retailing opens by pointing out that the wheel is not a "law", but rather an "untested hypothesis" (p.43). He goes on to deduce three specific hypotheses from McNair's original "postulate" and tests these under the assumption that the findings could be generalized to other firms and even (albeit with less certainty) to other economies (p.44). The sources of data for this study included regional and local newspaper advertisements as well as company annual reports. Sampling data for 20 points in time over a ten year period, the number of products, brands, and suppliers (categories representing inventory assortment) were counted. The totals for each of those categories were then observed in order to determine their correlation with the hypotheses and conclusions were drawn from that comparison. In its methodological assumptions, methods of data collection and analysis, and type of data used, Savitt's study conforms closely to the scientific paradigm described

above.

Another representative example is Pollay's (1985) descriptive history of print advertising. The purpose in that study was to identify (inductively) trends and styles in advertising since "no generally accepted theory [existed] to provide any detailed hypotheses regarding when and how advertising could be expected to display maturation phases" (p.25). A random sample of 2,000 print ads covering eight decades was subjected to content analysis in order to transform the ads into quantitative data for categorization. The results of the analysis were reported in the form of frequency counts and percentages of print ads which identified fads and trends in tactics and styles. An interesting methodological comparison can also be made of Pollay's study with that of Gross and Sheth (1989) which also used content analysis. However, the latter study made use of more formal hypotheses and conducted simple regression analysis of the proportion of print ads containing time-oriented appeals against chronological distance from the year 1890. In that way the Gross and Sheth study is archtypical of scientific history.

A final example from the scientific historical paradigm is the study by Zinn and Johnson (1990) which uses content analysis of selected marketing publications covering half a century to identify the frequency of publications dealing with the commodity approach. Their objective was to determine if the commodity approach was obsolete. This hypothesis was rejected in favor of one which suggested a cyclical pattern of adoption which the authors demonstrated using a graphical presentation of their findings.

Summary

In each of the examples cited above there is an attempt to develop theory, or at least "generalizations of a middle level" (Aydelotte 1971, p.26). In most of these cases formal hypotheses are tested using statistical analysis. The process of quantification and classification used in these studies is an efficient and convenient method of analysis given the type of historical data studied here (large volumes of readily observable, easily categorized characteristics) and it would appear that such data are becoming increasingly available, especially for advertising history. Clearly however, there are some historical questions and issues which do not lend themselves to this scientific approach.

TRADITIONAL HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Opposite the scientific paradigm is a perspective which follows Nominalism, Idealism and a belief in voluntarism or free will. This perspective characterizes the traditional paradigm of historical research. The objective of traditional historical research is to discover and imaginatively reconstruct the lives

of people in other times and places (Dray 1974), to offer insights into possibilities and to inventory achievements (Tosh 1984). This type of research uses a descriptive or narrative form of expression. In practice there is no formal technique for data collection or analysis. The exact procedures vary with the type of evidence used. Its reasoning is best described as common sense and its form of expression is common language (Hexter 1971, p.275), or story-telling. Typically, the most common primary sources include collections of personal papers including materials such as correspondence, diaries, and unpublished manuscripts, anything containing verbal descriptions of events in the past.

An example of traditional historical research is Fullerton's (1988) study of the "Myth of the Production Era". Fullerton draws explicitly upon Collingwood's philosophy of historical Idealism (p.109) to recreate a contemporary conceptualization of marketing which existed much earlier (although in a less developed form) than commonly believed. Even in his development of a 'model' of marketing's evolution, Fullerton maintains an essentially antipositivist position since he rejects determinism and predictability in favor of a "complicated and fluid process involving simultaneous dramatic change, incremental change, and continuity" (p.121). Consistent with the types of primary data characteristic of the traditional paradigm, Fullerton uses a combination of unpublished manuals which describe the marketing practices of firms from the period being studied, descriptive scholarly publications from the same period, and secondary data in the form of histories which, in turn, draw from firm archives and trade papers (p.110). This evidence is critically evaluated by Fullerton in a "web of constructive imagination" (p.109).

A second example of traditional historical research is Nevett's (1988) biographical study of Thomas Barratt and the advertising for Pears Soap during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nevett focuses on Barratt as a distinct and profound contributor to the development of British advertising and examines the nature of those contributions which included unusual budgetary practices and progressive creative strategies. Nevett's study is a very good example of classic, descriptive, historical story-telling. It draws on autobiographical materials of Barratt's, newspaper stories from the period, secondary data from published histories, and, of course, Pears advertisements. In the interpretation of the latter Nevett's study stands in marked contrast to those of, say, Pollay, or Gross and Sheth (cited above).

Summary

The examples of traditional historical research described above each focus on developing a detailed historical account of unique events in order to interpret (or sometimes to reinterpret) situations from the past. The knowledge objectives, means of addressing them... the rhetoric and style as well as the types of

primary sources employed, differ considerably from those of the examples from the scientific paradigm discussed previously. However, a caveat given in the introduction to this paper bears repeating. There is a risk of oversimplifying the works cited here by categorizing them as being "scientific" or "traditional". Although some tend to represent one approach or the other, many historical studies fall somewhere in between these paradigms by integrating both approaches.

A good example is Hollander's (1986) critical assessment of the "standard chronology" involving the emergence of the marketing concept. Hollander sets up that standard chronology (where the marketing concept emerged during the 1950s or later) as a hypothesis (p.8) to test its fit with the reality of business practices from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. To do so, he examines frequencies of publications (p.11), reports and citations of companies, economic statistics, interpretations of publications from the period in question, and secondary historical sources, to reconstruct the character of marketing activities from the era. Quantitative and qualitative data are combined; the hypothesis is rejected - "the standard chronology does not fit" (p. 22), but the written presentation by the author is a narrative one in the style of traditional historical research. For these reasons this study is shown between the two paradigms listed in Table 1.

CONCLUSIONS

The philosophic assumptions which we bring to our research efforts inevitably influence our choice of methods, data sources, and consequently, even the topics we study. In order to fully understand alternative points of view it is important to understand the assumptions upon which these points of view are based. By reflecting in this way on the nature of historical research done, marketing historians can become better aware of the range of perspectives and approaches to historical research in marketing.

This final observation is admittedly made from my own traditional (as opposed to scientific) perspective. Unlike the broader field of marketing which has been dominated by a scientific paradigm for most of this century, historical research in marketing has no such orthodoxy. Perhaps that is because of this field's relatively recent development of a critical mass of work. In any case, it is a healthy condition, one which will help in developing a rich variety of interesting questions and answers.

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