Is Relevance Relevant?

Geoff Easton
Management School,
Lancaster University,
Lancaster,
Lancs LA1 4YX
Tel 44 1524 593917
E-mail G.Easton@lancaster.ac.uk

Introduction

In a plenary session at last year's IMP conference a number of academics, of which I was one, debated the issue of relevance. This was not the first time that such a debate has occurred and it is clear that it will not be the last since opinions are divided, often sharply. In this paper I attempt to examine the issue from a broader perspective than is usual in the IMP group or in the wider context of marketing as a discipline. However I will leave it until the final section to provide my answer to the question posed in the title. I also apologise to non-marketing academics who are part of the IMP paradigm. I accept wholeheartedly that ours is a multidisciplinary field and only concentrate on marketing because it is the discipline I would claim to know most about.

A dictionary definition points out that the word relevance derives from the French word "relief" and offers the synonyms "aiding, assisting or helping". Yet while we can recognise that this definition captures most of the meaning we attach to the word in general, it is not quite what we mean in terms of our academic debates. This point can be illustrated by noting that few academics would go as far as to say that we exist in order to help marketing managers. That notion sounds too proactive and close to consultancy. Relevance as used the academic context means, I would argue, something closer to "may help" or "has a potential for assisting". There is a feeling that what is being offered is being volunteered in a passive mode. Perhaps this is because we feel that we should remain outside the fray, aloof and objective in our ivory towers. Perhaps it is because of the trepidation that we might feel about offering help that may not help at all. This point will re-emerge later in the paper. For the moment however help or assistance will be used as synonyms for relevance.

The paper begins with a description of a simple model of decision making and then proceeds to deconstruct it in order to point out the problems and complexities associated with its use in practice. The paper ends with a personal view of where the IMP group might go from here in terms of the issue of relevance but then argues that, on reflection, it is unlikely to do so.

A Simple Prescriptive Model of Managerial Decision- Making

Helping a practitioner in any area of human experience first requires an understanding of what that practitioner does. One rather obvious answer is that to practice they must make decisions and what distinguishes among practitioners is not the process of decision making but its specific content. An example of a simple rational decision-making model is presented below.

Figure 1 Simple Rational Decision-Making Model
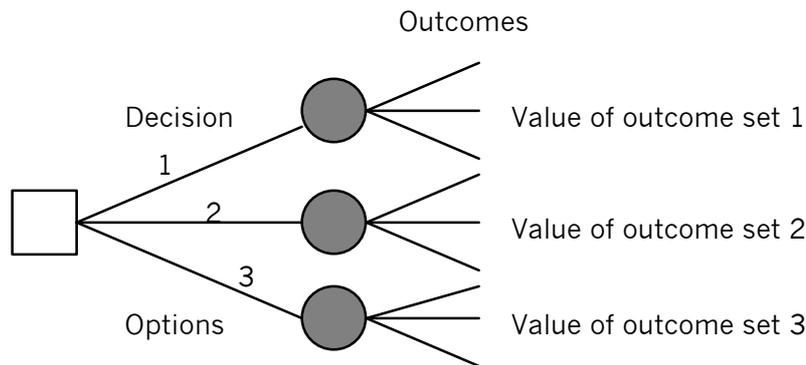
In this example, a practitioner is faced with 3 clear-cut options; each option is predicted to have a set of outcomes. The practitioner examines the predicted outcomes and decides which has the highest predicted value or meets his or her goals most closely and chooses that option. It is important to point out that this model is itself prescriptive. It suggests that this is how practitioners should make decisions. It is "rational" in two senses. Firstly it conforms to the rules of logic; secondly it makes assumptions about the nature of the way people are supposed to think that most western academics would accept (e.g. reviewing all the options).
In helping practitioners academics should be able to tell (or persuade) practitioners what it is that they should do. In terms of the model above, help may be given in terms of the types of decisions that have to be made and their structure. An example of the former is the famous 4Ps "model" which simply identifies a set of decisions that marketing managers take but should be aware that they take. In terms of the structure of any one decision academics can draw attention to the whole range of options that are open to the practitioner (e.g. alternative segmentation strategies).

However any prescription must contain a description or, more accurately, a prediction of the outcomes that will occur as a result of taking one option as against another. If you wish to say what *should be* as a result of a particular set of actions then you also have to predict, or guess, what *will happen*. The "should" element comes from the values and goals of the practitioner and will be discussed later in the paper. The prediction needs to be provided by the academic. Marketing prescriptions tend to take one of 3 forms; specific prescriptive models, general descriptive models and weak general prescriptions. Each will be discussed in turn.

Specific Prescriptive Models
Many of the papers in the Journal of Marketing Research and Marketing Science contain mathematical or statistical models based on data sets describing specific situations. Usually these models are concerned to provide optimising prescriptions where the novelty of the paper lies in the algorithms used and the descriptive / predictive data are secondary. A simple example would be a linear programming model of the media selection decision. The prescription provides an optimum allocation of the budget providing that the constraints and cost functions are linear, a condition not often met in practice. More sophisticated models often have to be designed specifically to deal with complexity in the decision making situation.

Where the context is one in which quantitative data are readily available (e.g. scanner data) then the reliability of the model is likely to be higher. This is important since models are based upon past data yet decisions are about the future and require predictions.

A different form of modelling, decision support systems, can be used where the data are difficult to obtain or unreliable (e.g. a new product launch). In this situation, practitioners subjective judgements about the outcomes of various actions are used to come to a decision based upon a prescriptive model designed by a management scientist.

Most of these models tend to work well in specific situations but do not readily lend themselves to generalisation. Either the prescriptive or the predictive elements or both may be simply too highly tailored to offer a standard solution in the case of any particular decision situation. Indeed the word is often used in management science to mean a specific exemplar of the application of a more general prescriptive or descriptive "theory".

General Descriptive Theories / Models

There are a number of rather general theories or models of various types that concentrate upon the description part of the decision model. In these cases the prescriptive element is less obvious. The assumption would appear to be that if we can describe the current and, by implication, predict future situations then which option to take becomes obvious. A good example of a quantitative model of this type is the PIMS model that correlates several performance measures with various decision and contextual variables. The assumption is that the model points out what needs adjusting and if this is done then performance will improve. At the other end of the spectrum are somewhat general and often rather qualitative models such as the classic Howard and Sheth model of consumer behavior. Such models tend to be general in nature since they include so many variables but then the skill lies in making them fit certain circumstances.

Underlying all general models is the requirement that prediction of outcomes should be possible across a wide range of different contexts. Positivism appears to offer one route to achieving this goal. This school of thought argues that there exist law-like regularities between events e.g. increasing advertising spend increases sales. What positivists suggest is that a causal mechanism is at work here. It is the increased spend that somehow increases sales. However the crucial issue here is how law like the relationships among variables are. To be published almost all studies in marketing within this tradition are required to meet the condition that the relationships among variables exceed some (often arbitrary) level of statistical significance. However statistical significance is not the same as managerial significance. The former means that there is a detectable relationship; the latter requires that the relationship be strong enough to lead to accurate predictions. Few studies in marketing meet that requirement.

One of the key reasons given for the poor showing of correlational studies is that, for a variety of reasons, some key variables have been missed out. Contexts differ (e.g. product characteristics in advertising studies) and contextual variables are often included as dummy variables without attempting to find out what it is about the context that makes the difference. What this means in practice is that the main way of increasing correlation is by studying more and more specific and therefore homogeneous situations. As a result the generalisability of the "laws" is heavily reduced and each situation has to be treated as almost unique. However by "situation" what is meant is a set of circumstances that provide a relatively large number

of events that can be modelled e.g. advertising spend and sales data for a single brand over many time periods, in order that the correlations can emerge. Yet it is obvious that at different times, different contexts have different effects (e.g. competitive action) and the model has to be changed to account for that.

The final nail in the coffin is that these models are descriptive not predictive. To make the former into the latter it is necessary to predict some of the values of contextual variables (e.g. competitive action). Of course this is a general problem with all kinds of prediction whatever the philosophical school of thought that produces them but it is particularly acute for positivists since they rely on invariance over time without having any idea why the invariance should or should not behave in this way.

Critical realism is an alternative philosophy of science that contrasts strongly with positivism (Easton (forthcoming)). It seeks to explain events using explicitly causal language rather than equating causality to invariant relationships. In fact it suggests that simple invariance is rather unusual and events are often close to unique. However there is a measure of invariance in terms of different underlying processes that interact in particular contexts to cause a particular event to occur. Thus it is not events that are invariant but the processes that help to cause them. Also different processes working within particular contingencies can cause the same events. In the advertising spend example it might be that quite different deep processes and mechanisms are at work in different markets. There are, for example, processes such as message retention, economies of media buying and the commitment levels of potential buyers that might work combine in different ways to create the sales - spend correlation.

In terms of providing a prediction to incorporate into a practitioner decision - model critical realism can offer some advantages over positivism. In seeking to understand why certain events occur and privileging the context, critical realism focuses on the specifics of the here and now. It does require an understanding of the deep processes that might be working in a particular situation, the impact of contingencies and the way the whole thing fits together. And prediction is a huge step beyond description. Nevertheless in concentrating on the process of individual model building, critical realism offers a structured approach to the practitioner and a role for the academic in disseminating the nature of deep processes that tend to occur in the situations relevant to the practitioner.

While the kind of black box modelling that positivism espouses may have some advantages in large number situations (e.g. in consumer markets), it is unlikely to be very helpful in the small numbers, highly interdependent markets that the IMP group focuses upon. In the latter context, critical realism and its research method of choice, the case study, are much more suitable. However neither offer the level of support that practitioners are likely to require. Imagine what you would say if a marketing director asked you what she should read that would provide "precise and explicit" guidance to help her decide which customers to try to form partnerships with. I imagine we would all argue that the terms precise and explicit would rule out everything that was currently available in print. But perhaps there is a third way.

"Weaker" Forms of Prescription"
Many papers in academic journals, especially those that involved description or positive modelling, have an obligatory final section on the implications of the work. They frequently use phrases such as "take account of", "place more emphasis on" and "be aware of". What is

clear is that while the authors believe that their work is describing some important finding they find it difficult to convert it into a prescriptive statement. Such reticence is probably justified.

A brief analysis of the excellent and thought provoking paper by Hakan Håkansson and David Ford "How should firms interact?" (Håkansson and Ford (1999), is used here to illustrate the problems and opportunities provided by weak prescription. The last section in the paper begins *"So, what can we offer?"* and answers *" Our aim as researchers is to construct tools to help managers understand their world, not to tell managers how to carry out their tasks."* This is an entirely defensible argument and recognises the inherent limitations of prescription at a distance. However it, understandably, avoids detailed consideration of the gap between thought and deed, between understanding and action. It assumes that better understanding leads to better decision making which may not always be true. However, accepting the limitations that they themselves impose on the paper, what kinds of tools do they offer?

The authors discuss three sets of paradoxes or tensions surrounding particular issues much in the way that De Wit and Meyer (1998) have done for strategy. The first paradox is that *"..a network is both the source of life for a company and the cage that imprisons it"* p3. The implications include, firstly, reinforcing *"…the need for the manager to analyze the position of his company… in terms of internal and external, especially relational resources"*.

Secondly, *"It is necessary both to give others a picture of the intended direction of a change and to find ways to combine different changes in nodes and threads that relate to the motivations and resources of others"*. Thirdly, *"The key questions…in business networks are thus more often about how to interact with existing counterparts than about how to choose new ones"*. Finally, a major effect of this first paradox is that companies… *will have to change their portfolio of relationships slowly over time"*.

The second paradox is that a firm is determined by its relationships and determines them. The implications are, firstly, *"The substantive choices for a company are those that centre on these processes of adaptation and investment rather than the initial choices of (which) companies…"*. Secondly, *"Interdependence between companies means that in reality the strategy process is interactive, evolutionary and responsive"*. Thirdly, *" If a manager just looks at a network of companies (ignoring the links between them - added in parentheses) then he will undoubtedly get a very restricted picture of the reality he faces"*. Fourthly, *"…we can see that the more important are a company's relationships, the more important the units (business or individual) will be"*.

The third paradox is that the more a company seeks to achieve control over the network the less innovative that network will be. The implications are, firstly, *".. the paradox highlights the problems that arise for managers if they take a self centred view of the network. A network will look very different from the perspective of different companies…"*. Secondly, *"…it is dangerous for a company to seek to manage its relationships so as to achieve overall control of a network"* and thirdly *" … there is no single generalisable solution to the problems of managing in complex business networks nor any one successful strategic approach"*.

In analysing these quotes it must be stressed that they are being used out of context. Each occurs within densely argued paragraphs and sections that provide for more subtle interpretations. However there are patterns that emerge that are worthy of comment.

First of all, the statements can be positioned on a continuum from the positive to the normative. The former describes the world as the authors see it and leave the practitioner to bridge the gap in their own situation (e.g. *"... the strategy process is interactive, evolutionary and responsive".).* In the mid range there are statements of two kinds, both weakly prescriptive. The first type emphasises the importance of some feature of the environment over another and exhorts the practitioner to pay more attention to it. In this way the prescription is concerned with the kinds of decisions to be taken rather than how to take a particular decision (e.g. *"The key questions…in business networks are thus more often about how to interact with existing counterparts than about how to choose new ones").* The second type of mid range statement is about a particular decision but couched in rather general terms (e.g. *"…the need for the manager to analyze the position of his company.).* Finally there are one or two examples of quite specific prescriptions (e.g. " *It is necessary (both) to give others a picture of the intended direction of a change…).*

While any or all of these implications may be helpful to practitioners, three interesting issues emerge from this analysis. The first is the overall generality of prescriptive statements that can be made, the second is their variety of form and type and the third is the extent to which the prescription set is, or is not, coherent. The first issue calls into question the whole notion of prescribing "at a distance". Would, for example, different managers implement the general prescriptions in quite different ways and is that a problem? The second points to the number of ways in which academics could prescribe. The third suggests that it would be an interesting exercise to identify and state the key assumptions underlying each prescription and then, using formal logic, to show how they are combined to produce the result. The whole prescriptive system could then be examined by attempting to link the assumptions to see which are crucial and whether the whole system is coherent.

However there are more serious problems at hand. Existing modes of prescription are focused externally on markets, customers and external relationships, and are published in academic journals. As a result of both these factors they can appear somewhat distant from the practitioner's world. In particular there are two aspects of the situation that render the whole notion of helping practitioners problematic; the inner context of the decision process (or the reality of managerial life) and the mechanisms by which academic assistance can be made available to practitioners. Neither of these issues feature much in relevance debates nor in the research that anyone in marketing does but they are important and will be discussed in the following sections.

Real Marketing Management®
The simple model of decision making presented earlier is prescriptive and suggests how managers should make decisions in a "rational" manner. However it is evident from research in management (Kotter (1982), Weick (1995), Mintzberg (1985), Hales (1993)) and organisation theory (Morgan (1997)) that while managerial decision-making may fit some elements of the model some of the time, in general it does not provide a sufficient description of the actual process. The reason is obvious. The "rational" model assumes a bounded, uncomplicated situation in which the manager has perfect information about clear-cut choices and is free to act in any way he or she likes according to their values. In reality, managers are

embedded in a complex socio-political system where decisions are often not even recognised as such, options are vague, information and time are scarce and other people are heavily involved.

To illustrate the complexity of managerial life it is useful to consider a series of metaphors that can be used to describe different perspectives on a marketing manager's life. These include manager as -

> actor - acting and reacting as well as thinking
> performer - performing designated tasks such as leading, planning etc.
> bureaucrat - creating and following organisational rules
> social being - influencing and being influenced by others
> emotional being - acting against personal rationality
> politician - wielding and yielding to various forms of power
> administrator - creating and accepting organisational systems
> ambassador - representing the department to the organisation and
> vice versa
> boundary spanner - managing the boundaries between the
> organisation and its markets.

The amount of research and writing that focuses on how marketing managers actually behave rather than how they should behave is minimal, for some exceptions see (Bonoma and Crittenden (1988), Greenley (1988), Piercy (1989), Ruekert and Walker (1987). In a sense it represents a lack of reflexivity in the discipline. We are all too ready to describe the market and the impact of the organisation upon it and from there derive prescriptions. Such prescriptions however make massive assumptions about the context in which they are to be implemented. If we have little idea about what those contexts are like in both the general and the particular how can we be happy about making any prescriptive statements.

The crucial issue here is one that lies at the very heart of the identity of marketing as a discipline; is it a technical subject concerned with markets and customers or a managerial subject concerned with serving a particular organisational constituency? Clearly there are advantages in accepting the former view. It allows us to deal with the technicalities of markets and how they behave without getting into the messiness inside the organisations that seek to serve them. It also means that we can avoid boundary disputes, in the academic world, with management and organisation theorists. We would, however, have to call our subject marketing technology or simply marketing and relinquish the label "marketing management". As a result we would lose credibility and hence, resources from students and practitioners.

However if we wish to be taken seriously as a "relevant" subject we should not continue down our current path. What is required is vastly more research into Real Marketing Management®, the day to day context in which marketing actions are taken. Only then can we know whether our prescriptions are likely to be put into practice and, more important, whether they will do more good than harm.

Vectors for Influence
Even this change of attitude will not be enough. We also need to understand the means by which we can and do influence marketing in action. Figure 2 provides a simple model of the various vectors by which what we research and publish reaches marketing practitioners in their organisations.

In the first part of this paper it was assumed, for the sake of clarity, that marketing prescriptions would be published in academic journals, conference proceedings or monographs and that what marketing academics provide is simply knowledge. In this section both of these assumptions are questioned.
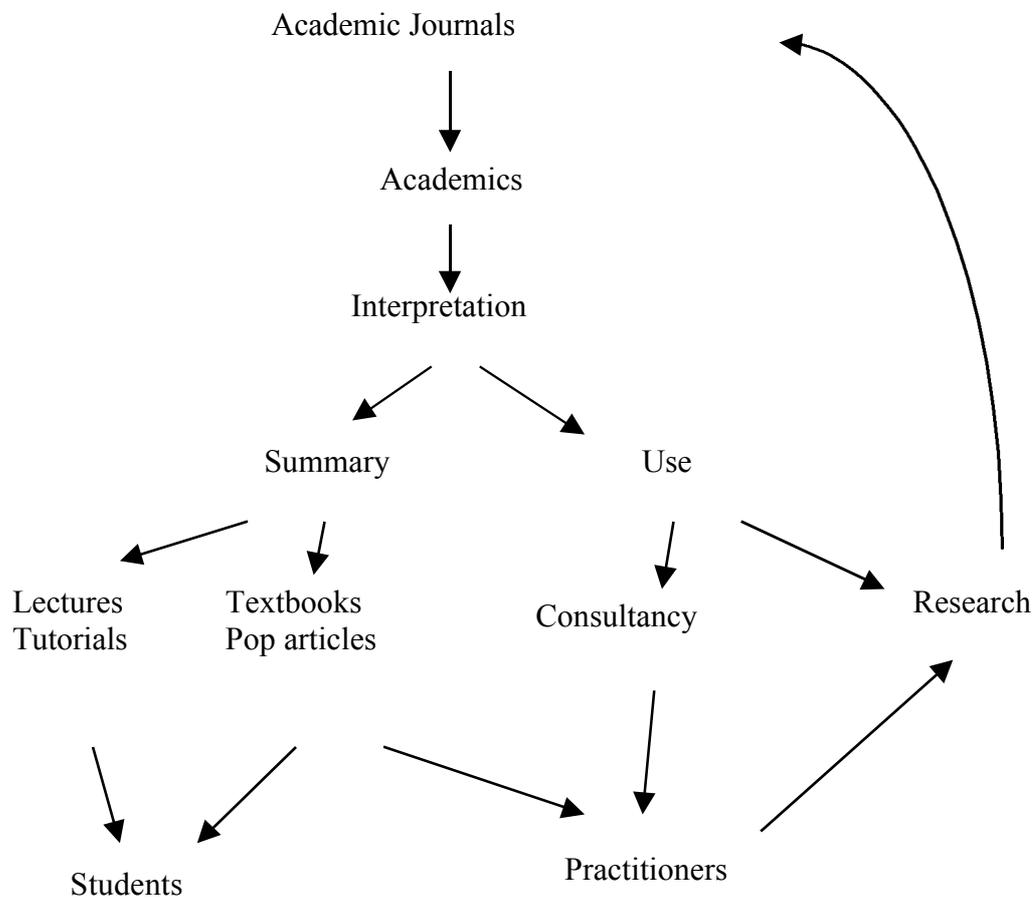
New research, models, theories and ideas are generally first published in academic journals. Some might go straight into the non-academic domain via popular magazines or books and this route, though still a minor one is becoming increasingly prevalent probably as a result of the time lag in the academic publishing system. As an example, a large number of books and articles have been published on e-commerce and marketing via the Internet. Most of these have been written by non-academic writers, either practitioners or consultants.

The bulk of new knowledge however is read and interpreted by academics. They, in turn, either summarise the knowledge or use it directly. In the former case the summaries are either published in mass media such as textbooks or articles in popular, that is non academic, media or are disseminated via teaching or training. In the former case the knowledge stands alone and there is no way of knowing, a priori, whether or how that knowledge is being received, understood or used. In the latter case, direct involvement with the student means that the flow of knowledge is much more controlled.

As a result adjustment to the process of assimilation can occur via dialogue and evaluation of the reception of the knowledge can be checked. Students vary from the complete novices whose lack of experience leads them to being accepting of the knowledge provided. However these novices graduate their courses and move into organisations where their knowledge is tested for its practitioner effectiveness. Anecdotal evidence suggests that graduates use the knowledge as a language to frame their actions but quickly learn that "street" knowledge is more important.

Practitioners also become students as they receive additional, or in some cases, initial training in marketing. These students have experience against which to check what they are being told and may question and even reject what they hear. Part of the problem relates to an issue discussed earlier - the importance of contexts. On open access courses practitioners from many different kinds of markets are looking for universal marketing principles and since there aren't any they are often disappointed. This phenomenon helps to account for the proliferation of single organisation marketing courses.

Figure 2. Simple Model of Vectors for Influence of Practitioners

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                    Academic Journals
                           |
                           v
                       Academics
                           |
                           v
                     Interpretation
                        /      \
                       v        v
                  Summary       Use
                   /   \         |        \
                  v     v        v          v
            Lectures  Textbooks  Consultancy  Research
            Tutorials Pop articles
               \   /          \        |      ^
                v v            v        v     /
             Students        Practitioners
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Knowledge can also be made available to practitioners through consultancy of various kinds. Here the knowledge is used in a negotiated environment. The academics (hopefully) understand the nature of the knowledge and its limitations. Practitioners can contextualise the knowledge and evaluate its use in practice. Both can provide a feedback loop that helps to modify the knowledge as understood by the academics. However most of this knowledge is tacit or remains in the heads of individuals.

What can be concluded from this simple analysis involving many assumptions is that, firstly, there are probably a variety of ways in which marketing knowledge created by academics can reach and influence practitioners. Secondly we know very little about these processes. There has been one study (Myers et al (1980)) that is now very much out of date. Yet if we are really concerned to help practitioners, how can we do so without understanding the means by which knowledge we create influences them?

But practice is not simply about knowledge; it also requires skills and attitudes. And this offers a way around the problem of the lack of universal principles that bedevils marketing and any other applied social science. What is needed is a closer marriage between research and teaching / training at all levels. Research and scholarships produce knowledge that can helpful in a variety of ways to practitioners. But the knowledge needs to be employed in a thoughtful, creative and evaluative way. Practitioners therefore need to find and choose

appropriate knowledge and incorporate it in a personal model of the situation they face. In doing so they will need, at the minimum, high level cognitive and creative skills and a critical attitude towards the knowledge they employ. An interesting theough subsidiary question is the extent to which marketing managers require similar or different skills to other organisational managers and practitioners.

In summary, what is being advocated here is that marketing academics should seek to understand how the knowledge they create reaches and influences practitioners with a view to finding ways of making the system work more effectively. It is also argued that knowledge is a necessary but not sufficient condition for competent practitioner performance. Skills and attitudes are, perhaps, even more important. Academe needs to discover what combination of such skills are required for marketing practitioners and then seek to find ways of helping their constituents to find them.

Should the study of marketing be relevant?

Throughout the paper so far it has been assumed that the marketing discipline should be applied and be relevant to its chosen constituency - marketing managers. The main conclusion is that it seems not to be very concerned about whether it is performing this function particularly well.

However there are a number of other constituencies that could be offered as alternatives to practitioners. The most salient of these is, arguably, the society of which we are all members. What can our society ask of us given that it is our paymaster? Starting at one extreme it is sometimes argued that research and scholarship should simply be done "for its own sake". Put another way, it need not be useful or helpful. However there are several ways in which research and scholarship can be relevant to society without seeming to be so. The most profound of these ways is that research and scholarship have the potential to improve the quality of our lives. Art, for example, can exist simply to make our lives more complete, make us joyful or sad but above all enrich our existence. Research and scholarship have the potential to do likewise. But scholarship and research also tap into a strong motivation in the human psyche; the need to understand. Such understanding need have no other driving force. There is no requirement that such understanding be put to practical or instrumental use. Thus knowing how Etruscan pottery was made or why black holes appear can satisfy our thirst for knowledge and be truly valuable but not help us to build a better mousetrap. What is crucial in any society is what knowledge is valued and how the desire for it is distributed among its members. These factors will determine the shape of academe in that society.

There is another sense in which research and scholarship may be relevant without appearing to be so. Here we enter the debate about pure vs. applied research. Applied research begins with a definition, often implicit, about a problem to be resolved and then designs research that attempts to solve it. While this method often works quite well on problems in simple systems it does less well when the systems are complex. Moreover the mechanisms that may lead to solutions are quite different in the two cases. In the latter the researcher works back from the problem and often does not understand why the solution works, should one be uncovered. Pure research on the other hand works to achieve an understanding of the phenomenon from which a solution may or may not emerge but can claim to understand why that solution works. But this description is rather misleading since it assumes that pure and applied research normally operate in the same domains. Many problems are solved by solutions that emerge from entirely different technologies or realms of knowledge. This is

only natural since we carry out research to discover what we do not know. We cannot always tell where such research is going to lead and so we cannot plan our discoveries. This provides a powerful rationale for interest-led, non-prescriptive research.

However we cannot know what will emerge if anything from pure research and so funding it requires a measure of risk taking by society. Unfortunately the current performance based climate in research funding in many developed countries requires that such risks be avoided and only do research where the outcome is largely predictable in advance. At least we claim it is and become adept at explaining, post hoc, why it did not work out as we expected.

There is another form of research and scholarship that represents an alternative to the identification of a discipline with a particular, and often powerful, constituency. Critical theory and its concomitant research and scholarship seek to redress what protagonists see as a societal wrong. The perceived marginalisation of groups such as employees, ethnic minorities, women and people of different sexualities has motivated critical theorists and researchers to write and research in a way that attempts to right the wrongs that society at best tolerates, at worst approves.

What are the implications of the above arguments for research in the IMP group? First of all it seems to me that it would be difficult to maintain that research that is deliberately designed simply to provide the joy of knowledge is an acceptable objective. This is not because such an objective is always to be avoided but because of the nature of the phenomena we study. Even if we tried to do research that was likely to have no application, it is by no means certain that it would not. We are not researching Etruscan pottery. Almost anything we do could have important practical applications although making the connections is by no means easy and this issue has been discussed at some length earlier in the paper.

Conversely, confining our research to the current marketing and / or purchasing problems in organisational markets, as currently perceived by practitioners, seems to be unnecessarily restrictive. If we had done so previously it is unlikely that the Industrial Networks tradition would have developed. Indeed the whole history of the IMP group has been one of trying to understand the phenomena first and looking to apply the results second. I would argue that there should be room for any researcher to place themselves where they feel most comfortable on the pure - applied research continuum.

It is also apparent that any notion of critical theory in the IMP tradition is highly problematic. One of the beliefs held in common by the group is that neither sellers nor buyers have a general monopoly of power. The context will determine how the power is distributed. Thus the notion of either organisational buyers or sellers being marginalised, as a category, simply does not accord with reality. There is therefore no need to seek to redress the balance although the same can hardly be said for some sectors in consumer markets.

The Sociology of Marketing Knowledge

In the previous sections a number of prescriptions have been offered for consideration by academics who study marketing. Much of what was being suggested, albeit implicitly, was that the discipline of marketing should be more reflexive about what it does. In particular, one of the prescriptions was that if you are trying to be relevant for a particular constituency then you should attempt to understand its behaviour. This paper is meant to be relevant for the IMP group, as represented by those who attend its conferences, and perhaps later for the

wider marketing discipline. The question then becomes "how are they likely to receive these ideas?"

Starting at the most general level, it should be obvious that disciplines and paradigms within them are examples of social institutions. They operate at a level somewhere between a formal organisation and a community. They have a measure of cultural homogeneity since they largely comprise individuals who have agreed to take part in the disciplinary project. They speak a common language and while there may be disagreements about ways of seeing the world and research priorities, they have much in common. As a result paradigms can be resistant to change especially where they compete for academic territory with other paradigms. There is nothing like a clearly defined enemy to help close the ranks. Some have argued that the Interaction / Industrial Networks paradigm shows evidence of this kind of ossification. Others, however, have criticised the paradigm for its lack of coherence and fragmented nature.

Power is also an important but somewhat ignored issue in the academic world. Power stems from access to resources such as academic position, journal publication, research grants and reputation. A relatively small number of powerful and senior people can, in effect, control the norms for a paradigm and to a lesser extent for a whole discipline.

The IMP is in a somewhat unusual position in this respect. While it would be naïve to deny that there are powerful actors within the paradigm, the norms they tend to espouse are relatively liberal and new modes of thought and opposition to existing ideas are, if not wholeheartedly accepted, then not actually destroyed at birth.

This brief and adumbrated picture of sociology of knowledge suggests that debaters at conferences who say things like "we should ...." ought, perhaps, to reflect on their situation. Who is the "we" in this situation? Is what I am suggesting substantially different from current paradigm beliefs and norms? Are my prescriptions for the paradigm ones that would be accepted by the power brokers? Is my model of paradigm change one that assumes that debate alone can move paradigm adherents? And most important of all, why am I doing this? What do I hope to achieve? In other words, we should, if we really want change to occur, reflect on how that change could be brought about and not simply assume that saying it should be is enough.

Readers who have followed the general tenor of the arguments in this paper will, I hope, have realised by now that I have set a trap for myself. What hope is there for me trying to make IMP researchers more reflective in general and in respect of prescription in particular by the vehicle of a conference paper? My answer is that I consider that it is rather small. However I do believe in critical incidents and defining moments and it may be that the circumstances are right for change, at least for some people. But even if nothing changes I would still have written the paper. Not just so I could come to the conference or to add to my publications but for a reason that some would find much less acceptable. Knowledge, more or less, for its own sake. I wanted to think through the issues and get them sorted out in my own mind. I haven't fully succeeded but I have come a little way. Happily academic life still allows the solitary scholar to think his or her own thoughts. This, somewhat anarchistic, view of academic life is, happily, one that is tolerated in the IMP group. Long may it continue to be so.

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