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Dealing with challenges to methodological pluralism: The paradigm problem, psychological resistance and cultural barriers

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ABSTRACT

This paper calls for methodological pluralism in industrial marketing research. We discuss three challenges that proponents of methodological pluralism have to address if their practice is to be seen as credible: the paradigm problem; psychological resistance; and lack of cultural readiness to accept pluralism. We review the works of a variety of authors from other disciplines who have tackled these problems, and identify useful ideas to take forward into a *model of learning*. This addresses the paradigm problem by making it clear that no pluralist methodology can exist without making its own paradigmatic assumptions. It deals with psychological resistance by talking in terms of *learning*, starting from wherever the researcher is currently situated (a large knowledge base is not needed to begin practicing methodological pluralism). However, this model does not deal with the question of whether the time is right, culturally, for methodological pluralism. We argue that the time will be right when it is widely appreciated that methodological pluralism adds value to industrial marketing research *practice*. The next step for our research community must be the accumulation of a body of empirical evidence to demonstrate that this added value does or does not exist.

1. Methodological pluralism in marketing scholarship

There have historically been competing paradigms in marketing research. The dominant paradigm has been called 'functionalist' (Arndt, 1985; Burton, 2001; Hanson and Grimmer, 2007; Hunt, 2002; Tadajewski, 2004, 2008, 2009; Tadajewski and Hewer, 2012), but many advocates of 'interpretivist' research are also evident (e.g. Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf, 1988; Brown, Bell, and Carson, 1996; Egan, 2009; Gummesson, 2003; Mathyseens and Vandenbempt, 2003). It has been argued that research published in leading industrial marketing journals demonstrates a better balance between these paradigms than within the marketing academy more broadly (Beverland and Lindgreen, 2010; Möller, 2013).

The above paradigmatic research communities make different philosophical, theoretical and methodological assumptions, which flow into their views on what kinds of methods they consider valid or legitimate. Broadly speaking, functionalists advocate the use of quantitative methods focused on observable phenomena, while interpretivists prefer qualitative methods that explore meanings from different human perspectives (Hanson and Grimmer, 2007). As a reaction against the splitting of the marketing research community into these competing camps, a small but growing group of researchers has spoken against notions of paradigm incommensurability (the idea that the paradigms are utterly irreconcilable) and has advocated, in various different ways, the adoption of a *pluralist* approach to marketing scholarship (Anderson, 1986, 1988a, 1988b; Davies and Fitchett, 2005; Hunt, 1990, 1991; Hunt, 1992; Hunt, 1994; Levy and Kellstadt, 2012; Lewis and Grimes, 1999; LaPlaca and Lindgreen, 2016; Lowe, Carr, and Thomas, 2004; Lowe, Carr, Thomas, and Watkins-Mathys, 2005; Möller, 2013; Nicholson, Brennan, and Midgley, 2014; Peters, Pressey, Vanharanta, and Johnston, 2013; Tadajewski, 2008, 2009; Tadajewski et al., 2014; Tadajewski and Hewer, 2012). These approaches to pluralism include the proposal of meta-theories that sit above and govern the use of ideas from the different paradigms (Hunt, 2013; Möller, 2013; Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2008); the creation of paradigm interplay (Davies and Fitchett, 2005; Lowe et al., 2004; Lowe et al., 2005; Peters et al., 2013); and the deployment of integrative theories and frameworks (Nicholson, Brennan and Midgley, 2014), drawing most popularly in industrial marketing on the lenses of critical realism (Easton, 2002, 2010; Ehret,

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2013; Harrison and Easton, 2002; Matthyssens, Vandenbempt, and Van Bockhaven, 2013; Peters et al., 2013; Ryan, Tahtinen, Vanharanta, and Mainela, 2012) and, to a lesser extent, structuration theory (Ellis and Mayer, 2001; Lee, Johnson, and Tang, 2012; Nicholson, Tsagdis, and Brennan, 2013; Peters, Gassenheimer, and Johnston, 2009).

However, most of the above work has focused primarily on *theoretical* pluralism. With a specific eye on methodological developments in industrial marketing, Nicholson, Brennan and Midgley (2014) point out that there are actually three dimensions of pluralism: theoretical, methodological and methodical. The latter two have received much less attention than the first, with only occasional calls to recognize the value of drawing upon both quantitative and qualitative methods to address the same research problem (e.g. Levy and Kellstadt, 2012; Tadajewski, 2008; Woodside and Baxter, 2013). The current paper focuses on *methodological* pluralism: the theory and practice of drawing upon methods from two or more different paradigmatic sources and using them together within a single study.

Since methodological pluralism is something that has only been called for relatively recently in marketing discourse, we believe that our understanding of it could be enhanced by reflections on mature debates in other disciplines. We focus in this paper on the line of reasoning that was stimulated by the seminal works of Jackson and Keys (1984); Jackson (1987a, 1987b, 1991) and Flood and Jackson (1991a, 1991b) in the disciplines of Systems Science and Operational Research (OR). This work has hardly been discussed at all in Industrial Marketing scholarship. Within OR, methodological pluralism came to be called 'multimethodology' (Mingers and Gill, 1997), but it is essentially the same concept. Because of this disciplinary cross-over between Systems Science and Operational Research, we will refer to those engaged in the debate as the 'Systems/OR' community. By the mid-1990s, well over 100 Systems/OR researchers had actively contributed through journal papers, books, chapters and conference presentations (Midgley, 1996a). Indeed the debate still continues, albeit with less intensity now, as the argument for methodological pluralism has basically been won. Nobody in Systems/OR now questions the utility of methodological pluralism, even if there are still some murmurings of discontent about different researchers' theoretical underpinnings: e.g. see Walker (2007) and Zhu (2011), who argue that the debate in Systems/OR has missed the opportunity to draw upon the American pragmatist tradition (e.g. Dewey, 1938; James, 1904; Peirce, 1934; Singer, 1959) due to Jackson's (1987b) early dismissal of pragmatism as atheoretical. He basically set up a degraded version of 'pragmatism' as a straw man to pit methodological pluralism against (Midgley, 2000), and this seems to have been accepted by some other authors without question.

Below, we draw extensively on the Systems/OR literature as we unfold our own perspective on how methodological pluralism should be conceived and what value can be derived from it. Our argument specifically responds to Woodside and Baxter (2013:382) who note that:

> "Because B2B decision researchers are likely to continue to use a broad range of theoretical bases, they will need a broader range of epistemologies and methodologies in future in order to investigate marketing phenomena".

Our concerns in this endeavor are similar to those of Tadajewski (2008), who looks at the politics of implementing and practicing paradigm commensurability; we focus on what philosophical, psychological and cultural challenges need to be addressed by industrial marketing scholars if methodological pluralism is to be both widely accepted and widely used.

First, however, let us start with some basic questions: what exactly is methodological pluralism? And why is it useful?

2. Two levels of pluralism and their value

To answer the first question above, it is vital to understand the difference between 'method' and 'methodology'. While methodology refers to the theory that justifies the use of particular methods, a method is a set of techniques operated in a sequence to achieve a given purpose (Checkland, 1981; Jackson, 2000; Midgley, 2000). When we talk of methodological pluralism, we mean embracing the possibility of engagement at two levels: at the level of methodology, where we can acknowledge others' methodological ideas and thereby allow their insights to inform our own methodology (either temporarily, during a particular study, or on a longer-term basis as continual reference points); and also at the level of method, where we can use a wide range of methods in support of particular purposes.

When a methodology is proscriptive, refusing validity or legitimacy to the majority of methods, it can be called 'isolationist' (Jackson, 1987b). Most methodologies produced during the 20th Century, whichever paradigms they had origins in, are isolationist: they prescribe what their creators believe is the 'one best way' of doing things (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Jackson, 1987b). In contrast, a pluralist can use the full range of available methods, but they are reinterpreted through the theoretical lens of a researcher's own methodology.

As there are different rationales for pluralism at the levels of methodology and method, they are dealt with separately below.

2.1. The value of learning from other methodologies

The essential value of being aware of, and learning from, a variety of methodological positions comes from the knowledge that no one theory, or set of theories — whether or not they have been codified into a methodology — can ever be comprehensive (Francescato, 1992; Midgley, 2011; Morgan, 1986; Romm, 1996). Therefore, it is bound to be the case that others will have different insights to us. While we may disagree with and want to challenge some of their assumptions, it may also be the case that one or more of their ideas could usefully be incorporated into a methodology of our own. The purpose of learning from other methodologies is therefore that reflections on the similarities with, and differences from, one's own ideas can enable the ongoing evolution of one's own methodology (Gregory, 1992; Romm, 1996). The key to this learning is to welcome the insights of fellow researchers without taking on any idea to the exclusion of all others (Midgley, 2011). Therefore, to say that (for example) marketing research requires a certain set of experimental methods should not lead to the conclusion that only these methods are valid. Those aspects of scientific methodology that promote a worldview which invalidates other methods need to be opened to challenge, but an experimental method (and indeed any other method which may have originally been derived from a proscriptive/isolationist methodology) can still be seen through the lens of a pluralist methodology. Of course, this raises the thorny issue of the nature of learning across paradigm boundaries, and we will look more closely at different authors' views on cross-paradigm learning later in the paper.

2.2. The value of a plurality of methods

The value of pluralism at the level of methods comes from observations of what happens if only a very narrow set of methods is used — indeed, it has been known for some people to specialize in the use of just one. With an armory of just one or two methods, three significant, interlinked problems arise:

First, in an applied research setting, the researcher may not be able to deal effectively with situations where the theoretical assumptions flowing into their favorite method are at odds with the assumptions being made by key stakeholders. This kind of situation can create significant stakeholder dissatisfaction. If this dissatisfaction is experienced by powerful decision makers, and the chosen method contradicts their assumptions without opening up a dialogue with them, then it is likely that the research will be ignored or even actively undermined. This point is alluded to by Tadajewski (2008:280) when he comments that

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