

Practitioner Accounts and Knowledge Production: An Analysis of Three Marketing Discourses

Abstract

Responding to repeated calls for marketing academicians to connect with marketing actors, we offer a discourse analysis of the ways in which managers portray their practices. Focusing on the micro-discourses and narratives that marketing actors draw upon to represent their work, we argue that dominant representations of marketing knowledge production present a number of critical concerns for marketing theory. We also evidence that the often promoted idea of a need to close the gap between theory, as a dominant discourse, and practice, as a way of doing marketing, is problematic to pursue. We suggest that a more fruitful agenda resides in the development of a range of polyphonic and creative micro-discourses of management, promoting context, difference and individual meaning in marketing knowledge production.

Keywords

Discourse; Micro-Discourse; Marketing Management; Legitimacy; Tacit Knowledge; Conflict.

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Introduction: What is missing in marketing discourse?

The dominant academic discourse of marketing management is structured around a range of rational and technical decision-making articulations (Hackley, 2003; Marion, 1993; Witkowski, 2005; Catterall et al., 2002). This approach assumes that marketing language in organisations has a consistently narrow and predominantly mechanical character in the sense that logical analysis frames actions that are the rational consequence of linear planning processes (Cunningham, 1999; Dunne, 1999; Kent, 1986; 1998). Thus, concepts are commonly recognised as being *the* discourse of marketing - revolving around a rhetoric associated with strategic planning processes, product life-cycles, positioning strategies and marketing mixes - and, as Skålén et al. (2008) argue, this discourse largely concerns stipulating a particular type of rationality for managing the organisation.

Within this paper we posit the view that this dominant marketing discourse remains influential, despite the existence of various hybrid paradigms (Coviello, et al., 2002; Echeverri and Skålén, 2011; Harris and Ogbonna, 2003). Furthermore, we argue that the dominant discourse often ignores individual accounts of marketing work, as articulated by practicing managers. For Saren and Brownlie (2004, p. 7), these practitioners have “immanent and insistent experience and knowledge ... which cannot be given expression through the received concepts and language of marketing.” Significantly, Skålén et al. (2008) also consider that the prescriptive academic marketing discourse lacks accounts of how it is actually used in organisations and, as Svensson (2007) observes, we do not have a very good idea of what constitutes marketing work. Therefore, connecting with marketing actors remains an important priority for study (Tadajewski, 2010), particularly in the sense that Jaakkola (2011) describes, making the point that social discursive practices, which are a necessary part of this work, have seldom been studied. Consequently, we take up the challenge presented by Skålén and Hackley (2011, p. 1), who highlight the relative lack of ‘bottom-up’ empirical research into how marketing is actually done in organisations, despite repeated calls for it to occur.

In order to address this vacuum, our paper draws upon in-depth interviews with marketing managers to provide a discourse-analytic perspective. This is a micro-level exploration and analysis of language, one which contrasts the relationship between managers’ reports of marketing work and the dominant academic marketing discourse. It reflects a view of organisations as verbal constructions (Kornberger et al., 2006). For Alvesson and Kärreman (2000), this approach represents a close-range interest in discourse and, consequently, the general perspective adopted here is a social constructionist one (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Caruana et al., 2008), meaning that the world is continually being invented and reinvented discursively by individuals.

The methodological approach we outline is implemented to show that when marketing managers provide accounts of their work discursively, in interviews, the language they use is constitutive of a number of representational discourses. In order to reveal and examine these discourses our paper is structured in the following way. First, we outline the notion of discourse and its applicability to marketing in order to justify the chosen methodological approach. Findings revealed through our study are then presented, accompanied by a review of the relevant debates which they expose. Finally, we discuss the contribution of the paper, within which we frame how the often argued idea of a need to close the gap between marketing theory and practice presents a moribund problematic, suggesting instead that a more fruitful agenda resides in the development of a range

of creative and pluralistic micro-discourses of marketing management.

Defining discourse: textbook knowledge as the dominant mode of marketing representation

Discourse is not a particularly easy notion to summarise, as Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) note: “The word discourse has ... no agreed upon definition and, confusingly, many uses” (p. 1127). Similar to other terms in use within the social sciences, discourse can be drawn upon in a variety of ways (Philips, et al., 2004; Grant et al., 1998). In a very general sense, discourse can refer to practices of writing and talking, usually represented textually (Parker, 1992; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Additionally, as Watson (1994; 1995) points out, discourses can frame actions. Discourses can be envisaged as generalised prevailing systems for the formation of ideas, a perspective with which Foucault (1980) is widely associated. Thus, sets of statements naturalise the social world and have the ability to inform practice. In this context, discourses have the potential to constitute particular forms of subjectivity and for Foucault (1980) levels of social reality can be shaped by extant power/knowledge relations. However, a somewhat different approach to understanding discourse, one adopted in this study, sees it as taking place in a micro-context, with the aim of making sense of a particular social arena (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000). In these different uses of the term, discourse can be viewed, firstly, as sets of processes which assist in structuring the social world and the positions of subjects within it or, secondly, as a highly local and context dependent phenomenon. In the former perspective, the subject is not primarily understood as a meaning creating entity, as evident in phenomenological analysis (Cope, 2005; Goulding, 2004), but instead, self and identity are contingent on the different subject positions embedded in forms of discourse.

In marketing scholarship, many authors have published their research from an explicit discourse-analytic perspective. Examples here include: Elliott (1996), advocating discourse analysis as a useful method for exploring a variety of issues, ranging from the ways in which managers use language to legitimate their activity and sustain their power, through to how they construct their views of the customer; Fellesson (2011), examining how customers become enacted through discourse, drawing examples from public housing and transportation contexts; Elliott et al. (1995), exploring young consumers’ discourses in relation to the symbolic value of different advertising styles; Copley (2010), detailing how discourse constructs the nature of marketing in SMEs; Ellis (1999), presenting four differing postmodern articulations of marketing, framed as competing discourses; Skålén et al. (2006), illustrating how Foucault’s notion of governmentality is applied to the role of marketing’s dominant discourse, and; the work of Ellis et al. (2005), who researched the use of prevalent marketing discourses in the agricultural industry from a social constructionist viewpoint. In this vein, the arguments of Brownlie and Saren (1997) and Hackley (2003) can also be adopted as a critical reference point in terms of analysing marketing discourse. However, it is also important here to define what we mean when we refer to a dominant marketing discourse, as it is with reference to this context by which the three discourses that emerge from our current study are examined and positioned.

Our argument supports a viewpoint within the academic marketing literature that a dominant discourse resides in marketing pedagogy and, in particular, within the marketing textbook. We recognise that a number of textual representations of marketing exist, including, for example: retro marketing (Brown, 2001); relationship marketing (Gummesson, 2002a); experiential marketing (Schmidt, 2003), and; the current paradigm of choice for many authors, the service-dominant

logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; 2008). However, it is the nature of the discourse embedded in the major marketing textbooks that is argued to form the primary knowledge base of the discipline. Despite those alternative marketing representations appearing within an ever-increasing number of peer-reviewed, published research articles and specialist texts, the sheer volume of debate still continues to lack the unified appeal and persuasion of the dominant rational and technical model. Indeed, as Brown (1998; 1999) highlights, what exists in marketing textbooks is no insignificant matter. He suggests that they represent the very essence of the discipline, a point also made by Gummesson (1993; 2002b). Significantly, marketing textbooks are central to the myriad of educational courses in the discipline (Hackley, 2003) and within the pages of these texts a form of marketing is constructed that is highly influential both in scope and content. This explicit, rational and linear-based discourse is presented to learners as the main facilitator of marketing understanding and activity in organisations, where action is the result of prescription; a position that previously led Kent (1986; 1998) to conclude that much of the textual marketing product is premised purely on iteration and reiteration of a set of ‘articles of faith’.

In order to illustrate aspects of this dominant discourse, we frame our study in relation to the key ‘articles of faith’ outlined in the arguments presented above. These serve to perpetuate a dominant marketing discourse which raises a number of concerns. The first of these relates to marketing textbooks which routinely prescribe how marketing decisions are best made using a restricted range of rationally-presented, technical tools. These include a somewhat eclectic range of portfolio-planning matrices, alongside a myriad of additional auditing techniques and analytical frameworks. In most marketing textbooks, it appears obligatory for firms to carry out a seemingly objective step-by-step process of analysis and planning, utilising a one-size-fits-all, rational and prescriptive formula as indicated in the following statement: “Once the company has performed a SWOT analysis it can proceed to develop specific goals ... this stage of the process is called goal formulation” (Kotler et al., 2010, p. 105). Here, an abstracted, formulaic process of analysis, planning and control reigns supreme (Hackley 2001), where scant regard is paid to local, situational or politically-sensitive issues of understanding, let alone enabling any scope for the recognition of managerial subjectivity or tacit knowledge generation (Hackley, 1999). Surprisingly, therefore, as Brown (2001) notes, matrices are very resilient to criticism and are extensively used on both introductory and more advanced marketing courses.

This apparent emphasis on a clearly codified, narrowly-prescribed order of rationality is made abundantly clear when we consider our second concern; one which suggests that the constantly evolving business environment can be analysed and represented in an objective manner. In most marketing texts, there is at least one or two chapters which represent the environment and its constituent factors in a relatively straightforward and unambiguous fashion (cf. Jobber and Ellis-Chadwick, 2012). It is, of course, inherently problematic for learners to encounter so little opportunity to question what is, or is not, included under those simplified banner headings ascribing to the Social, Legal, Economic, Political and Technological factors of interest. Nor is this a new concern. Indeed, as Smircich and Stubbart (1985) argue, managers are ‘playwrights’ who create and enact their own environments. In this sense it is clear that marketing textbooks regularly fail to capture the complexities and ambiguities involved in managing those socially-constructed, multi-faceted realities, modelling instead a simple dichotomy of organisation and environment.

The third key 'article of faith', from which we illustrate our concerns with the dominant discourse of marketing, lies in the presupposition that marketing is primarily concerned with managing Borden's (1964) ever-present, but heavily-criticised (Constantinides, 2006; Grönroos, 1994; 2006; Gummesson, 2002b), four Ps of the marketing mix. Yet many of the popular marketing texts devote substantial sections to this topic, arguing that the first task of marketing implementation is for the organisation to "*coordinate marketing mixes for its major product lines*" (Doyle and Stern, 2006, p. 126). These representations provide a relatively simple systemic-based discourse of marketing orientation as a given feature of organisational strategy, instructively cementing an edifice of segmentation, targeting and positioning processes. In this schema, not only is organisational context somehow relegated to a place of minor importance, but individual employees appear to fit within the marketing system in an unproblematic way. In the dominant discourse, explicit, rational decision-making processes (e.g. deciding upon the communications mix, or actioning inferences from the product life-cycle, etc.) are deemed to be the foundation from which to explain the intended consequences of choice. As systemic functionaries, managers are thus presented as rational planning and research intermediaries, proficiently executing elements of the pre-ordained marketing mix. In this textual discourse of management, decision-making is linear, variables can be isolated and technical rationality dominates processes of understanding (Cunningham, 1999). Indeed, as Dunne (1999) suggests, the dimensions of a technical, rational discourse are characterised as being objective, generalisable, replicable, controllable, transparent, accessible and also unambiguous. In this sense, we locate the dominant description of those features of marketing knowledge production found in most of the mainstream textbooks. What is missing is any consideration of the 'doings' of marketing, the broader social practices consistent with people's activities within organisations, and the 'sayings' of marketing, the types of language managers might use in performing these activities (Hackley, 2003; Brownlie and Saren, 1997).

This is a significant omission and one which warrants further examination as we argue that the prevalence of marketing's dominant, rational and technical discourse should be challenged. There are a number of reasons for this. First, the dominant discourse represents what Kornberger et al. (2006) expose as a totalitarian grand narrative that marginalises other voices, particularly those which disagree with its prescriptive stance. Consequently, the dominant discourse privileges a particular view of marketing management, one which fixes immutable rules about what can and cannot be said. For Brownlie and Saren (1997), marketing management thus becomes trapped in an ideological prison where competing views and alternative standpoints cannot be easily articulated. This is an important issue to expose as we support the view of Fougère and Skålén (2012, p. 24) who argue that the mainstream marketing management discourse currently aligns to an orthodoxy devoid of reflexivity, characterised as a discipline which never views a world outside of its 'customeristic' ideology, irrespective of context or temporality. Political tensions become irrelevant and a corporate discourse flourishes. The rhetorically positioned outcome (Hackley, 2001) fails to connect with other equally prescient issues and interests encompassing, for example, the over exploitation of resources and people, or conflicts of interest within organisations (du Gay and Salaman, 1992).

Recognising this omission presents the first good reason for facilitating a more open and pluralistic perspective on what constitutes marketing activities in contrast to the dominant 'textbook approach' that we have outlined. Furthermore, an additional concern exposed here suggests that the dominant discourse limits any scope of possibility for more persuasive, relevant

and plausible accounts of marketing management work itself. As Brownlie and Saren (1997) indicate, when marketing management is being written about it is not a question of deferring to actors' accounts of their activity, but instead, it is frequently a case of imposing on those same actors what can only be regarded as a rather sterile and simplistic view of organisations and the way they appear to work.

Consequently, a range of dimensions to the work of marketers becomes hidden by the normative discourse. There is an evident lacuna in the dominant discourse concerning accounts of marketing in terms of its local context and the impact of diverse operational and cultural settings on practice. The dominant approach fails to articulate the diversity and plurality of activity that is constituted by and through marketing work (Hackley, 2001). In particular, it neglects to refer in any meaningful way to the subjectivities of the human actor in organisations and how they serve to construct notions of marketing practice. In this sense, there are some significant gaps in our understanding of the actual processes involved in carrying out marketing activities that need unpacking in order that we may better understand the nuances of what is said and done under the label of 'Marketing' in organisations (Jaakkola, 2011; Skålén et al., 2008; Svensson, 2007; Tadjewski, 2010). Equipped with this more nuanced understanding of knowledge construction, the tools are provided to open up the closed, hegemonic discourse and to capture for would be marketers, practitioners and the academy, the plurality and multifaceted nature of marketing management in practice. This perspective offers potential to avoid the ritualised inflexibility of thought, or the myopic views of practice (Saren and Brownlie, 2004), to encompass polyphonic constructions of marketing management activity.

However, in this sense, it is also important to note the theoretical implications of our stance. The overarching view of theory inherent within the dominant marketing discourse can be seen to order perceptions "where there exists an invariable and privileged structure of predetermined categories" (Saren and Brownlie, 2004, p. 2). For Cornelissen and Lock (2005), these efforts to ape methods of the natural sciences, where broad, generalisable theories prescribe the way the marketing world should function (Tapp and Hughes, 2008), are expressed as instrumental theories of marketing. It is precisely this kind of axiomatic approach to theory development that we also contest. We recognise the pluralistic consequences of our social constructionist worldview to suggest that discursive accounts, deeply embedded in a particular milieu, should be capable of illuminating marketing settings without the need for constant redirection to the tense generalities of a dominant discourse (Astley, 1985). Indeed, as Brownlie and Saren (1997) point out, theory as discourse should not be a singular order. Instead, theory generation should become more closely preoccupied with ordering attempts that contain an exploration of marketing's different and changing embodiments, performances and interactions in micro and macro contexts. Without this more nuanced view of the doings and sayings of marketing actors we will simply continue to offer an impoverished view of the discipline (Hackley, 2003).

Research approach: method and analysis

The study presented in this paper draws on interview data gathered over a period of stages during the last decade. The aim initially was to examine individual perceptions of senior marketers in terms of their approaches to the development and implementation of marketing plans. At the analysis stage, which involved the identification of key themes, the responses of the majority of these managers suggested that their written plans appeared to function as cues and guides, rather

than prescriptively directing action. Managers appeared to develop their own locally-constructed marketing mixes whereby quality, service and relationships were significant factors for the majority. The emphasis on local interpretations of marketing was prevalent in the language used, as tropes, metaphors and stories competed with the more orthodox technical vocabulary of marketing.

Research analysis did not begin with the intention of identifying particular discourses, as this came about during a later re-examination. In total, twenty-six interviews were conducted within various organisations based in the Eastern counties of England, UK. The names of all companies and participants have been changed in order to retain anonymity. On re-examining the interview transcripts, the prevalence of three key discourses appeared to dominate the language used by managers. In each discourse, prevalent structures and functions, represented through key discursive repertoires (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), have been examined, providing the basis for analysis. Noticeably, as Watson (1995, p. 13) points out, there was an important lesson here concerning the transcription of interviews: "... another voice reminded me ... if you have got the energy and time strive to transcribe everything ... you never know what might seem significant until you have reflected on it later."

Each interview lasted approximately sixty minutes and took place with individuals in a private room within a building of their workplace. All interview recordings were transcribed and reproduced verbatim. During the interviews a narrative was co-produced between the interviewer and the interviewee (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Coupland, 2001; Copley, 2010) and the discursive validity of the responses provided depended on the ability of the respondents to convey meanings in a form that made them locally comprehensible. Our analysis of these accounts provides a way to focus on the identifiable discourses and how they might reflect versions of reality articulated by managers taking part in the study (Alvesson, 2003). A significant feature of the discourse-analytic approach is that researchers' understandings must pay attention to not only the discourse itself, but also to any relevant situational and contextual factors (Hardy et al., 2000; van Dijk, 2010). In addition to spatiotemporal settings, this can also include the goals of participants, their identity, roles, relationships, knowledge, ideology and any ongoing social actions concerning them. On a related point, there are also a variety of positions that deal with the ontological status of the qualitative interview. These range from seeing it as a report detailing an objective reality - an encounter based on rapport building and accessing deep individual understanding - to one that sees the interview itself as the site of knowledge production (Silverman, 1993; Kvale, 1996; Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Alvesson (2003, p. 31) suggests that an important response to the complexity of the interview is to adopt what he calls a "reflexive pragmatism" in terms of the accounts produced. This perspective suggests that it is necessary to make conscious and consistent efforts to view the subject matter from a range of diverse analytic viewpoints and to strenuously avoid privileging one perspective.

Other forms of discourse are evident within the transcripts, although these were less significant and in many instances informed at least one of the three major themes subsequently outlined. For example, some managers expressed a lack of attachment to traditional marketing research exercises. Others highlighted the primacy of relationships over and above any clearly identifiable, or prescriptive, uses of marketing tools and others declared their adherence to traditional planning processes with a somewhat sceptical eye. The three discourses we outline emerged freely as each

interview enabled informants to talk openly and explicitly about what constituted their work as marketing managers and the language they employed in its execution. Nonetheless, it is also worth commenting on the representational status we ascribe to the three discourses presented as the result of our analyses. For some writers (e.g. Marshak, 1998), it is not unusual to see discourse and action as separate entities. In this instance discourse is of secondary, and removed, importance simply representing a preliminary stage that a researcher must look through in order to identify the nature of action. However, an alternative view, one which we subscribe to within our argument, suggests that verbal accounts of marketing work, as articulated by managers, are a necessary part of that same marketing work. This line of reasoning postulates that all action is contained in discourse, where the discourse frames and holds the action of individuals (Johnson 1987). In this schema, we can relocate discourse from a position that is implicitly distant and removed from action, to an all-encompassing role where it relates directly to the exigencies of practical activity; which, in our account, means the marketing work that is lived by managers. The three discourses that we now discuss are representative of the key functioning aspects of the marketing manager's work and an articulation of their working worlds; the things which concern them and preoccupy much of their waking lives. In what follows, talk and action are not to be seen as discrete and different, but inextricably bound together, where action is embedded in discourse. With these sensitivities in mind, we now turn to an examination of the key discourses that emerged from the interviews. Within these, marketing work is primarily represented as: a discourse of legitimacy; a discourse of tacit expertise; and a discourse of conflict.

Marketing's technical language: The discourse of *legitimacy*

A key discourse identified revolves around the degree to which the technical language of marketing management acts as a rhetorical, legitimating strategy which serves to further individual and functional interests within an organisation, where marketing managers are keen to ensure that their influence is perpetuated (Harris and Ogbonna, 2003). The issue of reinforcing marketing's legitimacy is particularly evident when Jason, the marketing director of Stirling Publishing, talks about the role of marketing tools in the creation of a business plan. His response is couched in a rational and technical language, indicating that managers possessing academic marketing understanding are able to call upon a set of ideological resources; a language base where the value present is essentially about packaging, rather than content (Whittington, 1993). In line with this, Kornberger et al. (2006, p. 12) argue that "Marketing people might use MBA talk to convince others how important their issues are. The discourse of marketing enables them to define their position and argue for it." Such a view can infer that marketing's technical vocabulary bestows a degree of credibility on its adherents, which can then be mobilised in specific work contexts (Wilmott, 1999; Eriksson, 1999), as Jason describes:

"Yes, I would say that the Boston matrix is used everywhere, in fact everything is a two by two matrix and if you turn to our business plan, you would see that our business plan starts off with a Porter analysis, you know all the threats, internal, external. You would find there is quite a lot of classic marketing thinking here, partly because a lot of people have come in ... from other big companies ... our chief executive is from Giant Marketing Textbooks, and has therefore been responsible for producing a lot of the classic marketing texts, so he is quite keen we should practice what we preach. So yes, we follow the classic line."

What is important to appreciate with regard to the technical language Jason uses, is the wider

organisational context in which it is delivered. Jason indicated early on in the interview that he is new to the firm, having only been with the organisation for a matter of months, along with the marketing team itself. The company Jason works for is a major national operation and much is at stake for a recently appointed marketing director. Marketing's role must be justified both externally and internally. This was a point not lost on the interviewer, to whom it appeared that Jason was practicing promotional activity and impression management (Alvesson, 2003). Jason was clear to advance the supposed professional expertise invested in the marketing plan:

"It is a pretty classic marketing document, it will go through the competitive analysis, and we do a Porter analysis as well as a SWOT analysis on everything."

For Giddens (1990; 1991), marketing knowledge of this type is representative of an expert system which deploys modes of technical knowledge. These expert systems have validity independent of clients and practitioners and central to their place in the modern world is the high level of trust that people place in them, arguably a strategy that Jason illustrates.

In another context, Kevin, the marketing manager from a consultancy firm, was asked about his approach to developing and implementing marketing planning. His language throughout the interview was peppered with marketing's technical terminology, as if he was very conscious of his identity in representing a firm of consultants who advise others on structured ways to improve their business. As Hackley (2001) points out, marketing's technical discourse is very much suited to this approach. Furthermore, whilst it can be argued that Kevin is following a shared cultural script from the consultancy world about marketing planning, it appears he is also attempting to be honest and frank; "a moral storyteller" (Alvesson, 2003, p. 21) who does try to do as he advises others to do:

"We do have plans. Believe it or not, we try to do what we preach. We have one overall marketing plan, which sits within our three to five year business plan. From that, we then have separate brand and product marketing plans. We look into the current situation; have objectives, strategy, an action plan and evaluation, with timescales and a budget."

For evidence of a rational, technical discourse being employed in another situation, where some influence has to be exerted, Paul, a marketing manager within a major newspaper group, points out that the technical discourse of marketing initially helped centre his team's attention on a range of necessary, market-based actions. Having achieved this, he admits to using marketing concepts in an apparently limited, and more nuanced, way primarily to remind staff of their roles within the firm. When asked whether he found a use for the tools of marketing planning, Paul offered the following comment:

"The answer is yes and no. I suggested to the managing director we should follow a textbook-style approach to market planning. He agreed and we did it. We did the audit, we did the SWOT analysis in the way Malcolm McDonald advocates, we did critical success factors, us versus the competition, and we did our directional-policy matrix. That process really did help us focus. We still talk in those terms, there is a residual benefit from doing it, but to be physically spending hours and hours ... flip-charting, going through it all again, now everyone has heard of these things, I thought this is text book stuff, let's get real."

This comment appears, in part, redolent of Foucault's notion of the use of pastoral power (Skålén

et al., 2008). In Paul's case, the use of marketing's technical language appears to encourage employees to look inside themselves, a form of self-discipline, and then judge if they are sufficiently attuned and integrated into marketing-planning practices. Moreover, arguments in this section harmonize to some extent with the findings of von Koskull and Fougère (2011). Their study of a team involved in service development processes identified rhetorical arguments that relied on *logos* and rationality. A considerable amount of time was devoted to this, where references to knowledge were constantly being made. In terms of our findings, it appears that a rationale is being set for the deployment of marketing language, where the apparent legitimacy of supporting statements is reinforced by constant referrals to the pertinent expert knowledge systems of the discipline. This also supports the arguments of Jaakkola (2011) in the sense that managers draw on a language of technical expertise in dealing discursively with the selling and management of professional services, explaining that customers find it difficult to understand these things. However, when it comes to making marketing decisions things can be seen rather differently as the words of Paul may intimate above when he talks about getting 'real.'

Practical accomplishment: The *tacit* discourse

The previous section highlights the role played by a professional discourse in furthering particular agendas within the firm. However, it represents only one variant of the marketing practitioners' discourse. In contrast, a key discursive resource used by the managers in this study is manifested through constant references to the tacit when discussing their market-based actions. The use of a tacit discourse means that, in terms of performativity, marketing skills and knowledge are elevated to a higher realm of expertise beyond that of the simple technical processes described in marketing textbooks and numerous prescriptive research articles (Hackley, 1999). Furthermore, as research has shown in instances where marketing-planning tools are not widely used in practice (Greenley and Bayus, 1993; Hackley, 1998; Brown, 1995; 2001), the tacit takes on considerable importance. Whilst Collins (2001, p. 107-8) recognises that tacit knowledge is "ill defined and elusive", he also acknowledges it as a form of mastery of practice, covering those things that we "know how to do", something that Tapp (2004) suggests is central to an understanding of practice. At Jenks Print, a thriving SME, Irving, the marketing director, provides an illustrative attempt to grapple with this elusiveness:

"You have, what is it? The conscious incompetence and the unconscious incompetence, the conscious competence and the unconscious competence and when marketing gets into the unconscious competence, you know what the right thing to do is instinctively."

The instinctive represents the tacit, capturing emotion, intuition, judgement, gut-feelings and experientially acquired wisdom. Maclaren and Catterall (2000) and Maclaren and Stevens (2008) argue that marketing practice in reality is more generally emotional and subjective than is readily assumed and for Clive, a technical sales and marketing manager, some aspects of this tacit process are clearly apparent when he discusses a consultant who was brought in to provide marketing advice to his company:

"Our marketing chap came in and one of the first things he did was say, 'look there seems to be so much black art in this company, in [meat-] slicing generally, I am going to put together a catalogue for a salesman to go out and ask the right questions...' but the problem with that is it varies from one factory to another ... I suppose to some extent it does tend to be a black art. As I say, half a dozen customers can be doing the same thing,

manufacture the same product, but they are all doing it in a slightly different way, and their way is best...”

The notion of ‘a black art’ in the sense used here does not refer to any nefarious action on the part of the company but to the unfathomable practices that appear to exist, from an outsider’s view, with regard to the company’s practices and the wider industry. Parallels can be drawn here with Alvesson’s (1998) ethnographic study within an advertising agency, where he found decision-making to be ambiguous; a matter of attitudes, opinions and emotional reactions. Furthermore, in a recent study of marketing practices, Patterson et al. (2012) reveal that there are strong aspects of marketing management related to its intuitive nature. Certainly the issue of ambiguity aligned to the non-technical nature of marketing language comes to the fore at Morris Builders in our current study. When dealing with questions about the analysis of competitors, Jerry, the firm’s marketing manager, uses the notion of ‘gut feelings’ to explain his approach of monitoring competitors’ progress when competing for building tenders. Formal, explicit research is eschewed:

“To me, other things have greater priority but we do, I hate to use the phrase ..., [have] a gut feeling. When you get put on the tender list and you find out who else is on the tender list, and then you find out who came where, and then watch in the press who won this, and who won that, you start to get the feel of who’s healthy and who’s not healthy, who’s interested in this, who’s not interested.”

Another example of the tacit is provided by Gordon, marketing director of Mitre Technics, an SME operating in the area of micro-technology manufacturing, where new product development decision-making processes are located in the intuitive:

“Current sales, which number over ten thousand different types of product parts, are plotted on the computer system but then, at the end of that it is a kind of a guesstimate, we kind of look at new products out, and see what we think will sell.”

Gordon is working here with uncertainty and a degree of ambiguity. For Brownlie and Spender (1995), these qualities represent a key feature associated with strategic marketing decision-making. The ‘guesstimate’ represents a heuristic shortcut for the knowledge and expertise built into practitioner skills and experience.

Jason, at Stirling Publishing, also indicates that the tacit is a central feature of the discourse of marketing managers. At this point, it is worthwhile remembering Jason’s earlier attachment to the rational-planning discourse of marketing as he points out the significance of intuitive decision-making, demonstrating the managerial occurrence of multiple forms of discourse in different contexts. This is a good example of the variability to be found in discourse, where it can be used to perform different types of acts in different types of situations (cf. Potter and Wetherell, 1987):

“You have to make 7,000 decisions a year on product, whether you launch a product or not, but at the end of the day, one of the many values of the publishing team ... is they have a gut feel for what is going to work and what isn’t going to work, and even at the micro-level, looking at the cover of a book, they can sense whether it is going to work or not, so I believe there is a role for making those sort of judgement calls...”

This emphasis within decision-making is a considerable way removed from the explicit and codified nature of the dominant marketing management discourse. A further articulation of such is

presented by Sheila, representing a national DIY manufacturer, where she discusses their use of the BCG matrix, a ubiquitous portfolio planning tool within many core marketing texts. It is not a question here of convincing others of marketing's efficacy, but of articulating what actually makes for effective decision-making:

“The Boston matrix [for example]... In all truth, we do that by instinct. You just know that wall brushes, for example, it's a declining market; we won't be spending a million pounds boosting that product sector. So, cash cows and all the rest of it, we instinctively know what they are, it gets drawn out in different ways. We don't plot it around a matrix as such; we don't sit and draw out a Boston matrix. It is not the sort of thing we consciously sit down and draw up, we know because we know our business, which categories they are in and we make our decisions accordingly.”

What is apparent in the discourse of the tacit is that an intense subjectivity is being articulated. Managers indicate that knowledge and action is very personal rather than being embedded in prescriptive discourse. Arguably, each manager has a reservoir of wisdom which is embedded within the context of their own organisation and, along the lines suggested by Dunne (1999), therefore possesses their own unique narrative for managing (Ardley, 2006). In this way, sense is made of local action (Svensson, 2007).

Contesting marketing: A discourse of *conflict*

One of the more remarkable features of much research into marketing and of its prescriptive predilections is the lack of attention paid to the existence of conflict in organisations. In this respect, Hackley (2003, p. 1327) offers a compelling argument to suggest that “marketing management texts work up a managerial world devoid of discordance and awash with manufactured consensus.” Textbooks aside, a considerable amount of academic research into marketing also fails to address this conflict problematic where it matters, at the level of the individual marketing manager. Whilst there is a growing interest in studies which examine the ideological role of the discipline (Tadajewski and Brownlie, 2008; Brownlie and Hower, 2007), little consideration, other than the work of Faria and Wensley (2002) and Skålén (2009), has been paid to the ways in which marketing managers construct a discourse around conflict.

However, as revealed within this study, conflict appeared in a variety of ways as an endemic linguistic feature. At one level, conflict over marketing can be viewed as resting on issues of interpretation and definition. This point is articulated by Richard, a marketing manager at an independent legal firm. He points to the fact that there are differing views of what marketing actually is within an organisation that is made up not only of lawyers, but also includes administrative staff and accountants, all of whom he expects to participate in customer activity at one time or another. This reflects an apparent belief in the dispersal of marketing's role across the firm (Harris and Ogbonna, 2003). Generally, however, in our current study market-based strategy still appeared to reside largely with the marketer and their staff, across both small and large organisations. Richard stated that:

“Some will associate marketing with getting articles in the newspaper, taking someone out to lunch or having the odd bit of sponsorship. Others will recognise this as much more analytical and will see it as much more involved...”

People will classify the world in many different ways and these classifications become reified in their effects, as managers and staff work through the meaning they attach to the word 'marketing' and its implementation. As an example, Robin, a marketing manager with a global financial services firm, discusses a recent company initiative called "Driving the Business Forward" which was geared towards eliciting from all staff a general view of what would help to differentiate the company in the marketplace:

"If we could get everybody in the organisation giving the same answer to the question: what differentiates Nelson's? If everybody gave the same answer, that would be massively powerful. At the moment, even though we have done the process, if we said that, you would get 2,700 different answers."

In developing this point about conflict, Marion (1993) and Thomas (1993) suggest that the traditional prescriptive discourse of marketing is inadequate, because the aims of organisations and their members are not in fact given in any systemically determined way. The adoption of a marketing orientation by organisational members cannot be assumed to be an automatic process. Unfortunately, many journal articles routinely present instructions on how marketing orientation can be implemented, where scant attention is paid to issues of expressed or latent conflict within the firm (e.g. Narver and Slater, 1990; Jaworski and Kohl, 1993). In contrast, the work of Harris (1998) and Harris and Ogbonna (1999) points towards the importance of different organisational conditions and the problems of building consensus among disparate interest groups holding diverse perceptions of the organisation. This could include part-time shelf-fillers and cashiers in supermarkets, who may exhibit different values and diverse reasons for being at work when compared to senior management personnel. Marketing's technical discourse rarely drills down to this level of detail when discussing implementation issues because it lacks the linguistic resources to deal with conflict. This is an issue that Melissa, the marketing manager of an international food-processing company, highlights when she describes the problem of convincing employees within the factory that their work is ultimately about the production of an image, rather than anything else they may wish to articulate:

"One of the problems that we have is on the shop floor. Everyone knows that if the Big Retail Company shouts, we jump, so what we produce has to be perfect, but that idea is not always present on the shop floor and they would be quite happy to pack lower grade produce and say we can, as managers, do with that what we want. There's not an understanding that our brand name drives the business. So, brand perception is one area we are working on quite hard. We just had a two-day sales conference where we invited all the people from the factory, to get across how important the brand is. This is the biggest area that is not completely understood, that is my main concern."

Within the discourse used by these marketing managers it is possible to suggest a degree of proselytising taking place, where non-believers have to be converted to the 'right' way of thinking about the business. In this sense, it is interesting to note that Kent (1986) previously postulated that marketing orthodoxy is embedded in something akin to a religious faith; a point reiterated by Brown (2001). Similarly, Mary, the marketing manager within a construction company, echoed this notion of the one right way to believe, not only for her staff, but for everyone in the organisation:

"I do think it is very important that every single person in the company realises they are

marketing the company and it's not just left to the marketing department. I think it is much more important to get everyone involved, so they can't say: it's nothing to do with me. That's not right at all ... we have had customer care and marketing seminars, various programmes running, for six months or so, so that all staff when they go out on site, or just answer a phone call, know they are marketing the company."

We are mindful that Lyotard's (1988) notion of *différend* resonates here, an irreconcilable conflict between market logic and a more humanistic discourse, something that Robin, of Nelson's, the financial services company, vividly captures in the following statement:

"I use an analogy of iron filings and a magnet. If you could run a magnet over all staff and get everyone focused on the one thing this company would be unbeatable. And any other company would be. The problem is you can't do it, you can't actually get everybody lined up behind one thing..."

Contributions to discourse analytic research and marketing knowledge production

In response to calls for marketing academicians to connect with marketing actors (Jaakkola, 2011; Skålén, 2008; Skålén and Hackley, 2011; Svensson, 2007; Tadajewski, 2010), our research attempts to provide a more nuanced understanding of marketing knowledge production. Highlighting the pluralistic ways in which marketing practitioners constitute their work we evidence how managers utilise a range of literary devices to work up multiple realities of marketing management (Brown, 2005). While there remains a relative paucity of research in marketing which examines the social discursive practices of marketing actors (Jaakkola, 2011), our study provides a unique contribution to our understandings of marketing and the performative role of discourse in shaping the realities of marketing management practice. Consequently, our research also makes an important contribution to the growing body of discourse analytic research in marketing as it reconnects to a number of previous discourse analytic studies which recognise the importance of understanding the ways in which both managers (e.g. Skålén and Hackley, 2011) and consumers (e.g. Roper et al., 2013) constitute their practices and construct meanings through language.

In particular, our findings reinforce the previous arguments of Elliot (1996) to show that the discourses of practicing marketing managers are replete with interpretative repertoires utilised discursively to legitimate marketing activities. This is especially noticeable in our study where actors are seen to draw upon the technical language and character of the dominant marketing discourse (Cunningham, 1999; Dunne, 1999) in their attempts to advance and defend sectional interests within their organisations. Furthermore, from a practice theory perspective on discourse (cf. von Koskull and Fougère, 2011), our work also contributes additional insights to Jaakkola's (2011) labelling of the 'productization' discourse. Jaakkola evidenced how professional service practitioners, through the mediating effects of language, reduced abstract customer offerings or highly technical processes into a more standardised, controllable and easily exchangeable discourse among marketplace actors. In this sense we note that situational specificity and expediency are indeed important aspects of the marketing practitioner's role, particularly as they are constituted by way of a tacit discourse detailed in our study.

It is also significant for us to consider the work of Ellis et al. (2005) given their view that

marketing-led language is seen to position and orientate managers within a hegemonic relational contract. Subsequently, we also suggest that marketing is constituted by a relational interdependence between firms and an acceptance of the complexities involved when, for example, managing supply chain relationships. In this relational marketing discourse, conflict arises when the strains of juggling organisational mutuality clash with individuals' pursuits of self interest. These tensions, evident within our discourse of conflict, frame a concern that this is an area given scant attention in the marketing literature despite the fact that such tensions form a significant feature of the marketing manager's multifaceted role. Moreover, it is this multifaceted or pluralistic nature of the marketing management role that is particularly emphasised by the findings of our study. For Copley (2010) this is no insignificant conclusion, as he argues that the overarching mainstream discourse of marketing management lacks relevance for many participants. Copley (2010) argues that organisations are discursively constructed in accordance with several different sets of priorities, highlighting the importance of context, polyphony and multiple realities of marketing practice. In contrast to the dominant marketing discourse, something that we frame as an overly deterministic position, we therefore seek to emphasise a far more diverse and polyphonic appreciation of the social discursive practices of marketing actors which constitute the performative production of marketing work.

Contributions to marketing work as micro-discourse and social narrative

In line with a key tenet of this paper, Svensson (2007, p.272) suggests that marketing management orthodoxy views its core constructs as an "extra discursive phenomenon", its continuation independent of how concepts and narratives are actually used and interpreted in everyday marketing practice. For Svensson, marketing work is not narrowly focussed around predefined categories and tools, as typified by the rational discourse, it is a social practice constituted by a heterogeneous linguistic amalgamation, where managers make problematic the apparent idea of marketing as a fixed object. In his study, managers were shown to draw on social narratives and to use them alongside localised forms of understanding. Importantly, this work alerts us to the fact that micro-discourses can be influenced by and intermingled with wider social narratives (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Berger and Luckmann, 1966). In common with this perspective, our presentation attempts to foreground aspects of the human and social character of marketing work which lie outside its dominant representation. The three discourses presented in our study show that marketing work, like other forms of organisational activity (Boden, 1994), is discursively anchored at a micro-level within the business enterprise. We demonstrate here that marketing managers take possession of a dominant marketing narrative when they employ a technical, rational language (Giddens, 1990). This occurs, for example, when managers pursue the objective of expanding marketing's role within the firm. In this sense, a rational instrumental discourse, or narrative, is not carried neutrally; it is subverted for use by individual actors for their own interests, seemingly without any sense of tension being present in their articulations.

In terms of the second discourse here, centred on the tacit, a greater sense of disparity exists. Managers recognise that, to a large degree, practical work in marketing is made up of an 'unconscious competence' rooted in a subjective localness, rather than in codified knowledge. The legitimacy of marketing may be based on rational language, but this language may not necessarily be used when the practical accomplishment of external strategy is called for. This can be seen when managers in this study recognise the existence of a wider social discourse of technical rationality but are able, as interpreting actors, to 'navigate' around it successfully. To adopt

Svensson's (2007) metaphor, there is a multitude of small 'islands', social narratives, around which actors need to navigate. In terms of the micro-discourses of marketing conflict exposed in this paper, it is evident that these conflict-based social narratives are of significance. As managers in our study evidence, social narratives framed around such issues as marketing's ideological role (Marion, 2006), inequality, and management control of subjectivities (Taylor, 2002), interpolate their work roles substantially.

Given that the discourses presented are plausible, performative constitutions of practice we argue that the dominant marketing discourse is focussed on the uncritical absorption of marketing precepts which may bear little resemblance to the practitioners' world. Within such exchanges, a complex, complicated and multifaceted reality is reduced to neat textual packages, matrices and easily digested vignettes. The discourses presented in our study concern and detail the doings and sayings of marketers and, as a consequence, we highlight that, particularly within textbook representations of practice, some important dimensions of marketing accomplishment are excluded and concealed from any critical consideration. Clearly, in this instance, there is a danger that would be marketers, practitioners and members of the academy may become solely engaged with a singular discourse premised on precepts pertaining to a practice of technical rationality, thus marginalising other voices which disagree with its prescriptive stance. This is an important finding and supports the arguments of Duguid (2005, p. 112) who states: "Approaching a text as sincere or ironic yields two diametrically opposed interpretations of its meaning... A tacit understanding of the ground rules for interpretation thus plays a role in grounding a particular interpretation of the text – a facet of interpretation that originates outside the text to be interpreted." Our findings therefore raise concerns about the representational vagaries which are omitted from exploration within the dominant discourse. Interestingly, whilst a steadily increasing number of marketing scholars expose the breadth and diversity of approaches encountered within practice-focused empirical settings, this is seldom the case with regards the content of marketing textbooks, which, sometimes written by those same researchers, often appear as homogenous, normative and prescriptive. This also reinforces the difficulty of incorporating the inherently context-dependent knowledge of practices as Duguid (2005, p. 112) suggests, especially in the sense that "the codified no longer serves the purpose of the tacit it replaces." To illustrate this problem, we finally comment on a number of theoretical considerations, in relation to the findings of our study.

Towards a polyphonic discourse of marketing

As identified within the marketing managerial discourse of *legitimacy*, the professional identity of the marketing manager, particularly as presented in a textbook representations, appears as a given objective 'thing'; an agent with responsibility for managing the activities related to facilitating exchange relationships with groups of customers (cf. Doyle and Stern, 2006). In practice, the role involves much more than implementing the neat cognitive structures of prescriptive action contained in the textbook portrayal. As evidenced through the discourse of *legitimacy*, marketing managers frequently have to seek and exercise power within their organisational settings in order to advance their interests; key factors of the role that the dominant marketing discourse is remarkably silent upon. Whilst many organisations are shaped and, indeed, organisational lives defined by internal power struggles and conflicts of interest, the dominant discourse, as framed in many marketing textbooks, does not reach beyond a cosy unity of purpose based around the notion of a marketing-oriented organisation. No discourses of conflict exist in these descriptions.

Instead, there lies a form of management rhetoric, fixated on uniform notions of customer-centricity. The sometimes contrary motivations, perceptions and actions of the individual employee enacting this world are conveniently ignored. No attempts are made to either unravel organisational dynamics, of what is an intensely socially-mediated practice, or to reveal the problematic of social conflict, as evidenced by a number of our informants.

Furthermore, the nature of marketing management, as revealed by the discourse of the *tacit*, entails far more than simply managing explicit and codified variables of the marketing mix or, equally, applying the collection of various prescriptive tools and concepts such as the product life-cycle, SWOT analyses, diffusions of innovation and the inherently-flawed Boston matrix (Morrison and Wensley, 1991). These tend to be characterised through the dominant discourse as relatively abstract technical skills that, if mastered, will serve to transform the practitioner into a competent marketing professional. However, what is revealed, as the managers in this study engage in talk about their practice, is not that an exhaustive knowledge of these tools, concepts and planning frameworks is important, but rather how marketing tasks become defined and negotiated through localised experiences, accomplished through, and often as a direct consequence of, the tacit dimension (Hackley, 1999). Marketing is thus an inextricably indexical phenomenon. This is a fact rarely considered within those overarching textbook representations of practice where context-specific discussions are usually absent, replaced, instead, with the presentation of under-contextualised general principles, thus eliminating a careful ethnographic engagement with marketing practitioners to reveal the tacit nature of practical accomplishment. This omission, supplanted instead with the preference for a more sweeping generalisation concerning the nature of marketing practice, does not sit easily with the evidence presented in this study. Marketing activities are characterised by a diverse breadth of language, diverse ways of enacting tasks and accomplishing goals, set within increasingly diverse contexts. We argue that the uncritical reliance on a one-dimensional character of marketing management (Brownlie and Saren, 1997) underestimates not only the importance and significance of individual local practices that construct the everyday organising activities of marketers, but also the nature of the discursive resources utilised in the constitution and explanation of those activities.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly as a consequence of the findings presented in this study, we argue that a broader range of representational voices could and should be entertained in the construction of marketing theory; a much needed departure from the over-simplified dialectic of managers and consumers. We should be asking of the dominant marketing discourse: Whose voice is being heard here and to what extent should we privilege voices which exclude other agendas? It becomes the responsibility of marketing scholars, therefore, to at least attempt to expose other voices within the marketing debate, and certainly the ones currently silenced by the dominant marketing discourse. By virtue of the fact such narratives implicate the lives of multiple stakeholders we must question why we would choose to exclude particular voices. These include, and would not be limited to: the critically-informing voices of the socially-excluded; or the financially poor; or, by way of explicit example, Third World sweatshop workers. In the case of the latter here, they have a considerable impact on an organisation's supply chain often contributing significantly to profitability and effective resource leveraging. Yet, 'structural inequality', of which sweatshop work is representative (cf. Scrase, 2003; Yates, 2004), whilst being a recognisable term in sociology, is not usually viewed as being part of marketing's normative lexicon. This is because it is not reflective of the managerial marketing study of a 'customer-centric strategy.'

Consequently, we support the argument for polyphony within the discipline (Ellis et al., 2011; Saren, 2007). These currently excluded voices are an integral component of the marketing debate - the social and cultural product - although one would find this difficult to accept given the currently-presented, narrowly-framed concerns of the dominant, managerially-inspired discourse. We also argue that these alternative perspectives need opening-up for critical consideration as much as the alternative views of marketing management discourse presented in this paper. Only by embracing these alternative perspectives, in examining what these 'other voices', these excluded discourses, offer can our study of the discipline hope to further fulfil its potential to be more grounded in competing views of what Marketing *is*, than is currently the case. Naturally, this is likely to enrich the pluralistic development of marketing theory. However, if the contemporary, naïve and technical discourse continues to dominate then it is equally likely that its presence will continue to dilute understandings of not only practice but of wider, more critically-embedded marketing knowledge generation processes.

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