

# **A CASE OF MISTAKED IDENTITY: THEORY, PRACTICE AND THE MARKETING TEXTBOOK**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### *PURPOSE*

*One field in business where there is a purported gap between theory and practice is in marketing. This paper examines one area of the debate, the degree of congruence between the established textbook theories of marketing and the practical activity of marketing managers.*

### *METHODOLOGY/ APPROACH*

*Phenomenological interviews were carried out with senior marketing managers from a diverse range of organisations. The aim was to establish what types of factors inform manager's approaches to practice. Meaningful comparisons were made possible, as a range of marketing texts were also examined.*

### *FINDINGS*

*Textbook theories represent a flawed view of the practitioner's world. Many texts are very similar, based on an implicitly systems based paradigm. Universal truths are seen as indispensable modes of representational language. In contrast, the interviews with managers show that marketing is a locally contingent activity, occupying a discursive space separate from textbook theory.*

### *RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS*

*Scholars desire to reduce real world activity to over arching explanations has led to the simplification of theory. Textbooks should embrace an approach based on interpretative insights into the realities of marketing practice. Moves away from the 'one size fits all' theory need to occur, to a situation where marketing is recognised as being about a socially mediated, multifaceted approach to business activity.*

### *ORIGINALITY*

*Substantial attention has been paid to what many commentators regard as an academic practitioner divide in marketing. Most of this concerns the status of research into marketing. Considerable less attention is devoted to the position of the marketing textbook. This paper helps to remedy the situation. Ideas are offered up for the development of marketing knowledge and ways are suggested to help close the theory practice gap in the discipline, through the medium of the textbook.*

## **INTRODUCTION: THEORY, PRACTICE AND THE MARKETING TEXTBOOK**

The gap between theory and practice in business is well documented. A number of articles in well renowned academic journals have pointed out that the gulf between these two areas in professions is widening, see Van de Ven and Johnson (2006), Bennis and O'Toole (2005). A particular area of concern is presented by the field of marketing, where it has been suggested (Gumesson 1993; 2002 Hackley 2003a), that many textbooks in common use fail to adequately represent the reality of marketing practice. This paper seeks to explore this putative gap. It draws on some research carried out into the perceptions of marketing managers as to their practical activity, comparing findings with standard accounts of marketing in textbooks. It is apparent that what writers of the latter are good at developing are universal overarching theories of the discipline and setting them up as a basis for action (Brown 1995; 2001). Furthermore, as Hackley (2003a) argues, there is an inbuilt assumption in the majority of texts that marketing can be learnt in the abstract. These approaches are evident in many leading texts, typical of the ones used on many undergraduate marketing courses; see for example Jobber (2004), Brassington and Pettitt (2005); Dibb and Simkin et al (2005); Kotler and Wong et al (2005). The theories referred to latter in the article are well rehearsed in these texts and others like them. Market segmentation variables exist as a priori truths. The product life cycle indicates the type of marketing response necessary at each of its stages. There is a normative communications planning model which emphasises a universal view of consumer behaviour. Marketing plans should adopt the same structure everywhere, irrespective of context or size of firm. These 'articles of faith' (Kent 1986), are informed by a

hypothetic deductive approach rooted in a systems perspective. The assumption is that we start from an abstractly generated theory and then move into the real world (Tapp et al 2006). Marketing textbooks conform to this positivistic model of the world, where marketing action is seen as either being consistent with a theory or as an aberrant deviation from it. In contrast, praxis suggests that marketing theory as espoused in textbooks is rarely found (Edwards 2005). Yet still these frameworks are perpetuated as being eminently useful.

This paper argues that what is out there instead, is a range of disparate marketing practices. The latter first and foremost conform to a local logic of action and not to some abstract system of marketing thought. Marketing textbooks it is suggested, need to be restructured, paying more attention to the interpreted nature of knowledge, Berger and Luckman (1966); Silverman (1970; 1994). It is not one overarching positivistic theory with attendant models that we should be looking for, but many socially mediated theories. Most standard marketing texts appear to assume that all action is activated through technical theory (Dunne1999), when in reality organisations are about a complex, interpreted social world. At the disposal of any marketing textbook writer are a range of emic techniques, which could be potentially used to facilitate better understanding of the vagaries of the practitioner's world. These ways of knowing are rarely mentioned in texts and are largely underutilised in the study of marketing management generally. Techniques included in this approach embrace grounded theory, ethnography, the phenomenological interview and ethnomethodology (Goulding 2005; Ehigie and Ehigie 2005; Hassard 1990).

Simon (1994), points out that managers are valuable sources of information, where they are conveyors of an understanding that is rarely exploited in research into marketing. This is apparent in the majority of texts. Apart from the selection of often terse case studies in books, there is little engagement with the narrative form as expressed in the words of actual marketing managers. Short vignettes are put side by side with passages on marketing theory. Rarely do we see marketing practice articulated from the perspective of those who implement it. As a consequence, whether or not marketing principles were actually employed becomes very difficult to determine. As Hackley (2003a, p1342) points out, “Marketing texts offer little ethnographic or other contextual information...” Evidence of the fact that marketing is largely about different local realities, rather than platitudinous generalisation, is provided by the research study reported on later. Tapp et al (2006) make the important point that marketing is not amenable to study by an abstract and generalised method. It is a social construct almost impossible to externalise outside of dialogue and debate. Marketing management is hence a complex and nebulous phenomenon. Tapp et al (2006) call for the applied academic, (who also usually writes textbooks), to get nearer to this type of knowledge that is trans - disciplinary, reflecting the messy world of the practitioner. The paper seeks to respond to this imperative.

## **THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH APPROACH**

In order to examine marketing practice from an interpretative perspective, with the aim of attempting to highlight the discrepancies between the theory of textbooks and reality, an inquiry based on a phenomenological approach was adopted. Phenomenology takes into account the experiencing person and the connections between

human consciousness and objects existing in the natural world. In phenomenology, perception is regarded as the primary source of knowledge and is a source that cannot be doubted (Moustakas, 1994). The object of a conscious act or experience is inseparable from the meaning attached to it. The phenomenological approach involves an understanding of experience in order to obtain a comprehensive description that provides the basis for a reflective structural analysis. This is usually obtained through the open-ended interview, which is a first person's report of life experiences (Marshall and Rossman 1999). These life experiences can often be articulated as narratives, further adding to the richness of the researcher's insights (Shankar and Goulding 2001). As Goulding (1999) points out, phenomenology is a term often misused to refer to the qualitative paradigm generally, when in fact it more rightly refers to a distinct philosophy and method.

The phenomenological research study in this paper, involved having conversations with senior marketing managers who could speak for marketing activity in their organisation. Thomas (1993), points out that access in a qualitative study is both time consuming and difficult. With this in mind, considerable effort was put into obtaining and scrutinising a number of lists of local organisations operating in the area of the study. These lists were principally obtained from the local Chamber of Commerce. Over eighty different marketing managers were written to, using a standard letter, asking for interview access. In the end, twenty four interviews were completed with marketing managers representing a wide range of small, medium and large sized organisations. Interviewees came from printing, building contracting, book publishing, meat slicing equipment manufacture, financial services, retailing, computer hardware and software, professional services, public sector leisure,

television, consultancy, and a charity. Also interviewed were marketing managers from manufacturers of beauty products, handbags, paint brushes, packaging equipment and small electrical motors. For the purpose of this paper, all respondents and their companies have been made anonymous, along with the particular area of the country in which the interviews took place. In all cases, fictitious names have been adopted. The intention of this research project was to get access to a differentiated range of situations, in order to try and make sense of the perceptions of marketing managers' approaches to the implementation of marketing. In this respect, it was thought that there was no ideal number of companies to research, because it is suggested that each will have a unique approach to marketing and as Garfinkel (1984) points out, there is no master reality to uncover. Sampling involving notions of generalisability were rejected, as this can be seen as incompatible with an interpretivist approach which sees the data of the study as an end in itself (Hackley 2003b).

Holstein and Gubruim (1995), suggest that for qualitative interviews, an interview guide is constructed, which makes available to the interviewer a set of predetermined questions which can engage the respondent and establish the area of investigation. Such a guide was prepared and used for all interviews. The interview guide for this project was designed to be tentative and contingent and to not resemble the approach used in standardised survey interviewing. In most cases, rapport was built prior to the interview stage, when arrangements for the latter were being made. This involved telephoning potential respondents and quite often this meant that conversations took place about the nature of the research. By the time of the actual interview, most managers had been spoken to in advance. Attempts were made to understand

interviewee's experiences in a situation of guaranteed confidentiality. Managers responded openly and candidly to questions due to these efforts at rapport building. The latter process was also enhanced as a result of the interview taking place in a comfortable setting, namely at the managers place of work, a point made by Thomas (1993). All interviews were transcribed professionally. The interviews were reproduced verbatim and nothing missed out. The resulting transcripts were returned to the interviewee for verification, a process Bloor (1978) refers to as respondent validation. The final stage of research involved the process of phenomenological analysis, where the common mode of presenting findings is through the use of selected quotes. The latter were drawn from the interviews, enabling the process of meaning condensation to occur (Kvale 1996).

## **FINDINGS: MARKETING AND THE POVERTY OF TRADITIONAL TEXTBOOK THEORY**

Brown (1998) has pointed out that what exists in textbooks is no trivial matter. He suggests that it can be argued they represent the very essence of the marketing discipline, a point also made by Gummesson (1993; 2002). If false frameworks are being promulgated, then these need replacing. One such framework is represented by the common definition of marketing used. In textbooks, standard definitions of marketing make little or no reference to context; see the example in Brassington and Pettitt (2005). Marketing is defined universally, with little attention paid to the manner in which it might be interpreted by organisational members. This standard definition can be seen as potentiality invalidating other marketing meanings and actions, which do not conform to the same pre-determined measures (Kent, 1986). The issue here, confirmed

by the research, is that practising managers have different perceptions of what marketing is compared to the dictates of normative theory. For most managers, marketing was not defined in any abstract way outside of their own activity frame. The implications are that Different definitions of marketing can result in different enacted realities (Kent 1986; 1998).

A specific organisationally focused definition of marketing, representative of the general findings is offered by Clive Terry the marketing and sales manager of Thor Engineering, a manufacturer of meat slicing equipment. He said that marketing is,

“Exploring the needs of manufacturers and gearing our design efforts to solve their problems.”

The general findings of the research indicate that the sense of any object is derived from its context, or is 'indexed' to a particular situation (Heritage 1984). This is not to say that managers could not define marketing differently; they just chose not to use the latter, preferring to talk about marketing as a locally contingent phenomenon. In considering definitions and their impact on practice, Robson and Rowe (1997) point out that a phenomenological study would be of great assistance in assessing the true role of selling in marketing. They postulate that a significant number of marketing academics claim that selling is actually extraneous to marketing activity. As Brown (2006a p221) has pointed out, marketing is first and foremost about 'selling stuff' a point that sometimes seems to be obscured in marketing textbooks, which often attempt to make scientific sounding statements about market oriented companies being more profitable than ones with selling orientations. Judging by some of the comments from managers in this



study, selling is seen as being a very significant aspect of marketing. Jason Hobart, Marketing Director of Stirling Publisher commented that,

...marketing is at the end of the day selling, and you sell more by having the right product at the right price and knowing who the right people are to sell it to."

In general terms here, it might be tempting to suggest that these managers may not 'understand' marketing in its traditional form, but this was not the case. A full review of the interview transcripts revealed that virtually all respondents had completed some form of training in the area and were familiar with 'technical' marketing language. The research found however, that the common form of discourse used was an intelligent lay language, as opposed to the style of expression found in marketing textbooks. It is the former which constructs reality and shapes behaviour, a mode of speech existing outside the 'myopia and inflexibility' of the normative marketing rhetoric (Brownlie and Saren 2004 p2). It can be argued therefore, that success is not just about basing marketing activity on a single, 'right' way (Murray et al 2002). As an example, Robbin's (1991) in-depth case study analysis of a family company, found that although strategic marketing planning was absent, the company was prospering. Anecdotally, this type of situation is well recognised within the practitioner communities and might explain why the latter fail to take much notice of academic marketing research. The evidence seems to be strong that academic research in marketing fails to make much of an impression on marketing practitioners. From a survey of marketing managers McKenzie et al (2002) concluded that none of them regularly read an academic journal. A recent survey of marketing research practitioners established that they find sources of information other than academic journals, mainly professional magazines and web sites far more

useful for professional purposes (Baines, et al 2006). It is significant to note that marketing textbooks are nowhere mentioned in these studies as sources of prime information and assistance for practitioners.

Another central article of faith promulgated in textbooks is based on one which suggests the environment can be represented and analysed in an objective manner. In most marketing texts, (eg Dibb and Simkin et al 2006), there is a chapter which represents the environment and its constituent factors in a relatively straightforward and unambiguous fashion. Weick (1995) argues however, that the environment is subjectively perceived and constructed by organisational members as individual acts. Research conducted by Knibbs et al (1987), clearly highlighted how different managers within the same organisation construct significantly different organisational analyses, even though they are all supposedly describing the same external environments. For Gummesson (1987), each marketing situation is unique. If managers do not notice, or are not concerned by certain environmental events, then they will not be acted upon. Weick (1995), points out that the rational, prescriptive model, which is prevalent in most marketing textbooks, assumes a mass of data is collected on the business environment. This is not always the case in practice. One manager in the study spoke for many when he was asked if he completed an environmental analysis. He replied by saying “No, No...I just want to know how the opposition is disposed around me....” In this study, the business environment was not found to be a fixed objective entity, but embedded in the local rationality of marketing managers worlds. This is a result of the pragmatic acceptance of what is reasonable and achievable, by organisational members. Textbooks fail to capture this complexity and ambiguity, relying instead on the presentation of

simplistic models which fail to explain the reality of practitioner perceptions of the world.

An additional key article of the textbook faith is represented by the strategic planning tools. In most marketing textbooks, it seems obligatory for firms to carry out a portfolio analysis. (see Brassington and Pettitt 2005pp399-404; Kotler and Wong et al 2005 pp60-63). These are ubiquitous in the modern marketing textbook, despite a critical crescendo as to their relevance. Morrison and Wensley (1991) argue it is an approach which 'boxes in' strategic thinking and is an outmoded orthodoxy. Additionally, the Boston matrix is criticised as being too narrow and difficult to work with. Whilst Brown (2001p93) has noted that the 'bloom is going off boxes' matrices are very resilient. For some of the managers in this study, it is clear that decisions are based on an alternative, intuitive, tacit approach, rather than on the use of boxes. At Vincent Duke, a major financial services company, the marketing manager indicated that strategic thinking does not primarily come from the planning tools.

"...most of us really do our marketing thinking by just imagining how we would feel as a customer, and that has given us an awful lot of what we need to know and understand, to move the company on."

There is little evidence that marketing textbooks even acknowledge this approach to decision making let alone discuss it. The case is that intuition and tacit knowledge often developed in local contexts, do not sit well with overarching, explicit rationalist frameworks. For Jason Hobart of Stirling Publisher, there is also a role for intuition, and

experience in, for example, the new product development process. He makes the point that,

... 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..."

Hackley (2000) in his study of work in an advertising agency, indicated how central tacit knowledge is to marketing decision making. In addition he states (Hackley 1999), that the tacit area of practical knowledge refers to action which is left out of abstracted theoretical descriptions, but on which the accomplishment of action depends. He contends that high level practical knowledge in this area is tacit. He goes on to point out that a person who is highly accomplished in strategic marketing decision making, is likely to be able to utilise sophisticated and experientially mediated concepts in coping with marketing issues. These implicit features of marketing knowledge are systematically ignored in textbooks, where the emphasis is still put on the four Ps of the marketing mix as frameworks for understanding, see for example Jobber (2004) and Brassington and Pettitt (2005). This is despite concerted argument which suggests the concept is increasingly moribund (Gronross 1994; Brownlie and Saren 1992). Managers in the study here often referred to the inadequacy of a four Ps approach. At Stirling Publisher, Jason Hobart, the marketing director, pointed out that,

“in the marketing plan you will not see the four Ps...it becomes a bit slavish.... I would rather talk about understanding markets, understanding how you reach end

users, and understanding how you continue your business as usual; sales to those markets, how you get incremental sales to those markets, how you get loyalty, so during the year we have got a growing loyal base.”

The notion of social reality as a constellation of pluralities, suggests that knowledge is often personal and subjective. A consequence of this is that each marketing manager here has a reservoir of wisdom which is embedded within the context of their own organisation. This may not be able to be codified into one overarching marketing reality, but into many. This is a point most textbooks ignore. From the study here, one manager speaking for many, explains why he does not use the analytical marketing tools. Jerry Court of Morris Grout, a major building contractor in the locality of the study, points to the key role of on going relationships in determining marketing actions. For him, the Boston matrix is,

"...good to talk about over the dinner table maybe, but I didn't really find there was proper use for it. I have been with the company twenty five years, I know what we can do and I hope I can pass that out to the people in my department, and it is a matter of getting out, finding out who to talk to, going to see them, building relationships, and you do that as much by personality as Boston matrixes..."

Gummesson (2002) is critical of the way relationships and networks are dealt with in marketing textbooks. He argues that the area has still not made any substantial impact, with relationship marketing often appearing as adjunct chapter at the end. This may be overstating the case. None of the following have a whole chapter devoted to relationship marketing; Brassington and Pettitt (2005), Dibb and Simkin et al (2006), Jobber (2004).

Given Gummesson's point that business is a primarily a network of relationships, the reductionist logic inherent in the marketing textbook is fundamentally wrong. For Gilmore et al. (2001), networks are an important way in which marketing decisions are made. Their study indicates that SME marketing decision making is built around spontaneity, reactivity, informality and looseness. As a result of the interviews carried out with the managers of this study, there is no reason to suggest that networks are not a major way in which marketing decisions are made in all types of businesses, not just small ones.

The case is that the conventional strategic planning models of the textbooks emphasise a simple systemic approach. They do not capture the complex nature of lived reality and the strategy-making process which exists within the network approach to marketing (Wensley 1995; Moller and Halinen 2000). Here, the emphasis is not on general prescription but, rather, on description and understanding, in an attempt to explain how institutions and individuals interact in inter-firm relationships (Ellis and Meyer, 2001). At Mitre Technics, one of Business to business firms in the study, it is almost impossible just to base marketing on a simple general planning model, as each customer has to be dealt with individually. Relationships span documents and they also span years. Gordon Willis, the managing director, indicates that,

"...everything is sold to a different specification to every customer...a lot of long term contracts and you have to write very detailed customer plans and quality plans for a contract...we are currently writing contracts now, that will run for another eight or ten years..."

Arguably, a key relationship within the organisation is the internal market. Although the debate about this area has been present for some considerable time (see (Ahmed and Rafiq 2004; Piercy and Morgan 1994), it has still not yet appeared as a mainstream topic in marketing textbooks, As Robin Cawley marketing director of a major financial services comments,

“...your own people, who at the end of the day are the make or break of your company, because that is who the customer and the retailer will touch....and if they don't agree with what the company is doing? ...internal marketing is incredibly important, that is counted as almost the thing that most marketing textbooks ignore.”

As with relationship marketing generally, most textbooks do not give internal marketing much attention, let alone a separate chapter. The failure to deal with this topic fully, with its emphasis on people, their often diverse perceptions and motivations at work, means that textbook marketing isolates itself from the interdisciplinary nature of practice. Somehow, magically, employees fit easily into the configurations of the organisations marketing system. They disappear into a theoretical structure which views them as mere system functionaries, blindly carrying out tasks like puppets.

Another area of considerable neglect in the study of marketing decision making in textbooks, (which is linked to relationship and network activity), is the role of talk. Hackley (2003a), makes a very significant point then, when he argues that the enacted complexities of marketing are reduced in texts to the endless reproduction of abstract principles, where the process of talk is ignored. This neglect continues unabated, despite the fact that as early as 1973, Mintzberg showed that management decision

making is characterised by brief encounters, with the emphasis on verbal interaction. As Boden (1994p52) points out, the main activity of managers in organisations is not planning, but talking. Managers "*talk* their way to solutions, *talk* themselves into working agreements, *talk* their coalitions into existence, *talk* their organisational agendas.

In the study here, talk was found to be a central aspect of marketing decision making. Vaara et al., (2004) note that much existing research into strategy ignores the discursive practices of individuals. King (2003), points out that in organisational theory, the role of text is dominant over that of talking. Des Arkwright, director of leisure marketing at 'Newfound' City Council, indicates that talk is intrinsic to his work.

"Mainly it is talking, I do a lot of that anyway, I suppose. Mainly for me it is internally and externally, there are an awful lot of meetings for example with members, colleagues, with employers. So an awful lot of talking internally, with various people and an awful lot with partners, potential partners and again I mean last week we had a company come down from Scotland who would like to build facilities, maybe in some of our parks, and there was a lot of talking to them...quite a bit of talking to communities..."

Explicit theories of marketing contained in textbooks, dealing with high level strategic development fail to engage with the notion of the socially mediated nature of knowledge, where talk is central to decision making. In the texts, decision making is linear, variables can be easily isolated and technical rationality dominates the process of



understanding (Cunningham 1999). In contrast, for Weick (1995), the sense that managers make of their world is not rooted in theoretical models, but in talk, reflexivity and the ongoing nature of events, where managers are always in the middle of things. Strategy becomes observed patterns in past decision behaviour and is not a future constructed now, and then subsequently implemented. Most marketing textbooks seem to operate on this implicit assumption. Guy Martin of Media K a marketing and design consultancy suggests how important retrospect is to decision making.

“If you are wandering along with your army, fighting your battles and all that, at some point you have got to go over the next hill and see what is there and look back and see how you are.”

Significantly, what this additionally demonstrates is that textbooks fail in capturing the narratives through which marketers make sense of their world. An important body of research in organisations has been carried out, showing the extent of storytelling in organisations (see Boland and Tenkasi 1995; Hopkinson 2003; Skoldberg 1994). The textbooks emphasise normative marketing theory where people appear devoid of their interpretative, narrative based selves. As Patterson and Brown (2005) point out though, telling tales is central to successful communication. The problem is that marketing academics seem to have forgotten this important fact when they come to write their textbooks. This study found that managers frequently resorted to stories when recounting their experiences. If managers think in story telling modes, why is this not reflected in texts? One of the services marketing managers in the study commented on how people go about making meaning in their organisation, using stories. It shows that the

normative textbook theory, which makes ubiquitous use of the bullet point, fails to capture the narrative basis of rhetorical practice within companies.

“People think narratively, we do not think in bullet points...what bullet points lack are the broader explanations which people need...in terms of my staff having to implement plans, people will say ‘I worked for so and so and this is how we did it, can we do something like that here’. People rarely say we must achieve this or that ratio or percentage rate, but people will tell each other stories about retention rates instead.”

Marketing is essentially about good communications and here there is a paradox if we think about the role of the textbook. Brands are built on good stories (Brown 2005). Are textbooks, however, helping to develop the marketing storytellers of the future? The reliance in the textbooks on generalised, unimaginative theories, bewildering boxes and a variety of mystic matrices, are unlikely to provide budding marketers with the facility to provide the consumer with an inspiring vision of a company’s products and services. Textbooks not only fail to reflect reality, but they are also doing a disservice to those about to enter the field, or are new to it.

## **CONCLUSION: TEXTS AND CONTEXT IN MARKETING**

As individuals in society we interpret and order our knowledge in different ways (Berger and Luckman 1966), so it is questionable to think that marketing knowledge should be represented any differently. It can be argued that the knowledge base of marketing is in fact always contingent and tentative, rather than permanent and

overarching. Gummesson (2002), argues that scholars are like Flying Dutchmen, doomed to travel, never being allowed to dock in a harbour. The search for and belief in a general theory of marketing is illusory, when confronted by the reality of marketing managers local experiences and knowledge. Textbooks must try to capture this aspect of reality, if they are to present marketing with integrity. The argument which states the role of textbooks is to present sets of handy mnemonics is a tired one. Textbooks need to reflect marketing reality more closely and more rigorously. The need is of course for this new knowledge to be captured and disseminated. This is perhaps a major challenge facing marketing orthodoxy today. Textbooks need reinventing to include rich ethnographic accounts of marketing as it is carried out in a variety of organisations. Here the discipline has to draw much more fully on the interpretative tradition. We are likely as a consequence of the latter approach, to end up with competing theories of what marketing is. This can only add value to the subject both as an academic endeavour and as an applied field. If this complicates marketing, making it more interdisciplinary and demanding for learners, then this is a challenge worth facing, a point endorsed by McCole (2004). As a result, a new ethnographically informed marketing could be based on the changing common sense practices of social actors and not within a static, reified theory. In addition, it should be possible to write new forms of the marketing textbook on the basis of studying what goes on in communities of practice (Wenger and Synder 2000). Here, theory emerges from practices based in social participation, rather than out of abstracted principles.

As Brown (2006b) entertainingly illustrates, out there in business are a lot of successful marketing people who have never come across traditional textbook theory.

This rich source of new knowledge and theory for marketing needs capturing. Brief and Dukerich (1991), make a very significant point when they say that theory should not be about advocating one useful way to do things in an applied setting, as many current marketing textbooks suggest, but should be about being able to offer up various courses of action. This can be achieved if textbooks draw more directly on the perceptions of individuals who practice marketing for real.

As yet, few newer marketing textbooks, with some exceptions, (see Blythe 2006; Palmer 2004), appear to be about attempts to pursue different agendas. The latter book for example, places relationships in much more of a pivotal position than many other established texts, while the former takes a critical perspective on some established aspects of prescriptive theory, through the use of ‘talking points’ throughout the text. In general though, it seems to be the case that most marketing textbooks suffer from a case of mistaken identity. Their characteristics are purported to be about the reality of marketing management, yet the research interviews here suggest that what is on offer, bears little resemblance to the actual practical world. An obstinate form of positivism holds sway with many marketing scholars (Tapp et al 2006). It appears to be a paradigm resistant to change, particularly in the case of textbooks.

Results from the interviews in this study suggest that the textbook format currently in use needs a radical rethink then, in order to incorporate the interpreted realities of marketer’s activity. Thick descriptions could be the basis of new and different theories of marketing which are rooted in the lived world of the practitioner and not in abstract theory. This approach has the potential to enliven a field which currently

lacks much diversity, beyond well worn platitudes in many texts which state that services are different to physical products, and consumer markets are different from business markets. Scholars who write marketing textbooks should be unpicking the messy reality of marketing practice and attempting to understand how for example, two companies who sell similar products may have very different marketing approaches. Some important implications stem then from examining the local contexts in which marketing operates. Textbooks are required which reflect the lived reality of marketing manager's worlds. Central to this enterprise are language and the local logic of action. Fuller, richer descriptions of meaning and action should be presented in the textbooks, ones which reflect the ambiguity and paradoxes of reality. Terse theory can only ever be a superficial representation of events, presenting to learners a pristine, technically rational world that does not bear much relation to reality. Managers in this study have provided some rich insights into their own personal views of marketing theory and practice and this approach could be further extended to provide marketing learners with deep contextual information about the management of marketing. If marketing scholars do not attempt to move towards some of the approaches suggested here, then the theory practice gap in the discipline will remain as wide as ever

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