



## Taking time to understand theory

Linda D. Peters<sup>a,\*</sup>, Marcus Vanharanta<sup>b</sup>, Andrew D. Pressey<sup>c</sup>, Wesley J. Johnston<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Nottingham University Business School, Jubilee Campus, Nottingham, NG8 1BB, UK

<sup>b</sup> Unit D, 17/F, Tower 2, Harbour Place, Hung Hom, Kowloon, Hong Kong

<sup>c</sup> Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT, UK

<sup>d</sup> Center for Business and Industrial Marketing, J. Mack Robinson College of Business, Georgia State University, Atlanta GA 30303-3083, USA

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 30 August 2011

Received in revised form 4 February 2012

Accepted 27 May 2012

Available online 17 July 2012

#### Keywords:

Time

Structuration

Social theory

Agency

Networks

### ABSTRACT

*Purpose of the paper and literature addressed:* The purpose of this paper is to examine how one of the most cited theories in sociology, structuration theory, might help inform our understanding of time in business networks. Structuration theory deals with the creation and maintenance of ideas and structures as well as with change and continuity processes. It defines a social system as any set of practices, patterns of interaction and social relationships that are relatively enduring.

*Research method:* This is a conceptual paper.

*Main contribution:* This paper outlines improved theoretical and methodological bases in industrial marketing research, which specifically takes into consideration time. This new understanding draws upon Giddens structuration theory, and more recent critiques of his work.

© 2012 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

*"It is an interesting time to think about foundational issues."  
(Ermarth, 2010)*

The time referred to in this quote is based on a particular notion of a *moment*, in which *paradigmatic* change and "... *the functional alignment of multiple systems undergoes a foundational shift that opens unexpected and uncharted opportunities for new enunciation*" (Ermarth, 2010:149). It is precisely this *interesting time*, and how it relates to network processes, that we explore in this article. In doing so, we examine how a common concept – time – may be conceptualized and explored from different general theoretical perspectives. In particular, we propose to do this by examining how one of the most cited theories in sociology, structuration theory (Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 1979; Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1984), might enhance our understanding of time in business networks. Structuration theory deals with the creation and maintenance of ideas and structures as well as with change and continuity processes over time (Staber & Sydow, 2002). As noted by Meindl, Stubbart, and Porac (1994), there are few theoretical frameworks linking time and structure together in a meaningful and useful way, one theoretical framework that does precisely this is that of structuration theory (Giddens, 1984). Accordingly, this paper directly addresses the call by Halinen and Törnroos (2005) for better-informed theoretical and methodological tools to study time in researching industrial networks.

Structuration theory defines a social system as any set of practices, patterns of interaction and social relationships that are relatively enduring (Parker, 2000). It is a general theory, whereby theoretical ideas are removed from any specific social setting, such as industrial networks. As a result, structuration theory is intentionally both broad and integrative. This broad scope of structuration theory means that it can be used to explain a larger number of phenomena, while its integrative nature means that it serves to unify less general theories (Brodie, Saren, & Pels, 2009).

Well-established general sociological theories, such as structuration theory, have addressed both theoretical and methodological aspects of time in considerable detail (Hedaa & Törnroos, 2008). In this paper we seek to build stronger theoretical linkages between industrial marketing literature and general structuration theory. Our use of structuration theory leads to three new lines of enquiry relating to time in B2B marketing and contributes to the development of theory, practice, and research methods.

- First, we provide a more precise sociological terminology to articulate key aspects of time. This not only helps to clarify the discussion on time, but also allows for a higher level of theoretical consistency in future industrial marketing research.
- Second, by applying Giddens' structuration theory to network contexts, we conceptualize the network structuration process (NSP). We define NSP as the construction and reconstruction of network structure by the interaction of knowledgeable network actors. This leads to a new level of theoretical and ontological precision in B2B marketing research.

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 115 84 66602; fax: +44 115 84 66667.  
E-mail address: Linda.Peters@nottingham.ac.uk (L.D. Peters).

- Third, we demonstrate how the dimension of time has a methodological significance in enabling the analysis of the interaction between network agents and structures (see Archer, 1995). This results in a more precise conceptualization of managerial agency in network processes.

We will begin the paper by examining the current state of extant conceptualizations of time in industrial marketing literature. We will then proceed to outline how Giddens' version of structuration theory contributes to this understanding. We will conclude the paper by examining more recent critiques of Giddens' structuration theory, and how these contemporary insights can inform our understanding of time in the domain of industrial marketing.

## 2. Time in industrial marketing

### 2.1. Conceptualizing time

In this section, we will review key conceptualizations of time in the extant industrial marketing literature to establish the starting point of our investigation. To begin with, in industrial marketing research it has been common to conceptualize time as sequential, progressive, unidirectional and cumulative in its affects. We can quite easily identify with the notion of time as a sequence in which action unfolds, stretching from the past through the present to the future. However, as Ermarth (2010) states, while the assumption of time as a neutral, homogenous, and universal medium has been with us since the Renaissance, there is also the more recent notion of time (arising over the last century) not as an envelope for events but as a dimension of events which – according to relativity theory – is finite, rhythmic, has a beginning and an ending, and sets the tempo for events.

It is also possible to question these ontological conceptualizations of time by asking whether time is an immutable part of the external world or a subjective notion (Heath, 1956; Orlikowski & Yates, 2002). Is time an objective measurable thing (as realists would claim), or a subjective intellectual structure (as interpretivist would claim)? In industrial marketing research, Halinen (1998) has argued that the frequent and implicit use of the chronological time conceptualisation limits our possibilities for building relationship development theory, and states that time is, first and foremost, both a physical and social construct.

The conceptual framework of time as presented by Halinen and Törnroos (1995) attempts to expand our understanding of time by identifying both the horizontal continuum of temporal modes (past, present and future) intersected with vertical notions of time as embedded in cultural and contextual situations. Thus, time is also conceptualized as a subjective experience, and related to the pace of change. The conceptualization of time as a subjective (and socially constructed) experience has informed much of the more recent industrial marketing management research relating to time (Skytte, 2010). However, to focus so exclusively on the subjective construction of time, or indeed to focus exclusively on the observable external forces that shape change, is to miss the role of human practices as shaped by, and as shaping, temporal structures (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002).

Time can hence be seen as a multi-faceted phenomenon, in which both socially constructed subjectivist perspectives and objectivist views of time as a neutral medium have a place. For example, Halinen and Törnroos (1995) conceptualize time as both a subjective experience and time as a sequential process intersect. The authors define physical or absolute time (days, hours, minutes, etc.) as linear time, and natural time (day and night, the changing of the seasons, etc.) as cyclical. These objectivist notions of time relate to rational, concrete and metric notions of time as it passes through observable measurable stages. Such time is "... understood to exist independently of human actions, and is thus experienced as a powerful constraint on those actions" (Orlikowski

& Yates, 2002:688). On the other hand, subjective and socially constructed aspects of time are experienced through the culturally relative interpretations of individuals (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002) and include cultural time (the time consciousness inherent in each culture), organizational time (acquired through membership of social organizations such as family, school, or workplace), and individual time (the subjective experience of time).

In a similar vein, Van de Ven and Pool (1995) examine the purposeful social construction and enactment of reality – termed teleological process theory – as a primary driver of change and development. Their work significantly extends our view of time, in particular in relation to understanding the future. According to teleological process theory past, present and future temporal modes are not necessarily chronologically ordered because time may be experienced subjectively by individuals (Plakoyiannaki & Saren, 2006). This emphasizes the social construction of reality, and thus provides a way of linking the present (as a perceptual reality) with the future (as an enacted reality). However, to understand temporal change as flowing from changes in the cultural meanings and norms as perceived by individuals does not help us understand the way in which their actions are shaped by structural conditions outside their immediate control (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002).

In examining the development of inter-organizational relationships, Halinen and Törnroos (1995) identify several different approaches to conceptualizing time. These include event-structure analysis, which uses absolute time as a proxy variable. This approach, however, is unable to examine the processes that happen in time. In contrast, phase models use life cycle time as a proxy variable. However, this overlooks the fact that length-of-time and relationship development are not necessarily causally or linearly related. Finally, bonding and process models examine the development of relationships in terms of dynamic and changing relational content (e.g. commitment, trust, exchange) in terms of past, present and future. Although this conceptualization uses relational rather than absolute time, relational time is only implied and defined in a narrow sense (Halinen & Törnroos, 1995:507).

These conceptualizations of time have methodological implications. Halinen and Törnroos (1995) propose three distinctive forms of longitudinal research, which address the ontological differences between past, present, and future chronological dependencies. The first form, historical studies, looks at the past and past events. Here we can examine the role of evidence, as it may be difficult to capture the relationship of these structural changes to agent reflexivity. We can know what happened, but can we know the real 'why' embedded in that moment? For example, Medlin (2004) recognizes that it is selective interpretations of past events that shape all understanding of present activity and future possibilities, a view echoed by Ermarth (2010) who notes that the past only exists as a function of a present moment of memory, and so the relationship between the remembered past and the enacted present as distinct and separate events is a spurious one. In discussing theory building in the field of archeology (a necessarily past-focused field of research), Raab and Goodyear (1984:263) state that "...when we cease to ask merely what kinds of behaviors can be linked to certain records and start to ask why the behaviors in question came into existence, changed, or remained stable, we approach meaningful theory-building." In historical studies, we are often forced to consider changes to the structural properties and social practices of a social system in isolation from the individuals and their motivations in those moments of change.

The second form, follow-up studies looking at the here and now and current events, must address the issue of methodological conflation and the structure/agency relationship. While the concepts of structure and agency may be considered distinct, methodologically they may become so interlinked as to form a single identity (or duality: Giddens, 1984). This means that the duality of structure and agency may prohibit meaningful examination of their interplay (Archer,

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1028117>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1028117>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)