

MULTIDISCIPLINARITY IN THEORY BUILDING: POSSIBILITIES OF COMBINING

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Abstract:

The article aims to strengthen theoretical development that will hopefully result in more systematic combinations and combined use of present approaches, such as frameworks, models and theories. At the same time this would increase multiple disciplinarity in future research. The objectives of this article are to describe why, when and how to develop theoretically new, combined approaches and illustrate them theoretically and empirically with the help of the former studies. Combining is examined in the connection of multiple disciplinarity. Business administration, especially marketing is used as a theoretical and empirical example area. Methodology is inductive and deductive logic and in the empirical examples surveys, case analysis and secondary data are utilized. This article introduces an insufficiently used but rather promising way, in the long run, to develop new, comprehensive and multiple disciplinary approaches and even paradigms for different disciplines. Consequently, the ultimate message of the article is to stimulate the researchers to put the idea and rationale for combining to the test in their own research field and to build new, combined and comprehensive approaches if possible in the field. This message is a multiple disciplinary one, embracing for example economics, social sciences and political sciences in addition to business administration.

Key Words: Multiple disciplinarity, combining, theory building, paradigms, practice

Background

The status of different theories is continuously debated as discipline and in practice. There really are some key questions. Have scholars too much specialized in narrow perspectives and thus failed to look at the bigger picture in theory and in practice? Can theory describe the real world?

Many researchers have also debated about paradigms, generally and in detail. For example, in organization studies this debate has seriously dealt with the different arguments that can be advanced for and against the idea of one single paradigm (Burrell 1966, Deetz 1996 and Pfeffer 1993).

The article aims to activate theoretical development work that will gradually result in more systematic combinations and combined use of present approaches, for instance such as frameworks, models and theories. This would naturally increase multiple disciplinarity in future research. The objectives of this article concerning combining aim at contributing to theory building in three major ways:

First, the article describes the idea and rationale of combining theoretically. This means that it describes why, when and how to develop new, combined approaches.

Second, the article utilizes the former business administration studies which illustrate the idea and rationale for combining, build some new approaches by combining present major approaches and examine them empirically. Marketing studies in particular are used as illustrative examples because combining has been studied in that area (see Lehtinen 2011a and b) and we can utilize the results of these studies here. But some studies in other areas of business administration are also referred.

Third, the article stimulates and even challenges the researchers of other disciplines, sub-disciplines and branches of sub-disciplines to put the idea and rationale for combining to the test in their own research fields and to build new, combined approaches if possible. New combined approaches could be also a potential basis for new comprehensive paradigms for many parts of different disciplines or, at best, whole disciplines.

As an additional second-level aim these three objectives concerning combining are examined in the connection of a multiple disciplinarity. Different issues dealing with the relationships of combining and multiple disciplinarity are mainly dealt with.

It may be expedient to start a discussion about the key concepts. Here combining means putting some originally separate parts together. In this article those parts are different scientific approaches. Combining is an act or a procedure that leads to a combination. Combining is more or less synonymous with uniting, joining, connecting, linking and integrating.

Here “discipline” refers to a particular body of knowledge, wisdom or learning, such as physics, biology, psychology, economics or business administration. Usually this knowledge is associated with one academic field of study or profession. The distinguishing lines between disciplines are often arbitrary and ambiguous.

Thus I use the term “discipline” when discussing some main area of science e.g. business administration. I use “sub-discipline” when referring to a part of a discipline e.g. marketing and I use “branch of sub-discipline” when speaking about a theory, model or framework of a sub-discipline e.g. marketing mix or relationship marketing.

The general term “multiple disciplinarity” is used to mean “multidisciplinarity”, “interdisciplinarity” and “transdisciplinarity”, when the level and nature of involvement of multiple disciplines is unspecified (cf. Choi and Pak 2006). Consequently, multiple disciplinarity is the cover concept for multidisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity.

Multidisciplinarity is associated with more than one existing (academic) discipline. It draws on knowledge from different disciplines but stays within their boundaries. Interdisciplinarity is the knowledge extensions that exist between or beyond existing academic disciplines or professions. It analyses and synthesizes links between disciplines into coordinated and harmonized whole. Transdisciplinarity is more holistic and tries to relate all disciplines into a coherent whole. It transcends the disciplinary boundaries to examine the dynamics of whole system in a holistic fashion. This represents an interdisciplinary meta-theoretical perspective like structuralism. And as it was said earlier multiple disciplinarity is the cover concept for multidisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity. (cf. Choi and Pak 2006, Besselaar and Heimeriks 2001)

All concepts concerning multiple disciplinarity are closely connected and sometimes used variably. Therefore, e.g. multidisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity are sometimes used as synonyms.

Methodology in the theoretical part of the article is both inductive and deductive logic. In the examples i.e. the marketing studies methodology also includes surveys, case analysis and utilization of secondary data, but the main interest here is in the results of these studies from the viewpoint of combining approaches and multiple disciplinarity.

Combining can also challenge some areas of present thinking in those parts of disciplines that are in the process of combining. It demands answers to many basic questions concerning particularly the approaches that are to be combined.

Idea And Rationale For Combining

Possibilities of combining in theory building have attracted little direct attention in research. In several research areas there are no explicit combining studies. Yet, there are many general reasons to explore the combinatory possibilities of two or more present approaches:

- when there is a need to create a new, comprehensive approach (theory). (For example, the business environment has become more comprehensive and complicated, and, therefore, researchers and managers need more comprehensive approaches.)
- where is a need or purpose to build some kind of general approach, which can cover two or more current approaches.
- when current approaches are not mutually exclusive.
- where current approaches have their own distinct strengths thus complementing one another.
- where current approaches have their own distinct weaknesses and the weaknesses of one approach can be at least partly offset by the strengths of the other and at best vice versa.
- if combining present approaches is a useful way to fill gaps between different theories, within specific theories, between theory and practice etc.

- if the generally accepted approaches can be so pertinently combined that the result is an acceptable combination.
- when present approaches are well-known, which makes adoption easier.

Rather often combining is a tempting and suitable possibility to proceed with if there is both rationalistic and behavioral or positive and normative research in some research area. This kind of combinatory situation is usually more or less interdisciplinary.

These reasons are quite frequently valid. At least they are often valid in many parallel branches of sub-disciplines.

For the same reasons, the new approach (theory), which consciously, systematically and equitably combines the essential and compatible elements of current approaches, should be more reliable, fruitful and profitable than any of the previous and separate approaches. Perhaps the main rationale for combining approaches is the possibility of offsetting weaknesses with strengths.

Especially in practice, but also in theory, many approaches within several disciplines have never been fully separated. For example, in marketing the sub-parameters of communication of mix approach, particularly PR and selling, are strongly related to relationship marketing approach. Therefore, a company using one approach inevitably integrates elements of the other approach(es) at least to some extent.

In principal, combining can be performed at all disciplinary levels. But making use of advanced combining will be most common and natural at the level of branches of sub-disciplines as in the marketing examples below, where marketing mix and relationship marketing approaches are combined. At the higher levels i.e. disciplines and sub-disciplines combining will often remain in the parallel use of approaches though the common use of different kinds of compatible knowhow is a generally approved goal.

Naturally there are different ways to combine approaches. Already the parallel use of different approaches can be considered a simple form of combining. The parallel utilization of approaches, often without any purposeful combining, seems to be quite common. It can also be an important phase toward more sophisticated forms of combining.

On the other hand, conscious combining can be very systematic and supported by careful analysis. Consequently, the forms of combining may vary from the independent parallel use of various approaches to the conscious and systematic combining. There are many variations between these extremes. In any case, a scrutinized combining should be based on interrogating the ontological and epistemological premises of approaches in order to see whether or not they can sit well together in one combined approach.

The way of combining may also depend on the characteristics of the case in question. Thus combining can be performed with different degrees of thoroughness. This thoroughness depends on how easy it is to find and combine different but compatible elements of the approaches.

Combining may be performed within one discipline or as an interdisciplinary combining across the boundaries of different disciplines. For example, marketing and organizational research have largely borrowed concepts and theories from neighboring disciplines such as psychology and sociology. Actually, marketing as well as management and organization can be considered multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary areas of inquiry. For example, Oswick, Fleming and Hanlon (2011) listed fourteen remarkable contributions of organization and management theory and only one of the proponents of these contributions was primarily a researcher of business administration. On the other hand, many socio-psychological, mathematically formulated models have been utilized in consumer behavior research which is quite independent as a research area within marketing research. These kinds of borrowings have been very fruitful and they can sometimes be rather useful when trying to find proper combinations.

As it was stated in several disciplines there are both rational and behavioral branches of sub-disciplines. These branches are based on the different visions of research and are thus complementary. Therefore, it is natural and almost obligatory to ask if these could be combined at least to some extent. Often combining is possible and useful and often the result is also interdisciplinary. The following marketing studies may be considered the good examples of this kind of combining.

Naturally the total combining of present approaches is not the only way to proceed. Present approaches can be utilized only partially when combining. On the other hand, elements that are not in any present approach may be included in a new approach.

Some researchers have dealt with concepts that are related to combining. For example, borrowing and blending are related to combining and can be utilized also in connection with combining (see for example Oswick & Fleming & Hanlon 2011 and Whetten & Felin & King 2009). But this utilization presupposes the careful consideration of the nature of these concepts and the characteristics of theory formation in question (Corley & Gioia 2011).

Examples: Marketing Studies Combining Mix And Relationship Approaches

Some examples of combining marketing approaches (called here the marketing studies) are now discussed and used as an illustration of combining. Even in marketing the idea of combining approaches has attracted very little attention though there are some studies that fairly superficially touch on the possibility of combination (see for example Kotler 1992, Gummesson 1995 as well as Pels, Coviello, and Brodie 2000).

In the marketing studies marketing mix and relationship marketing approaches are combined. These approaches are at the center of theoretical and practical marketing (see Grönroos 2007, Gummesson 2008 and Kotler 2006). They really are the major marketing approaches. Marketing mix approach is quite rationalistic and normative whereas the relationship marketing approach is based on a quite behavioral and positive vision. Therefore, their combination has a multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary scientific background.

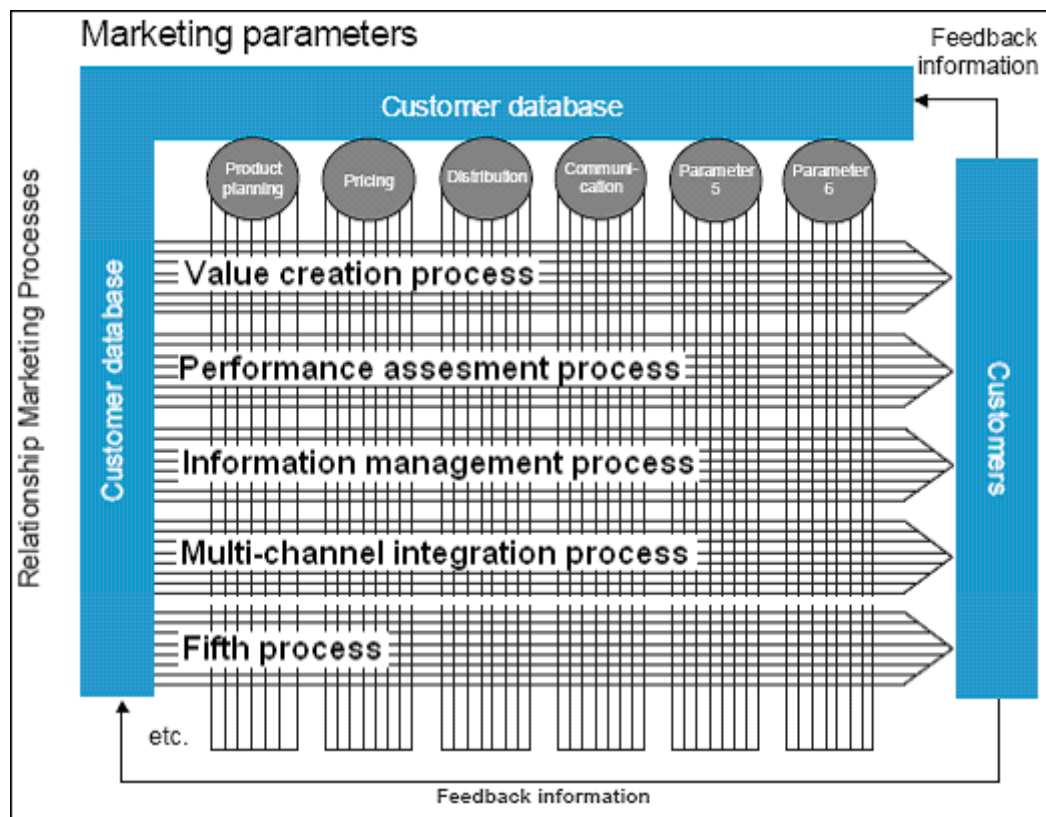
The idea and rationale for combining marketing approaches was scrutinized by Lehtinen (2007, 2009). The main objective of the marketing studies was to outline theoretically new tentative and conceptual approaches by combining the marketing mix and relationship marketing approaches and studying them empirically.

Some new combined approaches were developed according to the objectives of the marketing studies (Lehtinen 2011a and b). They serve as an opportunity to utilize both major approaches. Some weaknesses of one approach can be offset by the strengths of the other. The well-combined approaches probably offer a more comprehensive view of marketing compared to being considered separately or parallel.

When we speak about mix marketing approach and relationship marketing approach, we must recognize, that both approaches actually are offshoots of several different sub-approaches. Therefore, the fact is that we speak about the combining of one of the mix marketing approaches and one of the relationship marketing approaches. In other words, we can speak about the combining of a sub-approach of a branch of one sub-discipline and a sub-approach of a branch of another sub-discipline. These sub-approaches are based on the different scientific origins and in this sense the examination is interdisciplinary (see Choi and Pak 2006).

It is possible in theory and especially in practice to combine relationship marketing elements straight into the marketing mix elements (Lehtinen and Niittymäki 2006). In this way, we can take relational effects directly into account when formulating the use of the parameters of the mix in question. For example, if values of relationship marketing are taken into account in the pricing of marketing mix, the consideration of customers and the negotiating power and negotiating limits of the sales force are increased in price setting.

A fairly advanced combination framework is illustrated in Figure 1. It can be called the “RELMIX framework” (RELations-MIX framework).

Figure 1**RELMIX framework for combining marketing parameters and relational processes**

The framework is a matrix with the essential elements (parameters) of mix marketing on the horizontal level (on the x-axis) and the essential elements (processes) of relationship marketing on the vertical level (on the y-axis). The combining of elements happens at the intersections of parameters and processes (marked with vertical and horizontal lines). In principal, the number of intersections is the number of parameters multiplied by the number of processes used in combining. But in practice some intersections (or elements) can be left outside the combination work and thus they remain at the “zero level”.

We can regard the parameter and process areas outside these intersections (marked only with vertical or horizontal lines) as the areas where the elements can be developed independently. The markings “Fifth process” etc. in the figure illustrate the possible advancement of some new processes onto the basic process level. A corresponding practice concerns the parameters of mix, which is described by “Parameter 5” etc.

As to the disciplinary character, the RELMIX framework (see Lehtinen 2011b) as all advanced combinatory approaches can be considered interdisciplinary. In principal, the most advanced combinatory approaches can be transdisciplinary at least if the coherently combined approaches are scientifically quite far from one another. On the other hand, the parallel use of different approaches can be considered multidisciplinary but not interdisciplinary. Actually, the degree of multiple disciplinarity depends on the scientific difference of the combined approaches.

Lehtinen (2011b) has made four empirical studies (three surveys and one case study) and utilized three secondary studies. The quality of the empirical parts of the studies was maintained throughout the research work. Because the main results were almost identical in all three surveys, in the three secondary data as well as in the case study, all the results seemed to be quite valid and trustworthy. Taken together the empirical evidence was fairly clear for the purposes of this kind of preliminary empiricism.

The empirical results based on all seven marketing studies proved that there are clear gaps between marketing practice (manifested by empirical results) and current theories (manifested by the separate approaches of mix marketing and relationship marketing). At the same time, the results of these studies also confirm that there are a lot of parallel uses of both approaches; a significant use of approaches combined to some extent; and a strong need to explore how to combine approaches better, as well as a strong need to combine the marketing approaches more than before. Thus many companies have already utilized combinations of approaches at least in a modest form and the most companies really wanted to find a proper way to combine and would strive for more combinatory use of the approaches.

The findings of the marketing studies can be used in marketing management practice at least in a modified form. Applications naturally require plenty of time and attention from any company that wants to consider utilizing these new opportunities. Actually, no company can totally avoid the use of both major marketing approaches for the sake of the clear interdependencies of the approaches, but implementation will differ by company based on background factors such as the financial and competitive situation, the industry and the marketing competence of the people involved (Lehtinen 2011b).

One new practical solution in developing marketing is the addition of company-specific parameters or processes into combining processes (Lehtinen and Niinimäki 2006). These parameters and processes often strengthen customer relationships and solve some of the challenges concerning relationship marketing. Company-specific elements (we could also call them original or unique elements) can be based on unique features of the company or its personnel, the company's business models etc.

In real life, companies need a broad knowledge of different approaches of marketing and an ability to use them in an integrated manner (Möller and Halinen 2000, Lehtinen 2011). The ideas produced in the marketing studies can be used in companies' marketing decision making. The success of this utilization will reveal the practical value of combining these approaches.

The findings of the marketing studies clearly favor the continuation of scientific discussion and work on combining approaches. Especially the comments of managers in the discussions conducted after they had completed the questionnaire were both challenging and encouraging in this respect.

There is one additional possibility of theoretical development which could be called the total development procedure or strategy. This is realized if we try first to develop at least one (or at best all) approaches (theories) that we want to combine and then we combine these developed approaches. Quite probably, some part of the forthcoming scientific development in marketing will happen this way because especially relationship marketing is still a developing research area. At the very least the different numbers of parameters of mix should be tested when combining. In marketing the possibility of development concerns also the marketing mix approach (Lehtinen 2009, Lehtinen and Mäkinen 2012). Actually, many different disciplines are frequently developed in this manner though different anomalies and extended development time can obscure the procedure. Additionally the transformations of original approaches for combination can make the picture unclear (see also Lehtinen 2008a and 2008b).

Concluding Remarks

We can now return to the first key question presented in the beginning of this paper: Have scholars too much specialized their studies and narrowed their perspectives, resulting in a failure to look at the bigger picture in theory and practice? The results of the examples i.e. the marketing studies presented before suggest an affirmative answer to this question. But this article does not try to argue for a narrowing of perspectives. On the contrary, it seeks to broaden them.

There are gaps between practice and current theories according to the empirical results based on all seven marketing studies. As to the second key question presented in the beginning of this article, the major theories of marketing do not seem to describe the real world. By nature, marketing is usually considered as an applied science that should be largely based on the acts and needs of marketing organizations (see however Lee and Greenley 2010). Therefore, the gaps between the real marketing practice and theories should be reduced by empirical and theoretical research. Often also

combining approaches can theoretically be helpful. The results also favor the continuation of scientific examination on combining approaches.

This article introduces a insufficiently used but very promising new way to develop original, comprehensive and multiple disciplinary approaches and even paradigms. The anomalies of older approaches cannot be assimilated for very long, but in any case a new paradigm could emerge (cf. Kuhn 1970). The results of the marketing studies also suggested that a paradigm shift from the major approaches to combining them may eventually materialize.

It is a good reason to underline that we should have no implicit assumptions that combining or multiple disciplinarity as such are virtues. It is important to scrutinize different arguments that can be presented for or against the ideas of combinatory approaches or multiple disciplinarity. Even if we can develop some remarkable major approaches or achieve some level of multiple disciplinarity with the help of combining we must appreciate also minor theories that are fruitful in a limited area.

Often different approaches can generate different results in theory and practice and this may enrich our understanding of the phenomenon examined. Consequently, there can be sensible reasons for not trying to combine approaches and to support for example the parallel existence of approaches. On the other hand, some approaches can be so contradictory and incompatible that any combining is unwise or any combination is even impossible.

We must also understand that all forms of combining are not clearly multidisciplinary or at least interdisciplinary. But very many combinations are, because several combined approaches have rather different scientific backgrounds or at least somewhat different scientific origins.

It is natural that if two independent disciplines are combined, the new combination is literally multidisciplinary, possibly interdisciplinary and in some cases transdisciplinary. If sub-disciplines are combined the combination is probably multidisciplinary to some extent. And if some branches of a sub-discipline are combined, even the multidisciplinaryity of this combination is not self-evident.

All in all, the degree of multiple disciplinarity of the combined approach strongly depends on the nature of the combined approaches, especially the scientific distinction of the combined approaches. Therefore, combining can represent multiple disciplinarity even at the level of branches of sub-disciplines, if the scientific distinction between the combined branches is large. In the marketing studies described earlier the quite normative and rationalistic mix marketing was combined with the more positive and behavioral relationship marketing. Therefore, the combined approaches of two branches of a sub-discipline are multidisciplinary and the forms of combination can even be interdisciplinary.

In general, combining could be considered a procedure for or towards multiple disciplinarity. Actually, multiple disciplinarity may be impossible without some kind of combining of different scientific approaches. But probably combining is not the only way to multiple disciplinarity.

In any case, it is easy to believe that combining and multiple disciplinarity are probably increasing in the future theory building. Many reasons are presented before. Generally, it can be emphasized that it is reasonable to utilize the former successful work in theory building and its results i.e. current approaches.

The results of the marketing studies strongly encouraged a continuation of the scientific and practical work on combining approaches in marketing. But there is no reason to suspect that the basic idea and rationale behind combining are invalid in other sub-disciplines of business administration. For example, in accounting, in finance as well as in management and organization there are e.g. both rationalistic research and behavioral research. Thus some combinations of approaches in the main areas of business administration should be possible and reasonable. Combining can result in fairly comprehensive approaches and possibly even new comprehensive paradigms, which are more or less multiple disciplinary.

To the best of my knowledge it appears that the basic idea and rationale of combining could and should be utilized in very many disciplines in addition to business administration. It is easy to understand that this could be extended to for example economics, social sciences and political sciences in addition to business administration. Perhaps the scientists in most research fields should experience combining and, at the same time, multiple disciplinarity as fundamental challenges and possibilities when developing theory and practice.

Therefore, the ultimate message of this article is to stimulate and even challenge the researchers and research groups of different disciplines, sub-disciplines and branches of sub-disciplines to put the idea and rationale for combining to the test in their own research field and to build new combined, comprehensive and multiple disciplinary approaches if possible and useful in the field in question. Naturally, this message as such is rather multiple disciplinary. Sometimes research processes can even lead to new and multiple disciplinary paradigms.

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