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The Graduate School  
The Business School

**Teleological Reasoning and Knowledge  
Generation in Marketing Theory:  
Observations and Recommendations**

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## **Abstract**

The practice and sociology of theorising is one of the marketing discipline's most marginal specialties, yet its epistemological and methodological underpinnings including the morphology of explanations have very substantial bearing upon the nature and scope of marketing theory in general. Since the 1980s writings have increasingly attended to the relationship between philosophy and the marketing discipline. While much of the use of philosophy of science was rhetorical and directed towards either a critique or legitimation of the post-positivist or realist image of marketing science, certain ideas about the logic and epistemology of science nevertheless were insinuated into the practice of inquiry (see Hunt, 1991). Against this background and focussing on theory building and testing within marketing science, this paper discusses one act and aspect of theorising: the use of teleological reasoning in scientific explanations of marketing phenomena. The issues and problems surrounding the use of teleological reasoning are illustrated by an in-depth analysis of writings on 'integrated marketing communications' theory. Recommendations for the use of teleological reasoning in marketing and marketing communications theory are made.

**Keywords: Marketing communications, integrated marketing communications, marketing theory and representation.**

## **Introduction**

The practice and sociology of theorising is one of the marketing discipline's most marginal specialties, yet its epistemological and methodological underpinnings including the morphology of explanations have very substantial bearing upon the nature and scope of marketing theory in general. Since the 1980s writings have increasingly attended to the relationship between philosophy and the marketing discipline. While much of the use of philosophy of science was rhetorical and directed towards either a critique or legitimisation of the post-positivist or realist image of marketing science, certain ideas about the logic and epistemology of science nevertheless were insinuated into the practice of inquiry (see Hunt, 1991). Against this background and focussing on theory building and testing within marketing science, this paper discusses one act and aspect of theorising: the use of teleological reasoning in scientific explanations of marketing phenomena. The issues and problems surrounding the use of teleological reasoning are illustrated by an in-depth analysis of writings on 'integrated marketing communications' theory. Recommendations for the use of teleological reasoning in marketing and marketing communications theory are made.

The relationship between marketing inquiry and the philosophy of science became a matter of focused, and often polemical, discussion at the zenith of the debate about positivism and 'truth' during the early 1980s and carried on throughout the 1990s. The issue was hardly resolved, but it receded with the depolarisation and pluralisation of marketing science during the *post*-positivist period; with scholars residing in 'realist' (e.g. Hunt, 1990, 1991, 1992) and 'constructivist' camps (e.g. Hirschman, 1986, Peter, 1992, Zinkhan and Hirschheim, 1992). It might be argued that this was a salutary development and an indication of scientific autonomy and maturity that allowed the marketing discipline to extricate itself from a set of increasingly complicated philosophical problems about metaphysics and to proceed with more substantive concerns; i.e. theorising about marketing phenomena. This discussion paper is concerned with practices at this theoretical level; in particular with the use of teleological reasoning

in scientific explanations and in the historical representation and interpretation of marketing and marketing communications phenomena.

### **Teleological Reasoning in Scientific Explanations**

The subjects of representation and the morphology of explanations have recently been given increased interest in marketing science. Apart from stipulating these different deductive and inductive explanation types (see Hunt, 1983, 1991), a complete account of explanation types actually in use in marketing research is needed; but it is not the aim of the present discussion to provide such an account. The present aim is the more limited one of uncovering the use of teleological reasoning in scientific explanations of marketing phenomena. Teleology, literally the study of ends, goals or purposes, is the theory that events can only be explained, and that evaluation of anything can only be justified by consideration of the ends towards which they are directed. As a corollary, complexes of events are seen to take on a significant order only if seen as all directed towards some outlying purpose. In the context of marketing theory, teleological reasoning is perhaps particularly evident in proposed historical descriptions of marketing phenomena, where the teleological argument is often co-opted with, if not premised on, a historicist outlook of a paradigmatic shift and movement into a new marketing era. For example, the proposed shift to relationship marketing practices is seen as a logical progression from the what is now seen as traditional exchange conception.

Despite the fact that such teleological reasoning *per se* can, as will be argued here, be misleading and inept as a scientific explanation, it is at least possible to understand why it might nevertheless have been *thought* to provide for such an explanation. Teleological reasoning, albeit abstract, is seen to provide heuristic insight into the periodisation and progression of the marketing discipline. From a theory-building and hypothesis forming point of view, such abstractions are important because they operate at a high level of generality, might reveal the generic properties of a variety of phenomena, and can thus be used to explain phenomena across different domains and time-sets. Teleological reasoning might effectively form a first apprehension and suggested hypothesis of a

historical pattern or development (e.g. Bedau, 1992), but, for the following reasons, cannot in itself be taken as an adequate scientific explanation. For a start, the assumption that everything is as it is because of the effects it causes or because of the end-state to which everything is or should be progressing, is mistaken. To suggest for instance that there is an inherent logical pattern in the historical evolution of marketing practices and also to suggest, in true teleological fashion, that the end-state is professionally, economically, and societally to be preferred – e.g. a market orientation over product, production and selling orientations, relationship over exchange conceptions of marketing, and integrated marketing communications over specialist and mass communications – is, the paper argues, not warranted. The observed problem might also be here, as Bedau (1992) outlines, that contemporary analyses of teleological explanation generally attempt to ‘sanitise’ it, usually by trying to assimilate it into some uncontroversial descriptive form of explanation. In effect, explanations involving the suggested historical progressions in marketing practices (to relationship marketing, marketing orientation, and integrated marketing communications) mentioned above have found a widespread appeal and endorsement within the marketing literature. This trend is misguided: not recognising its heuristic status, teleological reasoning has often been taken as descriptively accurate of historical empirical conditions and as providing for adequate scientific explanations. The crux of the problem here is that teleological reasoning has often become reified as an accurate historical description: this has produced a discourse which in explaining away the historically contingent circumstances and products of actions is not true to the real characteristics of marketing and marketing communications practices over the ages. A related problem, and coming forth out of the observation that teleological reasoning does not provide for a necessarily true and empirically accurate picture of marketing reality, is that the use of teleological arguments might be merely rhetorical and discursive, and directed towards a legitimisation of a particular image of marketing and marketing communications (see below).

Some may be unconvinced by this argument that explanations based upon teleological reasoning have become accepted in marketing theory, in part because the general climate in marketing science, or in any other academic discipline for that matter, seems to be one

of descriptivism and experimentation, where an explanation, not supported by empirical evidence and/or not inductively or deductively warranted, will be easily revealed and disposed off. Therefore, the tone and content of our argument can be more clearly understood if a substantive example is presented. Through the following sections, the use of teleological reasoning in the theory of ‘integrated marketing communications’ is illustrated. The theory of ‘integrated marketing communications’ has been singled out for the sake of illustrating our claim in line with the expositional purposes of this paper. And although it has been argued that ‘integrated marketing communications’ thought has not reached the stage of formal theory yet (e.g. Schultz and Kitchen, 2000), the widespread use of teleological reasoning to make the case for a theory of ‘integrated marketing communications’ makes this example particularly salient.

### **The Inevitability of ‘Integration’: Teleological Reasoning in ‘Integrated Marketing Communications’ Theory**

Over the last decade or so, there has been a proliferation of writings on the concept of ‘integration’ in corporate and marketing communications; the practices associated with ‘integration’ and the alleged (historical) societal and market changes that brought it about (e.g. Cornelissen, 2000, Cornelissen and Lock, 2000a). Originally, the concept of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) was advanced as a corrective to the alleged preceding view that techniques of the disciplines of marketing communications, i.e. advertising, promotions, public relations and selling, are employed on a singular and separate basis, and should be organised (into functional departments) accordingly (e.g. Schultz *et al.*, 1993). Writers have argued here that IMC represents a transitory *period* between the old, historical, product-driven, outbound marketing systems and the new, information-driven, interactive, consumer-focused marketplaces of the twenty-first century (Hutton, 1996, Eagle *et al.*, 1999, Kitchen, 1999, Kitchen and Schultz, 1999, Schultz and Kitchen, 1997, 1998). Schultz (1999), for instance, argues that IMC is the natural evolution from mass-market media advertising towards targeted marketing. In his view, IMC is seen as a logical and historical progression into a new age of marketing

communications: "...it appears to be the natural evolution of traditional mass-media advertising, which has been changed, adjusted and refined as a result of new technology" (Schultz, 1999: 337). Stimulated by apparent changes such as media multiplication, audience fragmentation and technological advances (e.g. database marketing, e-commerce) and the emergent understanding that different techniques can complement each other in the achievement of a company's marketing objectives (e.g. Knecht, 1989, Smith, 1996, Pickton and Hartley, 1998), IMC embodied the idea that such changes in marketing communications have quickened a decay of traditional virtues in which the cross-fertilisation ('through-the-line') of communication techniques and media has tended to displace traditional rigid classifications of mass communications into 'above-the-line' and 'below-the-line' (e.g. Schultz, 1999). Ever since the introduction of IMC thought within marketing communications in the late 1980s it has led to a substantial debate and, according to its devotees, to a re-orientation on three key areas:

1. The linkages between messages and the media vehicles carrying those messages; including questions about the consistency or consonance of signals or cues (e.g. slogans, logos, themes, lay-out, etc.) within those messages (e.g. Haytko, 1996), about the consumer information processing of such messages (e.g. Moriarty, 1996), as well as about maximising communications mixes towards brand equity (e.g. Keller, 1996);
2. The planning and organisation of marketing communications; including questions about the organisation (e.g. cross-functional teams) and management of communications disciplines (e.g. Duncan and Caywood, 1996), about the expertise and orientation of practitioners needed (generalist-specialist) (e.g. Stewart, 1996), as well as about the planning of media schedules towards the groups of prospects, customers and consumers targeted (e.g. Sirgy, 1998);
3. The role of advertising or communications agencies and their relationship with the client organisation; including questions about the changes in orientations and

practices of agencies needed (e.g. Zinkhan and Watson, 1996) as well as the coordination and management of campaigns (e.g. Gronstedt and Thorson, 1996).

Since the intention was to redress an imbalance in marketing communications theory, which, it is argued, had not yet geared up towards the drastic changes happening within the practice of marketing communications and the communications industry at large, the exposition of IMC at the time perhaps offered potential as a complementary perspective on the subject. There has indeed been ever since the 1980s an enduring feeling among academics and practitioners alike that the field of marketing communications has been subject to a number of significant changes (e.g. Smith, 1996, Pickton and Hartley, 1998), such as technological advances in media and communication channels as well as the growing diversification and mobility of consumers, which, it can be argued, has created fertile ground for new theories and ideas of marketing communications, such as IMC, to replace the orthodox mass marketing communications model (e.g. Schultz, 1996). A contemporary contribution of IMC theory and analysis would then derive from its potential to address and explain current communications practices that have not been captured by traditional accounts of mass marketing communications (see Buttle, 1995).

As mentioned, there has been a general belief amongst marketing academic and practitioners that the field of marketing communications has since the 1980s been undergoing a period of change which has significantly altered the way communications is organised, dealt with and practised in organisations and agencies alike. There is sufficient historical evidence that business and management have changed, primarily since the 1980s, from a Fordist socio-economic system, which was premised on mass production and mass consumption, to a new system of production and marketing, characterised by more flexible labour processes and markets, a flexible organisation of activities (with geographical mobility), and a greater responsiveness to more rapid shifts in consumption practices (e.g. Harvey, 1989, Tedlow, 1990).

Reflecting this overall train of change, arguments associated with IMC equally express the idea that the current practice of marketing communications reflects a drastic change from mass communications to one-to-one forms of communications (database-

marketing, e-commerce, interactive media) (e.g. Schultz, 1996), from functionally organised communication disciplines to more cross-functional forms of organisation (e.g. Schultz *et al.*, 1993), from communications to mass audiences towards targeting of segmented groups (e.g. Belch and Belch, 1993), and from fragmented communications to communications in unison (e.g. Belch and Belch, 1995, Shimp, 1997, Schultz *et al.*, 1993, Duncan and Caywood, 1996, Duncan and Moriarty, 1998, Caywood and Ewing, 1991, Pickton and Hartley, 1998). It follows, however, that whilst there are certain important insights here, there are also strongly *ideological* elements informing this new myth of post-Fordist marketing communications. Post-Fordism, in marketing and marketing communications, is, in effect, imagined as anti-Fordism: it is quite simply seen as the inverse of, and anti-thesis to, the rigid and massified system of Fordism (e.g. Schultz, 1996). This kind of idealised and teleological thinking is, however, the paper argues, clearly unsatisfactory and even problematic. That is, we might expect that any real-world transition beyond Fordism is a great deal more complex, unruly and uncertain. For example rather than the argument which has been made in this teleological tradition that interactive media will functionally displace traditional media (Rust and Oliver, 1994, Rust and Varki, 1996, Zinkhan and Watson, 1996), it might turn out that such new media actually complement traditional forms of communication (Bezjan-avery *et al.*, 1998). In effect market analyses have actually repeatedly shown that advertising is still 'strong', showing a steady growth, in both the UK (Fletcher, 1996) and the US (Prensky *et al.*, 1996).

“Despite all the endless brouhaha, in Britain, above-the-line’s share [advertising] of the marketing communications cake is approximately 74 per cent and is still absolutely predominant; nor has it changed significantly during the last 15 years” (Fletcher, 1996: 23).

“One may be quick to assume that the increase in the use of sales promotions, particularly that of trade promotions, has eroded the expenditures on advertising. That is, promotions have grown at the expense of advertising. The available data do not indicate that this is the case. Although the importance of trade promotions has grown relative to media advertising, advertising as a percentage of the gross national product has remained roughly the same over the past 30 years, ranging between 1.8% of the GNP to 2.4% over that period” (Prensky *et al.*, 1996: 170).

Instead of this clear teleological evolution, however, the transition process might rather actually be fraught with disruption, or perhaps not follow this logic at all. Projected futures cannot simply and effortlessly dissolve away the solidity of inherited structures. Prensky *et al.* (1996: 181, italics added) for instance have argued that “marketing organisations *are behind* in developing the content of communication program and the process of co-ordinating such programs”, as established characteristics of structure, culture and politics were found to hamper the, in the view of Prensky *et al.* (1996), inevitable change process. It follows here, however, that prescriptions of marketing communications based upon this teleological reasoning are not necessarily descriptive of practice, nor should they dictate how marketing communications should be managed. As such, the organisation of marketing communications might simply not have followed the ‘evolutionary’ path, nor, we might suggest, should it necessarily have to.

On a similar note, many writings since Kotler and Mindak (1978) have suggested that the functions of corporate affairs or corporate communications and marketing communications will or should be ‘integrated’ into one external relations function (see also Kitchen, 1993, Gronstedt, 1996a,b). Kotler and Mindak (1978: 20) argued that “new patterns of operation and interrelation can be expected to appear in these functions [marketing and public relations]”, i.e. the two functions “rapidly converging” in their concepts and methodologies. Equally, the question arising here is thus whether indeed these ‘integrated’ functions exist in practice, and whether the teleological reasoning uttered here, i.e. seeing integrated functions as progressing from increasing overreach and commonality between marketing and public relations (where in the past the functions were functionally separated), provides for an adequate explanation.

“...and indeed as competitive and environmental trends unfold it may be that the view of marketing and public relations as the same function may not be far removed from the reality of the 1990s. While there may be disagreement, debate and contention surrounding the boundaries of public relations and marketing, there does appear to be some overreach and commonality between the two communication types. Such overreach and commonality has been fostered and developed primarily in relation to organisational development and change, itself a response to the external environment” (Kitchen, 1993: 90-91).

In a recent programme of research studying 126 large companies within the UK, Cornelissen (2000) found however that within the large majority of these companies the departmental arrangement of communication disciplines shows a strong functional organisation of communications into corporate affairs and marketing departments. Only a handful of companies had actually wholly consolidated or integrated the responsibilities and activities of their communication disciplines into a single department. At the same time, however, Cornelissen (2000) found high levels of cross-departmental interaction as well as the instalment of formal relationships between the functionally organised corporate affairs and marketing departments to enable co-ordination of communication programmes and efforts. These findings generally dislodge the validity of the suggested argument and explanation of a teleological movement to 'integrated' communication functions and give reason to conclude with Van der Meiden and Fauconnier (1994) that the arguments for 'integration' and 'integrated' communication functions juxtaposed to 'differentiated' functions have been coined at least since the early 1970s, and can merely be seen as a teleological rhetoric.

Generally, as the foregoing examples and accompanying discussion show, the general process of transformation of marketing and marketing communications might thus rather be seen as complex and uneven, where it is genuinely difficult to establish whether the present period marks the emergence of a post-Fordist system, whether it should be characterised as neo-Fordist, or whether, in fact, it remains a period of late Fordism. The basis of definition and periodisation is, in fact, not at all self-evident. In a complex process of change, we have to ask by what criteria we might identify the components of a new phase of marketing and marketing communication management, and also how we do so without falling into the trap of teleologism. Hence, in this paper, it is argued that, as change will likely be complex, turbulent and a matter of contestation, neither the emergence nor the nature of any system beyond the Fordist system of mass marketing communications is predetermined or inevitable. It follows therefore that rather than projecting, in a conceptual sense, and rhetorically legitimising the systems of communication management of the present and future as many authors have done (and termed as new panaceas or paradigms such as 'relationship marketing' or 'integrated marketing communications'), and presuming that these will inevitably appear, empirical

research is needed to describe and articulate the actual and current state of contemporary marketing and marketing communications practice.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The arguments of this discussion paper have been confined to the use of teleological reasoning in marketing and marketing communications theory. Throughout the above discussion, emphasis has been placed on identifying the theoretical contribution that teleological reasoning can make to our understanding of contemporary marketing and marketing communications practice. This argument has been adopted to move the debate about teleological reasoning within the field beyond the recognition that it is simply used (and leads to a particular image of modern marketing and marketing communications practices) to a stage at which we can begin to harness and control the possibilities and problems which it offers. The problems with teleological reasoning - the rhetorical and discursive periodisation of marketing practices, the false assumption of an inherent logic in the historical progression and evolution of marketing practices, and the widespread acceptance of some of these teleological arguments as accounting for an adequate scientific explanation – have been illustrated by a dissection of the writings on ‘integrated marketing communications’ theory. Perhaps not surprisingly, current writers (O’Driscoll and Murray, 1998, Cornelissen and Lock, 2000b) underscoring the rhetorical periodisation of marketing communication practices with the juxtaposition of ‘differentiation’ versus ‘integration’, have generally questioned the legacy of ‘integration’ and of the entire ‘integrated marketing communications’ enterprise.

“There has been little theory building concerning these occurrences other than a call for a more ‘integrated’ approach to managing a more complex communications mix. The detail of such prescription remains poorly articulated and while this might be excused on the grounds of the size and rapidity of change in practice (direct response marketing, loyalty scheme marketing, electronic commerce, the controversy over the effectiveness of mass advertising), it also shows signs of intellectual failure in the academy” (O’Driscoll and Murray, 1998: 398).

By the same token, although not analysed in detail here, other uses of teleological reasoning generally seen within the marketing discipline as accurate historical descriptions and as suggesting plausible explanations of changes in marketing practices, concern the concepts of relationship marketing (as the logical outcome and result of a progression from exchange conceptions of marketing) and a company's marketing orientation (as logically following from a product, production and selling orientation), concepts lying at the heart of contemporary marketing literature. The teleological character of the suggested periodisation and explanations accompanying these concepts needs to be exposed, thereby accounting for the truly empirical nature and predictive ability of such explanations. Rather than as a discipline following *en masse* the suggested paradigmatic shift to, for instance, relationship marketing and integrated marketing communications, a breath of time for reflection upon the logic that has been proposed to warrant these evolutionary changes (and accordingly our interpretation of the past, present and future of marketing practice) is, as the paper has shown, needed.

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