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THEORIZING ABOUT RESOURCE INTEGRATION THROUGH SERVICE-DOMINANT LOGIC

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Abstract

Resource integration, as it relates to value creation, has recently been a key aspect of the discussions about service-dominant (S-D) logic. However, the majority of research pays relatively little explicit attention to the process of theorizing and the epistemological and ontological assumptions upon which the theorizing process is based. This article addresses these issues. The processes that relate to theorizing and developing strong theory are discussed. We then examine how to conceptualize 'resources' and 'resource integration' following differing ontological and epistemological assumptions that guide the theorizing process. Research recommendations to help navigate through the finer details underlying the theorizing process and to advance a general theory of resource integration are developed.

Keywords

Ontological/epistemological assumptions, resource integration, S-D logic, theorizing

Introduction

With service being perceived as the foundation of human economic exchange (Vargo and Lusch, 2008), understanding the role of resources, which are exchanged and integrated by specific actors in service systems becomes pivotal when utilizing service-dominant (S-D) logic to generate further insights into the process of theorizing. Within S-D logic, resource integration refers to how organizations, households, and/or individuals ‘ . . . integrate and transform micro-specialized competences into complex services that are demanded in the marketplace’, and which perform particular service system functions for a specific beneficiary or actor in the service system (Vargo and Lusch, 2008: 7). While intuitively useful, just how helpful is this definition of resource integration when it comes to extending theory from an S-D logic perspective?

While resource integration, as it relates to value creation and service systems, has received considerable attention in the academic literature in the last decade, these discussions have been framed in an S-D logic context only relatively recently. Our Google Scholar search identified a corpus of 7 articles addressing this emerging, integrative area in 2006, which was observed to grow to over 100 articles per year by 2012. However, careful scrutiny of these articles revealed that the majority were not well grounded in theory, paying relatively little attention to theorizing or the interface between relevant theoretical/empirical domains as well as the use of bridging, or middle range, theory (Brodie et al., 2011). Additionally, those articles, which did provide evidence of theorizing, paid little or no attention to the focal ontological assumptions upon which the theorizing process was based.

In particular, 15 articles were identified as having used the term ‘epistemology’ (or stemmed versions) and/or ‘ontology’ (or stemmed versions). Of these 15 articles, 12 referred to ontology and 9 referred to epistemology. Six referred to both ontology and epistemology. In six of the articles, ontology or epistemology is addressed only relatively superficially or in negative terms (e.g. it’s not present; Grönroos and Voima, 2013) or not needed (Purvis and Purvis, 2012). In five of the articles, there is an attempt or partial attempt to define (either explicitly or implicitly) ontology and/or epistemology. Only in four of the said articles either or both these terms are discussed extensively (i.e. Helkkula et al., 2012; Hilton et al., 2012; Löbner, 2011; Möller, 2013).

This article responds to the need for more explicit attention the process of theorizing or about the resource integration and the S-D logic and the ontology and/or epistemology. By drawing on Weick’s (1995) challenge that ‘what theory is not theorizing is’, we investigate how strong theory related to resource integration and S-D logic can be developed by adopting appropriate theorizing processes. Specifically, we develop a set of research implications, which may be used not only to facilitate the advancement of a general theory of markets and marketing but also to provide marketing scholars with recommendations, which may assist them when navigating through the finer details underlying the theorizing process.

In the next section, we proceed to discuss the concepts of ‘theory’ and ‘theorizing’, where we also focus on the processes contributing to the development of strong theory. In the third section, we define the concepts of ‘resources’ and ‘resource integration’, while in the fourth section, we address the ontological and epistemological assumptions guiding the theorizing process in the area of resource integration. This leads to research recommendations to help navigating through the finer details underlying the theorizing process and to advance a general theory of resource integration.

Theory and theorizing

Before delving into the nature of the theorizing process and the role of strong theory, we focus on the key question, ‘what is theory?’ Theories provide descriptions or explanations of observed processes or phenomena of interest through a series of constructs and associated interrelationships that explain how or why the observed processes or phenomena of interest occur (Gioia and Pitre, 1990; Lynham, 2002; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Therefore, theories allow ‘even if only probabilistically’, the prediction of the variability of an outcome of interest associated with the observed process or phenomena (Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan, 2007: 1281).

The most common definition adopted in the marketing discipline was proposed by Hunt (2010: 10), ‘Theories are systematically related sets of statements, including some law-like generalizations that are empirically testable’. Hunt (2010) describes his own resource-advantage theory as ‘. . . a general theory of competition that describes the *process* of competition’ (Hunt, 2013: 284). While having empirically testable, law-like generalizations may be considered a feature of general theoretical development, Hunt also recognizes the importance of the development of a scholarly understanding of the theorizing process. Hence for the purpose of this article, we adopt Gioia and Pitre’s (1990: 587) definition of ‘theory development’, ‘Theory is a statement of concepts and their interrelationships that shows how and/or why a phenomenon occurs’. Specifically, this conceptualization supports a theory development process commencing from description and explanation, followed by the development of a deeper understanding, which emanates from the application of focal concepts and their interrelationships to specific consequences and outcomes.

One of the most systematic theoretical discussions of resource integration within S-D logic is provided by Kleinaltenkamp et al. (2012). In their essay, the authors adopt the more general theoretical perspective of structuration theory to inform a general framework addressing resource integrators. Within this theoretical framework, resource integrators are viewed as actors with agency (individuals and organizations) using operant resources acting on operand resources in the resource-integration process. The authors address the key question of analysing both resource-integrative practices and the social structures within which these take place together, including that of agency, which is viewed as the ability of self-reflexive actors to act with choice (Archer, 2000). Based on a strong theoretical positioning, the authors’ framework contribute to fostering our understanding that there is still much to learn about the practice of resource integration as well as the design and configuration of the resource-integration process. Consequently, further work is needed to provide a foundation for the development of general theory in marketing.

In their discussion regarding the nature of theorizing, Sutton and Staw (1995) emphasize that theory does not simply comprise a collection of references, data, variables, diagrams and hypotheses. Weick (1995: 389) comments on Sutton and Staw’s (1995) assertion, stating that:

The process of theorizing consists of activities like abstracting, generalizing, relating, selecting, explaining, synthesizing, and idealizing. These ongoing activities intermittently spin out data, reference lists, data, lists of variables, diagrams, research questions and lists of hypotheses. Those emergent products summarize progress, give direction, and serve as place-markers. They have vestiges of theory but are not themselves theories. Then again, few things are full-fledged theories.

This assertion begs two main questions, including (1) what are the characteristics of ‘full-fledged’ theories and (2) How do these provide the foundation for a ‘strong’ general theory of markets and marketing? In their editorial titled ‘Enhancing Marketing Theory in Academic Research’, Stewart and Zinkhan (2006: 478, italics added) take a positivist perspective in outlining what they view as the hallmarks of strong theory. Specifically, they state, ‘Strong theory *resonates*, it shows *patterns of interconnectedness*, it provides *details about causal*

mechanisms, and it provides answers to the question ‘Why?’ . . . [Strong theory] captures and succinctly summarizes knowledge that is generalizable’.

This analysis would, hence, suggest that the interface between S-D logic and the concept of resource integration is currently at a nascent stage of development. We, therefore, take the view that further work on the development of a theory of resource integration would have the potential to meet the requirements of becoming a strong general theory. Since the publication of Vargo and Lusch’s (2004) seminal article in the *Journal of Marketing*, there is considerable evidence that S-D logic has *resonated* within the academic community, a feature we explore in further depth in our corpus analysis provided in the section on conceptualizing resources and resource integration. Evidence for this assertion is provided by the number of citations of this article, which currently exceeds 4400 (as of August 2013). In addition, S-D logic has stimulated a new stream of academic research, which has also been adopted by disciplines outside marketing, including service systems, organizational behaviour and information systems (e.g. Vargo et al., 2008).

The development of S-D logic over the last 9 years has also demonstrated the potential to meet the other hallmarks of strong general theory, including the investigation of patterns of interconnectedness between key concepts. For S-D logic one key concept, captured in the ninth foundational premise, which states that all economic actors are resource integrators, is the concept of resource integration. Therefore, in order to capture and succinctly summarize knowledge that is generalizable in relation to this concept, a step that would lead us to developing strong theory in relation to S-D logic (Stewart and Zinkhan, 2006) and to be able to investigate its interconnectedness to other key concepts in S-D logic, we suggest a greater focus on the theorizing process is required. In particular, theory development and empirical research interfacing the theoretical and empirical domains are needed. However, given that general theories are by definition, broad and relatively abstract in scope, an inherent difficulty exists regarding establishing a suitable interface between abstract general theories on the one hand and empirical research on the other (Hunt, 1983).

As Gioia and Pitre (1990: 591) state, ‘ . . . developing multi-paradigm approaches offers the possibility of creating fresh insights because they start from different ontological and epistemological assumptions and, therefore, can tap different facets of organizational phenomena and can produce markedly different and uniquely informative theoretical views of events under study’. This does, however, beg the problem of incommensurability, which represents an emerging issue in the face of an absence of empirically common meanings between different theoretical assumptions. Some researchers associated with a multiparadigm approach have, nevertheless, argued that the problem of incommensurability has been overstated. For example, Davies and Fitchett (2005: 286) state that:

the lasting legacy of the incommensurability debate is that it draws attention to, and demarks difference as a core feature of all disciplinary identity. Differences can be the source of conflict and power but also enhanced understanding. An uncritical adherence to the concept of incommensurability can be seen as placing somewhat artificial barriers around the exchange and discussion of research from studies in other paradigmatic camps. A generation of researchers has been trained to conceptualize research issues in terms of paradigmatic boundaries and to underplay their permeability and interrelation.

However, as Peters et al. (2013b) point out, the notion of blurred boundaries between ontologically differing paradigms put forward by Gioia and Pitre (1990) has been a popular driver of theory building for over 20 years. So why, they ask, do we still find that theory building is a practice fraught with fragmentation, disagreement and differentiation? Peters et al. (2013b: 337) suggest that ‘ . . . this is because attempts to mix and match different ontological perspectives may lead to situations where the fundamental basis of these paradigms could be

undermined (Easton, 2002). This does not mean that incommensurability is a state of nature (Hunt, [1983]2010), but that ontological perspectives have integrities that may be undermined if not understood and respected'. Therefore, while Gioia and Pitre (1990) maintain that the rationale behind the use of multiple paradigm analysis in the development of marketing theory is that it is believed to facilitate conversations across different research paradigms, Peters et al. (2013b) recognize that 'one of the challenges of living with the real is that ontologies are neither mutually exclusive, nor wholly encompassing' (Peters et al., 2013b: 337).

Therefore, while we build on the work of Gioia and Pitre (1990), we do not seek to integrate (or bridge) specific paradigms. Instead, we explore the concept of resource integration by means of comparing and contrasting differing ontological perspectives in order to develop an informed awareness of the respective contributions to knowledge generated by each of these different perspectives. Following on from our discussion of the theorizing process, we now undertake a systematic literature review in the area of resource integration for the purpose of exploring the nature of the focal theorizing processes used and the authors' choice of specific ontological paradigms. We have selected the concept of resource integration because it is one of the core concepts in S-D logic and constitutive in two of the four core fundamental premises. In foundation premise1 service is defined as 'the application of skills and knowledge', both of which are resources; and in foundation premise9 'all economic and social actors are considered as resource integrators'.

Conceptualizing resources and resource integration

From our literature analysis, we deduce that resource integration represents a central concept, both for S-D logic and for related service literature. In conceptualizing what resources are, Madhavaram and Hunt (2008) used resource-advantage theory to define resources as the tangible and intangible entities available to a firm for value creation and defined operand resources as typically physical and operant resources as typically human, organizational, informational and relational.

Arnould (2008) identifies several approaches to understanding resources, in particular, the resource-based view of the firm (taking a strategic view of the firms' skills, knowledge and cultural competencies), organization ecology (focusing on the growth, development and decline of firms within a resource space), cluster theory (how geographic and social relationships may affect a firms' capacity to learn and innovate), interpersonal resource exchange theory (interpersonal resources allocation and exchange) and the development of social and cultural capital. In particular, he calls for the development of more sociologically enriched and complex models of interagent resource exchange. This development is reflected in the work of Hakansson et al. (2009) who state that resources are frequently the subject of discussion in the interaction between individual actors but may also be the objects that are changed and activated by their interaction with other resources. They proposed that the value of a resource was dependent on its relation to other resources, that resources change and develop over time, that they are embedded in a multidimensional context, and that changes in resources create tensions.

In contrast to a goods-dominant-based perspective, we view 'resources [to be] highly dynamic functional concepts; that is, *they are not, they become* [emphasis added], they evolve out of the interaction of nature, man, and culture, in which nature sets outer limits, but man and culture are largely responsible for the portion of physical totality that is made available for human use' (Zimmermann, 1951: 814–815; see also Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2011). While Zimmermann (1951) refers to 'physical totality', Vargo et al. (2010: 148) also include the notion of non-physical entities to come within the conceptual ambit of resource integration, ' . . . resources such as time, weather and laws, which are often considered exogenous and

uncontrollable by individuals and organizations, are often integrated – if not relied on – in the value creation process by all service systems’. Thus, resources may not only become, but conversely specific resources can cease to act as resources when they are no longer utilized in value-creating processes (Löbler, 2013). Specifically, service cannot be separated from the resource-integrating activities performed by focal actors drawing on particular operant resources, including knowledge and skills (Berghman et al., 2006; Golfetto and Gibbert, 2006; Ngo and O’Cass, 2009; Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2008, 2011).

Resource integration represents a continuous process, which has been defined as ‘a series of activities performed by an actor’ (Payne et al., 2008: 86) for the benefit of another party, which is conceptually aligned with ‘service; that is, "the application of specialized competences (knowledge and skills) through deeds, processes, and performances for the benefit of another entity or the entity itself"' (Vargo and Lusch, 2004: 2). Thus, the hallmark characterizing resources is the specific purpose related to its intended, or potential, deployment. As such, no tangible or intangible item represents a resource in its own right; rather, a resource ‘is a property of things – a property that is a result of human capability’ (DeGregori, 1987: 1243). In this sense, a resource represents a carrier of capabilities, enabling an intended activity only when used (Fischer et al., 2010). A focal resource, in effect, becomes a resource only when it is deployed for a specific intended activity, and ensuing value is derived from its use by focal actors (Löbler, 2013).

To illustrate, software is software; it only becomes a resource when used for specific intended applications, thereby providing a level of perceived value to its users (Löbler, 2013). Further, a car is a car: it only becomes a resource when used to achieve its intended purpose in a resource-integrative process, such as a logistical task in the transportation of goods or a sales person travelling to customers in a company car. To add to this level of conceptual complexity, the notion of a resource’s intended purpose may vary across individuals and specific situational characteristics. For example, while some individuals may emphasize the specific functions of a car’s mobility (i.e. mode of transport), others may attach other and/or additional (e.g. hedonic, status and prestige) connotations to specific vehicles (Voss et al., 2003). Furthermore, potential resources, upon conclusion of their useful life, revert to simply being their relevant object again (e.g. software and a car). Hence these objects can only regain their resource status by means of extending their useful life.

Consequently, specific resources may recurrently gain, or lose, their resource status, depending on their usability.

Groff (2013: 213) highlights this distinction when differentiating between dispositional and categorical properties. ‘As such, the identity of dispositional properties depends on what they dispose their bearers to do, and the display of which constitutes the essences of causal process kinds, whereas the identity of categorical properties depends on what they are’. In this vein, the acquisition of resource status does not depend on any specific property inherent in the object (e.g. plant, equipment, money, institution and concept) or individual (e.g. labour) but rather a disposition to being utilized for a specific intended activity. ‘It is a functional relationship between the thing, person, machine, money, institution or concept on the one hand and the intended activity being performed on the other’ (Löbler, 2013: 424).

As such, the dispositional property of an entity’s resource status is fleeting in nature, depending on whether the thing, person, machine, money, institution or concept is used and thus appraised as potentially ‘useful’. Specifically, a focal resource may gain new dispositional properties through particular resource-integrative processes. For example, integrating knowledge about the marketplace with organizational objectives and capabilities is expected to

render that knowledge useful in specific ways, depending on its particular relationship to those organizational objectives and capabilities.

In this article, we propose two distinct approaches to conceptualizing resource integration. Firstly, we may understand resource integration as ‘emergence’ (Clayton, 2006), where new dispositional properties emerge from the interaction of resources. In the next section, we proceed our discussion regarding the concept of emergence and how it relates, conceptually, to resource integration using two competing conceptual perspectives. Secondly, objects become resources if they are integrated through the undertaking of specific interactions (Ballantyne and Varey, 2006; Fyrberg and Jürjado, 2009), to perform a specific intended activity. Consequently, resource integration can also be viewed from an interaction-based dynamics approach, which we also discuss. Hence overall, we explore resource integration by developing an understanding of the concept both as the emergence of new dispositional properties on the one hand and as a series of interaction-based dynamic activities on the other. However, in doing so, we note social activity is interactional by nature; therefore, most social phenomena incorporate specific interactive rather than discrete (isolated or sole operated) dynamics.

Resource integration as emergence

What exactly do we mean by the term ‘emergence’ or ‘emergent’? Quoting Smith (2010: 26), ‘emergence refers to the process of constituting a new entity with its own particular characteristics (i.e. structures, qualities, capacities, textures, mechanisms) through the interactive combination of other, different entities that are necessary to create the new entity, but that do not contain the characteristics present in the new entity’. This is theoretically distinct from the view, often found in systems theory, that emergence is autopoietic. In other words, the components themselves produce the system of which they are a part, and such systems are autonomous and closed (Maturana and Varela, 1987).

In an autopoietic system, the interaction of components is enough to ensure the continuation of the system and in non-designed. This differs substantially from the view of emergence put forward by theoreticians such as Smith (2010) and Silberstein and McGeever (1999) who differentiate between epistemological and ontological emergence. Ontological emergence differs from epistemological emergence primarily in the relationship between the parts of a system and the system as a whole. As Silberstein and McGeever (1999) note, epistemological emergence maintains that a property of an object is reducible to or determined by the properties of its parts. On the other hand, ontologically emergent features are novel and are not reducible. Thus, while interaction represents a necessary condition for ontological emergence, permitting new dispositional properties to emerge, it is not in itself sufficient to produce ontological emergence. Interaction may, or may not, lead to emergent new properties. This is one of the defining features of conceptualizing resource integration as a process of emergence and as a process of interaction.

An example of emergence in the natural world is that of water, in which the combination of its constituent parts (hydrogen and oxygen) gives it distinct properties (i.e. the ability to extinguish a fire) that are not found in its constituent parts alone. This example shows that emergence does not require intentional intervention. However, emergence can also occur by design, that is, ‘. . . as the intended outcome of intentional intervention by purposeful actors’ (Smith, 2010: 29) and may be ‘. . . significantly constituted through rationality, not merely composition’ (Smith, 2010: 30).

An example of this is seen in the work of McColl-Kennedy et al. (2012) who examined the role of value co-creation practice styles in health-care outcomes. They note that it is not only

access to these resources that influences health-care outcomes, but the way in which these resources relate to the activities that the individual undertakes, the interactions they engage in with other in the service network, and the role they adopt in relation to this resource-integration process. Where the practice style of the patient was considered high in performance (or doing) of activities, had numerous and varied interactions with others in the service network, and where the patient saw their role as one in which they assemble and manage the health care and other actors as a team, their quality of life was found to be considerably improved. This improvement could not be reduced to the any particular action or relationship on the part of the patient per se but to the overall relations and interactions as a whole, which allowed novel properties (i.e. the improvement in their quality of life) to emerge.

Resource integration as interaction

A second perspective resides in the understanding of resource integration as interaction. During the resource-integration process, a specific set of interactions occurs between key actors (or entities) and particular resources. Specifically, these interactions render specific things, persons, machines, money, institutions or concepts to acquire resource status. In relation to resource heterogeneity, ‘. . . resources have no given features; [By contrast] these are the result of the interaction with other resources’ (Harrison and Hakansson, 2006: 232). The concept of interaction, in relation to resource integration and S-D logic, has been discussed extensively by Ballantyne and Varey (2006) and Fyrberg and Jürjado (2009), and we refer the reader to this literature.

More pertinent to our discussion here is how these approaches to understanding resource integration (i.e. as an emergent process or as specific interaction-based dynamics) can be adopted to facilitate the theorizing process. Specifically, this theorizing process can be developed from different ontological and epistemological perspectives generating crucial implications for theorizing (Peters et al., 2013a), which we explore in the next section.

Ontological and epistemological assumptions and their impact on theorizing

Our prior discussion suggested the importance of two distinct, yet potentially complementary, approaches to understanding resource integration. Specifically, the suggested perspectives address resource integration as (1) an emergent process and (2) a series of interaction-based dynamics. In this section, we examine how fundamentally distinct ontological and epistemological assumptions may be used to guide the theorizing processes. Specifically, we adopt Löbner’s (2011) typology of ontological and epistemological perspectives, which builds on the prior work of Tadajewski (2004) in the field of marketing, and Burrell and Morgan (1979) in the field of organizational theory. Table 1 provides an abridged overview of Löbner’s (2011) proposed four categories.

Table 1. Typology of ontological and epistemological perspectives.

Meta-theoretical assumptions	Object-oriented/objective	Subject-oriented/subjective (cognitive construction)	Intersubjective oriented/intersubjective (communicative construction/critical discourse)	Sign/signifier orientation
Ontology	A reality independent from the researcher exists	Reality is inseparable from researcher's life experience	Reality is construed via objectivation(al) discourses	'Everything' is a sign/signifier
Epistemology	Theories explain and describe objective reality	Researcher interprets his/her experience with reality	Researchers establish common understandings	Signifiers are related to other signifiers
Research object	Ontic reality	Perceptions and/or constructions	Symbols of common understanding/common understanding and coordination, objects as a result of objectivation	The relation of signifiers
Method	Modelling and empirical investigation (proof)	Subjective interpretation and/or construction	Discourse and interaction, which can occur by using various methods, quantitative as well as qualitative	Deconstruction
Legitimization/rationality	Proof/justification	Internal viability of subjective interpretation, no legitimization between researchers	Agreement, criticizability	There is no language outside language, signifiers refer only to other signifiers
Self-applicable	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Representatives	Realism, positivism, early critical rationalism, empiricism	Constructivism, interpretivism, relativism	Social constructionism, conventionalism, paracritical rationalism	Post-structuralism, postmodernism

Source: Löbler (2011).

While it is not our intention here to explain each of the categories in detail (for further detail we refer readers to Löbler, 2011), it is, however, important to ‘ . . . be aware that any categorization of meta-theories deals with ideal types and operates at a high level of abstraction. Thus, this framing cannot do justice to the eloquent and detailed argumentation of the many papers in the marketing literature’ (Löbler, 2011: 52). While Löbler’s (2011) table does not contain critical realism specifically, we think it is best categorized as an approach that falls between the object orientation and the subjective orientation, as it assumes a reality but recognizes the limitations of observers to fully perceive it. Table 1, instead, is designed to filter out the main concerns relevant to the present discussion, as a more detailed analysis of the differences between these theories, and specific meta-theoretical positions is beyond the scope of this article. We do not intend, therefore, to describe or discuss in detail these ontological and perspectives; but instead, we offer a categorization that covers the majority of the ontological and epistemological perspectives found in marketing research. Regarding the theorizing process, these categories help to foster an enhanced awareness of the meta-theoretical impact of different theoretical, ontological and epistemological perspectives and their associated assumptions. Table 1, therefore, highlights important categories, which may be used to support theory development from different ontological and epistemological perspectives. Recognizing Löbler’s (2011: 59) assertion that ‘From a postmodern perspective and the importance it places on signs and signifiers for the other three orientations one cannot merely juxtapose the above-mentioned sign orientation with the other three orientations’, we have placed this sign orientation beside the other three orientations. This is because of the strong emphases on a sign orientation in postmodern writings (cf. the section below on resource integration from a sign or signifier orientation).

We now draw on the proposed categories and their associated meta-theoretical perspectives to foster an enhanced scholarly understanding regarding the nature of theorizing in the area of resource integration. Certainly, other potential ways of conceptualizing resource integration exist, in addition to the two approaches discussed here (i.e. resource integration as an emergent processes and resource integration as a set of interaction-based dynamics). However, we draw on these specific approaches to initiate a theorizing process addressing resource integration from the four distinct ontological and epistemological perspectives identified in Table 1.

Resource integration from an object orientation

If one understands resource integration as an emergent process and considers the concept from an object-oriented philosophy of science point of view, the main assumption would be that new emergent properties represent (potentially) objective, observable and measurable phenomena. To illustrate, this would be the understanding of an individual taking a positivist, or critical rationalist, perspective. We say ‘potentially’ because some forms of realism (i.e. critical realism) do not rely on the notion of a constant conjunction between cause and effect but recognize that contingent factors may render otherwise ‘real’ emergent properties unobservable. As an example, one could consider the modification of a car to increase its performance. Following modification, the car has properties it did not have before. These properties are measurable and may include the speed or design of the car.

Alternatively, from an interaction-based dynamics approach, interactivity would be viewed as an observable process where relevant interaction-based inputs and outputs may be observed and measured. Ballantyne and Varey (2006) extensively discuss the role of interaction and their relatedness. Additionally, the authors emphasize process over outcome. Under Ballantyne and Varey’s (2006) view, focusing on a different object is part of an object orientation. The authors’ article is based on a generic ontological and epistemological perspective, which is essentially

object oriented. As such, this example shows that modifying the object of consideration does not necessarily result in an amended ontology or epistemology. Given this perspective, the car modification is based on different interactions: The first interactions are those between the craftsman and the car, a second might be between the craftsman and the car owner and a third interaction might be that of the car owner with his/her new tuned up car. All these interactions are observable and probably measurable, suggesting that all these interactions are ‘scientific objects’ in a quasi-objective sense.

Resource integration from a subjective orientation

By contrast, if one considers resource integration from a subject-oriented perspective (e.g. constructivism or interpretivism), the focus is represented by a subjective experience, which may differ across individuals participating in specific resource-integration processes. From a constructivist perspective, for example, resource integration is not seen as a given phenomenon per se but is viewed to represent a subjectively constructed cognition unique to each individual. Therefore, the reaching of a single, agreed definition (as positivist or critical rationalists would strive for) is impossible; rather, definitions would be contingent upon subjective interpretations. It is important for marketing theorists to develop an awareness of the incommensurability of these different categories, which implies that changing perspectives from one category to another also serves to amend one’s philosophical understanding of the world and the specific phenomenon in question. Put very simply, in contrast to a critical rationalist, a constructivist does not believe in real, measurable phenomena but instead proposes the existence of an individuals’ individually, and hence, subjectively generated, multiple realities. Here, car modification is seen through a subjective lens. Objectivity and measurability are no longer the focus of interest. Instead, what matters is what the people connected to the car modification feel and experience. From the perspective of resource integration as emergence, the focus could be on what feeling emerged, on how the feelings and experiences of the connected people emerged and on whether these feelings focused on their (subjective) perception of the changed car and/or their perceptions of the craftsman.

Taking the car modification as interaction, the focus could be on how all the interactions between car, car owner and craftsman (and possibly others) are involved in creating value or appreciation. How these interactions are described from the subjects’ perspective would also be part of the interaction.

Resource integration from an intersubjective orientation

Considering resource integration from an intersubjective orientation we would, by definition, understand the concept to be socially constructed and therefore existent for neither any single actor (i.e. non-subjective) nor real in an objective sense (i.e. non-objective). Rather, resource integration either emerges or is the result of specific interactive forms when people gather either with others or with other objects/entities, which become resources when activated (i.e. utilized). This contention supports the view that S-D logic (as framed by its 10 foundational premises; Vargo and Lusch, 2008) is primarily construed intersubjectively (Löbler, 2011); that is, service coincides with resource integration when individuals or entities serve one another. In this context, it is important to foster an awareness of the intersubjective perspective being commensurate with both subjective and objective perspectives, in the sense that both perspectives can be socially reconstructed. The rationale underlying this assertion is that the intersubjective perspective (e.g. social constructionism, conventionalism or pan-critical

rationalism) is founded on the belief that notions, such as ‘subjectivism’ and ‘objectivism’ are socially constructed by individuals within service systems.

Put simply, the subject and the object would not exist without a social construction. However, this relationship is not symmetrical per se. From an objective or subjective orientation, the intersubjective orientation is incommensurable, or unattainable, because for these orientations the object or the subject is given without any kind of social construction. The ‘objectivist’ would mainly argue that reality (although critical realists would exclude social reality) is independent of humans; therefore, humans simply observe their own, personal reality. Alternatively, a ‘subjectivist’ would argue that even when individuals are alone in the world, they would have experiences, which are inseparable from their existence as a subject and that they do not require others for the emergence of this experience. Taking the example of car modification again, the issue is now how the car owner and the craftsman co-create, meaning through the use of language and by social (intersubjective) processes. From an emergence perspective, the focus could be on how the car owner and craftsman together created a mutual idea of what the craftsman should do with the car. This common understanding might emerge out of the discussions between the car owner and the craftsman.

From the interaction perspective, the focus could be on how, and what kind of, interactions supported the car owner and the craftsman to reach a conclusion about what to do and what kind of interactions was necessary to tune up the car and to have fun with the modified car (from the perspectives of the car owner and others).

Resource integration from a sign or signifier orientation

The final category identified is referred to as a sign, or signifier, perspective. In relation to a ‘resource integration as emergence’ approach, this perspective would contend that the emergent new properties resulting from resource integration are nothing more than signs or signifiers reflecting the nature of those specific objects. By contrast, from an interaction-based dynamics approach, these signs and symbols are viewed to co-ordinate focal interactive processes between specific resource-integrative stakeholders, which stems primarily from the postmodern and/or post-structuralist debate.

Specifically, this debate refers mainly to the schools of thought espoused by French philosophers, including Lyotard, Baudrillard and Derrida. Their approach highlights the role of signs and sign systems and assigns significant importance to these in the development of individuals’ interpretation of reality. To illustrate, Baudrillard ([1970]1998: 79) notes, ‘What is sociologically significant for us, and what marks our era under the sign of consumption, is precisely the generalized reorganization of this primary level in a system of signs, which appears to be a particular mode of transition from nature to culture, perhaps the specific mode of our era’.

Baudrillard ([1973]1975, 1998) and Derrida ([1967]1976, 1977, 1978) totally disconnected the sign as a signifier from that, which it signified ‘The sign no longer designates anything at all. It approaches its true structural limit, which is to refer back only to other signs’ (Baudrillard, [1973]1975: 128). In marketing and the sociology of consumption, Cherrier and Murray (2004: 513) conclude that ‘in the post-modern era, there is no longer an attempt to refer back to nature or ground the representamen’. This means that signs do not refer to any kind of real entity but only to other signs.

Correspondingly, Venkatesh et al. (2006: 251) in their emphasis on ‘. . . (re)considering the starting point of our disciplinary analysis to be the market . . . as opposed to marketing’, clearly

took this position and considered the ‘market as a sign system’. Viewing resource integration as either emergence or as interaction-based dynamics is, therefore, a question of convention regarding our linguistic usage (Wittgenstein, 2008: 43). Of course, probably no ‘objectivist’, ‘subjectivist,’ or ‘intersubjectivist’ would agree with this position; however, the post-structuralist’s position would posit that each of the other orientations was created mainly by the use of signs – or to put it pragmatically – created by the use of language. To give an example, we again start with the emergence perspective. First of all, in this perspective signs become resources. They are connected to and integrated into other signs. From this perspective, the car modification could be seen from the signs describing the modification. The modification is a creation, or emergence, of signs and the design becomes a sign or several signs.

From an interaction perspective, the signs could ‘interact’. Questions such as, how is the appearance of the car (signs) described by the craftsman or the car owner or others or what kind of signs they use to communicate with each other and to reach and identify a mutual understanding, could become important.

We summarize in Table 2 how the application of these four ontological and epistemological perspectives may drive theorizing about resource integration according to the two approaches we have outlined; that is, resource integration as emergence or as interaction-based dynamics. We propose this matrix approach as a useful tool in generating theory, that is, a ‘theorizing generator’. We adopt the term theorizing generator as our model sets out the main assumptions underpinning each of the outlined perspectives. Thus, the model can guide researchers regarding how to relate specific theoretical perspectives to one another, such as bridging- or middle-range theory related to theories-in-use (or empirical observations), to develop general theoretical ways of framing concepts and their interrelationships at the highest conceptual level.

Research questions and opportunities

As Weick (1995) suggests, the process of theorizing consists of activities including abstracting, generalizing, relating, selecting, explaining, synthesizing and idealizing. Having outlined the main assumptions underpinning each perspective (i.e. abstracting and generalizing), the next step in the theorizing process is building relationships between entities, constructions, practices and so on (relating and selecting), which are contingent upon the specific ontological and epistemological perspective adopted, and which address important questions in an ontologically grounded way (explaining, synthesizing and idealizing). Based on the distinct philosophical assumptions that form the basis of each of the four perspectives, we offer in Table 2 examples of research questions and avenues for future research, which we expect to facilitate the process of theorizing in S-D logic.

For instance, a first attempt taking an object-oriented perspective at theorizing may involve conceptualizing, defining and operationalizing the relevant phenomena, either from an emergence or an interaction-based dynamics approach. Further, a second step could be to derive a set of hypotheses, which are relevant to reflecting the concepts of key research interest. For example, it could prove interesting to analyse the relationship between emergence and value or between emergence and the becoming of resources. Potential research questions include how do specific resource properties serve to influence the emergent characteristics resulting from resource integration? To illustrate, in addition to resource integration, value co-creation represents another key concept in S-D logic research as mentioned in one of the four core foundational premises of S-D logic; therefore, one research direction lies in the formulation of hypotheses relating these concepts to one another. From a resource integration as emergence perspective, one potential hypothesis may relate the ‘value’ concept to the new emergent properties resulting from resource integration.

Table 2. The application of ontological and epistemological perspectives to theorizing about resource integration.

Approaches to resource integration	Object orientation	Subject orientation	Intersubjective orientation	Sign orientation
Resource integration as emergence	<p>Main assumptions: Resource integration as emergence is a (potentially) observable and measurable process.</p> <p>Key questions: How can emergence be defined? How can emergence be operationalized? How do the properties of resources influence the emergent properties that result from resource integration?</p>	<p>Main assumptions: Resource integration as emergence is a subjective experience, which may be different for each participant in the emergence process.</p> <p>Key questions: Do people experience emergence? Are the feelings that arise as a result of emergence connected to their feeling of engagement or value?</p>	<p>Main assumptions: Emergence is always socially constructed and therefore non-existent for any single actor.</p> <p>Key questions: In which context do people experience and talk about emergence, if they do? Which terminology do they use in or after emergent processes? Are there specific (sub-) cultures for emergent processes?</p>	<p>Main assumptions: What we call resource integration and emergence is a question of conventions and a question of how we practice sign usage.</p> <p>Key questions: Which signs do people understand as emerging? When are signs understood as resources? How do people create meaning through emergence when they integrate these resources?</p>
Resource integration as interaction	<p>Main assumptions: Resource integration as interaction is observable and based on actors; one can measure the input and output of an interactional process.</p> <p>Key questions: How can interaction be defined? How can it be operationalized? Does greater interaction result in more resources?</p>	<p>Main assumptions: Resource integration as interaction is experienced subjectively by interacting actors.</p> <p>Key questions: How do people experience interaction as distinguished from action? Is their feeling of interactions reciprocal?</p>	<p>Main assumptions: Resource integration as interaction is by definition intersubjective, as it is the 'inter', which creates resource integration (not simply actors in isolation).</p> <p>Key questions: In which context do people create interactions? Which terminology do they use to intend interactions? Are there specific (sub-) cultures for different ways of interacting?</p>	<p>Main assumptions: Resource integration as interaction is a matter of symbols used to govern interactional processes. Symbols are more important than matter.</p> <p>Key questions: Which signs do people understand as interaction? When are signs understood as resources? How do people create meaning through interaction when they integrate these resources?</p>

Alternatively, the role of the interaction-based dynamics approach to resource integration may be explored through research questions including Do greater levels of interaction serve to generate an increased quantity of resources? From a ‘resource integration as interaction-based dynamics’ perspective, one potential hypothesis might be that the value of integrated resources will be related to the nature, volume and perceived quality of specific interactions. Thus, from an object-oriented perspective deriving a set of hypotheses, in particular, allows the researcher to develop an appropriate process of theorizing, which is expected to be conducive to theory development.

However, from a subjectively oriented perspective, such objective definitions fail to make sense, given that every individual is viewed to have their own unique interpretation. Instead, a focus on personal experience and interpretation would be taken under this perspective. Specifically, adopting this view, the subject represents the conceptual focus of the research, rather than the specific phenomenon at hand. However, it is not the subject alone but rather the subject taken together with their specific interpretations and experiences of the emergent or interaction-based dynamic nature of resource integration, which are of key importance. Consequently, the research focus shifts to developing an overall interpretation of individually constructed realities. For instance, do individuals experience emergence? If so, how do they describe it? Are feelings or experiences connected to experiences of engagement or value? Alternatively, how do individuals experience interaction as distinct from action? is their perceived interaction in fact, reciprocal, or is it predominantly a one-way delivery of resources, including information? Finally, (how) are interactive experiences connected to the experience of value?

From an intersubjective orientation perspective, we again observe different dynamics. As Löbler (2011) discusses in relation to the concept of value co-creation, a phenomenological understanding of the emergent or interaction-based dynamic nature of resource integration can also be intersubjective if one follows Schütz’s (1932) phenomenological perspective. Specifically, Schütz’s (1932) main claim is that ‘. . . only the *experienced* is meaningful; not, however, the *experiencing*’ (Schütz, 1932: 49; italics added).¹ Specifically, as soon as experiences are expressed or communicated, they are intersubjective. However, no individual has direct access to the experiencing of any other person. As an intersubjective phenomenon, the emergent or interaction-based dynamic nature of resource integration is expressed by language.

As the intersubject orientation perspective is more focused on the context and usage of language relative to definition and operationalization, we may pose research questions, such as in which context(s) (if any) do individuals experience and talk about emergence? Which terminology do individuals use during, or after, emergent processes? Are there specific (sub-) cultures reflecting emergent processes? Alternatively, we may address an interaction-based dynamics approach by adopting research questions, including in which context do humans create interactions? Which terminology do they use to intend interactions? Are there specific (sub-) cultures for different ways of interacting?

Finally, from a signifier orientation perspective, the research ‘object’ comes within the ambit of language, because in this perspective, words only refer to other words or signs to signs (see above or Löbler, 2010). Research questions of interest here may include how do individuals create meaning or more precisely which types of language practices do they use? Which stories do they tell? Which types of signifiers govern the practice of language use? These research questions, again, represent very different forms of enquiry, relative to those formulated by the other perspectives. Under this signifier orientation, resources are viewed as signs used to refer to other signs in the context of specific emergent or interaction-based dynamic processes; hence this orientation would be concerned with the specific types of signs used to describe emergence

or interaction. Additional research questions stemming from this orientation may include which signs do individuals understand to be ‘emerging’? Under which specific conditions are signs understood to represent resources? How do individuals create meaning through interacting whilst integrating these resources?

Conclusion

An inherent lack of understanding between theory as an outcome, and theorizing as a process, has led to a conundrum in the marketing discipline where few empirical studies attempt and achieve to develop strong theory (Day and Montgomery, 1999; Stewart and Zinkhan, 2006). Since substantial insights, guidelines or recommendations highlighting the intricate details underlying the process of theorizing remain equally unavailable to date (MacInnis, 2011; Stewart and Zinkhan, 2006; Yadav, 2010), we addressed this scholastic challenge and provided insights into the process of theorizing from an S-D logic perspective in this article.

Our work illustrates why the conduction of marketing research unfounded on any specific preconditions or conceptual guidance provides substantial challenges. While preconditions are often not made explicit but rather used implicitly (Peters et al., 2013a), we argue that explicating the basic philosophical assumptions underlying a research study do, in fact, not represent a disadvantage but help to clearly articulate the foundations by which any empirical or conceptual research is carried out. We can see from the research questions outlined in our prior discussion that the ontological stance from which one is operating may indeed lead to very different, and perhaps complimentary and/or contradictory, research directions. For example, the question ‘How do specific resource properties serve to influence the emergent characteristics resulting from resource integration?’ may well be complimentary to the question, ‘Do greater levels of interaction serve to generate an increased quantity of resources?’ as they both reflect an object orientation. However, they may also be contradictory if one assumes that resource integration as emergence requires novel, new emergent properties, whereas resource integration as interaction may not.

Furthermore, reflecting upon, and explaining the philosophical assumption underpinning a research study provides stronger support for the process of theorizing, as discussed. This does, of course, also support journal reviewing processes, as individual reviewers are able to assess the very different assumptions that underpin empirical work, and authors are more aware of their individual contribution to knowledge. Asking how might emergence be operationalized would be considered an appropriate question if an object-oriented approach is adopted, but not if one was taking a sign orientation. Where the underlying philosophical assumptions are articulated and understood, the process of theorizing is less hindered by confusion and misunderstandings between authors, reviewers, editors and readers.

Of course, researchers cannot make a right or wrong decision when choosing and outlining their philosophical assumptions. However, once a research study is committed to a particular epistemological and ontological perspective, this perspective governs the research both in an abstract and a practical way. It does this both through subsequent research design decisions and through the individual actions of the researcher. The necessary precursor to the process of theorizing in marketing in general, and in regard to S-D logic in particular, is therefore to develop a deep awareness and understanding of the basic epistemologies and ontologies available, and by explicating them in any article.

Our article has illustrated the theorizing process by exploring how different ontological and epistemological perspectives might drive two different approaches to understanding resource integration, that of resource integration as emergence and that of resource integration as

interaction-based dynamics. This article has also shown how explicating the basic philosophical assumptions both guides and supports this process. Further, we posit that utilizing specific tools conducive to theory development, such as the theorizing generator proposed in Table 2, is expected to support not only theory generation but also the advancement of empirical research in marketing, as it can be driven by different philosophical assumptions.

Half a century ago, the main philosophical assumptions in marketing research were mainly positivistic (Peters et al., 2013a). This has now changed and we are, as researchers, now confronted with a greater variety of perspectives in the philosophy of science. We should neither ignore, nor fail to recognize the importance of, their basic assumptions in our research. If we do either, we will have to question the status of our knowledge claims.

Note

1. Translated from Nur das Erlebte ist sinnvoll, nicht aber das Erleben (Schütz, 1932: 49).

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