Death of a metaphor: reviewing the `marketing as relationships' frame

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Death of a metaphor: reviewing the 'marketing as relationships' frame

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Abstract. *The frame* marketing as relationships *is central to contemporary marketing thought and informs both research and practice in marketing. It is underpinned by the 'interpersonal relationship' metaphor, which at the superordinate level relies upon social exchange theory (SET) and at the subordinate level reinforces the ideological values of Judeo–Christian marriages. The current pervasiveness of the* marketing as relationships *frame suggests that this view of marketing has become commonsensical, taken-for-granted and recognized by marketers as simply part of their discourse. In this paper, we trace the evolution of the* marketing as relationships *frame and analyse its current position. Using insights drawn from conceptual metaphor theory and critical discourse analysis, we argue that it is necessary to reactivate this metaphor in order to investigate whether it is relevant to current theory and practice in marketing.* ***Key Words*** ● *interpersonal relationship metaphor* ● *relationship marketing* ● *Social Exchange Theory*

Introduction

In attempting to understand the nature of exchange, and to bridge the distance between marketing activities and the end consumer, the discipline of marketing traditionally focused on individual transactions seen from the perspective of single actors. However, research during the 1970s and 1980s suggested that the basic assumptions inherent in the micro-economic paradigm be relaxed in the context of services and inter-organizational research (Arndt, 1985). In particular, assumptions regarding the anonymity of buyers and sellers, the availability of information and the relevance of past and future exchanges were problematized as a body of empirical evidence began to materialize. Thus, the frame *marketing as relationships* emerged initially at the margins of marketing thought of as a potentially fruitful means of elucidating upon particular forms of market exchange. To early services and inter-organizational researchers, the *marketing as relationships* frame offered a number of insightful possibilities. For instance, the frame moved research beyond the 'one actor, given goals perspective' (Arndt, 1983: 46) and the concentration on single, isolated exchanges. In services marketing, this frame enabled consideration of the service encounter, the importance of service design and internal marketing. For their part, inter-organizational researchers attended to the processes that influence interaction, the context of interaction, the consequences of interaction and the wider networks in which organizations are embedded.

The application of the *marketing as relationships* frame became increasingly popular, eventually infiltrating research on mass marketing contexts where once it was deemed inappropriate (O'Malley and Tynan, 2000). Indeed, underpinned by the *interpersonal relationship* metaphor, the insights generated by the frame were such that, by the mid-1990s, Relationship Marketing (RM) embodied the mainstream of marketing thought (Möller and Halinen, 2000), and the formation of exchange relationships became the strategic objective of marketing in a variety of contexts (Morgan, 2000). This movement of the frame from the margins to the mainstream is exemplified by the fact that the American Marketing Association (AMA, 2004, cited in Keefe, 2004: 17) currently defines marketing as:

> an organizational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and its stakeholders.

This would suggest that the discipline has moved from an understanding of *marketing as exchange* to one of *marketing as relationships.* Indeed, the nurturing of relationships has now become a priority for most organizations (Day and Montgomery, 1999). This has prompted studies into the extent to which the practice of marketing has altered (see Coviello et al., 2002) and the relative merits of different RM strategies in building effective customer relationships (Palmatier et al., 2006). The current pervasiveness of the *marketing as relationships* frame suggests that it has become a commonsensical, taken-for-granted part of marketing discourse. This raises questions about the continued meaningfulness of the underpinning *interpersonal relationship* metaphor and the explanatory value of the frame. It could be that this metaphor has become simply a rhetorical device in the professional lexis of marketing academics; one that creates a common discourse community with little meaning or relevance to the bulk of marketing activities. In this paper, using insights drawn from conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980a, 1980b) and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995, 2001), we trace the evolution of the *marketing as relationships* frame and analyse its relevance to contemporary marketing theory and practice.

Metaphors in professional and academic discourse

Metaphors are employed when researchers have no language or concepts in their repertoire that might help them account for or explain a particular phenomenon. The use of metaphor involves the 'structuring of abstract, complex or unfamiliar target domains . . . in terms of source domains that are more concrete, clear and familiar' (Semino and Masci, 1996: 244). Rather than being unaware (and, therefore, uncritical) of the elements of any given frame, conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980a, 1980b) urges us to unpick these elements and to interrogate their implications. For metaphor is never neutral. It always highlights some elements of a phenomenon while hiding others. As a consequence, the use of the same metaphors or the same lexical field across a range of texts facilitates the 'possibility to control discourse and hence cognition' (Koller, 2005: 201), thus constructing ideologies and professional in-groups. This happens because language does not exist independently of thought nor thought independently of language (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980b). Scientific endeavour is never neutral and the metaphors that underpin specific research streams call forth the very concepts and values that researchers use (Arndt, 1985). Despite their significance, however, metaphors are generally used uncritically within marketing (Van den Bulte, 1994), and often little attention is paid to the assumptions that underlie them.

Metaphors are not used simply because of an absence of language on the part of individual writers. Indeed, metaphors have currency in their own right. As academics we are expected to read and build upon the texts of others, and because we cite them and write our own texts in a similar way (and are required to do so), intertextuality is institutionalized in academic writing. Furthermore, writers produce texts within a relatively small and specialized discourse community, speaking its own professional dialect. In fact, it could be argued that marketing academics and practitioners comprise a community of practice in their own right (Lave and Wenger, 1991). As Hackley (2003) has indicated, academic business discourse is as much about reading business texts as writing them in particular ways. Marketing theorists are writing for an ideal reader, who 'would share the concept [behind the metaphor] either prior to his or her reception of the text or come to share it while processing the text' (Koller, 2005: 219). Thus, what one person thought was a good way to express, explain or direct thinking about something (e.g. *marketing as relationships*) can end up as an ideology that is taken for granted: 'In a circular fashion, these texts will serve as the starting point for new intertextual chains, each reifying and conventionalizing a particular conceptual metaphor' (Koller, 2005: 207).

In these ways, the academic pursuit and repeated use of particular frames inevitably results in sedimentation and produces dead metaphors whose force has been lost and whose meaning becomes literal (Brown, 1976). As such, Arndt (1985: 20) proposes: 'a first step in the emancipation of marketing thought is to understand the limiting and constraining nature of paradigms and metaphors, which are given the status of uncontested dogma'. Particular metaphors have come to be recognized as problematic in a number of diverse disciplines. For example, Reddy (1993) problematizes the *conduit* metaphor in communication studies; Sergiovanni (1993) challenges the *school as organization* metaphor in the field of educational administration; Schön (1993) questions the *slum* metaphor in social policy; while ten Bos (2000) interrogates the *organization as community* and *organization as happy family* metaphors within management theory. Thus, the problem of dead or conventionalized metaphors is common, though it is possible that marketing has not gone through the reactivation process that some other disciplines have.

Charting the death of metaphors

The assumption in conceptual metaphor theory is that metaphors become worn out through their everyday use to such an extent that their connection to the original source domain, in this case *interpersonal relationships*, becomes lost. In other words, the creative aspect, which inspired the original metaphoric use, is overtaken by the idiomatic aspect, the lexicalization of the metaphor (i.e. its conventionalized use in the professional marketing lexis). One consequence of this is that it comes to possess a literal rather than metaphorical meaning. Thus, in the same way that *the market* has lost its metaphoric properties in economic theory, so too has *the relationship* in marketing theory. Indeed, both *the market* and *the relationship* have become lexicalized and nominalized (acquiring a definite article to enhance their living status – cf. Chilton and Ilyin, 1993) and have taken on a literal life of their own. As Billig and MacMillan (2005: 461) put it, summarizing 'usure' theories of metaphor: 'One might say that the living metaphor starts dying once it begins to live within language'. 'Usure' theorists point out how we come to use language unreflectively and how we 'cease to notice [metaphors] for their meanings operate unconsciously' with unquestioned ideological effects (Billig and MacMillan, 2005: 461).

However, Billig and MacMillan (2005) argue that the 'usure' explanation, while useful, ignores the crucial question of how metaphors become lexicalized and how this changes over time. Thus they argue for 'reactivation', involving a charting of the passage from metaphor to idiom drawing on critical discourse analysis (cf. Wodak and Meyer, 2001). This approach deploys Glucksberg's (1998) 'attribution' theory, which posits that the key reason for the conventionalization of metaphors is a practical one: 'there is no readily available lexical item to express a particular idea, especially an abstract one that it would be useful for subsequent speakers and writers to use. In consequence, what was originally metaphorical becomes a non-metaphorical lexical item' (Billig and MacMillan, 2005: 463). Thus, it is necessary to look at the process diachronically through the examination of textual usage and to analyse this usage in order to uncover what it is implying. Koller (2005) also stresses the need to investigate not just the origins and structures, but also the effects of and purposes behind the use of particular metaphors. Another important element to consider here is the end user of the text, since as Eco (1983) points out, whether a metaphor is dead or not depends on a number of factors, not least the person encountering it. For example, for a business studies student who has never read a marketing textbook before, the *interpersonal relationship* metaphor is a new one. Alternatively, the academic immersed in the discourse may have long since failed to recognize the symbolic properties of the notion, and so the metaphor is dead or conventionalized.

This is the approach to be taken in this paper: to chart the passage of the marketing as relationships frame over time in order to demonstrate that the metaphor has become conventionalized and has taken on a literal meaning. In this regard, we identify the origins of the metaphor; we demonstrate the lexicalization of the metaphor through an exposition of brand–consumer relationships; we point to problems with the mapping process; and we analyse the metaphor's rhetorical uses, with 'reactivation' as our ultimate goal. On this basis, we suggest that the *marketing as relationships frame* is harmful to theory and practice in marketing in that it has created realities that are meaningless. However, we are not arguing in any prescriptive sense for a type of metaphor-free language, since in our opinion this is impossible. On the contrary, we are calling for a reflection on this metaphor and a timely appraisal of its role in marketing. In particular, we need to establish whether it is actually functioning as an 'additive instrument of knowledge' (Eco, 1983) or simply operating in a 'substitutive' or synonymic capacity.

The origins of marketing as relationships

The mix management paradigm dominated marketing thought and practice from the 1950s until at least the mid-1990s. This paradigm takes marketing to be a management function, within which the marketer manipulates mix variables in order to satisfy customers and make a profit. The basic unit of analysis is a transaction in a competitive market, with fully integrated firms controlling virtually all the factors of production. Within this framework, there is an inherent assumption that the firm is independent of its environment. Thus, the main marketing problems concern the allocation of resources to activities formulated in terms of product, price, place and promotion. Webster (1992) argues that although this view may have been appropriate when firms controlled (or attempted to control) all factors of production and distribution, it is clearly less so today, as firms compete not as individuals, but as participants in networks of firms. In order to account for this changing marketing landscape, some researchers began to emphasize the utility of a focus on relationships. As early as the 1970s, insights from the source domain of *interpersonal relationships* were brought to bear on understandings of the target domain *marketing exchanges* (see Guillet de Monthoux, 1975). Ford (1990: 2) highlights that in attempting to make sense of business markets, these early researchers considered that 'the processes of interaction between buyer and seller provided a good way to *understand* the nature of industrial markets'. The relationship frame was simply a useful investigative lens.

The focus on relationships became particularly popular in the industrial marketing and purchasing (IMP) group in Europe in the mid-1970s (Hàkansson, 1982) and received some attention in North America within marketing channels research (see Anderson and Narus, 1984) and later within work on buyer–seller interaction (see Dwyer et al., 1987). The emerging services marketing literature also stressed the importance of relationships and, in particular, the interaction between service providers and their clients (Berry, 1983). Thus, the relational frame emerged from disparate marketing contexts; was motivated by different problems; was conceptually underpinned by an assortment of theories; and was developed within diverse research traditions. Broadly, these emerging theories emphasized relationships, networks and interaction (Gummesson, 1987) and collectively became known as RM.

It should be noted here that the degree of semantic anomaly (Cornelissen, 2003) between source and target domain in this frame varies dramatically according to the marketing context to which the frame is applied. For instance, it could be argued that for many IMP researchers and for those studying high-contact service situations, there is little difference between source and target domains. The lack of semantic anomaly here is a result of the fact that, at their core, these situations actually feature an interpersonal relationship, either between an employee of a buying organization and an employee of a selling organization, or between an employee of a service organization and a customer. The degree of semantic anomaly is far more pronounced when the interacting parties are two organizations (i.e. inter-organizational research) or when the dyad is composed of a marketing organization and an individual end consumer (i.e. mass consumer markets). Thus, our focus for the remainder of this paper will be on those contexts with a high degree of semantic anomaly.

Although the *marketing as relationships* frame provides a broad theoretical pallet, in practice it is produced in a very explicit and particular manner. For example, although numerous theories of interpersonal relationships exist (see Sheaves and Barnes, 1996), social exchange theory (SET) became the prime resource for marketing researchers. SET had been successfully deployed in marketing to help explain the behaviour of marketing channel protagonists (see El-Ansary and Stern, 1972) and to explore issues surrounding power and conflict. Given that these concepts are not generally given prominence within current discussions of RM, it is important to understand both how and why SET has come to dominate the *marketing as relationships* frame.

Anderson and Narus (1984) in their seminal study on distributor–manufacturer working relationships explicitly employed Thibaut and Kelley's (1959) outcome matrix, a well-developed theory of dyadic social exchange. The outcome matrix focuses attention upon how participants in a relationship (in this case distributors and manufacturers) evaluate the rewards and costs associated with that relationship and make the decision to remain in, or leave the relationship, based on their perception of the alternatives. This deployment of SET was predicated upon a 'relation of comparability' (Montuschi, 1995: 317) between source (*interpersonal relationship*) and target (*market exchange*) domains such that the metaphor appeared to offer creative potential in the mapping process. That is, the connections between manufacturers and distributors were deemed to be similar in many ways to the connections between people in interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, the differences between source and target domains (i.e. semantic anomaly) were such that 'the projection and assignment of further implications . . . [were] potentially descriptive and explanatory' of marketing exchanges (Cornelissen, 2002: 262). These similarities and differences led Anderson and Narus (1984: 66) to offer the following guarded advancement of SET:

> While it is understood that caution must be used when generalizing interpersonal constructs to an interorganizational context, the adapted constructs . . . appear to have applicability to the study of distributor–manufacturer working relationships.

In their analysis of buyer–seller relationships, Dwyer et al. (1987) borrow further from SET. They specifically draw upon Scanzoni's (1979) work in outlining a relationship development process, and they identify three constructs they consider critical to the understanding of this development: trust, commitment and dissolution. Again, Dwyer et al. (1987: 25) stress that because their 'model's eclectic conceptual and empirical origins are not proximal to marketing, it is highly propositional'.

The understanding of interpersonal relationships produced by SET is, in fact, conceptually close to the understanding of exchanges in marketing. This is because SET is founded upon the metaphor of *interpersonal relationships as market exchanges*. That is, in an effort to make sense of interpersonal interaction, social theorists looked to the market as their source domain and began to treat interpersonal exchanges *as if* they were market exchanges. As a result of the process of metaphoric transfer, social exchanges, like market exchanges, were posited to be dependent upon the successful exchange of rewards (Homans, 1950). Interaction was deemed to occur when the rewards of exchange outweighed the costs (Thibaut and Kelley, 1959). SET is therefore entirely consistent with the notion of the *market*, and its fundamental axioms are consistent with self-interest seeking and a calculative approach to interaction and exchange. As Fischer and Bristor (1994: 328) point out, within a relational perspective: 'Rational economic man meets rational economic woman and they strike a mutually agreeable bargain'. This view of interpersonal exchange is consistent with MacNeil's (1980) work on contractual relations and McCall's (1966) theory of marriage (both of which feature strongly in the work of Dwyer et al., 1987). For example, McCall (1966: 197–8) describes marriage as follows: 'The two individuals agree to exchange only with one another, at least until such time as the balance of trade becomes unfavorable in terms of broader market considerations'.

It is no surprise, therefore, that the language and concepts of SET resonated strongly with marketing researchers, or that the resulting models of relationship development gained strong empirical support. Indeed, it may be argued that the literatures on market exchange and social exchange are incestuous to the point that the process of cross-domain mapping is made redundant. Thus, rather than offering an alternative to existing conceptualizations within marketing, the relational frame was similar enough to the existing mix management frame as to be quickly assimilated by the marketing mainstream. This occurred so quickly and so gracefully as to appear seamless, resulting in the almost immediate lexicalization of the metaphor.

The lexicalization of the metaphor

According to Bagozzi (1975: 37) 'the processes involved in the creation and resolution of exchange relationships constitute the subject matter of marketing, and these processes depend on, and cannot be separated from, the fundamental character of human and organizational needs'. Although Bagozzi does use the term 'exchange relationships', the emphasis in Bagozzi's work was squarely on exchange. Specifically, Bagozzi (1975, 1978) was concerned with developing the exchange paradigm within marketing and identifying three types (restricted, generalized and complex) and three meanings (utilitarian, symbolic and mixed) for exchange. The centrality of exchange is reiterated by Hunt (1983: 9) who posits: 'the primary focus of marketing is the exchange relationship'. Dwyer et al. (1987) take up these assertions and go further by claiming that while exchange has received due attention, relational aspects have been neglected and, on a number of occasions, they hint at the possibility of applying this new frame to a range of marketing contexts including mass consumer markets.

The shift in emphasis from '*exchange* relationships' to 'exchange *relationships*' might be explained by the fact that the concept of exchange was considered nebulous and ambiguous (Martin, 1985), largely failing to fulfil 'its promise of providing a coherent structure for the discipline' (Houston and Gassenheimer, 1987: 17). Thus, the relational frame was initially employed to shed light on processes of exchange within marketing, but increasingly, the concept of exchange was being abandoned in favour of a concentration on relationships. Interestingly, there are some parallels here with Bachelard's (1960, cited in O'Connor, 1995: 788) exposition of 19th-century scientists studying thunder. In an effort to understand thunder these scientists turned their attention to the metaphor of the *cannon*. Before long these scientists were studying cannons in the mistaken belief that they were studying thunder. The scientists were transported away from the real object of study by the metaphor and there was a 'confusion of map and territory' (Sandelands and Srivatsan, 1993: 7). In much the same way, efforts to understand exchange in marketing have transmogrified into a focus on relationships.

In an effort to increase the likelihood of relational success, researchers identified a number of relationship-enabling elements in SET, the most important of which are argued to be *commitment* and *trust*. Morgan and Hunt (1994: 22) suggest:

> commitment and trust are key because they encourage marketers to (1) work at preserving relationship investments by cooperating with exchange partners, (2) resist attractive short-term alternatives in favour of the expected long-term benefits of staying with existing partners, and (3) view potentially high-risk action as being prudent because of the belief that their partners will not act opportunistically.

Dwyer et al. (1987: 23) position commitment as 'the highest stage of relational bonding . . . [which] can be applied with great versatility to the study of inter-firm and consumer relations'. According to Geyskens et al. (1996), this recognition of the centrality of commitment engendered an entire research stream on the factors that contribute to it. Dwyer et al. (1987) also suggested that trust deserved priority attention, fundamental as it was to the development of relationships. Morgan and Hunt (1994) take up the call for further research in this area by developing their commitment–trust theory of relationship marketing. They explicitly recognize the role of these concepts in enabling participation in relationships and networks (Morgan and Hunt, 1994: 34):

> To be an effective competitor in today's global marketplace requires one to be an effective co-operator in some network of organizations. If being an effective cooperator in some network is a prerequisite to being a successful competitor, what are the requisites for being a successful cooperator? The commitment–trust theory maintains that those networks characterized by relationship commitment and trust engender cooperation (in addition to acquiescence, a reduced tendency to leave the network, the belief that conflict will be functional, and reduced uncertainty).

In this way investigations of marketing phenomena began to centre with increasing regularity on the development of relationships and on fostering trust and commitment. The metaphor had become conventionalized to the extent that the creative meanings brought about by the tension inherent in the metaphor were bypassed in favour of a single literal meaning (Searle, 1993).

One means of elucidating upon this lexicalization of the metaphor is to trace its effects within a particular field of marketing. In recent years there have been a number of calls within the branding literature for a consideration of brand-consumer relationships (BCRs). Some commentators (e.g. Blackston, 1992) have underlined the supposed failure of brand image research to provide concrete assistance to brand management programmes and suggest that a focus on BCRs offers a solution in this regard. In investigating mass-market brands Blackston (1992) compares the BCR to a relationship between a doctor and patient and, in extending his analysis to corporate brands, concepts from SET such as trust begin to emerge. Furthermore, Blackston (1992) makes explicit the link between BCRs and RM. This linking of BCRs to SET and to RM has had the effect of opening the conceptual floodgates. Consequently, Palmer (1996), as well as Dall'Olmo Riley and de Chernatony (2000), elucidates the complementary nature of research on commercial relationships and research on branding. The crux of Palmer's (1996: 253–4) position is that 'individuals have an underlying need for an emotional bond with high-involvement products that they buy. Brand development and relationship development are complementary and substitutable strategies towards this bonding'. Dall'Olmo Riley and de Chernatony (2000: 140) propose: 'the concept of the brand has evolved from a name given to differentiate a firm's products, to that of a relationship based on trust'. This evolution is predicated on the fact that brands possess meaning for consumers above and beyond their functional characteristics; they have personalities described in much the same way as human personalities, and, thus, we can have relationships with them. Essentially, then, these researchers are championing the employment of one metaphor (the *interpersonal relationship* metaphor) based on the existing employment of another metaphor (the *brand as personality* metaphor). However, the extent to which brand personalities are the same as human personalities is questionable. As Bengtsson (2003: 154) stridently indicates: 'although consumers may attribute anthropomorphous characteristics to brands, this does not necessarily imply that socio-psychological theories of interpersonal relationships [such as SET] are adequate to represent consumers' relation to their brands'.

Fournier (1998) recognizes that for a BCR to exist the brand must be a living entity because relationships exist between active and interdependent partners. That is, if brands were living entities, they would have personalities, would grow and develop over time and, therefore, it would be possible to have *relationships* with them. However, personification of the brand is insufficient for the brand to be considered a legitimate relational partner. Rather, for this to happen, brands need to be anthropomorphized, or humanized (Fournier, 1998). While brands can be animated through brand characters or are somehow possessed by the spirit of a past or present others, complete anthropomorphization of the brand involves imbuing it with human qualities such as emotion, thought and volition. Fournier (1998) argues that marketers perform this transmogrification through their everyday activities, particularly those conducted under the rubric of interactive marketing. The conceptual leap made here is that BCRs can be treated *as if* they were interpersonal relationships. Fournier and Yao (1997) make explicit reference to their use of the *interpersonal relationship* metaphor in analysing the bonds between consumers and the brands they use. Furthermore, although they acknowledge their failure to test the relevance of the relationship frame against other frames, they do call for the abandonment of research on brand loyalty in favour of relational perspectives.

The interpersonal relationship metaphor has been useful in that it has emphasized the positive elements associated with exchange. Depending on the exact relational perspective adopted these could include adaptation, flexibility, sharing, trust, intimacy and protecting the interests of the partner. The metaphor has also been useful in terms of offering a new perspective on the brand–consumer interface and demanding that the focus of research is extended beyond single, isolated exchanges. This has required the adoption of a more holistic perspective best illustrated in the work of Fournier (1998). However, Aggarwal (2004: 89) cautions that 'given . . . obvious differences between social relationships and consumer–brand relationships, it is important for researchers to not overextend the relationship metaphor when studying consumer behaviour'. In sum, BCRs have been reified and researchers have treated them as though they really were interpersonal relationships (Bengtsson, 2003). This reification has led to an almost exclusive emphasis on concepts from SET in their description and explication. For example, Hess (1996: 151) suggests: 'As they are for most kinds of relationships, trust and commitment should be the central operators of consumer brand relationships; that is, they reflect relationship quality and lead to positive outcomes'.

The mapping process

When we understand how metaphor is appropriately mapped from source to target domain (see Lakoff, 1993), we recognize that the transfer of meaning from *interpersonal relationships* to *market exchanges* has been fraught with contradictions. Specifically, SET, with its view of relationships as the outcome of restrictive trade agreements, has been combined with the more communal values of Judeo-Christian marriage.

The marriage analogy was introduced by Levitt (1983) and built upon in the later work of Dwyer et al. (1987). Levitt used the analogy to highlight the possibilities of focusing on the long term (the marriage) rather than the one-night stand (the transaction). In his words, 'the sale merely consummates the courtship. Then the marriage begins. How good the marriage is depends on how well the relationship is managed by the seller' (Levitt, 1983: 111). As a result, the values borrowed in the process of metaphoric transfer are more consistent with an idealized view of marriage as a communal exchange rather than as a market exchange. Interpersonal relationships predicated upon communal exchange are governed by very different rules: 'In communal relationships, the assumption is that each individual is concerned about the welfare of the other; the exchange of benefits is based on the *needs* of the other, not on the anticipation that benefits will be received in return' (Sheaves and Barnes, 1996: 225). Thus, the elements that comprise the frame *marketing as relationships* combine, at the superordinate level, *concepts* from a theory of relationships based on self-interest seeking (SET), and, at the subordinate level, *values* from an antithetical communal perspective (idealized understandings of Judeo-Christian marriage). The resulting frame, although apparently insightful, ignores many of the accepted conventions associated with the use of metaphor and has been subjected to little critical analysis in marketing (for exceptions see Hunt and Menon, 1995; O'Malley and Tynan, 2000). As a consequence, we argue that the resulting *marketing as relationships* frame has been harmful for theory and practice in marketing. Nonetheless, the frame has generally received unbridled support within the discipline because it performs a powerful rhetorical function.

The rhetorical power of *marketing as relationships*

One possible reason for the disjuncture identified above between concepts and values is that the particular set of values mobilized at the subordinate level possesses much rhetorical power. The *marketing as relationships* frame repositions the discipline as one based on harmonic connections (Smith and Higgins, 2000). This lies in stark contrast to other frames deployed within marketing. For example, the *marketing as warfare* frame is inherently adversarial and emphasizes victory and conquest (Desmond, 1997). Moreover, Kotler (1991, cited in Morgan and Hunt, 1994: 20) suggests that RM casts marketing as *helpful* and *fair* and argues that there is now the possibility of a *win–win* outcome in the marketing game. Indeed, RM was heralded as a fundamental transformation in the practice of marketing 'from manipulation of the customer to *genuine customer involvement*; from telling and selling to *communicating* and *sharing knowledge*; from last in line function to *corporate-credibility champion*' (McKenna, 1991: 68). In sum, there was an apparent shift in the axioms of marketing from 'competition and conflict to *mutual cooperation* and choice independence to *mutual interdependence*' (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995: 399). These new values are reflected in changes in marketing's discursive points (Fitchett and McDonagh, 2000). Specifically, need satisfaction is replaced by *promise fulfilment* and *relationship development*; and the notion of an *active agent* has replaced that of a passive consumer.

> RM is thus posited not only as a progressive concept for marketing practice and thought but also as a progressive discourse for consumers. Indeed, some RM writing has an almost evangelical tone, which prescribes greater sensitivity on the part of the organization towards its many publics and interest groups. (Fitchett and McDonagh, 2000: 211)

The focus on relationships also helped to strengthen marketing's case within the organization. As a result of a number of converging forces in the broader environment (i.e. the profligacy of traditional approaches to marketing, the rising expectations of consumers, and greater competitive pressures), the organizational stature of marketing was increasingly being called into question (Whittington and Whipp, 1992). During the same period, marketing became particularly concerned with engendering customer loyalty (Dick and Basu, 1994). The advent of the 'promiscuous consumer' (Uncles, 1994), content to switch between a variety of brands, coupled with the spiralling costs of customer acquisition programmes, focused the collective marketing mind. Further support was to come in the form of customer retention economics (Reichheld and Sasser, 1990), which suggested that the cost of acquiring customers was generally much higher than the cost of retaining customers. Thus, the possibilities afforded by this frame, in terms of increasing both the efficiency and effectiveness of marketing, were openly welcomed. It was argued that a focus on relationships dramatically reduced marketing costs, particularly those relating to mass communication (Palmer, 1996), while marketing's effectiveness could be enhanced through an increase in customer loyalty.

The use of this particular frame has also helped to legitimize the continued and more extensive use of a range of marketing technologies in which there has been substantial investment made by marketing practitioners and academics (Mitussis et al., 2006). For example, the general consensus within marketing is that the ability to develop successful customer relationships lies in an organization's capacity to understand its customers, their individual preferences, expectations and changing needs and to communicate with them appropriately (Dwyer et al., 1987). Given the complexity of contemporary markets, the collection, analysis and use of information to identify, understand and meet customers' needs is believed to be crucial in this endeavour. As a result, technology, initially in the form of the database, is widely regarded as the core of customer relationship management (CRM):

> It's a marketers dream – the ability to develop interactive relationships with individual customers. Technology in the form of the database, is making this dream a reality. (Blattberg and Deighton, 1991: 5)

Transaction data held in the database are often overlaid with data from a range of other sources to create a '360-degree view' of the customer. The database becomes the central knowledge tool for the organization (de Tienne and Thompson, 1996), used to simulate intimacy and connectedness (O'Malley and Mitussis, 2002). Personalized service is facilitated by allowing company employees access to a complete history of the customer's previous contacts and transactions, and by providing them with the information they require to engage, inform and deal with customers' requests effectively (Gordon, 2000).

Implications for theory and practice in marketing

Metaphors generate creative insights that serve as the basis for scientific endeavour whereby researchers attempt to discover the extent to which the metaphor has explanatory value for the subject of inquiry (Morgan, 1980). Although the full extent of comparison between source and target domains cannot be known in advance, the use of metaphor does delineate a potential research agenda by raising awareness about what the possible similarities or analogies might be (Brown, 1976). Indeed, 'much of the puzzle-solving activity of normal science is of this kind, with scientists attempting to examine, operationalize and measure detailed implications of the metaphorical insight upon which their research is implicitly or explicitly based' (Morgan, 1980: 611). In this regard, metaphors are tools for exploration allowing researchers to probe and consider the possibilities offered by a particular frame (Sawhney, 1996).

Metaphor does not simply provide a new, or different, way of looking at something, nor does it reveal what the facts really are: 'Rather, the metaphor in a fundamental way creates the facts' (Brown, 1976: 176) through a process of *naming* and *framing. Things* selected for attention are named in such a way as to fit the frame of reference (Schön, 1993) and become the salient features to be studied and understood. This implies that evaluating a metaphor against the reality it purports to represent is futile (Brown, 1976). Thus, 'what is at issue is not the truth or falsity of a metaphor, but the inferences that follow from it and the actions that are sanctioned by it' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980a: 485). While the *marketing as relationships* frame may, initially, have provided creative insights (particularly in recognizing the active, interactive and interdependent nature of many market exchange processes), the explanatory potential of the metaphor has been extended beyond its limits. Thus, connections between companies and some of their important customers are deemed to be similar to interpersonal relationships insomuch as they are close, complex, long-term and characterized by extensive contact and mutual adaptation (Turnbull, 1979).

However, the mapping from source to target domain becomes problematic when the 'structural match' (Gentner and Jeziorski, 1993) between those domains is inadequate, as is the case when the domain of *interpersonal relationships* is mapped onto exchanges in mass consumer markets. In such markets, interaction tends to occur between consumers and anonymous service personnel, or through the medium of technology, and not between known individuals. Rather than a marriage of equals, power inequalities are the norm. Further, in this context consumers are protected by legislation and market-based safeguards such that trust is rendered largely unimportant (Cowles, 1997). While commitment is fundamental to successful relationships, choice is a fundamental ingredient of mass-market exchanges. Moreover, while we might conceive of consumers in such markets as being dependent upon particular organizations, the inverse, where organizations are dependent upon particular customers, is rarely the case.

In sum, interaction may indeed occur between consumers in mass markets and organizations, but that interaction occurs between *unequal parties*, is generally *anonymous*, involves *bounded communication* and emphasizes *structural, task-related* bonds rather than social bonds. We acknowledge that differences between source and target domain are central to a metaphor's creative possibilities, but the extent of differences outlined here is simply too substantial for the metaphor to be considered meaningful. Thus, while it was appropriate to explore the utility of the *marketing as relationships* frame in high-contact contexts, it is also necessary to acknowledge that when creative insights are not forthcoming, the fictive truth generated by the metaphor must be abandoned and alternative metaphors sought (Brown, 1976). However, rather than circumscribing the application of the *marketing as relationships* frame, the marketing Academy has sought to redefine all marketing as relational.

Despite such conceptual problems, the rhetorical power of the *interpersonal relationship* metaphor focused attention on how best to create customer intimacy in a complex consumer marketplace. Information technology was heralded as 'an agent of surrogacy to be enlisted to help marketers to re-create the operating styles of yesterday's merchants' (Sisodia and Wolfe, 2000: 526). However, the promise shown by the technological solution has failed to materialize, not least because organizations continue to address relationship building with the same structures used to support transactional approaches (Gordon, 2000). Few organizations have been able to use technology to facilitate credible and responsive dialogue (Sisodia and Wolf, 2000) because they do not have an inherently relational approach and would even have difficulty creating dialogue in the absence of technology. At best, many of these organizations find there is no change in their connections with customers. At worst, these organizations realize they have incurred tremendous expense alienating their customers with intrusive communications (Fournier et al., 1998).

While the suggestion of win–win relationships with end consumers had the potential to confer marketing with a more benign image, it also resulted in unrealistic consumer expectations. The discourse of relationships abounds in advertising, encouraging consumers to accept that marketers feel close to them and welcome their greater engagement with the organization. However, it seems that consumers recognize the rhetorical nature of such advertising and regard it as inauthentic (see O'Malley and Prothero, 2004). Consumers appreciate the fact that contemporary firms are governed by self-interest and that profit continues to be the central objective. Moreover, 'the obligations on the part of companies seeking this pseudo-personal relationship are huge and consumers can feel betrayed when these obligations are violated' (Lannon, 1995: 163). It should come as no surprise then that in the USA customer complaints are at an all time high (Fournier et al., 1998) and customer loyalty is actually decreasing in the UK (Management Services, 2000).

'Each conceptual, or metaphorical, outline produces the phenomenon it is interested in as a particular kind of analytical object as it, at the same time, closes off other ways of seeing this phenomenon' (Ridell, 1996: 574). The academy's failure to capture the potential of mapping at the superordinate level seriously restricts the *marketing as relationships* frame. A whole host of interpersonal relationships other than marriages (including those between professionals, between children and their parents and between colleagues) remains ripe for exploration (see Iacobucci and Ostrom, 1996). In this way, the *marketing as relationships* frame has restricted theory development in marketing because of its limited focus. The fetishization of the *marketing as relationships* frame in the Academy lies in stark contrast to the practice of marketing where a high proportion of strategies in mass-marketing contexts remains purely transactional (Coviello et al., 2002). Thus, the divide between theory and practice grows ever wider.

Conclusion

Inevitably, the creative aspects of the *interpersonal relationship* metaphor have come to be displaced by its idiomatic aspects. Moreover, assumptions about the nature of relationships and the extent to which they are possible and appropriate in different empirical contexts have not been addressed. Yet, despite calls to reconsider the extension of the metaphor beyond services and inter-organizational research (see O'Malley and Tynan, 1999), and to undertake a more nuanced consideration of the metaphor (see Hunt and Menon, 1995), the Academy has not engaged with the necessary process of reactivating the metaphor, which would require a recognition of its original and primarily symbolic and illustrative function. The term *relationship* continues to be 'over-used and carelessly used in the literature, resulting in frustration for academics and practitioners' (Coviello et al., 1997: 503).

This paper has reviewed the origins of the interpersonal relationship metaphor in marketing, analysed its rhetorical uses and demonstrated the lexicalization of the marketing as relationships frame. We have distinguished between the application of this frame in inter-organizational research and in high-contact service contexts from its more recent extension into mass consumer markets and beyond. While we acknowledge the potential of the frame in the former contexts, we regard it as inappropriate and unhelpful for theory and practice in the latter. In particular, we demonstrate that the substantial differences between interpersonal relationships and exchange in mass markets render the frame meaningless. As a result, ongoing efforts to prove the utility of the metaphor in this context are doomed to fail. There is a need instead for marketing academics to acknowledge and problematize the lexis of their professional discourse community and the lexical and ideological constraints within which their writing takes place. Such 'critical language awareness' (cf. Fairclough, 1992) would help to ensure a continuing engagement with and awareness of the need to reactivate and interrogate the metaphors marketing academics live by. Relationship rhetoric has resulted in expensive outlays on technology and has created unrealistic consumer expectations while doing little for customer satisfaction or loyalty. As such, we make a final call for the abandonment of the metaphor in this context so that academics and practitioners may seek out alternative, and potentially more insightful, metaphors to advance research in marketing and to create sustainable strategy.

In continuing to employ the *marketing as relationships* frame in inter-organizational research and in high-contact services markets we urge both caution and reflexivity. More importantly, we reiterate calls to embrace the full extent of the metaphor's creative potential by exploring the implications of a whole range of interpersonal relationships which may or may not be close, positive, or, indeed, monogamous. In this way, the metaphor may be reactivated and it may continue to offer fresh insights that inform both research and practice. Finally, in terms of theory development we should reconsider definitions of marketing that embrace relationships in all contexts and we should revisit the *marketing as exchange* frame and satisfy ourselves that we have fully exhausted its potential.

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