

# TOWARDS MULTIPLE DISCIPLINARITY IN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

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## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to describe the possibilities to strive for multiple disciplinarity in research and practice. First, multiple disciplinarity and its methods i.e. blending, borrowing and combining are examined. A new concept of multiple modelling is introduced in this connection. Some empirical studies that illustrate the idea and rationale of combining, borrowing and blending as methods of multiple disciplinarity and modelling in business administration are then depicted. The empirical results based on the author's four studies and three secondary studies show that there are some gaps between marketing practice and current theories. The results also confirm that there is a significant multidisciplinary (parallel) use of both approaches, often some kind of use of the combinations of the approaches and a strong need to find out how to combine the approaches properly. The possibilities of borrowing and blending as methods toward multiple disciplinarity and modelling are also discussed. Finally, there is a discussion about the nature and reasons of multiple disciplinarity and modelling. Some challenges to marketing researchers, educators and managers are presented. Also some generalizations and additional challenges concerning the total utilization possibilities of multiple disciplinarity are raised.

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**Keywords:** Multiple disciplinarity, multiple modelling, utilizing multiple disciplinarity and modelling, challenges of multiple disciplinarity

## Multiple disciplinarity and multiple modelling

For the artificiality of the boundaries of disciplines, the challenges of multidisciplinary, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity have during the last few years developed at these boundaries quite fastly. Actually, these terms already are slogans in scientific discussion. They are largely accepted by scientists, educators, those who admit grants etc. But many users of these terms and even some researchers that utilize this phenomenon in their studies seem to understand the phenomenon quite superficially.

In fact, this phenomenon that can be called here "multiple disciplinarity" is complex and it has many levels. Multidisciplinarity draws on knowledge from different disciplines but stays within their boundaries. Interdisciplinarity is usually considered as the knowledge extensions that exist between or beyond academic disciplines. It analyses and synthesizes links between disciplines into a coordinated and harmonized whole. Transdisciplinarity is more holistic and relates disciplines into a coherent whole. It transcends the disciplinary boundaries to examine the dynamics of whole phenomenon in a holistic fashion. This represents meta-theoretical perspectives like structuralism and ecological economics. (cf. Besselaar and Heimeriks 2001, NSERC 2004, Choi and Pak 2006 and Lehtinen 2013 and 2014).

The concept multiple disciplinarity is here 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 can be considered a kind of the cover concept for multidisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity which refers to the different levels of involvement on the multiple disciplinarity continuum.

By which methods or procedures can multiple disciplinary theories, models, frameworks and approaches be created? At least combining, borrowing and blending are possible methods. Also other terms like joining, uniting, integrating, pertaining and involving can be used in this connection.

Combining is mainly utilized as a method towards multidisciplinarity in this article. Combining means putting different parts together. The parts can be disciplines, constructs of different disciplines or constructs of one discipline or subdiscipline.

Borrowing and blending are related to combining and can be utilized also in connection with combining (see e.g. Oswick, Fleming and Hanlon 2011 and Whetten, Felin and King 2009). In any case, the utilization of combining, borrowing and blending presupposes the careful consideration of the nature of these concepts and the characteristics of theory formation in question (cf. Corley and Gioia 2011). Actually, combining, borrowing and blending may be performed within one discipline or as an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary action across the boundaries of different disciplines.

Often a phenomenon of some discipline, subdiscipline or branch of subdiscipline is described by two or more models. Sometimes these models can be complementary so that the phenomenon can be better described by a model which is a combination of the original models. This kind of combining can be called multiple modelling.

Multiple modelling may be interpreted as subspecies of multiple disciplinarity. In any case, multiple modelling can be carried out in different

levels. These could be analogous with the different levels of multiple disciplinarity. Maybe it is possible to use at least terms multimodelling and intermodelling?

It is probable that the today's and future methods of multiple disciplinarity are analogously suitable for multiple modelling analyses. The required applications must be solved case by case as also in multiple disciplinary analyses generally.

### **Illustrative studies concerning the utilization of multiple disciplinarity and its methods**

The four earlier empirical studies of marketing management (Lehtinen 2007 and 2011) are here used to illustrate the combining as a method towards multiple disciplinarity and multiple modelling in marketing. The main objectives of these studies were following:

First, bringing forward the underlying idea and rationale for combining the mix (or parameter) marketing and relationship marketing approaches as well as the arguments explaining why they should be combined. The marketing mix and relationship marketing approaches have really been the major marketing approaches during last twenty five years.

Second, outlining new frameworks in order to combine the essential and compatible elements of approaches.

Third, studying empirically how well the opinions and actions of marketing directors mesh with the combinatorial frameworks. (Lehtinen 2011).

In all empirical studies (see Lehtinen 2011), both approaches were simultaneously used in almost all companies of the respondents of the three surveys. Relationship marketing approach appeared to be used slightly more often than the mix approach. There was fairly often the use of some combination of both approaches. The results also indicated that a clear majority of the respondents supported further integration or combining of the approaches in their companies and even generally.

After completing the questionnaires all respondents got an opportunity to comment on marketing issues freely without any leading remarks. In all discussions several managers expressed their surprise that researchers could still debate the superiority of one approach over the other. The managers clearly thought that the researchers should concentrate on the analyses of combining the most used approaches, which they considered to be marketing mix and relationship marketing. Most managers hoped for the development of proper methods or models to combine approaches. The findings showed that most companies already applied both approaches at least in parallel. Many managers stated that their companies had used some kind of combination approach. Moreover, several managers emphasized that

the combining of approaches would match current practice or at least the combining aims of companies. Therefore, it can fill the gaps between the present theoretical approaches and practice. The managers also thought that the developed combining models would allow greater marketing efficiency and better results.

The main results and conclusions concerning the coexistence of different approaches in the three wide secondary studies (Brodie et.al. 1997, Pels et.al. 2000 and Coviello et.al. 2002) were rather compatible with the results of Lehtinen's survey studies described above.

The results of the case study (Lehtinen 2011) clearly supported the theoretical vision of the other studies. Therefore taken together all seven studies showed that some kind of combining was sought and already also used. The combinations varied from parallel coexistence to advanced combinations.

All in all, the empirical results of studies including the comments of discussions strongly emphasized the utilization of at least two different approaches concerning marketing management. Actually, this can be interpreted also as a clear evidence in favor of multiple modelling and in this case even interdisciplinarity. The same evidence can be in fact seen in the gaps between practice and current theories though the gaps are also influenced by the undevelopment of concepts.

The findings of the studies can be used in marketing management practice at least in a modified form. The applications naturally require a lot of time, attention and business competence of any company that wants to consider utilizing these new opportunities. First, the company should determine its attitude in regard to combining. If and only if it considers that combining is of practical importance, a plan of operations specifying objectives and a time-table should be made. Then the systematic combining work should be started and completed.

Borrowing and blending are sometimes used methods or procedures towards multiple disciplinarity in marketing theory and empirical research of marketing. For example, many sociopsychological, mathematically formulated models have been utilized in consumer behavior research which is quite independent and behavioral area within marketing research. In fact, there was even a period of several years when these multidimensional choice models were in the central focus of marketing (see Lehtinen 1973 and *Journal of Marketing Research* 1974-1980). Anyway, these kinds of borrowings in marketing have been rather fruitful. Sometimes borrowing and blending (only one or both) can be integrated with the use of combining.

## **Challenges in XXI century**

Multiple disciplinarity provides very important possibilities throughout research and practice and because this phenomenon is not yet conceptually clear. There are several basic reasons why multiple disciplinarity and multiple modelling are extraordinarily important and why they should be pursued:

First, universum, world and human life in their different forms are multiple disciplinary by nature. Consequently, a lot of comprehensive problems, especially the most important and interesting ones are multiple disciplinary. These real problems are seldom restricted to the boundaries of disciplines, which are actually based on the fairly artificial fragmentations of knowledge. This, like many other reasons, here concerns even more demandingly multiple modelling.

Second, many smaller problems also require several perspectives and visions before solving.

Third, the development of society, economy and technology continuously produces more difficult, more comprehensive and more multidimensional problems. Resolving these perpetually renewable problems demand many-sided views and visions that for its sake calls for multiple disciplinarity.

Fourth, extraordinarily important tasks in research and practice are asking the “right” questions and formulating the comprehensive hypotheses. Often these questions and hypotheses are complex enough to require a multiple disciplinary approach.

Fifth, many kinds of practical operations, for example planning a new business, achieving consensus of multidisciplinary and argumentative parties as well as compiling an educational program, can be so complex that multiple disciplinary skills are needed.

Particularly experts with different disciplinary background observe, read and react differently. Therefore, all basic reasons mentioned before advocate the building of a teams of experts from different disciplines. Each expert can only contribute to a limited part of the complex problem in question.

On the basis of the results of the illustrative studies and their marketing emphasis it is easy to believe that the roles of combining as well as multiple disciplinarity and modelling are probably increasing in the future research and practice in marketing. This concerns researchers, educators and managers. On the other hand, marketing as a general phenomenon is connected very comprehensively with human life. For these reasons already the marketing applications of multiple disciplinarity and modelling will be extensive and remarkable.

It is also understandable that the basic ideas, rationales and methods of multiple disciplinarity and modelling are probably valid 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 these main areas of business administration can be possible and reasonable. On the other hand, e.g. organizational research has largely borrowed concepts and constructs and also researchers from neighboring behavioral disciplines such as psychology and sociology. 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.

There are some studies utilizing multiple disciplinarity and modelling also in the other areas of business administration. For example, Gabriellsson, Eronen and Pietala (2007) combined theory of international business and economic geography when they studied internationalization and globalization as a spatial process. They developed a graphical model that depicts both the attractiveness of target regions and the spatial patterns of target countries which are borrowed from economic geography.

There are logical reasons to believe that combining as well as multiple disciplinarity and modelling could and should be generalized to and utilized in very many disciplines in addition to business administration. It is easy to understand that they could be extended to the neighboring sciences such as economics, social sciences and political sciences in addition to business administration (Lehtinen 2011). But probably the scientists in most research fields should experience multiple disciplinarity and modelling as a fundamental challenge and possibility when developing theory and practice.

This discussion can be boldly summarized also as a following practical double challenge to researchers of any discipline: Every researcher should clear up the possibilities of multiple disciplinarity and its methods from the viewpoint of his/her study. Therefore, every researcher should attain good knowledge about multiple disciplinarity.

Naturally, the most basic challenge concerns the researchers of multiple disciplinarity. This phenomenon still requires careful and creative research work in order to achieve its full maturity and usability.

Finally, it is important to notice that it is not necessary to involve several disciplines or models and multiple disciplinary team for every problem or project of marketing or the other areas of study. Some problems are so simple and one-sided that they are best solved by one person who has a suitable background.

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