Final version:

Nicholson, J.D., Lindgreen, A., and Kitchen, P.J. (2009), "Spatial and temporal transferability: structurationism as the relationship marketing meta-theory", *Qualitative Market Research*, Vol. 12, No. 2, pp. 187-207. (ISSN 1352-2752)

Spatial and Temporal Specificity and Transferability:

Structuration as *the* Relationship Marketing Meta-Theory

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Structured Abstract

Purpose - By examining the potential of structuration to serve as *the* relationship marketing meta-theory, this research applies pragmatic and practical perspectives to the transferability of research findings.

Findings - With the proposed model, relationship marketing researchers, using structuration theory, can recognize the temporal and spatial specificity—and thereby transferability—of interactions and relationships. Structuration is academically rigorous and pragmatic, because it avoids the distraction of the largely academic paradigm wars.

Research implications - By addressing the often-noted spatial and temporal limitations of relationship marketing research, this research responds to calls for longitudinal research. The model offers the potential for examining historical interactions and relationships to gain insight into the constraining and enabling forces of social structures.

Practical implications - The use of a multi-paradigm perspective is more pragmatic than a single paradigm investigation. Using structuration as that multi-paradigm perspective, a relationship marketing researcher can gain greater insight into the spatial and temporal specificity and transferability of research findings. Researchers thus may assess the limitations of implementing marketing practice on the basis of the findings they gain from one space and time context in a different space and time context.

Originality/value - An article discussing structuration is a rarity among marketing literature. This article is the first to outline the potential use of structuration as the meta-theory in relationship marketing research.

Keywords - Structuration; relationship marketing; meta theory; paradigm; specificity; transferability.

Paper type - Empirical; conceptual.

Introduction

Within the relationship marketing literature, the treatment of interactions and relationships across periods of extended time remains a sticky problem (Halinen and Törnroos, 1995: Morgan and Hunt, 1994: Nielson, 1998). We revisit and examine this temporal problem from a methodological perspective, using Giddens's (1979, 1984) theory of structuration. In doing so, we highlight the inadequacy of current treatments of extended temporality in relationship marketing research as a significant block to the transferability of findings from one space and time context to another. The failure to meet the criteria of temporal and spatial transferability represents a major barrier between research and practice in relationship marketing.

Giddens's (1979, 1984) theory of structuration generated much debate and contention at the time of its conception and immediately afterward. Since then, argument about the theory initially diminished, though it appears to have recommenced in earnest more recently. Since the early 1990s, increasing references to the theory and use of structuration appear within business disciplines. For example, structuration had received increasing attention from management researchers, particularly in the field of organization studies (Ellis and Mayer, 2001), such as volunteerism–determinism literature in strategic management (Child, 1972, 1997; Pozzebon, 2004; Whittington, 1988) and its extension to structuration (Jochoms and Rutgers, 2006; Whittington, 1992). Another example emerges from the IT discipline, which supports the structuration framework as a means to categorize data (Brooks, 1997; DeSanctis and Poole, 1994; Rose, 1998; Rose and Hackney, 2002; Rose and Scheepers, 2001; Walsham, 1998).

In contrast, structuration has received little attention in marketing (Ellis and Meyer, 2001). We intersperse our description of structuration theory with implicit examples from, and relevant to, marketing practice identified in contemporary articles. For example, within the marketing and public relations disciplines, limited evidence exists of the explicit use of structuration as an alternative to functionalism, apparently as a meta-theory to analyze specific public relations crisis situations (Durham, 2005; Rawlins and Stoker, 2002). Structuration also provides a critique of traditional mass communications theory (Olkkonen, Tikkanen, and Alajoutsijarvi, 2000), and Vallaster and Chernatony (2005) use it to examine the relationship between organizational structures and individual brand supporting behavior. Thus, after a period in which structuration seemed relatively unfashionable, a multi-disciplinary movement appears to be revisiting Giddens's theory as a framework for dealing with the duality of agents and the structures they create through their interaction, rather than as an alternate epistemological stance, as Giddens may have intended. We present an operationalization of structuration for research into relationship marketing and analyze the practical benefits derived from this approach.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: We revisit the advanced subjectivist critique of functionalism as the dominant research paradigm before challenging the apparent fortification of the interpretivist paradigm and, in so doing, highlight interpretivism's weaknesses when dealing with social structures. The review takes the arguments derived from these two points as a foundation to begin a more thorough examination of the debate between paradigm commensurability and incommensurability and plurality in business research. Subsequently, we examine the transition zone between functionalism and interpretivism; concomitantly, we introduce the meta-theory of structuration as a multi-paradigm approach to relationship marketing. The central purpose of this debate is to address the issue surrounding the spatial and temporal transferability of relationship marketing research findings made in one time and space context and then transferred and applied in another context. We conclude by presenting frameworks to operationalize our argument and discuss its advantages. Finally, we identify this study's theoretical and managerial contributions and suggest avenues for further research.

Paradigm Wars and Plurality

A paradigm can be defined as a world view in any given field (Aijo, 1996; Creswell, 1998) or viewing the world through a particular instrument such as a microscope (Mingers, 1997). Within business research, for example, Burrell and Morgan (1979) present various research schools of thought as a two-dimensional matrix—subjective–objective and radical change–regulation—which they regard as both contiguous and containing shared characteristics, though distinct enough to be regarded as four separate paradigms (Figure 1). These paradigms include the radical humanist, interpretivist, structuralist, and functionalist; for the purposes of this article, we base our discussion on functionalism and interpretivism. These paradigms fall within the sociology of regulation rather than that of radical change in Burrell and Morgan's (1979) classification. Furthermore, functionalism and interpretivism, respectively, may be distinguished along an objective-to-subjective continuum.

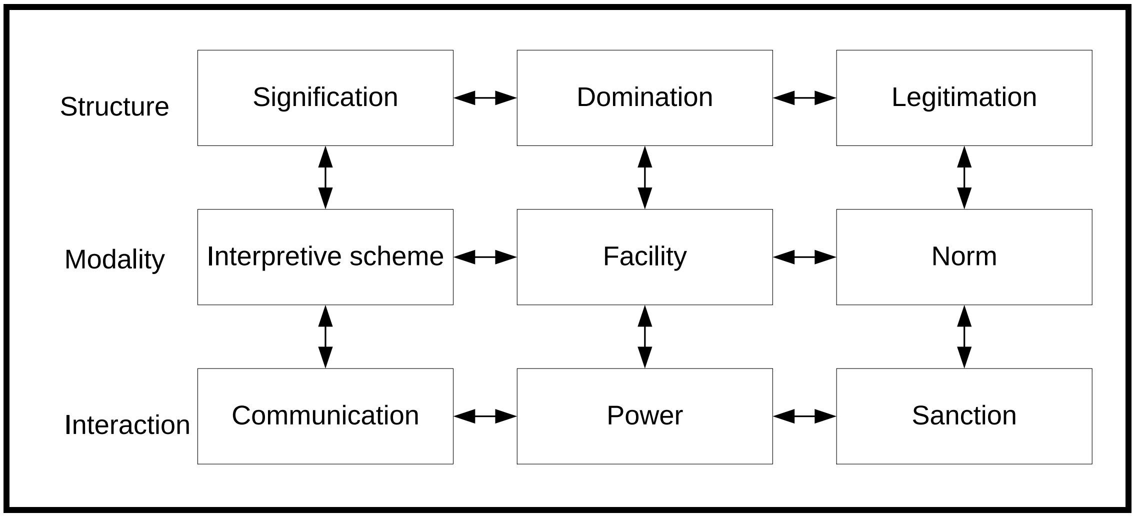

Figure 1: The dimensions of structuration

Source: Sydow and Windeler (1998: 271) adapted from Giddens (1984: 29).

Burrell and Morgan's (1979) stated intention was that their four paradigms could bind groups of researchers into ontological communities that would address the same problems. We observe and argue instead that early in a research career, a researcher elects, or is encouraged by peers, to take up permanent residence inside a single paradigm and immediately begins the process of boundary fortification. Many, mostly European authors argue that marketing has suffered from the dominance of the functionalist research paradigm, which is predicated on quantitative approaches (Fournier, Dobscha, and Mick, 1998, Gummesson, 1998, 2002). Yet interpretivism is better capable of uncovering the rich descriptions and insights of a firm, its environment, and strategy than the narrower functionalist tendency to enumerate frequencies (Beverland and Lindgreen, 2004).

The existence of a journal like *Qualitative Market Research*, perhaps driven by the more interpretivist European schools, confirms a body of opinion in favor of qualitative research for marketing research, including relationship marketing research grounded implicitly in the interpretivist paradigm but we acknowledge that as an alternative paradigmatic panacea, interpretivism also suffers from some weaknesses. Burrell (1999: 59) discusses the self-appointed role of the central members of a ruling orthodoxy that define a discipline, namely, to "suppress dissent within the state's boundaries and restore law and order." Those who uphold such laws he refers to as "Paradigm Walsinghams," after Sir Francis Walsingham, the spymaster for Queen Elizabeth I; those who oppose the laws are "Paradigm Warriors." The danger of a paradigmatic boundary fortification over plurality remains as much a debate for those who seek to fortify the interpretivist paradigm against attack as it does for those seeking to defend the functionalist paradigm. We believe that an overriding weakness of the interpretivist paradigm, and one seldom addressed in marketing literature, is that it accounts well for human agency but does not address social structures (Sydow and Windeler, 1998; Walsham and Han, 1991). In addition, it is reasonable to ask whether relationship marketing theorists can create interactions and plurality between research paradigms, rather than perpetuate the paradigmatic coexistence of research schools in a state of "disinterested hostility" (Burrell and Morgan, 1979: 36). We argue that plurality in research designs—involving a combination of the most contextually appropriate perspectives—has far more practical merit than the largely academic paradigm wars.

The incommensurability thesis further proposes that one researcher cannot legitimately operate inside more than one research paradigm at any given time. In support of Burrell and Morgan's assertion that paradigms exist in a state of "disinterested hostility," other authors have settled on the belief that research paradigms are incommensurable (Jackson and Carter, 1991, 1993). In this belief system, there appears to be "no common measure between paradigms of inquiry so that the representatives of opposed paradigms live in different worlds, hold mutually exclusive beliefs, and use different vocabularies" (Weaver and Gioia, 1994: 565). Incommensurability has two dimensions: semantic (incommensurability of meaning) and axiological (incommensurability of goals and underlying values) (see Anderson, 1986; Noteboom, 2004). An assumption that plurality and incommensurability are semantically antonymic or theoretically contraposed could not pass uncontested by commentators. Some authors assert that the four paradigms actually act as guardians of plurality; their distinct status ensures that no one paradigm can dominate (Jackson and Carter, 1991). A researcher therefore is left to search for an alternative argument through which permeable boundaries might, in contrast, create pluralism in research approaches.

Multi-Paradigm Perspectives and Pragmatism

Marketing has been criticized as weak in theory; in response, an argument that marketing is an applied discipline has attempted to defend marketers from this accusation and promote their superiority, in the sense that marketers represent worthy pragmatists pursuing the interests of practitioner stakeholders, compared with other academic stakeholders who demand theoretical rigor (Burton, 2005). Other authors advocate that good marketing theory should begin by considering epistemology and be grounded in an appropriate ontology to make effective connections between theory and practice (Hackley, 1999). Electing to reside within a single paradigm may be one way to fulfill this epistemological and ontological imperative while simultaneously remaining a pragmatist. Alternatively, multi-paradigm perspectives have been advocated as acceptance that the boundaries between paradigms are blurred and mediated by others (Giddens, 1976) and that plurality occurs when researchers cross paradigm boundaries (Weaver and Gioia, 1994). Multi-paradigm perspectives thus offer the potential of plurality by "creating fresh insights because they start from different ontological and epistemological assumptions" (Weaver and Gioia, 1994: 568). Still other authors argue that a search for alternative perspectives to the incommensurability thesis remains essential to ensure diversity in organizational enquiry (Mingers, 1997).

Beginning in the 1990s, belief in incommensurability began to break down, and the debate turned to pluralism (Mingers, 1997). Through this process, an "ecumenical spirit" (Brocklesby, 1997: 189) between paradigms arguably emerged. Practitioners may be more inclined than academics to operate across different paradigms, without necessarily needing to justify this plurality in either ontological or epistemological terms (Brocklesby, 1997). There is a sense, therefore, that multi-paradigm perspectives are pragmatic and practical but risk abandoning academic rigor and philosophical foundations. Concomitantly, the paradigm wars may represent a significant barrier between research and practice. Scherer and Steinmann (1999: 524) allude to the abandonment of the practitioner in the midst of these paradigm wars, commenting that "this situation would be extremely awkward, if one were to stand by the claim that it is the task of science to support practice by supplying suitable suggestions to help problem solving[.…] In practice, a pluralism of conflicting orientations has to be overcome, as practical actions will finally require unambiguity and a synthesis of contrasting views." That is, marketing research requires a balance between too much theory and too much pragmatism. For marketers, the resulting equilibrium must defend the discipline from accusations of being theory weak but also maintain consideration of the essential interests of the practitioner stakeholder (Starkey and Madan, 2001).

The remaining, significantly relevant, pragmatic question thus asks: How can one conduct a multi-paradigm investigation? This article attempts to answer that question. To navigate through to our central theme of translating relationship marketing theory into practice, we introduce the source for what we propose as a pluralistic, multi-paradigm solution, that is, Giddens's theory of structuration. We have noted the limited discussion of structuration in marketing literature; it therefore seems appropriate to outline the principles of structuration and juxtapose examples of relationship marketing theory against the elements that constitute structuration theory. We outline structuration theory next and then move to develop an argument that structuration should be positioned as *the* meta-theory for relationship marketing problems.

The Theory of Structuration

Giddens's (1979, 1984) insights into the social world are indisputably thought provoking, but he employs a linguistic athleticism that provides a significant barrier to brief elucidation and explanation. We therefore intend to provide only sufficient applied insight into the structuration theory to illuminate the closing debates. Giddens argues that individuals and society should be reconceptualized as the duality of agency and structure, "two concepts that are dependent on each other and recursively related" (Rose and Hackney, 2002: 2), or essentially are inseparable. Structuration is an "emergent property of ongoing action" (Barley, 1986: 79) and an approach that caters to the "essentially sociological character of alliances and business interaction" (Faulkner and De Rond, 2000: 23). Structuration theorists focus on connections between human action, in the form of structuring activities, and established social structures (Gioia and Pitre, 1990).

The concept of structure in this sense entails the "patterned regularities and processes of interaction" (Ranson, Hinings, and Greenwood, 1980: 1) and "the rules and resources people use in interaction" (Riley, 1983: 415). Structures provide the "binding of time and space in social systems" (Jochoms and Rutgers, 2006: 395). Structuration also may represent the "configuration of relations in an institutional environment" (Noteboom, 2004: 70). Therefore, the structural properties of social systems are "both mediums and outcomes of practices that constitute these systems" (Giddens, 1979: 69). Essentially, structures are the basis and the result of interaction.

Agency or structuring activities are "institutional practices that shape human actions which in turn reaffirm or modify the institutional structure" (Barley, 1986: 80). Giddens (1984: 9) discusses structuring activities as "events of which the individual is a perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct have acted differently. What happened next would not have happened if that individual had not intervened."

The related dialectic of volunteerism versus determinism appears frequently in strategic management literature (Child, 1972, 1997; Pozzebon, 2004; Whittington, 1988). Agency involves the free choice and volition of conscious human actors in society, though the notion of conscious volition requires further elucidation. Giddens (1979) proposes that consciousness consists of discursive and practical conciousness, such that practical consciousness entails an implict consciousness drawn on in certain circumstances, whereas discursive consciousness refers to things that can be put into words. In a narrative, discursive consciousness best defines the conscious agency of sentient actors in interactions. Agency represents a central concept in the IMP Group's (2002) interaction perspective. According to the theory of structuration, agency gets identified through the mediums of communication and power and the sanctioning of behavior. Yet accessing the practical consciousness of informants in most interpretivist investigations has proved difficult, especially through the structurationist reference to interpretive schemes, facilities, and norms (Figure 1). Identifying such interpretive schemes can reveal practical consciousness and therefore sensitize the researcher to the existence of social structures in the form of rules of signification, legitimation, and the facilities of domination. We attempt to demonstrate the recursive interplay among structures, modalities, and interaction by contextualizing the theory with implicit and explicit examples from relationship marketing literature and other literature from outside the discipline.

Sanctions, Norms, and Legitimation

Sanctioning behavior is a category of interaction or agency through which behavior gets encouraged or discouraged, potentially through the application of reward, penalty, coercion, and inducement. The interplay between interaction and modalities is analogous to going for a walk (Giddens, 1979): Going for a a walk is appropriate according to the normative sanctions, as well as the laws and power structures, of society. Norms are "suitable for articulating and sustaining what they [actors], in a particular context, consider right and wrong" (Ellis and Mayer, 2001: 195). Therefore, the acceptability of going for a walk on the pavement at a certain time is sanctioned with reference to the norms prevailing in that contextual space; these norms often may be identified as a prevailing culture that indicates how dangerous it normally is to walk alone at night, what volume of conversation normally is acceptable while walking at night, and so on. An even more helpful metaphor comparing the relevance of sanctioning behavior and norms to relationship marketing involves the gift cycle. Mauss (1954 [1924]) presents an anthropological study of the rituals of many societies with respect of gift giving and receiving, including three obligations in the gift cycle: giving, receiving, and repaying. These obligations also appear in the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), or the cultural expectation of the normal level of reciprocation for a gift received. The level and timing of this reciprocation must be sanctioned with reference to the norms of society, which is what Giddens (1979) calls the theory of normative regulation.

An interpretivist researcher instead may discern that "at any point in time, the agent could have acted otherwise" (Giddens, 1979: 56), but this conceptualization misses the constraining structural force of the rules of legitimation. Legitimation according to Giddens (1979) refers to the process by which involvement becomes socially legitimated in reference to established norms of behavior that "are those which, in the [agent's] view, are suitable for articulating and sustaining what they, in a particular context, consider right or wrong" (Ellis and Mayer, 2001: 195). Norms also may represent the spirit of social interaction, such that "while the letter of the law can be described in objective terms, the spirit [of the law] is more open to competing interpretations" (DeSanctis and Poole, 1994: 126-127). In turn, we argue that this spirit of interaction lies within the practical consciousness of actors. Bourdieu (1990) further suggests that an interpretivist approach ignores aspects of culture that might drive the gift cycle, specifically, those societal norms that compel and constrain reciprocity in the gift cycle, or habitus, "a generative schema in which the forms of elemental social structures come, through the process of socialism, to be embodied in individuals, with the result that people necessarily act in such a way that the underlying structures are reproduced and given effect" (Nash, 1999: 177).

Figure 2 presents our conceptualization of both habitus and structuration in the context of Burrell and Morgan's (1979) four paradigms.

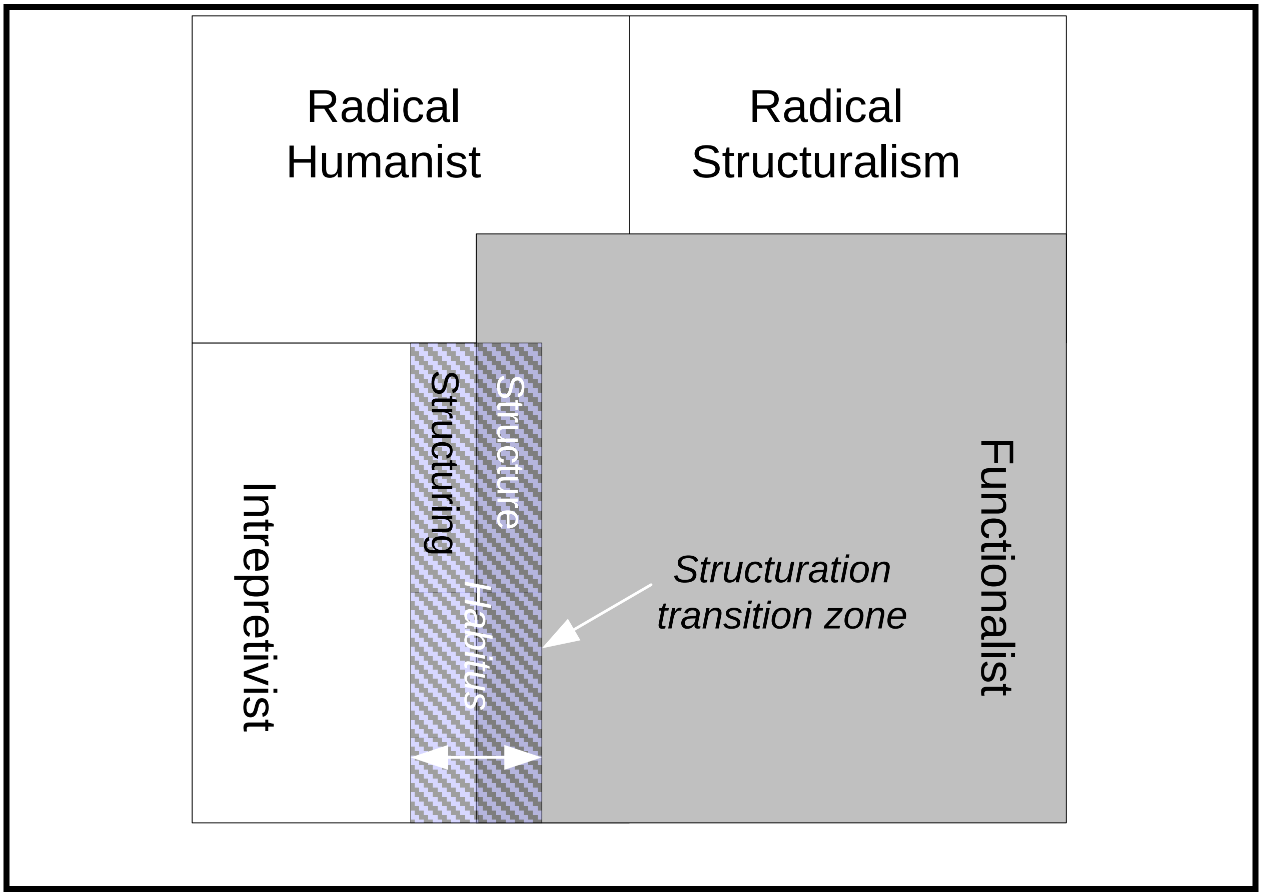

Figure 2: Structuration and habitus

Source: Adapted from Burrell and Morgan (1979) and Gioia and Pitre (1990).

Relational exchange norms (Heide and John, 1992) are central to understanding relational exchange and interaction, because the normal way to do things in a business relationship may be socially determined (Turnbull, Ford, and Cunningham, 1996) by the norms of behavior set by family members, peer groups, government, religion, employers, or even marketers (Sheth and

Parvatiyar, 1995). Interpretivist research could miss the constraining and enabling forces inherent in these norms and view actions as the result of individual, voluntaristic behavior, identified with reference to elucidated discursive consciousness. Relational embeddedness refers to the "the interdependence between social relations, exchange of resources, and combination of resources in the relationship" (Andersson, Holm, and Johanson, 2007: 35). When relational embeddedness occurs, firms likely share values, in which case reciprocation occurs relative to an actor's practical consciousness. Actors reciprocate according to habit, which gets established through constant references to norms over extended periods. The use of the structuration framework proposed herein therefore may help reveal the existence of behavioral norms without sacrificing the richness and depth of qualitative research.

Power, Facility, and Domination

Consider again Giddens's (1979) analogy of walking along the side of the road. The habit of giving priority to certain age groups or genders depends partially on the normative values of society but also is sanctioned by laws and power structures. Jaywalking, for example, is a punishable crime in many countries but remains a more normative sanction in others. Giddens (1979: 93) defines power as "the capability of actors to secure outcomes where the realization of these outcomes depends on the agency of others." The power to structure a situation is unlikely to be distributed symmetrically among actors in any situation but rather "is a man made instrument … made by men in proportion to their power in a given situation" (Gouldner, 1955: 27). Giddens (1979: 91) clarifies the definition of power as a volitional act when he proposes that "the powerful person could have acted otherwise in deploying their power [but didn't], the person against whom that power was deployed would have acted otherwise had the powerful person not chosen to exercise their power."

In marketing, power becomes manifest as differential access to scarce and essential resources, or information asymmetry. A conscious actor uses his or her volition to deploy or withhold the deployment of that power in a given circumstance. In relationship marketing research, power deployment often stands in contrast to relational approaches, in which an actor should experience the relationship as balanced or symmetrical (Rokkan and Haughland, 2002). Asymmetrical relationships involve less stability and more conflict, and the volitional deployment of power in relationship marketing literature appears as the phenomenon of opportunistic behavior (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Too, Souchon, and Thirkell, 2001; Wathne and Heide, 2000), such that "specific forms of long-term oriented co-operation between—in formal terms—independent firms imply important advantages which would neither occur simply on the basis of purely opportunistic behavior and short-term orientations nor would they arise from structures of central control and organizational integration" (Bachmann, 2001: 337)

Power therefore facilitates one partner’s opportunistic behavior, and the failure to behave opportunistically, if the opportunity exists, breeds trust (Friman et al., 2002; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Demonstrable patterns of trusting behavior over time help encourage perceived trustworthiness among agents (Blois, 1999; Zineldin, 1998). Despite considerable variance in the definition and characteristics of trust (e.g., Ali and Birley, 1998; Doney, Cannon, and Mullen, 1998; Faulkner and De Rond, 2000), interdisciplinary agreement suggests that trust is neither behavioral nor a choice but rather an underlying psychological condition that results from experience and interaction over time (Rousseau et al., 1998). In this sense, trust is a social structure.

The structural properties of resources that enable domination refer to the "means of production like information technology, knowledge, (access to) relations with other economic actors etc" (Sydow and Windeler, 1998: 271). For example, information asymmetry between buyers and sellers means that one partner in a dyad may gain ascendancy over the other during negotiations (Stewart and Pavlou, 2002). Communication tends to be asymmetrical, from the dominating to the dominated partner (Ford and Thomas, 1995), which represents the theory of authorization and allocation (Giddens, 1979), such as might occur in the asymmetry of information between top management and sales staff (Vallaster and Chernatony, 2005). Possession of or access to resources of domination greatly facilitates opportunistic behavior and can enable free riding (Rokkan and Haughland, 2002). Relationship marketing literature argues that the failure to deploy power, in a context of asymmetric power, engenders relationship trust. Similarly, granting access to resources over time can encourage trust and engender commitment (Friman et al., 2002, Morgan and Hunt, 1994).

Through the modality of contextual and individual facilities, powerful agents dominate—whether with "money, information, codified knowledge, means of production, or other agents" (Sydow and Windeler, 1998: 271). The process of networking represents an "attempt by the focal firm to create access channels to sources of resources, competencies and capabilities and to manage these access channels once created" (Cunningham and Culligan, 1991 [1988]: 510). Access in these terms therefore is a crucial facility, and the role of a strategic network center, focal firm, network captain, or manager becomes a facilitator of access (Campbell and Wilson, 1996; Koopenjan and Klijn, 2004; Lorenzoni and Baden-Fuller, 1995). The network center may withhold or grant access as a powerful sanction or facilitate action, as sanctioned by the norms of the network. Trust then is an enabling structure that offers access to certain facilities, which recursively reinforces the trustworthiness of the actors. Reciprocity becomes the norm rather than a means of deploying opportunistic power.

Communication, Interpretive Scheme, and Signification

As a structuring process, communication refers to the "formal as well as informal sharing of meaningful and timely information between firms" (Anderson and Narus, 1990: 44); it also provides a mediating variable for successful partnerships (Mohr and Spekman, 1994), and for establishing and maintaining trust and trusting relationships between businesses, customers, and consumers that develop and strengthen barriers to competitive entry (Anderson and Narus, 1990; Friman et al., 2002; Kitchen, 2003; Lindgreen, 2008; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). In a structurationist sense, communication "reflexively appl[ies] interpretive schemes and draws[s] upon rules of signification" (Sydow and Windeler, 1998: 271). The role of communication, according to structuration theory, is bi- rather than uni-directional, as in a traditional one-way communications model; notably, the "lack of two-way communication between equal partners hampers … the dependent actor's responses to the dominating actor's initiatives" (Rokkan and Haughland, 2002: 215). However, the idea of dependent and dominant actors gradually is being supplanted by equality and reciprocity in the context of relationship marketing (Kitchen and de Pelsmacker, 2004).

Context-rich communication might include relational communication, which is literally communication about relationships. Relational communication "has to do with how the message is intended and serves, therefore, to define the relationship between … actors" (Soldow and Thomas, 1984: 84). We argue that relational communication provides an interpretive scheme that makes sense of the context in which the communication takes place, as well as the communication itself. Relationship marketing literature also considers the notion of relationship atmosphere (Hallén and Sandström, 1991), which comprises an example of a diachronic relationship phenomenon (Håkansson, 1982), in that the "influence of structural conditions [structure] on actions [agency] can be seen as mediated through this [relationship] atmosphere" (Hallén and Sandström, 1991: 110). The atmosphere gets "reinforced and empowered by spatial and cultural proximity" (Cova, Mazet, and Salle, 1998: 206), and communication is central. We propose that according to structuration, two-way communication in a specific space and time context enables actors to build stocks of tacit knowledge that then serve as interpretive schema. Communications over extended periods enable actors to make sense of a given space and time context and build lasting and trusting relationships.

The structural rules of signification or sense making (De Rond, 2003) "restrict and enable agents to make sense of the context they act in and to communicate this meaning to others" (Sydow and Windeler, 1998: 271). Rules of signification include syntagmatic statements and semiotics and amount to what Giddens (1979) calls the theory of coding. Access to semiology occurs through the use of metaphor by respondents in a narrative. For example, verbal structures include "myths, metaphors, jokes, legends, names and rumours" (Riley, 1983: 419); these metaphors also "presuppose a great deal of common knowledge on the part of those who are supposed to understand them" (Storper and Venables, 2002: 19). Metaphors often appear when the consciousness being deployed is practical rather than discursive. Another example of semiology relevant to marketing pertains to visual branding and overall corporate visual design; the interplay between the rules of signification and the rules of domination occurs through prescription about the levels of creativity allowed to staff members to alter signs or logos (Vallaster and Chernatony, 2005).

Contextual factors both affect and are affected by communication. The modality of interpretative schemes typically gets taken for granted by organizational members (Ranson, Hinings, and Greenwood, 1980), who draw from "standardised elements of stocks of knowledge" (Giddens, 1979: 83) in their culturally constituted world (Shimp, 2007), which means those elements are context specific. The importance of stocks of knowledge even increases in non-routine marketing situations that require more specialized knowledge and expertise. The more turbulent the context, the more specialized the marketing knowledge and the greater the need to understand the dynamics of the served markets toward which communications are directed (Vorhies, 1998). Because of its intermediate status, between market and hierarchy, a network provides a volatile context. We broadly propose that context may be temporally specific to a market, industry, organization, department, or person, at a specific time and place, so "relationships and networks therefore cannot be understood without having knowledge of the communication processes occurring within them, and communication processes can be understood only if the situational factors are considered" (Olkkonen, Tikkanen, and Alajoutsijarvi, 2000: 405). In a structurationist sense, the context of the communication can take on greater significance than the message content, due to specific stocks of knowledge contained within the specific time and space contexts.

Pluralism and Structuration

We draw on many examples of relationship structure and structuring activities and seek to demonstrate that structuration can be applied retrospectively and usefully to existing relationship marketing theory, which offers fresh insight into long-term interactions. Having established the potential to use structuration, we seek to complete our argument by establishing that relationship marketing theorists who examine interactions and relationships over extended periods should use it. We previously argued for the consideration of multi-paradigm approaches in relationship marketing research; we now briefly revisit this discussion to juxtapose structuration theory with the commensurability/incommensurability debate.

The distinction between theory and theories should acknowledge that "a 'theory' [is] a generic category and 'theories' [are] explanatory generalisations" (De Cock and Richards, 1995: 699). Weaver and Gioia (1994) argue pluralism can apply only to theories; structuration stands as a theory or meta-theory, and for structuration to be pluralistic, it must be stripped of its ontological foundation (De Cock and Richards, 1995). In such a philosophically disrobed state, structuration cannot stand as meta-theory. Weaver and Gioia (1995) therefore place structuration as *the* meta-theory rather than *a* meta-theory. As *the* meta-theory, structuration offers plurality by being ontologically grounded in both the functionalist and the interpretivist paradigms. The practical application of structuration as *the* meta-theory is evident in various articles (Riley, 1983). More narrowly focused, single-methodology examinations can be valid when a relationship marketing situation remains stable across a shorter period of time. However, as *the* meta-theory, structuration addresses the previously discussed weaknesses of the interpretivist paradigm in addressing social structures over extended periods. Structure, to the structurationist researcher, occurs through the practical consciousness of respondents in a narrative; we propose a model with which to create this access.

The debate between paradigm commensurability and incommensurability remains contentious and doubtless will continue to rage, but it is not our intention to further this debate here. We note, however, the significant scope for further discussion of methodological plurality in relationship marketing research. We also identify the absence of such a pluralistic perspectives as a significant gap in current relationship marketing literature. In this article, we advance the mature argument in favor of paradigm commensurability and consider it from the perspective of relationship marketing.

Relationship Marketing Time and Space

Levitt (1983: 88) notes that "more and more of the world's economic work gets done through long-term relationships between sellers and buyers," with increasing appreciation that the "axioms of relationship marketing offer better explanations of the nature of marketing practice than do those based on the transactional approach" (Coviello and Brodie, 1998: 171). Some authors posit that a relationship requires a long, ongoing process (Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh, 1987). Relational exchange also may account for the social and historical context in which an exchange takes place (Rokkan and Haughland, 2002), and relationship marketing may represent a cultural construct (Hibbard et al., 2001). Culture entails a historical concept; different cultures may prevail and affect buyer–seller interactions (Palmer, 2000) or interactions at a social level.

Cross-sectional, short-term studies into relationship marketing phenomena remain in the overwhelming majority (O'Driscoll, 2006; Palmatier, Dant, and Grewal, 2007), though researchers also recognize the need for longitudinal studies that clarify these cross-sectional data (Arnett, German, and Hunt, 2003; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Nielson, 1998; Selnes, 1998; Winklhofer, Pressey, and Tzokas, 2006). Calls for dynamic and processual studies more grounded in a historical context also appear in various papers (Beverland and Lindgreen, 2004; Ravald and Grönroos, 1996; Ring and Van De Ven, 1994).

This need for a greater awareness of extended temporality represents the area in which the deployment of structuration could aid insight and theory building. Relationship marketing situations arguably take place in space and time, and many theories pertain to the nature of time and temporality. We draw on the notion of relational time (Halinen, 1998; Halinen and Törnroos, 1995), which conceptualizes time as bound to the past, present, and future and related to the culture and space that surrounds the interaction; relational time also is context specific. Figure 3 presents a representation of how the theory of structuration might be integrated as the meta-theory with the theory of relational time.

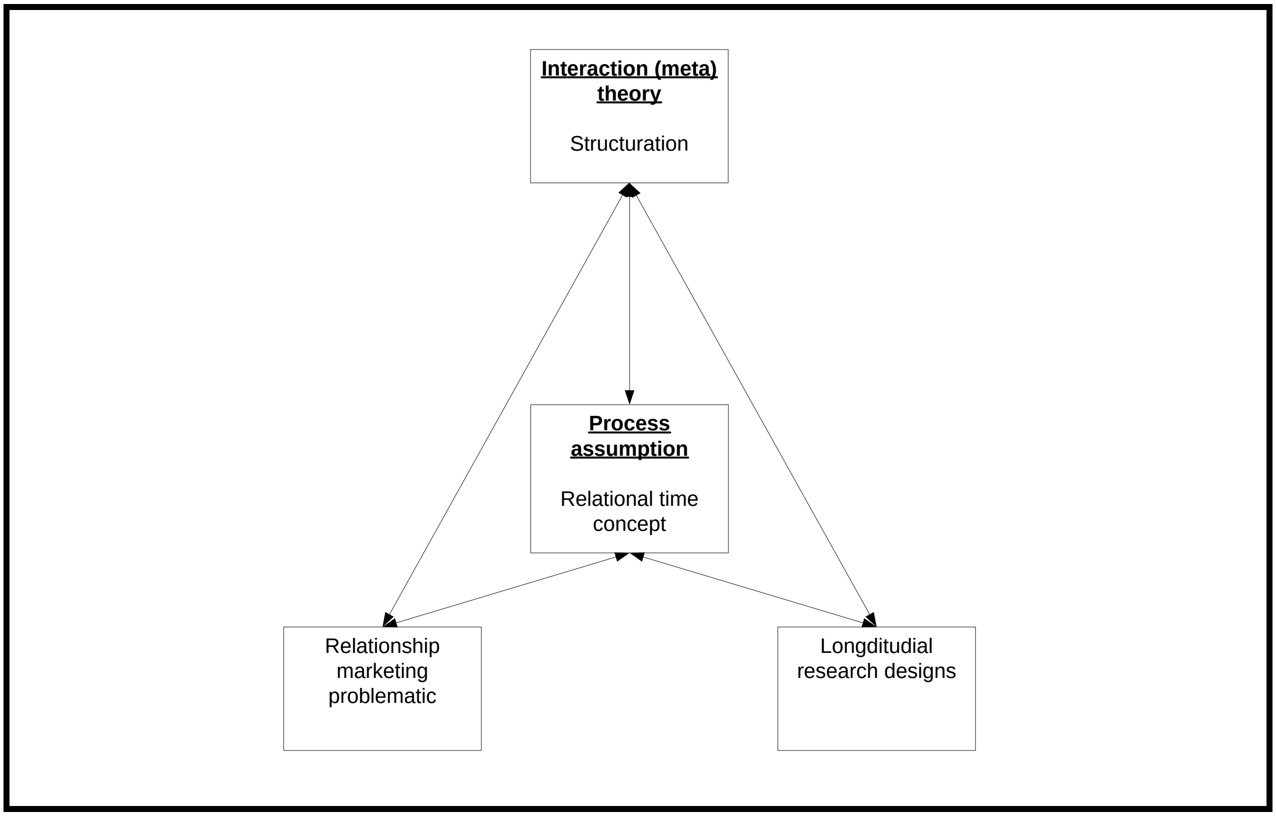

Figure 3: Relationship time and structuration as meta theory

Source: Adapted from Halinen and Törnroos, 1995.

Because relationship variables change over time, cross-sectional research risks "overgeneralizing and lumping very different dyads together" (Halinen and Törnroos, 1995: 510). The greater the extension of temporality, the less transferable the findings become; in turn, "structural-functional research which states that this is how things always have been, or will be, is untenable" (Weaver and Gioia, 1995: 705). We argue that lessons from one atmosphere cannot necessarily transfer to others due to the different constraining and enabling forces in that different relationship atmosphere, in which the volunteered actions of agents change the atmosphere over time. Some authors adopt a decompositional approach (Singh et al., 2005) to study relationship marketing and examine one phenomenon, such as a customer, in isolation from another phenomenon, such as the market or society as a whole. A structurationist approach does not decompose or disaggregate phenomena but rather views social structures and the volitional acts of agents as inseparable. Calls for cross-sectional research certainly are valid, but such research still may fail because of its single paradigmatic myopia that causes it to miss the potential pluralism of structuration. More succinctly, action should be considered only in reference to structure and structure only in reference to agents and agency (Sydow and Windeler, 1998). In turn, we propose structuration as a logical compliment to the relational time concept outlined in Figure 3.

Operationalizing the Meta-Theory

We summarize four contiguous points before moving on to our conclusion so that we may address the core theme of this special edition, namely, theory into practice. The potential lack of synchrony between relationship marketing theory and practice, as noted in other publications, may be only skin deep (Egan, 2001).

The functionalist paradigm is inappropriate, in isolation, for gaining genuine insights into relationship marketing problems. The lens through which researchers within the functionalist paradigm view the world is largely synchronic and misses the impact of extended temporality, such as that inherent in the relational time concept. It is not difficult to argue this point in this journal, giving this claim the air of preaching to the choir. Yet this argument remains an important stepping stone on the way to challenging the more sensitive subject of the apparently increasing crenellation of the boundaries of the interpretivist paradigm. Interpretivist isolationism thus is the second point we highlight. In our third point, we challenge this interpretivist isolationism through the medium of the incommensurability/commensurability debate. Relationship marketing researchers who rely on the interpretivist paradigm pursue more longitudinal studies than do functionalists, but they remain a minority compared with cross-sectional interpretivist studies. Those longitudinal interpretivist studies that exist betray their limited explicit references to social structures. Implicitly, they recognize structures, including the examples we present in our outline of the theory of structuration, which constitutes our fourth point of consideration. That is, the impact of social structures in a relationship marketing context remains largely overlooked in current theory. Therefore, our final point pertains to the potential efficacy of multi-paradigm perspectives in the pursuit of genuine insights into relationship marketing interactions. We focus on the core theme of theory into practice by highlighting evidence that indicates plurality in research design is more pragmatic and less academic. We also introduce the theory of structuration as *the* multi-paradigm meta-theory that can deal with historically grounded phenomena, such as those prevalent in relationship marketing problems, and thus must present our approach for operationalizing structuration in this context.

Criticisms of Giddens's work claim it does not provide a viable epistemology (Hekman, 1990) and or a "concrete empirical example," such that it offers "few clues as to how to proceed in the everyday world in the gathering of useful understanding, and it's reflection back on the world of practice" (Rose and Scheepers, 2001: 5). In essence, this point amounts to a valid critique of how to perform structurationist research in the same way one might do functionalist and interpretivistic research—a critique we seek to address. We support the assertion that Giddens's work is "manifestly well constructed and well respected" (Rose and Scheepers, 2001: 6) and offers an intellectual grounding for examining the research subject, with the promise of revealing original insights unavailable through a purely interpretivistically or positivistically grounded method of investigation. However, we further propose that structuration theory may be viewed and utilized as a "meta-theory within which to locate, interpret and illuminate other approaches" (Walsham and Han, 1991: 81). For example, De Rond (2003) uses structuration theory as a narrative approach and empirical platform in his recent examination of alliances.

Structuration addresses two practical considerations: temporal and spatial transferability. Cross-sectional research findings offer weak transferability from one contextual setting to another. In a similar sense, Giddens (1979) proposes that both functionalism and structuralism attempt to exclude time–space intersections in favor of synchrony, but by using the structuration framework, a researcher might gain greater diachronious access to relationship marketing phenomena. The framework enables an interpretivist researcher to pursue longitudinal and historically grounded research with the traditional tools of depth interviews and case studies. With the structuration framework conceived of as a series of categories or codes, an interpretivist researcher might categorize modalities (interpretive schemes, modalities, and norms) and points of interaction (communication, power, and sanction.). The identification of these modalities and points of interaction turns them into sensitizing devices to bring social structures (rules of legitimation, domination, and signification) into focus, a process some research refers to as interpretive structuring investigation (Riley, 1983). The interpretivist researcher moves into ontologically different terrain, crossing the paradigm boundary and ensuring pragmatism and plurality in research findings. We conceptualize this process in Figure 4.

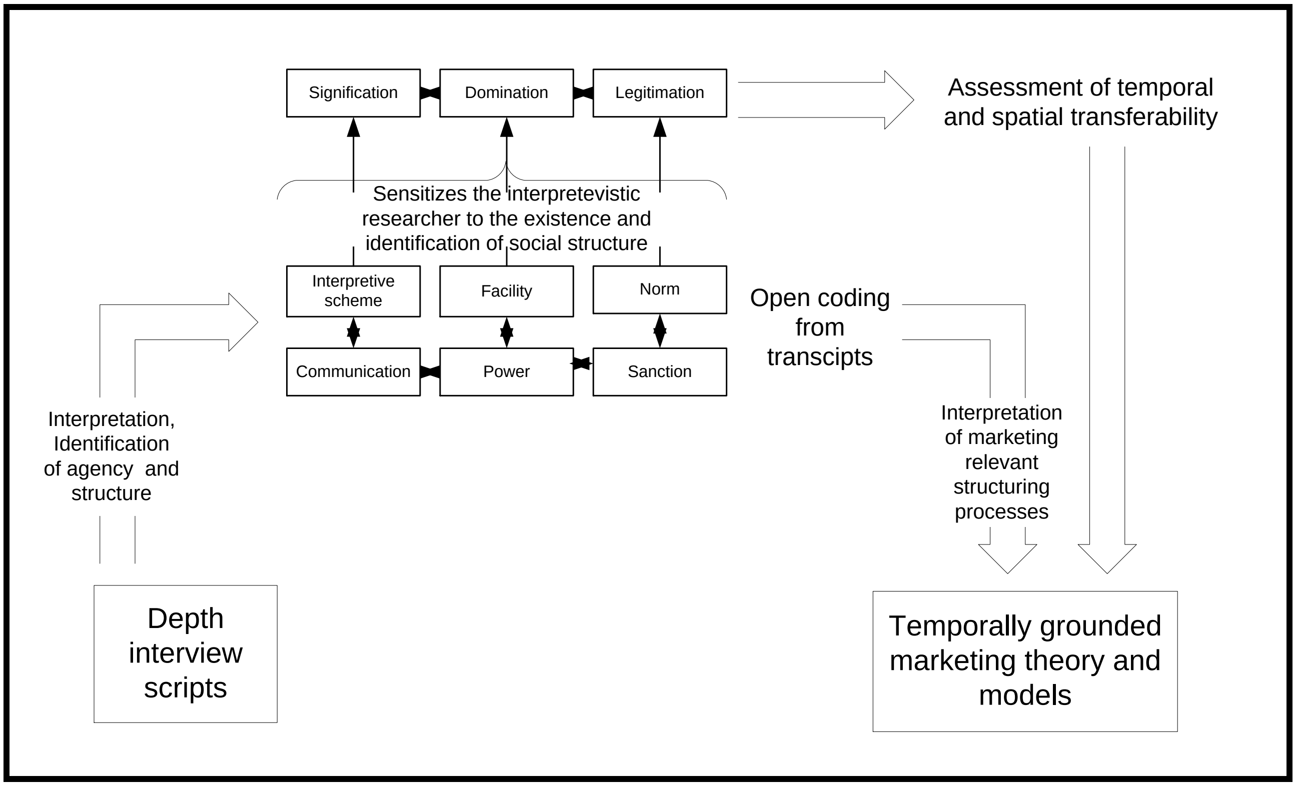

Figure 4: Operationalizing structuration for relationship marketing research

Figure 4 thus highlights a possible model for the use of structuration. We do not advocate structuration as a replacement for all cross-sectional, single paradigmatic, longitudinal studies or triangulated or multi-method investigations. As the meta-theory, it can stand independently in many, or most, studies without explicitly reference. Researchers who possess historical data or a series of cross-sectional studies in a consistent context can access structuration. As a sensitizing device, the structuration framework provides a series of open codes. The interpretivist researcher can use these codes to identify modalities and interaction. In line with Giddens's (1979) assertion, this approach to coding offers significant potential as a relationship-sensitizing device. The evidence provided in structurational coding also can identify social structures and their enabling and constraining influences. That which remains, however, is the pragmatic question about the usefulness of understanding such structures. The notion of the temporal and spatial transferability of research findings helps answer that question. That is, qualitative research findings generally appear context specific, so the notion of transferability (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln and Guba, 1985) provides an alternative to the more functionalist notion of external validity. Transferability indicates that results should hold in some other context, including another time and another place. The categorization of relationship atmospheres into rules of signification, domination, and legitimation further enable the assessment of the constraining and facilitating influences of social structures in one environment and then a comparison to another environment.

Concluding Comments

Appropriately, the research approach outlined herein would benefit from time and agency. Scope remains to reexamine existing transcripts from previous studies to generate new insights. Through such collegial activity, a greater shared understanding of social structures and their impact on relationship interaction would develop. This effort would help refine the introduced tool and lead to more mature and burgeoning insights into relationship marketing phenomena.

Acknowledgments

The first two authors contributed equally.

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