

KNOWING MARKETING: AN ACTIVITY THEORY PERSPECTIVE ON KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING IN THE MARKETING DOMAIN

Keywords activity theory, practice theory, marketing knowledge, organizational learning

Paulo Ferreira¹, paulo.ferreira@ncl.ac.uk, Newcastle University, UK.

Kasia Zdunczyk, kasia.zdunczyk@ncl.ac.uk, Newcastle University, UK.

Andrew Simpson, andrew.simpson@ncl.ac.uk, Newcastle University, UK.

Abstract

The paper highlights the need for an activity theoretical approach to the understanding of marketing knowledge and learning. In particular, we argue that activity theory has the potential to enable insights into the contradictory and complex systems of activity in which marketing practices reside. We contrast the tenets and applications of activity theory with the static, individualistic and linear assumptions which dominate the marketing knowledge domain. We show that activity theory supports the understanding of change, complexity and uncertainty related to marketing contexts by recognising and supporting the contradictory, collective and distributed character of knowledge and learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

Practice theories have been exerting sufficient influence on organization studies over the past two decades for terms such as Practice-Based Studies (PBS) or ‘the practice turn’ to receive considerable recognition (Gherardi, 2009). In particular, the practice perspective has been at the centre of developments in organizational studies of knowledge and learning. The socially constructed, relational, and situated view of knowledge and learning advanced by PBS contrasts with positivist, rationalists and cognitivist conceptions of knowledge (Geiger, 2009). Knowledge is no longer viewed simply as an object or asset, nor is it believed to reside in individual minds. Instead, PBS brings to the fore the concept of knowing as a situated activity which is collectively performed and is accomplished through the relational dynamics of practice and participation.

Given its current relevance in organizational studies, practice theory has received surprisingly little attention in the area of marketing. The dominant approach to studying knowledge in the context of marketing is rooted in the information-processing perspective and the main focus is on *market knowledge*, defined as structured and cross-functionally integrated information about customers and competitors (Li and Calantone, 1998). Significant attention is also given to *marketing knowledge*, i.e. the understanding and skills necessary to the practice of marketing (Andreasen et al. 2005). The idea of marketing knowledge resonates well with the practice-based view of knowledge.

¹ Corresponding author:

2nd Floor; Newcastle University Business School; Citiwall, Citigate; St. James Boulevard; Newcastle upon Tyne; NE1 4JH; United Kingdom.

Phone: 0044 191 2430867

Crucially, however, the marketing knowledge perspective does not recognise action as generative of knowledge. Knowledge is something gained prior to the accomplishment of a task and learning is assumed to occur in advance of the activity and afterwards - as the outcomes provide new information about the market. New information about the market is to be processed and integrated across the firm leading to a revised model of the market.

We argue that a practice-theory approach to the study of marketing knowledge and learning would overcome these limitations and identify activity theory (Blackler and Regan, 2009; Engestrom, 2000) as the strand of PBS which appears particularly relevant to the marketing domain. We argue that the application of activity theory to the problem of marketing knowledge offers novel insights into where the learning comes from (social-historical situated practices), how the activity is constructed, what tools and resources are available to different participants, and what the inner contradictions of the activity are (Blackler and Regan, 2009). Such a reconceptualization of the marketing knowledge problem, serves both the academic and practitioner communities by overcoming the limitations of the static, linear and individualistic frameworks, which no longer cope with the challenges faced by contemporary organizations (Dougherty, 2007).

The paper is structured as follows. The first section provides a brief overview of how the objective/ subjective divide is characterized in terms of current organizational knowledge and learning perspectives. The second section outlines the basis of practice theory and, more specifically, activity theory in its assumptions and propositions related to change and contradictions, complex activity systems and the interrelated nature of knowing, learning and doing through changing and complex systems of activity. The third section then proposes the understanding of marketing knowledge and learning by means of activity theory framework, as an alternative perspective confronting the current challenges marketing theory and practice encounter.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides a brief outline of the rationale for adopting the practice perspective to the study of organisations in general, and to the study of marketing knowledge in particular. Section 3 presents the key tenets and applications of activity theory and establishes its suitability for addressing the current demands of the marketing domain as identified in Section 2. In Section 4, we outline the key themes and debates relating to marketing knowledge and learning and identify the key challenges which require the application of novel theoretical approaches and are amenable to activity theoretical interpretation. Section 5 compares and contrasts the activity theory approach to learning in activity systems with the current developments in the social network analysis approach to marketing learning. We conclude by highlighting the most promising aspects of the proposed activity theoretical perspective on marketing knowledge and learning and offering our suggestions regarding further theoretical and empirical developments.

2. THE NEED FOR A PRACTICE PERSPECTIVE ON MARKETING LEARNING

The rapid advancement of the practice perspective on knowing and learning in organization studies is largely due to the growing dissatisfaction with the conceptual frameworks afforded by traditional dichotomies of the objectivist/subjectivist divide. As organisations are becoming “transitory, fluid and uncertain” (Blackler and Regan, 2009), explanations presupposing stable entities are increasingly proving deficient in

studying organizational knowledge and learning. Organizational actors cannot be assumed to hold stable dispositions and neither their knowledge base nor the learning processes they partake in are sufficiently static to be accessed by linear thinking (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002; Orlikowski, 2002). Thus there is a growing need to transcend traditional dichotomies and advance dynamic, relational, and situated approaches to studying organizations in general and organizational learning in particular. Practice theories answer this demand by situating knowing and learning in relational practices involving individuals and communities, tools and technologies, activities and places (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2000; Blackler, 1993). Human activity is thus embedded in a field of interrelated social practices (Schatzki et al., 2001). Learning is viewed as a collective and participative process unfolding within social contexts that are characterized by tensions and conflicts (Hong and Fiona, 2009). Knowledge is believed to be emergent, collective and negotiated. Doing, knowing and learning are interrelated and co-constituted in everyday practices (Strati, 2007; Orlikowski, 2002).

In the last three decades marketing has evolved from the dominant logic of the transactional perspective to include the relational, service-based and networked view of co-production and co-creation of value. This transformation has now reached an important stage where the underpinning web of value-creating relations is assumed to encompass a wider number of actors than simply customers and suppliers (Hakansson and Ford, 2002). Accordingly, researchers have shifted their attention from functional to cultural issues underpinning marketing practice. The cultural approach regards learning marketing as a process involving the entire organization (Slater and Narver, 1995) but stops short of recognising its ongoing and situated nature - thus maintaining the objective/subjective dichotomy in theorising knowledge and learning. The separation of cognition from action and learning from doing hinders the study of the multiple, complex, ambiguous, and unstable relations inherent in marketing practice.

The established approaches to studying marketing knowledge and learning have not been able to access the complex and continually changing web of marketing relationships. Instead, their focus is on the creation of marketing capabilities through the integration of adaptive and reactive learning strategies (Slater and Naver, 1995). The complexity and paradoxes related to the networked production of value are viewed as a threat obstructing the creation of knowledge (Hakansson and Ford, 2002). Therefore, there is a need to extend the current understanding of marketing knowledge and learning through the application of a theory sensitive to contradiction, instability, and uncertainty. Practice theories have been successfully applied to explore these aspects of knowing in different organizational domains, e.g. in studying circulation and production of safety knowledge (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2000); consulting practice (Hicks et al., 2009); or networked product development and innovation (Miettinen et al., 2008).

Activity theory stands out among other practice theories as the approach which has developed a conceptual framework and systemic analytical tools specifically in recognition of the need to study contradiction, instability, and uncertainty inherent in practice (Hemetsberger and Reinhardt, 2009). Therefore the argument advanced in the remainder of the paper focuses on activity theory, as particularly well-suited to studying the complex and multiple interrelations influencing marketing practice. Activity theory, we argue, can explain how contradictions of marketing are related to learning and how marketing knowledge is distributed in complex activity systems. Importantly, activity theory also offers a framework and a methodology for transformative action, thus adding to the practical relevance of developing a new application for the theory in the marketing domain.

3. ACTIVITY THEORY

Although some strands of practice theory can be accused of neglecting issues of power and politics, in the main, practice-based studies inspire critical discussions and insights (Gherardi, 2009). Activity theory (AT) is a good example of a practice-theoretical approach which is particularly sensitive to conflict (Blackler and Kennedy, 2004), contradiction (Engeström, 2006), and politics (Macpherson and Jones, 2008). In activity theory knowing and learning are negotiated, contradictory and intrinsically interconnected with practice. The conduit for learning is an activity system within which interdependent individuals and groups seek complementary or contradictory objectives (Blackler and Regan, 2009) and their interactions are mediated by culturally and historically situated artefacts. Change is seen as inherent in all activity systems (Macpherson and Jones, 2008) and the methodology associated with activity-theoretical studies affords possibilities of transformative interventions (Prenekert, 2006). Thus AT offers managerial relevance without losing sight of conflict, politics and the relationship between intrinsic contradictions within activity systems and learning associated with the transformation of practices.

3.1. Learning through contradictions

Contradictions in activity systems are a central concept in Activity Theory. They are defined as the historically generated properties of structures prompting disturbances and tensions in activity systems (Blackler and Kennedy, 2004; Engeström, 1987). In the first instance, every activity system is influenced by the primary contradiction of the capitalist order of production, i.e. between the “use value” and the “exchange value” of commodities. Engeström (1993) offers the example of primary contradictions experienced by physicians in bureaucratic medical work: they play the role of gatekeepers and cost-efficient producers as well as healers and consultants. Moreover, activity systems are also susceptible to secondary contradictions: as they are open systems, any novelty introduced to an element of the activity system can change the quality of this element, which, in turn, may cause a contradictory relationship between the transformed element and the remaining system elements.

Contradictions are associated with disturbances and tensions and considered to be sources of learning and transformation. They can result in the creation of new work activities and new methods of organizing: the worsening of disturbances and tensions can lead individuals to question rules and engage in a collective effort at changing patterns of activity and creating new meanings and understandings (Engeström, 2001). Despite the occasional character of this process, it has been suggested that change can be brought about by managers by means of intervening in the inner contradictions of activity systems (Prenekert, 2006). Researchers working within activity theory are also encouraged to affect change through research into the contradictions of activity systems (Engeström, 1987; 2001).

3.2. Practice as activity system

Activity theory explains practice as a complex system of mediated interactions between individuals, communities and their object of activity. The object of activity is the focus of work and transformation. It is simultaneously given (present in material or nonmaterial form), socially constructed (different representations regarding different social relations), contested (presenting different understandings according to different standpoints) and emergent (susceptible to changes) (Blackler and Regan, 2009) (Blackler and Regan, 2009). Individual subject’s interaction with the object of activity

is mediated by cultural artefacts such as tools and signs (Vygotsky, 1978). Learning occurs through the creation of new meanings of these cultural artefacts, i.e. when changes in practices occur (Vygotsky, 1986). In a collective activity, individuals also have mediated interactions with the envisioned object of transformation through a wider community (Engeström, 1987). This kind of social interaction also makes use of material and nonmaterial mediating artefacts, the shared creation of which brings about change in practice.

Mediating artefacts, however, do not have a straightforward role and effect. In highly dispersed groups these artefacts are likely to be avoided and the motivation of individuals will need to be aligned to collective activities (Hemetsberger and Reinhardt, 2009). Despite the relevance of mediating artefacts, knowledge transformation relies largely on the political processes embedded in collective action (Macpherson and Jones, 2008). Thus, the activity system is recurrently produced and reproduced in reflective action, where meanings and understandings are collectively negotiated by actors in mediated (by means of cultural artefacts such as tools and concepts) interaction, and where politics exert a significant influence on learning and change.

3.3. Expansive learning: understanding the dynamics of change

Engeström (2001, p. 138) notes that, “in important transformations of our personal lives and organizational practices, we must learn new forms of activity which are not yet there.” This idea is captured in activity theory through the concept of *expansive learning* (Engeström, 2001; Engeström, 1987), i.e. the production of new patterns of activity, where the entire activity system is the object of transformation (Engeström, 2001). The transformation of activity is due to collective reflection upon the contradictions within and between activity systems. A search for resolution is manifested through improvisation, debate and model creation. As a result, new priorities are recognized and different patterns of organizing are made possible. Learning, contradictions and change are thus interrelated in activity systems. Larger transformations require a shift of direction in the organizing effort of change. Thus expansive learning is a useful concept in dynamic and changeable contexts, where people and organisations need to learn as they act. However, in the case of more extensive transformations, there is a need for actors’ engagement in the understanding of the developmental path of the alternative directions, i.e. a historical analysis needs to be conducted.

3.4. Socio-spatial and temporal expansion: addressing complexity

Expansive learning is related to the idea of the socio-spatial and temporal expansion of the object of activity (Engeström, 2001; 2000). Socio-spatial expansion means the extension of the object of activity from singular relationships in the immediate context to the complex web of relationships involved in the activity. Temporal expansion signifies the evolvment of the object of activity from singular episodes to long term trajectories. In this sense individuals are capable of shifting from one activity to another resolving the contradictions between different activities. Understanding the context, priorities, and possibilities (perspective shaping), joint participation in practice within a community (perspective making), and interactions with other communities (perspective taking) are all essential to the integration and co-operation of groups with multiple and/or competing objectives (Blackler et al., 2000). Engeström (2000) emphasizes the creation and sharing of new artefacts of mediation related to tools and concepts

providing new interactions and new forms of engagement and participation. These new forms of interactions and engagement are established to the extent that all the parties are aware and responsible for multiple activities and no single party has a main enduring position, thus enabling the temporal and socio-spatial expansion of the object.

The nature of learning in activity theory is especially prolific for the understanding of dynamic, unstable and changeable contexts. The intertwined character of learning, knowing and doing provides the idea of participating in the transformation instead of adapting or reacting. Contradictions and tensions, often related to constraints and limits, engender collective action in activity systems and are sources for potentialities of the creation of new practices. For these reasons activity theory could overcome the existing limitations in the marketing domain and open new and topical avenues for investigation. As marketing theory searches for an account of the new challenges it faces, activity theory offers the possibility of rendering accessible a dynamic view of the knowledge, learning and practice of marketing.

4. MARKETING KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING

Marketing knowledge has been defined as the know-how and skills necessary efficiently to create and deliver value to customers and thus to create competitive advantage (Andreasen et al., 2005; Menon and Varadarajan, 1992). It is seen as a competence or capability (Morgan et al., 2003) and as know-how or skill (Simonin, 1999). Marketing knowledge is often related with individualistic and linear approaches to knowledge, which focus on individuals' ability to interpret the context and apply the appropriate rule to achieve predetermined goals (Holman, 2000). In this sense, marketing knowledge is viewed in terms of the hierarchical sequence of knowing how and what to do in relation to a given context. Moreover, marketing knowledge is a subject caught in the objectivist/subjectivist dichotomy: in the objectivist tradition marketing is treated as a discipline, i.e. a system of principles determining what is to be studied and how. The subjective view assumes that marketing knowledge resides in the minds of entrepreneurs (e.g. Read et al., 2009) and learning is based on personal traits (Ardichvili et al., 2003) and experience (Cadogan et al., 2008). Nonetheless, both objective and subjective dimensions assume the view of marketing knowledge and learning based on individual cognitive processes related to mental structures which are traced back to disciplinary marketing in the case of the objective view (e.g. Vorhies et al., 2009) and to personal experience in the subjective perspective (e.g. Sujan et al., 1988).

The subjective perspective on marketing knowledge captures the view of expert entrepreneurs using marketing knowledge based on personal experiences. The entrepreneurial approach assumes that experts employ a superior logic to tackle market uncertainties (Read et al., 2009; Gerrit et al., 2001). While in the objective view marketing managers base their knowledge on objective techniques looking to predict market behaviour (Vorhies et al., 2009; Varadarajan and Jayachandran, 1999), the subjective approach is to focus on the control and shaping of the environment. This subjective perspective emphasizes the role of entrepreneurial expertise applied to marketing activities for the creation of resources (Read et al., 2009). In contrast, the objective view is related to the use of marketing knowledge as a resource (e.g. Ramaswami et al., 2009). The persistent observance of the objective/subjective dichotomy means that marketing theory is ill-equipped to rise to the contemporary challenges facing marketing practice.

4.1. Marketing learning and complexity

Marketing has been facing increasing uncertainty and change in the competitive environment (Samli, 2006; Hodgkinson, 1997), which is characterised by volatility of customers' preferences (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990) and relentless competition (Hunt and Duhan, 2002). The dynamics of the field are such that marketing is practiced under conditions of chronic uncertainty (Dess and Beard, 1984), which necessitates the development of theoretical frameworks capable of coping with complex and dynamic temporal, spatial and social dynamics. Such theoretical developments require a departure from the traditional dichotomies originating in the objective/subjective divide which inhibit the understanding of learning and knowing as simultaneous and interdependent with action. The focus on adaptive or reactive strategies for learning inherent in these approaches reflects the assumption that learning is based on past events and established practices (Rose-Anderssen et al., 2009), whereas in significant transformations, there is a need to develop new activities that do not have any established reference (Engenstrom, 2001).

The problem of the complexity of contemporary marketing practice has been approached by researchers working in the market orientation tradition (e.g. Noble et al., 2002; Baker and Sinkula, 1999; Slater and Narver, 1995; Day, 1994), who have been studying the relationship between learning and performance. Day (1994) proposes that marketing learning is a process permeated by the culture of a market driven organisation. Thus, it must be conducted through managing knowledge acquisition, distribution and utilization related to customers and competitors creating a "market sensing" capability. The market driven organisation also develops customer relationships through integrative and collaborative processes between buyer and seller constructing a "customer linking capability. Organizational learning alongside an "entrepreneurial drive" creates the necessary knowledge related to dynamic environments while appropriate knowledge management prompts the capacity for response. Adaptive learning, based on information processing, is responsible for the adjustment of internal practice that could enable the flow of marketing knowledge throughout the organization. Reactive learning, based on experience and entrepreneurial logic generates new knowledge. Marketing learning is a process of integrating information with experience, thus creating an interface between adaptive and reactive strategies necessary for the development and maintenance of an appropriate knowledge base for sustainable competitive advantage (Slater and Narver, 1995). Thus adaptive and reactive learning are integrated in a model designed for tackling changing markets. What is missing (besides the fact that the static view of knowledge and learning does not tackle the dynamics of the environment) is the understanding of the causes of change and exploring how these causes are interrelated with marketing practices.

4.2. Contradictions as a source of difficulty

The contradictory nature of the market features prominently in marketing literature: e.g. Holt (2003) describes how the contradictions between the "real" American way of life and the prevailing ideological vision of American society is a tension that marketers need to be aware and act upon. Handelman (2006) explored how contradictory social and economic expectations result in tensions that marketers need to deal with. Secondary contradictions also appear as a result of marketing activity: as described by Aaker (1997) vertical extension of brands, e.g. moving them to a lower class segment, results in one brand having two contradictory conceptual images and perceived values. Handelman (2006) and Holt (2003) call attention to brand managers' need of cultural awareness. The emphasis is on adaptation to a complex web of knowledgeable and

diverse actors or the acquisition of knowledge and skills that enables marketers to profit from tensions through the creation of brand myths. Aaker's (1997) central message is to avoid contradictions unless there is no choice. In all cases the type of learning implicated in situations of contradiction is the adaptive strategy, i.e. marketers are required to apply successful practices in their own changing context. The complexity of interrelations is hardly understood and contradictions remain unresolved.

Consequently, despite indicating some important contradictions inherent to marketing management practices, knowledge and learning are subsumed in a framework that cannot explain how they could be interrelated with the contradictory environment and the respective practices. Thus, the generative cause for marketing learning and change is left unexplored. As outlined in the previous section, in the activity theory framework, learning does not precede action, it is intertwined with action. There is no assumption of adaptive or reactive interaction with the environment. In activity systems, these primary and secondary contradictions related to marketing require an analysis in terms of how they transformed through time, what the systemic interactions between the actors are and how they collectively engage in the construction of meanings and understandings (Engeström, 2000). This would enable an examination of the dynamics of marketing practices, knowledge and learning.

4.3. The networked view of marketing learning

Through its history, marketing has evolved from an objective inquiry of product distribution to the inclusion of the situated nature of exchanges (e.g. Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Hirschman, 1986). A relational paradigm has arisen as an alternative to the transactional exchanges view (Möller and Halinen, 2000; Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995). In the marketing management domain, the cultural perspective has provided a different analysis from the structural/functionalist view of the marketing function (e.g. Deshpande and Webster, 1989). Consequently, marketing can be understood as an orientation that permeates organizational practices enabling learning (Slater and Narver, 1995). Ultimately, the inquiry regarding marketing practices evolved into the logic of service provision (Gronroos, 1990) and inter-organizational relations (Achrol, 1997; 1991). The service dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004) in conjunction with the networked nature of marketing activities (Achrol and Kotler, 1999) has led to the view of marketing as a networked practice where value is co-created by a variety of relationships (Read et al., 2009). As Wilkinson and Young (2002) indicated, in these networks of interactions outcomes are co-produced by the actors adapting strategies of cooperation and competition. Due to the pace of changes and the complexity of the interactions the outcomes are uncertain. As a consequence, the focus of management shifts from directing and controlling to an emphasis on “processes of participating, sensing, adapting, and learning” (Wilkinson and Young, 2002, p. 84). The systemic interactions within these networks also confront intrinsic paradoxes related to the nature of the interactions and managerial action.

4.4. Paradox in networked marketing activities

Hakansson and Ford (2002) examined relevant paradoxes deriving from these business networks. The first paradox refers to the opportunities and limitations engendered by the interactions in the network. The second paradox is related to the influence that an organization exerts on its relationships while being influenced by others. The third paradox is the search for control while the network needs to be “out of control” to better adapt to the changing environment. Hakansson and Ford approach the intrinsic

contradictions of business networks through social network analysis. This theory and methodology regards the structure and pattern of interactions identifying both causes and consequences of network positions and relations among its components (Tichy et al., 1979).

The first paradox, for instance, is verified in terms of the investments in the development of a given relationship as well as in internal capacities related to this interaction. The investments results in opportunities for the organization. However, the more important this relationship becomes, the more restricted the organization is when it comes to changing. Thus opportunities are constrained and constraining. In contrast, activity theory emphasizes the tensions emerging from such contradictions and the respective learning outcomes through an evolving activity system. In an activity system, the “investments” made in a relationship are translated into material and nonmaterial artefacts mediating the interaction. As Engeström (1987) pointed out that a worsening of tensions results in a collective engagement for shared creation of new or modified mediating artefacts that could result in new forms of interaction and resolve the contradiction by producing a different social and material relation. The implications of these contrasting perspectives for how contradictory elements in a network should be operated for optimised change are explained by Hakansson and Ford (2002), who approach the interactions paradox by establishing a managerial paradox:

“[...] companies should aim for control but as soon as they acquire some “final” control over the surrounding network (or their supply chain or value chain!) they should be worried! Of course, a company’s task is to try to modify its own network position and to influence what happens in their own and others’ relationships. But the management task is also to encourage and help others to continuously clarify their understanding of the network. It is their actions, based on their perspectives that provide the dynamics of a network.” (p. 138-139)

Activity theory encourages changing the activity system through research intervention (Engeström, 2001; Blackler, 1993). In addition, managerial action supported by activity theory is able to identify relevant paradoxes and shape the process of change (Prekert, 2006). In this sense the contribution of activity theory regards the provision of a framework supporting intervention, where the inherent contradictions of the system are the source of transformation. Thus, activity theory provides a theoretical foundation for managerial action in uncertain and changing contexts related to marketing practices.

5 LEARNING IN NETWORKS AND ACTIVITY SYSTEMS

Working within the social network analysis approach, Hakansson and Ford (2002) assume that it is the variety of interactions that provides opportunities for learning and, consequently, facilitates the transformation of the role of the organization in the network. Learning by networked organizations refers to developing knowledge about how to use the organization’s own resources as well as understanding how the web of relationships prompts the use of the resources of other network components. By contrast, in activity system learning, contradictions and change are interrelated. Through stepwise cycles (Engeström, 2001), collective action is able to transform the object of activity and the mediating artefacts. Actors search for resolutions to tensioned contradictions through debate, improvisation and model creation (Blackler et al., 1999). In a social network model, the paradoxes of network interactions reflect on knowledge and learning contradictions. As Hakansson and Ford (2002) highlighted, every organisation attempts to control the understandings, knowledge and nature of their relationships with partners. Nonetheless, the development of new knowledge is

hindered when a network is centrally controlled because interactions tend to flow in only one direction.

In an activity theory perspective, knowledge and learning have the potentiality to expand to a wider network of interactions. Spatial and temporal expansion occurs when collective action is able to resolve contradictions and extend the activity from singular interactions to the whole network of relations and from singular episodes to long term transformation of the object of activity (Engeström, 2000). Therefore, activity theory is able to expand the analysis from single activity systems to the development of interconnected activity system related to the expansion of learning as contradictions are resolved (Engestrom, 2000). In this sense, activity theory is able to access an account of the broader consequences of learning marketing and its impact in a wider spectrum of society.

In sum, if marketing management in this networked/service logic is to “be responsible for creating and managing new marketing knowledge” (Achrol and Kotler, 1999), marketing knowledge and learning needs to be understood differently. We argued that an account of the emergent, situated and intertwined nature of practice, knowledge and learning (Gherardi, 2001; Brown and Duguid, 1991) is needed to provide the basis for understanding marketing knowledge and learning in the complex web of relationships that is marketing practice. It was also argued that approaches assuming knowledge residing in individuals’ minds and learning through a static and linear process are unable to tackle the unstable and changing environment of marketing activities. Activity theory contributes to the understanding of change deriving from inherent contradictions of activity systems. It provides the basis for understanding how marketing can evolve in consonance with dynamic environments. It enables a conceptualization of marketing as an emergent and changeable object of activity, which is dynamically transformed by collective engagement and negotiation. Finally, as marketing in increasingly associated with the co-creation of value through a complex web of relations, activity theory is able to provide the basis for understanding marketing knowing, learning and doing as value is co-created by multiple actors in everyday practices.

6. CONCLUSION

Theorising marketing practice as an activity systems brings to the fore the intertwined character of knowing, learning and doing. The contradictory and complex nature of activity systems permits the examination of marketing knowledge and learning as emerging in terms of unstable, tensioned and distributed action. The idea of multiple actors interrelated through mediated interactions enables the activity theory framework to explain changing patterns of activity in terms of the creation or the emergence of new meanings for mediating artefacts. The key contribution of activity theory to the theory and practice of marketing lies in the potential for the exploration of the contemporary dynamics of marketing. Activity theory reveals the value of the contradictory character of marketing practice as potentialities for the creation of new tools, concepts, mediated interactions and practices deriving from disturbances and collective action. The changeable and multifaceted nature of the marketing context and the associated uncertainty are explained by reference to interconnected and contradictory activity systems. Instead of being perceived as a hindrance, complexity and contradiction are seen as enablers generating knowledge and learning within distributed and negotiated collective action.

Future work is clearly needed on both theoretical extension of the ideas presented in this papers and empirical research inspired by the possibilities afforded by incorporating activity theory concepts and frameworks into the study of the marketing domain. The complex web of relations underpinning marketing outcomes could also be further explored through the notion of “knotworking”, i.e. investigating the capacities of interconnected collective action for transformations (i.e. Engeström, 2005). Thus the process and nature of the interrelations prompting distributed marketing knowledge and learning could be uncovered. In addition, the contradictions related to marketing management reach a broader spectrum of social context. Holt (2003) has indicated the need to act upon inner contradictions of the wider society to achieve value creation in certain circumstances. In this sense, activity theory analysis needs to reach inner contradictions of consumers’ activity systems. A “third generation” of activity theory has moved the unit of analysis to networks of activity systems (e.g. Blackler et al., 2000). Engestrom (2000) has indicated how inner contradictions of an activity system expand and unveil wider contradictions in society through the interconnectedness of activity systems. In addition, Prenkert (2006) have suggested a model of identification and managerial intervention to inner contradictions of activity systems. In the marketing management context, activity theory opens exciting opportunities for analysing broader contexts, following on from Engestrom (2000) and affecting consumers’ activity systems, taking Prenkert’s (2006) advice.

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