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Emerging Field:
A Commentary on Shelby Hunt's
Research on Marketing Ethics

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Research on Marketing Ethics**

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Shelby Hunt is clearly deserving of the accolade, “a legend in marketing”. His published research output (of which this volume represents considerably less than ten per cent) places him among the most prolific and highly-cited of marketing academics. The scope of his work is broad, encompassing marketing theory, marketing strategy, marketing management, relationship marketing and marketing education, as well as the focus of this volume, macromarketing, ethics and social responsibility. Shelby also works on topics that other academics in marketing and business more generally shy away from, such as the philosophy of science. In doing so, he is not afraid to ask the big questions. It was as a doctoral student that I first came across his article on “The Nature and Scope of Marketing” (Hunt 1976), and was impressed to find him asking: is marketing a science? I was of a more impressionable age then, but if anything I am more impressed today given my deeper understanding of the field's norms and expectations. These foundational questions are Shelby's stock-in-trade and are perhaps too rarely asked. It is no surprise that it is one of Shelby's doctoral students—of which there are more than twenty (including the editor of this volume)—who has been asking one of the more basic questions of marketing in recent years; namely, Bob Lusch, who with Steve Vargo has queried marketing's “dominant logic” (e.g., Vargo and Lusch 2004). Shelby is also unafraid when it comes to making big propositions, such as we find in *A General Theory of Competition* (Hunt 2000).

The focus of my comments is on Shelby's research on marketing ethics, with particular attention to the Hunt-Vitell theory (or model) of ethics. However, it is important to place this research in the broader context of his work, not least because this informs our understanding of his more specific contributions in marketing ethics. So, for example, not only do we find the same careful craftsmanship, from conceptualization through to execution of his papers, we also find Shelby's approach guided by his perspective on the philosophy of science. While for some it might be characterized as overly positivist, for others it is an approach that brings clarity and greater certainty to an uncertain domain.

This volume contains approximately half of Shelby's published output on macromarketing, ethics and social responsibility. Not included and worth noting is Shelby's work in the 1980s with his doctoral student Larry Chonko. I particularly liked their paper on “Marketing and Machiavellianism” (Hunt and Chonko 1984) because it tackled head-on the charge that marketers are manipulative—what Hunt and Vitell in chapter 12 of this volume (p. xxx [p. 143 in original]) refer to as the “ethics gap” between marketers and other members of society . Using a well-established Machiavellianism scale in a study of over 1,000 professional marketers, they found that these AMA members were no more Machiavellian than other members of society.

Shelby and Larry also published a series of papers reporting empirical research of the ethical problems faced by marketing practitioners (Chonko and Hunt 1985; Hunt and Chonko 1987; Hunt, Chonko and Wilcox 1984). Chapter Eight in this

volume is a retrospective commentary written following the *Journal of Business Research* award to the 1985 Chonko and Hunt paper. In the original paper, Chonko and Hunt identified the ten most difficult ethical issues faced by a sample of over 1,000 AMA members. The retrospective commentary observes that these ethical issues appeared to provide a major focus for subsequent research. Bribery, fairness and honesty came out as the top three most frequently mentioned “most difficult” issues identified in the original paper and the retrospective commentary notes that over 90% of subsequent works citing the 1985 paper examined at least one of these issues. Anecdotally, at least, it seems that bribery remains the most difficult ethical issue faced by most managers, especially in today’s more global business environment, for certainly this claim resonates strongly with executives I teach.

In a similar vein, while their paper does appear in this volume (as chapter 7) and though I only give it this brief mention, I do wish to acknowledge a debt to Shelby and Randy (Sparks) for introducing me to the research literature on ethical sensitivity. I have not only cited this paper in my own research, but the concept of ethical sensitivity is one that I use in virtually every introductory class I teach on ethical decision making. While I don’t believe I have ever cited the paper by Shelby and Jerry Goolsby (chapter 5), I have also made good, if indirect use of their application of cognitive moral development to marketing.

The focus in this commentary on the Hunt-Vitell theory of ethics is appropriate for at least two reasons. First, a personal reason, though this is also an indicator of its contribution to marketing ethics. John Quelch and I selected the original articulation of the model as one of less than a handful of articles in the marketing ethics literature to be reprinted in *Ethics in Marketing* (Smith and Quelch 1993a) and for which Shelby and Scot (Vitell) also kindly wrote a retrospective commentary and revision (Hunt and Vitell 1993b). Second, their general theory of marketing ethics is addressed in over half of the contributions in this volume.

The Hunt-Vitell Theory of Ethics

“The General Theory of Marketing Ethics: A Revision and Three Questions” (chapter 12 in this volume), is a twenty-year retrospective on the original *Journal of Macromarketing* article, first published in 1986 (and referred to at that point as “a general theory”). It provides an overview of the origins of the article, including a reference to some of the challenges the authors experienced in getting it published that I well recall Shelby describing to me in more detail when we were discussing its inclusion in *Ethics in Marketing*. It has no doubt been especially gratifying that the article has been widely cited subsequently and provided the basis for multiple empirical studies, some of which have been published in the top journals of the field, including Shelby’s own study with Arturo Vasquez-Parraga, another of his doctoral students, provided in this volume as chapter 6. Chapter 12 provides an overview of the model as revised in Hunt and Vitell (1993b), reviews “some of the scores of studies that have used the H-V model as a theoretical foundation” (p. xxx [p. 147 in original]), and addresses some of the criticisms of the model and how it can be used in teaching marketing ethics.

As well as chapters 6 and 12, five other chapters in this volume also make substantial reference to the Hunt-Vitell (H-V) model. Chapter 3 reports a partial test

of the model by Vitell and Hunt, providing support for the core of the model (as further discussed below). In chapter 4, Shelby provides a commentary on Mayo and Marks' (1990) test of the model. Chapter 10, by Hunt and Laverie, discusses its pedagogical application. Chapter 11 by Hunt and Vitell, and Chapter 13, by Hunt and Hansen, both use the H-V model to explore differences in ethical judgements across individuals.

This commentary asserts that Shelby Hunt's contributions to marketing ethics have helped lay the foundations for an emerging field, with the H-V model of ethics a key part. Nonetheless, while the H-V model is a valuable contribution, it is also a problematic, if not contentious one. It could only have originated from somebody willing to tackle big questions and to theorize on an elevated level—a mark of Shelby's scholarship, as noted already—and it also, likewise, reflects his perspective on the philosophy of science. For many, and not least most moral philosophers or moral psychologists, the project of developing a general theory of (marketing) ethics would be too ambitious, a topic too fraught with uncertainty and complexity, if not impossible.

For marketing scholars of the generation schooled in the broad general theories of consumer behavior, such as the Engel, Blackwell and Kollat model and the Howard and Sheth model (both cited in chapter 12), the approach to describing ethical decision making in the H-V model is familiar if not self-evidently appropriate as an approach. For moral philosophers, however, it appears to suggest the troubling prospect of the “ought” becoming “is”. The core premise of the model is that the theories of moral philosophy are used by individuals in deciding how to respond to an ethical problem. As Hunt and Vitell wrote in their original *Journal of Macromarketing* paper (1993a, p. 761), “to the extent that people actually follow the normative theories... these concepts should be incorporated into any positive theory purporting to explain their behavior.” More recently, in chapter 12 (p. xxx [p. 143 in original]), they observe in describing how the model came into being: “If people actually followed the suggestions and advice of moral philosophers, it was reasoned, then integrating philosophers' deontological and teleological theories could provide a framework for a positive theory of ethics.”

Over thousands of years, moral philosophy has produced many ethical theories for the purpose of differentiating between good and bad or right and wrong conduct. While there are many ethical theories, most can be classified as either teleological (consequentialist) or deontological (duty-based). Under teleological or consequentialist theories, the morally right conduct would be the one that produces at least as good a ratio of good to bad consequences (e.g., in terms of welfare or utility) as any other course of action, including not acting at all. The most well-known consequentialist theory is utilitarianism, first developed by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) and familiar in its use of the criterion of “the greatest good for the greatest number”. Under deontological theories, the morally right conduct would be the one that is consistent with binding moral rules or duties, with consequences not considered to be of primary importance. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is a leading exponent of deontological reasoning.¹

¹ See Smith, Kimmel and Klein 2009 for a recent overview of both types of theory and for an application of moral philosophy theory to deception in consumer research.

So while it is the case that, at some level, the H-V model incorporates some of the major theories of moral philosophy, to say “if people actually followed” these theories is a big “if” for many people. These normative theories were not developed with this descriptive purpose and while they are surely not the preserve of moral philosophers, there is likely to be considerable doubt as to whether lay users will or can use the theories as intended, let alone whether they are adequately articulated within the model.

In chapter 12, Hunt and Vitell respond to concern about their use of normative ethical theory to develop a positive ethical theory. They state that the H-V model “is, indeed, a positive and not a normative theory of ethics” and make clear that it is “a process theory that explains and predicts phenomena in situations having ethical content” and that its “purpose is not to provide normative guidance” (p. xxx [p. 149 in original]). Noting that it is well accepted in the philosophy of science that there is no set procedure for discovering good positive theories, they suggest the proof of the pudding is in the eating—that the success of empirical research in better explaining ethical decision making on the basis of the H-V model is the critical consideration. Accordingly, it would seem the case that the H-V model has proved its worth on the basis of the “scores of studies that have used the H-V model as a theoretical foundation” (p. xxx [p. 147 in original]) and, more importantly, found support for the core model, i.e., individual use of both teleological and deontological reasoning (see review of empirical tests of the theory in chapter 12).

However, while empirical research might well support the claim that people give attention to both duties and consequences, this is not quite the same as saying they are using normative theories in the way proposed by moral philosophers and, of course, this is not exactly the claim made. We are also told that the theories are used as a “starting point” (p. xxx [p. 149 in original]) for positing a positive ethical theory. It is not being asserted that people do indeed make deliberate and conscious use of particular normative theories of ethics.

Concerns linger, however. It seems that the suggested use of the model, at least, is for normative as well as descriptive purposes, and in this sense it is *both* normative and positive. For example, Hunt and Laverie in chapter 10 discuss how students would be given the model in relation to an ethical scenario and invited to consider the relevant deontological norms and “asked to speculate on the consequences of each alternative to each stakeholder group” (p. xxx [p. 10 in original]).

Moreover, at the given level of aggregation, there remains much that is unspecified by the model. At its root, is the problem of how the two categories of ethical reasoning are weighed by the decision maker. Are both duties and consequences always considered or will this differ across individuals and situations? Some of the empirical research discussed in chapter 12 points to individual differences in weighting (e.g., relative to variables such as Machiavellianism), and managers are often said to rely heavily on consequentialist reasoning, but surely the characteristics of ethical situations and other factors also come into play. Where consequences are markedly severe for one or more stakeholders, decision makers may choose to give less attention to (some) deontological norms. Equally, when it comes

to the deontological norms, there are often multiple, salient but not necessarily consistent norms. For example, a salesperson might chose to deceive a customer about a factory production problem contrary to a duty to tell the truth because of a duty of loyalty to the company. The model is seemingly silent on how such conflicts might be weighed.

The level of abstractness of the model also calls into question whether it does indeed incorporate perspectives and concepts such as integrative social contracts theory, moral intensity or opportunity, as suggested in chapter 12 (p. xxx [pp. 144-147 in original]). It is not necessarily inconsistent with these concepts, but moral intensity, for example is not explicitly incorporated, though one might imagine how it could be. Similarly, one could imagine how one might augment the model with recent developments in thinking about stakeholders and stakeholder salience. Normative stakeholder theory suggests all stakeholders who can affect or are affected by the firm's activities should be given attention. At issue here is 'who counts'? Are stakeholders only to be given consideration if they can have an affect on the firm? What if they are affected by the firm's activities but are relatively powerless, as frequently is the case for many sweatshop workers in multinational company supply chains? (Smith, Drumwright and Gentile 2010). On a different note, how does research suggesting something akin to the automaticity of moral judgements potentially figure in the model? A growing body of research in moral psychology suggests that moral judgment in practice is intuitive—the result of quick, automatic evaluations rather than the outcome of moral reasoning that rationalist models predict (Haidt 2001). However, maybe to think in terms of augmenting the model is a mistake, that it is already sufficient in its account and does not require greater specificity to do its work. There is virtue in parsimony after all.

In conclusion, this commentary has both praised and criticized the H-V model. However, in looking at it from today's perspective, it is important to remember that theorizing in marketing and in moral psychology has advanced significantly over the last 25 years. While there may be much that we might ask of a model of ethical decision-making today, there can be no mistaking the contribution of the H-V model in laying foundations for marketing ethics thinking over more than two decades, never mind Shelby's other work in the field.

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