

# The Disciplinary Status of Consumer Behavior: A Sociology of Science Perspective on Key Controversies

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Critics within the consumer behavior field have consistently debated three fundamental issues about the field's defining properties and goals: (1) whether consumer behavior should be an independent discipline, (2) what is (and is not) consumer behavior, and (3) whether our field should be interdisciplinary. Taking the perspective of the sociology of science leads us to conclude that (1) consumer behavior is not an independent discipline; (2) consumer behavior is distinguished from other fields by its focus on a consumer role, emphasizing the acquisition, consumption, and disposal of marketplace products, services, and experiences; and (3) consumer behavior is not an interdisciplinary field.

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The past 50 years have witnessed an explosion in academic research about consumers. Studies have yielded substantial knowledge about consumer choice, attitude and satisfaction judgments, consumption meanings, consumer-brand relationships, and more. Metrics indicate a thriving field, as evidenced by the increase in the number of articles about consumers, the growing number of researchers engaged in consumer research, and the plethora of topics examined by consumer researchers. Despite the kind of growth that indicates a healthy field, the field has witnessed repeated editorials, presidential addresses, and commentaries that raise concern because they involve three foundational issues about our field: (1) whether consumer behavior should be an independent discipline (Belk 1984; Deighton 2007; Hirschman 1986; Holbrook 1985, 1987; Kernan 1995), (2) what is (and is not) consumer behavior (i.e., what constitutes the field's boundaries; Deighton 2007; Folkes 2002; Frank 1974;

Holbrook 1987; Jacoby 1976; Sheth 1982; Simonson et al. 2001), and (3) whether consumer behavior should be interdisciplinary (Gardner 1977; Jacoby 1976; Lutz 1989a; Mick 2003; Sheth 1982; Wilkie 1981).

Debate about such issues is natural as the field's members exert social influence for consensus building over its direction. Yet these particular debates seem to have moved us less toward consensus than to conflicting messages. Consequently, researchers often must gain tacit knowledge about the contributions that the field as a whole values. Failure to gain such tacit knowledge leads to career setbacks for novice researchers least able to afford them. For example, researchers who view citizens' votes as an instance of consumer behavior may find their work rejected if journal editors and gatekeepers adopt a different perspective on what constitutes the field's boundaries. Conflicting assumptions about consumer behavior as an independent discipline or as a sub-discipline of marketing (or other fields) lead to divergent standards over the criteria on which research should be judged and the audiences to whom research should be relevant (e.g., marketing academics, academics in other disciplines, marketing managers, consumers, policy makers). Lack of consensus on whether consumer behavior is an interdisciplinary field raises questions about what interdisciplinarity means. For example, the *Journal of Consumer Research (JCR)* describes itself as interdisciplinary. Editors and authors might interpret this term to mean that the journal includes work from a variety of disciplines, that the journal expects integrative research that blends disciplines, or that interdisciplinarity characterizes the field.

Since the field's knowledge results from individual re-

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searchers' efforts, costs to individuals are costly to the collective. Disparate but seemingly legitimized stances about what is and is not consumer behavior, whether it is an independent discipline, and the extent to which it is interdisciplinary call into question the field's direction and distinctiveness, which can tarnish its stature in the eyes of external audiences. For example, uncertainty regarding what is (vs. what is not) consumer behavior (i.e., the field's boundaries) undermines what differentiates consumer behavior from other academic disciplines. Lack of consensus on boundaries can also undermine our field's stature and lessen its perceived relevance to policy makers and society to the extent that research fails to address these constituents. Lack of consensus on our interdisciplinary nature raises questions about whether research training and execution should emphasize specialized research topics, questions, paradigms, and methodologies or integrative and substantive solutions to consumption issues (e.g., obesity). Further, uncertainties about interdisciplinary status raise issues about whether specialized (as opposed to integrative) efforts are detrimental to the field.

We take a different perspective from those of previous commentators on the three major issues by examining them in the context of literature on the sociology of science. Our analysis of that literature leads us to conclude that (1) consumer behavior has not become an independent discipline. It is a subdiscipline of marketing. We argue, however, that this perspective does not mean that academic research should restrict its focus to marketing management or that it should abandon a societal or public policy perspective. We also advocate (2) distinguishing our field's core from that of other fields. Our core is characterized by the study of people operating in a consumer role involving acquisition, consumption, and disposition of marketplace products, services, and experiences. Expansive boundaries around this core will not serve the field well. Finally, we argue that (3) consumer behavior has not become an interdisciplinary field and that shifting to an interdisciplinary research orientation would require substantial change in how we train students and how we execute, evaluate, and reward research. Instead, we argue that our field is best described as multidisciplinary. Although this multidisciplinary orientation lends a fragmented sense to the consumer behavior field, we suggest that such fragmentation can fuel, not stunt, the field's advancement. Because these conclusions represent potentially strong statements about our field, we consider them in greater depth in the pages that follow.

We begin with a caveat that our analysis emphasizes these controversies from the perspective of the field as a whole. Thus, our analysis emphasizes commonalities, central tendencies, and means. It may not adequately capture the more nuanced attempts by specific scholars or cohorts within the field to move the field in different directions. We acknowledge that our field is and has been in flux and that the field's current state may change. Second, whereas previous commentators have addressed normative questions about what the field should be, our analysis emphasizes what our field

has become. Some of our article's conclusions reflect our understanding of the implications of a sociology of science perspective more than they embody our personal aspirations for the field. Finally, we acknowledge that the sociology of science perspective we bring is but one of potentially many that can be brought to bear on an analysis of these complex issues.

## IS CONSUMER BEHAVIOR AN INDEPENDENT DISCIPLINE?

### Origins of the Consumer Behavior Field

The academic field of consumer behavior has long been associated with the marketing discipline (Kernan 1995). Growth in the study of consumer behavior was fueled in the late 1950s by a set of commissioned studies on the state of business education. Those studies emphasized the need for business schools to move from their vocational teaching roots and descriptive research status to an academic status characterized by theoretical research (Dahl, Haire, and Lazarsfeld 1959; Gordon and Howell 1959). Business schools responded by hiring a new breed of marketing academics and academics from other fields whose specialized skills in research and theory were designed to emphasize a scholarly approach to business research. In marketing, emphasis shifted from understanding what marketing managers do to a theoretically based focus on understanding how and why consumers behave as they do (Kernan 1995; Wilkie and Moore 2003). These aspirations bore fruit in the 1960s with influential conferences, books, and articles that focused squarely on theoretical approaches to understanding consumers (Howard and Sheth 1969; Kassarian and Robertson 1968; Newman 1966; Sommers and Kernan 1967; Zaltman 1965, among others). These early conceptualizations of consumer behavior focused on consumers as buyers and hence emphasized consumer behavior as buyer behavior (Engel, Kollet, and Blackwell 1968; Howard and Sheth 1969). Thus, early in its history, the academic field of consumer behavior emanated from those within the marketing discipline.

Despite its marketing origins, early leaders in the consumer behavior field desired to establish an independent field, one that would break free from marketing and not be beholden to a marketing perspective (Kassarjian 2005; Kernan 1995; Wells 1995). Leaders also sought to establish the field's academic legitimacy and independence through the development of a new professional association (the Association for Consumer Research [ACR]) and the first academic journal devoted exclusively to the study of consumer behavior (*JCR*). The ACR began as a workshop held at Ohio State in 1969, ironically with a seed grant supported by the American Marketing Association (AMA). The idea for *JCR* began in 1970, largely out of a growing recognition of the need for an outlet devoted exclusively to the study of consumers.

To a certain extent, this distancing from marketing was an attempt to elevate the status of consumer research from its vocational roots to a scientific field. Indeed, ACR con-

ferences were designed as research conferences, which differentiated them from the educator and practitioner conferences then sponsored by the AMA (Kassarjian 1995). The distancing from marketing also emanated from a growing disdain of big business during the late 1960s and a disquieting recognition of the potential negative societal consequences wrought by advertising and marketing in action. Such distancing from marketing fostered a public policy and societal focus that emphasized consumer protection and social welfare (Schneider 1977; Shimp, Dyer, and Divita 1976), a focus spurred by the real needs of government for actionable consumer research (Wells 1995). Commentaries suggested that academics need not be the handmaidens of business and that consumer research could be valued for its own sake—independent of its value to marketing practitioners. Indeed, confining consumer behavior to the marketing discipline was viewed by some to limit the topical areas that may represent consumer behavior and hence to limit the potential insights consumer research can generate (see also Belk 1984; Holbrook 1985, 1987).

### Perspectives from the Sociology of Science on Disciplines and Subdisciplines

Whether consumer behavior is an independent discipline—and, if not, whether it will attain independent status—are complex issues that can be examined from a sociology of science perspective. Insight on these issues begins by understanding the term “discipline.”

The sociology of science literature defines a discipline as a field of study containing its own community of experts (Nissani 1997). Disciplines have disciples (i.e., faculty and students in a university) who are disciplined in a thought system and an area of specialization. Disciplines often have subdisciplines, which are defined as subfields within the broader community of experts. Subdisciplines form when disciplinary knowledge becomes so vast as to be relegated to specialists (Becher and Trowler 2001). Thought systems that characterize disciplines and subdisciplines typically include research paradigms, vocabularies, theories, analytical tools, and rules for judging research quality and impact (Abbott 1988; Becher and Trowler 2001; Chettiparamb 2007; Heckhausen 1972; Mason and Goetz 1978).

Disciplines (and subdisciplines) can be characterized in terms of their cognitive component—that is, what is agreed to represent a discipline’s intellectual domain. This cognitive component bounds what a discipline studies, clarifying what falls within and outside its intellectual orbit. Yet this content is socially constructed. Members of a discipline define what the discipline is by choosing and laying claim to the topics that fall within their disciplinary umbrella. In this way, disciplines are also characterized by their social component—that is, the networks and communities that underlie them, the social hierarchy occupied by people who have more or less academic stature, and the implicit rules that govern normative behavior (Becher and Trowler 2001). A discipline’s infrastructure—its academic departments, journals,

societies, and the people who occupy these roles—plays a major role in defining the discipline’s content (Abbott 1988; Becher and Trowler 2001). Hence, the activities of departments, journals, and professional associations are reflective indicators of what a discipline is.

Disciplines serve important roles. They provide specialized knowledge, academic legitimacy, intellectual authority, autonomy, identity, and reproduction (through new scholars; Abbott 1999; Becher and Trowler 2001; Fuller 1985; Gieryn 1983; Merton 1979). This role is stabilized, in part, by the university system, which is dependent on disciplines and departments for reputational status and degree-seeking purposes (Whitley 1984). Disciplines exist partly to enable universities to bestow academic degrees and to certify student knowledge for employment purposes (Abbott 1988). Disciplines also represent the macrostructure of the labor market for faculty and the microstructure of individual universities (Abbott 2001).

Disciplines can be characterized as basic or applied. Universities often characterize the latter as members of professional schools (e.g., law, engineering, political science, and business). Literature on the sociology of science shows that academic disciplines with professional school orientations often attempt to gain status by distancing themselves from the professions that purport to use their knowledge (Abbott 1988). Science elevates knowledge production to the domain of the few who have the credentials and research expertise to develop and impart knowledge to professions that use university services.

Although the university system engenders a certain amount of stability for disciplines, disciplines evolve as scientific, intellectual, social, and political forces forge new subdisciplines within the larger disciplinary structure or even novel disciplines (e.g., gender studies) that break free from the parent discipline or disciplines.

### Implications for Consumer Behavior

The early years of consumer behavior had numerous properties that characterize the development and success of a new academic field (Hambrick and Chen 2008). Leaders’ shared social ties and interests allowed them to act collectively to articulate the need for intellectual scholarship devoted to the study of consumers. Such mobilization was timely and well-received in light of the criticisms leveraged at the marketing discipline. Legitimacy-building efforts, namely, the establishment of a flagship journal and conference, claimed the field’s distinctiveness while marking it with the scholarly credentials characteristic of solid academic fields. Finally, the founders endeavored to differentiate consumer behavior from marketing by articulating how a concerted effort to study consumers would address issues that were not at the forefront of marketing managers’ agendas (e.g., societal and public policy issues; Hagstrom 1965).

Although the efforts of our fields’ leaders were highly successful at establishing a new field of consumer behavior, the aforementioned description of disciplines, their roles, and the indicators that characterize them lead one to con-

clude that the goal of establishing consumer behavior as an independent discipline has not been met. Academia today recognizes consumer behavior as a subdiscipline that has academic legitimacy within the marketing field. Merely a consideration of universities and their structure reveals that universities often have departments of marketing but rarely have consumer behavior departments.

Furthermore, the current status of the field has the aforementioned roles that mark consumer behavior as a subdiscipline of marketing. From the standpoint of intellectual authority, editorial review boards at the field's flagship journal (*JCR*) are numerically dominated by marketing academics as opposed to academics from other disciplines. Moreover, although we have seen growth in new consumer research journals (*Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *Journal of Consumer Culture*) and professional associations (e.g., the Society for Consumer Psychology [SCP]) that affiliate with other disciplines, participation in these journals and associations is skewed toward marketing academics.

From the standpoint of intellectual identity, the majority of researchers who self-identify as consumer behavior researchers are marketing faculty members. Indeed, a recent survey revealed that almost a third of faculty in leading marketing departments describe themselves as consumer behavior researchers (Hult, Reimann, and Schilke 2009). In marketing, reading habits emphasize marketing journals more than any other discipline (Baumgartner and Pieters 2003; Leong 1989). Socialization to create this intellectual identity takes place primarily in marketing departments. Doctoral courses on consumer behavior are dominated by academic articles on consumer behavior written by marketing professors (Bauerly and Johnson 2005; Urbanic and Sailors 1996).

From the standpoint of knowledge production, consumer behavior research published in our flagship journal and presented at our association conference is largely produced by marketing academics. Indeed, even at the inception of *JCR*, Robert Ferber, an early *JCR* editor, noted that the journal's biggest problem was getting manuscripts from scholars housed outside the marketing discipline (Ferber 1976), a problem that continues to this day. Although academics from other disciplines have been invited to write articles for *JCR*, authorship from nonmarketing fields is the exception. There are few incentives for academics in other fields to contribute to consumer behavior journals; they have their own research journals, associations, networks, and intellectual orbits and receive few rewards for publishing elsewhere. Similarly, the field's professional organization that supports intellectual exchanges is composed primarily of marketing academics. Indeed, even in its early stage of development, ACR presidents Pratt (1974), Gardner (1977), and Bernhardt (1984) bemoaned the organization's limited academic diversity.

Finally, as a subdiscipline of marketing, consumer behavior has attained a certain autonomy from fields outside the marketing discipline. The American Psychological Association has a division of consumer psychology (the SCP), but organizations like the American Sociological Association

and the American Anthropological Association do not have specialized sections or divisions devoted to the study of consumer behavior, suggesting that these disciplines have not sought to establish consumer behavior as a formal subdiscipline within their own fields.

In short, whereas our field's founders were highly successful at laying the groundwork for a new perspective on consumers, the field of consumer behavior today is organizationally legitimized and socially recognized as a subdiscipline of marketing. Not only have marketing academics successfully developed a subdiscipline of consumer behavior, but they also are likely to grow this subdiscipline. The marketing discipline offers attractive opportunities because academic jobs are lucrative and plentiful and because research funding is relatively abundant and noncompetitive (compared with the grant-based system of funding in other fields). The field's growth has also been fueled by marketing departments outside North America. We surmise that we will continue to see growth in the consumer behavior field and that the growth is most likely to come from within the marketing discipline.

**Conclusion 1a:** Consumer behavior has not become an independent discipline as envisioned; it has established itself as a subdiscipline of marketing.

## Perspectives on Marketing

Acknowledgment of subdisciplinary status naturally raises the question of how the field relates to the larger discipline of marketing. Hence, one's perspective about marketing becomes critical. Some researchers may find subdisciplinary status disquieting because it suggests that founding aspirations for the field of consumer behavior (as a discipline independent of marketing) were never realized. Associating the field with a professional school may cause some to view consumer behavior as an applied field with limited theoretical stature. Moreover, being a marketing subdiscipline seems to imply that the subdiscipline must adopt the discipline's core issues and its often vocational perspective.

Characterizing consumer behavior as a subdiscipline of marketing may suggest that research should focus on managerial issues pertinent to profit maximization as opposed to research with relevance to nonmarketing constituents (e.g., consumers, policy makers, and society). Such a perspective seems particularly incongruent with the recent calls for transformative research (Keller 2009; Mick 2006, 2008) and the recent *JCR* special issue on the same topic (see also Bazerman 2001; Belk 1984, 1987; Cohen and Chakravarti 1990; Hirschman 1991; Hutchinson 2004; Richins 2001). Some researchers may feel that a marketing designation is inconsistent with personal values about societal welfare. In order to do research with personal and societal significance, some consumer researchers believe that they should "side" with consumers, policy makers, or society and not marketers (Hutchinson 2004). Indeed, considerable research suggests that marketing efforts can wreak social havoc, contributing

to problems that include obesity, materialism, and compulsive consumption. These concerns about intellectual identity are nontrivial in light of the social component of disciplines. Social identity research documents the importance of group identification for individuals' cognitive and motivational processes (Hogg and Terry 2000).

We suggest that conceiving of consumer behavior as a subdiscipline of marketing engenders few of these negative effects if we widen our perspective on the discipline of marketing (see also Wilkie 2005). One view, and perhaps the view that some academics find disquieting, is that marketing is a function within a firm whose goal is profit maximization. This limited view suggests that marketing (and hence consumer) research should emphasize marketers' problems and propose actionable solutions that maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of this function. However, a different view holds that marketing is a social institution that operates in the context of other institutions—consumers, policy makers, and society. According to this perspective, an academic approach to marketing (and consumer behavior) means understanding the interacting forces that influence and are influenced by this institution. Just as the accounting field has expanded to include the ethical, regulatory, consumer, and policy impact of accounting decisions, so can consumer behavior live within a marketing field that considers the set of institutions in which the marketing institution operates. This elevated view of marketing accommodates research with relevance to consumers, marketers, policy makers, and academics and regards the marketing and consumer behavior in a broader perspective.

**Conclusion 1b:** Considering consumer behavior a subdiscipline of marketing does not mean forgoing theory testing or abandoning a policy, societal, or consumer perspective; it means adopting an elevated view of marketing.

## WHAT IS (AND IS NOT) CONSUMER BEHAVIOR?

Regardless of whether one views the field as a subdiscipline of marketing or as an independent discipline, we believe that it is important to clarify what the field of consumer behavior entails—that is, to articulate the core of our intellectual domain and to clarify what differentiates a field of consumer behavior from other fields. This issue is relevant since varying perspectives have been offered regarding the topics relevant to the field of consumer behavior.

### Consumer Behavior and Other Disciplines

*Openness to Other Disciplines.* Founders of the consumer behavior field welcomed perspectives from myriad disciplines, including psychology (Dichter 1964; Ferber 1976; McGuire 1976), sociology (Coleman 1983; Levy 1959; Nicosia and Mayer 1976), political science (Nakanishi, Cooper, and Kassarian 1974), economics (Katona 1974; Ratchford 1976), history (Belk and Pollay 1985), and

neurology (Krober-Riel 1979). Openness to multiple disciplines was institutionalized at *JCR* by the establishment of a policy board run by members of 11 sponsoring organizations, each of which represented a different disciplinary perspective. Openness to other disciplines was also encouraged by ACR presidents and *JCR* editors as well as by these organizations' founders. No doubt, the field's receptivity to many disciplines was fostered by an attempt to differentiate consumer behavior from marketing while still leveraging the intellectual and monetary resources that the marketing discipline had to offer.

With this openness to other disciplines came an expansion in the topical domains viewed as falling within the consumer behavior umbrella. The purchase focus, so attuned to marketing managers' orientation, was viewed as unnecessarily restrictive and led some to consider a more expansive view of consumer behavior (Sternthal and Zaltman 1974). Since then, critics have suggested broadening the process duration of consumer research (from buying to acquisition, consumption, and disposition; Belk 1984; Jacoby 1976). Some claimed that consumer behavior research should include institutions such as businesses, government, hospitals, manufacturers, retailers, and wholesalers (Frank 1974; Jacoby 1976). Since marketing efforts extend beyond the marketing of products and services, consumer research has been deemed relevant to myriad marketing contexts, including social marketing (Andreasen 1993), social services marketing (Frank 1974), and political marketing (Newman and Sheth 1987). Researchers have also suggested broadening the contexts in which consumers make choices to include choices outside the conventional company-customer purchase context. Such topics include choices about fertility, mobility, and education (Frank 1974; Levine 1976). Consumer behavior research has also expanded to include dark side issues, such as addiction, compulsion, and gambling (Hirschman 1991).

*Openness or Vague Boundaries?* The possibility of incorporating vast amounts of intellectual territory within consumer behavior has, however, raised concerns about what is *not* consumer behavior (Deighton 2007; Holbrook 1987; Simonson et al. 2001). Such concerns reflect qualms about whether the domain of consumer behavior has broadened so much that it is unclear what differentiates consumer behavior from other disciplines. Holbrook (1987, 128) argues that the term "consumer behavior" has become so expansive that "by now, it stands for everything, which in this case is tantamount to nothing." Folkes's (2002) ACR presidential address argues that consumer behavior is different from general human behavior since it (a) engenders unique interpersonal relationships (e.g., exchange relationships) that influence the power balance between buyers and sellers, (b) involves unique contextual features (e.g., the proliferation of mass media persuasive messages), and (c) entails domain-specific topics (e.g., materialism). Nevertheless, consensus on what does and does not constitute consumer behavior and, hence, what distinguishes it from other fields is far from clear. Like Folkes (2002) and Holbrook (1987),

Deighton (2007) argues for the need to bound the scope of consumer behavior so as to differentiate consumer research from research in other disciplines.

### Perspectives from the Sociology of Science on Disciplines and Their Boundaries

As with the issue of consumer behavior's status as an independent discipline, controversies over the scope of topics that fall within the field of consumer behavior can also benefit from perspectives from the sociology of science literature.

*Boundaries and Their Benefits.* At their birth, disciplines and subdisciplines are marked by a core period of disciplinary settlement where researchers in one discipline lay claim to the intellectual turf that marks its territory (Abbott 2001). Key to this settlement is the articulation of the field's "boundaries," which are socially constructed and historically grounded (Campbell 1969). Boundaries are ultimately related to the aforementioned role that disciplines play in providing specialized knowledge. Individual researchers benefit from specialization in terms of productivity and publication quality (Leahey 2007). Boundaries mark territory, create divisions of labor, and denote what is the problem of one discipline over another. They create order by specifying what falls within and outside one's field. In this way, they foster coherent intellectual discourse and prevent knowledge from becoming too abstract or overwhelming (Abbott 2001; Newell and Green 1982). Boundaries legitimize areas of inquiry on which future rewards (e.g., publication, tenure, and research prizes) are based. They limit topical areas of study so as to foster expertise in a domain while also prioritizing the topical efforts that a discipline's members view as making a contribution. They define roles and foster spheres of competence. They facilitate scholarly communities and research networks. They also calm angst within disciplines and subdisciplines by serving as a force that unites subdisciplines marked by excessive fragmentation.

A field's boundaries can be based on many factors, including context (e.g., the study of cities and suburbs differentiates urban studies from political science, which studies political systems), method of discovery (induction vs. deduction), or the use of facts as background (as in history) or as padding (as in philosophy; see Barry 1981). Boundaries can also be based on conceptual frameworks. For example, Yates (as cited in Becher and Trowler [2001]) notes that although sociologists and anthropologists often study the same phenomena, sociologists view methodology as a tool for understanding reality and objective knowledge, whereas anthropologists view methodology as a mechanism for understanding subjective/cultural meaning. Boundaries can also be based on "axes of cohesion" (Abbott 2001), or central principles. Thus, marketing is grounded in an exchange principle (Bagozzi 1975), whereas law focuses on jurisprudence. In general, disciplines (and subdisciplines) are thus distinguished by their boundaries, which can vary in terms of

(a) the questions they ask, (b) the entities they choose to study, (c) the point of view from which the entity is studied, (d) the assumptions they make about the world, (e) the methods and analytical tools they use, (f) the concepts and theories they employ, and/or (g) the degrees they offer (Heckhausen 1972; Newell and Green 1982).

*Adjoining Territories.* Literature on the sociology of science also shows that despite or perhaps because of boundaries, members of disciplines can often readily articulate adjoining territories that bear a relationship to the discipline or subdiscipline at hand. For example, Becher and Trowler's study of disciplines found that academics have little difficulty describing disciplines that relate to their own field. They found that "economics was said to have one common frontier with mathematics and another with political science; some trade relations with history and sociology; and a lesser measure of shared ground with psychology, philosophy and law. Biology was portrayed as being bounded on the one side by mathematics and the physical sciences (especially physics, chemistry and physical geography) and on the other by the human sciences (in particular by psychology, anthropology and human geography)" (Becher and Trowler 2001, 58).

Researchers tend to share knowledge across adjoining territories. However, sharing knowledge, paradigms, and methods across adjoining territories does not join disciplines, though it may render boundaries less precise. Even members' consensus about their field's boundaries does not prevent incursion from other disciplines (Abbott 2001).

### Implications for Consumer Behavior

The aforementioned issues suggest that boundaries separating our field from adjoining territories can benefit academic disciplines. Although commentators have suggested expanding the boundaries of consumer behavior to include institutions (i.e., businesses, hospitals, governments, intermediaries), thus far the field has been marked by socially constructed boundaries that emphasize end users. This emphasis bounds consumer behavior from the marketing strategy subdiscipline, which emphasizes these institutions. Despite lamentations to the contrary (MacInnis 2005), the field of consumer behavior has also become differentiated from the marketing models subdiscipline by its emphasis on behavioral approaches to studying consumers versus quantitative modeling approaches to studying consumer markets.

Furthermore, although proponents have recommended expanding the field to include topics like mobility, fertility, education, religion, voter behavior, and social services marketing, consumer behavior's socially constructed boundaries today stress a consumer role. That is, they reflect end users' acquisition and consumption of products, services, and experiences acquired through an economic marketplace and factors that affect or are affected by these activities. Socially constructed boundaries also include product disposition (Jacoby 1976), though the field's literature has yet to emphasize disposition.

The study of acquisition through economic exchange bounds consumer behavior from other disciplines, since exchange differentiates marketing (of which consumer behavior is a subdiscipline) from other academic fields in which economic exchange is not an intellectual priority (e.g., education, geography, religion, political science, social work). The study of acquisition through economic exchange is also central since consumers exert power in an economic marketplace and shape marketing and other institutions by their individual and collective economic choices.

Consumer behavior today is conceptualized as more than acquisition through economic exchange (e.g., buyer behavior), as it includes consumption and product disposal. Consumption and disposal behaviors link consumer behavior to the marketing institution and the other institutions that surround it. Hence, emphasizing consumption and disposal (as well as acquisition) is consistent with the previously articulated elevated view of marketing (e.g., marketing as an institution vs. as a function within a firm). Having these topics at the field's core fosters study of the positive benefits of acquisition, consumption, and disposal on consumers and society (e.g., fulfilling goals, advancing connectedness, enhancing variety, and creating sensory, educational, and artistic experiences that provide pleasure). They also foster study of the negative consequences of marketers' efforts to encourage acquisition, consumption, and disposal (e.g., advertising to children, advertising's effect on materialism and negative body image), as well as the negative consequences of acquisition, consumption, and disposal for consumers, marketers, and society (e.g., theft, gambling, addiction).

The focus on end users' acquisition, consumption, and disposal of products, services, and experiences has greatly benefited knowledge in our field as we have concentrated our human resources on dimensions that relate to end-user acquisition, consumption, and disposition choices and factors that influence them. The focus on the desirability of these choices has led to the study of topics like consumer emotions, goals, temptations, self-control dilemmas, satisfaction, and materialism. The focus on the meaning of such choices has led to considerable research on symbolic consumer behavior, consumption rituals, collections, consumer identity, brand-self connections, brand communities, endowment effects, consumer inferences, product and brand categorization processes, and more. The focus on the riskiness of such choices has led to extensive research on product and brand involvement, consumer protection, and behavioral decision making. The focus on the extent of processing underlying such choices has led to considerable work on persuasion, multiattribute attitude models, imagery, and pre-conscious and subconscious processing of marketplace stimuli. The focus on the fairness of such choices has led to work on equity, price perceptions, the appropriateness of advertising to children, and consumers' susceptibility to scams. The focus on the controllability of such choice has led to research on consumer impulsiveness, addictions, habits, and the theory of reasoned action (among others). The focus on the normative appropriateness of choices had led

to work on self-conscious emotions, susceptibility to normative influences, and obesity. The focus on knowledge involved in making decisions has led to a flourishing body of work on memory for brands and consumer experiences, attitudes and persuasion processes, informational influences in decision making, objective and subjective knowledge, and comprehension processes. Hence, the wide-ranging and extensive body of knowledge accumulated thus far indicates that a focus on end users' acquisition, consumption, and disposal of marketplace products, services, and experiences by people operating in a consumer role has served our field well. Product disposal issues are also highly relevant, though they have not yet received as much attention as acquisition and consumption have.

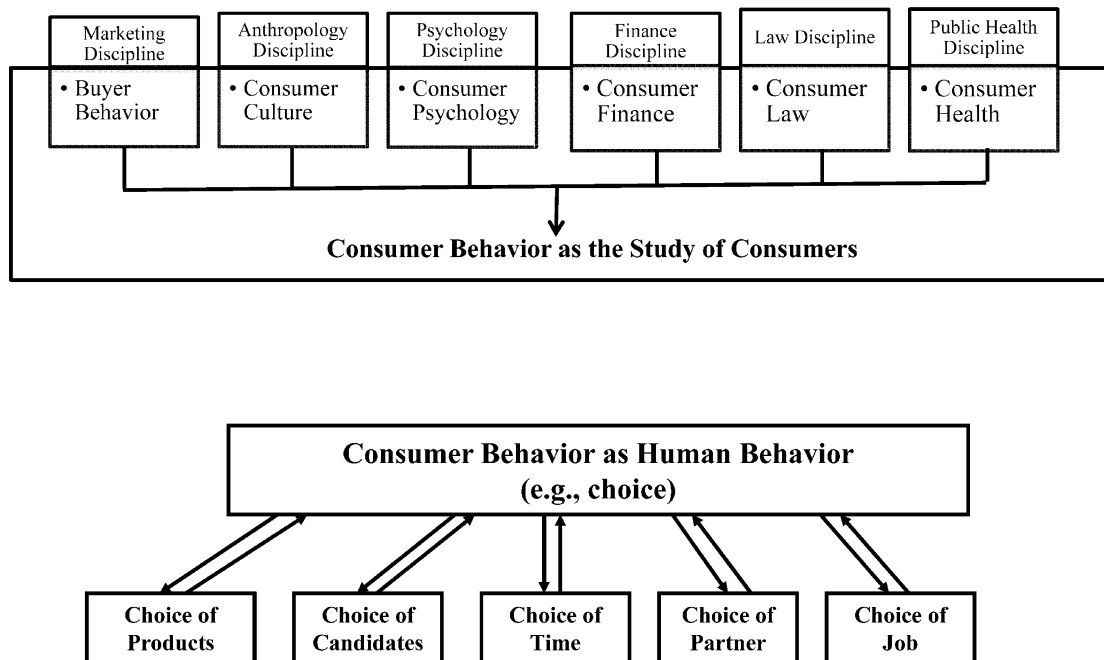
**Conclusion 2a:** Consumer behavior research is distinguished from other fields by the study of the acquisition, consumption, and disposal of marketplace products, services, and experiences by people operating in a consumer role.

*Consumer Behavior as Bounded by a Focus on Consumers?* Our conclusion 2a helps identify not just what our field incorporates but also what falls outside our domain. There are additional fields that study consumers (e.g., law and health; see fig. 1, *top*). Indeed, an electronic search by the authors revealed over 33,000 articles with "consumer" in the journal article title or abstract. These articles were published in journals typically aligned with such fields as health and medicine, economics, law, psychology, management, policy, communications, history, finance, political science, sociology, and anthropology and culture. Indeed, many more articles would have been identified had different terms for "consumer" been used (e.g., buyer, investor, member, guest, voter, patient, client, donor, or patron), had our electronic access gone back to the journal's origination, and had our search been expanded to include books or other scholarly products (e.g., films). Should the field of consumer behavior encompass anything touching on consumers, including decisions about fertility, mobility, education, religion, and political candidates (as suggested by previous commentators)? We believe the answer is no.

Whereas researchers in disciplines outside marketing do study consumers, many focus not on consumer behavior but on other factors where "consumer" is merely a modifier (e.g., consumer law, consumer lending practices, consumer interest rates, consumer mobility, consumer price indices, and consumer education). These fields may represent adjoining disciplines useful to understanding consumer behavior. However, these fields do not collectively compose a field of consumer behavior. Instead, research pertaining to these nonbehavior domains has been claimed by other disciplines with their own research agendas, paradigms, journals, research impact criteria, PhD training programs, job markets, and knowledge networks. Moreover, such fields are unlikely to claim consumer behavior as a topical focus of study, and the field of consumer behavior is unlikely to expand to encapsulate these disciplines.

FIGURE 1

TWO MODELS THAT CONTRAST WITH THE VIEW OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOR AS A SUBDISCIPLINE OF MARKETING



*Consumer Research as Expanded to Include Roles Where Consumption May Exist?* Researchers in disciplines outside marketing (e.g., medicine, political science, education, geography, religion) also study people who can at times assume a consumer role (as when a patient makes choices over which doctor to see or when a voter decides to donate to a candidate's campaign). Acknowledgment that consumer behavior can be evident in myriad contexts may also lead one to believe that the top part of figure 1 best captures the field of consumer behavior. However, these non-marketing fields more typically study people in roles unrelated to a consumer role (e.g., as voters, patients, students, new community members). When researchers in these allied fields do study people in roles that include consumption, our field and other fields are adjoining disciplines on which each may rely.

Nevertheless, this overlap should not imply that consumer behavior as a subdiscipline of marketing should expand to include the study of these other roles. Our goal is not to be part of other disciplines in an attempt to understand voter behavior, patient behavior, mobility, education, fertility, and religious behavior. Rather, these disciplines may best serve as adjoining fields on which a consumer role can be better illuminated. This focus clarifies what can fall within the boundaries of the (sub)discipline of consumer behavior and, hence, where the field's resources can best be allocated.

*Consumer Behavior as Bounded by Behavior?* Since consumers are people, one might wonder if the consumer context is really necessary to understand consumer behavior;

that is, consumer behavior may simply represent human behavior, as suggested by the bottom part of figure 1. Suggesting that consumer behavior basically represents human behavior might lead one to conclude that consumer researchers should aim to apply theories of human behavior to a consumer context. Such an approach encourages consumer researchers to emphasize the study of consumers but does not necessarily emphasize generating original knowledge. There is also evidence that such an approach to consumer behavior characterizes the field, as commentators have long lamented that we have spent more time importing theories and constructs from other fields than developing theories and constructs about consumers (Kernan 1995; Olson 1982; Sheth 1982). Moreover, commentators have wondered whether this applied orientation hinders original contributions to the field (Deighton 2007).

Another implication of the conclusion that consumer behavior simply represents human behavior (fig. 1, *bottom*) is that consumer researchers might just as well study people in contexts removed from consumption because findings about people in other contexts generalize to consumers. Such an approach encourages consumer researchers to generate original knowledge even if that knowledge is not about consumers per se. Some evidence exists that this approach to consumer behavior is prevalent in the field. Manuscripts submitted to journals like *JCR* are sometimes quite removed from acquisition, consumption, or disposition. For example, an article may aim to understand general aspects of human memory but use brand names as the remembered stimuli.



The use of brand names highlights a consumer context, but the goal is to understand memory. The use of nonsense syllables could just as easily have been used. Such articles create dissonance among reviewers and editors and confusion among journal readers, who question why a particular research article should “belong” in a consumer behavior journal as opposed to a journal in a different field (e.g., cognitive psychology).

We argue that, rather than the perspectives offered in figure 1, the perspective on the field emphasized in conclusion 2a is most likely to highlight the unique contributions to knowledge that our field can make. That is, researchers in the field of consumer behavior (in which a consumer role assumes centrality) should focus not on original knowledge per se or on a consumer context per se but rather on original knowledge about a consumer context. For example, research that shows how retailers’ use of organizing categories on the Internet (e.g., allowing consumers to search by price, brand, style, or some other factor) helps us understand whether and to what extent such categorization tools influence consumer choice quality, where quality decision making is reflected by identifying the best product at the right price in the least amount of time and in the most satisfying way. Research that shows how advertisements influence materialistic tendencies brings insight to the uniquely consumer phenomenon of materialism. Original knowledge about a consumer context contributes to our own field as well as provides novel insights that may benefit adjoining disciplines in the following three ways.

First, emphasizing a consumer context puts consumer researchers in a position to uncover novel phenomena and theories that might be obscured in other contexts. For example, a consumer context provides unique opportunities to illuminate ownership and related principles (e.g., the endowment effect) that may be less obvious in other contexts. Moreover, understanding consumers’ real or imagined ownership of products may offer insight into feelings of ownership over nonmarketplace entities (e.g., one’s children, country, clubs, or school). The motives and emotions related to possessing products may be quite similar to and so add novel insights about feelings of jealousy and envy that people harbor about another’s friends and family. Here, the centrality of acquisition and consumption enlarges insights about consumers as well as makes the consumption context a springboard for generating original knowledge about human behavior.

Second, emphasizing a consumer context may allow researchers to produce original knowledge about consumer behavior (and human behavior) by understanding how a consumer role changes human behavior. For example, Friestad and Wright (1994, 1995) have shown how buyers’ knowledge of the marketplace affects information processing in ways that differ from non-economic-exchange contexts.

Finally, analysis of a consumer context may reveal principles that are specific to consumption and identify a consumer role or consumption context for which there is no

direct parallel in other contexts. Such knowledge can aid in developing novel theories of consumer behavior. For example, brand communities involve a unique interplay between consumers as they try to establish and foster a community with other consumers amid marketers’ attempts to alter communities for their own purposes.

Certainly, many situations are common to consumer behavior and other contexts. However, the field of consumer behavior is uniquely poised to make original knowledge contributions by emphasizing a consumer context.

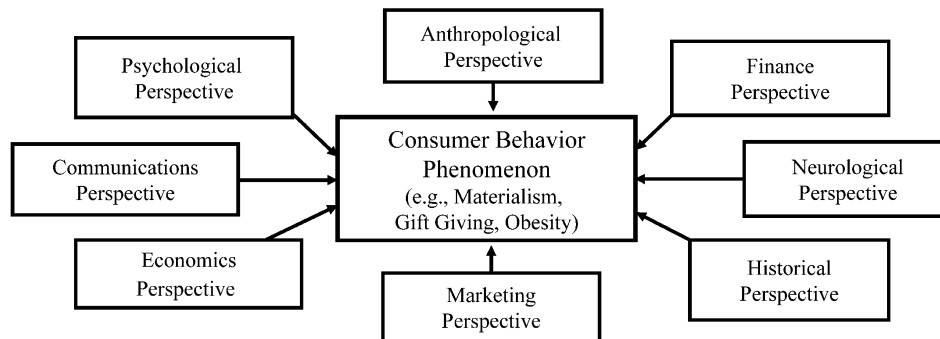
*Broadened Views of Consumer Behavior and the Meaning of Disciplines.* Importantly, conceptualizing consumer behavior as a field that (a) studies consumers generally or general roles about which consumption could potentially play a part (as suggested by fig. 1, *top*) or (b) conceptualizing it as a field that studies human behavior generally (as suggested by fig. 1, *bottom*) would provide none of the aforementioned benefits of boundaries. A diaspora of consumer researchers reduces synergistic benefits of knowledge interchange; there would be no center of intellectual authority, autonomy, identity, and reproduction. A field that claims an expansive territory acquires prestige, but only if it maintains its intellectual territory (Becher and Trowler 2001). The field of consumer behavior may be overreaching its intellectual resources and academic legitimacy by attempts to understand broad topics related to consumers per se or human behavior in nonconsumption roles.

**Conclusion 2b:** Openness to adjoining disciplines can expand intellectual horizons and add insights to our topical domain. However, a focus on people in a consumer role will best focus our field’s intellectual resources and foster original knowledge about consumers.

## IS CONSUMER BEHAVIOR AN INTERDISCIPLINARY FIELD?

The boundaries we recommend may seem at odds with a third controversy facing the field of consumer behavior, that is, whether it is or should be interdisciplinary. Critics have often pointed out a conflict between an ideal of the field as interdisciplinary and the reality of our noninterdisciplinary status. The interdisciplinary perspective was manifested in the charters of two institutions—the Association for Consumer Research and the *Journal of Consumer Research*. The ACR realized many of its interdisciplinary aspirations early on by fostering an interdisciplinary membership base and by timing ACR conferences contiguous to conferences in other fields (Kassarjian 1995). The interdisciplinary aspirations of *JCR* are exemplified by the journal’s subtitle (*An Interdisciplinary Bimonthly*) and were reinforced by Frank’s inaugurating editorial (1974). This interdisciplinary goal was echoed by subsequent *JCR* editors (Deighton 2005; Ferber 1977; Kassarjian and Bettman 1984; Mick 2003; Monroe 1993, 1994) and ACR presidents (Belk 1987; Bernhardt 1984; Gardner 1977; Jacoby 1976; Lutz

**FIGURE 2**  
A MODEL OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOR AS AN INTERDISCIPLINARY PROCESS



1988, 1989b; Sheth 1982; Wilkie 1981; see also Holbrook 1987).

Disciplinary pluralism has been useful for growing consumer behavior knowledge as adjoining disciplines have helped foster numerous insights about consumer behavior. However, despite the founders' aspirations, pleas for interdisciplinary research have gone largely unheeded (Deighton 2005; Kassarian and Bettman 1983; Lutz 1988; Mick 2003). Moreover, concern about our interdisciplinary status has been evident since the field's inception.

### Perspectives from the Sociology of Science on Interdisciplinarity (and Multidisciplinarity)

Once again, research from the sociology of science provides useful input for understanding the interdisciplinary status and potential of consumer behavior research. That research and work in interdisciplinary studies acknowledges that the term "interdisciplinary" can create confusion because it has been used in many ways to refer to different things (Klein 1990; see also Cohen 1980). Among other uses, people use the term to describe (a) a field, (b) a perspective reflecting openness to adjoining disciplines, or (c) a research process, as described below.

*Fields as Interdisciplinary.* Disciplinary scholars use the term "interdisciplinary" in regard to an area of study as meaning a boundary-spanning field that integrates research (and researchers) from two or more discrete disciplines so as to form a unique and independent field (e.g., gender studies, urban studies; Chettiparamb 2007; Mason and Goetz 1978). An interdisciplinary field aims to generate novel insights that cannot be obtained from any one discipline in isolation (Nissani 1997). Interdisciplinary fields are most likely when the parent disciplines have established their legitimacy. As Merton (1979) writes, interdisciplinarity is possible only because the discipline is no longer "on trial."

*Fields as Multidisciplinary and Open to Adjoining Territories.* Some confusion about interdisciplinarity occurs because the term "interdisciplinary" is sometimes used

to describe fields that are more appropriately characterized as multidisciplinary. Authorities agree that a multidisciplinary field has subdisciplines, each of which draws on distinct adjoining territories (Klein 1990; Mason and Goetz 1978) as theories, methodologies, and concepts from many (multi)disciplines are brought to bear to study the issue at hand. Multidisciplinary fields are often fragmented, with networks of researchers who themselves develop boundaries with other specializations within the field (Garand 2005; Greendorfer 1987; Stocking 1995; Wiemann, Pingree, and Hawkins 2006). Thus, multidisciplinary fields house researchers who share a common disciplinary focus but whose subdisciplines identify with distinct adjoining territories. The field of psychology, with its 56 separate subdivisions (e.g., social psychology, neuropsychology, developmental psychology, rehabilitative psychology, psychopharmacology), is a good example of a field described as multidisciplinary.

Researchers in a multidisciplinary field work in the same department (e.g., psychology) and share an overarching identity, but collaboration across the subdisciplines is generally circumscribed, as each subdiscipline subscribes to its own set of questions, paradigms, and theories. Thus, disciplines characterized as multidisciplinary do not share an expectation for research that blends or integrates knowledge across the subdisciplines. Instead, research emphasizes specialization within the subdiscipline. Each subdiscipline relies on different adjoining territories to provide insight into the domain of study, and interaction among the subdisciplines is limited. Such fields are not interdisciplinary as previously defined.

*Research as Interdisciplinary.* Interdisciplinary scholars have also used the term "interdisciplinary" to describe (among other things) a research process (Klein 1990). Interdisciplinary research refers to the joining of researchers from multiple and distinct disciplines to address a problem whose solution is not possible from a single discipline's perspective, as suggested by figure 2.

The research goal is to transcend disciplines by developing novel insights from blending disciplinary views. Interdisciplinary research is often problem focused, emphasizing

real world issues and problems (Newell and Green 1982). Points of intersection often revolve around a multifaceted and complex topic, issue, or problem (e.g., obesity, AIDS, global warming; Klein 1990).

Although there is no doubt that interdisciplinary research can yield considerable intellectual insights and aid in the solution of real world problems, the sociology of science literature shows that interdisciplinary efforts are the exception rather than the rule. Klein's (1990) historical analysis from the late 1800s to the 1990s articulates numerous proclamations favoring interdisciplinary work and even initiatives put forward by major funding organizations to advance it. Whereas some interdisciplinary projects were initiated during that time period, a movement toward interdisciplinary work was never fully established. Klein (1990) concludes that these formalized efforts have had little impact on the way disciplines and researchers operate. Abbott (1999, 136) echoes that "a long historical process has given rise to a more or less steady, institutionalized social structure in American academia; a structure of flexibly stable disciplines, surrounded by a perpetual hazy buzz of interdisciplinarity."

The reason why interdisciplinary research is the exception rather than the rule lies not in its value but rather in the fact that the very nature of disciplines makes interdisciplinary efforts difficult. Universities are typically organized around sustaining disciplines, not joining them or facilitating interdisciplinary teams. Communication across disciplines is difficult given different vocabularies, paradigms, theories, and methodologies. Interdisciplinary projects can be economically costly and larger in scale, further exacerbating the time and cost of such work. Interdisciplinary projects may also lack longevity. Problem-oriented empirical work does not create enduring, self-reproducing communities like disciplines except in areas with stable and strongly institutionalized external clientele (Abbott 2001).

Personal disincentives also impede interdisciplinary research. Research published outside one's home discipline may be devalued and seen as tangential to one's discipline, jeopardizing promotion, tenure, and other academic rewards. Incorporating other disciplines into a particular topical area may also give the research the appearance of being on the fringe. In turn, interdisciplinary research may be perceived as less rigorous, and the interdisciplinary researcher may be perceived as a dilettante (Mason and Goetz 1978). Whereas universities may push for government grants that seek interdisciplinary research teams, such efforts may offer more concrete benefits to universities (through indirect costs) than to the individual researchers who participate in them. Because disciplines do not facilitate interdisciplinary efforts, interdisciplinary research, when it occurs, emanates organically from clusters of individuals who connect by virtue of passion for a common topic (Klein 1990) rather than by proclamation of the field as interdisciplinary or by externally imposed requests for interdisciplinary research.

## Implications for Consumer Behavior

*Consumer Behavior as a Multidisciplinary versus Interdisciplinary Field.* On the basis of the discussion above, it is clear that consumer behavior has not become an interdisciplinary field in the way that sociology of science scholars have defined it (i.e., there has been no blending of multiple disciplines to create a new and independent discipline). Nor is interdisciplinary research common. Instead, the field is better characterized as multidisciplinary (Belk 2002; Monroe 1993). Indeed, early in its settlement, founders of the consumer behavior field observed the development of specializations that drew on adjoining disciplines (Gardner 1977; Wilkie and Moore 2003). Consumer information processing became an early specialization (Helgeson, Mager, and Kluge 1985), drawing heavily from the adjoining discipline of psychology. Our field has since expanded to the three dominant specializations shown in figure 3, each with different assumptions and connections to other adjoining disciplines (Simonson et al. 2001; see also Shaw and Jones 2005).

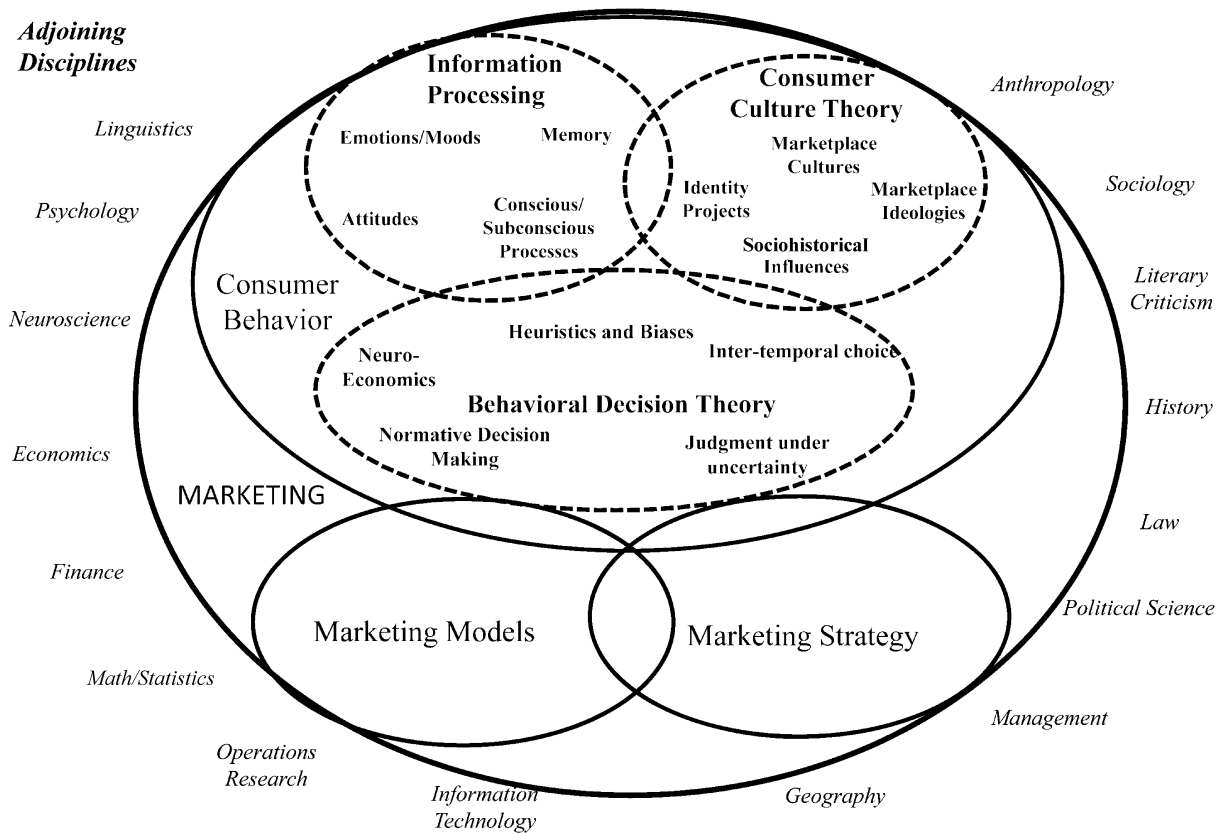
Minor specializations orbit and further subdivide these specialisms. Rather than blending disciplines so as to make the field interdisciplinary, specialization has led to a characterization of the field as multidisciplinary (Chakravarti 1992; Monroe 1993; Robertson and Kassarian 1991).

Although the consumer behavior field (as a subdiscipline of marketing) is not interdisciplinary, perhaps some of the field's early members conceived of the term "interdisciplinary" as meaning openness to adjoining territories. Such openness is critical to the field's advancement. As Zaltman (1983) notes, the world does not divide itself into areas that correspond to the disciplinary units that make up universities. To ignore adjoining disciplines and what their knowledge implies for consumer behavior is to develop an insular and limited perspective of consumer behavior.

*Consumer Behavior and the Interdisciplinary Research Process.* Even a cursory inspection of the articles published in consumer behavior journals reveals that the term "interdisciplinary" does not apply to the way that many members of the field conduct research. This observation is not an indictment against the field in light of the above-noted barriers that stymie such efforts. Though interdisciplinary projects are laudable and do have much to offer consumer research (Mick 2006), they do not adequately characterize how our field operates.

If thought leaders and gatekeepers do aspire to move the field toward interdisciplinary research, a fundamental shift in how consumer research is executed and evaluated would be necessary (Mason and Goetz 1978). Doctoral students' program choice would be based on whether universities have a collection of faculty members in and outside marketing who study the substantive topic of interest—ideally, those associated with interdisciplinary research centers. Doctoral programs would need to be lengthened to give students the appropriate methodological tools necessary to conduct interdisciplinary research and to learn the substantive and the-

**FIGURE 3**  
A MODEL OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOR AS A MULTIDISCIPLINARY SUBFIELD OF MARKETING



oretical issues, as well as the terminologies that various disciplines bring to bear on the topical focus. Promotion and tenure cycles would need to be lengthened so as to accommodate the extended time frame often required by interdisciplinary research. To judge research value, articles submitted for publication and promotion and tenure cases would need to be reviewed by an interdisciplinary panel who could comment on the contribution of the research project to the substantive topic it addresses. (Notably, this kind of journal article review process did indeed characterize *JCR*'s practice during its early years; see Kassarian and Bettman 1982). The scope of interdisciplinary research and its real world emphasis would require the solicitation of external grants to support interdisciplinary efforts. These efforts are certainly possible and worthwhile. Although some consumer behavior research is interdisciplinary, such research is not prototypical of the field, and such projects are the exception rather than the rule.

**Conclusion 3a:** The field's openness to adjoining disciplines characterizes it as a multidisciplinary field. A shift to an

interdisciplinary approach to consumer behavior research will require substantial change in how we train scholars and execute and evaluate research.

*Multidisciplinarity and the Field's Advancement.* Some scholars may worry that a characterization of our field as multidisciplinary undermines cohesion within the field. If neither theory nor method unifies the field, then defining its essence becomes challenging. One might also argue that multidisciplinary harms the field both because it fosters research "camps" that fail to understand one another and because it stunts growth by emphasizing specialization and incrementalism at the expense of integration and expansion. However, research on the sociology of science identifies several forces that might allay such concerns.

First, we have argued that the field of consumer behavior is unified by a core concern with acquisition, consumption, and disposal of marketplace entities by people in a consumer role. The field's subfields coalesce around this core and fuse the field to marketing and other marketing subdisciplines.

Second, we have no evidence that specialization has stunted the field. Indeed, specializations have resulted in expansion in the number of subfields and further subfield development (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Third, future stimulation can come from adjoining territories that are gaining traction, such as neuroscience and finance.

Finally, the sociology of science literature suggests that specialization can fuel (not limit) novel insights and energize the field. Such insights often emanate from recombinations of specialties that create hybrid (sub)disciplines (Abbot 2001; Dogan 1994; Dogan and Pahre 1990). Such hybrids represent a limited form of interdisciplinarity. Hybrids form when two (sub)subfields form a new subdiscipline or when one field's subdiscipline joins with a subdiscipline in another field. For example, the two consumer behavior subfields of information processing and consumer culture theory might join as a hybrid.

Specialization can foster hybrids because researcher density around problems and paradigmatic entrenchment motivate a search for theories from other disciplines that will refute well-established principles (Dogan and Pahre 1990). Competition among researchers breeds novel perspectives, which involve a search for questions and perspectives from unexamined adjoining disciplines and from new ways of examining subdisciplines. Hence, a field that endorses multidisciplinary and tolerates its attendant fragmentation and recombination while maintaining unity facilitates knowledge advancement by fostering change.

**Conclusion 3b:** Consumer behavior's characterization as a multidisciplinary subdiscipline of marketing can advance (not undermine) growth in the field.

## CONCLUSIONS

Discussion of the field's criticisms should not be interpreted as an indictment of consumer research. Indeed, the past 50 years have seen enormous research productivity and growth, testifying to the vision and dedication of our field's founders to the study of consumer behavior. The sociology of science literature suggests three conclusions about our field. First, consumer behavior is recognized not as an independent discipline but as a subdiscipline of marketing. Notably though, considering consumer behavior a marketing subdiscipline does not require abandoning a societal/consumer perspective; we can adopt an elevated, institutional view of marketing, one not affixed to an individual company's goals.

Second, as a marketing subdiscipline, consumer behavior's territory must differentiate our field from nonmarketing disciplines if it is to achieve its potential. Boundaries offer numerous benefits to a field, as opposed to the disadvantages of merely sharing wide expanses of overlapping territory with other disciplines. Claiming an overly expansive territory renders discipline-based knowledge too broad for the development of expertise. The field must adopt boundaries that help it make unique contributions. We view the acqui-

sition, consumption, and disposal of marketplace entities by people in a consumer role as bounding our field.

Finally, although the consumer behavior field is open to adjoining disciplines and includes researchers engaged in interdisciplinary research, interdisciplinary scholars would characterize ours as a multidisciplinary field (fig. 3). Making interdisciplinary research the goal of our field would require substantial change in how research skills are developed and how research is executed and evaluated. A characterization of the field as multidisciplinary does not represent an impediment to the field. Rather, multidisciplinary can stimulate novel directions.

Our analyses and recommendations necessarily deal in generalities as they apply to the discipline as a whole. We have painted the field in broad brushstrokes (e.g., by focusing on *JCR* and *ACR*) rather than capturing fine differences or short-term trends. Further, by taking a sociology of science perspective on the field, we have focused on institutions rather than individuals. The conclusions we arrive at for the field are not mandates for the individual researcher. Individual researchers can enrich themselves and, ultimately, the field by crossing disciplinary boundaries, by gaining breadth through conducting interdisciplinary research, and by understanding behavior outside the consumption context.

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