Philosophising on the Elusiveness of Relationship Marketing Theory in Consumer Markets: A Case for Reassessing Ontological and Epistemological Assumptions

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Abstract

Relationship marketing in consumer markets came to the forefront of marketing in the 1990s. However, theory development in this area lags behind applications and prescriptions. We attribute this lack of development, in part, to researchers asking the wrong questions. A case is made for reassessing the epistemological and ontological assumptions about relationships in consumer markets. We argue that humans appear to be genetically predisposed to forming relationships. Instead of concentrating on why consumers seek relationships, researchers should ask, “How do consumers get into relationships with marketing entities?” The rephrased research question will prove more apt in consumer markets where reality is socially constructed. Finally, we assert that a discovery-oriented phenomenological approach should be adopted to answer the rephrased question.

Keywords: Relationship marketing, Ontology, Epistemology, Consumer markets

1. Introduction

The concept of relationship marketing (RM) clearly managed to capture the imagination of scholars in the 1990s. Editors of a number of journals across continents (Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science 1995; European Journal of Marketing 1996; Asia-Australia Marketing Journal 1996; and Journal of Marketing Management 1997) were impressed enough to devote special issues to the topic. Indeed, about a decade ago the excitement amongst the scholarship was palpable. A paradigm shift in marketing at the expense of four Ps was foreshadowed (Grönroos, 1994); and new schools of thought – the Anglo-Australian School, the Emory School, the Nordic School – emerged (Möller and Halinen, 2000; also see Coote 1994). Inevitably, as the dust begins to settle, questions are being asked about how much of RM is rhetoric and how much reality. Detractors point out that the term is being overused as a “catch all phrase” and is “prone to an abundance of vague interpretations” (Brodie, Coviello, Brookes, and Little, 1997, p. 385). Moreover, not all are entirely convinced about the applicability of RM in the context of consumer markets (O’Malley and Tynan, 2000).

Tracing how RM in consumer markets shed its obscurity, O’Malley and Tynan (2000) credit Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995) for giving impetus to the area. They observe that prior to 1995, a majority of marketers were reluctant to transfer learning from services and business-to-business markets to the consumer market domain. The authors note that it was Sheth and Parvatiyar’s (1995) article – hereafter referred to as S&P – which laid the conceptual framework for theory development in the area. Writing in the same special issue of JAMS as S&P, Bagozzi (1995) applauds S&P’s effort and predicts that their framework would take marketers far toward a theory of RM. Eight years on scholars have not made much headway. Why should this be the case? Is it because researchers have been unable to successfully grapple with complex and ambiguous constructs involved in consumer relationships? Or is there a more fundamental reason? Could it be that the central research question that academics have been asking is inapt?

In this article, we explore why a theory of RM in consumer markets has thus far proven elusive and offer some pointers that could remedy the situation. It appears that in their rush to develop a theory of RM, scholars ceased paying as much attention to philosophical assumptions implicit in their stance as they should have.
We concur with Möller and Halinen (2000) who suggest that in order to move forward, we need to look backwards and understand the roots and foundations of our knowledge. As Boyd (1991) asserts, it is the theoretical position held by researchers that determines what gets construed as a research problem, what theoretical procedures are used, and what constitutes evidence. Accordingly, we make our case by focusing on the theoretical positions of scholars and the assumptions which underpin their respective positions.

In the sections that follow, we discuss S&P’s conceptual framework and later use it to illustrate the importance of examining the underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions about relationships found in extant literature. Thereafter, we contend that the nature of relationships in consumer markets may be better understood through the ontological perspective of constructivism. We then suggest that given the ontology of relationships, the central research question in the area should be rephrased. Finally, we show why a discovery-oriented phenomenological approach should be adopted to build RM theory in consumer markets.

2. S&P’s Conceptual Framework

A content analysis of 117 different sources produced as many as 26 definitions of RM (Harker, 1999). Since there is no consensus over a definition of RM, it might be pertinent to briefly discuss what relationship means to marketers. All exchanges, by definition, involve a relationship (Czepiel, 1990). These relationships, according to Czepiel, may involve one-off transactions as witnessed between a tourist and a souvenir shop, or the relationship may be complex and long-term as between large computer systems users and their suppliers. The former type of exchange is seldom thought of as a relationship even though it meets the technical requirements of being one – it is an association or connection between two parties that benefits both of them. Most marketing scholars assert that relationships encompass an extended series of interactions and transactions over time. For instance, Shani and Chalasani (1992, p.44) define relationship marketing as:

An integrated effort to identify, maintain, and build up a network with individual consumers and to continuously strengthen the network for the mutual benefit of both sides through interactive, individualized, and value added contacts over a long period of time.

Most businesses, unlike souvenir shops, do not primarily rely on one-time-only customers. It is in the seller’s interest to have long term relationships with clients who provide repeat business. Intuitively, one can appreciate that benefits would accrue to businesses that enjoy a loyal customer base. However, the benefits that individual customers might enjoy are not always very clear. In fact, the desire on the part of individual consumers to get into relationships could be deemed irrational in one sense. After all, getting into relationships with marketers reduces choices, thereby foreclosing potentially attractive options. It is also true that relationships can sometimes be one-sided and are not always mutually beneficial. Consumers on certain occasions do attempt to dissolve or extricate themselves from bad relationships; any theory on relationships should account for such outcomes. These complexities partly explain why developing a theory of RM in consumer markets has proven troublesome. Scholars have engaged themselves in trying to explain why consumers get into relationships. This line of inquiry could be unavailing as different consumers may get into relationships for different reasons and there may be no all-encompassing explanation as to why consumers get into relationships (see Smith and Higgins, 2000).

According to S&P, relationships over time construe brand, product, or service patronage, and unless consumers are motivated to reduce their choice set, they will not be inclined to manifest brand, store or product/service loyalty. S&P further declare that it is important for a theory on relationships in consumer markets to take the perspective of consumers, “The fundamental axiom of relationship marketing is, or should be, that consumers like to reduce choices by engaging in an ongoing loyalty relationship with marketers” (p.256). Appraising S&P’s work, Bagozzi (1995, pp.272-3) succinctly paraphrases their contention thus:

...The authors advocate that the parties to the relationship should purposefully reduce choices and cultivate long-term relationships because they will improve effectiveness and efficiency of the parties in the relationship... S&P seem to be saying also that any theory of relationship marketing must integrate the psychological side of behavior with the sociological (or, more broadly, with the social). The consumer is both (a) pushed by a need to simplify and make sense of his/her consumption situation, avoid risk, and reduce psychological tension and cognitive dissonance, and (b) pulled by goals with global and local consequences for satisfaction. These motivational and purposive aspects of consumer behavior are inextricably embedded, S&P maintain, in a social context that contains well-defined inhibitors and facilitators, augmenting individual action.
Bagozzi (1995) acknowledges S&P’s effort as a tour de force in RM in that it lays an intellectual foundation for relationship ideas in consumer markets. He also notes that S&P’s article makes several vital connections to ideas from basic research in psychology and sociology. But he is equally quick to point out that choice reduction is often a byproduct, and an unintended one at that, of a relationship. He adds that consumers may often form relationships as a means for fulfilling or facilitating the fulfillment of a goal, and not for choice reduction per se.

The competing explanations could not be more divergent. On the one hand S&P state that consumers get into relationships because they like to reduce their choice set, on the other Bagozzi (1995) conjectures that reduction in a consumer’s choice set could be a fait accompli of his or her decision to get into a relationship. According to both viewpoints however, there is an implicit acknowledgement that any theory of RM should attempt to analyse why individual consumers get into relationships with businesses. S&P and Bagozzi seem to believe that resolution of this research question is a central issue. Prima facie, this belief appears reasonable but as we argue shortly, there may be a case for scholars to consider rephrasing the central research question. In order to put our argument in perspective, it is imperative that we first examine the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of the competing viewpoints.

3. Examining Ontological and Epistemological Assumptions: An Illustration

Scholars from most vantage points seem to agree that while one may not be able to directly observe a relationship; its manifestations (e.g., repeat purchases or positive word-of-mouth communication) are readily observed. Further, most marketers, including S&P and Bagozzi, would concur that individual consumers who are in relationships with businesses would continue to remain in one irrespective of whether observers (interested or uninterested) are conscious of the relationships’ existence or not. Thus there is some convergence of opinion between the ontological stances of the competing viewpoints – both viewpoints are essentially “objectivist” in nature. To an objectivist, meaning, and therefore, meaningful reality exists independently of consciousness. A tree in a forest is a tree, regardless of whether anyone is aware of its existence or not. As an object of that kind (“objectively,” therefore), it carries the intrinsic meaning of “tree-ness.” When human beings recognise it as a tree, they are simply discovering a meaning that has been lying there in wait for them all along (Crotty, 1998).

While S&P and Bagozzi appear to agree on the nature of reality (i.e. the ontology) of relationships, they do not do so with regard to their epistemological positions. A post-positivist stance seems to be implicit in S&P’s approach. They have, perhaps unintentionally, taken an instrumentalist position. Instrumentalism incorporates and admits to the value of incorporating unobservables in scientific theories. But this value is merely akin to that of “useful fiction” – while the unobservables may facilitate our understanding of the observed world, they continue to remain fictitious (Chalmers, 1998, p.148). To an instrumentalist, the main use of a theory is to assist in making predictions, and in making the transition from one set of data to the other (Penguin’s Dictionary of Philosophy, 1997). Instrumentalism in effect asserts that the ultimate truth or falsity of a scientific theory is irrelevant; only the ability of a theory to explain empirical reality is of value (Nagel, 1979). To amplify with the help of an example – iron filings are a reality, as is the observation that filings get attracted to a horseshoe shaped piece of steel, but the concept or theory of “magnetic field” is not reality. As long as magnetic field theory can explain observable reality, the theory is acceptable. The real reason for attraction of filings may be something very different, but an instrumentalist does not care about the real reason. In similar vein, it is implicit in S&P’s theory that they do not care whether consumers in reality want to reduce their choice set, if this contention of theirs is taken as axiomatic, then observable reality as it exists between consumers and businesses can be explained.

It must have been noticed that instrumentalists make a clear distinction between “observation” and “theory”. But such a distinction seldom exists. Objects like iron filings or steel – observed realities to instrumentalists – are themselves theory-dependent. How would one, for example “prove” that one was really observing “iron filings” and nothing else? One could perhaps take recourse to the theoretical concept of metals and their place in the periodic table. To further demonstrate the ferrous nature of metal in question, one could show how reaction with oxygen causes the filings to rust. Notice that each step of the “proof” is an appeal not only to further observations but also to theoretical concepts. Godfrey and Hill (1995) argue that strictly speaking, a true instrumentalist would have to reject all observations based on electron microscope as the device uses “electron theory” to observe reality. Thus the notion that observation and theory are separable does not appear to be tenable.
On close examination, S&P’s fundamental axiom that consumers like to reduce choices by engaging in an ongoing loyalty relationship with marketers runs into trouble on philosophical grounds. Their axiom is derived from a theoretical notion that it is rational for consumers to reduce their choice. Harper Collins Dictionary (1992; emphasis added) defines an axiom as “a fundamental statement that cannot be deduced from other statements.” What complicates the issue further is that S&P appear to be deriving the axiom from the same theory in support of which they intend to use the axiom. One can insist that the very act of reducing choice or foregoing options is tantamount to getting into a relationship. S&P seem to have entangled themselves in a “chicken-and-egg” argument. This we believe makes their axiom flawed. We now turn our attention to the epistemology implicit in Bagozzi’s (1995) proposition.

Bagozzi’s (1995) observations that reduction of choice is often a byproduct of consumers’ decision to get into a relationship, and that consumers often get into relationships because relationships can help them achieve their goal of acquiring a product or using a service, appear to broadly embrace realism. To quote Godfrey and Hill (1995, p.525), “The hallmark of realism, as we shortly discuss, is nugatory in the context of relationships in the consumer domain. This premise of realism, as we shortly discuss, is nugatory in the context of relationships in the consumer domain.

4. Social Construction of Reality

Scientific realism may be described as a middle ground position between “direct realism” and “constructivism” (Hunt, 1990). Direct realism maintains that our perceptual processes always produce truthful representations of external objects, resulting in accurate knowledge about them (Hooker, 1985). Thus direct realism as an epistemology is consistent with the ontology of objectivism. Constructivism on the other extreme rejects the objectivist view of human knowledge and holds that there is no objective truth waiting for us to discover. Like objectivists, constructivists hold that shoppers have always existed and will continue to have exchanges with retailers whether one observed them or not; where they part company with objectivists is when they insist that these exchanges “become” relationships only when someone describes them as such and ascribes relational properties to them. Until this is done, it is immaterial whether “relationships” existed previously or not. Relationships surely did not exist in any “meaningful” way. How can something exist prior to its conception?

To constructivists then, the world we experience, prior to our experience of it, is meaningless. Meaning is never inherent in objects – it emerges only when a conscious mind engages objects. To reiterate, a tree may have been whatever, but it came to be called a tree and had “tree-ness” ascribed to it only when humans discovered and chose to engage it. Meaning therefore is constructed; however, constructivists are quick to point out that meaning cannot be created. According to them, we do not impose our own arbitrary meanings on our surroundings – that would amount to creating meaning (Crotty, 1998). Instead, we construct meaning through the interplay of
our imagination and creativity (i.e. subjective faculties) with animate and inanimate things (i.e. objects). During the interplay, we do not trivialise objects; if anything, we treat them very seriously. Meaning therefore comprises of subjective and objective elements that cannot be teased apart; the elements are “indissolubly bound up with each other” (Crotty, 1998; p.48).

In the world of constructivists, meaning is not only at once objective and subjective but it is also at once realist and relativist. Some scholars however insist that one cannot be a realist while being a relativist. These, to them, are mutually exclusive positions (see Hunt, 1990). But Crotty (1998) disagrees; he argues that constructionism is as realist in its orientation as it is relativist. To underline the realism of social constructions, he cites an example used by the philosopher, Stanley Fish. In an article in New York Times (21 May 1996), Fish writes that “balls” and “strikes” are social constructs. They exist as rules of baseball written by society. But who can argue they are not real? Players are paid millions of dollars to produce them or prevent their production. Some people remain unconvinced. They argue that only social reality – and not physical or natural reality – can be socially constructed. This argument merits further scrutiny.

The argument of those skeptical about the realism of constructionism (or constructivism) implies that since the concept of sport is an abstract one created for social interaction, it is acceptable for constructivists to claim that the concept of baseball as a game has been socially constructed. It is however, not acceptable for constructivists to claim that the concept of a natural object such as a “tree” has been socially constructed. But Crotty (1998) clarifies that the “social” in front of social constructionism or constructionism is about mode of meaning generation and not about the kind of object that has meaning. Those who reject the realism of constructionism should realise that the tree is as real to constructivists as it is to objectivists – it is not as if tree to the former is a figment of their imagination. The point of departure between constructivists and objectivists does not pertain to reality per se; it pertains to when things become real. We have briefly discussed why constructivists insist that there is realism in their world. What about the contention that their world also contains relativism? We now turn our attention to this issue.

Relativism of constructivism recognises that different people may inhabit different worlds and that their respective worlds may contain different ways of knowing, distinct sets of meanings, and separate realities. To an adult born and brought up in an artists’ colony, a tree may be a focal point of aesthetic pleasure, but to another individual born and brought up in an animist community, a tree may be a source of deep reverence, even fear. Relativism in effect, introduces the second major point of departure between constructivists and objectivists. Unlike objectivists, constructivists, owing to their relativistic orientation are willing to accommodate multiple realities. While on this subject, we must note that relativism of constructionism is not to be confused with subjectivism. Unfortunately, it often is. Subjectivism gives one the mandate to conjure up reality out of nothing; constructionism is more conservative, its reality is firmly rooted in objects that “really” exist. Recollect that meaning to a constructivist is subjective and objective at the same time. Those who espouse scientific realism will do well to make room for relativism in their study of relationships in consumer markets. Researchers are likely to discover that approximate truth of RM in consumer markets contains multiple truths. Relationships often mean different things to different people. Marketers need to understand the values each participant brings to an exchange and start treating consumers as “socially embedded” individuals (Smith and Higgins, 2000, p. 92).

RM lends itself to being studied by a constructivist viewpoint. Humans are needed to not only observe and give meaning to the concept of relationships but also to engage in relationships. Zinkhan and Hirscheim (1992) point out that it may be questionable to focus on truth in a domain where truth is socially constructed. Because human beings cannot transcend their language and culture, they cannot obtain any absolute viewpoint. In the current context, a search for an objective all encompassing truth may prove futile. In all probability, such a truth does not exist. We feel that the central research question in this area should be rephrased if scholars are to successfully unravel the nature of socially constructed truth or reality that exists in consumer markets.

5. Rephrasing the Central Research Question
In our opinion, extant literature on relationships in consumer markets suffers from two shortcomings. Firstly, it uncritically imports findings and constructs from business-to-business markets. Secondly, its emphasis on understanding why people get into relationships appears to be misplaced. An analysis of these shortcomings may partly explain the elusiveness of RM theory in consumer markets. O’Malley and Tynan
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(2000) observe that constructs like trust, mutuality, cooperation, and commitment from social exchange theory are readily applied by marketers in the context of consumer markets despite a dearth of conceptual and empirical justification. The assumption is that business-to-consumer relationships are similar to business-to-business relationships, which in turn are similar to interpersonal relationships. O’Malley and Tynan (2000) draw attention to the stark contextual and structural differences between consumer and business domains and urge marketers to challenge this assumption.

Undeniably, a general theory of RM valid across domains would be useful; perhaps it is the allure of such a theory that tempts scholars to import variables from the business domain with impunity. We agree with Möller and Halinen (2000) who sate that by increasing the level of abstraction one could attempt to create a general theory of RM, but that would mean losing much of the valuable knowledge content that is idiosyncratic to the two domains. Differences between the two domains range across, but are not limited to, issues such as switching-costs, availability of alternatives, relative economic value, type and frequency of interactions, level of interdependency, underlying motives, relative size and legal protection, and the overall importance buyers and sellers attach to relationships (cf. Gruen, 1995; Möller and Halinen, 2000). Additionally, we believe that while it may be fruitful to focus on why businesses forge relationships in business-to-business settings, it may not be as important to understand why consumers get into relationships with businesses.

The starting premise of RM in consumer markets should be that most consumers are in, or would like to be in, relationships. There is overwhelming evidence from diverse disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and psychology to indicate that human beings are social animals (Homans, 1958; Thibault and Kelley, 1959). As such, consumers, being humans are genetically predisposed to forming relationships. They do it instinctively, even if taking such a step is sometimes tantamount to irrational behaviour. The point is that scholars should accept it as axiomatic that relationships exist in consumer markets. Gummesson’s (1999, p.73) observation that relationships have always been “omni present” in the past and will continue to exist in the future, seems to echo similar thoughts. The author states that society, as indeed life itself, is a network of relationships and laments that marketers were slow to acknowledge this fact – had they acknowledged it earlier, RM would have made much greater headway than it has.

Although Bagozzi (1995) states that a marketing relationship may be an end in and of itself to certain consumers, he too expresses the need to explain the motives of customers for getting into a relationship. Instead of focusing on why consumers get into relationships, marketers should ask, “How do customers get into relationships with marketing entities?” This will bring into sharp relief the processes that come into play as relationships are formed. As Richard Bagozzi discusses in his personal correspondence with the second author, such a line of inquiry may also help us learn about how relationships should be forged. The “should” as Bagozzi amplifies in his letter, refers to the normative, ethical and moral criteria that people bring to bear when they decide to do something. It is our belief that answers to the revised research question will yield insights that could bring marketers closer to the elusive theory of RM in consumer markets.

To suggest a new theory is beyond the scope of this paper. However, since we are making a case for rephrasing the central research question, we feel it is incumbent upon us to offer some suggestions as to how might one develop an alternative line of inquiry in the area. One possible source that could inform RM theory development efforts is Oliver’s (1997) theory on consumer loyalty. According to Oliver, consumers are satisfied when they sense that consumption has fulfilled a need or desire and when they acknowledge that the fulfillment was pleasurable. After a series of discrete pleasurable (and satisfying) transactions, a consumer crosses what maybe called the “loyalty threshold.” Oliver defines satisfaction as pleasurable fulfillment. This reasoning is consistent with one of the viewpoints on satisfaction-loyalty literature, which considers satisfaction to be the beginning of the transitioning sequence that culminates in a separate loyalty state (also see Oliver, 1999).

Welcoming the recent trend of conceptualising loyalty primarily as a sociopsychological rather than a behavioural phenomenon, Saren and Tzokas (1998) advise marketers to cease artificially distinguishing between transactions and relationships, and instead start viewing every discrete transaction as a relationship opportunity. This is precisely the position we wish to take. Our suggestion is that only once a consumer reaches the loyalty state as envisaged in Oliver’s (1997) theory, should a business claim to have forged a
relationship with him or her. Such a conceptualisation of relationship shifts the onus on businesses to remain “loyal” to customers once relationships have been formed. Thus firms must continue to fulfill the promises that they make to customers (cf. Grönroos, 1990) during the initial “courtship” phase, failing which the loyalty process could reverse. The cumulative effect of discrete painful transactions and unfulfilled promises could potentially lead to termination of relationships.

It seems that loyalty literature has implications for RM in consumer markets that have not been adequately appreciated by marketers. Be the case as it may, one thing is abundantly clear, due to the unfortunate tendency on part of researchers to bring with them the heavy baggage of business-to-business markets, whatever little emphasis there is on consumer markets, is centered on constructs from social exchange theory, a theory that is of questionable relevance in consumer domain (O’Malley and Tynan, 2000). Even if scholars disagree with the central research question being suggested by us, they should analyse the implications of loyalty literature on relationships in consumer markets in greater detail than they have done hitherto.

To recapitulate, we have thus far argued that some of the ontological and epistemological assumptions about relationships in consumer markets found in the literature are questionable. We have also suggested that a constructivist stance might be compatible with a reality that is socially constructed. Given this perception of reality, we have stated that it might be more fruitful to discover how reality is constructed than it would be to focus on why reality is what it is. In the section that follows, we recommend adoption of a phenomenological approach to answer research questions about reality. As we discuss below, such an approach would be entirely consistent with the ontology of our position.

6. Advocating a Phenomenological Approach

The ontological assumption behind the epistemology of post-positivism and scientific realism is that reality is objective; the implication being that those who subscribe to these epistemological positions believe that reality can be “objectively” measured. This inevitably leads them to favour quantitative analyses. Constructivists, having reconciled to duality of meaning (the reference here is to indissolubility of objectivity and subjectivity in their world) are perhaps more comfortable with a reality that cannot be quantitatively measured. We hasten to add that this is not an attempt on our part to re-ignite the qualitative versus quantitative research debate. By no means does adoption of constructivist ontology make it incumbent upon a researcher to analyse data qualitatively. In this instance however, since the central research question asks marketers to discover processes through which relationships develop, there is sound reason to favour a qualitative approach.

Since relationships develop, they have a temporal dimension. The best that a quantitative approach can provide is a “pre” and “post” test measure to understand developments. But as Patton (1990) notes, pre and post-tests do not do justice to a dynamic development process. Such tests assume linearity in the process; in reality however any development, including that of relationships, occurs in fits and starts, some upward or forward movement may take place, and then there may be backsliding and consolidation. Under such circumstances, qualitative research can perhaps provide insights that quantitative research cannot. While there is obvious merit in exploring research questions from different perspectives, the efficacy of the adopted methodologies is often contingent upon the research puzzle. Clearly, the mandate of the central research question is to discover the relational phenomenon in depth. And a discovery-oriented project dictates the use of phenomenological interviewing (Thompson, Locander and Polio, 1989). A phenomenological approach falls under the overarching research tradition of interpretivism and is compatible with any school of thought that subscribes to socially constructed reality.

The basic philosophical assumption of phenomenology is that we can only know what we experience. While initially our experience may come from the sensory experience of a phenomenon, that experience must be later described, explicated, and interpreted (Husserl, 1962). According to Husserl, descriptions of experience and interpretations are so intertwined that they often become one: interpretation is essential to an understanding of an experience and the experience includes the interpretation. According to phenomenologists then, it is imperative that a researcher understand what people experience and how they interpret their world. They state that the only way a researcher can really know this is by experiencing the phenomenon in question herself or himself. Some scholars may object to the use of phenomenological inquiry in this instance by pointing out that it is impossible for a researcher to actually “experience” a relationship that a consumer might have experienced.
with a particular business. In response, we can do no better than quote Patton (1990, p. 70) who states (emphasis in original):

A phenomenological perspective can mean either or both (1) a focus on what people experience and how they interpret the world (in which case one can use interviews without actually experiencing the phenomenon oneself) or (2) a methodological mandate to actually experience the phenomenon being investigated (in which case participant observation would be necessary).

Phenomenological interviewing in the current context can help us understand how individual consumers perceive various offerings and overtures of sellers (see Pels, Coviello, and Brodie, 2000) and develop their own view about businesses. Researchers may for example, discover individual level differences in propensities to engage in relational behaviour. What strikes as “intimacy” to businesses may be construed as “intrusion” by some consumers (Smith and Higgins, 2000; p.84). As relationship formation processes come under the spotlight, a number of corollary questions may get generated: When do consumers become more amenable to forming relationships? What can be done to cajole those who are reticent about getting into relationships? What are the situational factors that undermine relationships? How do consumers react when they feel cheated? How is relationship terminated by either party? The last question is particularly important. One of the weaknesses in the literature appears to be the reluctance to acknowledge that relationships can be unpleasant and one-sided. Smith and Higgins (2000) attribute this reluctance to naïve humanism. They observe that the ideals of trust and mutuality are rarely achieved, yet relationships prevail – often in the face of individual selfishness, superficiality and self-indulgence. The point is that a researcher cannot hope to elicit high levels of self-disclosure needed to understand relationships without establishing personal rapport with respondents.

Though we have suggested that marketers look at loyalty literature as one possible source of explaining the relationship phenomenon in consumer domain, we note that the task of theory building would be better served if researchers were to undertake interviews with no a priori considerations. No mean task this, but for those researchers who do transcend – or temporarily suspend – their own worldview, the potential rewards can be attractive. Spielberg (1982, p.680) describes phenomenology as “a determined effort to undo the effect of habitual patterns of thought and to return to the pristine innocence of first seeing.” It is surprising that scholars who have chosen to study relationships in the consumer domain have been less than enthusiastic in embracing a phenomenological approach. Valuable exceptions do exist (cf. Bagozzi and Dabholkar, 2001; Buttle, 1994; Fournier, 1998; Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989; also see Deighton and Kent, 1995) but these continue to be just those – exceptions.

7. Conclusion

We have argued that it should be taken as axiomatic that humans are predisposed to getting into relationships. Failure to do so may lead researchers to look for some non-existent all-encompassing objective truth that does not exist. To make our case, we scrutinised S&P’s paper which is generally recognised as one of the seminal works in the area. We discussed that predilection with realism that adheres to a single reality – a reality that can be objectively measured – and instrumentalism that is based on a suspect axiom has the potential to hinder theory development in the current context. While we did not attempt to develop a new theory, we made a case for rephrasing the central research question so as to tap into a reality that is socially constructed. Thus, we suggested that it may be worthwhile to explore how consumers “construct” their own reality (i.e. how do consumers get into relationships). Given the rephrased question, adoption of a phenomenological approach was advocated.

As Czepiel (1990) observes, all exchanges involve a relationship. One might add that all relationships necessarily have at least two sides. We are perhaps guilty of having focused solely on the perspective of the consumers. As one of the reviewers of this article pointed out, “in relationship marketing consumer behaviour and organisational behaviour are enjoined dialectically as a base for sound enquiry.” The central line of inquiry proposed by us can, and should, no doubt be pursued from both perspectives. Our failure to expound the organisational perspective should not be attributed to the ontology or epistemology of our position. A constructivist stance may preclude one from taking an organisational perspective, but the same cannot be said of a constructionist stance. We point out that the latter can accommodate collective generation of meaning as shaped by an organisation’s social processes, culture, and norms (Crotty, 1998).

It would be remiss of us if we were to advocate social constructionism and constructivism at the expense of other positions. Indeed, reliance on a single paradigm
has the potential to impose serious limitations for any marketing phenomenon (cf. Fournier and Yao, 1997; Mick and Buhl, 1992). We do not hold that findings from a constructivist approach would be incommensurable with other approaches. In fact, we agree with Doppelt (1978) who observes that rival scientific paradigms need not be insular, self-enclosed, and imprisoned within their own language. Since rival paradigms speak to the same empirical situation, they must share some common concepts, data, and problems. Once a theory has been built, it might help to test it within the framework of post-positivism or scientific realism, but to commence building theory we exhort the concerned scholarship to become more open to other ontological and epistemological positions.

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