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## **Structurationism and its potential contribution to relationship marketing theory development**

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### **Abstract**

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There is a tendency much observed tendency for research within business research to be dominated by functionalism. There is equally as much criticism of this tendency as a constraint to generating new insight. Henry Mintzberg (1983) for instance states that “the field of organisational theory has, I believe, paid dearly for the obsession with rigor in the choice of methodology. Too many of the results have been significant only in the statistical sense of the word.” Marketing has arguably suffered from the same functionalist bias. Within the relationship marketing sub-discipline the need for examination of this functional bias would seem even more paramount. For instance Ford and McDowell (1999) suggest that “relationship actions have effects, some of which are intended and foreseen and others that are neither foreseen, nor intended”. This would seem difficult to cope within a functionalist paradigm. However, even within this in mind, the American school of RM remains overwhelmingly quantitative and appears significantly hostile to the more qualitative European schools. Amongst these ostensibly European schools, the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group (IMP) has conducted significant studies into dyadic, triadic and network interaction “the empirical thrust of which has gone hand in hand with efforts to interpret observed phenomena’ (IMP Group, 2002). The Scandinavian school of service, industrial and relationship marketing has also been argued to be grounded in empirical data gathered in case studies (Gummesson, 1997). Fournier et al. (1998) also argue that “to get inside peoples heads, marketers need to turn to the tools of ethnography and phenomenology: qualitative social science methods dedicated to richly describing and interpreting peoples lives.” The existence of this journal, perhaps driven by these more European schools confirms a body of opinion in favour of qualitative approaches for marketing and indeed relationship marketing

investigation. Gummesson (1998) for instance argues that, “objective rule governed research as the road to knowledge is naïve...statistical methods are based on subjective value. That quantitative results demand qualitative interpretation, is treated as taboo.” More recently (2002) he states that “fuzziness and ambiguity and received with cheers by the [qualitative] researchers and not shunned as unorderedly and threatening as they are by quantitative researchers.”<sup>1</sup> In relation to extending the boundaries of relationship marketing, O’Malley and Tynan (2000) advocate, “methodologies commensurate with the objectives of theory development rather than theory testing.” Araujo and Easton (1996) also propose adoption of “an eclectic set of methodological orientations, be grounded centrally in the discipline of marketing, and make extensive reference to other research fields,” which would seem to advocate the consideration of research paradigms beyond pure functionalism whilst pursuing inter-disciplinary research. Support for interpretive theory building in extending the boundary of relationship marketing would seem abundant however, one relevant criticism of a phenomenological approach remains, that it “emphasises actions and human agency but does not address social structure” (Walsham and Han, 1991). It seems reasonable to ask whether relationship marketing theorists can create a relationship and debate between research paradigms rather than coexist in a state of “disinterested hostility” (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Gibson Burrell (1999) later discussed the self appointed role of the central members of a ruling orthodoxy that define a discipline as to “surpress dissent within the states boundaries and restore law and order.” Those who uphold these laws he refers to as “paradigm Walsingham’s” after Sir Francis Walsingham, Queen Elizabeth’s I’s spymaster, and those who oppose it, “paradigm Warrior’s”. This methodological and

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<sup>1</sup> Authors’ additions added in parenthesis

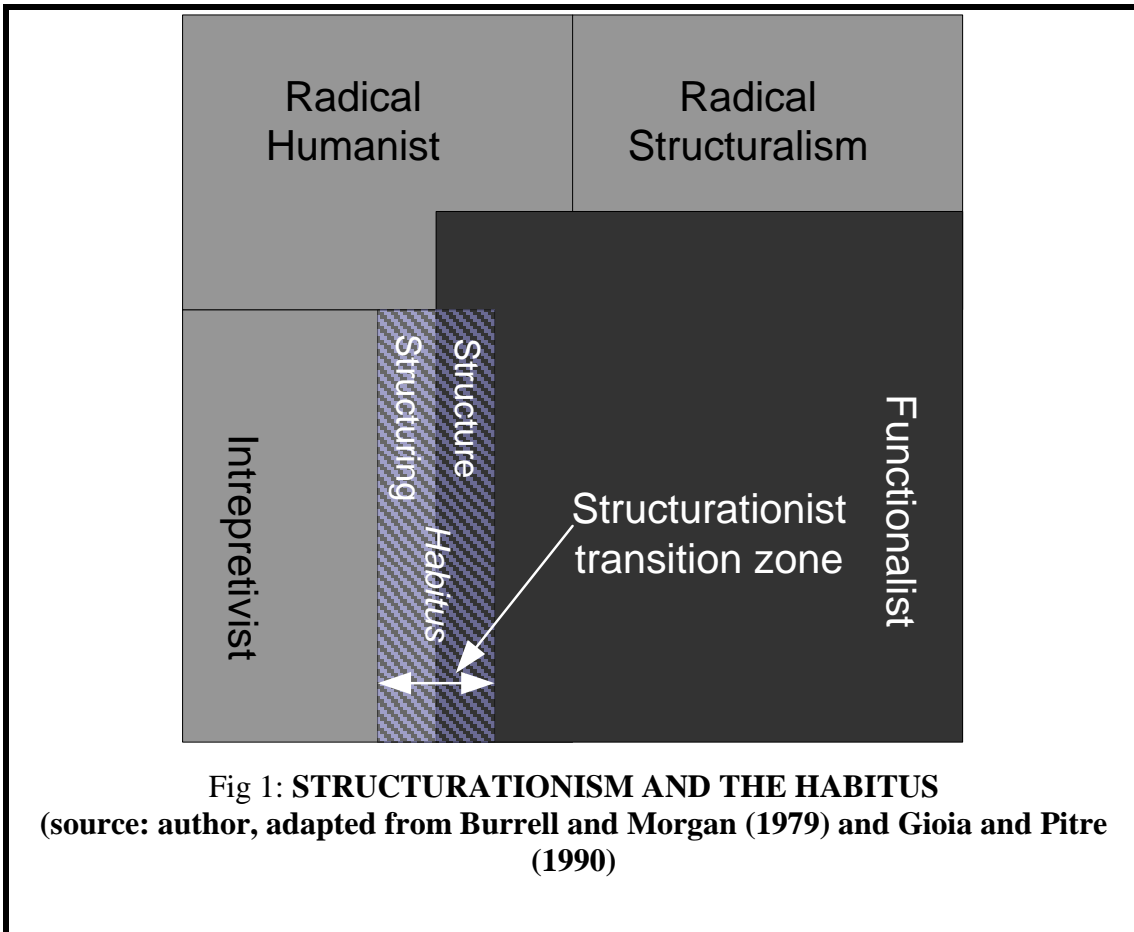
paradigmatical struggle within the marketing discipline may have blinded researchers to the potential value of collaboration between research paradigms. This paper will now go on to play the Warrior to both qualitative and quantitative paradigm Walsingham's and expand this debate to argue that a multi-paradigm perspective in relationship marketing research have particular relevance.

### **Multi-paradigm perspectives & structurationism**

In support of Burrell and Morgan's contestation that paradigms exist in a state of disinterested hostility" other authors (Jackson and Carter, 1991) have settled on the belief that paradigms are indeed incommensurable, reinforcing the assertion from Weaver and Gioia (1994) that there is "no common measure between paradigms of inquiry so that the representatives of opposed paradigms live in different worlds, hold mutually exclusive beliefs, use different vocabularies," they exist as opposing Warriors of their relative faiths. Noteboom (2004) proposes that incommensurability has two dimensions, "semantic (incommensurability of meaning) and axiological (incommensurability of goals and underlying values)." Alternatively, multi paradigm theory building has been advocated as acceptance that the boundaries between the paradigms are blurred and mediated by others (Giddens, 1976) and that they present the opportunity of "creating fresh insights because they start from different ontological and epistemological assumptions" (Gioia and Pitre, 1990). It has also been suggested that interactionists seek to "subdue conflict across research streams by creating dialogue" (Fabian, 2000).

The anti-positivism vs positivism polarisation has been argued to assume that the natural world and the social world are ontologically continuous, overlooking how behaviour and beliefs can be historically and culturally conditioned. (Brownlie et al., 1999). Social theorist Anthony Giddens (1979) proposed that an ability to separate the social from the individual is a major inadequacy of the structuralist paradigm “from Saussure onwards”. Giddens proposed that this extends from the assertion in Saussure that things are either conscious or unconscious. Giddens (1979) proposed that consciousness can be divided into discursive consciousness and practical consciousness. Practical consciousness he defines as an implicit consciousness which is drawn upon in certain circumstances. This Giddens uses to illustrate the duality of agency and structure. This can be illustrated by the notion of the gift cycle. In Marcel Mauss's (1954 [1924]), seminal work ‘The Gift’, he presents an anthropological study of the rituals of many societies in respect of gift giving and receiving. He characterises the three obligations in the cycle as giving, receiving and repaying. Hendry (1999) proposes that “a gift returned may seem like a clear symbol, but it must be interpreted within the range of possibilities of a particular social system.” This has also been referred to as the “norm of reciprocity” (Gouldner, 1960). There are implicit references to the relevance of these norms of reciprocity in a number of papers. For instance, Ford and McDowell (1999) propose that many relationships seem to be taken on the basis of habit rather than judgment. The objectivist view would be that the giving and receiving of gifts is mechanical and automatic, one being triggered by another. A subjectivist approach would be the consideration of the phenomena as being created by free will and that there is no mechanical explanation of when and where the reaction will occur, and what has driven

it, without a consideration of meaning. Bourdieu's (1990) stance was that a subjectivist approach ignores the aspects of culture that can drive the gift cycle and can be termed "regulations" or the "norms" of society. This he terms "the habitus". Nash (1999) proposed that "habitus is conceived as 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." The transition zone between the interpretive and functionalist paradigms has been termed structurationism. Structuration theorists focus on connections between human action (in the form of structuring activities) and established structures (Gioia and Pitre, 1990).



**Fig 1: STRUCTURATIONISM AND THE HABITUS**  
 (source: author, adapted from Burrell and Morgan (1979) and Gioia and Pitre (1990))

A proposed reconciliation between Burrell and Morgan's four research paradigms, structuration and the habitus is presented in figure one.

Giddens (1979; 1984) argues that individual and society be reconceptualised as a duality of agency and structure, “two concepts that are dependent on each other and recursively related” (Rose and Hackney, 2002). Structuration is defined as an emergent property of ongoing action (Barley, 1986). The concept of structure is also argued to be the “patterned regularities and processes of interaction” (Ranson et al., 1980), and “the rules and resources people use in interaction” (Riley, 1983). Whilst structure within the structuralist paradigm is seen as constraining, within structurationism, it is seen as both constraining and enabling. This is consistent with the American school of marketing networks who suggest that analysts “are now beginning to look at networks not as constraints but as opportunity structures” (Galaskiewicz, 1996). Noteboom (2004) also proposed that structure is the “configuration of relations in an institutional environment. It is both the basis and the result of processes of interaction.” and that structural properties of social systems such as relationships are “both mediums and outcomes of practices that constitute these systems” (Giddens, 1979). Rose (1998) proposed that Giddens work shows “how the knowledgeable actions of human agents discursively and recursively form the sets of rules, practices and routines which, over time and space constitutes his [Giddens] conception of structure.”<sup>2</sup> Faulkner and De Rond (2000) argue that structurationist approaches cater for the “essentially sociological character of alliances in which individuals, not just organisations cooperate and make repeated commitments to continue cooperating. Meaning systems; how the world is represented to

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<sup>2</sup> Authors additions indicated in parenthesis

the self and to other people, originate in one's own personality, values, opinions, and attitudes." Willmott (1999) argues that the attraction of structurationism theory undoubtedly lies in its emphasis of human agency. The ongoing changes that take place as a result of interaction could be referred to as structuring, "institutional practices that shape human actions which in turn reaffirm or modify the institutional structure" (Barley, 1986). Structurationism may provide a way to reconcile the subjective elements of structuring (agency) against the more objective institutional elements of structure that exist within a spatially defined environment. The notion of actors shaping networks and vice versa seems to be approximate to the IMP group's (Hakansson, 1982) conceptualisation of a an atmosphere" (Ellis and Mayer, 2001). "The influence of structural conditions [structure] on actions [structuring] can be seen as mediated through this atmosphere" (Hallen and Sandstrom, 1991).<sup>3</sup>

Sydow and Windeler (1998) propose that research into interfirm networks emphasize "action at the expense of structure or analyze structure whilst neglecting the strategies and the behaviour of agents." The agenda for researchers is to uncover the nature of relationships, (Turnbull et al., 2002) through the structuring processes but to also go beyond the analysis of individual behaviours, attitudes and beliefs, to examine how multiple interactions constitute a "framework or structure that can be studied and analyzed in its own right" (Galaskiewicz and Wasserman, 1994). Through a structurationist approach, the nature of interaction is seen, as dynamic and is likely to be changed by intervention (Stewart and Pavlou, 2002). This is the objective, structural aspect of networks. Rowley (1997) proposed that the purpose of network analysis is to

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<sup>3</sup> Authors additions indicated in parenthesis



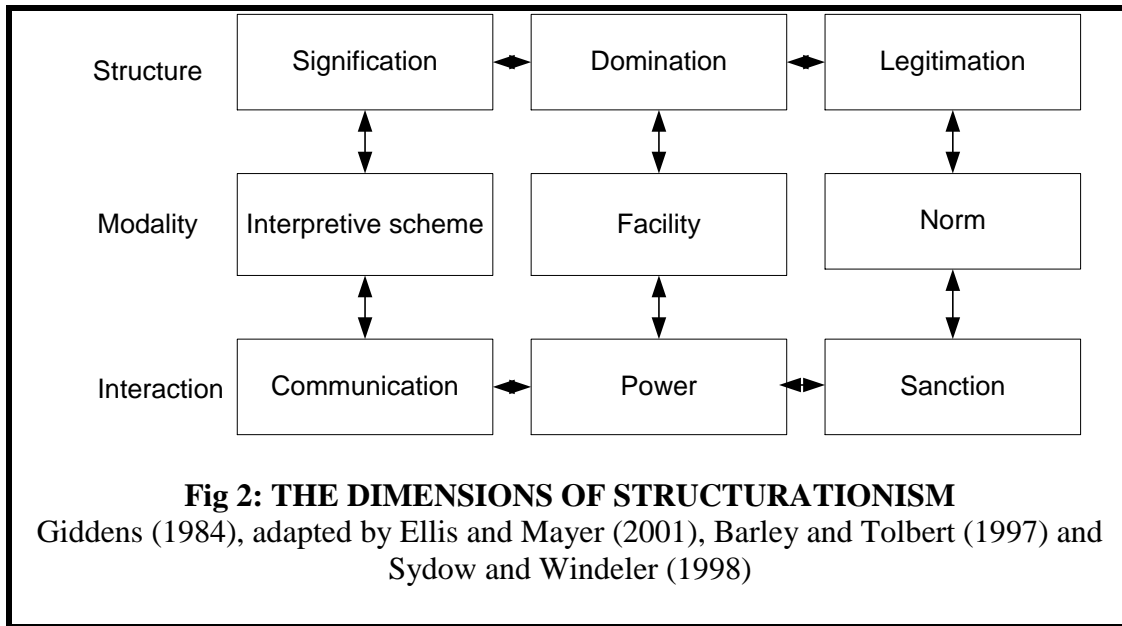
“examine relational systems in which actors dwell and to determine how the nature of relationship structures impacts behaviours.” Put more concisely, “action can and should only be analyzed with reference to structure: and structure only with reference to agency” (Sydow and Windeler, 1998).

Returning to the concept of ‘habitus’ discussed earlier, Bourdieu’s stance is that a subjectivist approach ignores the aspects of culture that can drive the gift cycle and can be termed ‘regulations’ or the ‘norms’ of society. The implication of this is that it may not be entirely appropriate to advocate interpretation of events that are grounded firmly in the regulations and norms of society as they may not truly be subjective. Sydow and Windeler (1998) would seem to support that this is sympathetic to structurationism arguing that “the notion of structure does not refer to the context of social action as detached from this action, but is considered an outcome and medium of action.” Within relationship marketing literature there is also evidence of this appreciation, such as Heide and John (1992) who propose that “relational exchange norms are based on the expectation of mutuality of interest, essentially prescribing stewardship behaviour and designed to enhance the wellbeing of the relationship as a whole”.

Arguably therefore the following methodological model proposes a solution to the objective versus subjective dilemma presented through the analysis of interaction.

### **The theory of structuration**





Structures are made of the three dimensions of signification, domination and legitimation.

Interaction comprises of sanctions, power and communication.

**Rules of signification** or “**sense making**” (De Rond, 2003) “restricts and enables agents to make sense of the context they act in and to communicate this meaning to others” (Sydow and Windeler, 1998). These include syntagmatic statements & semiotics or what Giddens called the theory of coding. Access to such semiology could be gained through the language of co-researchers in a narrative. Gummesson (1996) proposed that relationships exist between people, and objects and symbols. A marketing relevant example would be that of visual branding and overall corporate visual design. The interplay with rules of domination would be through prescription as to the levels of creativity allowed within staff members to alter signs (Vallaster and Chernatony, 2005).

**Resources of domination** refer to things such as “means of production like information technology, knowledge, (access to) relations with other economic actors etc” (Sydow and Windeler, 1998). An example would be information asymmetry between buyers and sellers that one part of the dyad uses to gain ascendancy over the other in a negotiation (Stewart and Pavlou, 2002). This is what Giddens calls the theory of authorisation and allocation. Vallaster and Chernatony (2005) use the example of asymmetry of information between top management and sales staff to illustrate resources of domination.

**Rules of Legitimation** refer to the process by which involvements are made socially legitimate by reference to established norms of behaviour. “These norms are those which in the [agents] view are suitable for articulating and sustaining what they, in a particular context, consider right or wrong” (Ellis and Mayer, 2001). This had also been argued to represent the spirit of the social interaction, “while the letter of the law can be described in objective terms, spirit is more open to competing interpretations” (DeSanctis and Poole, 1994). This is what Giddens calls the theory of normative regulation.

**Interpretative schemes** “typically are taken for granted by organisational members” (Ranson et al., 1980). An example given by De Rond (2003) in respect of alliances is an interpretive scheme where informal assurances were received as more reassuring than formal corporate level communications.

**Facilities** could be contextual and individual facilities that powerful agents use to dominate, “be they money, information, codified knowledge, means of production, or other agents” (Sydow and Windeler, 1998) to reinforce structures of domination.

**Norms** are those norms which are “suitable for articulating and sustaining what they [actors], in a particular context, consider right and wrong” (Ellis and Mayer, 2001). These norms are asymmetrically influenced by those actors with power using structures of domination. This is potentially what Turnbull et al. (2002) refer to when they proposed that “a structure of meanings surrounds the actions of participants” in network interaction and additionally Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995) propose that “consumers also engage in relational market behaviour because of the norms of behaviour set by family members, the influence of peer groups, government mandates, religious tenets, employer influences, and marketer induced policies.” In the context of spatially defined interaction Floysand and Jakobsen (2002) propose that “firms are particularly good at coordinating within industrial clusters, because their frequent local interaction helps create rules of conduct (shared understanding).” Competence based competition includes clear appreciation that competences can be based on recipes, routines, shared value systems, and tacit understanding of interaction (Bogner and Thomas, 1994) and experiential assets (Helleloid and Simonin, 1994). Hall (1994) also proposed that competence based capabilities can be grounded in cultural values, beliefs and attitudes. Sanchez and Heene (1997) suggest that “knowledge has been proposed to be a stock of beliefs held by individuals or groups of individuals within a group.” Learning which they propose to occur when there is a change in this stock of beliefs arguably occurs as a result of agents

interacting. Tacit knowledge forms an untradable asset as lies in routines and norms so therefore cannot form a facility in the way that codified knowledge can.

**Power**, defined by Giddens (Giddens, 1979) “in this relational sense, concerns the capability of actors to secure outcomes where the realisation of these outcomes depends on the agency of others.” The power to structure a situation is unlikely to be distributed symmetrically between actors in any situation. Power “is a man made instrument and it will be made by men in proportion to their power in a given situation” (Gouldner, 1955). This would include differential access to scarce and essential resources. An illustration here would be information asymmetry. where codified knowledge is held back or released. In the knowledge economy, knowledge is power, but there is some contradiction between power and the notion of reciprocity in a relationship. Dicken et al. (2001) for instance propose that “networks are both social structures and ongoing processes, which are constituted, transformed and reproduced through asymmetrical and evolving power relations by intentional social actors and their intermediaries.”

**Sanctioning behaviour** is the modality of interaction through which behaviour is encouraged or discouraged, potentially through application of reward and penalty or coercion and inducement (Giddens, 1979). This would seem to be a core concern for message strategy in marketing communications.

**Communication** in the structurationist approach is therefore used to “reflexively apply interpretive schemes and draw upon rules of signification” (Sydow and Windeler, 1998).

Olkkonen et al. (2000) argue that “relationships and networks cannot be understood without having knowledge of the communication processes occurring within them, and communication processes only can be understood only if the situational factors (contextual and structural characteristics) are considered.” Communication is therefore seen as an essential precursor of relationships. Communication here is seen as a processual content factor which has been taken to mean that it is integral to the structuring process. Contextual (structural) factors then affect this communication and are affected by it.

### **The modern relevance of structurationism to marketing and relationship marketing**

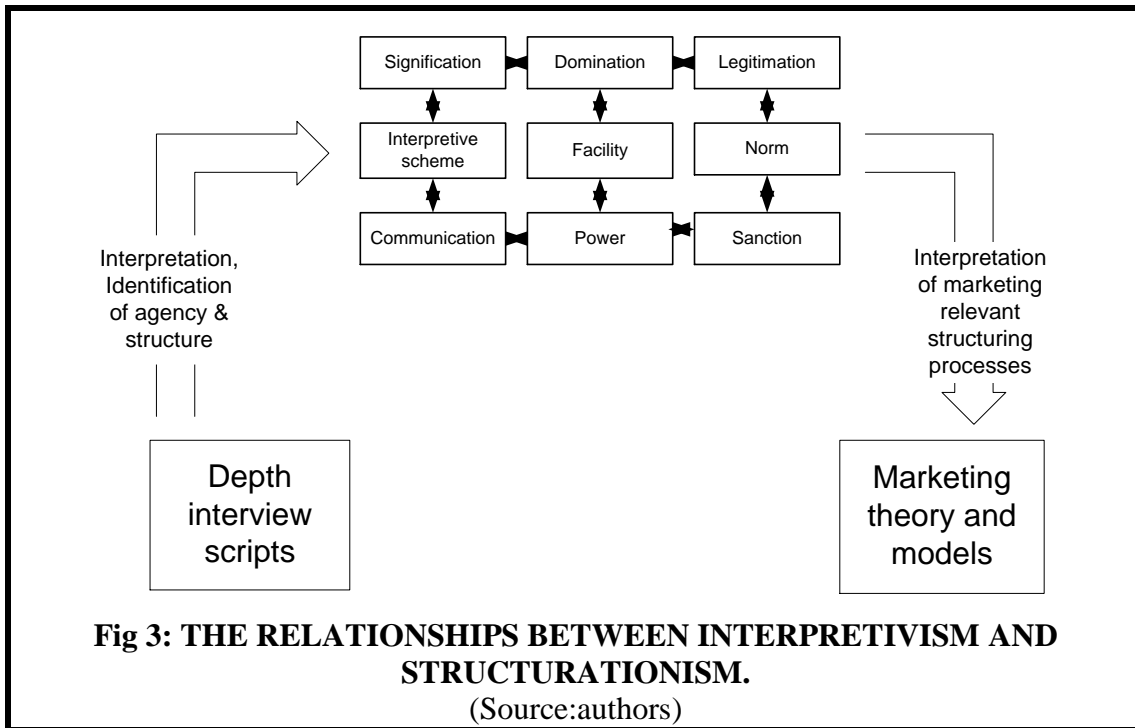
Giddens work has been criticised as not providing a viable epistemology (Hekman, 1990) and has been further challenged as failing to provide a “concrete empirical example in his own work,” offering “few clues as to how to proceed in the everyday world in the gathering of useful understanding, and it’s reflection back on the world of practice” (Rose and Scheepers, 2001). Within the IT discipline, the uses of structurationism has become more widespread and accepted in recent years (See for instance Walsham, 1998; Rose and Scheepers, 2001; DeSanctis and Poole, 1994; Rose, 1998; Rose and Hackney, 2002; Brooks, 1997). Within these papers there is support for the use of the structuration framework to categorize data (Rose and Scheepers, 2001)

Within the marketing and Public Relations disciplines there is limited evidence of its use but where there is evidence, it is more recent. Durham (2005) and Rawlins and Stoker (2002) use structuration as an alternative to functionalism, apparently as meta-theory to

analyze a specific Public Relations crisis situations. Vallaster and Chernatony (2005) examine the relationship between organisational structures and individual brand supporting behaviour. Most relevant to relationship marketing is the use by Ellis & Meyer (2001) to understand industrial network development.

After a period of being unfashionable, there does therefore seem to be a multi-disciplinary movement to re-visit Giddens structuration theory as a framework to deal with the duality of agency and structure rather than as an alternate epistemological stance as Giddens perhaps originally intended. This paper supports the assertion that his work is “manifestly well constructed and well respected” (Rose and Scheepers, 2001), and offers a 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. This paper proposes that structuration theory be viewed and utilised as a “meta-theory within which to locate, interpret and illuminate other approaches” (Walsham and Han, 1991) and it also has usefulness as “meta-triangulation” (Gioia and Pitre, 1990). The proposed relationship between structurationism and interpretivism is therefore conceptualised as follows (Fig?)





**In summary**

In this paper we have outlined the series of controversies that underpin the debate as to the usefulness of structuration theory in developing marketing theory. We have also outlined the documented weaknesses of structuration as a methodology. Inspired by work from the IT discipline, we have then presented a possible resolution to this weakness (fig 3) by presenting a model of structuration as part of an interpretivist investigation. Here structurationism is defined as meta-theory. Throughout the paper we have contrasted the theory of structuration against aspects of theory drawn from relationship marketing research. What remains therefore is to finally clarify and position the usefulness of structuration specifically within the relationship marketing discipline.



There are two elements which can define the usefulness of structuration as a meta-theory in generating new relationship marketing insights. These could be defined as temporality and spatiality, time and space essentially. Culture can also be seen a temporal concept; different cultures may prevail and effect buyer-seller interaction (Palmer, 2000) or indeed interactions at a social level. Sydow and Windeler (1998) argue that “network practices are embedded in the social context of the interfirm network, the industry and the society.” Cultures arguably have a historic grounding and developed over extended time and space. Similarly, relationships may have long term relevance. The original concept of the relationship lifecycle was developed by Gronroos (1980) and Ford (1980). Ford proposed that there are five stages to a relationship as follows:

1. ‘Pre relationship stage.’
2. ‘The early stage.’
3. ‘The development stage.’
4. ‘The long term stage.’
5. ‘The final stage.’

Ford argued that a firm having developed the desire to evaluate a new, unknown supplier consider three factors; experience, uncertainty and distance, distance being defined as social, cultural, technological and geographical. He argued further that commitment is a factor that becomes increasingly important from the development phase onwards. A slightly modified version of this model has been proposed by Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987) using slightly modified terminology.

1. Phase one: Awareness
2. Phase two: exploration
  - i. Attraction
  - ii. Communication/negotiation
  - iii. Developing and bargaining
  - iv. Norm development

- v. Development of cooperation and planning expectations
3. Phase three: expansion
4. Phase four: commitment
5. Phase five: dissolution

An evolutionary economic geography approach “aims to understand the actions of economic actors and paths of change in a context of time and space...it focuses on the dynamic interplay between structure and agency in particular contexts (Boschma, 2004).”

The ultimate guide as to the methodological choice for a qualitative piece of research is the test of validity, reliability and generalisability. Reliability has been argued by some to be an alternative to the positivistic need for replication. Gummesson (1991) has argued that the concept of generalisability in qualitative research can be approached by considering credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability propositions. Transferability is an alternative approach to generalisability, accepting that adaptations may be made but that broad repetition of the approach can be achieved in different contexts. It has been recognised that relationships exist within an atmosphere and this paper has proposed that this be seen as an example of social structure. If an investigation reveals strengths or weaknesses within a relationship marketing programme, are these factors transferable if mediated through a different atmosphere? This atmosphere in line with the principles of structurationism over those of structuralism is seen as constraining and enabling. “proposes that structurationism reflects a change from the ostensibly predictable outcomes of strategic action to the assumption that all outcomes must be interpreted as they are produced” (Durham, 2005), equally as relevant is where they are produced. This paper proposes that the use of the structurationism framework (fig2) as meta-theory (fig 3) will provide insight into the generalisability of insights gained within

one atmosphere when transferred to another. This could be defined as spatial transferability.

This paper therefore proposes that the structurationism framework been seen as an evolutionary concept, seeing relationships as temporal and occurring within definitive but potentially growing and shrinking spatial environments. It allows for relationship marketing researchers to determine how interactions are influenced and conditioned by structures and culture within certain, albeit potentially fluid boundaries such as at the level of the organisation and the level of the external atmosphere. By the use of historic analysis, the use of structuration as meta-theory helps to understand how the agency of actors affects structure over time by breaking interaction down into its constituent elements of structures, modalities and interaction. It allows the potential of influential agents to effect change to be revealed to them whilst conducting otherwise ostensibly routinised relational rituals. In line with Giddens assertions it offers the potential as a relationship sensitizing device.

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